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## **Switching Darkness Off: Young Irish Poets**

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The Irish poet Annemarie Ní Churreáin has affirmed that "poetry has the potential to unbury us and restore us back into the landscape to which we truly belong" (2017), a statement which, contrary to postmodern scepticism, shows strong confidence in the power of language, literature and, in particular, poetry. The words 'unbury' and 'restore', however, convey notions of concealment, suppression and exclusion and point towards the bleak historical and social context in which young Irish poets have been writing for the last twenty years. Confronting past institutional violence and abuse by the Catholic Church, the Irish State and the Troubles is a painful chore that requires immense courage and determination. For those who have been victims, one way or another, of this viciousness, a long and arduous path towards healing still lies ahead. How can poetry help in overcoming this traumatic and not so distant past? Some tentative answers to this question could be the following: to avoid the collective inclination to amnesia promoted by the glare of the Celtic Tiger economic boom, to transform the pain into a narrative and to share those unpalatable truths with the empathising reader the way, for instance, Ní Churreáin does in *Bloodroot* (2017) and Elaine Feeney does in *Rise* (2017).

When we talk about "Irish poetry", the question comes up as to which of the two Irelands we are talking about, Northern Ireland or the Republic, and one wonders the extent to which political borders really succeed in estranging writers of one community from those in the other. The Brexit negotiations have shown that this particular border between North and South can mutate from soft to hard as the result of political decision or compromise regardless of the population's daily practices and concerns. Meanwhile, memories of the violent Troubles are now revived –if they have ever faded since 1998. How do young poets from Northern Ireland relate to the past history of their community? There might be the risk of aestheticizing violence by rendering it in poetic form. Writers such as Stephen Sexton inscribe the past –not just the nation's but also the family's and the individual's– in their poetry, which, as is often the case with postcolonial writing, is populated by ghostly figures that bring together the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, the ego and the alter-ego, the realistic detail and the absurd, the local and the exotic, the lyric I and the alternative voices that speak in Sexton's polyphonic

poems. No single voice seems to have more authority than the rest in an apt rendering of the complex makeup of the community.

The sobering post-Celtic-Tiger years are scrutinized by the poet Ingrid Casey in verse which is at the same time vigorous, supple and musical, and which renders the predicament of contemporary women through a sophisticated network of intertextual allusions –Yeats and Joyce included– that are revisited from a feminist standpoint. The stark reality of the economic crisis and its devastating effects on people’s emotional life and mental health is often expressed through surrealistic and imaginative tropes that engage the reader’s –and the citizen’s– responsibility in the decoding process. Similarly, Elaine Feeney shakes her audience’s conscience with her poetry, both written and performed, as she tackles the inhumanity of Ireland’s recent past by means of vulnerable, though denouncing, voices. Feeney questions the class and gender politics of representation in Western culture, especially those practices concerning the material conditions of women’s lives. In a like manner, Jessica Traynor’s *A Modest Proposal* (2017) dissects the systemic, intergenerational ailments of Irish society that make Jonathan Swift’s homonymous text from the early eighteenth century still relevant today: homelessness and lack of affordable housing, women’s health and the state’s regulation of women’s bodies and reproductive lives, the class divide, the inappropriate provision of migrants’ needs, the debt left by Celtic Tiger extravagance that younger Irish generations will have to repay... and all of it expressed in a direct, biting style that, while eschewing morbidity, revolts against present-day euphemistic official discourses (Traynor 2017).

A frequently raised aspect in discussions of Irish poetry of all times has been its “sense of place”, which is no doubt deeply connected with the rich folklore and popular wisdom about specific natural settings and their vernacular names. One might wonder to which extent younger generations may continue or discontinue this ancestral attachment to the Irish landscape or whether the urban sprawl and modern cosmopolitan lifestyles have transformed their perception of nature. On reading Alice Kinsella’s poetry we realize that the childhood bond with the farm and the early communion with plants and animals continue to be powerful sources of inspiration even for very young writers like her. Kinsella lingers over those still moments of revelation, those watersheds between innocence and experience, at which personal transformation is intimately circumscribed by nature: flowers, fruits, shells, stars, tree leaves... However, there is no room for the pastoral here, precisely because of the unsettling forces that lurk beneath the placid surface of appearances. Something similar could be argued about Seán Hewitt’s explorations of the continuity between human and nonhuman nature in a landscape that may be Irish or foreign –thereby questioning also the frequent appropriation of landscape as an icon of national identity. Although ecocriticism has warned us about the risks entailed by anthropomorphic representations of nature, Hewitt occasionally uses them as devices for estrangement that yield fresh perceptions of nature and highlight the remarkable literariness of his writing.

In spite of the dominance of English-language literature today, Ireland has a dual tradition with outstanding poets in both languages, English and Irish. The same is true regarding those younger poets who may have learnt Irish only at school and not at home, but who have made of this language and its encompassing culture both the source of inspiration and the medium for their writing. Such is the case of Doireann Ní Ghríofa, who has written, until present, a number of poetry collections in Irish, others in English and one in a bilingual edition. Writers like her give continuity and hope to the Irish-language poetic tradition by bringing together past mythology and present urban and suburban daily life, by delving into the painful history of loss, emigration and famines but scrutinizing also today's social challenges and proposing alternative subjectivities and more balanced gender relations. Young Irish-language writers often have to translate their own writing back and forth, from Irish into English and vice versa, cross-fertilizing their repertoires, examining their work with a translator's detachment, undoing and reconstructing their poems. This type of self-translation also questions notions such as "original version" or "reproduction" and makes us wonder whether we are dealing with one or two different poems.

Poetry by young Irish poets does not restrict itself to the printed page of books or magazines. Intermediality is a frequent feature in their work, as they explore the various possible intersections of the written or spoken word with music, video, film, performance, dance, painting, the plastic arts, the internet... Nor is their verse confined to the ivory tower of poets and critics, since these poets go to hospitals, schools, prisons, pubs, community centres... where they run workshops, launch open mic nights and poetry slams, help refugees to enunciate their predicament, work with minorities towards their integration, through language and culture, in the community... Their poetry straddles the lyrical expression of the self and attention to the other; it engages with cultural institutions as much as with charitable and social enterprises. Poets such as Colin Dardis and Sarah Clancy desacralize poetry with their irony and conversational tone and bring verse to all corners of Irish society. Rob Buchanan decidedly names this effervescence and democratisation of contemporary poetry "a new renaissance" and celebrates the hybridisation of the written and the spoken word that is making poetry relevant across a wider spectrum of social groups. Buchanan identifies the positive effect of social media in the dissemination of new poetry that would otherwise find enormous difficulties in being published and commends the role of modern technology not just in bringing the rest of the world closer but also in providing a larger context to the personal and the local. However, in spite of the increasingly liberal atmosphere of present-day moral standards in Ireland, Buchanan believes that LGBT sexuality is still an "unexplored dark continent" in Irish literature (Buchanan 2015).

The Celtic Tiger and the subsequent economic turndown may have encouraged young poets first to travel and know the world and, afterwards, to remain abroad due to the draconian cuts in social and cultural services in Ireland. Many have fostered a second home in more or less distant lands and languages, but have kept very effective writing bonds with Ireland. Writers such as Keith Payne, who organises literary

festivals that bring together Galician and Irish poets, or Dylan Brennan, who lives in Mexico immersed in its traditions, history and literature that are then conveyed to the Irish reader through his writing, are commendable examples of contemporary diasporic writers' mediating role between home and abroad.

The –also young– Basque poet Leire Bilbao once told her audience the anecdote of her little child crying from bed to ask her to “switch darkness off”. Bilbao remarked on children's innate capacity to create poetry, a gift that is often stifled in later stages of education and development. I would like to borrow that image to convey that young Irish poets are indeed working earnestly to switch off the darkness of social injustice and they are doing so with imaginative verse that calls for the readers' very active engagement in the production of meaning and in the transformation of society.

## References

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