



POETRY IRELAND NEWS

Scéala Éigse Éireann September / October 2012

editorial / eagarfhocal

Dear Subscribers,

We were saddened to hear over the summer of the deaths of poets Joe Kane and more recently John O'Leary. Living at opposite ends of the country, both poets made a notable contribution to their communities through readings, hosting workshops and essentially through making a gift of their creativity. We extend our deepest sympathies to the families and friends of the bereaved ... We've been busy here in PI Towers and a new issue of *Poetry Ireland Review*, 107, should coincide with this newsletter. It's also that time of year when there seems to be a literary event on every evening of the week. Among the highlights are Culture Night (Friday 21 September), which we'll celebrate this year at The Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland on Merrion Square, and of course this is our fifth year hosting All-Ireland Poetry Day (Thursday 4 October), when there'll be poetry in almost every county in Ireland, updates are available at www.poetryireland.ie/poetryday ... A new literary festival takes place on the first weekend in November, the ISLA Festival, bringing Irish, Spanish and Latin-American writers and poets together at the Cervantes Institute in Dublin; see www.dublin.cervantes.es ... Lastly, a word of thanks to summer interns Rosamund Grene and Clare Reeth for their outstanding work for the organisation over the past few months ...

– Joseph Woods, Director



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CULTURE NIGHT / POETRY DAY

Friday 21 September is the date for **Culture Night 2012**, 'a free night of entertainment, discovery and adventure taking place in a record 34 towns, cities, counties and islands in Ireland'. This cultural cornucopia of events and opportunities for all ages includes: a visit to **James Joyce's** house of *The Dead* at Usher's Island, D8; *Learn to Samba* at The Factory, Sligo; *Celtic Soul*, a **Van Morrison** tribute act at the Armagh Planetarium; *Sorcaluba*, a 3-woman outdoor trapeze act in Cork city; **Fritz Lang's** 1927 masterpiece *Metropolis* with live music score in Tinahely, Co Wicklow; and free *Acting Workshops* with the Gaiety School of Acting, Temple Bar, D2. Poetry Ireland will participate in Culture Night with an open-mic session (poetry, prose, comedy, diatribe, etc) at the Royal Society of Antiquaries, 63 Merrion Square, D2, from 6-10pm, where **Dave Lordan** will MC proceedings, and participants can register on a first-come first-served basis. For the full programme, go to www.culturenight.ie

All-Ireland Poetry Day takes place on Thursday 4 October, with the Poetry Ireland website providing a coordinating hub for this nationwide celebration of versification. All readings, workshops, etc will be posted online at www.poetryireland.ie/poetryday as the programme is finalised. Dublin city readings already confirmed include **Maurice Harmon** in the National Library, Kildare St at 1.05 pm, and **Rita Ann Higgins** and **Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin** at the Royal Society of Antiquaries, 63 Merrion Square at 6.30pm; while at 8.30pm **Ciaran Carson** will be in The Dock, Carrick-on-Shannon, Co Leitrim.

Poetry Ireland Review 107

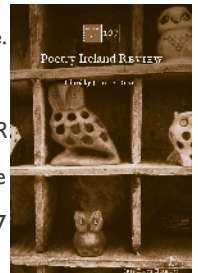
Poetry Ireland Review 107 is now available from bookshops and online at www.poetryireland.ie. The issue includes an extended tribute in prose and verse to the late **Pearse Hutchinson**, including a fascinating interview Pearse gave to *Innti* magazine, made available in translation for *PIR* by **Cliona Ní Ríordáin**. The issue also includes the latest excerpt from **Richard Murphy's** prose diary, 'Transgressing into Poetry', and contains a feature on contemporary religious poetry. *PIR* 107 opens with a suite of new poems from **Aidan Mathews**, and includes work from **Maurice Riordan**, **Rachael Hegarty**, **Kerry Hardie**, **Dermot Bolger**, **Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin** and **Michael Smith**. Books reviewed in *PIR* 107 include Derek Mahon's *New Collected Poems* (Gallery Press) and **Michael O'Loughlin's** *In This Life* (New Island).

A fish out of water, the old German Jesuit
Who survived the atom bomb at Hiroshima
Would cross the main Sandford Road at rush-hour
Without once glancing up from his black breviary.

He was radioactive still. Transistor
Static crackled from his tortoise-shell spectacles
While he walked as if he were working a treadle,
Slow-motion skips. A late sickness. The last stroke.

No schoolboy ever spoke to him. Otto
Scarface Skorzeny SS lived locally
Who had spirited Mussolini from a prison-cell
To the Führer's white fortress at Berchtesgaden...

– from 'Verges' by Aidan Mathews, *PIR* 107



Please send items for publication in the next issue no later than mid-October 2012.
Due to space limitations, not every item received can be included in the newsletter.
Visit our website at www.poetryireland.ie to view readings and events not included in this issue.

readings léamha

Poetry Ireland Readings

All Poetry Ireland events are admission free except where indicated. To confirm, use local contact details or tel. 01 6789815; e-mail info@poetryireland.ie

Sunday 9 September @ 6.30pm

Poetry Ireland in association with Mountains to Sea dlr Book Festival presents **Macdara Woods** celebrating in the year of his seventieth birthday the launch of his *Collected Poems* (Dedalus Press), when guest poets including **Michael Coady, Thomas Lynch, Kate Newmann, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Maurice Scully & Joseph Woods** will read from his work, with musical interludes
National Maritime Museum of Ireland, Old Mariners Church, Haigh Terrace, Dún Laoghaire, Co Dublin
Admission free, booking essential at richard@lineupsme.com

Thursday 13 September @ 6.30pm

Poetry Ireland in association with the Ireland-Japan Association and the Irish Writers' Centre presents the launch of *The Japanese Effect in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Palgrave Macmillan) by **Irene De Angelis**
Irish Writers' Centre, 19 Parnell Square, D1
T. (01) 8721302 E. info@writerscentre.ie

Thursday 13 September @ 8pm

Poetry Ireland in association with Charlestown Arts Centre presents **Mary O'Malley**
Charlestown Arts Centre, Barrack St, Charlestown, Co Mayo
T. (094) 9255812 / 086 8202883 (Adm. €7/5)
E. charlestownartscentre@gmail.com
As part of this event, a workshop will also be provided in St. Joseph's Secondary School, Charlestown on the same day

Monday 17 September @ 6.30pm

Poetry Ireland in association with Salmon Poetry and the Irish Writers' Centre presents the launch of *Beyond the Sea* by **Anne Fitzgerald**
The Breaking of the Day by **Michael Heffernan**
The Sin-Eater by **Thomas Lynch**
Irish Writers' Centre, 19 Parnell Square, D1
T. (01) 8721302 E. info@writerscentre.ie

Wednesday 19 September 7.30pm

Poetry Ireland in association with the Irish Writers' Centre and the Australian Embassy in Ireland presents *From Scattered Seed: Readings and Conversation* with Australian writers
Andy Kissane, Alex Skovron, Alison Wong & Robyn Rowland
Irish Writers' Centre, 19 Parnell Square, D1
T. (01) 8721302 E. info@writerscentre.ie

Saturday 22 September @ 7.30pm

Poetry Ireland in association with Shorelines Arts Festival presents **Pat Boran & Rita Ann Higgins**
Church of Ireland, Portumna, Co Galway (Adm. €10/8)
T. 087 2931055 E. noellelynskey@gmail.com

Tuesday 25 September @ 6.30pm

Poetry Ireland in assoc. with Doghouse Books and the Irish Haiku Society presents *Bamboo Dreams* – an anthology of Haiku edited by **Anatoly Kudryavitsky**, launched by **Jimmy Deenihan** TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht
Unitarian Church, 112 St Stephen's Green West, D2
Contributors to the anthology will read on the night

Thursday 27 September @ 7pm

Poetry Ireland in association with Clifden Arts Week presents **Philip McDonagh**
Station House Theatre, Clifden, Co Galway (Admission €10/8)
T. (091) 442730 W. www.clifdenartsweek.ie

Friday 5 October @ 8pm

Poetry Ireland in association with Westport Arts Festival presents **Dermot Healy**
The Creel Restaurant, Westport Quay, Westport, Co Mayo
T. 087 299 6682 W. www.westportartsfestival.com

Wednesday 24 October @ 7.30pm

Poetry Ireland in assoc. with the Irish Writers' Centre and the Trustees of the Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh fellowship presents a reading of former recipients of the Kavanagh Fellowship
Eileen Casey, Mark Granier, Rita Kelly, Aidan Murphy & John W Sexton
Irish Writers' Centre, 19 Parnell Square, D1
T. (01) 8721302 E. info@writerscentre.ie

Wednesday 24 October @ 8pm

Poetry Ireland in association with the John Hewitt Society and the Ulster Bank Festival at Queen's presents the John Hewitt birthday reading (Adm. £8/7) with **Leontia Flynn, Rita Ann Higgins & Michael Longley**
John Hewitt Bar, 51 Donegall Street, Belfast BT1 2FH
T. 028 (048 from Rol) 90971197
E. admin@johnhewittsociety.org

Tuesday 30 October @ 7pm

Poetry Ireland in association with Thurles Arts Festival presents **Michael Coady**
Mitchel House Restaurant, Mitchel St, Thurles, Co Tipperary
T. 086 2397376 E. jimryanproperty@eircom.net

Thursday 1 November @ 3pm

Poetry Ireland in association with The National Museum of Ireland and Age and Opportunity presents *Samhain*, an 'exploration of the rhythms of life and death through poetry and music' featuring **Maurice Harmon & Anne Le Marquand Hartigan** plus musical accompaniment
Viking AV Room, National Museum of Ireland, Kildare St, D2
Admission free, booking essential at (01) 8057709 or at info@ageandopportunity.ie

ISLA (Irish, Spanish & Latin American) Festival, Cervantes Institute, Lincoln House, Lincoln Place, D2
The ISLA Festival (2-4 November) featuring 18 authors from Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Ireland, Mexico and Spain.
For more information visit www.dublin.cervantes.es



education oiliúint

Friends remember John O'Leary

John was born in Boston in 1954 and studied at Trinity College Cambridge and Trinity College Dublin. He came to west Cork about 35 years ago and settled in Allihies, where he farmed and was particularly well known for raising thoroughbred draught horses. He was also deeply involved in the arts community in west Cork and was a stalwart of the Poetry Ireland **Writers in Schools Scheme**. As part of the Writers in Schools Scheme over the years John undertook a lot of innovative work with young people in west Cork, particularly in Beara Community School. As a writer with the scheme, he exemplified all of what is best in what the Writers in Schools Scheme sets out to achieve.

His work with young people displayed respect, humour and fearlessness, and the relationships he created with them, their teachers and the schools led to the creation of projects such as *Ful Fadom Five*, a poetry and music project (see PI website) which also featured as part of the thirtieth Anniversary celebrations of the Writers in Schools Scheme in 2008, and most recently in 2012 the book *Who Am I?* which was on display in the Library in Castletownbere during the summer. As a keen sailor, his great love of the sea and of west Cork was reflected in his poetry and in the titles of his two poetry collections, *Sea* (2003) and *Salt* (2004). John was a good friend who will be greatly missed and we extend our sympathies to his family and friends and the community of west Cork.

– Jane O'Hanlon

Impossible for me, this close to his death, to write of **John O'Leary** with any confidence that I might do him a closing justice. We are not called to judge the dead, still less to sing them in hollow praises, and he was a wild man in the true meaning of it and would have disdained the neatening, the tidying of a life which is also a tidying away, a denial that fear and absence are woven into the one and only deal we get and must honour if not obey. So I grieve for his children in their grief, the children he loved without caveat or reservation, and I grieve for his fields that knew his walk, for his lovers who knew his presence and his absence, his friends who befriended him and fell out with him sometimes but stayed his friends; I grieve for the lonesome horse on the hillside in the slanting rain, waiting to hear his footfall, to sniff his outstretched hand, and I grieve for the very fields, their long grasses beaded with perpetual rain, laid down in ranks and folds in the wind.

I grieve for the sea that entranced him and taught him, that bore him up so often and in the end, to her and our unvarying grief, was fated to bear him down. **Bob Dylan** said, 'to live outside the law you must be honest', and John lived outside and beyond the law in so many ways that his honesty was never in doubt. He had the high carelessness of those who love life without stint, the instinct to bless of **Christopher Smart** and the deep learning of all true keepers of the lore. He was unruly, unkempt, ecstatic, implanted with dynamos and completely irrepressible. His natural unprompted greeting was to open his arms to you, and it is hard to think that now those arms embrace only the void. His voice in this life was, to quote from one of his many fine poems, 'an unbelievable singing, the salt of the earth'.

– Theo Dorgan



To Do List:

1. find dragon and slay
2. exorcise cat
3. prove conclusively the identity

of Beauty and Truth.

4. watch, fast and pray
5. sail Atlantic single-handed
6. write name in water

7. return Teach Yourself Waltzing Tape
8. weep for Adonais and feel bad
9. write her a letter telling her you love her

10. go out into the midnight and check for new stars.

– from *Sea*, by John O'Leary

John O'Leary, who, so sadly, drowned when his sailing boat capsized on Monday 13 August, was a poet and a scholar. He was also a man who very willingly shared his time and talents with aspiring writers of all ages. Over the years John did wonderful work with the pupils of Scoil Phobail Bheara, teaching them creative writing, helping them to believe in their ability to write and encouraging them to produce excellent work. (Just some months ago, under John's guidance, they produced a beautiful handmade book). John was a founder member of The Beara Writing Experience and it was a privilege to work with him on the writing retreats, where he was truly inspirational.

Through his death we have lost a wonderful poet, a true intellectual, a generous man who never judged others and a loyal friend. He will be greatly missed.

– Paddy O'Connor





opinions tuairimíocht

ON FIRST READING SYLVIA PLATH BY GERALD DAWE

Gerald Dawe recalls some first impressions on reading Sylvia Plath who would have celebrated her 80th birthday this October.

Orangefield, the school I went to in the mid Sixties, had for the time a bold artistic initiative through inviting writers to address the senior forms – and in a culture which privileged practical work-orientated experience above much else, this was quite an initiative. In one of these classes, as we were preparing to sit ‘A’ (Advanced) level state exams, the playwright **Stewart Parker** read **Sylvia Plath’s** poems. Plath was ‘on’ the ‘A’ level course in English literature, represented by several poems which Parker read and discussed, along with other Plath poems which clearly had fired his own imagination, including ‘Fever 103” and ‘Daddy’.

Nothing seemed quite the same after that. His Belfast accent was faintly inflected with an American tone drawn from his years living in New York where he had taught at Hamilton College and Cornell before returning home in 1969, the year he visited that class in Orangefield in east Belfast where Parker himself had come from and had his cultural roots, explored in his masterpiece, *Pentecost*. Parker spoke softly but confidently and it probably did not pass us by that he had the look and demeanour of someone who was close in age and manner to his audience. The following year Parker would begin his innovative stint as ‘rock’ columnist with the *Irish Times* newspaper, producing in ‘High Pop’ a fabulous record of the musical culture of the time (collected in Stewart Parker, *High Pop: The Irish Times Column 1970-1976* [Lagan Press, 2008]).

There was something about the language of Plath’s poems which Parker read that afternoon that sounded familiar and strange at the same time – the interrogative, unexpected, staccato syntax; the vulnerability of the solo voice that broaches such trippy heights as ‘The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I’, came close to the music that we all listened to obsessively while chiming also with the anti-rhetoric of the peace movement and CND, ‘Greasing the bodies of adulterers / Like Hiroshima ash and eating in. / The sin. The sin.’ *Ariel* was published in the UK in 1965, was reissued in a paperback edition in 1968 and reprinted again in 1970. That edition I bought in July that year having, clearly, become completely transfixed by Stewart Parker’s reading. Plath was

the sound of the time: questioning, self-absorbed, casting her imagined mind in her poems across shifting landscapes of England, New England and the terrible recent history of post-WW2 Europe. The English she wrote her poems in – in *Ariel* but also in *The Colossus*, (a hardback copy of which I was given by a friend on February 1971, though bought



the previous year in May) – quite simply sounded real, intimate and part of what felt like a cult following.

Between Parker’s reading in 1969, the purchase of *Ariel* the following year and the gift of *The Colossus* soon thereafter, it looks like Plath was on my mind a lot in that final year and a half of the 1960s. Just as things in my own life were about to take a definitive turn and as the good times were starting to turn not so good in Belfast, I read everything I could of Plath’s and about her. The year flashed by with romance, dance and nights and weekends spent in the famous Crown Bar, a few steps away from the college’s front door. My mother sold her unwieldy old house in north Belfast and moved to an apartment on the east side. My own connections with the city were loosening as boyhood friends were becoming impatient or anxious about their futures and Belfast succumbed more and more to sectarian violence and the social freedom of movement we had known growing up became dangerous. Some left and moved elsewhere – the gift of *The Colossus* in February 1971 had been a farewell gift.

In May of that year, the brash intense somewhat dislocated soul that I was sat in class with the great historian of Ulster, **Jonathan Bardon**, as a bomb exploded nearby. It must have been one of the first such bombings which would become a feature of life in the Northern Province for the next three decades. Riots had been one thing; shootings, arson attacks, vigilante groups, fights, shouts, sectarian taunting. All seemed run of the mill. But bombs left in public bars, shops and factories, that was quite another matter. It was obvious, although no one that I knew

was actually saying so at the time, things were getting completely out of hand.

In May I was invited to a dress dance at Queen’s University. A friend’s girlfriend wanted me to go on a blind date with her friend. So off the four of us went and a friendship bloomed. I would meet the girl, a young woman of sporting accomplishment, and we would attend classical recitals in the Ulster Hall – no Jazz Club this time, my usual haunt – and in that brief time we spent together, barely a summer, she quoted **Robert Lowell** and from the house she shared with her family in Bangor, a very popular, small coastal resort, she produced his books, such as the hardback of *Near the Ocean*. I heard more of that contemporary ironic voice which seemed so close to nuances and inflections of what I knew but did not really hear in the Belfast out of which I was growing increasingly more impatient to be gone.

Like Lowell, Plath’s sheer unrepeatable energy ‘turned my head’. Throughout those early years of trying to write poems that matched or conveyed something of the madness engulfing the places of my upbringing, Plath constantly came to mind as a source of possibility. I was wrong but it was understandable in one so young and imaginatively vulnerable. When, thirty years later, my first book of poems, *Sheltering Places* was revised and republished, I used an epigraph from Plath which had stayed with me, from the haunting opening poem of *The Colossus*, ‘The Manor Garden’:

... History

Nourishes these broken flutings,
These crowns of acanthus,
And the crow settles her garments.

In one of those quirks of fate that leave only the faintest of traces behind, in the new university we drove towards that autumn of 1971, one of the lecturers would recount how he had stayed in the same house in which Sylvia Plath had lived her last year; another lecturer, who became a dear friend, would read Plath’s poems aloud with the same telling degree of fidelity and caution that only poetry of the highest order inspires.

This is an extract from a work-in-progress, The Stoic Man: Poetry Memoirs. Gerald Dawe’s Selected Poems was published earlier this year by Gallery Press



competitions, etc comórtaisí, srl

FESTIVALS, COMPETITIONS, ETC

REMEMBERING PATRICK KAVANAGH

The Monaghan Association of Dublin will dedicate Tuesday 11 September to **Remembering Patrick Kavanagh**, with talks on *Patrick Kavanagh the Film Critic*, and on *John Ryan, Artist, Publisher and Patron of Bohemian Dublin*. The venue is Buswells Hotel, Molesworth St, D2, admission is €6 with a concessionary rate. For further information, contact Peter McDonnell on 087 6175478 or at petermcdonn@eircom.net

PEN FEST

Carlow County Library's **Pen Fest** for Emerging Writers (14-16 September) includes workshops on *Writing Poetry for Beginners* with **Iggy McGovern**; *Screenwriting for Beginners* with **Ferdia Mac Anna**; and *Atlantean: From Film to Book and Back Again*, with **Bob Quinn**. For information about these and other workshops, e-mail jshortall@carlowcoco.ie, call (059) 9129713, or go to www.carlowlibraries.ie

DEDALUS PRESS

On Tuesday 18 September at 7pm in the Irish Writers' Centre, 19 Parnell Square, D1, **Joseph Woods** will introduce the launch of three new Dedalus Press titles: *The Next Life* by **Pat Boran**; *The Invisible Threshold* by **Catherine Phil MacCarthy**; and *A Gather of Shadow* by **Mark Roper**. T. (01) 8721302 E. info@writerscentre.ie

SIX-WORD STORIES

Tobias Hill and **Brooke Magnanti** are the adjudicators for *Fleeting* magazine's **Six-Word Story Prize**, which offers a stay at The Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan or a cash prize of £100 / \$160 / €130 to the winner. The deadline is 30 September, for guidelines go to www.fleetingmagazine.com

CUISLE

Limerick City's annual **Cuisse International Poetry Festival** runs this year from 10-13 October, and will feature **Medbh McGuckian**, **John F Deane**, **Fred Johnston**, **Peter Sirr**, **Lorna Thorpe** and Slovene poets **Anja Golub**, **Veronijc Dintinjana** and **Radharanic Parnarcic**. W. www.limerick.ie/cuisse

TROUBADOURS

Jane Draycott and **Bernard O'Donoghue** will decide the winners of the **Troubadour International Poetry Prize**, which offers a first prize of £2,500.

All entries must postmarked on or before 15 October. For a Rules Sheet go to www.coffeehousepoetry.org or contact Poetry Ireland.

KAVANAGH FELLOWSHIP

The Trustees of the Estate of Katherine Kavanagh are seeking submissions for the **Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh Fellowship Award**. The Fellowship is specifically for Irish poets in their middle years, who have published a body of work, and who are in need of assistance. There is no application form but applicants will be asked to supply evidence of age, financial need, citizenship, along with copies of published books. The deadline for applications is 15 October. Applicants may obtain further information by writing to The Trustees at 3, Selskar Terrace, Ranelagh, D6.

THE SALT PRIZES

Salt Publishing is now accepting submissions for **The Salt Prizes**, with categories for poetry, short stories and flash fiction. The first prizewinners in each category will receive £1,000 and publication in *The Salt Anthology of New Writing*.

The deadline is 31 October. For entry guidelines, see www.saltpublishing.com/prizes or contact Poetry Ireland.

CRASHAW PRIZE

Salt Publishing is accepting submissions for the **Crashaw Prize**, an award for a debut collection of poetry in English. The winner will receive £1,000 and publication.

Entries must be submitted by 31 October, by e-mail only, to crashawprize@saltpublishing.com. For a Rules Sheet, see <http://thecrashawprize.co.uk>

ATTYS POETRY PRIZE

Wattpad, the e-writing website, is hosting a new prize for online poetry called the **Attys**, named after **Margaret Atwood**, who will judge the competition. Along with \$1,000 in cash, other prizes on offer include the chance for your name to be included as a character in Margaret Atwood's next novel. The Attys includes a category for a suite of 10 poems, and a single poem prize. The deadline for entries is 31 October, for full details visit www.wattpad.com/attys

NATIONAL POETRY COMPETITION

Vicki Feaver, **W N Herbert** and **Nick Laird** will judge the UK Poetry Society's **National Poetry Competition**, which is open to international entries and offers £5,000 to the winner for a poem not exceeding 40 lines.

The closing date is 31 October. For more information go to www.poetrysociety.org.uk or contact Poetry Ireland.

SMITHEREENS

Smithereens Press is a new publisher of poetry chapbooks online, which intends to act as a venue for work from emerging and established poets across different poetic styles.

Submissions and queries can be sent to Kenneth Keating at smithereens.press@gmail.com, the Press website is at <http://smithereenspress.blog.com>

FRANCIS LEDWIDGE POETRY AWARD

Entrants to the **Francis Ledwidge International Poetry Award** may submit a maximum of six original, unpublished poems (€4 per poem, 3 poems for €10, 6 poems for €20). The overall winner will receive a cash prize, a trophy and an invitation to read at the Ledwidge Commemoration at the National War Memorial Gardens in July 2013. Entries must be submitted before 5 November to The Francis Ledwidge International Poetry Award 2012, c/o 43, Emmet Crescent, Inchicore, D8. For more information, call 085 1425752 or visit the Inchicore Ledwidge Society's Facebook page.

WORD JUNGLE + HUDSON N FITCH

An evening of experimental poetry takes place at 8pm on Thursday 8 November at the Centre for Creative Practices, 15 Pembroke St, D2, when *Word Jungle* – **Roger Hudson**, **Nuala Leonard**, **Brian Quinn** & **Anne Tannam** – present poems in different combinations of voices, followed by *Hudson n Fitch*, featuring poetry and improvised music from Roger Hudson and ambientcellist **Claire Fitch**. T. (01) 799 5416; E. info@cfcp.ie (Adm. €6).

Niamh Sharkey: Thursday 4 October @ 11am, Royal Society of Antiquaries, 63 Merrion Square, D2

Poetry Ireland, Dublin UNESCO City of Literature and Children's Books Ireland present Laureate na nÓg Niamh Sharkey celebrating **All-Ireland Poetry Day** for younger audiences. Further information / booking from writersinschools@poetryireland.ie



opinions tuairimíocht

‘TITTER YE NOT’ by CAITRÍONA O’REILLY

In a week when the head of the domestic violence charity Wearside Women in Need has called for **E L James’s** *Fifty Shades of Grey* (sales in excess of 40 million and counting) to be publicly burned, one might well be prompted to wonder whether poetry is capable of raising temperatures to quite such a degree. Is poetry in this as in other ways fiction’s poor relation – or rather her priggish cousin – high-minded, vegetarian, sandal-wearing and frankly, not much fun?



It is true that sex in poetry is often a serious business, not least in the long and distinguished tradition of erotic poetry that has come down to us from antiquity. **Sappho’s** famous Fragment 31 speaks of the power of eros to effect what Rimbaud termed ‘a long, prodigious and rational disordering of all the senses [by] every form of love, of suffering, of madness’:

That man is peer of the gods, who
face to face sits listening
to your sweet speech and lovely
laughter.

It is this that rouses a tumult
in my breast. At mere sight of you
my voice falters, my tongue
is broken.

Straightway, a delicate fire runs in
my limbs; my eyes
are blinded and my ears
thunder.

Sweat pours out: a trembling hunts
me down. I grow
paler than grass and lack little
of dying.

– translated by William Carlos Williams

Rimbaud’s dictum (*dérèglement de tous les sens*), issued when he was in his teens, has since doubtless licensed a great deal of *maudit*-inspired self indulgence. In these days, when poets – arguably to poetry’s loss, although not to theirs – are likely to obsess more about which school they should get their MFA from and the best career path to follow afterwards, being subjected to a long and prodigious absinthe-and-sex-fuelled disordering of the kind that used to be standard-issue might be seen as a nuisance and a distraction.

Nevertheless the greatest verse has always struck a fine balance between the self-loss and suffering of passion on the one hand, and the reassertion of control on the other. The ability to discipline and elevate lust’s vertiginous excesses is one of poetry’s greatest achievements. Sappho’s virtuoso metrics in the original fragment is an obvious example, and that specifically classical tradition of honed eroticism can be seen as late as the 20th Century in **C P Cavafy’s** melancholic evocations of desire for the young men he encountered in the cafés of Alexandria: ‘He’s lost him utterly. And from now on he seeks / in the lips of every new lover that he takes / the lips of that one: his. Coupling with every new / lover that he takes he longs to be mistaken.’ (Trans. **Daniel Mendelsohn**). In Cavafy the poet-historian, Eros is inevitably refracted through the long lens of historical time as well as

autobiography, and it is this subtle intellectual layering which gives his erotic verse its depth and its poignancy. It is extremely sexy, but not just for kicks – physical kicks at any rate.

A striking exemplar of this tradition in Irish poetry is **Michael Longley**, who has used the template of classical eroticism for some of his most successful poems (even **Yeats’s** ‘hair tent’ love poems are too Pre-Raphaelite and bloodlessly disembodied to be really sexy). Longley included a fine version after Cavafy, ‘Cavafy’s Desires’, in one of his collections from the 1990s, and his versions from **Ovid** capture eroticism’s dynamic and disturbing energies without sacrificing wit; the arachnophobe’s obscure object of desire:

Enticing the eight eyes of my imagination
To make love on her lethal doily, to dangle sperm
Like teardrops from an eyelash, massage it into her
While I avoid the spinnerets – navel, vulva, bum –
And the widening smile behind her embroidery.

The eroticism of Longley’s poetry has also provided a counterbalancing scale of intimate value to set against a troubled public reality, as in ‘On Mweelrea,’ which has always reminded me of **Paul Brady’s** ‘The Island’. At the risk of overstating this aspect of his poetry, its eroticism harks back, in a gentle way, to the bawdier and more explicit socially subversive traditions identifiable in **Rochester** or **Byron**. Genuinely erotic poetry is difficult to pull off (pun intended), which is why the detumescence of humour or scurrilousness always comes as a relief. There is something vaguely **Frankie Howerd**-ish about the Earl of Rochester’s escapades; for instance, the *enfant terrible* of the court of Charles II once mistakenly handed the king a predictably blue satire on his own royal personage – ‘Peace is his aim, his gentleness is such, / And love he loves, for he loves fucking much’ – and was obliged to flee court for a time, eventually to be gathered back into the fold like the beloved prodigal he was. ‘Ooh you are awful’ seems to have been the standard reaction, but in truth Rochester’s bawdiness, like **Swift’s**, has a deadly serious point to make: ‘Fantastic fancies fondly move / And in frail joys believe, / Taking false pleasure for true love; / But pain can ne’er deceive’. That last line is startlingly similar to the maidenish **Emily Dickinson’s** ‘I like a look of Agony / Because I know it’s true’, and Rochester’s x-rated outlook is of a piece with his similarly flayed perception of reality and a highly ironized puncturing of social and sexual hypocrisies.

Reading Rochester is an astringent corrective to the kind of erotic verse that takes itself terribly seriously, to the point of straying unforgivably into the territory of TMI. The permissiveness of metaphor has led to all kinds of excesses – a distinguished male poet comparing his virile member to a vegetable, in one memorable instance – but chief among perpetrators has to be the American poet **Sharon Olds**, whose sexual encounters are always of the pantingly sacramental kind; toe-curling, but not in a good way – at least not for the reader. In ‘After Making Love in Winter’, where most poets would probably be sitting up and lighting a cigarette, Olds is in rapt self-contemplation: ‘I can / feel my ovaries deep in my body, I / gaze at the silvery bulbs, maybe I am / looking at my ovaries, it is / clear everything I look at is real / and good. We have come to the end of questions...’ To which one can only respond, ‘quite.’ Perhaps the *Literary Review’s* Bad Sex Awards might in future be persuaded to extend their remit from fiction to some of poetry’s habitual offenders?

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