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Alien Nation

Michael Hartnett and his Audience

At a conference on tradition in Cork last summer, the composer and ethnomusicologist Michéal Ó Suilleabháin discussed the work of Tommy Potts and his anomalous position in the tradition of Irish music. Potts's gift, Ó Suilleabháin argued, was that his compositions drew on disparate sources: a once-heard funeral march, or a well-known piece by Chopin, for instance, as well as the range of Irish traditional music with which he was familiar. Ó Suilleabháin pointed out that Potts's wide range, and his refusal of conventions, made him a difficult case for the canon of Irish traditional music: he is not in the main stream of that tradition yet his innovations suggest ways in which that tradition might develop in the future. It is fair to say that he is an acknowledged master but it is also difficult to discern whether he is an exemplary figure or a dead end for the developing tradition. For Michael Hartnett, Ó Suilleabháin's formulation seems to reflect his own anxiety about his achievement: "Tradition squats on me at night/ an ancient thing and lizard-like", as he puts it in "The Purge". With the publication last September of his *Collected Poems* ("A poet's merely his collected poems... the rest's a mythic referent", from "The Purge" again), it's possible to ask if his poems occupy an analogous position to Potts's music.

The *Collected Poems* was met with great enthusiasm for the poet, but as yet little enough comment on the poems. Likewise, Hartnett was not a best-selling poet but his untimely death was announced on the national news bulletins and the excellent 1999 film documentary on his work, *An Muince Dreolíní / A Necklace of Wrens*, was re-broadcast in a prime-time slot to mark his passing. As a cultural figure, he had obviously earned a place in the public imagination, but the poetry has been neglected.

Hartnett's work consciously presents problems for a reader and it is possible to relate these problems to the original ways in which his work imagines and approaches its audience.

Michael Hartnett had a confusing publishing career. His 1970 *Selected Poems* was in fact a gathering of previously uncollected work, and he published English-language collections with most Irish poetry publishers (Dolmen, Gallery, New Writers', Raven Arts, Goldsmith and others), collections that often seem to ignore chronology and that also, content-wise, consistently overlap one another. Then there are his collections in Irish, published mostly by Coiscéim, his dual-language collections and the translations from Lorca and Chinese (or should that be the language known as "Victorian English", since it was from a Victorian translation that he worked on his Tao sequence?), and of other Irish-language poets. Gallery's new *Collected Poems* (in English) is the first step towards the clarification of this matter: in an endnote, Peter Fallon promises two accompanying volumes, one of which will feature all of his published translations in addition to translations of Heine and Catullus, and a volume of his ballads and satires, *A Book of Strays*.

Hartnett told Dennis O'Driscoll in the *Poetry Ireland Review* interview reprinted here, "I refuse to have what is known in the trade as a coherent metaphysic", and this philosophical (or anti-philosophical) outlook was, until now, reflected in his varied publishing history. Also, it probably intensified the confusion that has led to critical and readerly neglect of his work. With the Gallery *Collected Poems* in hand, it is easier to come to terms with Hartnett's oeuvre. One way of approaching the work's consistent originality without abridging it is to consider the question of audience: who did he write for? Seamus Heaney writes approvingly that Hartnett "never had his eye on any audience", but it often seems as if Hartnett did have an audience in mind for his poems, it is just that he had no affection for them, no desire to please them. This is more a question of hostility than difficulty. The early work is both terse and—in the quarrel with himself and with others—rhetorical. Its effect is often violent and confrontational as if the poems' task is to lead the reader to an apprehension of violence. To this end there are loose versions of "Leda and the Swan" ("Charleville Mall Sestina", "Sulphur", "Fairview Park: 6 a.m."), meditations on pain (the love poem which begins, "I think sometimes/ of the fingernail slotted/ to

most sensitive red flesh"), detailed descriptions of skeletons ("shamed pelvis" in one poem, "the long femur survives perhaps/ or the wreck of ribs,/ but nothing plasmic" in another). Addressing John Moriarty in "I will arise with the hawk..." the poem's surprising turn declares: "I will fly into the sun/ and blind you with blood". An unusually unsettling, hostile attitude towards his readers, which is re-enforced in the early poems by the brutal images and regular recourse to archaism and technical or anatomical language, continues to mark Hartnett's poems, although it becomes more subtle in later work.

One precedent for Hartnett's uneasy relation to his reader may be found in his identification with the local Gaelic poets, an identification which Hartnett mentions in what may be his first interview, with Peter Orr, in 1963. In particular, Hartnett saw the seventeenth-century poet Dáibhí Ó Bruadair as a kindred spirit. Ó Bruadair saw himself, as Hartnett puts it in his introduction to his Ó Bruadair translation (1985), as "the sole survivor, the last receptacle of Gaelic culture." Hartnett also notes that the Gaelic poet's attitude towards his Irish, and newly English-speaking, audience is at best contemptuous. This idea of the poet is at the centre of Declan Kiberd's recent *Irish Classics* where it is presented as a perennial Irish modernism: the poet imagines himself as an anomalous figure, born after his time, with no natural audience. Perhaps Hartnett's publishing history—in Irish and in English, in folk or ballad as well as in more literary forms—reflects the ways in which, like Ó Bruadair, he auditioned and rejected various audiences for his poet's craft.

The poet's estrangement from his inheritance is most vivid in the powerful poems about older women, written before he began to write solely in Irish, which can be understood as elegies for a disappearing culture. Hartnett completed a masterful syllabic translation of the "The Hag of Beare" in 1969 but in his original poems to older women he side-steps the rhetoric of the *cailleach*. In "For my Grandmother, Bridget Halpin", "Thirteen Sonnets, 9", "The Retreat of Ita Cagney", "Mrs Halpin and the Lightning" and "Death of an Irishwoman", Hartnett problematises any simple elegiac allegiance to these old women: there is something clinical about the way in which he sums them up with a litany of possessions and superstitions. In "Death of an Irishwoman", one of his best-known poems, Hartnett places

himself outside the woman's broken world, alluding—headspinningly—to Yeats's "The Stolen Child" before the bitter ambivalence of the interjection: "I loved her from the day she died" and the final litany that describes a world whose currency has no purchase on how we live now. Hartnett recognises his isolation from this world, although in the title poem of *A Farewell to English*, he promises to make amends: "I have come with meagre voice/ to court the language of my people". His various achievements of the previous decade, the compressed obliquity of "Secular Prayers"(1967) and "Thirteen Sonnets"(1968) having given way to the more relaxed Lowell-esque portraits of *Notes on my Contemporaries* (1969), are set aside in favour of a fresh experiment in a new old language.

This farewell to English, the central event of Hartnett's career, has interesting contexts. It is a reckoning with his own community, and marks his fraught entrance into a world that he fears will reward him by transforming him into "a song that nobody sings... a language seldom spoken". Or, as he puts it in "A Visit to Croom, 1745", "It was a long way/ to come for nothing". The motivation for his decision, as he told Dennis O'Driscoll, was personal and political, and reflected a personal incapacity to say certain things in the English language as well as a reaction to:

> the attitude of the government of the time—a coalition government containing Conor Cruise O'Brien et al. Irish was an embarrassing language to have—you couldn't trade with it in Brussels. I wanted to make a stand, for what it was worth.

Interestingly Hartnett's response to a Fine Gael–Labour coalition whose intellectual lynchpins, Garret Fitzgerald and Conor Cruise O'Brien, seemed opposed to the revival or growth of the Irish language, was similar to Seán Ó Riordán's: both poets reacted publicly to the governing coalition's biases, Ó Riordán in angry essays for the *Irish Times* and Hartnett in the title poem of *A Farewell to English* whose sixth section imagines, brutally, concisely and bizarrely Ireland's rush towards an urban modernity: "I saw our governments the other night—I think the scene was Leopardstown... galloping/ towards the prize, a glass and concrete anus." The violence and abrasiveness of his earliest

poems recur as satire in the more public poetry of *A Farewell to English* and subsequently in the Irish poems.

The viciousness of Hartnett's satire is turned on bad poetry, on poets and on critics in one of his long Irish poems, an *ars poetica* which he translated as "The Purge":

> A critic once got lost in a poem.
> He saw no signposts there marked "Home".
> Every subtle thing he swept aside—
> he heard the brittle noise and wept.
> .....
> His compass was no use in such a place,
> a land where there was neither north or south.

Notwithstanding this, it is important to read in a Northern Irish context for Hartnett's poems. His return to Templeglantine in West Limerick and his adoption of the Irish language do reflect nationalist sentiment in the republic in the 1970s, and his move acts as a sort of clarifying backdrop to the work of many of Hartnett's Southern contemporaries. Aside from a more intense focus on the Irish aspects of this cosmopolitan poet, the political aspect of his decision also led to a more acute awareness of how poetry deals with violence that it cannot control. There is something embarrassed about the poem he translated as "Moonsnow '77", which ends:

> Over the border, torture and wounds
> and death sneers
> hands in pockets
> whistles at street corners:
> and myself in the moonsnow
> praising a rook's nest
> the poet, arrogant, verbose, safe.

Here, and in the poems of his return to English (in the wonderfully titled *Inchicore Haiku* [1985] and *Poems to Younger Women* [1988]), the hostility is no longer directed at his readers but at the poet. In the English poems Hartnett's wit and good humour are more obviously on show: the haiku are wry and sad from this past master of syllabics: "On Tyrconnell Road/ Catholic Emancipation/ thirteen milkbottles", or "From St Michael's

Church/ the electric Angelus/ —another job gone". Then the plangent refrain of the last trio of haiku, "Are these my people?", prompts no Ó Bruadair-like disdain, but is answered thus:

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

The later volumes introduce more thoughtful and ruminative poems, and his designs on his reader are joined by a self-scrutiny that is as unsettling as ever. The sequence "Mountains, Fall on Us" casts the poet as Dr Faustus in his final self-destructive act, and a seemingly gentler later narrative such as "The Man Who Wrote Mozart, the Man Who Wrote Yeats" warrants careful reading, with its anecdotes about plagiarism (do you, reader, recognise the sources of the poem?) and its demystifying, cruel sourcing of a poem in its material:

It is like pouring milk into a stream
high up a hill:
though down it comes some hundred feet
(effervescent over rocks
or lulled to tarns
behind some elbow of grassed turf,
falls, tumbles, runs or slows as smooth
as a dark honey ooze)
and may be called
a rivulet, a runnel or a rill,
it still comes out a stream
that someone poured some milk into
high up a hill.

The tension with which Hartnett consistently and tautly strung out his lines, his careful avoidance of sentimentality, the quicksilver unpredictability with which he turns on his reader,—all these make the poems at the end of the *Collected Poems* a surprise. Now God enters some of the poems ("Grant me good rest tonight, O Lord") and there is a gentle and dreamy clarity to "Last Aisling" and "The Blink of an Eye":

I see the Morning Star
Through my childhood skylight

And close my eyes and dream for fifty years
Reliving every setback, every highlight;

I open my eyes and there's the Evening Star
And suddenly it's twilight.

Hartnett's English-language poetry is an important example for other poets: whether it is, in Michéal Ó Suilleabháin's terms, a dead-end or a development of tradition is hard to say. Hartnett had his own negative vision of how tradition operates, isolated figures holding up a gravity-defying structure which may at any minute crush them, as he describes it in "Struts", a poem which has since met a fine response in Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's "Studying the Language", the sort of response which suggests that he is already embedded in the adventitious growth of Irish poetry. "We are climbing upwards into time/ and climbing backwards into tradition", he says, in this poem which begins:

We are all spread out upon a hill,
each to his ledge,
visibility almost nil,
seldom seeing each other—
hearing an occasional shout
above or below
and sometimes and most welcome,
seeing fires like silver spirals
jump along the crevices.