

With Hartnett in Sardinia

At least the function room is air-conditioned and full of delegates who have loyally turned up for the poetry reading. The International Association for the Study of Irish Literature (IASIL for short) is holding its 1994 annual conference in Sardinia. Papers on abstruse literary and cultural topics take up most of the day, but tonight as a refreshment or a distraction Desmond Egan, Michael Hartnett and I will read from our work. The distinguished American critic and academic Hugh Kenner is master of ceremonies. We have twenty minutes each.

After an inadequate introduction from Professor Kenner, Michael reads his poems gracefully, passionately in English and Irish. He may have been drinking earlier in the day, but on the platform he remains agile and captivating. His slight figure with its gentle angularities, his singsong accent and the lilt of his lovely lines dominate the large room. We forget where we are. We forget that we are attending a performance. Michael becomes the embodiment of poetry. This is a rare privilege for most of us, and we do not want the spell to be broken.

Far too soon Professor Kenner is even more inadequately introducing me as one of George Herbert's *epigoni*, some strange mutant Englishman he seems surprised to encounter at this Hibernian celebration. A bit miffed by his indifference and bothered by an attack of gout, I lay my aluminium elbow-crutches across the table, grab the lectern and read with a fervour I hope will ease sore feet and bruised *amour propre* as well as win over the audience. A sonnet of mine which is an Homeric refraction of the IRA's August cease-fire has just appeared in the *Irish Times*. I end my session with my first public reading of "Ceasefire".

Professor Kenner's introduction to Desmond Egan is enthusiastic and knowledgeable. Desmond sings "Down by the Sally Gardens" rather well and reads a few short poems. He then

steps down from the podium onto our level and is joined by Professor and Mrs Kenner. Shoulder to shoulder (more or less, for the professor is very tall) this trio performs a poem for three (or more?) voices—not consecutively, one at a time, but in confusing unison. The po-faced solemnity of this vainglorious entertainment suggests that in the Sardinian heat the emperor has shed all his clothes.

From the right side of the function room someone shouts out: “How long is this nonsense going on?”

At least three jaws drop. The rest of us gasp, some in alarm, others in relief. It is Michael Hartnett. He stands up white with indignation: “Your twenty minutes are up!”

The elderly professor sways down the aisle towards him looking outraged and waving his arms: “Learn some manners, young man! Learn some manners!”

Michael and the professor, who seems twice his height, are wagging their fingers. They are fencing with invisible swords. “I have perfect manners. And Longley has perfect manners. We were asked to read for twenty minutes each, and we read for twenty minutes each. You have gone way over your time with this balderdash! It’s you who have no manners!”

The Italian professor who is our host rushes onto the platform and croons anxiously into the microphone. “Let us allow the three poets an extra five minutes each. We all agree, don’t we?”

“I don’t want an extra five minutes! I don’t need an extra five minutes!”

Vehement and upset, Michael rushes from the room. Leaving the trio to finish their futile verbal fugue, I join Michael in the bar and hug him tightly. He bursts into tears. He shivers and shakes. Small and fragile in my arms, he makes me feel huge and heavy, a kind of untidy windbreak. He puts me in mind of the trapped wild birds whose terror terrifies me when I rescue them from indoors. Song birds. Michael is the soul of song. I tell him we are in complete accord and that I admire the bravery of his outburst. Then a clerihew suggests itself:

If Hugh Kenner
Thinks Egan a winner,
Can he be sound
On Pound?

We start to laugh as the rest of the audience files in from what has been a memorable reading.

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Occasionally a poem by somebody else enters my brain at what feels like the place of origins. Although the lines are not my own, they feel as close to me as lines that are. Or closer. Reading such poems again and again is connected somehow with my own creativity. They come from the far side of my own silence and set me free. I never tire of them. They seem inexhaustible. Patrick Kavanagh's "Innocence" comes to mind, and Edward Thomas's "Tall Nettles", and George Herbert's "Prayer", and Seamus Heaney's "Mossbawn Sunlight", and Wilfred Owen's "The Send-Off", and Derek Mahon's "Everything Is Going to Be All Right", and James Joyce's "Tilly", and John Clare's "The Nightingale's Nest". My most recent glimpse of the wellhead is the heartbreaking elegy by Michael Hartnett, "How goes the night, boy?":

She was my three-years child,
 her honey hair, her eyes
 small ovals of thrush-eggs.

 How goes the night, boy?
 Oh, my poor white fawn!
 How goes the night, boy?
 It is dawn.

Such anguish and quietude. A cradle-song for sorrow. And for many years I have revered "The Wounded Otter", Hartnett's own translation from his poem "An Dobharchú Gonta". It ends:

She did not notice
 the world die
 nor the sun expire.
 She was already
 swimming at ease
 in the magic crystal river.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill tells me that the Irish original is even more beautiful. It must be almost unendurable. Michael Hartnett has written some immortal poetry.

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I read with Michael once before—at the 1988 IASIL Conference in Coleraire. By a coincidence we shared a platform with Desmond Egan on that occasion as well. Possibly because Hugh Kenner was not in attendance, I recall very little about the reading, except that Francis Stuart turned up with his new young wife. Michael joined Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill to read for the Queen's University English Society around the same time. I have a photograph of him in our living room signing a book for an admirer.

I wish now that I had known him better. In the anthology *Watching the River Flow* I write about the emergence of our generation of poets in the 1960s and the cultural apartheid that operated between the two Dublin universities:

Extraordinarily, there was no interchange between TCD and UCD.... If we Trinity poets were learning from each other, how much more skilled and versed we might have become had we jostled with the likes of Michael Hartnett, Eamon Grennan and, later, Paul Durcan who were inhabiting a parallel universe in Earlsfort Terrace.

It does seem rather sad. Perhaps it was healthier for us to sing from our separate bushes. In any case there was always some degree of mutual permeability. When I visited him in Kinsale, Derek Mahon enthusiastically drew my attention to Michael's "A Visit to Castletown House". And I remember a sympathetic *Irish Times* review of Seamus Heaney's *North* in which Michael compares "Mossbawn Sunlight" to a Vermeer interior. If the poetry is any good, we all get to know each other in the end.

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In Sardinia I am crippled by gout and stay out of the heat in my room for much of the time. I look through the shutters and beyond the courtyard to the swimming pool. There in the flash-

ing light Michael spends hours and hours, drink in hand, showing off to the young bathers. He keeps on his heavy Irish clothes. Sometimes he sings. Sometimes he dances in a peculiar slow motion. His movements seem apt, like those of a desert lizard lifting its feet to keep them cool. I wish I could join him. I want to bring him a long drink of ice-cold water and lead him into the shade.

AN OCTOBER SUN

in memory of Michael Hartnett

Something inconsolable in you looks me in the eye,
 An October sun flashing off the rainy camber.
 And something ironical too, as though we could
 Warm our hands at turf stacks along the road.

Good poems are as comfortlessly constructed,
 Each sod handled how many times. Michael, your
 Poems endure the downpour like the skylark's
 Chilly hallelujah, the robin's autumn song.