

Desmond Egan's "The Northern Ireland Question" The Rest is Unfathomable Silence¹

Written by Kunio Shimane

Responded by Desmond Egan

I. Genesis of "The Northern Ireland Question"(Egan)

1. General: I am very involved in what is happening in Northern Ireland. Like most Irish, I long for a 32-county Republic; for the total freedom of our small country. I believe that the border runs through all our psyche, reducing us. The full freedom of Ireland, the getting rid of the British flag, and Empire, and military presence . . . is not just our ideal, it is a necessary precondition for this country's finally taking her place among the free nations of this earth.

2. I abhor violence—beginning with the institutionalised violence of a British political and military presence in my country. This violence leads inevitably -- history teaches us -- to a violence of reaction. To car bombs. One such, that I read about, led to the slaughter of two little girls("wee" is N. [orthern] I. [rish]dialect/Scottish for "little").

II. Analysis(Shimane)

1

More than most poets Desmond Egan reflects and responds to the reality of our world. His poems interact with it spontaneously both in theme and technique. His interests are varied one of which is contemporary politics, especially politics in crisis. One poem has been chosen among his political poems: "The Northern Ireland Question".

two wee girls
were playing tig near a car . . .
how many counties would you say
are worth their scattered fingers?

(Elegies 41)

This is all of the poem, consisting only of three and a half irregular lines in two

sentences. To the reader used to traditional English poetry this hardly looks like a poem. A memo, perhaps? A short maxim, at best? If he were ignorant of the poet's craftsmanship and poetics, he would find it almost impossible to believe it a poem. He would not be able to notice the existence of silence in and behind it, much less fathom the depth and vastness of it: the bottomless and boundless dark silence that conveys the poet's thousand feelings.

In this silence the word is powerless. It has to yield itself to silence capable of expressing everything in its negative capability. Precisely because it has no sound, no meaning, it can connote anything and everything. Only it depends on how it is used. It is comparable to the blank space in a painting which a master makes use of to produce effects that nothing else could. A mediocre painter spoils his entire work because of it. It is like darkness causing the moon and stars to shine in the night sky. Not only his thoughts and feelings, the silence in "The Northern Ireland Question" tells symbolically of Egan's poetics from his definition of poetry to style.

2

Egan is one of the few poets of our time so keenly aware of the nature and function of poetry in relation to the age. This he clearly manifests in his essays. His sensitivity captures the morbidness of our time and warns him of the danger of mankind perishing. According to him we are living in the age of despair; we are living in

a world in which, for example, half the global population starves while one million pounds per minute is spent on arms? or where children are kept in jail and forced to watch the torture of a parent(Iran)? Or where youngsters can be beaten with hammers or 'kneecapped'(a new twentieth-century verb--as 'carbomb' is a noun) by paramilitaries as an example to others (Northern Ireland)? Or dissenters can end-up undergoing shock treatment 'collaboration' is punished by the offender's being collared in a burning tyre full of petrol (South Africa)? None of these horrors [is] as isolated incidents but as systematic, organised, *official* programs. One could begin to wonder whether humanity itself is not in danger (*Metaphor 55*; Italics mine)

In this age and world of ours, he sees little hope:

There was no saving the Twentieth Century, torn by world wars and genocide, by atom bombs, concentration camps and a new, unexpected, barbarity, from that *angst* in

which *we* live and move and have our being (*Metaphor 15*).

The old optimism that people have harboured and enjoyed is quite gone. In eighteenth century Europe they began to believe in the power of human reason and scientific and technological progress which promised them prosperity and happiness. Surely the magic wand of the industrial revolution brought about the material wealth unprecedented. Both Darwinism and Marxism proved the belief in progress. In the very midst of Victorianism (in England) people came to feel a growing anxiety and uneasiness on one hand and a loss of nature on the other. The advancement of technology and civilization has only enhanced these problems. At the height of Victorian prosperity Arnold uttered his uneasiness in a calm but gloomy tone:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle fur'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.
(*"Dover Beach"*)

G. M. Hopkins had to cry out in grief upon seeing the inscape of nature being damaged:

Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
Strokes of havoc unselve
.....
The sweet especial rural scene.
(*"Binsey Poplars"*)

And he expresses his deep concerns for the future of nature:

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wilderness? let them be left
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.
(*"Inversnaid"*)

In this very future we are now living, feeling intense fear which may lead to despair.

It is significant that such a revolutionary poet as Hopkins, many of whose poetic aspects looked far beyond his age, still strictly observed verse forms; his sonnets for example were molded meticulously according to his design. He is the restorer, one may say, of the sonnet in his time which seemed to have declined in the previous century.

Arnold, as seen symbolically in his "Dover Beach", on the other hand, felt quite free about verse forms; though very short as it is, this is written in verse-paragraph rather than in stanza. Their verse forms reflect the difference of their world views. Yet the Romantic reaction against the neo-Classical observance of the rules of versification thus continued in many Victorian poets. It is T. S. Eliot who has marked in both thought and style the beginning of our contemporary poetry. His *The Waste Land* represents the age which has undergone World War One. Curiously enough, W. B. Yeats does not appear to aspire to stylistic innovation.

Naturally, in our time of fear and despair and of new themes, poetry should assume an appropriate style. On this point Egan is eloquent:

Is it a coincidence that an age as full of fear as ours, an age that has begun to lose faith not only in God but in man, an age more aware of the dark than of the light, . . . that such an age should have offered as perhaps its main contribution in the area of poetic technique not only a new refinement in the use of imagery but a new acceptance of such imagery as adequate in itself to express the passionate transitory that is life? (*Metaphor* 20)

"Poetry is the *language of now*" (*Metaphor* 72). That is to say:

Modern writing at its best has taken on the character of a dialogue with despair. A poetry that is more public, more brutal (eschewing literary niceties), more experimental and more purely emotional would seem to be a direct consequence. (*Metaphor* 58).

Therefore the poet

must re-invent a vocabulary --and consequently get away from traditional prosody and versification (= order), including rhyme. To write in iambic pentameter nowadays (unless for effect) would in my view imply insensitivity. The finest writing of our time has a daring and experimental character. It launches courageously out into the unknown,

unsuspecting, like Columbus, that beyond the flat horizon there is only the abyss, an infinite emptiness. A raid indeed, not only technically but thematically (*Metaphor* 55).

3

"Daring and experimental " are key words applicable to Egan. When traditional values, views of the world, philosophies and even religions cannot hold together the realities of our time, it is too naive to assume that literature, poetry, still keeps its old form. When Hopkins invented a new free verse rhythm, Sprung Rhythm, and experimented daringly on various phonetic techniques, he did not worry about the traditional forms of English poetry. His belief in the sonnet form, for example, was not shaken; he took for granted the framework, the form of poetry itself. He was optimistic about it. This optimism must have an intimate relationship with his religion and view of the world. His personal problems never shook his vocation nor his belief in Catholicism. Probably Hopkins was a great exception together with Newman.

Enlightenment and Liberalism were shaking the foundation of Christianity; scientific and technological progress and Darwinism kept attacking it; Marxism joined them. The great war devastated the European civilization and spirituality; it brought about a colossal wasteland. Even an eminent cleric, R. Knox clearly states in the 1920s : "Amid the tangle[in the beginning of the 20th century], one strand seems to define itself--within the last hundred years, within the last fifty years, within the last twenty-five years, the force of religion, . . . has steadily and visibly declined. I do not mean that a careless and external diagnosis would detect the change"(Knox 1-2). Since the Second World War the confusion has deepened and widened.

The poet is not a hermit placing himself outside the turmoil of the age. His art offers no excuse to become one. Through poetry he has to confront the confusion of our time. He has been forced to abandon traditional prosody and versification(=order) including iambic pentameter. Metaphor also. All his poems are free from these. Of course there are natural elements which have been included in the traditional prosody and versification such as arbitrary internal rhymes and rhythms similar to the iambic and trochaic -- elements innate to the English language which even the most daring experimental poet cannot eliminate from his poetry so long as his language is English.

Now, the reader as well as the poet must face the hardest reality about English poetry -- i.e. what is poetry? Is it a new kind of prose? New themes can well be treated in the novel, the essay, the drama and the scholarly treatise in various fields. Then what makes

poetry poetry after all its traditional versification, style or language—or what one may call the framework of poetry— has been cast away? The poet has to invent new language and new technique from its ashes: a new style for a new theme in a new age which is our own. The reader is also required to be ready to confront a new (and strange) poetry. His knowledge, if competent, of the old poetic techniques is now useless. This is a tremendous trial for both the poet and the reader. A poet of no ordinary merit, after surveying eleven centuries of English poetry, has firmly concluded:

In spite of the breakdown of many traditional rules, somethings are here to stay. *Alliteration, rhyme and iambic pentameter*, all three organic elements of the English language, still have long lives ahead of them (Bantock 197; Italics mine)

Looking at the recent trend in English poetry, to which Egan contributes forcibly and consciously, one comes to wonder if this statement is too conservative and optimistic. At the same time this poet naturally admits room for poetry to “advance as it will” as “there are no rules set in advance”(Bantock 198). We will have time to examine if alliteration, rhyme and iambic pentameter are “organic elements of the English language”.

At least one thing is certain: The poet is now groping for a new form, a new style for his new poetry. This struggle began with the Romantic Movement and after more than two hundred years poetry has become much freer. There seems no limit to this freedom; it is as if poetry is trying to shuffle off its mortal coil. However hard it tries, it cannot remove it completely. Then what does it try to assume instead? What kind of form? It seems that no poet has found the new and ultimate form yet. For the reader the situation is also very difficult. His knowledge of traditional poetry as taught at school is no longer applicable. He may not be able to recognize “The Northern Ireland Question” as a poem, it being so remotely different from the poems he is familiar with. The difficulty lies solely in style, not in content. We have to find the essence of style which makes this poem a poem and analyze it.

4

We have to begin with some basics of language. Language consists of sounds; this simply means that it does not consist of letters. All its essence and indeed everything is contained in sounds since language is primarily sound. Writing is only auxiliary and a means of recording. The poet is a person who is most keenly aware of this vital fact about the

language he uses for his art. His problem is that although he does not wholly trust writing, he has to rely on it. He knows that there is room for making up for its shortcomings; at the same time he knows that they cannot be remedied completely. All he can do is to try his best to overcome them. G. M. Hopkins was probably the most extreme and best example to try this in an age when no gramophone records, recording tapes nor CDs were available. He invented an elaborate system of marks to indicate stressing, intonation, pause and other phonetic phenomena—i.e. the model oral reading he intended— which could not be shown by mere writing or were likely to be overlooked. Naturally also, he was keenly aware of the function and value of punctuation. All this is clearly shown in his manuscripts; and anyone who wishes can see it in the facsimile edition of his poems prepared by Norman MacKenzie or in the decisive *The Poetical Works* edited by the same. Hopkins' mature poems, therefore, were composed by means of a combination of the conventional writing system and his own phonetic mark system, either being indispensable to each other. This is the legitimate and concrete outcome of his definition of poetry that it is *speech framed to be heard* (*Journals and Papers* 289). It is a matter of course that he should request his friends to recite his poetry.

Even in this age of the high technology of audio system, the short-coming of writing is not completely overcome. It is quite natural that the poet should give recitals of his own and others' works and record them, as his own voice is thought to be the most faithful means of expressing them. There have been many examples of recording from the pioneering Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade", W. B. Yeats' "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Dylan Thomas' his own poems and *Paradise Lost* and Egan's his own and others' poems. All these are invaluable and deepen insights into the poem. Yet there still remains a question, along with other minute technical ones, if an abstract voice is better than the poet's concrete (actual) voice (I have no intention of considering this question as it is too technical).

Even if the poet composes poems verbally—i.e. uttering and recording them on tape or CD, he has still to write and publish them in the form of a book. He cannot escape writing. He has to make up for its defects to make it his faithful servant. Unless he invents, like Hopkins, various marks to add to it, he has to manipulate the conventional writing system to mould it according to his purpose. As long as he plays within its framework, the room for innovation is not large. Nevertheless, to a resourceful poet like Desmond Egan it is spacious enough. He has come to eliminate capital letters and punctuation marks as in this typical example as:

music you loved has filled like autumn with sadness
and places we used to be I can hardly bear
flowers are less than flowers days are of darkness
something fell like a leaf when you went away

(“Requiem”)

Here we see clearly that Egan does not trust writing — at least writing with conventional rules (by rules I do not mean grammar). This is not a piece of writing but a speech which is not casual but highly stylized. This may be difficult to understand when put down in letters like this but when spoken correctly it is easy to understand. While there are no capitals nor commas, colons, semi-colons, nor full-stops in speech, there are stresses, prominences, intonations and pauses which all indicate these punctuation marks. The listener hears them all and understands the meaning of the speech. Punctuation marks exist to help writing to be understood correctly. Egan sacrifices it for the sake of his poetry being speech actually to be read aloud and listened to. In fact he loves to recite it and to me he seems to believe that his recitation (or good recitations by other people) manifests every linguistic element to convey the meanings and effects of his poems. This is an ideal attitude. When his reader views his poetry as pure writing and has no intention of treating it as speech, this attitude has a great danger of misinterpreting it and even mistaking it for something other than poetry. Punctuation marks are a safeguard against it. Egan naturally knows this but sacrificed it.

As a poet who has been experimenting to free his poetry from the old “fetters” such as rhymes and metaphor, it is quite natural that Egan tries to abandon metres adopted to English poetry through the classical theory of poetry. The traditional metres which have been used in English poetry for centuries are Greek and utterly foreign in the origin. The basic of the Greek metre consisted of measured differences in the syllable length—a long syllable equals two short syllables—is linguistically incompatible with the nature of the English language, especially with the nature of English stress. Yet it is quite curious that English rhythm could resemble iambic or trochaic metres in the sense that they alternate between a stressed and an unstressed syllables. True that a stressed English syllable is considerably longer than an unstressed one; its length largely depends on how it is stressed. When they alternate regularly, the listener is quite easily beguiled into thinking it is either iambic or trochaic metre in its original form. Thus:

Tiger, tiger burning bright

In the forest of the night.

A phonetician would be surprised if the two syllables *of* and *the*, for instance, had a length-ratio of 1 to 2. It may possibly happen in an unnaturally exaggerated "poetical" reading but such a reading only makes the whole poem sound ridiculous. All that one can be certain of is that the stressed syllable is longer than the unstressed in natural English speech. What we should bear in mind about English stress is that length is only one element and others such as pitch and intensity are equally or sometimes more important in it. A regular alternation of the stressed and the unstressed syllables in a line of English poetry is quite possible, whether it is named iambic or trochaic or other metres. These Greek names lost the original meaning when they were introduced to English poetic composition. Their nature became English despite both the poet and the reader believing they retained their Greek nature.

That Egan determined to give up the rhythm consisting of regular repetition of the strong and the weak syllables in his poetry means that he had to begin to adopt the native rhythm of English to his poetry. This also means that he would return to the tradition of Anglo-Saxon poetry. The best example of a modern practice of this was G. M. Hopkins' Sprung Rhythm. Following the old tradition Hopkins set a rule to place a fixed number of stresses to the line. While Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry in its typical cases had four stresses to the line three of which were connected to alliterations, Hopkins' Sprung Rhythm varied in numbers of stresses to the line from poem to poem. He tried consciously to keep certain definite forms in his poetry; he did not quite go as far as annihilating all the traditional conventions nor did he see a necessity to do so. Rather he had no intention of breaking poetic rules unless absolutely necessary to create phonetic effects.

Now Egan's poetic rhythm. If we look at "Requiem" and examine its rhythm:

music you loved has filled like autumn with sadness
and places we used to be I can hardly bear
flowers are less than flowers days are of *darkness*
something fell like a leaf when you went away

This poem is composed in a more or less regular form—especially the length of the line. The rhythm is also regular in the sense that each line has five stresses. The first line can be scanned in terms of a classical metre: dactyl; the following lines are a mixture of metres like iambus, anapaest and dactyl. This is how a reader accustomed to traditional poetry

would try to scan this poem, which is quite irrelevant to the poet's intention. The poet did not intend to apply traditional metres. Simply he has used a natural English rhythm that sounded most effective in his ears when composing this poem. The traditional appearance is purely coincidental. This is the native rhythm of English whose governing rule is isochrony—equal-timing —between stresses, as it is a major attribute of English stress. This naturally is one of the most important elements of Hopkins' Sprung Rhythm. This does not mean at all that Egan imitates Hopkins. Rather, their rhythms share the essence of English rhythm. Paradoxically, because both poets write in English, their rhythms are similar. Only Egan's rhythm is freer or "wild" in so far as it has no rule nor restriction which Hopkins imposed upon his own rhythm. Egan's rhythm has a much greater effect than a regular and mechanical traditional metre in Blake's short verse.

5

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

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

In this poem a regular repetition of a strong and a weak syllables (or the reverse) is utterly helpless to express the profound feelings that the poet had when he learnt about these *two wee girls*. Indeed, "to write in *iambic pentameter* nowadays would be simply insensitivity". The very end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century are vastly different from the last century.

But the issue of the independence of the Irish nation has long since continued. Hopkins in Ireland perpetually witnessed civil rebellions against English rule. A century or more later the problem still continues in Northern Ireland, which naturally and deeply affects the Republic of Ireland. The IRA is still active and has finally become the target of attack and criticism not only of the British and the Northern Irish governments but also of many fellow Catholics. As an Irishman, though not native of Northern Ireland, Egan is profoundly concerned with the Northern Ireland question.

Shocked by the news of the two little *wee* girls, killed by a bomb planted in a car, I presume, by the IRA, the poet could not but feel overwhelming distress akin to despair. Probably "this 4-line poem . . . possesses the clarity and power of the best Greek

epigrams”(Arkins73). It also reminds one of the best Japanese *haiku or tanka (waka)* especially because of its symbolism as well as conciseness, though the number of syllables of the whole poem is different (I am aware of the meaninglessness of counting syllables of *pure* English poems in which the number of syllables to the line is irregular). There are many—I say *many*-- elements in this very short poem which either alone or in combination produce various effects. Of these a few should be examined here.

First. Diction. As in all other Egan poems the diction in this poem is quite ordinary and of daily life; it consists only of monosyllables and disyllables. To produce the effect of locality he often uses dialect and foreign words. The dialectic *wee*, which “neatly identifies the two young girls as Northern [Irish]” (Arkins 73), is an ideal word in this poem in both connotation and pronunciation as well as denotation. The reader knowing its denotation of being *small or little*, cannot but feel a sense of *prettiness* and *darling-ness* of the girls -- at least the poet’s affection for them. Fathers who have daughters instinctively share this affection for young, small and darling girls.

Through pronunciation this word produces extraordinary effects in the first two lines. The expression *two wee girls* constitutes what I have defined *dissonances*(Shimane 128-30). A dissonance is a contrast between a front and a back vowels; I have named so as an antonym to assonance which is one of the few accepted terms of poetic techniques. Whereas an assonance consists of the same vowel in more than two words such a one between “play” and “say”(in Egan’s pronunciation it is a long /e:/unlike a diphthong--“double vowel”--/ei/in the English Received Pronunciation), a typical dissonance is one between vowels placed at directly opposed positions as in this case: “wee” — “two” between whose vowels a horizontal line can be drawn on the vowel chart. This is one of the most typical and sharpest phonetic contrasts. This contrast can be interpreted variously in the context of the poem. While in many cases, however, it has no connection to the meaning of the line or poem, it is capable of producing great effects when it supports the meaning. In “The Northern Ireland Question” the dissonance wonderfully enhances its content. It enhances the opposition between innocence and violence, good and evil; it may be interpreted to imply racial, religious and political conflicts.

There is more in the same dissonance. The word *wee* is quite extraordinary in that it forms another but subtle dissonance in it: “wee”--“girl”. The vowel in *girl* in Egan’s pronunciation is a kind of back vowel with an r-colouring rather than a central vowel. This contrast also supports the context of the poem.

We should not confine our attention to vowels alone, as there are also techniques in consonants. There are contrasts in the pairs of consonants, /t/(two)-/w/(wee)and/t/(two)-/-

g/(girl). In the first pair are two kinds of contrasts pertaining to both manners and places of articulation—i.e. the former is between one of the hardest consonants (/t/) and one of the softest (/w/); also between a front (/t/) and a back consonant (/w/ being velar). In the second pair exists a contrast between a “front”(/t/) and “back”(/g/) plosives, which at the same time constitutes another kind of contrast between fortis (voiceless or hard) and lenis (voiced or soft)plosives.

Here we have to notice the role of the semi-vowel/w/. This is a “strange” sound in that it has a double articulation—i.e. both velar and bi-labial—and it is neither a “pure” consonant nor a “pure” vowel. In this expression this assumes an ideal role of making an agreement with /g/and a contrast with /t/.

In this very short, seemingly insignificant expression — *two wee girls* —, thus, exists such intricate combinations of effective techniques which may not register analytically in the mind of the reader. If sharp, his sensitivity is capable of feeling them. When his sensitivity has felt their effects, this expression has come to assume great brilliance. The most important thing is to *discover* new techniques applied in it which even the poet may not be conscious of; his poetic sensitivity and talent has made him create them without his being conscious of them. They are not so simple nor obvious as the traditional techniques of alliteration, rhyme and assonance. They are numerous. To discover them is the sole responsibility of the student of poetry (The principle is expounded in my *The Poetry of G. M. Hopkins: The Fusing Point of Sound and Sense*).

Then, *two* is combined with *tig* through alliteration. This combination is quite natural. The choice of *tig* is surprisingly appropriate. Its effect can hardly be exaggerated when we analyze its phonetic significance. The poet had a choice between *tig* and *tag* for the same children’s play and chose the former. By this word he has managed to imply the delicacy and fragility of the *two wee* girls. For it in its dialectal usage means: “To touch gently; to give light tap or touch, used. esp. in the game of ‘touch last’ or ‘tig’”(Wright). This becomes clearer when it is compared with *tag* (though disregarding the difference of parts of speech): “A wild, romping girl”(W[est]. Y[or]k[s]hire)—e.g. He’s two daughters, and they’re regular tags (Wright)”. Between the two words denoting the same game is this difference of connotation: *gentle, light* and *fragile versus wild, rough* and *energetic*. Significantly the difference is also implied by the difference between the vowels of these two words :/i/and /ae/. The point is the loudness or “volume” of each vowel. By any objective calculation the vowel in *tag* is much louder than that in *tig*. With the same initial and final consonants the condition of this comparison is ideal. This kind of vowel implication is accepted by phoneticians through such an example as “*large*” and “*little*”; the meanings of these words

are directly supported by these vowels (Abercrombie 14) ; the vowel under the same condition in the former word is of the greatest loudness among the single English vowels, while the vowel in the latter word is of the second smallest among them (For a full discussion see Chapter 4 of my *The Poetry of G. M. Hopkins: The Fusing Point of Sound and Sense*). Thus by both lexical and phonetic meanings the word *tig* is most suitable for this poem. *Tig* through its vowel is connected to *fingers* and also to *wee*; though not exactly the same it has a very close relation with /i:/in *wee*; in fact they share a considerable part of their phonetic areas in pronunciation.

And the tragic opposition between *fingers* and *counties* in the second stanza cannot be overlooked. This is enhanced by the volume-difference between the vowels of the stressed syllables of these words, between a short front closed vowel and a diphthong(i.e. "double vowel"):/i/ and /au/. The difference is so obviously great that the comparison seems even absurd. But this comparison has created a most effective paradox in the content by which the tiny, delicate *fingers* of the *two wee girls* have become infinitely valuable.

6

So far would quite suffice to prove the excellence of such a short poem "The Northern Ireland Question". There is yet another major phonetic effect to be analysed. The effect of silence. Silence is of course the absence of sound, and, therefore, of word. Contrary to common assumption, it does not necessarily signify a void of meaning. Often it becomes as meaningful as the word (For a full exposition see Chapter 5 of my *The Poetry of G. M. Hopkins: The Fusing Point of Sound and Sense*). From the pen of a great poet it creates effects undreamt of. In the eternity of silence God created the heaven and the earth and he separated the waters and the dry land. It is the dry land that has begun giving the waters a regular movement and rhythm of dashing and receding — one of the "two noises too old to end". Tennyson expresses this as no one else could have done:

Break, break, break,
On thy cold stones, O Sea.

What regulates the rhythm here is the silence indicated by the commas. Without it the motion of the waters would be as chaotic as before God began his work of creation.

Silence in poetry is multi-functional. The silence in "The Northern Ireland Question" is fundamental, therefore of at most importance, as well as eloquent, since it expresses what the

word cannot express; it tells far more than the word can. In the silence between the two stanzas:

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

It does not merely suggest that the car-bomb exploding and shattering the innocent, darling girls into pieces and the confusion following that and their families' distress. It also implies the whole of the Northern Irish and so the whole Irish question with its unhappy history; it includes all the other Irish political themes developed in such poems as "Hitchhiker", "Hunger Striker" and *Siege!* Thousands of words could not express all these to the poet's satisfaction. If words and sounds are not enough, silence is the only means which can in itself be a technique. The silence created by the question mark at the end is unfathomable. When Hamlet has says, "The rest is silence", he feels optimistic. He is certain that Fortinbrass will take over his office as the king of Denmark and that Horatio will tell the truth about the tragedy both of himself and the Danish court. The silence brought about by Hamlet is pregnant with order and peace. But the vast silence at the end of "The Northern Ireland Question" is filled with a mixture of the most profound emotions, mostly of frustration, fear, anger and even despair.

Desmond Eagan talks of "modern writing" which "at its best has taken on the character of a dialogue with despair". His own poems, and especially "The Northern Ireland Question" are "more public, more brutal (eschewing literary niceties), more experimental and more purely emotional" (*Metaphor* 58). "The Northern Ireland Question" is also "a direct consequence" arisen from the sense of responsibility and identity of an Irishman who is a poet.

III. Response (Egan)

The technical expertise of this Commentary opens a whole new, unexplored, perspective on modern poetry (and, by implication, on modern art in general) : the concept of submerged technique.

The old poetic forms will no longer suit the purposes of an altered consciousness; they are not fluid enough to accommodate a modern sense of chaos rather than of order; of search rather than a satisfaction; of doubt rather than of belief,

I can't go on. I must go on. I go on.

— tying in with another Beckett perception:

No matter. Fail again. Fail better.

This is not despair. Nietzsche was right when he affirmed, in *The Will to Power*: "There is no such thing as pessimistic art. Art affirms."

Was Hopkins in despair because many of his greater poems battle with the mystery of evil, of doubt? Is it not more life-affirming to try to come to grips with the cancer which is part of the human condition—an overwhelming part—than to trip thoughtlessly through the daisies, ears deaf to the quiet scream of humanity, thrown into a tragic situation which it cannot understand but must somehow face? Would Hopkins have been greater, more nourishing, more necessary for us who depend on art and the artist to help us understand things a little more—if he had confined himself to writing rural ditties or pietistic poems with easy moralising? Why was his diction, his technique, so complex? It was because he was trying to grapple honestly with the changing master preoccupations of his age, mirrored in himself:

Plainly if it is possible to express a subtle and recondite thought on a subtle and recondite subject in a subtle and recondite way and with great felicity and perfection, in the end, something must be sacrificed, with so trying a task, in the process, and this may be the being at once, nay perhaps the being without explanation at all, intelligible (Letter to Bridges, Nov.6 1887)

The complications of living take a new turn in every age and each must grapple for a vocabulary to deal with them. The artist is not the one who can fully understand things but who can give them a voice, say them, nevertheless. Most people, educated on the great writing of the past, and on the implications of such, tend to live in the past. Van Gogh reaches his biggest and most appreciative audience 100 years after he has died penniless. He has lived so completely in his time that it has taken the world a century to catch up with his present.

So: the writer, the poet, must wrestle with words, trying to push them to express something that has never been understood before. Because of the profound confusions deriving from the awfulness of the 20th century, it has become more difficult perhaps than ever before to mirror the emerging consciousness of an age convulsed by doubt, by disillusion, by a temptation to a sense of meaninglessness.

The Shimane approach draws our attention to the fact that technique is as crucial as ever in grasping the nettle of existence—but it is less obvious. Not that it hides itself, or must: just that it must fit itself to a different sense of reality. When the times do not rhyme, then neither can poetry—which, after all in exploring all the resources of language, must effect some kind of mimesis, some correspondence between word and deed: a new rhythm.

Part of my own search—since all experimentation, so crucially a part of real artistic endeavour, is an awareness of an other barely glimpsed—has involved rejection of conventional punctuation. It has also led to the technique described by Hugh Kenner as the “fractal”, a parallel voicing in counterpoint to the first.²

Shimane does us all a service in adverting to the less obvious but real subtleties of modern poetics; and in his highlighting the impulse towards such a submergence of technique in our confused time. The sunken cathedral.

(June 2000 in response to the chapter of commentary)

Notes

1 In the summer of 1999 I attended The International Hopkins Society Summer School held at Monastereven, Co. Kildare, planned and run by the poet Desmond Egan and his friends. Egan, the moving spirit of the Society, is a famous and leading Irish poet who began the Summer School 14 years ago “as G. M. Hopkins would have liked”. Monastereven is a place closely associated with Hopkins who would holiday there entertained by the Cassidys. The Summer School is a poetic (and artistic) festival where poets and eminent Hopkins scholars gather from all over the world and give lectures, poetic readings and engage in other artistic activities.

Egan and I share deep admiration for Hopkins and we have agreed to collaborate a writing on Egan’s poems in which I as the critic analyse them and he as the poet provides commentary on my criticism on his poems. In doing so I intend to try my criticism—how valid and invalid it is in the poet’s eye—and Egan has an opportunity to talk of his own poems.

This had been my long-standing wish: to comment on poets’ works and be in turn commented on by them. Such an attempt, both Egan and I hope, will provide a new stimulus to poetic study and open a new vista for it.

2 Although in his original “response” Egan explains in detail his own technical invention, the “parallel voicing in counterpoint” or “parallel text” in a poem, I have had to cut the explanation, since this technique is not used in “The Northern Ireland Question”. It will be treated duly in our essay on a poem, such as “SNOW SNOW SNOW SNOW”, which has it.

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