

Ireland Now

Poetry and the Possible Republic

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Our first attempt to build a republic in Ireland has been at best a partial success: limited to 26 of the 32 counties, the state we call the Republic was founded on a republican ideology which was at best *ad hoc*, and which was suborned and diverted as a political project almost from the first. We live now in a form of flat oligarchy, ruled not by ourselves in some kind of pure democracy, nor by our deflected legislature – though they make the laws – but by supra-national forces and by the shifting interest groups which control world capital, including the comprador formations which manage their specific interests in Ireland.

We have no monarch, we have a constitution which affects to value each and every citizen equally, we have a reasonable separation of powers, universal suffrage and a party political system which at least makes a token attempt to go beyond the cursory two party system – though in practice, as with the notorious US system, there is little or nothing to distinguish the parties ideologically from one another. We have the outward forms of a republic, but not the living, internal dynamic which has its root in the ancient Latin formula, the republic as the *res publica*, the public thing, with its implicit promise of politics as process, as a living art and truth.

The idea of a republic necessarily implicates us in a form of collective self-attention, an ongoing interrogation of past and current practice, a willingness to dispose of our social, intellectual and moral futures inside a frame of values collectively debated and agreed. It is at least arguable that in the infancy of the state theorists as diverse as Connolly, de Valera, Larkin, Collins and the broad spectrum which operated under the Sinn Féin umbrella had, in some form or another, a kind of political organisation in mind which would be centrally based on, or at least incorporate some of, these features. We have no such arrangement now among ourselves, and I do not see that it will be possible in the foreseeable future to construct such an arrangement.

It has been argued that a number of crucial, disabling mistakes were made right at the inception of the Free State: the entire civil service apparatus was adopted from the departing colonial power; the adversarial courts system, the education system, the systems of local government, all of the social and political engines of control and command were allowed to remain in place, to consolidate the distribution and management of power in society, to blunt and deflect every kind of revolutionary energy. I am not entirely sure it is enough to see these errors as simple mistakes: we had already by the turn of the last century a state class with its schools and clubs and university traditions, and it would be naive of us not to see how seamlessly, when the heat and dust of battle was done, the managers and the owners blended the apparatus of former power into the management of the new state. The republic was abandoned not least in the ossification and suffocating airs of a theocratic, monolithic Catholic state. Let anyone who doubts this latter point take as a starting point for their reading in the area John Cooney's recent biography of John Charles McQuaid.

It is true that the internal power dynamic of the Catholic church inside Ireland is weakening. Equally, and as a consequence, it is true that this weakening represents and enacts the weakening of a model of power which is authoritarian and exclusionary; clientelism, the system by means of which key individuals mediate for the believer or for the citizen in her or his negotiations with a higher power, is only one of the means by which the church model inflected and perhaps ultimately shaped the citizen's understanding of how the state was to be dealt with, and in turn the state's understanding of where it stood in relation to the citizen.

It is also true that the average individual in the state today is considerably more assertive of self than were their parents or grandparents.

It is not true, however, that the propensity to question authority, the drive towards increased self-assertion, leads necessarily to a widespread demand for more power in the organising of the state, more willingness to construct political demands, more appetite for a republic in theory or in fact.

The leading élites in the Republic have re-defined the state as the apparatus which controls, manages and organises the economy, and they have been extraordinarily successful. What is good for the state is what is good for the economy, and the economy is increasingly defined as a manufacturing and distributive apparatus which has its being in some curious disjunction from our actual experience of ourselves as human beings, individual or in collective. The language tells it all: men and women are not deliberately put out of work for the benefit of shareholders – jobs are, somehow, unaccountably lost; it isn't that miners in Tara are asked to work longer hours, and thus put themselves in more physical

danger every day – they are asked for a productivity deal; it isn't that our schools, our health services, our housing are improving – it's that GNP is increasing, and therefore things must be getting better all round. We know, and they know, that this is smoke and mirrors, but we collude with the real beneficiaries of this new madness in agreeing that the Republic is becoming wealthier, and therefore a better place for us all as human beings, when we know and our owners know that our meagre bank balances, and their obscenely-enlarged bank balances, are the most impoverished index possible to what really matters – our experience of what happens to us as sentient human beings between birth and death.

Why we collude I do not know.

What can be done about this I do not know.

My purpose in the remainder of this article is to reflect on some of the ways in which some of us have seceded from this process, or worked out a relationship with the state which is in essence subversive of those values on which the state is at present predicated. I will want to suggest that in the aggregate of values subversive of the status quo we may find the embryonic forms of some possible republics. Since it seems sensible to concentrate on what I know best, I want to consider the situation of poets and poetry in Ireland.

Poetry is at best marginal in official Ireland today, despite the fact that we have upwards of 250 poets with works in print. The average book of poems is published in an edition of 1,000 copies, though Heaney, Durcan, Mahon, Montague, Longley and Boland will exceed that, as will a small number of the younger poets; except for a tiny handful, though, poets are not so valued that it is possible to make a living from the craft. We have a small number of indigenous publishers to bring work before the reading public, and we have a certain level of support from the state mediated through the Arts Council in the form of bursaries and grants for the individual poet as well as grants to publishers and to support organisations such as Aosdána, Poetry Ireland, The Irish Writers Centre and Ireland Literature Exchange. Poets who write in Irish may also receive some financial assistance from Bord na Gaeilge and Bord na Leabhar Gaeilge. None of this is so systematic as to put us in any danger of nurturing régime poets, as was the case in the former Soviet Union, say, though there are undoubtedly a handful of poets who share the values of our present temporary ruling class and embody their preoccupations in their work. Such poets, thankfully, are few, and their work is generally bad, so they need not concern us very much.

Poetry is marginal to the state's concerns inasmuch as the level of investment is a minute percentage of, say, the grant support on offer to the robber barons of the beef industry. Poetry is marginal to the state's concerns, also, in that – to judge by their speeches, policy documents,

manifestos and general utterances – our politicians and owners, to say nothing of their lackeys, display a quite remarkably low level of general literacy. A sense of fairness demands that I note some handful of exceptions, who will please excuse themselves from the general observation should they happen to read this, but by and large the established politician, industrialist and manager of today considers himself well-read if he can get through a balance sheet and a leading article without moving his lips.

This is healthy for poetry, since it means that what the poets are writing is all but invisible to the state, always a good thing. The reflex of the autocratic or oligarchic state, even a baby oligarchy like our own, is to commodify and therefore control whatever swims into its ken. In extreme cases, as in the former Soviet Union for example, or China today, the state will do the poet the honour of considering her or him a danger to power, and deal with the problem accordingly. Here, though there are probably some who crave a little light martyrdom, the state is indifferent to what we do: they realise that in civilised societies art in general is considered a good thing, and so they make some little money available so that we may not be shamed before the sophisticated world, but in truth, and again with a few honourable exceptions, they are indifferent to what it is we say and do. I repeat, this is a good thing. There are autonomous literary organisations, arts centres, festivals, publishers and others who have managed to suborn a certain level of financial aid for poets, it would be good if it were more of course, and the para-state agency The Arts Council has a constrained ability to put money in poets' purses – though without as yet any marked commitment to democratisation of the decision-making power when it comes to doling out the grants and bursaries. But there is no Ministry for Poetry, no official poets union, no line which, if followed, will lead to reward.

Internally, in the community of poets, there is considerable liberty. A poet may write what he or she likes, with a reasonable chance of getting it published, a reasonable chance of reaching an audience. True, because publishers are few, there are chokepoints in the process, and we are at the mercy of the tastes of those who own and control the publishing houses, but the technology on the kitchen table is now such that this is hardly the insuperable problem it once was. Further, there is no particular leading fashion to dictate subject or form, and no single audience exercising a veto on who is read or who is not. People swim in and out of the public eye, as far as I can see, in a more or less random fashion. Ironically enough, the only external demands made on poets as poets tend to come from marginal, ideology-driven groupings all of who seem to display a tendency to prescribe to artists as the one thing they have in common, besides powerlessness of course.

When W. B. Yeats wrote 'Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot' he wrote as a man deeply implicated in the welter of debate about Ireland's independence. In common with lesser poets like McDonagh, Pearse and Plunkett, dramatists like Synge and, somewhat later, O'Casey, in common even with the great self-exiled Joyce, Yeats had contracted with himself to engage his gift with the matter of Ireland. I put it like this because it was, I think, a deliberate decision for him and for those others to engage with Ireland as drama, to seek their themes and the wider stage for their imaginings in an Ireland which was at that point in history on the point of synthesising its conflicting histories. Yeats was to be brutally disappointed, abandoned and scorned by the first inheritors of independence, and in his turn scornful of 'the sort now growing up'. He proved himself, as a citizen, a loyal member of his class, as O'Casey would prove loyal to his class, and Joyce with his petit-bourgeois predilections would prove prophetic of the coming age and its anti-romantic scepticism.

There has been no national poet since Yeats, and I doubt that there will be again, since the idea of the nation has become almost untenable, and since the poets have tasted the wider world. Consider: Heaney, almost an Antaeus of County Derry, is as influenced by Hopkins and Wordsworth, Frost, Milosz and Walcott as he is by any poet from Ireland's past. Montague and Kinsella acknowledge certain roots in tribal Gaelic Ireland, but Kinsella is an urban poet of mordancies and doubt, Montague shaped and influenced by French and American poetry of the mid-century. Mahon is our first radical dandy since Wilde, Boland's nearest kin is the great American Adrienne Rich and even Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill is closer in sensibility to Marina Tsvetayeva than she is to any Irish poet since Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill. All these and many more write matter-of-factly about the Ireland of today, few if any acknowledge a responsibility to history, especially remote tribal history, as an obligation of identity. It is possible to go further, and say that Muldoon, Carson, Meehan, McGuckian and many others set out to destabilise the possibility of a mono-Ireland, however that might be framed or proposed.

And it is from this point that we turn back towards the possible republic.

It isn't that poets have lost the sense of engagement with history so much as the fact that the poets, in common with most of their fellow-citizens, have lost faith in a dialogue between personal preoccupation and the constituting myth of a republic that might unite us in a common frame of reference. Yeats was right when he said that we make poetry from the quarrel with ourselves, rhetoric from the quarrel with others – and this is an anti-rhetorical age. The poets, even when they deal with 'political' subjects, have turned inward, they enact rather than propose political positions, they tell the stories but refrain from pointing the moral. Paul

Durcan is often proposed as a model of an *engagé* poet, and it is true that his long discursive poems often deal in hyper-real and recognisable dramas of the day-to-day, yet what is fundamental to a Durcan poem is that his most profound quarrel is always with himself. Even at his most scathing (and he is, in a good sense, a scold) he finds the point of view in the poem in self-doubt. Ciaran Carson's Belfast is a city riven by war, but not defined by war; a former Antrim hurler, an accomplished traditional musician, reared speaking Irish on the Falls Road, he is nonetheless first and foremost a free subject, a man who owns his tribal roots but owns no determined loyalty to the tribe. Eavan Boland, daughter of an ambassador, is of Ireland in the sense intended by Mary Robinson when she quoted 'I am of Ireland' in her inaugural address. That is to say, Boland refuses a circumscribing identity, finding no place for herself as a woman in any given Ireland, assuming as part of her project of a life in poetry the burden of making a new identity for herself which may (or may not) be enabling for other women of Ireland. Paula Meehan has an unshakeable loyalty to the class and kin who are the foundation of her world view, but this is a site of difficulty, a necessary tension to be engaged with, rather than a set of shorthand permissions to reach escape velocity by appealing to the social guilt of her readers. Rita Ann Higgins as a matter of deliberate poetic tact sets and frames her stories of the underclass in the language itself of that underclass; this tactic shifts and undermines any sense there might be in the culture of 'poetic language', thereby enriching both poetry and language while often discomfiting the would-be priests and explainers of poetry. Thomas McCarthy's prudent and elegant eviscerations of Fianna Fáil have been often represented as propaganda for that party – which sets me scratching my head, I must confess. McCarthy is to Fianna Fáil what Solzhenitsyn was to the Communist Party. What these poets, and many, many others, in both languages, have in common is a willingness to set personal liberty above and beyond all other obligations. What kind of Republic might it be, that would encompass in its politics the debates with self these poets conduct in poetry? And if we then factor in more Parnassian poets like Moya Cannon, Peter Fallon, Vona Groarke and a host of others whose preoccupations are perhaps more consistently personal, where might they in their turn take us?

I am framing the question in this way because, of course, there is no answer, or at any rate no easy answer. I do not think we will again, in my lifetime, have a consensus on Ireland, let alone on an Irish republic, which will provide a master-text for poets or poetry. I do think, however, that taken in the aggregate, the worlds of those poets now at work can be encompassed in an over-arching republic if we can invent a citizenry to debate with itself in some of the ways these poets have found to argue with

themselves. The business of poetry is with language, more exactly with the dance between self and language. Each poet must forge a language for herself, adequate to her existential predicament, supple enough to allow for growth and change, precise enough to persuade us to perception; but that language is a language we hold in common with others, it comes down to us all from the same sources and flows away like a river into the sea of the unknown future. The business of poetry is to do with truth to self in a language we share with others – or truth to language in a world we share with other, equally-valuable selves. Is there not, perhaps, a model here for how we might think of ourselves as citizen-individuals seeking a common language with our fellows? And is it not likely that any possible republic can only come from such new roots? If we are to make a republic it will involve us in an act of transubstantiation; the republic will be an overlay and interpenetration of many visions, a poem of poems, a vision of visions, constantly undermining and reconstituting itself in the way a poem does, day after day, without cease.

We must arm our minds and hearts with visions if we are to build this possible, quarrelsome, protean republic. We could do worse than steep ourselves, as a preparation, in the words of those fellow-citizens who struggle each day with failure and with themselves in the battle to make a clear, simple, resonant poem.

Or painting, song, sculpture, novel, story or play.

I make no special case for poets or for other artists. A great number of people in Ireland today have turned away from the formal political debates which animated the early days of independence. The conditions of our lives today are such that first and foremost we think and act as self-motivated individuals, in many cases almost completely cut off from the state. Yet, in the arts and other voluntary organisations, in sports clubs and in a wide range of associations-by-affinity we find ourselves deeply and complicatedly involved with each other. In the language we use to conduct these socialised lives is the beginnings of a new language for politics. In the reality we often avoid, that many of these organisations depend on the state for funding, despite what we might call in most cases an institution-alised aversion to the state, is another lesson: the owners and managers of the state, no matter how successful they may appear to be in alienating us from our own, can never be wholly successful – in the end, we own them, and not the other way around. If I say that in the diverse narratives of poetry we find a more generous possibility of ourselves, I would also wish to say that in the practice of poetry we can find models for repossessing ourselves as human, the first and most urgent precondition for building a republic.

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