

*Ceist na Teangan/
The Language Issue*

Michael Hartnett's "A Farewell to English"

Ciaran Carson wrote two stinging reviews in 1975. One is his notorious *Honest Ulsterman* hatchet job on *North*. The other, much less remarked on, is a review in the same issue of *HU* 50 of Michael Hartnett's *A Farewell to English*. As someone whose first language was Irish, Carson was well placed to judge Hartnett's dramatic decision to exchange English for "the language of my people". As it turned out, his verdict was far from complimentary. It was not so much the abandonment of English that Carson objected to as its "half-assed" execution, leaving the book "confused, derivative, lyrical, hysterical [and] posturing" if "on occasions, exact."

It is an understandable reaction. Few people, I think, would place the title poem of *A Farewell to English* among Hartnett's best work. As eirenic a critic as Eamon Grennan pronounces it "uneven... with some sub-Kavanagh satire, a few clumsy swipes at Yeats, and myopic, exclusive, pseudo-mystical claims for the Irish language." Yet the one thing it is not is a poem that can be conveniently ignored or overlooked. Even those who revere Hartnett, as I do, have to come to some sort of dispassionate verdict on what he was up to in it. At the time the thirty-four-year old Hartnett was both a rising star and, with a *Selected Poems* to his name, already a canonical figure, after a fashion. With the poets of Northern Ireland in the ascendant and those from the Republic almost disappearing in their shadow, outside Ireland at least, Hartnett chose to retreat to a Hidden Ireland both literal and metaphorical, moving from Dublin to West Limerick, home ground to his great precursor Dáibhí Ó Bruadair as well as to Hartnett himself, and a landscape much

invoked in *A Farewell to English*.

Placed immediately before the title sequence in *A Farewell to English*, “A Visit to Croom 1745” suggests that Hartnett was unillusioned about the sort of response his new resolution could hope to encounter. Croom was the site of the country’s last *cúirt filiochta*, court of poetry, but two hundred and thirty years before Hartnett the visitor he describes finds its Gaelic culture already in retreat. He has travelled “fourteen miles in straw-roped overcoat”:

to hear a Gaelic court
talk broken English of an English king.
It was a long way
to come for nothing.

The one certainty about the organic culture, Raymond Williams quipped, is that it has always gone. For Hartnett however, as for many Munster poets of his generation, Daniel Corkery’s classic 1924 study of eighteenth-century Gaelic Munster, *The Hidden Ireland*, struck many resonant chords, even as the revisionist attack on Corkery and all he stood for got underway. *The Hidden Ireland* ends with a quotation from Alice Stopford Green on the “second death” to which the Gaelic bards have been subjected, “buried by the false hands of strangers in the deep pit of contempt, reproach and forgetfulness—an unmerited grave of silence and shame.” It is thrilling rhetoric, so much so that the task of putting these forgotten writers back on the record can seem mundane and unglamorous in comparison. It is common in Irish poetry today, for instance, to find the disappearance of Irish used as a catch-all signifier for the postcolonial condition, with or without any accompanying sense of what exactly was being lost. Here is Eavan Boland in full neo-Corkeryan mode describing a dispossessed bard in “My Country in Darkness”:

The Gaelic world stretches out under a hawthorn tree
and burns in the rain. This is its home,
its last frail shelter. All of it—
Limerick, the Wild Geese and what went before—
falters into cadence before he sleeps.

He shuts his eyes. Darkness falls on it.

Who is this poet? By what piece of bardic hyperbole has he become consubstantial with the entire “Gaelic world”? The effect Boland creates thrives on such generalisation, to the point where specific details may be more of a hindrance than a help (and it is revealing that in her elegy for Hartnett, “Irish Poetry”, the Irish language is described as an absence, “the sound/ of a bird’s wing in a lost language”—as if “finding” this “lost” language would fatally undermine the role that Boland has assigned it).

“A Farewell to English” begins with a dramatic rediscovery of that “lost language”, as embodied by a woman whose eyes are “coins of porter” and whose West Limerick voice “talked velvet in the house”: a latter-day *aisling*, no less. An undoubting Thomas, Hartnett takes palpable hold of the past: “I sunk my hands into tradition /sifting the centuries for words.” The words that come next are standard *aisling*-speak: *mánla*, *séimh*, *dubhfhochtach*, *álainn*, *caoin*—“words whose meanings hover about the English adjectives graceful, gentle”, as a note reminds us. No one who has written a school essay in Irish, where one adjective never sufficed if five could be used instead, can fail to remember the iron chains of association that bound the words *mánla* and *séimh* together. He may have the impression of riding Pegasus, but as Hartnett acknowledges, he is talking pure cliché. Section two tries again, presenting another startling encounter with the Gaelic tradition on the road to Camas. As he bids “grand evening” to the “hungry, snotnosed, half-drunk” old men he passes, it is as if Stephen Dedalus and not his friend Davin had been soaking up the Gaelic ambience of the back roads in Munster:

They looked back once,
black moon of misery
sickling their eye-sockets,
a thousand years of history
in their pockets.

But something stands between Hartnett and the old men’s essence of Gael. It is, of course, the bulky mass of Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival. Section three spells it out:

Chef Yeats, that master of the use of herbs
 could raise mere stew to a glorious height,
 pinch of saga, soupçon of philosophy
 carefully stirred in to get the flavour right,
 and cook a poem around the basic verbs.
 Our commis-chefs attend and learn the trade,
 bemoan the scraps of Gaelic that they know:
 add to a simple Anglo-Saxon stock
 Cuchulainn's marrow-bones to marinate,
 a dash of Ó Rathaille simmered slow,
 a glass of University hic-haec-hoc:
 sniff and stand back and proudly offer you
 the celebrated Anglo-Irish stew.

The Anglo-Irish stew is promiscuously hybrid, unlike (implicitly) the purity of what it usurps. Following the Yeatsian lead, the "commis-chefs" go into cultural cringe, swapping their organically imbibed Gaelic for an artificially acquired, academic variant thereof. This is followed by an attack in section four on the mongrel condition of Irish life since independence, in which "We knew we had been robbed/ but were not sure that we lost/ the right to have a language". Hartnett does not lay the blame directly at Yeats's door, though in such stark juxtaposition to the preceding section the inference is difficult not to draw.

When Louis MacNeice attacks the calcified smugness of post-independence Ireland in *Autumn Journal* he zeroes in on that perennial nanny to the Irish mind, the nation as woman ("Why/ Must a country, like a ship or a car, be always female..."). Hartnett, most unusually, flies not from but into the arms of this figure, as he had done on more than one occasion before, notably in section thirteen of "Anatomy of a Cliché". The Irish language "is the conscience of our leaders,/ the memory of a mother-rape they will/ not face", while the "two pigs" responsible for spawning modern Ireland are given unabashedly Oedipal gender roles:

The brimming Irish sow
 who would allow
 any syphilitic boar
 to make her hind-end sore

was Mammy.
 Daddy was an English boar
 who wanted nothing
 but
 a sweaty rut
 and ownership of any offspring.

There is no disguising the crudeness of this as satire. Hartnett's recourse to gender stereotypes we are used to seeing condemned out of hand when employed by Matthew Arnold is not without its own irony. But as "A Farewell to English" continues, the ironies cannot help multiplying. In her poem "Ceist na Teangan" ("The Language Issue") Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill uses a waterborne Moses basket (albeit carrying a Pharaoh) as a metaphor for writing in Irish. If Hartnett fancied a biblical epigraph for "A Farewell to English", "slaughter of the innocents" might have come in handy. Gerard Manley Hopkins used the phrase in his journal to describe the holocaust of his juvenilia on his ordination. Hopkins turns up in section five of Hartnett's poem as one of the poets to whom he must say farewell, alongside the foreign poets he has read in translation and (once again) "our bugbear Mr Yeats/ who forced us into exile/ on islands of bad verse". It is going a bit far to accuse Pasternak or Lorca of proxy colonialism merely by being translated into English, but the gesture emphasises how important English remains to what Hartnett is doing. It is not enough to write in Irish, he must write in Irish at the expense of English and all he has learned through that language; the artist is validated as much by what he renounces as what he actually does. A case of *odi et amo* if ever there was one. As John Kerrigan has observed: "A poet so trenchant in English cannot but whip that language into acerbity when he fears his inability to relinquish it."

"A Farewell to English" revels in its acerbic renunciations: sections four and six attack post-independence Irish mediocrity ("the Irish paradise/ of files and paper-clips") in much the same spirit as Yeats's nose-wrinkling at penny-grubbing shopkeepers in "September 1913". Yes, Yeats. Grennan compares "A Farewell to English" to another Yeats poem, "The Fisherman", and beneath the ostensible jabs and digs that Hartnett directs at the older writer the similarities are unmistakable. Like "A Farewell to English", "The Fisherman" is emblematically set in

the West of Ireland, and is Yeats's meditation on what it would mean "To write for my own race", a dream that turns out to be impossible: the fisherman is "A man who does not exist,/ A man who is but a dream". For Grennan this means that Yeats, unlike Hartnett, is reconciling himself to an audience of one, but Hartnett's identification with "his people" at the end of section seven is desperate enough for us to hear the undercurrents of fear that he too may be writing for himself, and that the very phrase "my people" may be a form of personal indulgence:

I have made my choice
and leave with little weeping:
I have come with meagre voice
to court the language of my people.

As he went public with "A Farewell to English", Hartnett candidly admitted to an interviewer that he was still writing poems in English, and the published record shows that he continued to veer between the two languages in the following years. *A Farewell to English* was followed in 1977 by a Dolmen Press *Poems in English*, the long poem *Cúlú Íde*, shadowed or ghosted by its English version "The Retreat of Ita Cagney", the English pamphlet *Prisoners* (written in the 1960s), and the Irish collections *Adharca Broic*, *Daoine*, *An Phurgóid*, and *Do Nuala: Foighne Chrainn*, before the penitent re-embrace of English in *Inchicore Haiku*, in 1985:

My English dam bursts
and out stroll all my bastards.
Irish shakes its head.

Nor were the Irish poems of the decade 1975-1985 sufficient unto themselves in Hartnett's eyes, with many of them appearing in English versions in the bilingual 1987 collection *A Necklace of Wrens*.

Irish may have shaken its head at the abandonment of Hartnett's monolingual adventure, but this is not the only nod to "A Farewell to English" in the 1985 haiku sequence. Surveying the grim inner-city deprivation of Inchicore, not a place where an eighteenth-century Gaelic bard could easily feel at home, the second-last haiku asks:

All divided up,
 all taught to hate each other.
 Are these my people?

To which the answer comes:

My dead father shouts
 from his eternal Labour:
 "There are your people!"

Irish-speaking Munstermen, brashly Anglophone Dubliners or a non-existent Connacht fisherman: a writer takes "his people" where he can find them. So how will history judge Hartnett's "A Farewell to English"? Coming from a lesser writer than Hartnett, one is tempted to suggest that it would seem "half-assed", in Carson's word, and nothing more. And on one level it is indeed half-assed. Like Yeats's fisherman, the purist Irish-language poet in Hartnett did not really exist, but in "A Farewell to English" he boldly attempted to write him a poem as passionate, if never as cold, as the dawn. In Irish or English, the truth is that all Irish poems are bastard progeny of at least two traditions, something for which we can only be grateful if work like Hartnett's is the result.