

... to turn
weightless as a line to
hover sweep fly free sink back
into the infinite heavens ...
("At Hopkins's Grave")

And then it was off to the bar for a pint, a chat, to swap stories and laugh - the serious business of living. With a group of friends that Desmond had just met, but because of the heartfelt shared experience of his poetry, they felt they had known each other forever. Desmond is a generous man, and a convivial host. These impromptu gatherings are like his poems - a celebration of life to which everyone is invited.

CHRISTINE PAGNOULLE

Seeing Double And Feeling Far; The Poetry Of Desmond Egan*

"Seeing Double and Feeling Far": this might be the opening of some cheap Irish joke about someone who cannot see straight because of too much alcohol and who is maudlin and sentimental as the Irish are traditionally said to be. Yet, while Desmond Egan is Irish with a vengeance, the title of this essay is intended to mean something totally different, as will soon be apparent.

A few words of introduction may not be superfluous, however, for Desmond Egan is not quite as well known on the Continent, or even in England, as he is in the United States. He was born in 1936 in Athlone, on the river Shannon, right in the middle of Ireland, in what is indeed called the Irish Midlands. He now lives in Newbridge, Co. Kildare, not very far from Dublin. He looks young, and he feels young. He certainly hasn't grown old any more than those Americans he appeals-to in the poem "Ground Zero." Yet maturity is there, maturity in terms of awareness, and in terms of technical development.

That he had a good classical education is obvious from quotations and references in his poems. In fact he used to teach classical Greek as well as English and he has translated Euripides' *Medea*. Egan has an excellent working knowledge of modern Greek, French and Spanish, and he understands German and Italian; his open-mindedness and receptivity to modern languages should inspire many English speakers. Moreover, he also speaks, and occasionally writes in Irish.

Until 1987 he taught at Newbridge College. He now tries to live by his pen. He is actively involved in Amnesty International. So far he has published nine collections of poetry as well as a Collection of prose pieces. A volume of selected poems edited by Professor Rafroidi came out in 1988. (1)

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Egan considers that writing in regular lines on a regular beat with neat rhymes or assonances would betray a kind of insensitivity to the threatening chaos he perceives in the world we live-in. Yet there is a rhythm in his lines, and his words are often interconnected by sound effects. Imagery is the test of his inventiveness and of the strength of his feelings, and images, in his poems, are very often the accurate "objective correlative" to the situation or emotion he wishes to call up.

In "Non Symbolist", a poem that comes close to an *ars poetica*, he insists upon poetry telling about the world in its immediacy, upon the essential mystery of things as they are, upon vision arising from concrete occurrences and experiences.

The poem entitled "The Northern Ireland Question" (2) is a perfect illustration of his economical technique of suggestion and elision:

two wee girls
were playing tig near a car ...

how many countries would you say
are worth their scattered fingers?

Egan's dual vision is the opposite of a blurring; it is in fact a sharpening of vision, a deeper perception of the contradictions and paradoxes in our world, which is necessary to an adequate response to its complexity. His poetry is never dogmatic, never reductive, always keenly aware of the multiplicity of potential approaches and interpretations.

In the Collection called *Seeing Double* (1983) he introduces in some of his poems a two-column lay-out that makes a double approach graphically plain on the page. The right-hand column functions as a counterpoint, very often contrastive (as in "Hitchhiker" or "Young, Gifted - and Unemployed"), sometimes reinforcing (as in "Last Day of May" or "Loneliness", where the sense of vacancy expressed on the left is echoed in the random, meaningless characters on the right). As to his emotions, they have a directness and a simplicity which make them essentially different from what is usually understood by the word sentimentality. They are deep and genuine, and often expressed with striking restraint. His poetry is a poetry of feeling, a poetry of emotions, but of emotions rooted in concrete reality.

They concern his divided country ("Hitchhiker"), his car

("Goodbye Old Fiat") or a departed friend ("Skylark"); they are about the plight of a young unemployed girl, about landscapes that have moved him, about memories from his childhood, the woman he loves, the death of his father ... They are stirred by torture, apartheid and by the crimes of the military in Chile or in the Philippines (before or in spite of President Aquino). It would not be true to say that the intensity is the same whatever the subject. There is an urgency of love in some of the poems he wrote after his father's death which gives the reader a sense of immediacy and personal exposure that cannot always be found in other poems. But in all there is a genuine commitment of the heart.

I propose to substantiate these statements by briefly commenting upon some of his later poems. First, a note on the text. "Germany", "Hitchhiker" and "Non-Symbolist" belong to *Seeing Double*, the last Collection included in his *Collected Poems*. (3) "Brother Sister Chile" was published first as a poster by the Ireland/Chile Society and then in *Poems for Peace* (1986) (4) - a Collection explicitly meant to express his concern at the present state of the world. The other poems are included in *A Song for My Father* (1989) (5).

It seems to me significant that this latest collection should include side by side extremely personal poems about a private grief (the loss of his father), poems that are direct comments about our society, such as "Young, Gifted and Unemployed" or "Dunnes Store Sale", and others that are violent indictments of injustice and oppression in their most naked forms. The effect of this juxtaposition is twofold. It gives his private grief a public dimension, as indeed also in the beautiful title, reminiscent of medieval poetry: *A Song for My Father*, but it also testifies to the depth of the poet's personal involvement in public issues.

The order in which we shall look at the poems is neither the chronological order in which they were written, nor their succession in the printed collection, but rather corresponds to a gradation in the starting point or driving impulse: a progression from those emotions that can be shouted in the market square to those that can only be whispered in the bedroom.

"Brother Sister Chile" and "Hiroshima" are two poems of protest illustrating Egan's commitment to peace and justice in the world.

"Brother Sister Chile" is presented as a collective address of the Irish people to the Chilean people, yet a number of words in the poem suggest an intimate, homely relation. It uses the simple, transparent, rhetorically repetitive syntax of the genre. Yet the parallel constructions

are carefully deparallelled, as it were, by changing their positions in the lines.

Some images deserve more careful attention. When, in line two, thoughts become "fingers", with a break in the word that mimes the movement, the verb "each out" is restored to its concrete meaning. The fluid movement of the chain of solidarity that crosses oceans and continents is suggested by the repetition of "hands" in line three as much as by the words "light river".

The liturgical connotations in "he bread of our burning hearts" give the verb "gobble" a suggestion of the sacrilegious in keeping with the rather repulsive "khaki mouth" of the military.

Towards the end of the poem the image of the country as an extended prison cell for the Chilean people leads to the simple comparison in the last line between the loving help extended by one people to another and the longing for freedom prisoners experience when glimpsing the sky through barred windows.

One of the most striking features about "Hiroshima" is the contrast between the images at the beginning and at the end. The first two lines express the disintegration under the impact of the bomb. The image works in several ways. The explosion has left an indelible mark on the records of human achievements, an open wound, that is still burning. But the image was first prompted by that curiosity shown to visitors: the "shadow" a woman left on the granite steps where she was standing when the fireball overwhelmed her.

The last line refers to fragile shapes made by children in a particular frail material. Yet those "delicate paper cranes" that testify year after year to the lasting compassion of children for children, turn out, in the face of atomic destruction, to be stronger and more durable than the "granite of history".

Like "Germany", "Hitchhiker" was first published in *Seeing Double* and reprinted in *Poems for Peace*. Like "Germany" it involves the I-speaker more as a witness than as a central figure. Like "Germany" (in spite of the title) it is essentially about Ireland as a divided country ruled by hatred. Like "Germany" it has a two column lay-out (although the "second voice" functions in slightly different ways in the two poems). In "Hitchhiker" the sober narrative of the Northern Irishman's tribulations on the left-hand side is consistently contrasted with the complacent attitude of Irish politicians on the right: a scathing takeoff of the public man uttering ponderous and perfectly inane comments on the merits of pipe-smoking or of certain sportsmen in almost complete

indifference to whatever may be happening in the country he is supposed to administer.

"Germany" begins in an almost confessional tone: "Germany when I think of you these times". But his "roommates" (line 5) turn out to be German painters, writers and musicians whose works are present in his room. The second stanza highlights the violence of a division imposed from outside and for political reasons, and the third shifts to a comparison between Germany and Ireland as two countries that are divided by politics. The poem ends with the unfortunate privilege; for the Irish of having been subjected to the wiles of politics and state affairs for seven hundred years, and of being therefore seven hundred years, not the wiser but "the sadder for it." As a result of that long experience they have produced a diabolical device: the car bomb. From the middle of the poem we are right back to the collective voice of the Irish people: "we from a two flag island ..."

While "Germany" might be synonymous with a refined cultural environment (first stanza) the prevailing association "scrambling all other signals" is the Berlin wall as a tangible sign of division and strife, and it is probably imposed by yet another "roommate": the television set. The deliberate confusion in which the properties of that monument to separation are listed leads to the metaphorical shift at the end of the stanza: the barbed wire is stretched not only across the land, but across the soul of the country.

The condition of refugee sharply contradicts the usual connotations of the word "hitchhiker". The fleeing man has nothing of the young tourist backpacking through the country, and this is established in the second line: "his middleage . . . a bag".

The poem begins abruptly, with a question asked in the present tense to a "you" who is the poet himself. The answer is given first in the quasi juxtaposition of "empty" and "full". There was too much of the man. What we get in line three is one of those accurately observed everyday details that give concrete depth to Egan's poems: you hardly ever stop level with a hitchhiker.

The last two lines of the second stanza convey the mixture of fear and weariness of the man running off and away from whatever may still mean anything to him.

The speaker's inability to help in any effective way is stressed in the image of the mirror swallowing the man up, as though now nothing is left of the hitchhiker who has become a vagrant, another displaced person, nothing but a few evanescent memories in the poet's mind, and

the last of these memories - the photographs with their adhesive blots - is unobtrusively pathetic.

"Young, Gifted - and Unemployed" is a little *tour de force* of impersonation. The poet is nowhere directly to be heard, neither in the bragging recital of an unemployed girl on the left-hand side nor in the incoherent succession of nouns on the right. This can be seen either as the voicing of preoccupations among the unemployed, with *herm* and *androlog* suggesting a weakened sense of identity, including sexual identity, or, as I read it, as the disapproving voice of adults whose certainties gradually disintegrate until the (almost) final skidding and slipping of sounds that undermines and denies all security in distortions and repetitions evocative of a scratched record. This occurs just before the dawning of - we shall never know exactly of what, we are left with guesses. It can be a day in which early promises are not kept and early hopes not fulfilled (that would fit in with "unemployed"), or a day when the parents' jobs go too, and they too experience unemployment. Or perhaps that "different" day foreshadows ("forelights"?) a totally different social order ...?

Such a complete absence of the poet's voice should make this poem the least personal; but clearly it isn't: someone is speaking, and the main difficulty (for the translator as well as for the poet!) was to catch the idioms of the teenage girl. I like the careful affectation of indifference in,

staring into the near distance
while months pass in parents' voices,

the weariness expressed in the repetition of "and" at the beginning of lines as well as in the repeated word "interview", the exasperation in the rude unvoiced dismissal "piss off piss off", the discomfort suggested by "the central heating clicking off" (another neatly observed detail). I like too the way Egan renders an affected deliberate carelessness in the final flourish. But dishes will still be there to be washed up.

With the poems Egan wrote after the death of his father, by contrast, we reach the point where the voice is at its most personal: confessional in the sense the word has when used about Robert Lowell's poetry. Yet they are also truly universal. They tell of filial piety, of the love of a son for his father. While firmly rooted in their Irish environment - Mullingar, Loughnavalley, Athlone, Ballinderry Hospital, the river Shannon, not to mention the ballad that serves as a prompter

for the poet's awareness in "awake when the clockradio went off" - they are valid anywhere and for all time.

Diction and syntax are pared down to an exquisite simplicity. Again, images are not used to visualize an abstract notion, but rather to immerse the abstract in the concrete, everyday world: the imminent and ineluctable separation of death becomes the experience of driving away from someone you love.

In the same poem the simple image in the right-hand column (the equation of feeling with a river, sometimes hidden and undetected, sometimes overflowing in uncontrolled emotions) also illustrates the device.

While, as noted above, "Non-Symbolist" expresses the poet's view on poetry, "Have Mercy on the Poet" is very much a humorous portrait of himself as poet. Starting from a line by Pablo Neruda, Egan shapes the piece on the *Kyrie Eleison* sequence at the beginning of the Mass.

We get a number of snapshots as it were of the poet in various everyday situations, often far from flattering. For instance, the poet asking for a loan at one of those temples of Mammon that have replaced, if not ousted, churches and chapels; or the poet not knowing what to do when his car is being repaired. Most of these *instantanés* are kindly deflating and can apply to many of us, but the last line uniquely applies to the poet as quester. Not that the poet should be in any way someone special, set aside from the mob, but he (or she) is the one who keeps looking for the right word, the right phrases, that will be given free when the time is ripe to whoever looks with the right eyes.

This last line can be briefly developed in relation to Egan's art, and can serve as a connection with some of the tenets expressed in "Non-Symbolist."

Egan is indeed on a never-ending quest. Until a poem is published, he will go on revising it, and a long string of dates at the bottom of his manuscripts testifies to the number of successive versions.

The poet keeps looking into himself and around himself. In "Have Mercy on the Poet" he walks down "the jewelled road", i.e. along a real tarmac road transfigured by rain and sun. The poet goes out into the world with open eyes, and with an open heart; words will then flow from what he has observed, not from any theory or from any symbolic system.

This is his main contention in "Non-Symbolist". The poet, he argues there, wants to restore the taste of things:

the sacred mood as rich
as an apple or a cup of tea.

His plea is that he may remain alert to the mystery of things as they are, not as they are interpreted, processed by our minds.

This alertness is present throughout Desmond Egan's poems. It makes for the complexity of his perception and gives his poetry universal significance.

NOTES

- (1) *Midland* (1972), *Leaves* (1974), *Siege!* (1976) *Woodcutter* (1978), *Athlone?* (1989), *Snaptadragon* (1983), *Seeing Double* (1983), in *Collected Poems*, University of Maine, The National Poetry Foundation, The Goldsmith Press, Newbridge, Ireland, 1984. *Poems for Peace*, AFRI, Ireland, 1986 *A Song For My Father*, Peterloo Poets/Kavanagh Press, 1989 *The Death of Metaphor*, Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe, forthcoming. *Terre et Paix*, Poemes choisis et présentés par Patrick Raftroïdi, traduits par Danielle Jacquin, Christine Pagnouille, Patrick Raftroïdi et David Scheinert, Lille, Presses Universitaires, 1988.
- (2) *Collected Poems*, p.42.
- (3) *Id.*, pp 194-5 and 190-1 respectively.
- (4) *Id.*, p.17.
- (5) *A Song For My Father*, pp. 22, 11-12, 51-52 and 40 respectively.

MAURICE HARMON

An Introduction*

Desmond Egan has emerged in recent years as a poet with a remarkable range of talents and a sure sense of direction.

His first collection of poems was called *Midland*. Its title calls attention to the part of Ireland in which he feels most at home - the wide expanse of country that runs from Dublin on the east to Athlone westward on the Shannon and north as far as the river Boyne. He was born in the town of Athlone and has written a nostalgic collection of poems about it. Now he lives in Newbridge, a small town near the great plain of the Curragh and surrounded by farming countryside. It is the people and places of the midlands that one finds in his lyrics - observations on fields and sky, trees and flowers, and the creatures of the region.

Desmond Egan is a poet of mood and of image; a modernist in that he avoids formal shapes, rhyme schemes, traditional prosody and fluencies of sound. The form, as he says in the Introduction to the U.S. edition of his *Collected Poems*,

The form is the feeling. I aim at a syntax which might reflect the flux and confusion of our present ... Each attempt at making a poem must uncover its own new shape; each line discover its own peculiar rhythm.

He creates by suggestion, by breaking up the rhythm, by grouping nouns together, by casting individual images before us. From a quiet, unassertive beginning his work has become more definitive and also more political - more political in that it registers his awareness of contemporary violence in Ireland, north and south, and of political violence in other countries, particularly towards artists. Throughout his work there is a strong visual quality - the shapes of objects appeal to him, their relationships to each other and to the observer. He has a

* Speech on the occasion of a presentation made to Egan in 1984.