

**'From there to here': writing out of a  
time of violence  
A creative and critical thesis**

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This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in  
substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree  
elsewhere.

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From there to here

poems

Siobhán Campbell

'... You are neither here nor there.  
A hurry through which known and strange things pass'

From 'Postscript', Seamus Heaney  
(*The Spirit Level*, 1996)

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## Weeding

When you weed a field, bend over the long root suckers,  
the weeders moving in a line across the ridges,  
a stippled human stripe of inclined heads against  
the ordered rippling rows of mangels,  
then the world seems right and we are in our place.

When you refuse to weed and hang out with a friend  
under the dreeping willow in the bend that is not ploughed  
where no grass grows over the stones and what is buried,  
you watch the workers easing themselves to night;  
its shadow keeps ahead of them as they cross.

Then you might think of sacrifice or the greater good  
but you don't, flirty with heat as heat leaves the day  
and you separate, seeing things anew, filthy  
with possibility. It's too late now to join the weeding crew.  
And the willow laughs its long thin laugh at you.

## Lace

Crochet, a hook and one set of fingers  
curling and coiling a hesitant confection  
in thread that will stand up on its own.  
Not lace but lacy, the effort  
scrunching up your face, the making  
of making in your short-sighted eye.  
Potential. How before you begin,  
it is clambering clean and forever.  
You seem to detach from the chair,  
from the room from the world we are in  
when you pull intent out of air.  
Might it be a welcome, set under two glasses  
of scotch on a bedside table? Might it be  
a collar laid over yoke like a nun's  
from a convent in France? Could it  
muster charity while calling  
the willing eye to prayer? They told you  
lace that is not lace will not seduce.  
You smooth a medieval dark down  
through its gaps, stemming the curlicue  
loop, its interweaving.  
The twist of a flaw, that disappointment,  
how not to use it, *the better to strengthen*  
*the whole*, that would be cliché,  
and this is lace if not yet lacy.

## Photos of the islanders

They have forebears. Noses and foreheads  
forged in the art of fact.  
They have seen a daughter wither from ill use,  
prayed for her, sent bread to her funeral.

There's a welcome stapled to their tongue  
and they count your leavings when you're gone.  
*What we make now must get us through the winter.*

What do they see when they look out –  
a one who says they are still married to belief,  
a one who thinks they are mired in a falsehood?

Is the split at the picture edge  
an implication? That they neither do  
nor undo.

\*

*Poverty Isolation Tradition*  
Pressure comes in threes.  
Devout in practice, loved by an unnamed god,  
who will they be today?

Who will they be today?  
Masked by the strip of archetype.  
Life as a scene of foreshadows.

\*

He wears the dagger tattoo of his father  
and his cap, and like him can  
twist his eyes into his head  
leaving the whites behind.

Losses eddy in lines about the mouth

and when he sits, because his father asks  
to help repair the trawl,  
he is tamed in the fray of its knots.

\*

A line of men along a wall  
each of them matched by a pine behind.  
They sit and the dry wall presses back  
a heritable skill, plucking and picking  
by sight and feel. Wall-making by touch.

One has a hat with ribbon bands,  
the dandy among them –  
equally protected and despised.

They share the hill behind until they die  
thinking it is theirs.

\*

clearing stones the first peoples made the fields  
and on nights with a red dusk you can hear them ease  
the pain of strained backs, too much bend  
how three feet takes a whole night to clear  
how the wall begins at the edge with what they sling  
the wall begins to keep something in

if you follow a heifer she will show you where there's a spring of fresh water  
not everything is old wives' tales

\*

just what would fill the head of a goat  
we know the fleet of its feet  
the bass of its baa  
the burr on its coat

when we know the fleet of its feet  
the burr of its baa  
the bass of its burr  
how to turn on a goat  
look it square in the eyes

the dare of it

disrespect in the pupil

it can be slit before its hoary time  
the flat black capsule of the pupil

slit and hung before its hoary time  
how to better a goat  
we've passed this down

the only way is to make a pipe we play  
from the sac of its udder  
then blow a melody out of her

a mournful lament is the only way  
to get the better of a goat

is the way we put a pipe in its udder  
then finger a melody

put in the pipe  
put in the pipe and squeeze a music from the teats

'In their high cheek bones run the veins of a nation'

Characters choose to resemble the noble peasant.  
They look as if they know the value of elbow grease.  
Even though their backs are bent with longing,  
they may appear taller than they are.

One might willingly tell of the devil, sitting there on her left,  
making her write with the wrong, giving Teacher such a fright  
he brought the strap down *Whack*. Tied the offending hand  
behind her back. Now she's ambidextrous.

Some may say they lived through the Famine,  
or at least were sent packing west of the river  
where they told stories set by fires in one-roomed schools  
and caressed the oppressor's tongue.

In this genre, beware of a creeping nostalgia.  
Nothing grows resentment better than an acre of stones.  
An island passport might land you a tax haven.  
Then again it could cost you an arm and a leg.

## Interviewing the beast

My mother is Sappho, my father is Homer, she told me.

I lived with the real things of the earth. If you go to bed  
with wet hair you will wake up with meningitis.

The tea leaves recounted her past in five different ways.  
One where King Billy was vanquished, there were no apprentice boys,  
no secret societies save those led by the pope.

If you cut down an oak, the tree peoples will colonise your head.

I have lived with the double-jointed tongue of Fionn.  
Where he needed friends, he tied it to the roof of his mouth.  
When he wanted a rout, he released it to greet his enemy.

Once when she was little, there was a statue that moved, bent from the hip  
in a green grotto at night. They all thought it a sign but she knew of the people  
pulling lights this way and that, making us think of things beyond.

Using your tendency against you, I said. I didn't record my nods.

When there are red berries in a month with no r, the world has slipped  
on its axis, a splinted angle not to be measured as if matter.

In one scenario she speaks in tongues, thinking it lowland Gaelic,  
adding consonants to vowels, coughing up phlegm.  
Not the real thing but a story that implies it: this is her method.

When we look at the fields, they curl at the edges, showing the layers of greed.  
To seek an assistant, I strike a match to the face.

Blow it out, you are hired.

## Ravens

Ravens in their *ruaile buaile* hear the tick of season-tuning trees  
they colonise like something moral to be despised.  
Out of the regions of the tourist dark they surprise by being  
here, by being real. I am aware that our language crosses swords.  
Your capped heads, your jagged faces, not all one colour, no,  
you are blue and grey gradations, you are indigo inked to the red  
edge. The stones you drop crack open a rival's eggs.

There is a smite of forever in the calluses behind your beak  
though some of you ail and moult and cheep rather than caw.  
You are not omens of something happening elsewhere, petty deaths  
on the other side of the hill nor votes casting a future of transaction,  
a tit for tat, a blind eye bought for less than it cost last year.  
Lone selves, nothing as trite as foretelling in your congregation.

How to approach you, how to be in the same acre? How not to ask  
why you screech now, wheeling over the trees, or why you quieten,  
each staking yourselves out. You do this. You show aspiration up  
and dress it down. Are you most apt for how little is known?  
This is not wild. This is not idle. Ravens have said it all, almost.  
Here comes the horseman, may I say 'pass by'?

## Colonial Drift

Re-naming the institutions.  
Counting the freckles between sleeve and sling.  
Watching the mountains change colour in time  
to the drums.

Matching ghosts to their namesakes,  
licking their like out of bricks.  
Dismantling the wall  
and re-making it as a cube.

Acting surprised  
when plates take off across the room.  
How many troubled souls to make a poltergeist?

Re-drawing the districts.  
Counting the votes due from each house.  
Adding name variations  
in three official languages.

Calculating the rate of shift,  
taxes due on the living and the dead.

## Camouflage

How many steps back does a soldier take  
before he is due to turn around? Long stride.  
Short stop. Every gate pillar has potential.  
The butcher shop is open today. Fish, fresh  
from the lough, hit the counter with a slipped slap.  
We are out collecting rubber bullets – pocket money  
for the pictures. Internal injuries braised for later.  
Watching is too small a word. Desire informs  
the way we see them walk. Their tempered dance  
is riddled implication. They can turn into a bush  
at a given sound. But the foliage is wrong for here.  
We know where they are. We want to bring them  
tea, hear them try to pronounce our names,  
but there's no way of saying this to camouflage.

## Piebald

Horses of the others,  
 the thinkers, the travellers,  
 tethered on the edge of new dual carriageways,  
 tied in the blank side of advance factories.  
 They verge on the flanks of dealers and shakers  
 where plans end in a thicket of rubble and stumps.  
 What are they for?

A yelled canter down the scruff-sides of dusty villages,  
 barebacked warmth sidling  
 and a hearts-beating thud between your knees –  
 where mis-remembrance is a dream to nourish,  
 where promise can out-run irony.  
 Not the hero horses, beauties black and brave,  
 who took the warrior to battle and will not return,  
 these are compromised, misled and confused,  
 heads too big for their ribcage, scrawny as the  
 screed of grass they pull.

Yet they must have been there from the start –  
 round the back of wired-off ruminations.  
 We pretended not to notice the occasions  
 when they recalled a field,  
 the hock-stripping speed of a gallop down a long hedge  
 where a quiver of legends misted into song  
 but when they started to gather  
 in places built to house a desperation,  
 they seemed to trick our vision of a freedom.

That was a world we lost before it named us –  
 none of the promise, the clang  
 of potential,  
 instead the fetters that hold us to self-interest  
 the binds that make taxes out of failure.  
 That was a world lost before we named it,  
 part of a larger undertaking

to help us understand captivity.  
*Go back, go back* they seem to say  
but we have no direction,  
rounding again the ring road to the city  
as if we know the story behind the story.

## Why islanders don't kiss hello

And it's not just the bad-timing nose-grazing  
jaw against pursed expectation, nor  
is it because of Judas  
(though he slips out the side door of this discussion)  
but more that it seems too familiar  
as we have not been to pre-school with your mother.  
Perhaps we are not fully of *the Europe*  
where the lean-to nature of a kiss can denote  
who will be shafted in a vote.  
Or is it just a fear of being wrong, two in  
Paris, three in Belgrade and so on?  
Right-left instead of left-right could affect the funding  
for those new roads in Cavan.  
It's not to do with hygiene;  
we shake hands happily instead  
but we've learned because we must,  
being from the island of largesse,  
to give that peck of venture in a shared future  
where the view over one shoulder is as good  
from this side as the other.

## Protection

Where he could breathe was under a tree in no trespass.  
Where he could see was out on the lough in a public storm.  
He was able to count the intentions on an eyelash.  
Avoid/evade left no consonant forlorn.

Nights he readied his slap-face, prepared  
to pay through the nose,  
hoping their brand of nod was as good as a wink,  
forgetting the horse -

and in the dead lanes, the cul-de-sacs and the flip-back flats,  
he attempted to forfeit the Queen's shilling,  
long-fingered Bank of Scotland flimsies,  
fivers that no-one would take for a bet on cock or dog.

If only there was somebody to tell him,  
one who could let him know  
when, how and to whom he might pay,  
because he did want to pay,  
he was determined to pay his income tax.

## Flora

The cow is on top of her game,  
her haunches fat, her bones rounded.  
She feels the goddess power of her udder  
in the mould-damp dark of the milking shed.

If she stays still, all may be well.  
If she thinks of the cool absence of horns,  
feels their undead weight balancing her head,  
she may contain herself.

But if she kicks the bucket at full froth,  
tips it from the milker's raw-red hand –  
then she begins a hell which gathers heat  
all through the live-long days without that milk.

## The longing of the bees

Gather together, whisper into the ferns, send a trill  
out with the mistle thrush. What we have to learn  
is that they must be heard. If they arrive all at once  
to remind us of a plague, mutant in their anger,  
loud in their sway, then we might be persuaded,  
even while netting drains, sealing the gaps in outer doors.

Be ready to puncture that inner ear, it is no longer  
needed. Brace yourself for commotion. A brouhaha  
if ever you saw one. Tumult of absence, uproar of lack.  
Without them it seems, nothing is fertile; wheat becomes  
an illusion, oil will not press from seeds that were not crossed.

Who knew the workers had a feel for dork and drone?  
Castrati singing in our ears while we sweltered,  
checking our influence in waves of disproportion.  
Research shows that genes are not the problem.  
We resolve to put a capsule into space, a narrative  
for those who may yet come. Listen to the hedges  
it will say. Remember, to swarm is not to warn.

## Night Light

Here's to the workers, the benders, the binders  
 in their slow push across the open field  
 moving and planning as if all is certain.  
 We wanted none of that,  
 tucked under the sweeping ash  
 on grass that would never be hay.  
 We thought we knew best, lolled till the night  
 tightened the day. And then we saw it –  
 lantern of goblin, flicker of demon,  
 spittle of devil, will-o-the-wisp.

Did you come to let us know the worst,  
 spin us a fright at the light that teeters and dips?  
 When we move, you move.  
 No way out but the side of the field

where you lie in wait with a cold flame.  
 Are you a person lit from within with a hope  
 or a beckon? No limbs but a head that  
 flickers and bobs. Lantern of goblin,  
 spittle of devil, will o the wisp,  
 why did you come?  
 A stroke of blood slows in the ears  
 and stops.  
 We could be punished, streaky with sweat  
 on our backs on the grass that cannot be cut.  
 We could learn how things must always fit together.  
*Will o the wisp o, wisp o the will o*  
*we will repent in any given future*  
*if you'll just let us go, o will o the wisp.*

## Republica dolorosa

I didn't mean it personally. Not as a fanatic strips a thousand year old Icon with a knife because they are alone with it in a darkened room and it beckons. Not like that. I didn't mean to do it, wobbling a path down the garden with an over-full wheel barrow to sever the bee as big as a knuckle, smack in the middle of the crazy paving. I thought it was dead already. But the bees came, swung their severed force at me, their world wrecker. Upways, edgeways and every-ways; virgins, workers and drones, all forgetting the sworn dance. Not in swarm but in confusion. Confusion, as if they know how things have unravelled out, how we hate majesty, the daring of it, pushed in our proletarian faces. Apparently I dared to kill a queen. Now I operate outside the protocols, not knowing who is on the inside track, realising the barrow is upset, the flood gates are open; we are standing on the brink of the slippery slope. When the icon is sooth-slashed, who will teach us how to cope?

## Warrenpoint

I was born after the event. In the undergrowth  
we ate liquorice leaves, blackened our tongues  
so we could say bad words like *cunt*.  
We talked to the bogey man who lived in the wood.  
He went hatless and hunching to the convent door  
every day save Friday when they dipped fish.  
The roads ended in hills where the world began.  
When the sun went down it lit up other people's lives.  
If we wanted a goose we went to the goose farm,  
chased them until they were solid with fear.

In the summer we swapped nest eggs.  
That we laughed was no guarantee of hatching.  
We played soccer in a field flattened out of a hill,  
our balls scuppered on pricks of thistle-down.  
*Exponential* was a word I learned from the radio  
bringing the maimings close.  
Our attics linked up if you wall-crawled through.  
From the last window we could watch the street unreel.

## Periwinkles

Long after pollution was confirmed, you insisted  
on picking periwinkles by the Bull Wall.  
We swapped them in the kitchen for fresh ones  
from Thomas's fish stall in Mary Street.  
And when you went out door-to-door for Fianna Fáil,  
they thought your northern accent helped to swell  
the brand of softer nation they were selling.  
Dev had been betrayed and those treaty chaps  
were led astray, forgetting the sacrifice of the fifteen.  
The inheritance was clear, a straight line right back  
from there to here and a daughter who believed  
not one word of it, until you took her up -  
gave her the Troubles tour, backing around  
Stranmillis to Malone. That's where Muldoon slipped  
out a window of a night to meet his squeeze.  
And there's the bay those giant roses set alight.

## Bog Swimming

Never again we say each year, bitten by midges  
into promises we won't keep. Then again  
we wonder about the depth. Will the pool hole  
hold us in its deep or will drought have shrunk it,  
reeds have choked it, bulrushes have brushed it?  
A flask is essential, the crawl of Irish down our gorge.  
No one has fenced this bit of bog, recalling some  
ancient right of way, some widow's curse  
that could get you rightly. A globule of fear  
down the slather side of the cut and we're off!  
Ease is not sun is not shade. So many things are not  
what they appear, yet we have a bog and grog  
and wherever there's a might there's a maybe.

## Young girls must have ponies

Livery stables on the Big House theme  
 tucked in the crook of suburban crescents. Actors  
 take the part of groomsmen, making no comment,  
 giggling from afar. A managed environment.  
 Untouchable dung, shovels kept in the barn, used  
 at night when sets are revamped for procession.  
 Reasons to learn pony club songs and sing into  
 community. Event. Ceremony of sacramental  
 reach, like the rosette, its presentation a finality.

The act, art of being seen, present in a way that shines.  
 Cashmere watchers, a faint jag of feeling for horse,  
 Equus, a stirring in the left brain, that dream she had  
 before she was married. Is there a classical reference?  
 No way now to define what a stallion means. Yet  
 she recalls a rearing Arabian, plumed head, plaited tail,  
 there for the night show of palominos, a ballet of proportion.

The lesson, how it went, rising trot, canter from the left.  
 Connect that solid shoulder to your trembling knee,  
 an imperceptible lean gives the signal. It's almost *dressage*.  
 Provide them, we say, in the managed wood,  
 every weekend, to keep boredom and worse at bay.  
 Otherwise young girls – needed for breeding – will fade.

## Framed

Because he had a large growth on his neck they called him Dinny of the unborn twin and the worst of them asked if he ever voted for labour. When the ships came in there were containers to lift with the new-fangled thing-uma-jig that took away the jobs of fourteen dockers. Once a smallish wooden pallet that got sent the wrong way from Guyana. Pineapples, smelling to high heaven. The scent of the Caribbean, though we argued about whether Guyana was South American or part of the Anglo-Carib proper. Sparks who had BBC World Service said it was; he'd heard a long-boat-man from there tell how they roasted coconuts on fires till they burst with the heat of their milk, making a splatter that they ate all up, washed off the stickiness in the tide. But there was a reason to begin this... yes, the question of the unborn and the rights of same. Well, we brought Dinny in, all scrubbed up, to the minister. Frame was his name, from somewhere down west where they've those long towns built toward the worship hall and they're trained to stare straight and to think straight. Reverend, we said, there's a growing boy out the back of this man's neck and we think, as you are the upstanding and the outstanding you should now stand up for the rights of the yet to be born and get it out for us, yes, get it out. Well, he's still looking at us with one eye forlorn as a burnt out tree and the other whipped clean to the whiskey. We turned him that day, it's true as god, and he left for Scotland once the spring came in and didn't even have a farewell do for his leaving. Somewhere in the outer or the inner Hebrides they say, there's a squinter of a man who was once of the cloth and his crossing is and his crossing was and his crossing always will be forever and ever, amen

## Fodder

What you have seen cornfield, could make you weep.  
The stories they tell from the north  
would be worthless to yours.  
When you were a battleground, you held your whist.  
One side or another, whoever won would need to eat.  
You have ears to hear the centuries whisper  
but mostly you heed your own low murmur –

Cornfield, when the breeze flies through you,  
makes a set dance of your bright tips,  
or when a path opens up to your centre  
as if a mysterious finger parts your waves,  
then we could believe you hold the wisdom of the ages.  
But you might not agree.  
You might say instead,  
*Just believe in corn.*

## Shooting up the Satellite

Gathered on the dark side of the dealership,  
under its old enormous dish.  
Steel pins you wouldn't think could bend in heat,  
a cone of insects, webs, dead beetle shells.

God knows where they found the bullets,  
guilted into assignation.  
Guns are plentiful round here  
but not many have ammunition.

It used to be white, this grey-streaked pool  
of dirty light. Comparing barrel size,  
they work it up. First to hit the center.  
Waiting for that ping of the winner.

But the bullets go right through the thinning  
metal. No zing. Not a ricochet between them.  
They don't use the word *disappointed*  
but slope home, carry what they wasted.

## Drumlins have no personality

they bland the land,  
make one space much like another.  
The road imposed by tar  
could ribbon off at any moment –  
pop open a corpuscle, a sup-hole of slippage.

In the dips between shale hills  
is water or its suggestion.  
The glands of a fish were found here  
petrified in a granite slate.

If you could find where it ends,  
this is egg-in-a-basket topography,  
undulations for a giant game of hide and seek,  
threnody for straw boys  
and those who chase the wren.

In the few straggling bushes,  
polished pockets of stasis.  
What would it be to sink here  
if these hills reversed,  
plug holes to a swipe of earth –

They cannot be farmed. They will not be domestic.

They ask for nothing  
but leave us a little frantic,  
a touch of babble at the edges of our springs.

## War has been given a bad name

(after Brecht)

I am told that the best people have begun to say, from a moral point of view, how it is difficult now to believe in a cause. With international terror, the home-grown sort was difficult to ignore. Of course the finest of us were never in their target, being able to justify the conflict for either side. But even the bishop is concerned about absolution: perhaps a collective blessing where nobody catches his eye. Business types warn about recession, as most of those 'volunteers' will need a pension. Some even think it better to maintain status quo. But they do say we should attend the *Let go and Forget* sessions, coupons free with national newspapers. I believe they have someone there so mesmerising that even those with holes through their palms may learn to pray.

## The lease

The widow was protected  
by every cancer, liver or lung  
by the heifer found hung,  
by poison in the well,  
by gypsies and their tell,  
by the lawyer in his seat  
who rounded down instead of up,  
by the grant giver,  
the inspector's cover,  
all that holds things in together  
so they seem, they seem,  
until the widow's curse is slated,  
her lease is not renewed,  
and we know next to nothing  
about what might be lost  
until the day they roll their tools  
into her yard, to strip her pipes  
and prise her roof apart.

## Interference

I'm on a caffeine high and on the street and on the steps and in the crowded train, everybody seems their loveliest, their best selves hauled out of beds, scrubbed, finished with a comb, moisture still glistening in their pores. I could hug them all and I'm one of them, all business this day with work to go to and a bag full of scripts to mark. My coffee is the free one you get after eight others and the barrista says *regular skinny cappuccino* and it tastes all the smoother from someone who could have been a friend, judging from her sparky shoulders. *Announcement: Southern rail is delayed due to a person under train.* Briefly, with a smidgen of doubt, I see the brain opened by speed, the cauliflower slice before the blood but then a tiny infant in a blue suit smiles half at me and I catch his eye and we play peek-a-boo around my cup. Could this be a church really, right here on the morning train, could this be church? And thank god, or that beyond which there is no appeal for the bean growers and the harvesters, the roasters and the drivers that bring this treasure from Colombia (certain other cargoes in slip-sided vents); the middle men and women, all just trying to raise their kids and give them an education - except those that are not. And I think of the last time I was in church before the cardinal said that it was right in canon law for that priest to do nothing after children were raped except tell his superior, tell his superior and skip back to the sacristy to get sacramental. It was right in Canon Law. And it's clear that law is not what these lovelies want, nor what I want nor what the dote in the blue suit wants. How can they not see that we are holy? Is it that holding things in place long enough to enter your pores renders a question that halves itself on the way from right to left brain and halves again until it's in so many pieces you can hardly bear to keep them but you know it can go on halving? And why did that person, heart scudding, wrist pulsing, walk out under that train this morning?

## The same people living in the same place

i

the first mistake was we believed our own publicity  
 we were gone and there was no finding us  
 not through protest not via mothers crying on TV  
 not through the spiel of indignation when elections loom –  
 we were gone so far from the seat of power that  
 this is what they call 'disappeared'  
 we held ourselves quietly, with dignity we thought  
 though there was no-one to see, we waited  
 as a chip waits for a lucky draw,  
 as the back end of an argument waits for *the reveal*  
 we waited, until we almost forgot ourselves,  
 until the hum and the haw of prevarication  
 was the rhythm it seemed of the seasons.  
 Will we be left in the lime slide of time  
 and what will they call us then?

ii

Hell is an island of too many horizons.  
 A book called *Enquire within about everything*  
 has got to be framed by the devil.  
 The first ink drawing of the man with the longest nails in the world.  
 He cannot change his clothes, his nephews must help him to eat.

An overview of human teeth, separated by race,  
 herbivore apes on a sliding bar of comparison.  
 Twenty seven varieties of sausage made from offal,  
 none including ground chicken feet.

*Oh for the curlicue of an ornate majuscule.*  
*Ah to feel a cursive stroke of light.*

Here is the curl in N for New Ireland  
 Here is a list of the least important deaths.



## Origin of the mimeo

What do guns when they are not in use?  
In the dead of night they double and divide,  
naming new owners, finding a new ruse.

Carry a gun on stage, it must be fired.  
*Deterrent* only lasts until undone.  
Better they are counted out of mind.

List the ways to frame a decommission,  
a car-park graveyard covered with cement.  
Which stay on stasis is sufficient?

Marking each as *put beyond use*.  
Keeping their provenance as you would art.  
Rocking the replicas back to their false start.  
It's got to be efficient.

## Convexed

If the eye of Ireland is really Lough Neagh,  
is it all-seeing or blinkered down one side?  
Does it know the difference between reed beds  
and seedy edges, bulrush and sedgeway?  
Can it feel the scoring of oars on nights  
with a black finish or tell when small  
little stones are pulled by more than a boat?  
Looking up, possibly through us, the lake  
feels huge in its land bed as if we could never  
know it as scooped from the hand of Fionn  
or as pissed from the horse of Aengus.  
And if it looks down, is there a swirl from  
the eddies, a sucking out of capillaries  
as every last drop down to the centre of that  
inexplicable body of water slips through  
the upholdings of the expert water leveller ?

## Clew Bay from the Reek

No way to pace yourself or plan a rest.  
Each ridge peak declares itself a fake.  
So on, over fences of chicken net  
that mark out fields of sheep dropping and rock.  
We may be on the wrong side of the stack.  
Each patch is someone's care but we are glad  
to find some sagging wire, paths worn down  
by pilgrims; like us, not the barefoot kind.  
At last the top. A tough stone chapel  
and a saint's hard bed. And look, the cloud  
beneath breaks open to begin a bay,  
blue and green as earth seen from our  
nearest star, perfect as paint. Panting  
we count the islands in its keep, one  
for each day of the year, though some tiny,  
just a nest, a pair of gannets maybe –  
not that we can see them from up here but  
think, and of the salt clams beneath  
clamping cool suckers to the planted rocks  
or oysters, growing their cold pearl hearts  
where even now a stone might lodge to rub  
itself into a keepsake of love. Pots of lobster,  
meat of the sea, boiled from life, slathered in  
butter as a feast; all this we see  
and separate out from our group to feel  
how things are shifting from this height,  
how we're lifted out of ourselves until one,  
young and without fear, begins to whoop  
a clear, felt sound, a rare high tremor.  
She whoops and waves her arms as if to take  
it all, gather in against whatever comes –  
false ridges that may yet hide proper peaks,  
she whoops and whoops for every one of us  
and how we are discovered by a reek.

## About cows

They shit a lot and at first it is a warm pat  
ridged with raised circles as it dries.  
Water stopped in its tracks or a viscous jelly  
hardening from the outside in.  
I think of dying in a pool of shite,  
the one my mother meant –  
*Go take a running leap in the slurry pit for all I care.*  
We had lost three cats that summer.  
Seeing them stiffed, legs rigid and shining  
made an art of death.  
But this was to be about cows,  
their lumbering walk to the gap to be milked  
as if they know more together than apart.  
They can smell a stream of fresh water from a mile.  
They can hear grass growing under the bull.  
They hold time in their four stomachs, chewing it down  
till the evening milking, feeling the hours move on through.  
They do not miss the calves they have had taken.  
No attachment is apparent in three days.  
Perhaps like the farmer in a unit of money,  
they count on exchange.  
Cows know their own patch but they'll stray to graze another's.  
Swung towards the hedge in rain, heads dripping,  
tail swatch taking a rest from flies.  
Apparently rural but worldly wise, cows know that loss  
is our only measure, expellation a passing pleasure.

## Drip Feed

The trough beside the house is thick  
with dashed hopes. There before brick,  
before mortar, for travelling horses, stages  
from their posts, its sides poured and patted  
keep the mark of spade and blade, spit  
in its motted pocks and fear of the ganger.

This is the drowning spot for runts of litters,  
sow's disgrace squealing down the night,  
when straw runs short and tempers fester envy.  
Here birds fall, the souls of angels trapped  
in slow-flapped deaths though no-one ventures  
why in heaven's name they failed to fly.

But it's the cat, set on the aspic shelf  
that stays wet to the touch. Rigor bound  
with four trip-rigid legs. Cat in its drowned  
death no longer Tabby, but something more dead,  
more of a shock to find in the wide morning  
of visitor delight than any reminder  
that we know nothing yet.

## Learning Greek in Knockanes

Whiff of dead cow from a lorry's lurch.  
Out to be out, one solitary walker,  
I hope to go as far as the garden centre  
where half a loaf is hung from the Laburnum.

No low wall to sit from here to there,  
just these quick grow hedges, leafing fast  
to mask the hangers of inverted temples,  
many fine archways for the bats.

Cobwebs have ionised the monkey puzzle  
where birds insist on calling out a summer.  
And look, a jogger getting smaller and thinner  
runs himself on into the damp.

The ranch house waits for its seventh pillar,  
gapes at a sun room, massively blank.  
Peonies nuzzle in a stone swan's back  
tickling those wings about to flap.

Pruned garnish, an island on the gravel,  
nothing edible for anyone outcast.  
But two eagles prepare on cement posts  
to guard against whatever might be worse.

A vacant site, bullocks breathe the gap  
before new earth movers arrive.  
Yellow tabs jammed in their jet ears  
catch the last inkling of the light.

The jogger's back, damp-dark in his vest,  
incoming rain glistening on his legs.  
I'd best turn round, head into the mist  
from halfway to where I meant to get.

## Tone

Tone says here is the other cheek, why don't you have a go at that?  
Tone is when you're giggling at a double bluff and you see someone crying.  
Tone is an artist dropping a Ming vase and calling that *art*. Tone is another artist slashing that guy's canvas, calling him a fart. Tone is muscling up to the Peace People, they don't have a mandate for peace. Tone sings a Satanic mass in the civic center, where tone agrees to use vinegar for urine.  
Tone is an author in search of a character able to roll tone home from the bank.  
Tone wants a reader in tune with the tone that is there and the one that is not.  
Tone is peeling an orange in its pocket so the smell will madden, building a bungalow on your eyelid with an overlook to the back. Tone is a weasel, drawing the birds down with a special sensuous dance and then, tone is lunch.

Nothing trumps tone but when there's a crack in it, watch what slips in.  
It might be an anti-tone - undoing bravura, dulling the gloss, leaving tone spent, in a fierce bad mood, exposed in the light of all that we once thought we shared.

## The shame of our island

is that we killed the wolf.  
Not just the last  
but the two before that.

I knew a man who met a man  
who was the cousin removed  
of the great-grandson of the man  
who killed the third-last wolf  
on the island.

Slit it he did,  
to see the steaming innards -  
how long they were, how tightly wound.

Had it a white paw to the fore?  
That gene would have been recessive.  
Was there a black bar across the yellow eye?  
No time to notice its *différence*.

Is this a wolf with its bared teeth  
and its lairy smell  
and its fetlock tipped with white?

Is this wolfish?

## Introduction

The environment of the linguistically and politically conflicted island of Ireland and of its relationship to the cultures of the larger neighbouring island has informed poems and poets throughout the several traditions lodged within these islands. As Auden said of Yeats, 'Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry' and there's a sense that poets have fallen into identifiable sections – those who visited the historical and present-day loci of identity issues and various other forms of conflict within their work and those who have appeared not to do so.<sup>1</sup> Even a cursory look at key moments in the debates around such issues however, shows that there are many cross-currents and inter-dependencies within these apparently binary arguments.

Michael Longley said in an interview in 1979 that a writer 'would be inhuman if he did not respond to tragic events in his own community and a poor artist if he did not seek to endorse that response imaginatively.' However, he added that the artist needs to take the time required to let material settle to a proper imaginative depth.<sup>2</sup>

And it's true that this sense of the need to allow time to pass, instead of supporting a

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<sup>1</sup> W.H.Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1991), poem: 'In Memory of W.B.Yeats', pp. 247-49.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Frank Ormsby, 'Introduction', *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1992), p. xvii.

kind of reactionary writing, informed the thinking behind some of the vehement adverse commentary on the anthology edited by Padraic Fiacca, published in 1974, *The Wearing of the Black: an Anthology of Contemporary Ulster poetry*.<sup>3</sup> Fellow poet, James Simmons' review of this work in *The Honest Ulsterman* took Fiacca to task for what was perceived as blatant opportunism in a badly thought through collection of work presenting, to use Fiacca's phrase, poets who had been 'touched by violence'.<sup>4</sup> Simmons soundly scolds Fiacca in his review entitled 'The man most touched', objecting to both the premise of the collection as well as the fact that the editor includes more of his own work than that of anyone else and characterizing the work as parasitic on the unfolding conflict in Northern Ireland. It's instructive perhaps to note that even as recently as 1993, the literary debate surrounding the publication of *The Wearing of the Black* was still worth mentioning by Patricia Craig as she reviewed the then new anthology of Troubles poetry, *A Rage for Order* (edited by Frank Ormsby) comparing the latter favourably with the 'ill-advised immediacy' of Fiacca's 1974 'rush-to-press anthology', *The Wearing of the Black*.<sup>5</sup> Even here she says, 'the neurotic demotic mode of Fiacca gets far too substantial a showing. The failing of such poetry, when it fails, is called portentousness.'<sup>6</sup> The discomfiting anti-lyric nature of some of Fiacca's work will be dealt with in the chapter devoted to him below but it's interesting to note a different point of view in Terence Brown's appreciation of the different 'moods' of Fiacca. Brown writes in a chapter entitled 'Pádraic Fiacca, The Bleeding Bough' in 1975, characterizing both an earlier and a

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<sup>3</sup> Padraic Fiacca, ed., *The Wearing of the Black: An Anthology of Contemporary Ulster Poetry* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Padraic Fiacca, 'Violence and the Ulster poet', *Hibernia*, 6 December 1974, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Craig, *Times Literary Supplement* 19 February 1993, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

subsequent book by the poet: 'To be Irish in *By the Black Stream* is to know a permanent condition of loss; in *Odour of Blood* it is to know unending psychic pain. To one is a vision of poignancy sensitively presented, the other of anguish confronted directly with moral and aesthetic courage.'<sup>7</sup>

In re-looking at the set of debates over the relationships between poetry and politics, myth and history with a backdrop of the Troubles, the arguments over the book, *North* by Seamus Heaney are still pertinent and remain best outlined by Ciarán Carson's review in *The Honest Ulsterman*. Carson is wary of what the poet might become in terms of himself embodying the status of 'myth, of institution' implying perhaps that the poet's proper place is to retain the freedom for artistic endeavor from the sidelines of any establishment or cultural hegemony. More importantly in relation to the poems themselves, Carson believes that abstraction has won out over precision. He specifies that this lodges within 'a superstructure of myth and symbol' which leads almost inevitably to becoming 'an anthropologist of ritual killing, and apologist for "the situation", in the last resort, a mystifier'.<sup>8</sup> Heaney is also accused of neglecting the human consequences of the violence thus encoded and of thereby allowing for a tendency to let actual happenings acquire the status of myth without plumbing their political reality.

The panoply of Irish writing shows up a number of varying approaches taken by poets

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<sup>7</sup> Terence Brown, 'Pádraic Fiacc, The Bleeding Bough', in *Northern Voices, Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), pp. 141-48.

<sup>8</sup> Ciarán Carson, 'Escaped from the Massacre?', *The Honest Ulsterman*, 50 (Winter 1975), pp. 183-186.

toward dealing with aspects of the historical identity crises of the peoples on these islands and/or of the realities of the Troubles. While some have found poetic answers by developing work which uses tonal play and other devices to encompass both the lyric imperative and a socially engaged moment, others have developed a wholly defensible position in foregrounding aesthetics over politics even while acknowledging that struggle outside the realm of the poem. Poets who have written about the dilemma have done so aware of the dangers of being accused of exploiting suffering for literary gain or of fetishizing or downplaying the effects of violence by encoding it within literary forms. On the other hand, they write while knowing they may be accused of ignoring the social effects of political decisions. As John Montague puts it in 'No Music': 'There is no music for so harsh a song' though elsewhere he makes a case for a transcendent aesthetic and, perhaps tellingly, he leaves out this stanza in his collected poems.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Tom Paulin, in defence of the power of imagination but with a sense of the artistic cost, writes in 'The Other Voice': 'The theatre is in the streets,/The streets are in the theatre,/The poet is torn to pieces.'<sup>10</sup>

Addressing the anthology mentioned above, *A Rage for Order*, raises another interesting question as to what kind of poem was considered 'poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles' to quote the sub-title used by editor Frank Ormsby. Having been excluded from this collection, Medbh McGuckian chose a quote from Pablo Picasso about the

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<sup>9</sup> John Montague, *The Great Cloak*, (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1978) contains this stanza whereas *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1995) does not (p.105).

<sup>10</sup> Tom Paulin, 'The Other Voice,' *A Rage for Order*, ed. Frank Ormsby (Belfast, Northern Ireland: The Blackstaff Press, 1992) lines 94-96.

second World War as the epigraph to her 1994 collection *Captain Lavender*: 'I have not painted the war... but I have no doubt that the war is in... these paintings I have done.'<sup>11</sup> Additionally, in her author statement on the British Council website, addressing the topic 'why I write', McGuckian says, among other things: 'To be a voice, or to give voice to things that have been oppressed and repressed in my particular culture'.<sup>12</sup> It seems then that the public-facing poem may in fact be more subtle than some critics or readers acknowledge. Indeed, it may be that the decisions made by individual artists could be radically misinterpreted by those we trust for those interpretations.

Is it clear to most readers that Paul Muldoon's poem 'The year of the sloes, for Ishi' was written directly after Bloody Sunday and, according to the interview in *The Paris Review* is somewhat in response to that event? Muldoon says '...I wrote it immediately after Bloody Sunday, which is when the paratroopers opened fire on an unarmed crowd, it seemed. They're still inquiring as to what happened on that day in 1972. And I wrote that poem really in response to it. So that seemed to be a chancy thing to do, and something that nobody really understood at the time, I think.'<sup>13</sup> Muldoon goes on to make a point about poems such as 'Imram,' the long poem in *Why Brownlee Left*, which, he says, 'people weren't really able to read immediately any more than they were immediately able to read "The More a Man Has, the More a Man Wants."'

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<sup>11</sup> Medbh McGuckian, *Captain Lavender*, (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1994), p. ix.

<sup>12</sup> 'Medbh McGuckian', British Council authors website <<http://www.literature.britishcouncil.org/medbh-mcguckian>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> November 2014].

<sup>13</sup> James S.F. Wilson, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon', *The Paris Review*, Issue 169, Spring 2004 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/30/the-art-of-poetry-no-87-paul-muldoon>> [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> November 2014].

What is clear then is that while the political, directly or even obliquely addressed, may make some critics and readers uncomfortable, it's acknowledged by some poets as one of the things a poem can do. The interviewer of Muldoon, pursuing the use of Native American material in the 'Ishi' poem, uses one of the arguments also used against Seamus Heaney's book *North*:

INTERVIEWER

In spite of the historical verities, working with this material one still runs the risk of reducing an artwork to an analogy, which then is basically empty but for values to insert from history.

MULDOON

Yes. It's always problematic, that's for sure. Again, these analogies are true only for a moment, for an instant. And if one tries to extend them one runs into trouble often.<sup>14</sup>

With this in mind, Medbh McGuckian may be a case in point. Her work is radical in its pursuit of a linguistic richness and associative power of shifting perspectives which seems both wholly lodged within her milieu as well as providing the transcendent ladder out of that milieu as it were. Initially, I hoped to include a reading of McGuckian's work within the critical element presented here but on re-reading the books, I found that this

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

is work which almost completely resists academic investigation. There may be nothing useful to be said 'about' a McGuckian poem except 'experience it through reading it'. In this way, her anti-academic and wholly artistic stance is confirmed constantly by any encounter with the work. She seems to say 'the poem is the poem is the poem'. Were it not for the necessity to write critically for a doctoral presentation then, these could be the last words of this paper but, since there's only one McGuckian, and the rest of the poets and critics do not inhabit the mysteriously right place that her work can create while one is caught in its grasp, I have chosen two other poets who both embody differing aesthetic answers to the set of problems outlined above.

Eavan Boland and Padraic Fiacc appear, on the surface, to present reasons for being addressed in a presentation such as this. Boland from the Republic of Ireland and Fiacc from Northern Ireland were arguably at least partially formed as poets in their time spent in the USA, and in Boland's case, also in the UK. Thus, they might present two aspects of 'outsiders' to what is variously called the 'Northern group' or the 'school' or 'coterie' which includes Heaney, Longley, Simmons and latterly Muldoon, who met, more or less regularly depending on who is doing the telling, with the poet and Professor Philip Hobsbaum to air both work and ideas. The latter 'group', while more recently spoken of as less formally conceived than it may sometimes appear in criticism, was nonetheless a powerful Four-Horseman type entity at least in popular imagination.

Perhaps because of her auto-criticism and the consequent academic appreciation of her work through a feminist prism, Boland is to my mind under-regarded as a poet of conflict, a 'war' poet of sorts and one who deals with the disenfranchised and the excluded as part of the latter tendency in her work and not solely to uphold the 'herstory' of women's experience. Fiacca is under-regarded for other reasons, partly due to the controversy surrounding his tendency to confront the brutality of violence within the poem itself, something not appreciated by his contemporaries, most of whom maintained a careful ethic in the face of the mayhem in Northern Ireland.

It will be seen however that these reasons just adumbrate the surface of the topics which a close reading of selected sections of their oeuvres uncover. Fiacca and Boland operate in contrast to each other, but there are distinct links in terms of their overall project. Identifying and amplifying those links also provides a way towards discussion of my own creative work. Both Boland and Fiacca will be seen to experiment with the point of view within the poem, sometimes manipulating the 'voice' in the poem to have it both ways as it were, using a dual objective/subjective prism. Both poets will be seen to employ a complex layering which builds throughout their work, creating an overall metaphorical power in addition to what can appear to be surface narratives. The latter two poetic 'moves' are of interest to me as a practitioner. I believe that 'From there to

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<sup>15</sup> See Gerald Dawe, 'History Class: Northern Poetry, 1970-1982', *New Hibernia Review* 7.1, 2003, pp. 75-86. This article partially debunks the idea of a literary renaissance in Ulster as well as the coherence of the Belfast group.

here' continues to extend some of the interconnected metaphors exemplified by Boland and Fiacc, especially those standing for abuse of power as well as for the dual dangers of nostalgia and lack of vigilance.

In addition, the collection of poems included here is proffered in the spirit of knowing that every attempt at a poem is an experiment and that no quasi-academic enquiry should or could interfere with that scary moment of encounter with the blank page when something or nothing may happen for a writer. However, 'From there to here', read after the process of development, is seen to raise themes and ideas via the artistic decisions made on the page which pertain to the overall thrust of the critical chapters. In this way, the title may also obliquely refer to the lessons learned from poets Boland and Fiacc who have also grappled with some of these distinctive stylistic and aesthetic questions.

One way to address 'From there to here' is to ask whether the collection proffers a position on the place of art in the social arena. Could it be that the nature of the poem itself is, at least occasionally, an answer to whether there's any moral imperative on the artist, especially one who writes about a violent society or from within one that is emerging from violence? One of the aspects that links Fiacc and Boland is their consistent effort not to be forced to take sides (despite Edna Longley's interpretation of

Boland as a quasi-nationalist).<sup>16</sup> Both exhibit the ability to poetically skewer aspects of what might be considered their own set of traditions (if we take it that they were born into these) as well as those of others. They appear to share contempt for fanaticism in its various forms and a wariness of the self-delusion which can fuel such fanaticism.

That 'delusion' could be seen to be part of the legacy of a Revivalist tendency where culture was being marshalled, sometimes coercively, to support the creation of a myth of nation. This can be seen from that fact that while both these poets may hunger for the lyrical, they also share an intellectual distrust of how that lyric might be used. They both at times, undercut the lyric by writing against lyric expectation and yet the lyric retains a strong presence in both oeuvres, with Boland often also publically describing herself as a 'lyric poet'. Can it be that their distrust of the abuse of the lyric, its (sometimes) easy assumptions, its tendency to persuade under the influence of musicality, is a site of aesthetic conflict for both poets? My contention here is that they both pursue what they perceive to be a moral imperative to deal with the social and political realities and that while their answers are technically different in terms of poetics, they have many points of comparison.

In the introduction to *After Every War: Twentieth-Century Women Poets*, Eavan Boland makes clear that the political poem in Ireland (post-Troubles) had to make a transition from being a public poem to being one which charted the deepest point of injury

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<sup>16</sup> Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Tartet: Bloodaxe, 1994), pp. 173-85. In this piece, Edna Longley suggests that Eavan Boland holds onto unitary assumptions about "a society", "a nation", and "a literary heritage".

engendered by violence: it had to move towards the private arena. The political poem she says, did register what she calls 'that disappearing country'. 'The more it registered the political upheaval the less it became a public poem. The less it became a public poem, the more available it was to the private world which is the site of the deepest injury in a time of violence.'<sup>17</sup> In this way, Boland makes a case that could be applied to her own work. She has written eloquently on re-inscribing the poem with the private experience of, in particular, women. But she is also addressing the after-effects of terror, that invasive by-product of political violence, starkly displayed by the guerrilla warfare that occurred during the Troubles in Northern Ireland and now so clear to us all in daily life. Boland operates to address the subliminal aspects of terror as they invade private consciousness. She moves the political poem towards the personal in doing this. As she says of the after-war poems in *After Every War*:

The political poem is an elusive category. The absolute privacy and reticence of some of these poems may not at first seem to fit that category. Yet in many instances, these poems show how the privacies and sidelinings of a woman's life—the silences of mothers and daughters, the individual life swept away by remote decisions, the shattered existence of families—affect a poetic perspective in a time of catastrophic violence. It is the very powerlessness of these lost entities which becomes, with hindsight, both a retrieval system and a searing critique of power. In that sense, of course, these are defining political

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<sup>17</sup> Eavan Boland, ed., *After Every War: Twentieth-Century Women Poets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 5.

poems.<sup>18</sup>

Fiacc makes a different aesthetic decision but one nonetheless stimulated by moral feeling. Adopting the approach of sometimes forming images from the savagery of political violence, he also writes pieces which trace the privately-felt cost upon his 'person', particularly when he writes of the childhood which he seems perversely stuck within, as if the violence of the present has stunted an expected natural development. As will be seen, Fiacc takes this further, writing poems to mirror the chronic instability of the social arena in ways which suggest that this has destabilized the poem itself and within the poem, the line, and even the word.

It is as if the idea of 'witness' in both poets has forced them to match aspects of their art to the demands of that witness. As both began writing before the spate of violence which began in 1960 and which is termed the 'Troubles', and as both experimented with other aesthetics before refining their work in the directions described here, it's possible to trace a poetic development which in both made a turn towards socially engaged work which experimented with ways of allowing the political, social and cultural struggles into the poem. Both, at times, were strongly criticised for this attempt which is not surprising, given the heated nature of cultural control and counter-control in Ireland.

Robert Hass, the poet and thinker from San Francisco, also gives us an elegant

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.5.

description of how a poem which relates to terror might operate. He writes in a chapter called 'Poetry and Terror: some notes on Coming to Jakarta' of the long poem by Peter Dale Scott and of how such a poem might be written 'not just in order to understand the nature of terror, but to produce an aesthetic effect that might be called the sensation of understanding, the formal feeling of understanding.' He goes on to make a case for the fact that the poem can assimilate and present aspects of contemporary experience which can otherwise feel unmanageable:

That effect amounts to an assertion that the quieted anxieties and nightmare terrors of private life, and the political violence... the secret world through which arms, money, drugs and agendas of political manipulation pass, that we also glimpse, though more fleetingly, when fragments of a pattern emerge in the investigation of some scandal or other, also the visible and semi-visible processes of government, and the common sense that our world is spinning out of control or sunk in a deathly inertia of habitual closed circuits of action – that all these can be integrated in a poem, despite the fact that our lives among these phenomena do not feel integrated and the fact that these materials are, therefore, the ones that would seem to sink the very possibility of poetry'.<sup>19</sup>

If Hass' elucidation of how the understanding of being politically manipulated can enter into the poem corroborates Boland's move to recognise the personal as political, it is also corroborated by Fiacco's decision to write out of his own direct experience, a shift of

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Hass, *What light can do: Essays on Art, Imagination and the Natural World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), p. 194.

approach to his own poem which will be described in the chapter devoted to his work.

For now though, I find that the words of Hass move me in re-reading them as they have done on first encounter since, as a poet who tries to face the realities of manipulation including arms dealing and sexual abuse in certain poems, I see an advocate here for the kind of poem that Fiacc and Boland and myself are at least sometimes drawn to write. I find his way of thinking of the poem as a site of something made 'visible' quite liberating and it's heartening to think that there are some critics who, despite the sometimes hostile reaction to such work, can see beyond such reaction to more considered arguments.

In summary then, I have learned from Fiacc and Boland in that I too want to create a poem which is conscious of the human condition, a poem which tries to say what it is like to be human *now*, a poem which addresses the truth of our dilemmas and which is inscribed with the responsibilities that truth entails. My poem is one in which different kinds of 'tellings' can appear – both those concocted as part of abuses of power and those arising because of other kinds of manipulation. This poem is true to my experience of living in a contested State adjoined to a contested statelet where the peddling of false unities is a dangerous accompaniment to political propaganda. Finally, I wanted to create a lyric which is aware of the cost of creation of such a poem, acknowledging that at our writing desks we are protected, and our art is protected, by all kinds of

transactions and compromises in the wider world. Such a lyric is one which retains its power of beauty and of truth and that is the poem to which I aspire and to which Fiacc and Boland remain constant presences.

## Chapter one

### Padraig Fiacc: one of the 'wrong ones'?

In the work of Padraic Fiacc (b. 1924), both the language of the poem and the construction of the poetic line are sites of aesthetic conflict. A favourite poetic device is to subvert reader expectations of the line as it might appear in the inherited lyric poem and to abuse syntax for effect. Normal narrative associations are peppered with odd swerves into apparently dissociative imagery, often using sentences stripped of pronouns. Fiacc employs several devices to emphasise the element of rhetorical 'telling' in the poem, thus drawing attention to questions of whose story it is to tell and with whose authority. Fiacc likes to scramble word order and to, in Gerald Dawe's words, portray language 'as a physically despoiled body'.<sup>20</sup> The ellipsis, disrupted cadence, and almost anti-musical nature of some lines with their sharp enjambments and use of capital letters and brackets give the work a sense of belonging to the wider modernist movement while the re-animation of Irish legend and the socially engaged and apparently shocked conscience of many pieces give a sense of the distinctive place of Northern Irish conflict as the main driver of much of the oeuvre.

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<sup>20</sup> Gerald Dawe, 'Introduction', in *Ruined Pages, Selected Poems* by Padraic Fiacc, edited by Gerald Dawe and Aodán MacPóilin (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1994), p. 1.

The arguments which ensued after the publication of *The Wearing of the Black* anthology were raised here in the introduction. However, in looking at how Fiacca developed his own aesthetic, it's his introduction to this volume which is interesting. Far from making the claims that others ascribed to the work, Fiacca is clear that the anthology is not 'to offer any final statement on ... how deeply contemporary violence can enter a poet's inner being.'<sup>21</sup> He acknowledges that the collection is of its own time and that whether or not any of the poems have the mark of greatness is for a future generation to judge. He clearly wants the work to pose 'the question' by 'presenting poets touched by, or involved in, the situation here,' and to suggest 'how they have tried to come to terms with it in their poetry.'<sup>22</sup> Fiacca thus sets out his interest in the question of what kind of approach to the poem might be taken by a poet writing out of a time of violence (to mangle one of Boland's book titles). As an editor, he is interested in foregrounding the aesthetic decisions such a poet might make and as a poet, he is interested in seeing what form of poetics most fully meets the challenge in his own poems. As will be clear from the final chapter of this thesis, if it's not clear throughout, this is also the question that has preoccupied my own recent project. Fiacca makes a further case saying, 'there is a time to keep silence and a time to speak; at the very least there is nothing in this anthology that did not cry out to be said, and that is surely more than enough to justify its existence'<sup>23</sup>. As already discussed of course, this idea of what

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<sup>21</sup> Padraic Fiacca, ed. *The Wearing of the Black: An Anthology of Contemporary Ulster Poetry* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1974) p. vii.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

cries out 'to be said' was not corroborated by his critics. Their varying approaches leave the impression that obliquity in relation to the Troubles as adopted by many poets may be seen sometimes as an avoidance of appearing to favour one set of communal touchstones over another and at other times as collusion in the myth-making behind such inherited stories. But for my purposes here, it is the interest of Fiacc in how the poem withstands the introduction of tropes of explosive violence and its consequences that is under discussion. As will be seen below, Fiacc approaches the aesthetic question in several different ways and not always with poetically successful results. He often appears to be working with a kind of mock-innocence of reportage which allows the actuality of incident into the poem in a stark fashion, something he uses as a kind of shock tactic. It's a technique that's designed to work as a way of conveying just how shocking the violence is, by drawing attention to the moral dilemmas around it.

Padraic Fiacc (var. Pádraic) had been born Patrick Joseph O'Connor in Belfast in 1924 but emigrated as a child with his family to the Hell's Kitchen area of New York City. There he was educated in Commerce and Haaren high schools in Manhattan and studied for the priesthood. A return to Ireland in 1946 for four years was followed by another stint in New York. He returned permanently to Belfast, which he sometimes terms 'Hellfast', in 1956.

We know from his poems (especially 'Old Poet' where the titular poet is the Revival-era scholar, Padraic Colum) and from his autobiographical fragments that Fiacc struggled

with the advice of his then-mentor Colum, in New York. Colum encouraged Fiacc to write, not of the streets of Hell's Kitchen, but instead to concentrate on the subjects beloved of the Revival, a kind of bucolic mish-mash of myth and yearning. In the poem, 'Old Poet', Fiacc rehearses the arguments for and against an aesthetic which does not take account of the lived-life of the poet nor of the reality he operates within. It is as if Fiacc uses the poem to round out the debate about the search for the proper subject and the proper mode for his poetry. This is the search which every poet encounters when creating a poetic they can live with; it is a search for that authentic poetic moment which answers 'what is my poem *for*?' This is demonstrated within the second section of 'Old Poet' where the poet/speaker is walking through Central Park with the figure of Colum:

The pines stood up as guests about the Hundred and First Street Lake  
 A table of frozen black glass.  
 He waved a hand up to the copper beech  
 To let the grey-faced student strolling with him  
 A tworthree bit of say

Arguing about El Greco and de Valera  
 The eye more on the sparrow than the ear on his own word  
 Who strolled the streets of Dublin with James Joyce  
 And had, like the rest, a bit of a tiff with Yeats...

Under the iced branches of Central Park West  
 With a voice could be of Daniel Corkery  
 Said what Yeats said what the best said  
 'Dig in the garden of Ireland, write of your own':

When we came to Ninety Sixth Street he  
 Flung eyes over the old roads  
 Of the midlands still looking home,  
 Blotted out a penthouse here to scan a hill there  
 Skimmed the snow on the grass as a boythrown stone  
 Skies the skin of water shyfully...

As season's passing, the rain  
 Left on the pavements where the pigeons are  
 The dead leaves of a summer sun...

(*RP* p.40)<sup>24</sup>

The poem deftly highlights the irony of the imperative 'write of your own' as juxtaposed against the wilful aesthetic blindness of he who 'Blotted out a penthouse here to scan a hill there'. A reader of the early work of Fiacca might point out that he too uses the Gaelic revival idiom of borrowed phrases and studied Hiberno-English inflection in some of these poems and that the realities of Hell's Kitchen are kept firmly at bay. Fiacca may acknowledge part of this tendency when he says, 'As a boy, I had Rimbaud's capacities to transform, say, the reservoir into the raging Atlantic...' <sup>25</sup> But he makes a cogent argument in an interview in *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* where he rails against re-interpretations of the Gaelic tradition which misunderstood their real import:

'[Colum] gave me Gaelic literature and folklore and myth and that became important in my work. And, of course, the more I dug, the more I was horrified. Colum was trying to take me off the streets of New York and I guess I was flattered that an older, established poet was interested. In New York even if you want to escape reality you have got to face it for it just keeps coming and coming

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<sup>24</sup> Padraic Fiacca, *Ruined Pages: Selected Poems*, eds. Gerald Dawe and Aodán Mac Póilin (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1994). This publication is hereafter referred to as '*RP*'.

<sup>25</sup> Padraic Fiacca, 'Hell's Kitchen: An autobiographical fragment' in *Ruined Pages, Selected Poems* by Padraic Fiacca, edited by Gerald Dawe and Aodán MacPóilin (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1994) p.155. This text is the script of a programme written and presented by Fiacca on BBC Radio Ulster, broadcast on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1980, produced by Paul Muldoon.

at you—there might be five or six murders a night every night in Manhattan. You see I had this terrible longing for Ireland and Padraic nursed that in me; there are the translations of early Irish literature but these poems are not about escape... “And great King Conor of himself said/Did you ever see a bottomless bucket/In the muck discarded?” How New York can you get? The link between early Irish poetry and New York is that both force you to face reality.’<sup>26</sup>

It was the nature of the reality that Fiacca faced when he returned to Ireland that may have forced him as a poet into developing an aesthetic which could combine the dislocations he felt operating within the society along with those operating within his own personal life.

A key work in this regard is ‘The Wrong Ones’, a poem which appears on pages 30-31 of Fiacca’s 1977 Blackstaff Press volume, *Nights in the bad place*. It also appears in *Ruined Pages*, the invaluable 1994 volume of selected poems edited by Gerald Dawe and Aodán Mac Pólin which tries to unravel Fiacca’s complex publishing history as well as placing work which was only published decades after being written into a semi-chronological order.<sup>27</sup>

The title, ‘The Wrong Ones’, creates the notion that if a set of people are marked as ‘wrong’, this can never be made right. The poem is seen to build upon this idea, drawing

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<sup>26</sup> John Brown, ed. *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Press, 2002) p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> ‘The Wrong Ones’. *RP* p. 136.

in other sets of people as it moves towards its conclusion. The opening line introduces the 'military' and the barracks they were housed in, often hurriedly built with the 'tin /Roof' which here amplifies the rain. These barracks were a normal part of the cityscapes of Northern Ireland where the British Army were deployed in 'Operation Banner' from August 1969 to July 2007. The 'childhood' mentioned is characterised as more aggressive and active, 'murdering' than that of a passive victim 'murdered'. The use of the gerund with its sense of continuous present (in 'ing') implies that the effects of the childhood continue to be felt as negative. The reader might expect this childhood in the present to be a kind of living hell of missed opportunity and thwarted potential and these motifs appear here and in several other works by Fiacca to such an extent that they could be said to be key tropes of his poetic project.

The repetition of 'tolling' seems to indicate the reference should be noted to both John Donne's Meditation XVII from *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* written in the wake of ill health, as well as to the 1940 Ernest Hemingway novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, with its story of a young dynamiter, part of a Republican guerrilla unit during the Spanish civil war. I would hesitate to think that the idea of 'republicanism' is somehow being promulgated here, especially as later in the piece Fiacca makes it clear that the 'kids', the British soldiers and the 'cops' are all in the same situation, but if the reference is to work at an almost subliminal level on the reader, it may be about the 'No man is an island' passage, emphasising the sentiment of 'any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.'

The second stanza is one syntactically difficult sentence, broken at the compound word of 'storm-erected':

I rise and stalk across the scarred with storm  
-erected daisies, night in the north, grass.

The nod to Yeats ('I will arise and go now and go to Inisfree') is possibly invoked to imply a possible opposite to this 'stalk' across a 'scarred' landscape. Unpicking the syntax, it can be read both that the daisies are 'scarred with storm' and that they have been 'storm-erected' (possibly because of the metaphorical storm). The line-break draws attention to '-erected' implying something quite unnatural and not generally associated with daisies. The subject-predicate version of the line without sub-clauses is 'I rise and stalk across the grass' and in reading the line with all its clauses, the broken nature of the syntax operates against the expectation of the reading eye, thus slowing the reader down and subverting expectation of a progressive sentence. This is not linear narrative, but seems dissociative even though the words appear to associate together well as, in the dark, one may have to 'stalk' and one may indeed walk over the flowers of weeds. The use of 'grass', particularly associated with Ireland ('forty shades of green' and so on), brings in the idea of 'green' but it's not clear what kind of political shade this 'green' is, and though it may be seen as in juxtaposition to the 'Orange' of the next stanza, this is the kind of inference not entirely led by the poem and therefore is something to be careful about.

The device of converging thoughts, using syntax to amplify their complexity, is also used

in the following stanza:

My water-coloured twilit-childhood island  
-scape is barricaded with circles of rain-rusted  
Orange, coiled to kill, barbed wire.

Orange is a political word in Northern Ireland, here given the capital letter usually used to denote the Orange Order, founded in 1796 with a name which honours the Protestant, Dutch-born, King William of Orange who defeated the Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Here it is also the colour of rusted barbed wire 'coiled to kill' in a sentence which syntactically can be read to imply that the 'childhood island-scape' (a childhood of the inner mind perhaps) being also 'coiled to kill'. This 'childhood' appears often in the work of Fiacca, being variously portrayed as ongoing, problematic, delusional and tormented. Here it is 'water-coloured', possibly difficult to see within, like 'twilight' with the latter word also referencing the Irish revivalist tendency (sometimes called the Celtic Twilight) with its inbuilt idea of shading in or fading out. This 'twilight' is now a '–scape', a psychological territory as well as a real one, and 'barricaded' though it is not clear whether barricaded in or barricaded to keep something out.

In these first three stanzas, Fiacca uses several of the devices which he displays throughout his work. It is as if the artistic space of poem is consistently invaded by the realities at play in society and moreover, that the reaction of the poet to the psychological pressure of those brutal realities makes him develop a poetics of disruption, of broken syntax and of odd juxtapositions which force the reader to address the phrasing in different ways in order to fully appreciate its set of possible meanings

even while being aware that the idea of 'meaning' itself may be upended by this process.

The fourth stanza has 'Dead mother' who 'rises again to bang bin-lids' and the device of continuous present is at play here where much of import happens 'Behind the corrugated iron walls of the barracks' which are one constant feature of the city-scape. In the fifth stanza, Fiacca's sense that language as commonly used may not be enough to encompass the 'affect' of contemplation on violence is seen again in the creation of compounds, this time linking the elements with hyphens in a five word 'adjective' which trips over itself when read:

... ,the grey Belfast wind  
Is blowing against the unblooming-as-yet-wall  
-flower mind. I reach my hand out and touch

Here, as in other poems, Fiacca makes clear his dictum that the 'mind' is what bears the brunt of damage to the self from living in violent times. This motif will be seen as present through much of his work as he develops a poetics to match the social environment and the inner mind-scape of the poet. Here too is a vision of the natural world or the natural environment which reflects the psychic distress. From 'The howl of the rain' in the first stanza, to the air that is filled with shooting, making the sky 'The colour of smoke', there is image after image of this 'island/-scape' as being, in essence, 'unblooming' as the poet has it here. This is a note of difference with Eavan Boland as will be seen in the chapter on her work as, in Boland, the continuum of the natural world sometimes provides something close to a salve for the unresolved and difficult present.

After the first five stanzas which are of 4, 2, 3, 4, and 6 lines respectively, comes the sixth stanza of fourteen lines which finishes 'The Wrong Ones' using jaggedly broken lines as well as the emphasised enjambment observable in the previous section. If a reader has not felt the 'wrongness' conveyed via poetic device and word-choice in the first section, the opening of this final stanza makes the connection with the title clear:

I'll be a 'son of a gun' for ever now.  
 For ever now I'll never be right. I'm one  
 Of the Wrong Ones.

Here, the idea of 'son of a gun' is subverted from its admiring, positive connotation to the idea that once exposed to conflict, especially in childhood, one will 'never be right'. It may also refer to the 1919 silent movie 'Son of a Gun' (although this is a stretch) and if that's the case, the moniker may also be used here as a kind of Western-influenced gang name. The phrase 'the wrong ones' is also of course used by Robert Frost in 'Directive': 'Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it.' However, the latter may not be expressly being referred to by Fiacca here.

The stanza moves to consider the fate of not only the 'I' in the poem but also the 'rubber-bullet-collecting kids' whom no-one will help as well as another group whom no-one will help: the 'grim/ faced teenaged British soldiers or young/ Cops, hating the being hated.' The move toward a horizon which widens away from the protagonist's vision and which engages beyond the arena of one sector's experience is characteristic of Fiacca's work where he consistently opens up the notion that all involved in the contested province are damaged by that experience. Here, he shows a particular empathy for

youths who have joined the British army or the police and who are young enough to have the innocence of those who hate to be hated. The poignancy of the idea of fated and wasted lives works here because it is in juxtaposition to the previous descriptions of bleak and inhospitable elements of the lived life. While the reader might have understood this awfulness to be particular to one 'side' of the conflict and therefore possibly politically motivated or aligned, Fiacca subverts any expectation of this, ensuring that the reader understands the nature of the 'all' as in 'We all/Go down the road now sharp and small/ As razor blades...'. In a move now seen as typical of Fiacca, 'razor-blades' may act as a qualifying adjective describing the people here invoked as well as acting as a qualifier to the 'road' which is denoted as difficult and indeed, as bladed.

Finally, the last three lines emphasise the alignment between the protagonist and the soldier, between the childhood that figures in the poem and the scenes of violence evoked:

I pick my steps across  
My backstreet childhood as a soldier would pick  
His steps across a little mine-filled field.

The import seems to be that the childhood is not only comparable in essence and in effect to the experience a soldier might have but that the fact it continues to torment the present-day adult mind makes the mind itself a 'mine-filled field'. The use of a ten syllable line here mirrors the other decasyllabic line which ends the fifth stanza, 'Two-hundred-years-old iron and chipped brick'. The latter image may be used here as a

device to make the reader think about the longevity of the discord in Northern Ireland which can be dated from various points including 1609 as the start of the plantations of Ulster (which went on for a century) and/or 1641, the year of the first rebellion of note by Ulster Catholics. If we elide the words between, the final sentence has: 'I pick my steps ... across a little mine-filled field' and though it may be a poet's interpretation, I am inclined to think that Fiacca is nodding to the tradition here, making use of an echo of the iamb and denoting the difficulty of the act of writing as well as making the connections outlined above.

'Difficulty' is a word that can be applied to making a reading of the work of Fiacca in that the poetry is not easy to read, either syntactically, politically or in terms of the sometimes brutal nature of the content. Fiacca mentions in 'Glass Grass' that his fellow poets 'call my poems "cryptic, crude, distasteful, brutal, savage, bitter..."' (*RP* 131). I would suggest that all these are part of his attempt to hone a poem capable of conveying an aesthetic robust enough to operate under several layers of pressure. I will discuss some of the techniques employed in the work here to draw comparisons from within the work with a view to looking at the poems of Eavan Boland as a kind of counter-aesthetic, or a sort of worthy adversary-in-poetics – if such exists.

'The Wrong Ones' is from Fiacca's 1977 volume, *Nights in the Bad Place*. Though the poems from this period appear in a slightly different order in *Ruined Pages*, it does seem that the core poems of this book were mainly written around the time of one of the

incidents mentioned – the bomb in the Belfast Gasworks of October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1973 (which detonated when being planted, killing three members of the IRA). Fiacca, quoted in the ‘Troubles Archive’ compiled by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, says that *Nights in the Bad Place* is ‘my bleakest and blackest and darkest book... Behind the book is the murder of Gerry McLaughlin, a poor innocent boy...’.<sup>28</sup> Fiacca also says ‘I don’t like taking sides... I don’t understand why people would kill each other over religion and politics here.’ He notes that ‘the poet is alone’, quoting his own poem ‘Saint Coleman’s Song For Flight’ which is a piece that emanates from Belfast’s brutality and is a poem that says there’s no shame in leaving the place: ‘the poet is... the wolf outside, munching the leper’s head.’<sup>29</sup>

Here, Fiacca touches on the place of the poet as outsider to the fanaticism that drives the passions of others. In the same interview in the Troubles Archive, he speaks about how difficult a poem ‘Christ Goodbye’ was to write. This, and other work in *Nights in the Bad Place* serve well as a showcase of his poetic tactics in bringing the realities of violence and its affects into the poem. The work stems from a particularly bloody period in the history of Northern Ireland, in a decade which had the conflict spill over into bombings in London, Birmingham and Guildford. Throughout, Fiacca shows himself to be committed to a kind of humane breadth of understanding and to an interrogation of what the idea of ‘enemy’ might mean. His duality of approach to the word ‘enemy’ gives rise to other dialectic techniques within the poems.

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<sup>28</sup> ‘Padraic Fiacca’, <<http://www.TroublesArchive.com/artists/padraic.fiacca>> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> January 2014].

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

'Enemy Encounter' is an example of such, where the speaker in the poem comes upon a 'British Army soldier' hiding near a culvert. The fellow, 'young enough' to be the boyfriend of the poet's daughter is characterised as like 'a lonely little winter robin'. 'I/ Can nearly hear his heart beating.' says the speaker, making the connection clear between the observed and the observing, the one looking out for the enemy and the other encountering the supposed enemy. There's a humanly understandable moment when the speaker tries to make this young man grin and then, there's the 'but':

I am an Irish man  
                   and he is afraid  
 That I have come to kill him.

(RP p.120)

What is intractable is that the 'he' is British and the 'I' is Irish, and though they are 'that close to each other', they have been put into a situation where both are obliged to consider the other the 'enemy'. Fiacca employs line breaks to maximise the quietly eerie build-up of the poem. In the first stanza, he uses:

I come on  
                   a British Army soldier

which is mirrored in the final stanza after a word-break over a line break that is typical of Fiacca's methods:

-whiskers down  
                   the Shore Road street.

Here, although 'side-whiskers' is the full word and the run of sense is 'But his glass eyes

look past my side//whiskers', it is Fiacca's consistent interest in how words can be 'dual' that makes 'whiskers' also work as a verb for the possible action of the soldier. Fiacca leaves the description of this encounter to speak for itself, providing no further explication, but he uses the next poem, 'Kids at War', to show that the fear felt by the soldier is well-founded as in this, the soldier who enters a shop to buy ice-lollies for the 'Irish' kids is shot by one with whom he had just had a moment of interaction right outside. In both pieces, the idea of the soldiers as kids and their adversaries as also young is emphasised with the first half of 'Kids at War' presenting the image of Irish kids who 'sneer and jeer' at the body of a young British soldier who has given up his life to save just such children along with the life of an Irish mother. The first section runs on without punctuation, relaying the story backwards to 'About to explode...'. The subversion of chronology here has the effect of emphasising the horror and the truncated lines necessitating the use of the hyphen seem to imply that this whole world is somehow hyphenated:

Irish kids sneer and jeer  
 At, salute with cat  
 -calls the dead body  
 Of the young British soldier

Gave up his life to save  
 The Irish woman and kids  
 Caught in the Spring  
 -field Road barracks  
 About to explode...

Fiacca's ellipsis here is used to encompass not only all that happens, but also to capture the essence of living with the threat of violence even when it is not occurring but is

being anticipated or dreaded, as in 'Enemy Encounter'.

The question of how to manage images of political and individual violence and abuse as a poet is one which Padraic Fiacca and Eavan Boland address differently in their work. Fiacca, despite the controversy over his work as editor shows himself to be a poet who does not fetishise violence by giving it a poetic credence or cadence and therefore legitimacy, a concern of some critics as discussed in the introduction. If anything, Fiacca, as can be seen from the work in *Nights in the bad place*, is at pains to include the plethora of victims, the wider contexts and the ongoing sense of youth wasted, equally applicable to the 'Military', to the 'Irish' and to the poet himself. Fiacca uses himself as a character in some of the poems, veering toward the melodramatic on occasion and with a sense of the poet-self as both mocking and tragic. Eavan Boland, as will be seen in the next chapter, instead tempers her work to a measured intellectualism, with a sense of the self-as-poet as earnestly engaged and charged with a witness of a different sort. If Fiacca is 'hot', then Boland will be seen to be 'cool'.

In 'Wee Fellas', Fiacca uses devices which are familiar to readers of his work including reported demotic speech and a juxtaposition of incident as observed from different viewpoints. Here though, he introduces two other tropes which can be traced through his oeuvre – the idea of the 'arena' or 'stage' on which these scenes are being played and in a reverse move, the idea that these people are themselves being 'played'. Here too is the notion of the defiled sacred, couched in terms of Catholic iconography, which

is brought down to size and often bloodied within the poem.

The first section is 'The Snatch':

It seemed such a cheap  
 Stage effect of reality that Death  
 Hiding in the wings  
 On a foundry roof  
 Sniping at soldiers, should  
 Like a childless woman,  
 Snatch away  
 A wee chalk-faced boy  
 Playing marbles in the mud.

(*RP*, p. 122)

The 'seemed' in line one reminds us that nothing may be as it 'seems' while the 'Stage effect of reality' compounds the idea that reality can be created, depending on who you might be or what power you might wield, as a kind of stage director for instance. The irony is fully felt by the reader when it becomes clear that the sniper, hoping to kill a British soldier, instead murders a boy, 'Playing marbles in the mud.' But it's the 'Death... Like a childless woman' who would snatch away such a life that is perhaps most striking since it brings in the notion of child-stealing (possibly to replace lost children) which Fiacc extends in the second section called 'Gloria' (after the prayer of praise used in the Catholic mass):

Glory be to, so  
 Much for, salute  
 All us 'armies of  
 The people' who  
 Drag away  
 A 'backward boy'

The eldest of a large  
 Family in the Low  
 Markets, sentenced to

Reform-school gaols  
For being mental  
For being poor  
For being tortured into  
Yelling 'Yes/No,  
I am an "informer"'

And crucify him with  
Bullets for nails

Up by the Zoo.

This ironic 'Gloria' puts quote marks around 'armies of the people' to draw attention to whether any armed faction in the mix is actually 'for' the people. Thus he emphasises the interchangeability of who may be doing the stealing of the children, implying this with economy.

The section shows one instance of daily brutality which Fiacca captures with what may seem detachment but which I would argue is the ethical engagement of the outraged moralist. Here his mock salute is to those 'armies' who take away a boy they call 'backward' when it's clear to poet and reader that he is mentally disabled. This boy in the poem may be standing as well for any young man abused by those in power who can sentence someone to reform school or worse, 'for being poor' as the poet has it. The tone of underplayed outrage is clearly used to highlight the display of a complete lack of moral authority. The final lines see a crucifixion 'with/ Bullets for nails' occurring after this boy has been tortured into 'Yelling' that he is indeed an informer with the latter word in double quotes inside single quotes to emphasise that this is not the case.

Overall, the impression is created by the poem's prosody as well as content that those who manage the stage effects mentioned above have won the day and, the implication is, will continue to do so as we understand from the final phrase that the society is a 'Zoo'.

Appearing as a companion piece to 'Wee Fellas' in *Nights in the black place*, is 'Wee Girls', which is placed after the former poem within this volume. In this volume too, both poems are given quote marks in the title, though these are dropped by the editors of *Ruined Pages* when selecting just one of them, 'Wee Fellas' for inclusion in that selection. 'Wee Girls' continues the one-two effect of a two-section poem, numbered as such, and with the separated sections seen to work both in tandem and somewhat in opposition to each other as in the poems discussed above. As it's so short, it's reproduced here in full:

'Wee Girls'

i *Enemies*

At the Gas and Electric

Offices

Black boats with white sails

Float down the stairs

Frighten the five year old

Wee protestant girls.

'Nuns, nuns,' one of them yells

'When are yez gon' to git

morried?'

ii *Victory on Ship Street*

A bomb-blasted pub!

Another blow struck  
For our very own  
    Corner  
On Devil's Island...

Stabbed a thousand  
Times by flying glass

Two wee girls in  
Hallowe'en dress  
    Burnt  
To death as witches!<sup>30</sup>

Arguably, this is the least successful of the two-part poems under discussion here. This piece lacks the forward motion created by the anti-chronological narrative in 'Enemy Encounter' and it differs in diction from 'Wee fellas' which deploys a sing-song rhythm towards its end:

For being mental  
For being poor  
For being tortured into  
Yelling 'Yes/No,  
I am an "informer"!'

However, 'Wee Girls' can be seen to amplify Fiacc's interrogation of what 'enemy' might imply. He suggests that the 'protestant girls' are frightened by the nuns in the first stanza, yet portrays them as having the presence of mind to call out a joking comment. The atmosphere changes so quickly as to be discomfiting to the reader with the ironic 'Victory' giving way to the 'bomb-blasted pub!'. The exclamation points here and after 'witches' are related to each other as both imply a sense of moral outrage which is not

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<sup>30</sup> Padraic Fiacc, *Nights in the Bad Place*, (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1977), pp. 17-18.

discursively approached within the poem. The leaden irony of 'Another blow struck...' and mention of the notorious prison of Devil's Island hammer home the point. But it's the juxtaposition of the wee girls of the title with the other wee girls (or perhaps the same ones) who, dressed up in witch costumes, meet an evil that, even in imagination, they could not have conjured, that is most striking. Though Fiacc can at times be a poet of the raw statement, here he is seen to use non-statement, placing the two incidents beside each other and allowing the descriptions to do the work. From 'Enemy Encounter' through 'Kids at War', to 'Wee Fellas' and 'Wee Girls', Fiacc can be seen to come at the idea of what constitutes the 'enemy' using a variety of poetic devices, predicated on the dialectic mode. It is as if Fiacc uses language as if it will render experience fully – by setting out to describe actual incident – but his oddities of expression, his inclusion of the demotic and his strangeness of word-hyphenation and line breaks all combine to imply that there is no such transparency available within his poem.

Fiacc is egalitarian in his denigration of the acts and methods portrayed in his poems written in the 1970s but his interest as a poet is in seeking ways to render violence and social disintegration within the form of the poem. He is resolutely bleak, or one could say, resolutely realistic, as he does not offer a transcendent moment in his use of the lyric but rather, works the expectation of the reader of the lyric into the poem as he presents a kind of anti-lyric, all the more discomfiting because of that expectation. Unlike some work by Seamus Heaney or Michael Longley which reaches for the

pantheon of Greek mythological figures as a prism through which to speak about violence, Fiacca wants the poem to be open to violence and tries to find linguistic methods of matching that aim. At times he appears to almost be daring the reader to be able for the awfulness. He appears not to want to make the true 'beautiful' as much as to be committed to the jagged rhythms, sharp turns and strange verbal alignments which he judges useful to his poetic goals.

Another note in Fiacca's work is that of despoiled religion, seen as another site of misalignment, as in the poem 'Christ Goodbye' where he appears to lament the end of the power of Christian beliefs against a back-drop of brutality of a sort that could never be reached by any notions associated with a supposedly loving religion. Here the protagonists are not nationalist but loyalist. The shaping form of the poem is the two-part numbered form which allows for an implied pendulum movement as seen above. Section I is told as if by a teller of the tale a while after the event with the latter meaning perhaps that the horrific nature of the last lines of the section can be baldly stated without further exposition to soften the effect on the reader:

Dandering home from work at mid-  
 night, they tripped Him up on a ramp,  
 Asked Him if He were a 'Catholic'...

A wee bit soft in the head He was,  
 The last person in the world you'd want  
 To hurt:

    His arms and legs, broken,  
 His genitals roasted with a ship-  
 yard worker's blow lamp.

(*RP* p. 127)

In this poem, the Christ figure is one and the same as the victim, and is given the capital 'H' for the third person pronouns throughout. The conversational tone established in the first stanza is one of the story-teller, a figure who looms large in the lore of Ireland and still exists as the 'Seanchai' – mainly now a storyteller who re-tells ancient tales orally in Irish. The second stanza opens: 'In all the stories that the Christian Brothers/ Tell you of Christ He never screamed/ Like this.' The use of the idea of story being told as related to narratives promulgated as 'truth' by the lay religious teaching order of the Christian Brothers is juxtaposed against the actual screaming of a real person under some of the same pressures that the Christ figure was supposedly experiencing, but why – the question seems to be posed in the poem – is it not recorded that he screamed? Alternate versions of story, of reality and of engagement with that reality are layered here into a poem which uses quotation marks around phrases that the perpetrators may be saying, threatening for instance to 'Cut off His balls!'. But what is the reader to make of the repetition of 'poor' at the end of the poem, once apparently in the voice of the speaker in the poem, and the other in the voice perhaps of the perpetrators of the violence as told later to another listener, after the event:

Poor boy Christ, for when  
They finally got round to finishing Him off  
By shooting Him in the back of the head

'The poor Fenian fucker was already dead!'

Could it be that the perpetrators of this horrendous act were able, within the story as told later, to allow that the 'Fenian fucker' was 'poor' and thereby to allow a smudge of

sympathy into their parlance about him? Or, is it that in the re-telling by a person originally seeming empathetic to the murdered soul, the telling itself leads the speaker to some kind of momentary understanding of how the thugs could themselves briefly apprehend the 'poor Fenian'? The upshot poetically is that these layered and shifting voices draw attention to the 'told' nature of the piece. This self-consciousness, as well as the use of 'you' by the ostensible speaker of the poem, draw in the reader who leaves the piece with some understanding of the treacherous nature of power play within a society based on bullying or on a might-is-right principle. It is part of Fiacca's project to insert the dismantled feeling of the social milieu into the poem where the poetic line, and even the word itself becomes dismantled. No-one would read Fiacca for the aural pleasure one might hope for from others of his contemporaries. It is as if for Fiacca the poem itself is under the same pressures as the society and as religious feeling with its implied transcendent possibility. Here, the 'Christ Goodbye' title is seen at once to refer to the murdered Catholic in the poem as well as to the notion that the idea of Christ as symbolising anything that might redeem or might convince against violence as gone, finished and finally taken leave of.

Aidan Tynan, in a recently published article, makes even more of the connection in Fiacca between what is 'properly poetic' and the political saying:

Fiacca's poetry of the Troubles demonstrates affinities with poetic traditions quite far removed from the Irish one, such as the work of Paul Celan whose major poems are devoted to the experience of the Holocaust and its consequences. The

work of a poet such as Celan is concerned not simply with the relationship between violence as a historical phenomenon and poetry as a means of representing experience but with how language itself, to the extent that it manifests an indelible inscriptive power, can be understood as containing an irreducibly violent component.<sup>31</sup>

Tynan's argument is that the very nature of violence is at the core of Fiacc's work 'rupturing the divisions between personal and social experience, aesthetic and non-aesthetic language.' He goes on to make a cogent argument for seeing a link in Fiacc with ideas that the work of poetry itself is disturbingly violent. I am not pursuing that end of the argument here, aware for instance that Celan's poetry eventually goes to where language itself wavers, where the linguistic enterprise itself is at stake. This is because, while both Fiacc and Boland certainly question the efficacy of language to perform the task they ascribe, neither go the route of having it completely break down. That said, it is worth noting that in a poem like 'Glass Grass', Fiacc is seen to perhaps most fully elucidate his sense of the futility of the poetic impulse within the broken society.

'Glass Grass' has a quotation attributed to Günter Eich as its epigraph which goes some way to explaining the psychic pressure felt by the poet in this period: 'Try to understand that you yourself are guilty of every atrocity howsoever far from you it seems to be

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<sup>31</sup> Aidan Tynan, 'A season in hell: paradox and violence in the poetry of Padraic Fiacc', *Irish University Review*, Vol.44, No. 2 (2014): pp. 341-356.

happening.’ The poet is on his way out to a poetry reading and the poem opens with the ‘scorched-cloth smell of burnt flesh’, a left-over from that morning, ‘a bomb in one of the parked cars’. The almost casual description is accompanied by dyspeptic images of the natural environment, the gulls ‘glinting like ice on asphalt’ and ‘The sun, in a smog of cheap petrol exhaust/Fumes.’ The poet is on the move and the poem follows his steps ‘Crossing the shadow-deflected town that burns,/ Crossing the always-takes, never-gives man,’. The crux of the poem is the description of the city, where the poet has to duck flying glass on his way to the reading, and that of the reading itself where the poet finds himself ‘Tired of trying to pretend I am not this frightening / Freak...’. The poem builds to the dramatic moment when as part of interactions at the discussion, the poet lies, saying he cannot put himself into the mind of the man who kills. But his private horror is that he can do this:

*But I can, I’m polluted  
With the poison of violence, born and bred into it.*

He quotes his critics who call his poems ‘cryptic, crude, dis/ -tasteful, brutal savage, bitter...’ and it’s a moment of aesthetic wonder to the speaker that he finds himself on the wrong side of their argument. By the end of this poem, the reader feels that he may even equate his experience with that of the city itself where ‘Belfast is a beaten sexless dog, hushed,/ Waiting for when or where the next blow/ Will fall.’ The poem seems to convey that what is cryptic, crude and distasteful should indeed end up in poems as otherwise it causes writers to ‘pretend’. The powerful disconnect described in this poem can be seen to be what drives the aesthetic that Fiacca develops throughout his work. This poem is one of Fiacca’s most controlled in terms of unities of stanzaic shape, of line

length and of the rhythms of vernacular speech. Yet here too is what Gerald Dawe terms 'the aggressive understatement of Belfast vernacular speech'<sup>32</sup>. In 'Glass Grass', what is at stake in terms of taking on the role of publically-facing poet is clear and it underscores why Fiacca might have perfected that tonal playfulness of the demotic and the ironic threading through his work. Such tonal play allows for the visceral disconnects to be felt within the fabric of the poem itself while simultaneously pointing to the other 'event' of the poem, that of what is happening outside and around it, including the environment of its gestation within a contested and possibly censoring culture. As will be seen in the poems in 'From there to here', such tonal play is one of my favoured techniques as well.

Critics of Fiacca have variously upbraided him for allowing the poem to be tainted with the actualities of violence and have conversely praised his work for encompassing what Terence Brown calls an 'unending psychic pain'.<sup>33</sup> Brown praises Fiacca for confronting anguish 'directly with moral and aesthetic courage' but as mentioned, a poet with whom Fiacca often clashed in print, James Simmons, poses the question in his review of *The Wearing of the Black* about 'how deeply can contemporary violence enter a poet's inner being?'<sup>34</sup> Simmons opines that this is a question he has never put to himself, adding 'I'm not sure that publishing an anthology answers it. It might help us to realise who has written most poems about the violence, in which case Mr. Fiacca would be the winner.'

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<sup>32</sup> Gerald Dawe, 'Introduction', *RP*, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Terence Brown, 'Pádraic Fiacca, The Bleeding Bough', in *Northern Voices, Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975), pp. 141-48. 'To be Irish in By the Black Stream is to know a permanent condition of loss; in Odour of Blood it is to know unending psychic pain.' p. 148.

<sup>34</sup> James Simmons, review of *The Wearing of the Black*, in *The Honest Ulsterman*, Nos. 46-47 (Nov. 1974-Feb. 1975), pp. 67-71.

He continues, 'I respond to his intensity and sharp insight, although many poems trail off into hysteria and are not properly worked on.'<sup>35</sup> In the latter instance, he is referring partly to the fact that Fiacca includes more of his own work in this edited anthology than that of other poets (Fiacca -21 poems; Hewitt -13; Heaney- 9; Michal Brophy- 8; Gerald Dawe- 7; Paul Muldoon -2, to name a few) but the sense from this review that Fiacca has made a questionable moral aesthetic choice is unmistakable. Critics such as Fred Johnston and Brendan Hamill have noted the Blakean connection in Fiacca (responding, I take it, both to the fact that Blake believed the human imagination was born from conflict and to the dialectic approach taken by Blake and mirrored in pieces by Fiacca). Johnston, writing in the *Irish Times* on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1997 in 'A poet of Blakean wrath' notes Hamill's own article in *Krino* which had appeared in the 1995 summer issue. This expressed concern about Fiacca's self-characterisation as 'poet-as-victim' and Johnston's article agrees with Hamill on Fiacca, calling him a poet talking 'the language of wrath', before adding himself: 'sometime in the future we may come to understand Fiacca as one of our most modern poets, his work transcending local politics yet grounded in a deep and very Northern - and urban - significance. We need to hear more of him; we need the occasionally chilling newness of his Belfast Blakean voice.'

If the problem for some critics is that the violence in Fiacca's poetry is untransformed, is too much lodged in reality instead of being made to act in a symbolic fashion, then they may be missing two things. One is the aesthetic choice made by Fiacca to write against

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.71.

the received metrical line as it were, to instead use unsettling, shifty rhythms and surprising turns of viewpoint and address. They may also be missing the moralist impulse in this poet who seems to wail 'never again' in his descriptions of brutality as if calling the reader into taking action. The sense of moral orphaning in Fiacc with the insistence on wasted youth, thwarted potential and crushed dreams may in fact be further evidence of the moral reach of his aesthetic as he appears to lament the impossibility of the transcendent. The poems themselves may be saying that to speak of awfulness is better than not to do so, even if this form of art is itself open to interpretation as a 'violence' of the mind.

If Fiacc is responding in his own way to what he sees as the moral imperative for the artist, Eavan Boland will be seen to do so in a different but equally compelling manner in the next chapter. In Fiacc, the presence of the natural world, where it exists, has been seen to be connected to that of the modernist turn where nature is no longer 'for' us, but is vastly amoral and indifferent and we are puny, delusional and ironised. In Boland, the physical world of gardens, of plants, of seasons and of the lived-environment becomes a buffer to this sense of contingency and in her poetry, that world hints at stability, at renewal and finally at the possibility of love. Whereas in Fiacc the physical world is so violated, unsure and unstable as to be unusable as a transcendent symbol since it reflects the shifts of power in a reality created by the biggest bully of the moment, in Boland this will be seen to provide a poetics of a different kind of resistance, part of the description of her separate answer to the aesthetic questions most present

as a poet writing from an unsettling and unsettled political milieu.

## Chapter Two

Eavan Boland and the development of a poetics: 'It may be beauty/ but it isn't truth'<sup>36</sup>

The poems in Eavan Boland's first volume *New Territory*, published when she was 22 years of age, are formally constructed in the main, exhibiting classically inflected rhythmic patterning and often using full or nearly full end rhymes. These cerebral, cleverly constructed poems have antecedents in the tradition among the Metaphysical poets as well as the Romantics and W. B. Yeats is also a presence. However, it is true that certain themes are adumbrated here which arise in the later work. Critics have cited 'Athene's song' as a poem in which Boland marks out her territory of concern with becoming a poet as a woman and the difficulties therein.<sup>37</sup> 'From my father's head I sprung/ Goddess of the war,' acknowledges, as she does elsewhere, the heroic tradition in poetry and foreshadows the subject of the difficulty for women in entering that sanctum, something she will return to in both poetry and prose throughout her oeuvre.

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<sup>36</sup> This quote is from the poem 'Tirade for the Lyric Muse' in Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 130.

<sup>37</sup> For example, John Goodby in *Irish poetry since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) discusses the fact that Boland's 'apprenticeship was prolonged' citing 'Athene's Song' as a turning point and quoting Derek Mahon on the poem as sounding a 'proleptically "feminist" note' which Goodby opines is returned to in the poem 'The War Horse'. p. 178.

In this poem, perhaps particularly in the line 'Peace became the toy of power', she foregrounds her growing understanding of how rhetoric and its associated rhythms can be misused, knowing that there are – as she will say much later in 'Violence Against Women',

arranged relations,  
so often covert, between power and cadence  
(*NCP*, p.54)<sup>38</sup>

For the purposes of looking at how Boland deals with the ideas of violence used for a cause and of blood sacrifice in the service of an aspirational liberation, a poem like 'A Cynic at Kilmainham Gaol' may be instructive. Initially the atmosphere of the poem, referring to the leaders of the 1916 rebellion (fourteen of the sixteen shot at Kilmainham Gaol where they had been imprisoned) seems reverend and sombre:

Autumn dark, no worship, mine or yours  
Can resurrect the sixteen minds,  
(*NCP*, p.42)

But soon, a dichotomy is explored which undermines the initial feeling of the piece. The 'dual sight' of the rebels is noted, with 'one eye' on the guns and the other on the 'magic, tragic town, the broken/ Countryside, the huge ungenerous tribe/ Of cowards'. Boland seems to imply that the rebels knew how the majority of the Irish people were not supportive of the rebellion and that moreover they 'chose' the 'magic' anyway, and even, as the syntax used allows this interpretation, that they are operating with a certain self-consciousness 'with the tears they chose/ Themselves'. The title gives a hint as to this interpretation of the poem and it will become clear that Boland's freighting of

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<sup>38</sup> Eavan Boland, *New Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005) hereafter termed *NCP*

possible meanings is often carried by her sly use of syntax for effect. At times this usage is akin to that of Fiacc where word placement adds a duality of meaning but at other times, as will be seen below, it is perhaps more rhythmically rendered in Boland than in Fiacc as the latter's syntactical play can sometimes become over-torturous as has been discussed.

It is with the volume, *The War Horse* (1975) that certain of Boland's themes of interest to this study begin to more fully emerge. The title poem places the speaker as 'safe' within a suburban house as something wild and inexplicable, the 'war horse' invades that peace, bringing with it an intimation that neither the safety nor the peace are solidly based.

'Only a leaf on our laurel hedge is torn –  
Of distant interest like a maimed limb,'  
(NCP, p.26)

This, along with 'why should we care' acts to make the chasm between those who watch, apparently unmoved, from relative safety, and those who partake of this danger appear to be almost unbridgeable.

The half lines 'a volunteer/ You might say,' uses the word that the IRA used for those who signed up to its cause, (called 'volunteers') and it is likely to also be referring to the Irish Volunteers, (or Óglaigh na hÉireann), a military organisation established in 1913, also with nationalist aims. The speaker maintains that 'no great harm is done' and yet the 'maimed limb' and the 'screamless dead' imply that harm is not as much kept at bay

as might first appear. There's an interesting line where the 'unformed fear of fierce commitment' is characterised as 'gone', seeming to imply a move towards what the horse may represent. And this is borne out as the actual physicality of the horse is conveyed well in the first two thirds of the piece but once he passes ('He stumbles on like a rumour of war, huge,/Threatening;'), the speaker leans on the sill in 'relief' and describes her blood as still with 'atavism'. If the latter is taken as the recurrence of a feature of a distinct culture or tribe though it has been genetically absent for generations, it leads to the final lines requiring to be taken as knowingly ironic – 'recalling days/ Of burned countryside, illicit braid:/ A cause ruined before a world betrayed.'

'Child of our time' a poem dated the day of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings of 17<sup>th</sup> May 1974, in which three infants died, shows Boland, unusually for her, entering the realm of dealing with actual contemporary violence. Here, she is in effect writing both an elegy for the dead baby but also questioning 'idle talk' and its relation to the rhymes, rhythms and legends she mentions that might have been able to protect this child. Boland starkly admits that the poem takes 'its tune', 'its rhythm from the discord of your murder,' but hopes in the final lines to find a 'new language' which is able for the task ahead. The poem appeared in the *Irish Times* but within two weeks Boland had written an essay entitled 'The Weasel's Tooth' (a self-consciously Yeatsian title), also for the *Irish Times*, where she retracted the poem, appealing 'for writers now in Ireland to liberate

themselves from the myths, the hallucinations of cultural unity'<sup>39</sup>. Jody Allen-Randolf, in her book on Boland, interprets this 'important turn' as indicative of the poet recognising that 'Yeats's fantasy of cultural coherence' had continued in Ireland and was in compromised relation to the continuing violence and she sees Boland here as 'freeing herself to seek out a new political poem'.<sup>40</sup> This new poem would determine to interrogate the former compromises with a political poem that charts divisive violence within the individual psyche and it's that increased wariness of rhetoric and that investigation of who is doing the 'telling' which animates several poems in the books which are published in 1987 and 1990 respectively, *The Journey* and *Outside History*.

In the titular poem, 'The Journey', we see the poet being brought to an underworld by Sappho. The speaker has already been addressing issues of aesthetics and of the 'proper' subject for poetry: "'there has never/ I said 'been a poem to an antibiotic:' " and her concern is that there would be a separation between the ability of language and the necessity of the task in hand, "every day the language gets less / 'for the task and we are less with the language'." Note the oddity of the use of quote marks around just part of the sentences which otherwise appear to be quoted in full. This seems to suggest that the phrase 'the language gets less' (as it does not appear in quotes and also places 'less' at the end of the line) is concurrently to be read as a statement in its own right. And so it appears to be since the rest of the poem has Sappho showing the speaker the terrible sight of diseased women and children in a nightmare scene of suffering for which the

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<sup>39</sup> Eavan Boland 'The Weasel's Tooth', *The Irish Times*, 7 June, 1974.

<sup>40</sup> Jody Allen-Randolf, *Eavan Boland: Contemporary Irish Writers* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), p. 51.

poet asks, 'let me at least be their witness', only to be told that what she has seen is 'beyond speech' and 'beyond song' – surely a problem for a poet. Sappho says that the poet has been brought to this scene precisely to learn the 'silences in which are our beginnings' and that all there is to do is to 'remember it'. This dilemma of the poet committed to a socially engaged poem is one to which Boland will return and it will be clear from discussions of both her work and that of Padraic Fiacca that while these two come up with different answers to the aesthetic questions, they are nonetheless playing in the same corner of the poetics playground.

*The Journey* brings together several poems which continue to explore both the 'consolations of the craft' and the dangers within that consolation. In 'Listen. This is the noise of myth', the poet links the lies, the tricks and the legends that a culture may hold dear:

This sequence of evicted possibilities.  
Displaced facts. Tricks of light. Reflections.  
Invention. Legend. Myth. What you will.  
(NCP, p.272)

And in 'Fond memory', Boland makes these links clear, using the thrall of nationalist sentiment here exerted in the guise of a Tom Moore song which has an emotional effect on the listener. She has to fight back her tears but finally comes back to reason, deciding that such a reaction is 'wrong':

I thought this is my country, was, will be again  
this upward-straining song made to be  
our safe inventory of pain. And I was wrong.

(NCP, p. 276)

Here the word 'safe' takes a reader back to the compromised safety explored in 'The War Horse' and what appeared to be an impulse to question it in that earlier poem has now blossomed into a whole sequence of poems which set out the dangers of beautiful rhetoric in the service of a cause.

Boland's subject then, or at least that section of her subject under review here, is the problem of presenting a wariness of beautifully crafted rhetoric within the lyric poem which is often committed to just that. Her ancillary subject of how to establish herself as a poet within what she sees as the patriarchal tradition of poetry is amply discussed by critics such as Allen-Randolf, Meaney, Wills *et al* (see reference section) and by Boland herself in her prose essays in *Object Lessons: the life of the poet and the woman in our time*. What is of interest here is that Boland's concern with the creation of poetic 'self' and the making of that self within the artwork is one which is partly mirrored in the work of Padraic Fiacc. Both poets have concerns which stem from the dilemma of becoming a poet and finding a suitable set of poetics when writing from a violently contested island where the very source of art itself may be suspect.

With these two elements in mind then, one poem in *The Journey*, warrants a close reading at this juncture. 'Mise Eire', appears as the second poem in the first sequence of *The Journey* appearing after the poem 'I Remember' which may itself be a statement of

intent for the poet:

I was the interloper who knows both love and fear,  
 ...  
 beyond the need to touch, to handle, to dismantle it,  
 the mystery;  
 (NCP, p.232)

In this discussion, the 'dismantling' predicated here can be seen to take place in 'Mise Eire' which, with short lines, many with just two to three words, appears over pages 233-235 in *New Collected Poems*.

The title, ostensibly means 'I am Ireland' and has been taken to have this meaning by critics (see Meaney and Goodby).<sup>41</sup> However, to fully render the 'I am' in Irish grammar, this phrase should read '*is mise Eire*' which may literally also mean 'I name myself Eire' since *is mise Siobhan* is 'I am Siobhan' meaning I am (called) Siobhan. It also contains an element of 'me=Ireland' as in 'me Tarzan', implying that the *me* and the *Ireland* are one and the same.

The name *Eire*, or Ireland, was used in the 1937 Constitution to name the State of Ireland, even though the State did not include the six counties of Northern Ireland (though articles two and three of the Constitution laid claim to those counties as well).

The Constitution was taking the historical name for the island of Ireland/Eire and

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<sup>41</sup> Gerardine Meaney. 'Myth, History and the Politics of Subjectivity: Eavan Boland and Irish Women's Writing', *Women: A Cultural Review* 4.3 (1993), pp. 136-153. John Goodby *Irish poetry since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 231.

therefore to some, the aspiration of the state including the 'six counties' area is inscribed within this word, perhaps even more so when it is rendered in Irish as Eire. This naming has caused journalists and commentators pause for thought when writing of Ireland as the impulse can be toward disambiguation with some preferring to call the State 'the Republic of Ireland' while others use Eire to specifically denote the 'Irish' area of 'Southern Ireland' (an unofficial, yet widely used title for an area which is everywhere that's not 'Northern Ireland').

In the very title of this poem then, Boland draws our attention to the problem of language construction, thereby implying that nothing which follows afterwards should be taken as literal. Because this kind of reading assumes that there is intention behind word choice, I maintain this even while knowing that this title is also that of the 1912 poem in Irish by Pádraig Pearse in which Ireland appears as a lonely old woman who has been 'sold' by her children and although I also understand that it may simultaneously refer to the 1959 Sean O'Riada score for the George Morrison movie celebrating revolutionary nationalism which has the same title. There were many possible title variations available to Boland to use but she chose 'Mise Eire' and that may be tantamount to a statement of intent.

The poem opens with a statement in the negative,

I won't go back to it –

my nation displaced  
into old dactyls,

Dactyls of course are the metrical foot of Greek elegiac poetry and there's a powerful forward movement in that structure of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables which can play against the inner ear almost like the sound of a train. The word 'poetry' itself is often used by academics as a useful mnemonic to give to students of this metrical foot. In the use of dactyls here, is Boland implying an older heroic poetry that hers will certainly not be returning toward?

Having established that the speaker will not go back to 'oaths' made in the past, we move to the second stanza which begins with a litany:

land of the Gulf Stream  
the small farm,  
the scalded memory,

That the Gulf Stream is a constant (at least until recently when it may be affected by climate change) seems to imply that the small farm and the sense of a painful past invoked by 'scalded' are also constants and even that they may be 'natural' to the land in question. The following lines invoke 'songs' and 'words' that seek to re-make, obfuscate, or otherwise apply a balm to historical event:

the songs  
that bandage up the history,  
the words that make a rhythm of the crime

where time is time past.

The final line of the quote above might seem to say that time in this 'land' is never experienced in the present but is freighted with the 'crime' of history and that the poets (if we read 'poetry' for 'words') are ill-serving the real injury, preferring to 'make a rhythm' of it.

Clair Wills in her 1993-published piece seems to imply that Boland is here suggesting a revisionist aim of challenging the orthodox version of the past and that this would be preferable to the 'bandage' of words she mentions.<sup>42</sup> And that does seem possible if we allow that such orthodox accounts may not include characters such as the two females invoked in the next sections, a garrison prostitute and an emigrant mother leaving Ireland with her 'half-dead' baby. But what to make of the twice-negative line 'No. I won't go back.' followed by the line 'My roots are brutal.'? In the former, it could be argued, is a fatalistic sense that no matter how much the 'no' is meant or emphasised, the speaker may well be drawn 'back'. In the latter, the use of 'roots' – knowledge of which is often seen as a positive, strengthening force – followed by 'brutal' could be seen as both a statement of historical fact and as a burden which continues to be carried in the present.

A colon leads into the final pair of sections, implying that these two are the 'roots' of the

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<sup>42</sup> Wills, Clair, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 57-58.

poem that we read in our own present moment, our 'time' which, as readers, has to be time present. The first 'I am the woman' section equates the speaker with she who 'practises/ the quick frictions' – perhaps another form of metaphorical 'bandage' in the peddled falsity of the 'rictus of delight' and one which women find themselves able to perform perennially – thus reminding us of the constancy of the Gulf Stream earlier. Is there anything as humanly constant as transactional sex and the faked female orgasm? In the second of these sections, the speaker becomes the emigrant listening to an 'immigrant/guttural', and missing the 'vowels' of home, though neither knowing or caring that any 'new language' is 'a kind of scar' that heals 'into a passable imitation' of what has gone before. The two dactyls of 'immigrant/guttural' could perhaps offer a new form of the old inheritance if they were not seen immediately to be compromised. So an imitation of the previous dispensation is all this emigrant woman has to show for her journey away from the 'land' in question, surely implying that the orthodoxies of the 'songs' and 'words' may go on making a 'rhythm of the crime' as will the rhythms of sex, no better or no worse than before. The distinct impression left to this reader is to ask what the difference is between this description and a going 'back to it'?

With this in mind, I am sent back anew to those 'old dactyls', reminded as I go that the word 'history' is an accepted example of a dactyl whereas 'herstory' does not seem to perform as one. And if we look at the line, 'I won't go back to it', we can hear again the possibility of two dactyls here and then hear how they are undone in the re-working of that line as 'No. I won't go back'. Boland may be putting down a marker that her poem

will deal with the ostensibly unheroic experience of women even as she uses the prostitute and the mother as emblematic and not individualised. But we know from the end of the poem's 'imitation' of 'what went before' that the poet may also be admonishing herself as a writer using the 'words' she initially seems to complicate to subsequently work against the very thing she describes. There's a distinctly pessimistic view of the power of poetry in this poem which may indeed be all an 'imitation' of what has gone before despite the effort of the poet to re-work the received heroic poem. And all this is discussed within the medium of this particular poem which is one that might lend itself to being interpreted as 'disguised political tract' (in Gerardine Meaney's phrase). However that interpretation may miss its full range of focus while simultaneously taking it to be linguistically simpler than it actually is. I am suggesting that there is a double-bluff here by Boland and she is depending on her reader to see through the layering achieved. It will be seen in 'From there to here' that certain of the poems may also demand much of a reader, partly because of the shifting locus of authority within them, something deftly managed by Boland.

A close reading of this work therefore implies that the eminent critic Edna Longley may have the emphasis wrong when she says in *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* that the piece destabilizes *Mise* but not *Eire* as here, we see that *Eire* is standing for any repeated falsity, in itself certainly an unstable name for a contested political State but almost more importantly a name that also doubles for a

problematic state of poetic mind or a problematic set of poetics.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, we understand the *Mise* to be incontrovertibly linked in a me=Jane way to the *Eire*, thereby the problems of one are the problems of the other. When Longley praises Paul Muldoon for distinguishing between ‘dead and living tradition, between apparent and real breaks with the past’, could it be that she has not allowed that Boland may be implying that there’s no way of breaking with a ‘past’ which has had no substance in the ‘words’ that should perhaps have inscribed it?<sup>44</sup> Could Boland be suggesting that if such a break was to be in evidence, it might mean that the ‘imitation of what went before’ would have stopped somehow and for this poet, at least in this poem, that is not the case. Instead, the poet appears doomed to repeat, much like the archetypal characters who peopled the classical poetry she invokes in her now fully problematised mention of ‘old dactyls’ and that while the poetic line she uses may be variable and free of fixed metre, and while her archetypes may instead be women who compromise and carry on, the problem of rendering anything in a ‘new language’ remains intractable. ‘My roots are brutal’ this poem seems to say, and brutal – it implies – they will remain.

As Boland develops this section of her aesthetic over several books, she explores not only the danger of beautiful rhetoric whether in speech or in ‘songs crying out their

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<sup>43</sup> Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 1994). ‘Eavan Boland’s feminist poem ‘*Mise Eire*’ (I am Ireland) destabilises *Mise* but not *Eire* – “my nation displaced/ into old dactyls”’. p. 173.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 172.

ironies' (from 'The Achill Woman') but also the question of whether any so-called 'healing' of these kinds of fractures which affect the self and which appear in the poem is possible or even desirable. As she says at the end of 'In Exile' (from the sequence 'Outside History' in the book *Outside History*): 'my speech will not heal. I do not want it to heal.'<sup>45</sup> This is an insight earned by listening to the 'sense of injury' the speaker recognises in the speech of two exiled German girls who spoke 'in their own tongue: syllables in which pain was/ radical, integral'. Indeed, the repetitions of motif that Boland performs might even become monotonous were it not that they are freighted with the idea, raised in 'Mise Eire', of the 'imitation' of what went before. It is as if with re-turning and re-working her subject matter, Boland gets closer to this notion, mentioned in 'We are Always too Late' as 'the re-enactment. Always that.' And in this poem, that idea is qualified with the notion of continuously being too late as the speaker, who is 'always' going towards the character in the poem, tries to show her the trees, here standing for 'beautiful upstaging of/ what we suffer by' but the upshot is a defeated attempt as the piece ends 'she never even sees me.'

The artistic dilemma for Boland then is how to match a poetic approach to an acute sense of how history pervades the present coupled with the need to address the silenced suffering of the voiceless as this is where she feels poetry ought to go. These imperatives however are themselves coupled with the knowledge that any attempt to work them into art may be doomed, even as she expresses the demand for that attempt

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<sup>45</sup> *NCP*, p. 316.

to be continued. In this way, Boland sets out the aesthetic challenge in a slightly different way than Fiacc but both can be seen as interested in the wider political dimension of poet-in-the-world and of poem-in-the-world. Neither, for instance, fully lean toward an 'art for art's sake' moment, though it could be said that there's an implied lament for that moment in certain of Boland's moods, especially in poems where the natural world is a repository of positively-laden imagery. In the book 'The Journey' alone, there are several poems where the titles themselves draw attention to the protagonist's understanding of the environment: 'The Briar Rose', 'The Bottle Garden', 'The Wild Spray' etc., and in the latter poem, her often-used image of suburban whitebeam trees makes an appearance. The natural world in Boland is sometimes seen as a source of painterly pleasures, the 'camisole glow' of that briar rose or the way the tended garden emphasises the normality possible in the world of routine of family love as in 'The Unlived Life': 'The sweet-pea ascending the trellis/The clematis descended'. While she does deploy the 'broken/ Countryside' and the torn laurel leaf in poems discussed here, Boland's nature imagery is often used in a contrasting way to that of Fiacc as the latter continues his ideas of brokenness and 'wrongness' more fully into images coined from violated sites of violence.

In these books then, Boland uses a different approach than Padraic Fiacc to the same set of aesthetic issues. While Fiacc allows disruption right into the poem in forms of abused syntax, heavily enjambed lines, neologisms and language that traces the contours of brutality, Boland instead addresses many of the same questions but her methodology, at

least in this earlier work, is to come at the issues through controlled poem sequences and through taking various lines of approach to the same subjects. Via these approaches, she provides incremental shifts in her poetic answer to the problem of dealing with the legacies of violence and of a contested culture within the poems. She also amplifies the problem of the poet, a figure who must try to answer the question of how to create an artwork that is up to the task.

The problem is perhaps most obviously inscribed in poems within the 1994 volume, *In a time of Violence*. In a piece titled 'Inscriptions', characteristically part of the titular sequence of the book (though called, with a small variation, 'Writing in a time of violence'), Boland addresses the issue of the dead:

For years I have known  
 how important it is  
 not to name  
 the coffins, the murdered in them,  
 the deaths in alleyways and on doorsteps –  
 in case they rise out of their names

(NCP, pp.350-352)

The poem is ostensibly talking about one child, 'Peter', who is long gone but whose named cot is among the belongings in a rented holiday cottage but it moves this thought outwards to suggest that there is no comfort in knowing that 'his sign is safe tonight'. The reader has to work hard to find any relation between the deaths in alleyways and the beloved child but the link appears to be in the lines, 'Someone knew/ the

importance of giving him a name'. Could the poet here be admonishing herself for a lack of attention to the actual victims of violence even though her professed poetic aesthetic is ostensibly developing as quite the opposite? When she professes in the sequence 'Outside History' from the book of the same name, 'out of myth and into history I move to be/ part of that ordeal', might a reader not have expected more of these actual murders, real people suffering and visceral brutality to have appeared within the work? To return to 'Inscriptions', it is unsuccessful as a poem perhaps, particularly in the less than satisfying ending which reaches for the somewhat clichéd 'name-eating elements' that 'must find/ headstones to feed their hunger?', thus ending with an almost maudlin reminder that the child, Peter, is long dead. Perhaps though the poem which appears previously to this in the book, 'The Dolls Museum in Dublin', also about problematic commemoration, is instructive in its more powerful and more difficult ending as the final stanza here begins to use the strangeness of sentence structure which the poet will bring to full fruition in a later book, *Code*:

To be the hostages ignorance  
 takes from time and ornament from destiny. Both.  
 To be the present of the past. To infer the difference  
 with a terrible stare. But not feel it. And not know it.

(NCP, p. 350)

The stanza is a grammarian's nightmare and arguably fails poetically even as it serves

to show up the problems of individuality and the illusions around it that are explored in the poem. It does however serve to show Boland at her most syntactically torturous when she grapples with the most intractable poetic problems. This is corroborated by her finishing this sequence with the poem, 'Beautiful Speech'. Here, she may be warning the attentive reader that her 'speech' will move away from the 'dear vowels/ Irish Ireland ours' (which she has unpicked in all their attractive dangers) and that we should come with her towards a use of syntax which will reflect her poetic obsessions more closely, or, as she will eventually write in 'Instructions' (*Domestic Violence*, 2007): 'Now take syntax. Break that too.' It is possible that these poems in *In a time of violence* are priming the reader to more fully enter into the dilemmas that pervade the 2001 volume *Code*. Here is where it's possible to most fully see Boland's most amplified set of poetic issues played out over a whole book, a book which uses and abuses syntax to approach those issues.

The volume begins with the poem 'In Which Hester Bateman, 18<sup>th</sup> Century English Silversmith Takes an Irish Commission'. It is the first in a sequence entitled "Marriage". Eleven poems make up this group and their obsessions reflect a poetic career's worth of poetry dedicated, ostensibly, to making meaning, to telling – not necessarily showing – to addressing the larger issues of history, of art, of nation, within a framework which tends toward accentuating the individual conscience, the individual life, particularly the female life, as really lived.

The poem which takes Hester Bateman, Silversmith, as its starting point is freighted with so many of these characteristics that a reader may be tempted to gloss over them without watching out for the workings of the language. In this book however, as here in the initial poem, the question of what kind of linguistic structure is fit for the task becomes central to the work itself.

Hester Bateman made a marriage spoon  
 And then subjected it to violence.  
 Chased, beat it. Scarred it and marked it.  
 All in the spirit of our darkest century:

far away from the grapeshot and tar caps  
 And the hedge schools and the music of sedition  
 She is oblivious to she pours out  
 And lets cool the sweet colonial metal.

All the 't' sounds in the opening verse force the ear to hear that 'violence'; and make it a relief to move into the second stanza, which becomes more assonantal. But there, the third line refuses to be easily read. 'She is oblivious to she pours out' is given without an internal comma so that 'She' becomes both object and subject and the verse can be read both upwards and downwards, something that has been forced by the syntax — urging the reader to look again, to establish what exactly is being poured out and to what, precisely, 'oblivious to' applies. Here is the syntactical play which, as it goes on within the work, seems to imply that there are at least two ways of reading everything, that nothing is given, that the onlooker could end up seeing double, questioning the layering that makes the notion of marriage resonate to include art and intention, empire and nation, 'past and future and the space between'. But more importantly, as I want to

notice, here the inner workings of language itself is drawn into the arguments posited more discursively in Boland's earlier poems discussed above.

This first poem, along with the ode that closes the book, brackets a collection that includes some poems explicitly concerned with the parts of language, exploring for instance, how the 'Old Monks' used vowels and consonants and also investigating the stance of Standard English towards Hiberno-English. In this light the final verse of the first poem can be read to be as much about language as about the marriage spoon:

Until resistance is their only element. It is  
 What they embody, bound now and always:  
 History frowns on them: yet in its gaze  
 They join their injured hands and make their vows.

The capitalisation of the first word in each line imposes a glottal stop which is at its most effective when a run-on is expected: 'It is/ What they embody'. The poet seems to be asking the reader to work harder and look longer, to ensure that linguistic difficulty is noticed and the feeling that this conveys is noted. The use of non-sentences like 'Chased, beat it.' is a recognisable trait from earlier collections. As a device, it has been noted here in *In a Time of Violence* but a poem in the sequence 'Outside History' from the book of that title, 'An old steel engraving' may foreshadow the themes of this Hester Bateman piece, and not only in the 'spaces' which it tries to illuminate between the 'unfinished action' captured in the object, and how the onlooker's own moral space is included by the artefact, but also by ending with the stanza:

Is this river which  
 moments ago must have flashed the morse

of a bayonet thrust. And is moving on.

What is the subject of 'Is'? Again, a reader must travel back up the poem to find it. And, with a real sense of fun, we can play with the fact that the subject is movable; either it continues from, 'this is/what happened and is happening', or it may refer to 'the word/nothing can stir'. It seems that this linguistic 'resistance' is partially already formed in previous collections though it may have been overshadowed in terms of criticism by commentators also feel, to use Mary O'Connor's word 'over-rehearsed' and this combination may act towards taking the reader's eye off the poetic ball so to speak<sup>46</sup>.

But, for this study, it is important to remain a close reader and I would argue that it is since the publication of *Code*, that Boland's parallel project has become clear. She is interested in exploring the tension within the syntax, within the cadence of Hiberno-English (as opposed to merely the words used), and in employing those conflicts to her own poetic ends. In the same way that linguistic shifts within individual poems force a re-reading, so an overall appreciation of the work of a career is seen now to be in 'Nights of childhood' from *Outside History*:

lucid as a nursery rhyme and as hard to fathom,  
revealed by rhythm, belied by theme.

*NCP*, p.323-324

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<sup>46</sup> Mary O'Connor, 'Chronicles of Impeded Growth: Eavan Boland and the Reconstruction of Identity' in *Post Identity* 45 (vol.2, no.2, Fall 1999), <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/postid/pid9999.0002.203/>> Hosted by Michigan University Library. [accessed 1 Feb, 2014].

It is as if the poet wants language itself to enter a new season, to come with her as she develops her aesthetic and to become pliable to her intentions. We heard in 'What we lost' (*Outside History*) that 'The dumb show of legend has become language,/is becoming silence' and we know from many poems including, 'The Carousel in the Park', also from the latter, that Boland wants to avoid 'those safe curves, that seasonless canter'.

It seems to be where her set of ever-present tensions are at their highest that the poet turns to prose. In *Code*, the second piece in the 'Marriage' sequence is 'Against Love Poetry'. Written in short sentences, it mirrors some of the Bolandisms characteristic of the stanzaic poems: 'Why do I put these words side-by-side? Because I am a/ woman.'<sup>47</sup> Apart from the mysterious story that this small piece tells, it is certainly a coda for *Code*. 'It is to mark the contradictions of a daily love that I have written this. Against love poetry.' This might be read as the poet working within recognisable 'meaning-laden' language wishing simultaneously to show up the perilous nature of assumptions that she too can make about the efficacy of language in a poem. Yet the resonance of the story in which a condemned man, a great king, breaks down and weeps in front of his victorious enemy only when his old servant is paraded in front of him, seems to hint at the larger theme of the poet as servant only to her own muse, of the artist as a willing slave to something greater.

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<sup>47</sup> *NCP*, p. 451

In a poem like 'Quarantine', Boland's ambition for the work in *Code* is viscerally felt by the reader. She has expressly taken on the love poem and yet, she writes one here. She has said that poetry must take real account of the human endeavour to make a good life and yet, never avoid the 'accurate inscription/of that agony'. She has loaded this twenty-line piece with conflict-ridden words and themes: 'north' (twice), 'the toxins of a whole history', two famine deaths in the worst of circumstances and the wish/statement: 'Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.' How will the poet end such a poem? As it turns out, with two sentences beginning with that friendly sentence-starter, the Irish-English, *agus*-And. This has a connotation of *while/although/as* as well as an 'and then' quality when used as a sentence starter by traditional story tellers in the Irish language and is also linked to the use of the continuous present tense in Hiberno-English.<sup>48</sup> Used thus, 'And' could seem to refer to a whole linguistic and human history while opening out within the sense to embrace the importance of a relationship of care and the difficulty of expressing that care which may reside in a place language has yet to reach:

And what there is between a man and a woman.

And in which darkness it can best be proved.

'A Marriage for the Millennium' appears at first to be a simple narrative piece where the speaker travels back 'the whole distance of our marriage' metaphorically (but recorded as physically) as she passes the place the couple once lived and returns to the present ready to tell the marriage partner that 'nothing had changed', a line and a stanza that

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<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of the various uses of 'agus', see Patrick S. Dinneen, *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla: An Irish-English Dictionary*, (Dublin: M.H.Gill and Son, 1904) accessible as an e-book at <<http://www.ucc.ie/Celt/Dinneen1sted.pdf>>, [accessed 31<sup>st</sup> January 2015], p. 14.

finishes without punctuation but which still does not naturally give to what follows,

them, nothing ever would:

The reading eye is nonplussed by that 'them' and before continuing, it may be necessary to read back up the poem to flesh out the pronoun. Is it the old rowans, the computer games, the iron edges of the road that have not changed? Or is that what follows the (by now becoming characteristic) colon:

The man with his creased copy of the newspaper.  
Or the young woman talking to him. Talking to him.  
Her heart eased by this.

(*NCP*, p. 463)

The repetition of 'talking' seems to indicate an ease located at a distance from the written, as if the moment of full communication is not that recalled afterwards and recorded, but the one that will not change even as it stays in the memory as does a real historical moment. Therein though, lies a core issue for the poet. While exploring the tensions of language, she must still use it for her art. While acknowledging how problematic that is, she seeks some constancy that will allow itself to be expressed.

In the second section of *Code*, the poem of that title spotlights themes already touched upon in the first sequence. 'Code' is an ode which also draws attention to itself as artefact by veering from its iambics and by varying line length and stanza shape in alternate stanzas. It takes up the issue of Creation (once with a capital, and once with a lowercase 'c') affirming: 'let there be language/even if we use it differently:' and it appears to give primacy to 'word' over the natural world which, as in many Boland poems, makes its appearance as a perfect metaphor for a time. Addressed to Grace

Murray Hopper, verifier of COBOL, it concludes with the large statement:

I am racing at a screen as blue  
as any hill, as any lake, composing this  
to show you how the world begins again:  
One word at a time,  
One woman to another.

(*NCP*, pp. 466-469)

And in trying to replicate the placement of one line underneath the other as it appears on the printed page, I find that I would need the hidden codes showing where each line begins. And in thinking of language itself as code, I find myself re-reading the poem for clues as to code-breaking and discover, 'The given world is what you can translate' and 'I never made it numerate as you did./And yet I use it here to imagine'. What seems to be implied here is that it may be the power of imagination that informs language, itself a metaphor for our 'code' as individuals, and that this code is transformative, and even capable of creation.

Boland, over a number of collections before *Code*, had addressed the whole question of memory in terms of a real or received history, in terms of truth and imagination, and in relation to the whole issue of time: passing, recalled, stalled and revived within the poem. The moral space, that Boland insists her poems inhabit, exists precisely because she refuses to write the historical moment out of memory or to make the real lived moment solely emblematic. Since rejecting her own poem, 'Child of our time' then (a

piece which she has omitted from several collections since), there seems to have been a commitment to exposing the moment where that very movement might happen, were language 'is concealed, is perilous'. Perhaps this shift is also demonstrated by Boland's emphasis on the syntactic slipperiness of language in *Code*. In this book, the twin themes of the unreliability of 'memory' and almost intractable problems of 'making' become explicitly linked. 'Making money' re-imagines the mill workers of Dundrum, a suburb of Dublin, and it states,

if you can keep  
your composure in the face of this final proof that  
the past is not made out of time, out of memory,  
out of irony but is also  
a crime we cannot admit and will not atone  
it will be dawn again the rainy Autumn of the year.

The poem then moves to its final lines where the action of the past is looked forward to in the future tense,

The air will be a skinful of water —  
the distance between storms —  
again. The wagon of rags will arrive.  
The foreman will buy it. The boxes will be lowered to the path  
the women are walking up.  
as they always did, as they always will now.  
Facing the paradox. Learning to die of it.

(NCP, pp.469-472)

Looking at this section, especially at that favoured Boland word 'distance', and the enjambment which emphasises 'again' in a way which brings to mind the Irish-English 'again' (*arís*: another time with its connotation of mythic or archetypal repetitions), it seems that the awkwardness of the enjambment from 'path' to 'the women are walking

up' has the effect of jolting the reading mind, momentarily slipping the noose of time. This then may be what is meant by 'paradox' in the final line where the paradox of 'time travel' (undertaken by the poet in the poem) meets a paradox like that of the Ship of Theseus (will this ship be the same object if its wooden parts are replaced over time?). In that moment, forced to contemplate these women in a way managed by the poem, the reading mind becomes conscious of itself, thereby becoming strangely more aware of their presence, now actual women (since there's no difference within the mind between imagined and actual in this moment), walking 'as they always did, as they always will now'. Boland may here be playing the kind of poetic mind-game that we associate more with a Paul Muldoon. Here though, the argument is clear. Boland wants the language she chooses, her placement of it on the page including her use of resonant non-sentences ('Learning to die of it.') to form part of her insistent themes in order to rise poetically to the challenge of the difficulty she describes.

'Irish Poetry', the ode for Michael Hartnett with which *Code* concludes, has that 'it' appearing in the first stanza which surely must be the created, the made 'it' that filled the initial verse of the first poem of the book regarding Hester Bateman (hear the 't's cutting her name).

We always knew there was no Orpheus in Ireland  
 No music stored at the doors of hell.  
 No god to make it.  
 No wild beasts to weep and lie down to it.

And, within the recollection of, and the image of people talking (again), this poem moves

in short bursts as if it is coming to an understanding of itself as it is being written, to describe what Boland's verse may have done for the reader:

You made the noise for me.  
 Made it again.  
 Until I could see the flight of it:

But this is the sound of a 'bird's wing in a lost language'; a curiously anatomical natural image falling to find its intended expression perhaps, or a reference to 'The Black Lace Fan My Mother Gave Me', another poem where wing and/or fan takes on the time-stopping resonance of a moment, of place, of feelings deeply felt between people. On reading the poem aloud however, on making its noise again, it is possible to hear a certain grief within:

how the sound  
 of a bird's wing in a lost language sounded.

Here indeed is a distance. Reader and writer may only have the possibility of hearing an imitative sound of how something sounded (which itself is another form of Hiberno-English hyperbaton). This poem is written to the poet Michael Hartnett, whose own *Farewell to English* (and his subsequent return to writing in that language) may also inform it. Eavan Boland has him make the 'noise' so real that an 'as if' can develop which is the closest, she seems to say, that art can get to where any or all of the conflicts traced in this book, and by extension – in her oeuvre – might be resolved. The revelation, such as it is, applies as easily to what Boland has been doing throughout her poetry. Here, even with an always less-than-perfect language, even with the distances the poet has described, we can, through the fruit of the imaginative mind become that

thing, compromised and problematic, but nonetheless desired as the best poetic that her aesthetic can produce:

and the savage acres no-one could predict  
were all at ease, soothed and quiet and  
listening to you, as I was. As if to music, as if to peace.

*(NCP, pp.491-492)*

Here Boland brings what has been seen as 'savage' towards an 'as if' that allows for 'peace' even though the problems therein are clearly observed. Here, as is her way, she allows for the poem as an accommodation and not as a solution but suggests that it, standing for art, is the best that might be possible, given that it can hold within it an aesthetic reply to a contested culture and a violent state as well as implying the transcendence of a momentary creation within art, however diminished that might be. It is armed with that knowledge that I approach my own current project and from which the poems in 'From there to here' arise.

## Chapter Three

### Writing 'From there to here'

The thesis title of 'From there to here' operates dually as a title for the creative work and also for the critical engagement with two poets who approach some of the same aesthetic concerns that drive my own poetry. I have addressed the work of Fiacca and Boland using a methodology of 'close reading', not entirely as used as a critical term by the New Critics, but certainly paying close attention to the inner workings of the text itself, while not stripping interpretation of any wider cultural reference.

Poets who engage fully with the work of other poets are reminded of T.S. Eliot perhaps who of course pursued criticism that still has purchase and said that a poet is 'always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing'.<sup>49</sup> I would re-calibrate that slightly for my engagement with the two poets under scrutiny here in that I find myself using certain of the techniques observed in both poets, albeit re-deployed in different ways. While I have chosen neither to fully go the route of Fiacca's complete psychic distress mirrored within the fabric of the poem, nor to follow entirely the detached elegance of

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<sup>49</sup> T.S.Eliot, 'The Music of Poetry', W.P. Ker Memorial Lecture, 1942, quoted in T. S.Eliot, critical biographical note on <http://www.PoetryFoundation.org>, < <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/t-s-eliot>>, [accessed January 20<sup>th</sup> 2015] (paragraph 23).

Boland or her arguably more self-consciously cerebral syntactical play, my poems allow the disjunct between 'official' or legitimised 'tellings' and the implied resistance of re-tellings into the poem in ways partly inspired by both Fiacc and Boland. It's a strategy which enables the poem to reference the tradition while remaining historically aware and socially engaged. I take my understanding of the possibilities of this kind of lyric from Louis MacNeice who understood its dramatic potential:

... all lyric poems, though in varying degrees, are *dramatic*... there may be only one actor on the stage but the Opposition are on their toes in the wings... your lyric is in fact a monodrama.<sup>50</sup>

On the surface of things, what might be said to link these two poets biographically to myself is that we have all spent time away from Ireland, time that might be described as formative in terms of the body of work we've produced. While the idea of 'exile' seems outmoded in terms of a critical approach for our contemporary moment, it may still be worth noting how tropes of investigating what 'home' means, as well as how poetic moments forged by a sense of complicated or false and inherited identities inform sections of the work. The idea of 'exile' then is not the one we are familiar with from narratives of political and artistic exile of the past. Rather, it is akin to a sense of disturbed notions of identity, sometimes at odds with idealised 'identities' being peddled by others, and it bears some relation to the difficulty of creation of the poet-self, something that also preoccupies these poets.

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<sup>50</sup> Louis MacNeice, 'Experiences with images', *Orpheus*, 2 (1949) quoted in *The Honest Ulsterman*, 73 (September 1983), p. 13.

As described here, both Boland and Fiacc have at least partly turned away from the formal demands of the more traditional English lyric towards the liberating models available in poetry and poetics emanating from the US. Boland has been clear about her debt to writers including Adrienne Rich and Denise Levertov while Fiacc is rightly noted by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews as 'Adapting both the confessional mode, and the familiar techniques of American modernism associated with Eliot, Pound and Williams.'<sup>51</sup> Both poets have been seen to be concerned with bringing real historical or present-day incident into the poem in a way which still allows the poem to operate beyond that recorded moment. I believe that my work is also involved in these attempts and others in ways explored below.

Jahan Ramazani in his book, *A Transnational Poetics* gives us a way of seeing how contemporary Irish poetry could in fact be transnationalizing 'the local', looking outwards as well as inwards for its models and for its ideal reader in ways that Boland and Fiacc can be said to do. Ramazani's appreciation is of a 'contemporary poet who conceives the poetic imagination as transnational, a nation-crossing force that exceeds the limits of territorial and juridical norm'<sup>52</sup> Boland does this via her adaptation of the 'Écriture féminine' but also by using the 'local quarrel' to address the pressures on the dislocated modern or post-modern 'self' within the post-colonial social hierarchy inscribed in the poems. Fiacc operates by sometimes using Roman Catholic iconography and ideas of self-sacrifice or a sacramental moment to imply a transcendent which may

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<sup>51</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Irish Poetry, the American connection* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p. 228.

<sup>52</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2009), p. 2.

exist almost in spite of it not being readily available. I hope that my work too goes beyond the local set of fractured and fractious identities to imply, via poems which have verve and swerve, that the apparent set of displacements fits in with some of the present arguments in poetry which, as they arguably have always been, are around 'what is the poem *for*?' Jahan Ramazani posits that the contemporary Irish writer has dismantled the old forms of an isolationist aesthetic linked with nationalism and I would hope I join Boland and Fiacca in doing that.

While here I have concentrated on two important poetic 'teachers' as it were, I am clearly in dialogue with the work of other poets. In terms of work which claims a historically and culturally aware space, books would include *Utter* by Vahni Capildeo which emanates from the socially and politically changed Caribbean but has much to say about the place of poetry in our post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world. In 'For Z, at the end of term' for instance, the speaker articulates, 'A new insanity is settling in, I've noticed.// Walking around, looking relaxed, are those without conscience.'<sup>53</sup> In addition, Moniza Alvi's *At the time of partition* reflects on the partition of India and Pakistan but the poetic understandings she brings to bear might feel particularly apt to a reader reflecting on Ireland. Indeed, she might be talking about one of Fiacca's own thematic riffs when she says, 'In an exodus, such a child/ grown up and not grown up/was ripe for being lost.'<sup>54</sup> Sujata Bhatt also provides moments of recognition in her work, most recently in

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<sup>53</sup> Vahni Capildeo, *Utter*, (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2013). 'For Z at the end of term', p. 27. See also the poem 'Creative Writing' where the speaker announces that 'Violence begins to enter this interchange', p. 31.

<sup>54</sup> Moniza Alvi, *At the time of partition* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2013), p. 11.

*Collected Poems*, where her piece 'History is a broken narrative' opines, 'History is a broken narrative/where you make your language/ when you change it.'<sup>55</sup>

Emanating more from a specifically Irish moment, but also with a wider reach in sight, are poets including Colette Bryce, Leontia Flynn and Alan Gillis who have variously approached and continue to approach some of the thematic concerns and even the symbolic range encountered here. Colette Bryce's recent book *The Whole & Rain-domed Universe* (Picador, 2014) has a poem, 'Helicopters', which feels viscerally real to me in terms of symbolic register as that all-seeing 'eye' and the sense of eerie observance it implies also appears in my book *Cross-Talk* (Seren, 2009). The bright spirit to much of the work of these writers and myself may well be Louis MacNeice who was both able to write a public-facing poem and an intensely driven, almost 'private' lyric as well as being able to employ a dialectic approach in his poems which centre on the island of Ireland and its wider relationships.

For this chapter, I am reflecting specifically on the work within 'From there to here', with an interest in drawing on my readings of Fiacc and Boland to show how my own creative decisions are influenced and amplified by my reading of their work. This will be done over three short sections which deal with the skewed pastoral, the problem of 'place' and with how the poems themselves inscribe a poetic.

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<sup>55</sup> Sujata Bhatt, *Collected Poems*, (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2013), p. 323.

### The skewed pastoral

I have noted how, in Fiacc, the natural world is recorded within the poem as constantly violated, a site not of any balm to the other occurrences playing out in the poems, but rather as a backdrop which may somehow be in collusion with those happenings.

I rise and stalk across the scarred with storm-

Erected daisies, night in the north, grass.

‘The Wrong Ones’, *RP*, p.136

When the ‘country’ is mentioned here, it is not with anything like the received idea of a countryside place in contrast to a more complex city environment but a wholly integrated locale where atrocities happen as in ‘this coffin country/ Where your hands are clawed’ from the poem ‘The Ditch of Dawn’.<sup>56</sup> When a poem like ‘Glass Grass’ begins with sensual detail of smell and sound, it is Fiacc’s way to ensure that the smell is the aftermath of a bomb, ‘The scorched-cloth smell of burnt flesh’ and that the sound is from migraine-inducing seagulls, the latter also used as a counteraction to any possible vision of them as restorative by appearing again at the end of the poem, circling ‘like hazy-eyed drunks’.<sup>57</sup>

In Fiacc, the natural world is, more often than not, the site of degradation, atrocity, murder and defilement. As ‘Glass Grass’ has it, the physical ‘world’ of the poem is ‘Waiting for when or where the next blow/ Will fall.’ In Boland, the natural world is used

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<sup>56</sup> *RP*, p. 143.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 129-32.

variously. One iteration is as a site of moral investigation as in the poem 'The science of cartography is limited' where the starving Irish are given roads to build in exchange for food and, as the poem puts it, 'Where they died, there the road ended'. Another is the suburb-scape in which the returning and recurring motifs of whitebeam, of jasmine and of other flora, present one device which appears to allow for a sense of mythological 'return' within an apparently quotidian environment. *The Lost Land* is perhaps the book in which Boland most makes use of images drawn from landscape and here she makes the connection clear between memory or loss and imagined or real environs:

memory itself  
 has become an emigrant,  
 wandering in a place  
 where love dissembles itself as landscape

'The Lost Land' (from *The Lost Land*, p.40)

In this book too, there's an awareness of the metaphorical possibilities of the natural world with the poem 'Home' deploying a metaphor of butterfly migration, and 'The Blossom' using an extended metaphorical conceit to inscribe the emotion of loss when talking about a beloved daughter.

Fiacc then, with his sometimes unnaturally violent 'natural' world, and Boland with her pervasive awareness of the intersections of physical and political/personal landscapes, are poets from whom I have learned with regard to the tension between natural and symbolic worlds. It is as if the politics of borders, crossings and transgressions is

sometimes mirrored in a dialectic of nature vs nurture or of the naturally occurring vs the worldly and manufactured. The resulting tension drives poems into existence in the ways outlined below.

Aware of how poetry from Ireland has on occasion seemed to conflate the physical or natural world with ideas of nation and nationalism through the tradition, I hoped that any use of flora or fauna in my work could provide an implied counterpoint to such a use by rooting such images in the actual physical world in which we live and move while still remaining aware of pervasive political control or social situations. There is almost no 'value-free' view of nature here. A reader can be 'Watching the mountains' in my poem but this will be as they 'change colour/in time to the drums' ('Colonial Drift', lines 4-5). It is no wonder then that I found the final collection included poems in which the natural world played a key role in terms of image generation and an expansion of the tonal play available in each piece. The reader is invited, as the poem 'Interviewing the beast' puts it, to 'look at the fields'... 'they curl at the edges, showing the layers of greed.'

This collection begins with 'Weeding', a poem in which the moral obligation of the 'weeders' is explored. Those joining in the ordered line of workers may have the sense that the 'world seems right' but if the 'you' was to avoid the order, play truant as it were, becoming liminal themselves in that part of the field that can't be ploughed, then – the poem asks, what might be the consequence? One reading is that the punishment is clear. In a kind of fall from grace, the skivers are 'filthy with possibility' and lost. The

other reading, also implied here, is that this veering from order may be worth it, even if the willow, pressed into service here as a kind of askance observer, laughs in the end 'at you'. The poem sets up two strands of thought explored throughout the collection, one relates to poetry itself and the other to the vexed traditions of entrenched ideologies available on the island of Ireland, but often played out as a microcosm of our wider zeitgeist with its ever-present threat of random terrorist violence. Here, those strands are hinted at in terms of asking what happens when the poem steers away from the inherited norms of the formal English lyric ('the ordered rippling rows'), even while presenting that option in a controlled five line stanzaic form and also in terms of the juxtaposition of 'flirty' with 'filthy' which may be positive/negative and the mention, more sinisterly, of 'what is buried' which links with the word 'cross', here used in a verbal clause but certainly doing the work of implying a range of secrets including that of dead bodies.

While 'Weeding' might be read as quasi-positive if the shiftiness of tone were not noted, another characteristic use of the natural world in this work is to allow it into the poem, but in ways that make it also appear to be compromised, re-imagined, defiled or ambiguous. The latter relates to the theme of crossings, of edges and of liminality which both drive and permeate the work. This dialectic approach might be best exemplified by making a reading of three pairings of poems. They pertain, at least on the surface, to horses, to bees and to cows.

The first two, which have horses and ponies respectively as part of their imagery are 'Piebald' and 'Young girls must have ponies'. 'Piebald' takes some of its sense from the meaning of that word which includes the idea of being made up of incongruous parts. The horses referred to here are ostensibly those used by the travellers who set up camp on the edges of the main cities in Ireland (and outside towns across the UK), but in the Irish case often using waste ground, or land that is in the process of being built upon with buildings paid for by grants designed to attract inward-investment. These are 'brown-field sites' in contemporary parlance. The poem plays with the notions of these incongruities, asking 'what are they for?' in an attempt perhaps to sort the symbolic nature of the 'horse' from the actual scrawny examples to hand. The dialectic here is of two arguments, one is that the horses have been stripped of any possible symbolic value but the other is that such a value is just under the surface and requires the reader to pretend 'not to notice the occasions' when it surfaces. Word-use and phrasing here implies an ancillary theme – that of a gently satiric look at a post-boom economy with the advance factories 'built to house a desperation' and 'the binds that make taxes out of failure' leading to the sense of 'captivity' within the ring-road of this city, around which are the recalcitrant horses. Written in stanzas varying from 7 to 9 lines, there's a rhythmic looseness in terms of the line, as it follows the undulations of a speaking voice as it were. However, juxtapositions including dealers/shakers, rubble/stumps, scrawny/screed are used to maintain aural interest while corroborating content, and composite words using hyphens, ('scruff-sides', 'hearts-beating', 'hock-stripping') are deployed to generate a cantering (or horsey) feel to the whole.

In contrast to the horses in 'Piebald', the ponies mentioned in the title of 'Young girls must have ponies' do not appear within the poem as such. In the same way as the fox is in Ted Hughes' poem 'The thought-fox', these ponies are utterly present to the poem, but are also absent – a thought which emphasises the imaginative playground that a poem can be. These ponies appear to be part of the 'sets', moved around at night, for the implied actors to use in what may be a ruse, or indeed may be 'real life'. This poem comes at the question of the symbolic nature of horses in a different way to 'Piebald' as here they are almost all-symbol. Here the patent falsity of what may be the middle-class pretension of the pony-club brigade is shown up as 'managed' – a word used twice here, once for 'environment' and once for 'wood', implying that in this piece the very nature of nature has been taken over and forced into service as if a symbol of the aspirational life. The mordant humour of 'It's almost *dressage*.' is matched by the final line which indicates the tone of this poem is with tongue firmly in cheek and hopefully acts to invite the reader to re-read the whole with that knowledge.

The pairing of pieces which take different approaches to the imagistic range provided by bees are 'The longing of the bees' and 'Republica Dolorosa'. Is the possibly eco-aware or even eco-critical approach in the 'The longing of the bees' positing a kind of eco-centrism as a way of healing the psychic drama of the post-colonial or failing republic – already seen to be driven by pretension and fraudulent tax policies in the poems discussed above? I am not going to make this claim but it's true that the thrust of this

poem might be linked with 'eco-poetry'. I am taking Forrest Gander's definition of this term in his essay in Poetry Foundation, as a poetry 'which investigates—both thematically and formally—the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception.'<sup>58</sup>

In this poem, the imperative form of the verb is used in all three stanzas ('Gather together', 'Be ready', 'Brace yourself' and so on) which may act as a way of gaining and retaining reader attention. The sequence of instructions ends with 'Listen to the hedges', possibly implying that the auditory sense is paramount (not surprising in a poem). There is experimentation with the shaping of the line in this piece with a reliance on the sentence rather than the poetic line as the guiding device, longer forms of these sentences in the first stanza giving way, to carry more urgency, to shorter, almost staccato utterance in the second, 'Tumult of absence, uproar of lack.', the latter also corroborating that the aural sense as the most important. The patent uselessness of the 'resolve to put a capsule into space' is counterpointed by a warning disguised as not a warning, using another imperative to finish the poem.

If the eco-centrism of the latter is subtly implied as a possible alternative to nationalist representations of Ireland where the 'land' is pressed into symbolic service to political ideals, the 'bee' content of 'Republica Dolorosa' may annoy the very eco-centrists possibly pleased by that poem. Here, the 'queen' is standing in for what might be pitted

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<sup>58</sup> Forrest Gander, 'What is eco-poetry?' in Poetry Foundation, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2008/11/what-is-eco-poetry/>> [accessed 20<sup>th</sup> November 2014].

against the idea of a republic, albeit a weeping one. This fourteen-line poem is patently not a sonnet but it knowingly nods towards that form with some of the line endings interlocking in terms of sound: old/room, path/as, thought/at, but/out, faces/protocols. It also employs an abused couplet ending with the two rhymes appearing here on the one line: 'slope' and 'cope'. And there's an acknowledgement of the idea of 'turn' in the poem, not just in line nine, where the repetition of 'confusion' almost performs the kind of 'turn' we might expect in a sonnet between lines eight and nine, but also in the rapid swerving that the poem undertakes – from 'icon' to killing 'a queen' to the idea of what kind of republic might exist after such a death.

The bees here are 'forgetting the sworn dance' and so are out of kilter. No wonder as an insect whose very survival depends upon there being a queen bee, they are 'in confusion' when the hierarchy is upended. However, this issue is superseded as the 'I' of the poem understands more of the visceral nature of ambiguities associated with the levelling nature of 'republic'. The barrow is upset here (not the 'apple cart' of the well-known phrase) and in a continued use of clichéd phrases, the possible creators of the mooted republic are afraid of the flood gates that may open, and of the slippery slope on which they appear to be. Far from there being any icon available to pray toward, they now don't know 'how to cope'. The poem operates to use incongruities, slippages and rapid recoveries to create cross-currents of possible meaning, providing a way of undermining each meaning, even as it is posited.

And so, to poems apparently 'about' cows: 'Flora' and 'About Cows' continue to explore the possible symbolic registers of using images from the natural world, by now fully understood as a kind of anti-pastoral miasma of disconcerting skids and oddities, this time pitting a mythological playfulness against a wandering poem that wants to go off on tangents and is determined to end in a cow pat. Flora is of course the Roman goddess of the coming of spring, a fertility goddess associated with flowers and fruits and a symbol for nature itself. Here Flora is a cow and is delineated with a decasyllabic line in the main. I believe that the poem may have occurred due to being exposed to Michael Drayton's translations of Ovid as he deals with some of the latter's Chloris-into-Flora mutation stories and perhaps also because he seems to have adapted Ovid's line to the English decasyllabic quite successfully.<sup>59</sup> Its use here also gives just enough of the 'heroic' cadence or the cadence of what we might call 'the heroic line' to act as a contrast to the quotidian subject matter of the cow knocking over the milking bucket. Anyone who has milked by hand and had this happen does not need a poem to convey the absolute ignominy of that moment but the attraction of a goddess-subject and her indifference to the milker was enough to drive that moment of 'heat' which a poem needs, here turning on whether the poem is actually seeking a mythological perspective or significance or in fact undermining the reach for same. Tonal play, as elsewhere in this collection, is deployed to imply it is both, to have it both ways as it were.

'About Cows' uses a declamatory style, at one point listing the attributes of cows. What

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<sup>59</sup> See the discussion in *A History of English Poetry* by W.J. Courthope, Volume 3, pp. 42-43

'cow-ness' may carry in the poem becomes clearer as the conversational sentences continue and is perhaps to do with the indifference of mothers lodged in a word which itself implies 'mother'. The speaker here may be measuring the world in terms of one's longing in the sense that Rilke may have meant in his *Book of Hours* where he has 'Go to the limits of your longing' (I, 59). Description is used in this poem to present the 'thingness' and exactitude of cows, possibly as a stay against the death-wish of lines five to seven. It is as if, were we to learn from Rilke's 'panther', the fully described, fully encountered cow of the imagination becomes capable of a kind of eternity. Here, I may be moving beyond the models offered by Fiacc and Boland, going – as they generally do not – beyond subject matter as such and toward a poetic moment where 'cow-ness', the essence of 'cow', may become as Rilke has it, 'a new thing that has no name and belongs to no-one'.<sup>60</sup> However, with the characteristic destabilizing move of this collection, the final lines undercut the moment, moving back to the idea of physical 'expellation', perhaps now as an almost pleurably tinged form of loss. Thinking about how the pastoral has always been political and describing some of the shifts of register available when using imagery from the natural world leads inexorably to the question of 'place' in its wider sense (both of physical place and the position of the poem in relation to the idea of place) and this discussion appears in the following section.

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<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Dore Ashton, *A Fable of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 50-58, accessed at the UC Press E-Books Collection < <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft8779p1x3/> > [accessed 30 November 2014].

### The problem of 'place'

Elmer Kennedy Andrews is interesting on the question of ideas of place:

Each person in Ulster lives first in the Ulster of the actual present, and then in one or other Ulsters of the mind... The fountainhead of the Unionist's myth springs in the Crown of England but he has to hold his own in the island of Ireland. The fountainhead of the Nationalist's myth lies in the idea of an integral Ireland, but he too lives in an exile from his ideal place. Yet, while he has to concede that he is a citizen of the partitioned British state, the Nationalist can hold to the physical fact of his presence upon the Irish island just as the Unionist can affirm the reality of the political realm of the UK even as he recognizes the geographical fact that Ireland is his insular home.<sup>61</sup>

While Kennedy-Andrews is fascinating on the idea of 'islands of the mind' as partly adumbrated above, this does not fully encompass the further oddity of being among those of us who are Irish from the so-called South and who have extensive ties in the so-termed North. But such an observation can itself seem to allow for the primacy of place to overrule imaginative possibility. Are the plays of Martin McDonagh not expert in exploring the peculiarity of displaced, evil, flawed and fascinating characters because or despite of their setting, because or despite of the fact that he was born in England but has Irish parentage and seems to have been most formed as a writer during childhood

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<sup>61</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland 1968-2008* (Woodbridge: Bowdell and Brewer, 2008) p. 2.

periods in the west of Ireland? If, as critics, we are to police what is 'real' in terms of self-placement by poets, we'd be wasting our time. What I have concentrated on in 'From here to there' is partly what Kennedy-Andrews moves toward at the end of the above quote where the geographical 'fact' of Ireland as an insular home can give rise to meditations on 'islandisms' of the mind, leading in turn to sharp shifts in the shaping 'voice' deployed in the poem and to an opportunity for the poem to be able to encompass several dichotomies including those of bringing difficult subjects within its gambit.

To use the personal for a moment seems apt here. I am called Siobhán with a fada on the 'a' which may register to those who think they know as implying a set of cultural norms (possibly Gaelgoir, certainly Catholic, likely to be nationalist). I was called this name as my mother, who didn't have a word of Irish, thought it was French. So much for working class pretension! I am also from the 'South', which is a place in which one can be more northerly than in the 'North'. And the contradictions continue until one is tempted to re-quote Gertrude Stein's 'there's no there there'.<sup>62</sup> Thankfully however, the poem is one venue in which shifts of identity, of authority and of metaphor can be accommodated and amplified by tonal decisions as well as those related to language choice and manipulation of the line.

In the chapter on Padraic Fiacc I have discussed how his use of motifs of psychic distress

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<sup>62</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1937) p. 289.

in the poems seems certainly to be recognition of being neither here nor there in terms of his returned-to locale of Northern Ireland. The divided sense of self appearing in the poems and discussed here is readily linked to both the fractious history of the island, to local factional and sectarian strife and to the wider theme of the making of the poetic self, and the role of the poem in addressing such themes. It seems that the spiritual brokenness of Fiacca's poetic sensibility may have led him towards his most syntactically difficult, more challenging and therefore more discomfiting mode of writing whereas in Boland, the pursuit of a measured cadence and the unities of a metrical line may continue further into her poetic career but have here been seen to also allow for several techniques of disruption of that line, including a unique use of the floating pronoun and the manipulation of the line break and of syntax for effect.

In my own case, while exposed to the tradition of English literature and the English lyric, the option of matching the formal graces of that tradition to the subject matter I am drawn toward has never seemed wholly available. It is as if in writing the poem in which a skewed, askance or otherwise tangential view is taken, I am bound to experiment with a playfulness of tone along with enjambment and line breaks which can sometimes read as if 'against' the received line, even as that tradition is acknowledged. I work with wariness of generating poems which would otherwise feel at best, imitative, and at worst, post-mortem.

The use of Hiberno-English as a literary language in the poems, where it seemed useful

to deploy, is one of the ways in which I retain a sense of linguistic interest as a person who speaks this dialect. The inversions, syntactical twists, double-adjectives and other markers of the dialect have always proved useful to writers seeking to inscribe a questioning of how language conveys meaning into the fabric of the work itself. We only have to think of Maria Edgeworth, John Millington Synge and Flann O'Brien or James Joyce on the one hand or, in contemporary playwriting, Marina Carr and Martin McDonagh and in poetry, Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon to see how the various usages possible from Hiberno-English have been adopted and adapted to suit literary ends and means. Quite recently, in the centre of Dublin I overheard a woman speaking about a new mother saying, 'Nine pound, and not a stitch in her did she get'. There are several of the distinctive features of the dialect in this one sentence and they combine to make the sentence memorable – which is what a poet wants. Hence, though the line 'What do guns when they are not in use' may give pause for thought (should there be another 'do' in there?), I retained it after trying it several ways as I feel its oddity is warranted by the import. Likewise, supervisors and I discussed 'the Europe' as it appears in the poem 'Why islanders don't kiss hello', rightly wondering whether the discomfiture created by the apparently added definite article was poetically apt. Again, I retained 'the' in this instance since political distance and disaffection from 'the Europe' is indicated by the phrasing which adopts a knowing distortion of 'proper' grammar, a device beloved of Hiberno-English. My compromise here is to italicise 'the Europe' in order to hopefully flag some of the above to a reader, should that be necessary. It's a feature of Hiberno-English to emphasise the rhetorical aspect of an utterance, thereby

undermining any authority it might have. Sometimes, this is achieved by combining an assertion and a statement at the same time. The opening line of 'Convexed' reads 'If the eye of Ireland is really Lough Neagh,' and I considered the other option of 'really is' before realising that the statement/question nuance of meaning available in the former is better and that it too is the kind of 'having it both ways' that Hiberno-English allows. Conversely, I adjusted several areas where the linguistic assumption seemed to work against the poem and the line.

There are many instances where the ironic stance, the polyphonic approach and the shifty tone of this work has to be entered into by a reader and this has given me pause for thought in deciding which poems most fully rose to that occasion and which demanded just too much and/or toppled on their own strangeness. Several poems were dropped altogether and in some that remain, there are moments which might give the editor-self disquiet. 'Protection' appears after a number of other poems which indicate the method in play in the collection, and is therefore likely to be read correctly as equating the payment of protection money with 'income-tax' (which effectively it is, except paid weekly under threat of violence). A poem like 'Fodder' can engender mixed reaction as I've encountered one editor who felt its musicality was 'over the top' while another took that to be a tongue-in-cheek device, understanding the piece to be partly about being corny.

The poetic possibilities of judicious use of Hiberno-English have been seen to be

employed by both Fiacc, with his Belfast street-speak, and by Boland, who brings the discussion right into a poem like 'An Irish Childhood in England' where an English school teacher admonishes the pupil for using 'amn't' saying, 'You're not in Ireland now'.<sup>63</sup> Pilar Villar-Argaiz, a key critic of Boland is lucid on this. In a discussion of the 'english' (here she uses Derek Walcott's term for a counter-discourse) as used by Wilde, Yeats and Joyce as well as Boland she says, 'In this sense, this use of "english" by contemporary Irish writers is generally acknowledged to be different from the English language.'<sup>64</sup>

While always interested in linguistic patterning, a key driver of poems in this selection was to find ways to incorporate the violated, the disrupted, the abused and the undermined into the lyric. I have wanted to do this without toppling the lyric into anything like a polemic and I have arguably worked on the cusp of this dilemma in some pieces such as 'Interference' and 'Framed'. In the former, a longer, loping line is used which gathers force as the real subject of the poem is revealed. The lines contain between thirteen and seventeen syllables in the main and are rendered to be rhythmically reminiscent of the train on which the speaker travels. The line in which the words 'children were raped' occur is lengthened to twenty syllables to mark this crux point and it also uses the repetition of 'superior' to act as a way of implying the other sets of abused power implied in the work. The 'interference' of the title refers not just to other poems in which the idea of an authorised 'telling' is pitted against actual experience ('War has been given a bad name' for instance) but also to the one

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<sup>63</sup> Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995) pp. 126-27.

<sup>64</sup> Pilar Villar-Argaiz, *The Poetry of Eavan Boland: A Postcolonial Reading* (Dublin: Academica Press, 2008) p. 78.

'announcement' in this piece, that of 'person under train' which is the untold, unexplored and radically lacking option of a 'non-telling', an idea that pervades the poem. It is as if 'interference' becomes understood fully as a way of not being told truths or of being continually lied to by those who have the power to do so.

By contrast, in 'Framed' there is almost too much 'telling' as the whole poem acts as a kind of seduction of the 'told'. The loping line is used here again to give the forward narrative thrust its solidity. That pacing is also deployed to allow it become clear that the speaker is dealing with a set of imagined circumstances pushed to such a degree that they open out into a fully 'created' reality, one which is patently not 'real', but which may be psychologically so. One might believe that the impossibility of realism has made imagination instead more trustworthy than experience. This thought goes to the heart of what is at stake in many pieces in the collection: if something were to be 'told', how can it be tested against the shifting lies of 'normal' interaction? If a 'telling' can be a seduction of sorts, then what is true could be relativized except when violence enters the picture. The latter is a pressure point in life as it becomes here in certain poems. It is with these two poems that a reader may gather that this work is partly to do with the wielding of irony as a wrench to try to unlock psychical resistance.

One of the most difficult poems to include, because its subject is 'the disappeared', was 'The same people living in the same place'. In attempting this, I was painfully aware of the accusations levelled at Fiacc, at Heaney and others (see the introduction) of

appropriation of the suffering of others or of situations not their 'own' in terms of the 'proper' subject for a poem. The question is firstly how dare a poet go towards this subject when there are families still wondering where their loved ones are buried but also, having gone there, how can a poet do justice to the seriousness of the subject? The first section of this poem posits a 'voice' in conversational mode, using 'we' which refers back to a reading of the title, the Joycean (via the character of Bloom) definition of 'nation' – 'the same people living in the same place'. If this 'we' is a community which has lived through awfulness, then – this poem seems to imply – the worst moments of the collective experience are, even if individually clearly incommensurate, nonetheless communally felt. The idea that art is not capable of entering the social arena to deal with difficult subjects is not one to which I subscribe, but I do uphold that the art which attempts this had better measure up to the attempt. Ethics, in this way, does not trump aesthetics. And that was the challenge with this piece of work. With the first section in place, the poem was clearly not finished. The second section appeared to arise as a series of non-sequiturs, implying partly that no matter what followed the first, it would be inadequate to the subject but also embodying and rendering the visceral disconnect and discomfiture created by the opening. Looking more closely however, those non-sequiturs appeared to actually follow poetically. The apparent description of a book with the title 'Enquire within about everything' brings in the idea of a publically acknowledged 'record', a notion absent of course from the first section. Here, in this 'book', the noting of the striking and the memorable is seen as a way of creating memory itself, of claiming and memorialising the past and of putting a kind of 'stay'

against the 'too many horizons'. Multiple horizons are a feature of the black hole phenomena as we know from astrophysics. The idea of more than one possible horizon then is playing against the possibly positive connotation it might otherwise have, as here the un-worldly notion of there being too many goes with the sense of the perpetration of outrages beyond human comprehension in the first section. The act of recording in detail of the weird and strangely random is posited as morally bankrupt in comparison with what has not been recorded: the final resting places of the disappeared. At this point the poem has become more fully a piece about 'record' while the overall thrust of the work may be to imply that evil is our collective problem.

In the final two lines, there is perhaps a glimmer of optimism in terms of the ornate majuscule of the 'N' in New Ireland but, the final line reminds us of the real subject of the poem, those who are known to be dead, but who have not properly been allowed to 'die' with a vestige of human dignity as they cannot be buried by their families. These loved ones are still, in a macabre and humanly upsetting way, almost living presences as they are suspended in time as one might be in a place with too many horizons. The poem allows a kind of appearance of the disappeared within itself as if to also say that poems can indeed approach this subject matter. It tries to acknowledge the absolute horror of the subject by upending a sequential expectation and it attempts to allow the finer points of meaning to permeate including a sense of acute disquiet along with the notion of laws of physics being abused and the need of real historical record remaining unmade. It's all wrong. And that may be right for the poem. Finally, the last line uses the

word 'deaths' with the words 'least important', clearly as a jolting move which is one of the things a poem can do. Is there such a thing as a 'least' important death? Who would dare to articulate that and yet the line acts to possibly imply that society ('we') may be acting as if this indeed is the case. The poem finishes on the idea of record, but now a much more problematized version of that idea, fully linked with the awfulness of what is raised the first section. This is a divisive piece of work as became clear in revision when airing the draft work. The final piece is much reduced in terms of length in order to highlight the above concerns and I have retained the piece in this collection as it exemplifies the challenges and debates around the overall work.

Deaths due to the violence in Ireland have been discussed here in terms of how they appear in the work of Fiacc and of Boland (see chapters one and two) and it is part of the overall structure of this work that, from the opening 'what is buried' in 'Weeding', the poems do not shirk from acknowledgement of the contexts of violence, here seen as psychological, as well as societal and personal. The problem of 'place' then is seen to pose several interesting questions to a poet, not simply the 'place' of the poem but also regarding the poem's 'proper subject' as well as the other strand of more actual 'place' as it appears within poems, here seen as almost too slippery to be 'placed' for long within the questioning and shifting arena that is a poem.

While the above set of interesting concerns are also discussed within the chapters on Fiacc and Boland, the final section here explores some of the moments within 'From

there to here' where the place of poetry itself becomes more overtly part of the subject matter, something that has also been described as key to making a reading of both poets studied.

### **The poems 'on' poetry**

In 'Lace', just the second poem in this collection, a reader might see a kind of setting out of a poetic stall as it were, the subject arguably that of the power of imagination and the 'Potential' of same. The line 'They told you/ lace that is not lace will not seduce.' may act here as a pointer to a certain expectation of poetry in general (and perhaps to a limited reading of the same) and the answer, which pertains to the thrust of this collection, is denoted as the use of the 'twist of a flaw' which is clinched by the idea that this 'is lace if not yet lacy'.

'Photos of the islanders' is, apart from its interest in the idea of 'islander', a kind of coda to the emergence of the poems in the collection. Perhaps in a way to get over the 'welcome stapled to their tongue' by others, the islanders themselves speak using the collective 'we' in the last section, delivering a re-working of aspects of the myth of Pan, using the idea of a goat's udder, fashioned into a pipe which, though clearly emerging from a defiled and compromised moment is still able to provide a 'mournful lament' and a memorable melody. The movement from 'they' to the use of 'we' in the final section mirrors an increased intimacy the subjects here (ostensibly those pictured in the

'photos'). The major shift, between sections four and five, is from a 'description-from-without' mode to a kind of collective-memory mode of utterance as 'the wall begins to keep something in'. The line 'not everything is old wives' tales' is the lead in toward the mythos of the final section. That section arguably inscribes the struggle to maintain a poetic integrity: 'how to turn on a goat/look it square in the eyes/ the dare of it'. From my point of view, having abandoned several attempts at the 'public poem' which used the first person plural, this poem is partly about creating or even earning the right to use 'we' by the final section. This partly goes to whether part of the role of a poet can be in small part in memory of the old bardic tradition, to speak along with 'the same people living in the same place' of some part of collective experience.

The three-word line in italics, '*Poverty Isolation Tradition*', might be seen, after a reading of the collection, as a pointer to some of the overarching themes: *poverty* being perhaps a poverty of vision or of understanding referred to throughout, *isolation* taking into account what Seamus Heaney said of the poet as 'stretched between politics and transcendence' and *tradition* encompassing the problematizing both of inherited notions of identity and of cultural traditions including the poem itself.<sup>65</sup> Regarding the latter, the sub-theme of superstition or socially approved lying used as a mask for abuses is evident in poems such as 'In their high cheek bones run the veins of a nation'

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<sup>65</sup> Seamus Heaney, in the Peter Laver Memorial Lecture, 'Place and Displacement: Recent poetry from Northern Ireland' (1985) says: 'The poet is stretched between politics and transcendence, and is often displaced from a confidence in a single position by his disposition to be affected by all positions.' p.3.  
[http://www.pwsz.krosno.pl/gfx/pwszkrosno/pl/defaultaktualnosci/506/3/1/s06\\_heaney.pdf](http://www.pwsz.krosno.pl/gfx/pwszkrosno/pl/defaultaktualnosci/506/3/1/s06_heaney.pdf)  
 [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> December 2014].

where much is hidden by and within the conventions of 'story-telling' and in 'Protection' where the protagonist is determined to pay the 'income tax' which is understood as protection money but is unsure whether he'll be able to interpret the 'nod' or the 'wink', as he is mixed up in something he doesn't fully understand except at its most obviously abusive level – the threat of physical violence.

It is that violence which informs the question that 'Origin of the mimeo' tries to answer. In terms of the writing of a poem, how would a poet bring a gun into that arena? We know that the gun is used as the scene-ender by Hollywood, *bang bang you're dead*, but where arms and the 'strong-arm' threat they imply are part of the everyday scenario, how, I wondered, does one do what it's a truism to say you should not – bring a gun onto the 'stage' of the poem and not fire it. In effect, this is the poem which brings together many of the themes discussed. I found that the way into this subject was to meditate on two things. One is that, in recorded gestures to 'disarming', several armed groups in Northern Ireland have put guns 'beyond use' as part of the peace process there. In thinking about how putting arms and ammunition into a hole in a car park and covering it in with cement, while being photographed doing so for a secret archive, not available to the public, and doing this at night in the dark in a secret location, I wondered what this had really to do with lessening the use of strong arm tactics or making the populace of a contested statelet feel more safe. The answer came in the word 'replicas', which I hoped could both imply and embody these layered oddities of irony and contradiction. And the poem, framed in a kind of abused villanelle, tries to

allow these contradictions while also rendering a discussion on what the capabilities of a poem may be.

It became important to try to also hit another poetic note toward the end of this collection. While many poems which were more straight-forward, lacking irony or tonal play, were abandoned as not fitting with the emerging overall themes here, I have retained poems which posit a kind of counter-argument. 'Clew bay from the reek' is used thematically as well via the shaping of the line to create a kind of musical antidote to the stark subject matter of much of the work. Here, is a rare uplifting moment of content, that 'whoop' of revelation or re-discovery which is still, notwithstanding the discussions above, available from poems which adopt aspects of the received formal line to create fully rooted contemporary work. I prefer however, to use this kind of moment sparingly as otherwise feel it can become one of the lies I am mostly engaged with uncovering. Such an approach can of course also allow for a playfulness of intent as can be seen in 'Learning Greek in Knockanes', where the cadence of the heroic line is re-deployed and matched with some Greek-entangled references to create a piece which may, depending on how it is read, also act as a temporary balm against the pessimistic realism of other work around it.

These poems continue the discursiveness about poetry itself that begins in the first two poems appearing here, 'Weeding' and 'Lace', but one could argue that the poem is a construct which, at least since mid-twentieth century, has the tendency to almost

always discuss its own existence. With that spirit in mind, I also find that 'Shooting up the Satellite' pits the 'First to hit the centre' (standing for satisfaction in a particular kind of work) against the experience of reading more tonally shifty work, giving the experience of 'Waiting for that *ping* of the winner', playing with that very sense of expectation and even allowing for 'disappointment' – though the poem works this as a word that the protagonists very deliberately 'don't use'.

As an Irish poet the presence of Yeats seemingly has to occur and there are several embedded moments where I feel myself doffing my hat to his political lyric (see 'rocking' in 'Origin of the mimeo') but it is in 'Ravens' that he makes a distinct appearance, partly because this poem was written as part of a commemoration of the centenary of the birth of John Berryman (famously obsessed with Yeats) and also because of Yeats' own lines,

The ravens of unresting thought

Flying, crying, to and fro

(From 'The Two Trees' in the volume *The Rose*)

If that unresting thought is seen by a reader to be the driving force of the work in 'From there to here', then the poetry presented here has found its measure.

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