

Desmond Egan's "SNOW SNOW SNOW SNOW"

Analysis by Kunio Shimane, Nagoya City University

Commentary by Desmond Egan, Co. Kildare, Ireland

I. The Poet Talks of the Poem (Egan)

Seeing Double, published in 1983, contained "SNOW SNOW SNOW SNOW". My wife (since August 13, 1981) and I were living in a small country cottage in the wilds of Kildare. Some snow had fallen that winter and, driving in to teach in Newbridge College one January morning, I passed through a quiet silent, countryside covered in snow. I have always been a lover of Russian writing and was reading some of its war poetry (in translation) at the time; now our own snowy landscape made me think of Russia and then of its poets. No, not of *Doctor Zhivago* and Pasternak: for some reason, he would not be a favourite and *Zhivago* is one of the few novels which I started and could not finish..... but I thought of poor Osip Mandelstam trudging shivering through such a bleak and freezing world to die in 1938 en route to a Siberian Gulag to which he had been condemned for some satirical lines he wrote about Stalin.

In fact I had been so moved by the two memoirs of his wife, Nadesha, that I had autographed an earlier Collection of mine and sent it to her, via her English publisher—only to have the book returned with a note that she had just died. My reading of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*—all three volumes—had further reinforced my hatred of Communism, even as it made me admire Russian spirituality more than ever, and the great Russian soul.

On top of all this, there was a feeling of human vulnerability and of love: all poems touch some personal chord and take energy there. A poem is a feeling, given voice— and a feeling, as we know, is something very complex: it includes not only thinking but also the imagination, memory, the objective and the terribly personal.

What began in Russia ended up as a love poem, one which is very dear to me and in which I can still re-live that time and those people, now twenty years stranger.

I do not have the manuscripts of the poem, its various drafts—they are in the collection of Georgetown University Library, USA—but I know that I wrote the basic outline fairly quickly and would then have worked on this for about another six drafts, omitting and trying to allow the the core to merge in a fresh and (this is the problem) spontaneous way.

The title may be read in various ways (I like that) and the poem remains one of my own favourites.

II. The Critic Analyzes the Poem (Shimane)

1

Desmond Egan is innovative. He has been experimenting with poetic forms and techniques. He does not believe in traditional techniques nor metres and, therefore he has to experiment. He has established his own style which is so different from traditional poetic styles that the reader is either baffled away or feels challenged. In either case the reader often feels something urgent and inevitable about his poetry. His poetic style and themes suggest something urgent and peculiar to our time, just like T.S. Eliot has told and warned of the greatest spiritual and cultural crisis of the modern world in *The Waste Land*. This kind of poetry had been unthinkable before the great war and in the Victorian Era, but a hint was there which had been implied, though implicit, by Thomas Gray in his *Elegy* and by Matthew Arnold in his 'Dover Beach'. Gray suggested his uneasiness about the coming of a new age in a traditional style, while Arnold his melancholy in a new style.

To write *The Waste Land* Eliot abandoned the poetic stanza and adopted the irregular verse paragraph to convey the uneasiness and anxiety of modern man whose spiritual foundation was completely shaken by the unprecedented war and the revolutionary development of technology and industry which was the direct continuation of the Industrial Revolution. Eliot however endeavoured to return to the most traditional European value, Christianity, and presented an answer.

We have had to undergo yet another world war far larger in scale and far more devastating. Human life has been changing at an unparalleled speed and our age demands appropriate forms and contents of literature. To respond to this demand, Egan maintains, the poet

must discover a *raison d'être* — 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, . . . How could one adapt traditional structures ?(*Metaphor* 55).

He continues:

Though writing is a solitary occupation, the writer has never before been so utterly alone, in a waste land of uncertainties, unnourished by the old confidences. The poet must create his/her own new order, discover a new form . . . and do so for each poem (*Ibid.* 56).

Since the poet has to explore the unknown territory of poetic composition, the reader can no longer cling to his limited knowledge of old, traditional poetry as was taught at school. He has to face the new poetry and struggle with it, to find new meanings and enjoyment. He has to try to discover new techniques which have hitherto been unknown. To read Desmond Egan requires him this kind of effort. To read his 'The Northern Ireland Question' is not similar to reading Tennyson's *The Lady of Sharlott* (I never undervalue Tennyson; *The Lady of Sharlott* is in my view of phonaesthetics one of the perfect poems in English Literature). Reading 'Snow Snow Snow Snow' is equally as taxing as reading 'The Northern Ireland Question'.

2

One of the most obvious features of Egan's style is the absence of punctuation marks. A glimpse at any line or stanza of his poetry shows it, as in the first stanza (main text alone) and even the very title of 'Snow Snow Snow Snow':

like some obvious symbol, snow
overnight had sifted everywhere
startling the mind's eye into seeing again
the field forms the gentle hills of Kildare hills
and even a bruised sky with its line
of Russian pines — the whole thing
a steppes[sic] where I began to watch
Mandelstam trudging to death camp

Whether he was influenced to abandon punctuation by someone else such as Joyce or Beckett does not interest me. Punctuation is an element that a writer treats seriously in creating his own style. A great writer is meticulously concerned with it. Perhaps an absurd exception is Dylan Thomas whose punctuation is often so erratic that the reader has to correct it in his mind to understand his poems or, conversely, to do it according to the meaning of the line. The poet Anthony Thwaite points out his 'anarchic punctuation' which is 'a central trouble in many of Thomas's poems'(Thwaite 104). Although each mark has no lexical meaning, punctuation is, needless to say, as important as the word (Shimane 89-90). No writer nor reader can afford to be careless about it.

There must be a definite reason for Egan to abolish punctuation marks in his poems. Basically, however, it is not difficult to infer it from his style. Besides trying to part from the traditional poetic style and create a style suitable for our age, the poet obviously takes poetry for a genre of speech in its scholarly--i.e. linguistic and phonetic sense which also includes writing and non-verbal behaviour. In essence poetry is a speech art, not a writing art. Egan's enthusiasm for reciting poems both of his own and others tells of this clearly. His reading, as his tapes and videos testify, is masterly. Unlike Dylan Thomas' reading of his own poetry and Milton's *Paradise Lost* in a perfect Received Pronunciation, Egan is confident in his reading in his own Irish Midland pronunciation. Poetry existed before man acquired the art of writing and has a long oral tradition independent of writing; it is in the modern times, probably since the 19th century when printed books became so cheaply available that the oral tradition declined quickly. Precisely because of this Hopkins urged his friends to read his poems aloud.

In our time it is still maintained, though not so strongly, as many poets think it vital to compose orally and recite their poetry; many of them are expert readers like Dylan Thomas and Desmond Egan. It is interesting and important to realize that lines and expressions they compose with the ear are quite liable to become telling to the reader's ear with various phonetic and, therefore, poetic effects which escape quite often in reading with the eye. Through their auditory faculty, poets automatically shape expressions and lines; it is so automatic and, as it were, instinctive, they are not usually conscious of the mechanism of effect. Poets who are competent linguists or phoneticians are a rarity; Shakespeare and Keats are not; though richly gifted, they are not scholars. Milton, Thomas Grey and G. M. Hopkins were exceptions. What is common to all great poets is their exceptionally sensitive hearing and ability to create great expressions and lines. Egan's aural sense has hammered out such an effective expression as *two wee girls* (Shimane and Egan).

Now treating poetry as speech, Egan must have come to a realization as well as

resolution that no punctuation mark can be applied to it. How could one apply it in an actual speech which is not writing? It is useful only in writing. In speech punctuation is signaled by rhythm, intonation, prominence, pause and other phonetic phenomena by means of which the listener applies marks mentally. This is a natural 'speech-punctuation'. To understand his poetry it is ideal to listen to the poet's own reading. When it is not possible to hear the poet's voice, his writing is the next most reliable means. I do not maintain that writing is the poem itself; rather it is a means of recording it. A written poem must be transformed back to the original piece of speech art in order to be analysed and interpreted. In essence poetry, like music, is an art in sounds in time; it cannot realize itself without time; only poetry is linguistic. We read the title of the poem, 'Snow Snow Snow Snow', mentally supplying commas: "Snow, Snow, Snow, Snow". This is the usual, grammatical reading. Likewise the first line should be:

Like some obvious symbol, snow
Overnight had sifted everywhere.

The exception to the absence of punctuation in Egan's poetry is the question mark which should naturally be indicated in writing by the use of inversion or interrogative pronouns, as he does in this and other poems: 'so what can I do?' The other marks are more indispensable for correct reading than the question mark but it is treated as an exception in his poetry.

Deftly treated—i.e. well calculated, punctuation marks just like words are capable of producing great effects—from change of meaning to that of feeling. The presence and absence of a comma after 'still' in the very first line of Keats' famous 'Ode on a Grecian Urn':

Thou still unravished bride of time,

changes the meaning of this word, which affects seriously the reading of the whole poem. This is reminiscent of a famous line in *Macbeth*:

this my Hand will rather
The multitudinous Seas incarnadine,
Making the Greene one, Red.

(II. ii)

The comma after 'one' in this *First Folio* reading is now removed in recent editions; the reader mentally then places one after 'Greene' according to the meaning of the line. The intonation drops here and rises with 'one'. The absence of a punctuation mark is equally significant as the presence which is the usual object of interpretation; it can be an effective poetic technique. The reader is likely to feel something extraordinary when he encounters such lines as follows in a poem in which punctuation marks are extra-carefully used (or not used):

When drop-of-blood-and-foam-dapple
Bloom lights the orchard-apple
And thicket and thorp are merry
With silver-surfed cherry

And azuring-over greybell makes
Wood banks and brakes wash wet like lakes
And magic cuckoocall

(Hopkins. *The May Magnificat*)

To contrast this, the next line rings with the staccato of the 'magic cuckoocall' which

Caps, clears, and clinches all—

On the other hand in a poem where no punctuation is the usual practice, one should be particularly careful to discover hidden effects produced by the absence. They are buried like white sheep in the snow. So again we should think about the title; why is 'Snow Snow Snow Snow' without commas and 'Snow' repeats as many as four times? Simply because the poet has wanted to indicate the incessant continuation without interruption—by means of commas —of snow-fall and the wideness of the area on which it falls— 'everywhere':

snow

overnight had sifted *everywhere*.

Thus the familiar landscape, 'the gentle hills of Kildare' and other parts have been

transformed to startle the poet's *mind's eye*; and the snowfall is swift, continual, heavy and uniform 'like some obvious symbol'. In his imagination he sees a Russian steppe where the poet 'Mandelstam trudging to death camp'.

The complete absence of punctuation except for the question mark is multiple in effect and one of its effects is similar to the one produced by means of the repetition of the ever-active gerund--the verb ending in *-ing* in Bridges' 'London Snow':

When men were all asleep the snow came *falling*
In large white flakes *falling* on the city brown,
Stealthily and perpetually *settling* and loosely *lying*,
Hushing the latest traffic of the drowsy town;
Deadening, muffling, stifling its murmurs *failing*;
Lazily and incessantly *floating* down and down:
 Silently *sifting* and *veiling* road, roof and *railing*;
Hiding difference, *making* unevenness even,
Into angles and crevices softly *drifting* and *sailing*.

Here the application of punctuation is careful and grammatical; it is no less noteworthy than Egan's practice of applying no mark. Together with the punctuation, the repetition of the gerunds indicates an 'incessant' and 'perpetual' snowfall over the wide London, though at times it changes its tempo suggested by the careful application of commas.

While the snow in London 'muffles' and 'hushes' the noises including the 'latest traffic', the snow in Kildare softens and blurs the shapes and lines and boundaries of things in nature. It does more than this; the snow 'dulls' in one's senses the demarcation in time between past, present and future:

we the ordinary go--at allow too much
to go dulling past as if screened.

In this snow the three dimensions of time have merged into timeless eternity. Thus everything physical and metaphysical including one's memory blurs its outline and boundary and melts into eternity. This blurring effect is strengthened by the absence of punctuation, though it makes some lines ambiguous in meaning.

Yet there remains one thing sharply clear and definite, resisting to be blurred and

included in the broad and profound eternity -- the poet's sensitivity and tenderness which exists at the base of his instinct groping for new verse:

Is this the despairing chase of verse?
that handful of pianonotes which can
sink inwards like hot ashes or the old
desolating rush of tenderness squeezing to
tears at some subtitled film?

In the comprehensive and oblivious snow his instinct alone sharpens. He can do nothing--'nada'--about 'the snow dazzling into the kitchen', which has begun to be included into eternity. The absence of punctuation implies nothing but the smooth, steady snow fall which is continuing without interruption.

3

In 'Snow Snow Snow Snow' exists another major technique: the use of the open syllable. An open syllable itself is not a technique but is capable of producing effects undreamt of. An open syllable is a word or syllable which ends in a vowel--e.g. *tea*, *day*, *pure*. The English vocabulary being essentially closed syllabic(--i.e. of words ending in a consonant or consonants, such as *book*, *desk*), the rate of open syllables is very low. A glance at a newspaper report or a magazine page can readily show this. The open syllable can be so used as to produce great effects. In his 'Ode to a Nightingale' Keats' auditory sense has realised an extraordinary effect of the echoing of the song of the 'immortal bird' mainly through 'away' and 'adieu'. A reader who cannot feel in the following line that something extra in addition to the mere meaning is a poor reader:

Away! away! for I will fly to thee.

The concentration of open syllabics in this short line is just extraordinary. This line, especially the repetition of 'away', echoes to 'adieu's in the last stanza. These 'adieu's in turn echo those uttered by the ghost of Hamlet:

Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me (I.v.).

It is precisely because of the nature of the vowel at the end of the word, that the open syllable is capable of creating a sense of continuation or echoing according to the manners in which it is used. This does not necessarily mean that the vowel alone can produce the effect of continuation, for the consonant other than plosives (such as *p, b, t, d, k, g*) can do this also. Rather in many cases the consonant has a very long duration at the end of the word. For example, *s* in *ships* is much longer than one usually expects; *l* in *bell* is also long. So we have to take into consideration, in addition to duration, loudness or prominence of the sound. Under the same conditions the vowel is greater in loudness or prominence. This is the phonetic basis for the effect of the open syllable. A sensitive ear can perceive it in such ingenious lines as above and in:

*Be beginning to despair, to despair,
Despair, despair, despair, despair.*

Spare!

There is one, yes I have one (Hush there!)

(Hopkins. 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo')

Undoubtedly this is one of the most striking examples of echoes created through open syllables in English poetry. Especially the most natural transition from *despair* to *Spare* cannot but impress even mediocre readers. It is utterly ludicrous to regard this masterpiece of Hopkins as a mere jingle. The echoes above signify the transformation of mortal beauty to immortal beauty. 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo' is an ideal epitome of Hopkins' theory of poetry (Shimane 180-200). Naturally, the echoing effect is best manifested when the same open syllables are repeated as in the examples above.

So much for the effect of echoing through the open syllable. There is another important effect that it realizes: a sense of continuation. An ideal example is in *Macbeth*:

*Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time.*

(V. v)

Here the repetitions of 'tomorrow's and 'day's should not be interpreted as echoes but a continuation of time to the end of human history, which signifies nothing now to the

protagonist. Shakespeare, as in this example, often makes use of quite simple and obvious techniques to produce profound effects.

At the end of the colossal epic of the angelic rebellion and the original human disobedience, Adam and Eve lose the Garden. At the very end of the last book Milton uses open syllables to imply their long, hard journey in the wilderness waiting for them ahead:

They hand in hand with wandering steps and *slow*
Through Eden took *their solitary* way.

Paradise Lost is an epic which owes much to the fact that the poet was blind—his 'day denied'; his auditory sense became much sharper to compensate for his blindness. Reading it, reading aloud especially, convinces one of this. The oral composition must have been Milton's greatest pleasure both sensuous as well as intellectual. Both to him and his reader it is a grand angelic symphony.

So far this has been a bare essential of the phonetic nature of the open syllable and an analysis of typical examples in English poetry. These examples convince us of the capability of a phonetic phenomenon not only to support but also to enhance the meaning of the lines; this is a fusion between sound and sense. Great poets bring about this fusion.

Now we cannot overlook the effect of the same technique in Egan's 'Snow Snow Snow Snow'. It begins with the title itself and continues to the very end. The title is not only mere repetition of a word but one also of an open syllable, 'snow'. This is not an echo but a continuation as well as heaviness and expansion. About this point it would be interesting that in Egan's pronunciation, as in the usual Irish, the vowel of 'snow' is not a diphthong as in the RP but a long vowel [o:], which helps to suggest a sense of continuation. It continues:

like some obvious symbol *snow*
overnight had sifted *everywhere*

In Egan's pronunciation 'everywhere' has a slight retroflex-*r*, which is quite similar to that in common American pronunciation. But in his pronunciation it is very mild and does not hamper the effect of the open syllable. In fact it is so mild as to sound like another vowel. Yet it acts like a consonant in an expression like 'the small *tear over* a spring' ('Goodbye Old Fiat') as, though very delicately, it becomes a 'linking-*r*' between *tear, over* and *a*. The 'linking-*r*' is a distinct feature of the RP. The effect of continuation goes on

through 'Kildare', 'sky', 'day', 'way', 'away', 'ordinary', 'tomorrow', '*nada*', 'briefly', 'mirror' and others. It continues to the final 'eternity':

so what can *I do?* *nada*
about the *snow* dazzling *into* the kitchen
and round *your* softness *where* you stand
briefly dabbing at the *mirror*
this that *eternity*.

In 'eternity', 'this' and 'that' have no distinction in meaning as they are the same and one in it. The snow has brought about one moment of eternity. Eternity has no time. Curiously enough it nevertheless goes on, because of the final vowel in the word. This continuation is strongly supported by the absence of punctuation which, if it existed, would inevitably hinder its smoothness. In this moment of eternity the couple experiences their love.

4

When he met Samuel Beckett in 1984, Egan discussed with the shy but 'the most intensely studied writer of our time'(Egan 106) many things among which was Egan's poetry. Egan remembers that:

now we briefly discussed the experiment in it [*Seeing Double*, a collection of his poems] of paralleling two columns of verse on the one page, each impinge on the other. As analogy I referred to some of the portraits of Francis Bacon--another Dubliner. Becket listened with interest. (*Metaphor* 105).

Although he 'listened with interest', what Becket commented on Egan's experiment, Egan does not note. Egan defines it as similar to counter-point in music; it was an important device especially in Baroque music and is used in varied forms in Jazz. It is "original to Egan and first found in the volume *Seeing Double*, [and] is the employment in the right-hand margin of a sub-text, which interacts with the main text in a variety of ways: 'as parallel to counter-point, as parody or homage to the main poem'" (Arkins 9). To cite an example from 'Snow Snow Snow Snow':

like some obvious symbol snow

unseeable lapwing

overnight had sifted everywhere

mews of distance and

startling the mind's eye into seeing again

otherness

the field forms the gentle hill of Kildare

To introduce the notion of counter-point into English poetry is very rare but not without precedence. Already in the nineteenth century G. M. Hopkins used it in his rhythm. This is evident in his definition of the rhythms of several poems. The definition of the rhythm for 'God's Grandeur' reads: 'Standard rhythm *counterpointed*'. He actually invented a mark for counterpoint and applied it in his manuscripts. Here we have to bear in mind that Hopkins' counterpoint was used solely for rhythm--the interaction between stresses.

From the point of view of phonetics Egan's device is incomparably more complex than Hopkin's counterpoint, as it is the interaction between lines consisting of syllables which are not few in most cases. In other words it is a counterpoint between expressions and even sentences and not between mere syllables. The reader or listener is required not only to listen to the rhythm and intonation but also to understand the meanings of the sentences or expressions impinging on each other. Just compare Hopkins and Egan:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

('God' Grandeur')

and even a bruised sky with its line

they leave you at the very swell

of Russian pines the whole thing

swell

a steppes[sic] where I began to watch

('Snow Snow Snow Snow')

In the above example Hopkins' counterpoint occurs within only four syllables--three words. This is so simple as not to affect the hearing of the reader nor his understanding of the line.

But Egan's is quite a different matter. As I have mentioned above, it is far more complex than Hopkins' whose counterpoint does not counteract the text. Both poets' counterpoints denote almost entirely different devices under the same name. Egan is quite original in his own device. But here arises a question: Is the human ear able to listen to and understand the two texts going on simultaneously? When they are pronounced, could he listen to them both?

Still it contributes to the poem. I am not certain if the poet thought that just main poetic text is a solo as in music—either a solo singing or playing of an instrument—and tried to attain similar effects produced by the combination of different singers or instruments or a singer supported by the accompaniment. In music the combination can achieve great effects. I think that as a lover of music, especially Jazz, Egan knew the effect and experimented with it in his poetry. Like in music here is a certain interplay between the two texts—the sub-text featuring the main text; the listener has to pay more attention to the main text than when listening to only one text.

This has been an exposition of the interplay solely from the point of view of phonetics and based on an actual hearing of a recorded tape. It is a technique necessary for Egan's ultra-modern poetry. Naturally a quite different view is possible.

For all this snow goes on falling. One can do nothing-- '*nada*—about the snow' and 'this that eternity' which goes on.

III. What the Poet Thinks of the Analysis (Egan)

Firstly, I am impressed, once again, by Professor Shimanen's choice of poem for analysis. 'Snow Snow Snow Snow' is, I believe, one of my most ambitious and complex poems and I have continued to like it over the twenty years since it was written, and to read it from time to time at public readings.

Specifically : I am honoured that Shimane has chosen to emphasise the phonaesthetics of my poem. Sound is always crucial to me—and its accompanying rhythm. If I come back in another life, it might well be as a musician (but one innings will do, thank you); even as I write, I am nourished by some music on my cd player. Many years ago, on Inis Mean (one of the Aran Islands) I made the discovery that I could hardly live without music and, in its total absence just then, fell to playing a mouth organ in the boarding house where I was lodged.

Like the Professor, I also admire this aspect of Tenyson's poetry; I know several poems of his by heart including all of 'The Lady of Shalott', which I love; it does indeed approach perfection as a poem—not only phonetically but in many other ways too: the

symbolism runs deep. To be compared, however fleetingly with Tenyson is a great honour,

Sunset and evening star
And one clear call for me
And may there be no moaning of the bar
When I set out to sea.....

--now there is perfection, both inviting and defying analysis.

* * *

The absence of punctuation in my poetry has excited derision, bafflement and frustration over the years. Why can I not punctuate? In prose I am a stickler for all the nuances of punctuation but in poetry I simply cannot employ any. This is not a conscious decision on my part, some program I set for myself; a cerebral position. No: I simply discovered that in writing poetry I cannot use punctuation marks. Why? Perhaps your guess is as good as mine. I can only suggest that I have unconsciously noted the example of Classical Greek, where punctuation impinges very little. Or I may have wished for a fluidity of rhythm akin to that of life itself, which offers no commas or capitals and only one full stop (which may be dispensed-with). As Heraclitus reminds us,

(Everything flows and nothing remains)

Then again, Japanese minimalism may have added something: why use what you do not need? Less is usually more. Hopkins's own 'sprung rhythm' may also have influenced me--although he, of course, did not avoid punctuation. My position here has afforded me much effort and no little torment over the years, as I try to make do without commas, colons, semi-colons and stops-- and even, mostly, without question marks. Initially I did not use capital letters even for proper names but increasingly found this distracting and decided to compromise--if compromise it is--in that regard.

Of course my method has its compensations: a creative ambiguity for example, where a phrase or word may refer both back and forward at the same time; and a fluidity which I like and even need.

The first review which appeared of *Midland* in 1972, though favourable, suggested that I throw away my e.e. cummings book. In fact, I would swear I had never to my

conscious knowledge read a single line of cummings then--and the review sent me scurrying to see what he was up to. It now strikes me that the real question is not that of influence (in this case: none at all) but the consideration: why should a poet --cummings or Egan--write this way. I met the same kind of response in 1983, when experimenting with parallel voicings within a poem: what Hugh Kenner has christened 'fractals', taking the term from Gleich's Chaos theory. The real problem here stems from a lack of informed literary criticism; a glaring one in contemporary Ireland, where a sophisticated critical consensus can hardly be said to exist.

By the way neither Joyce nor Beckett influenced me in my writing style; nor Emily Dickinson either.

Another point suggests itself now. All art worthy of the name represents, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, 'a fresh raid on the inarticulate' i. e. a search to find a new way of forming a new experience. Implicit here is the assumption of some level of experimentation, dictated by the need to put words on the hitherto wordless. Any artist worthy of the name, in any of the arts, exhibits in his/her works some level of experimentation in the effort to achieve spontaneity of expression. In music, for example, I value such an element highly and consider anything wholly bound by tradition less interesting, if not dead. I enjoy and am certainly influenced by the element of improvisation in Traditional Irish music and of course in Jazz--but equally so in Sculpture and in Painting etc. If we feel it new, we will make it new--as Ezra Pound suggested we ought. Conversely writing (especially) which is too bound by the conventions of the past, without their rationale, holds little if any interest for me.

This leads to the whole question of rhyme and prosody--related topics--I shall content myself with saying that if the times do not rhyme, then neither should poetry, and to try to express a feeling within the straitjacket (now) of a past with a different rhythm of living and a different sense of things, is a mark of insensitivity--the very opposite of what one might expect from real poetry.

Professor Shimane makes an incisive comment in suggesting that I treat words as speech rather than a written entity. I am not sure that any poet can disregard the need to compose aloud (in his mind) since words are sounds, as Basil Bunting reminds us. Are a kind of music, I would add.

I also admire Shimane's insight that the lack of obvious punctuation 'can produce hidden effects'. Here he exhibits, once again, the respect and persistence of a true critical intelligence. One good critic is better than a hundred bad poets.

May I add that in a poem the line itself offers crucial punctuation and I get upset

when any of my hard-earned lines are broken in a written commentary—a mistake which Kunio Shimane never makes.

* * *

The Professor has some penetrating things to say about my use of the open syllable, one ending in a vowel-sound. I have always tried to make the words of a poem (if it is a poem) relate to or if possible even mime what is happening in the poem. Shimane does me a great service by adverting to this and analysing it so authoritatively—but I must again point out that my instinct rather than my brain calls the shots here. A poem should explore and exploit all that language has to offer— and yet do so instinctively with a certain spontaneity of response. That said, I value Shamne's incisive analysis of the bricks and mortar of a poem. Technique flourishes when a strong emotion is pressuring its way into words: finally, matter and form are part of the same impulse.

My pronunciation of 'everywhere'—as of so much else—is at root a Midland Irish one, I believe, rather than an American: I treasure accent and know that my own marks me as someone from the Irish Midlands where I have always lived.

Samuel Beckett offered no comment on my 'fractal' experiment but it intrigued him. He was very polite and respectful—a true gentleman in the Newman sense. He was also good fun and good company; since his death, I have avoided a Paris turned empty on me.....

May I say, regarding the notion of counterpoint in poetry, that my experimentation in this area differs completely from the Hopkins counterpointing. His had to do mainly with sound; mine almost totally with meaning. When someone reads one of my multi-voiced poems with me, I always advise the person not to worry about relating lines (and therefore, sounds) as we read. My interest lies in the complexity of utterance, of response— and the Professor quite rightly reaches that conclusion when he suggests that with Hopkins 'almost entirely different devices' are in question.

Hugh Kenner is quoted as saying that such a mix of lines is 'literally unutterable'— but Kenner revised his opinion on hearing a performance and in fact several times read a column with me in public readings. He was impressed by the effect and by the audience appreciation of it: you will see some of this in his interview on the documentary video on D[esmond] E[gan], which was made in U. S. A. (directed by John Hunter) in 1998. A good part of my technique is dramatic and can best be appreciated in live performance. Who can follow two lines at once? Well they are not totally simultaneous—and, any way, who could claim to take in all that happens in a musical quartet or in a Jazz group, or orchestra?

Yet things do (or should) come together to create a single impact.

All the Shimane commentary on the musical parallels in this area are fascinating and deeply insightful: I have even learned a few things myself!

Desmond Egan
September 2001

Works Cited

- Arkins, Brian. *Desmond Egan: A Critical Study*. Little Rock, U.S.A.: Milestone Press. 1992.
- Egan, D. *Selected Poems*. Nebraska: Creighton University Press, 1992.
- *The Death of Metaphor*. Buckinghamshire: Gerrards Cross and Kildare: The Kavanagh Press. 1990.
- *Desmond Egan: Poet's Choice Selected and Read by Himself*. Kildare, Ireland: The Kavanagh Press. (Recorded Tape with No date).
- G. M. Hopkins. *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Ed. N. H. MacKenzie. Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1990.
- Shimane, K. *The Poetry of G. M. Hopkins: The Fusing Point of Sound and Sense*. Tokyo: Hokusiedo Press. 1983.
- Shimane and Egan. 'D. Egan's "The Northern Ireland Question"', *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.xix. Nagoya City University. 2001).
- Thwaite, Anthony. *Essays on Contemporary English Poetry: Hopkins to the Present Day*. Tokyo: Kenkyusha Ltd. 1957.