

Desmond Egan: "Needing the Sea": A Poem of Contrasts

Analysis by Kunio Shimane

Commentary by Desmond Egan

I. The Poet Talks of his Poem (Egan):

I was bred, born and reared in the midland town of Athlone; did not really leave it until my mid twenties--and then only to live in other midland places (Mullingar, Naven) before finally settling in the hinterland of Country Kildare. Strangely, though very much a 'townie' in my upbringing--as witness my Collection, *Athlone* (1980)--I now wished only to live in the country; and did, first on one side and then on the other, of Newbridge town. When I look out my study window as I write, I can see no house but trees and greenery and fields. Rurality has claimed me. All summer long, I eat most of my meals at our table outdoors, with flowers, leaves, birds, the sky, the sun itself in attendance. I love it--and can understand why some Japanese painters spend a lifetime focused on painging a small part of the astonishing richness of the natural world: Cherryblossoms, for example. The only way to see the world, I now realise, is in a grain of sand.

Occasionally, even in the middle of all this plenty, one can miss the sea. What the sea is and what it can do to us when we experience it.

It was in such a mood--a wish to confront and be confronted by its power and immensity; its hint of eternity--that I set off from my midland and looking for that humbling, liberating, presence. Who can feel proud or important when faced by the sea? It is a glimpse of beauty, terror, tragedy, human limitationas cathartic as any work of art, though it moves at a different level and one must never forget that.

One day I had such an urge to face the sea that I just got in my car and drove until I came to it, on the East coast, south of Dublin. I was not observing for the sake of observing; nor hunting a theme, looking for poetry--fodder. One should never set out to write in that journalistic frame of mind because the result will be journalistic, self-conscious and aimed at an audience instead of at the experience. I have suggested elsewhere that in the act of writing poetry there is no room for a focused awareness of audience--no, not even for the audience of oneself. The element of discovery (and therefore of the spontaneous) is crucial for the artistic impulse.

My confrontation on this particular occasion led to such a rush of feelings that I found

myself writing 'Needing the Sea'. Critics have suggested that it is representative of my best work; it may be the poem by which I will be remembered. If indeed--as the waves remind me--I am remembered at all.

II. Critic Analyses the Poem (Shimane):

1

"Needing the Sea" is a strangely soothing and tranquil poem despite the fact that there are a few different kinds of contrasts in content as well as in description. They are arranged to pose a whole balance in the poem.

There are contrasts in nature: nature's course and geography:

in September maybe most that time
When the earth begins to take over again
something in my gets bogged down and
cries out for the grace of water.

"In early autumn, in the month of September" in "the Irish Midland is when the flowering of summer has come to an end," and "when falling leaves herald the bareness of winter, . . ." (Arkins 14). This fast fading of summer may not be fully sensed at places south of Ireland. September in the Irish Midland is contrasted with its June when:

green shadow
closed each side
of this other world
where everything teemed
mile upon mile of
profusion struggling
like the lost--

("Tunnels of June")

September anticipates the coming of long winter which "the earth begins to take over again" from lush green and flowers; this suggests decline of life towards death, one's life "cries out for the grace of water", the source of life. It is the sea which grows life and

"the grace of water" will restore the vigour of life as well as wash away the mire of the bog. When one feels "bogged down" and things do not go so well as one wishes, it is a wonderful change to go to sea and bathe in it.

Here the expression "the grace of water" is memorable in sound effect let alone in imagery. The initial sounds of *grace* and *water* have much in common in articulation. But the vowels in stressed syllables are clearly contrasted in Egan's pronunciation of "grace" not with a diphthong("double vowel") but a long front vowel[e:] as commonly heard in Irish (and Scottish) accent and with a long back vowel[o:] [ɔ:] in "water" like the one in the RP and unlike a kind of front vowel heard in some types of American English. Another contrast exists between the two words: one between a closed syllable and an open syllable. Also noteworthy is the "r-colouring" of *water* in the pronunciation of the poet, which, though not prominent, is enough to produce the effect of a "liquid sound" to suggest the movements of water. They will be vividly described later in the poem. The sound of the expression "the grace of water", while symbolizing the contrasts in the structure of this poem, has a curiously comforting effect.

2

While feeling the "need of the sea", the poet is well aware of what is going on, the sad and cruel things, in the world. He has to look at the world in contrast to himself: the world full of violent and miserable happenings and himself engaged in creative but solitary work. This contrast is reminiscent of that which another poet, G. M. Hopkins, found:

Away in the lovable west,
On a pastoral forehead of Wales
I was under a roof here, I was at rest,
And they the prey of the gales.
(*The Wreck of the Deutschland*, 24)

"I"—i.e. the poet-- was leading a peaceful life studying theology in the last stage before ordination to be a Catholic priest at the Jesuit seminary of St. Beuno's, while the ocean liner the *Deutschland* near the mouth of the Thames at the Kentish Knock was wrecked in a snow storm with its passengers fighting with the "sea flint-flake", "God's cold" and "the sea-romp over the wreck". And here also is a poet practising poetic composition alone in the Irish Midland; he is aware keenly of the evil which is prosperous in

the world. No one does not have to remind the poet Egan:

about the countless whose lives are far from such luxury
about starvation and misery the latest holocaust
of those who never got a dog's chance.

In these lines the polysyllables "luxury", "starvation", "misery" and "holocaust" have come to assume a sense of gravity. Thinking of such worldwide misery of holocaust, torture and starvation, a petty pleasure of going to the seashore has become such a great luxury. There is a profound contrast between "luxury" and "misery".

Egan thinks it the poet's duty to face the realities of the world and express his opinions about them. Although working alone, as "writing is a solitary occupation" (*Metaphor* 56), he does not lead the life of an aloof, separated and disinterested poet. The very important fact is that he is an Irish man who witnesses daily the troubles going on in Northern Ireland which are at once political, racial and religious; they are part of his life. The strife going on in Northern Ireland is for him not a mere, distant happening but a daily reality. Naturally he cannot be indifferent to the political, racial and religious violence in other parts of the world. Writing of a Greek poet who protested the tortures performed by the Greek military government, Egan cannot but think of the "Northern Ireland Question":

Ritsos writes more directly . . . of what has happened to Greece--as anyone might expect who had read his *Romiosyne*, the political poem which first made him famous; so when he writes about a young girl [18] who had been tortured his anger makes itself strongly felt--and the restraint with which he expresses it, his tender invoking of mythological and Christian beliefs, only makes that anger all the more palpable. . . . Can any of the verse which has emerged from the troubles in Northern Ireland stand comparison with Ristos' in this Collection [of his poems]. Is there any "committed" poetry in contemporary Ireland, by this standard? If Ritsos were living in Northern Ireland what kind of verse would he be producing? (*Metaphor* 62-3).

Thus Egan believes part of the poet's role is to express disapproval of political brutality and injustice. He adds:

I cannot agree with Edna Longley that, poetry and politics, like church and state, should be separated. --as if, in some situations, such a choice existed. The example of Ritsos shows that there need not even be distinction between politics and poetry; or not always (*Metaphor* 64).

And in order to protest, "the poet should remain independent"(*Metaphor* 75). This stance of his as a poet is firm as well as indispensable, for it is part of the *raison d'être* of his poetry.

He naturally feels "what that hitcher from the North felt/as he watched the blaze of his cottage". The poet came across the "hitcher" one day and gave him a lift in his car:

The North was sitting beside me
outside Mullingar

his voice softly accepted awful things it held
too much like the traveling bag including
all that had happened yesterday his cottage
bombed
and smoking up into the Dungannon sky.

("Hitchhiker")

"He fished out three polaroid snaps" of which "one" was of the wife/shot accidentally dead at a bank at 25." The poet took him home, "gave him a dinner and few bob another/Southern lift out of town" "What could anyone do" with such dark violence of reality?

Misery and violence exist outside Ireland and the North also. It is almost a world wide phenomena. In his mind when writing poems, the poet

can hear the scream of
someone being carefully tortured while others
with their only life blindfolded face into
the high cement wall of one military or another
even the thought like that of Poland becomes
a kind of dying : [sic] . . .

Political and military violence have long existed but particularly after the fall of the Berlin wall, more conflicts have come to occur throughout the world. Of the political and military (as well as racial and religious, I believe) violence, what particularly concerns the poet is torture. The expression *someone being "carefully tortured"* has a chilling sound. What kind of torture is it which they execute "carefully"? It is "carefully" carried out in order to extract confession; it is also "carefully" performed as a secret from outside. Ritsos, the Greek poet depicts in a poem the profound fear of torture:

Now and then he assures himself he hasn't seen, doesn't know; he preserves the naturalness of his chin, his lips, eyes; he knots his tie tastefully before the mirror, puts the keys in his pocket, goes out, walks along -- doesn't look back at all ; he greets the passers-by. Yet he knows with a terrible certainty that behind the door, in the house, in the mirror, he has left behind, locked up, the same handsome, dark prisoner, and that, on his return, he will find his slippers somewhere else, and the three fluffy towels will be wet, tossed over the back of the chair (*Metaphor* 63).

Elsewhere Egan uses another abhorrent expression, "*refinements of torture*" (*Metaphor* 54)--another chilling wording which implies our civilization has brought forth a fearful advancement of the method and implement of torture. Also, a new word I have encountered reading Egan is *kneecap* to be used as a verb. In the following quotation cataloguing various kinds of torture, he uses it. 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 in a lunatic asylum (U. S. S. R.) ? Or where '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).

Evidently "to kneecap" is to shatter the kneecaps with a hammer. In "Hitchhiker" the

boss has sacked Jim, the "hitcher", whose wife was killed and who had to "farmed his daughter out to neighbours/along with the collie dog; his boss has "valued his *kneecaps* and house". Against this Jim has "no hard feelings". "What could anyone do?"

The poet hears the scream of despair in a world full of sad and heart-breaking things,— poverty, starvation, abortion and others—in addition to political injustice and violence. To think of them is to be full of sorrow and wrath.

3

The poet "needs the sea" and he

as if on strike soundlessly cries out
to come on it high above the road.

and he wants

to stand on that rock which tells no lies and
feel the grassgreen otherness making the mind reel.

Unlike the land on which there are so many troubles, the sea still retains the innocence, vigour and purity at the time of Creation. Washed constantly by the "grace of water", "that rock tells no lies". The sea is "grassgreen otherness" quite distant and different from the land, *distant* in a metaphorical sense. Egan often uses the rare Elizabethan word *otherness*, seeming to emphasise the meaning of "difference, distinctness". Here is an example of usage implying it: "mew of distance and *otherness*"("SNOW SNOW SNOW SNOW"). Not only feeling "the greengrass otherness" but also the poet sees

the wide slow gathering of a watershadow rising rising up into
the wash the rush the clatter spreading down a beach.

These lines, reminiscent of Hopkins, eloquently tells of the poets' keen observation of the wave; his eyes never fail to catch the movements of the waves rising and receding. They are constant in that they regularly come and go, but with infinite variety. They are not of the ever-constant, imaginary and even symbolic rhythm of Tennyson's:

Break, break, break,
On thy cold grey stones, O Sea!

Here the motion of the wave is uniform and controlled almost mechanically by means of the repetition and the perfectly regular metre. This is quite unlike the motion of the ocean in Hopkins' "The Sea and the Skylark":

the tide that ramps against the shore;
With a flood or a fall, low lull-off or all roar,
Frequenting there while moon shall wear and wend.

Behind these lines lie his countless observations of the waves of the sea as minutely and accurately recorded in his *Journals*. No less impressive is Egan's description of the waves in those lines which are backed by his keen observations of the ever changing shapes of the waves.

The wave, the running water of a brook, the cloud and the wind are the most difficult objects in nature to recapture in art--either poetry or painting. The poet or the painter has to perceive their inscapes and then re-create them. The painter may be satisfied to have succeeded in realising the inscape of the landscape he perceived on his canvas; he thus paints one moment of its shape and colours manifesting its inscape; by doing so he fixes it on his canvas. The poet on the other hand re-creates the inscape of the object he has caught in his language. His poetic composition is multi-dimensional as he tries to express what all his senses has captured. Also that language is his means of composition poses a nature essentially different from that of painting. His poem has to progress, develop and unfold itself in time. What the painter expresses in colour and shape, the poet expresses in imagery, rhythm and combinations of sounds. Thus when he tries to recollect and recapture the movements either of natural or artificial things, his language synchronises to depict them not at a moment but in a series of motions.

The kinetic imagery of the waves in Egan is a result of his expertise which has been accomplished by means of the combination of various kinds of phonetic devices. His chief faculties are sight and hearing. He not only sees the motion of the sea but hears it. In these lines coexists the close cooperation of the two senses. To analyse the effect is not an easy task. The basis of the description is the Germanic (or English) vocabulary(except "strangely" and "comforting") in those lines. Unlike "luxury", "starvation", "misery", and "holocaust", in essence these words are short--monosyllabic or disyllabic-- and in a typical monosyllable the

phonemic structure is CVC—i.e. an initial consonant (C) and a final consonant (C) sandwich a vowel (V). It is the characteristic of English stress that it emphasizes every sound in the monosyllable. In the quoted lines such words as “wash”, “rush” and “beach” are typical monosyllables of this kind. Although “beach” has a dubious etymology, it looks and sounds more Germanic than “sea” and “slow” which are Germanic despite that they are open syllabic.

English can be defined as a language of consonants; if to say this is too extreme, one may say safely that it is a *consonant-rich* language (even though this does not necessarily mean its vowels are inferior)¹. Another point of view is to say it is a language of fricatives (such as *f*, *v*, *s*, *z* and others), affricates (such as *ch*, *dzh*, *tr*, *dr*.) and plosives (*p*, *b*, *t*, *d*, *k*, *g*.) which, especially when stressed, are very sharp and even harsh sounds. The reader with a good ear cannot miss the sound and behaviour of waves expressed by “wash”, “rush” “clatter” “spreading” and “beach” with these sharp consonants; they clearly suggest the waves dashing against the shore, striking the rocks and clattering and rushing up and down the beach. Both Egan and Hopkins are masters of these “hard” and sharp consonants which are essential elements to create swift motions.

These brisk movements of waves show a contrast with their “slow gathering and rising”. The combination of a long vowel in “slow”(in Egan’s pronunciation) and a diphthong in “rising”’s with *-ings* contribute much to it. Also effective is the repetition of “rising”.

In these seemingly simple lines the poet engages a large variety of devices and combines them intricately. In this sense these and the following line are highly reminiscent of G. M. Hopkins. Only Egan here is less explicit so that the well constructed structure of techniques is not easily unraveled. Yet it would be rewarding to point out only the obvious. The most obvious of all is the initial consonant agreements (except “pure” alliterations) among “wide” (“water-shadow”, “wash”), “gathering”, “clatter” and “beach”. The key to the agreement is the semi-vowel *w* with a double articulation. It agrees to the plosives *g* and *k* which are articulated at the velar and also with the plosive *b* which is articulated by the lips. In this way “wide”, “gathering”, “watershadow”, “wash”, “clatter” and “beach” are intimately linked as if to form the backbone of the lines. To this backbone almost all the other words are connected. Take “Sea” for example. This links through alliteration with “slow” which in turn connects through rhyme (with identical long vowels in the poet’s pronunciation) with “watershadow”, a word belonging to the backbone; it further links with “spreading” through alliteration and also with “beach” through assonance. This linkage is implicit but firm to imply nothing but the ever-changing movements of “watershadows”. Any poet who can instinctively produce this kind of lines must be richly talented. They show

obviously that he composes poetry by the ear, loves to read it aloud and would like his reader to listen to it rather than read it with the eye.

The word “watershadow” seems to be Egan’s coinage. This tells his extraordinary power of observation. It seems to mean the curved, dark, shadowy side under the crests of a wave on the other side shining in the sunlight. We usually overlook this when we see waves. In both image and sound “watershadow” is remarkable.

Now the poet hears

the *strangely comforting clinking of pebbles.*

This line is a most natural sequence of the preceding two lines in that it continues with the crisp and sharp sounds of

the *wash the rush the clatter spreading down a beach.*

The italicised consonants are, as we have seen, all sharp and hard plosives and fricatives. By means of these sounds, rather than soft “liquid sounds”, Egan succeeds in recapturing the sound of waves which can be noisy and disturbing, as it is enhanced by their friction against the sand and rocks and by their dashing against the cliff, but at the same time “strangely comforting”. The description of ever changing motions of ocean waves is, as mentioned above, one of the most difficult to put into words. In “Needing the Sea” the poet manifests his mastery of the description.

4

The poet’s yearning for this sea increases all the more. He repeats: “I need”:

I need

to be consoled by the rush of my own smallness
to swim my soul awhile in the pure space let it go adrift
where one wave can hide the shore.

It is the sea of “the grace of water” which is “the pure space”. It has the redeeming grace. He needs to soul-make to restore the wholesomeness of himself by putting his soul adrift in the water awhile, for the sea has the power to cleanse, to heal, to re-fresh and to

re-generate; it is the source of life.

In the second line above, "rush" seems to have a double meaning: "an abrupt and strong demand" as well as "a worthless thing". The second sense is now archaic but if the poet intended this also, this sense has come to assume a continuation to the very last line: "forgive me". This word and the last line tell the deep modesty and sympathy of the poet: modesty as a human being and sympathy with the people for whom even such a trifle pleasure as going to the sea is not allowed. If going to the sea is a trivial act, bathing in "the grace of water" is not.

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

Yes, September and autumn present a moment towards death of winter. I do not like autumn: its beauty—which of course one admires—is a sick beauty; the flush on a patient's face.

The word 'grace' has in it also a reference to the Christian idea of grace: 'Grace is glory in exile; glory is grace at home'. An intimation of the divine, never absent from my work.

I am very pleased that so authoritative a scholar of phonetics and the techniques of language as Professor Shimane is, should have adverted so precisely to the construction of this poem. Technique in a void is uninteresting; verbal effects must align themselves even to the point of mimesis to the feeling and content of a poem. This is not a primarily conscious decision, no more than the swerve and shot of a footballer is; a poet is someone who feels and who has an instinct in expressing that feeling. Someone who can score in words.

The question of the poet's function: without for a moment disagreeing with your comments, I would be hesitant to lay down any rules for the poet's 'role'—as if this were somehow amenable to programming. A poet is a human being. From this emerge a complex of implications and of responsibilities. What I object are the current assumptions about what a poet's role is NOT. Much of this theorising—especially in contemporary Ireland—springs from a cowardly refusal to have opinions on what is happening in Northern Ireland. At the root there lies an opportunism, a clever but shameful avoidance of controversy by taking sides or even having an articulated point of view. All real poetry has a political character because politics is basic to living.

A propos of which: 'kneecap' as verb meaning to shatter a kneecap with hammer or bullet or in other ways is not my coinage but part of the vocabulary of violence emerging from the Northern Ireland Troubles; 'car bomb' also come to mind here.

I welcome the detailed technical analysis of my humble poem. Too much of what passes for criticism lacks this element of understanding what words do and can do. In this respect, Professor Shimane is a refreshing exception—and from his expertise in phonetics I derive much of my admiration for him.

When I am writing, I spend a lot of time and no small effort trying to marry the sounds and other capacities of language to the content so that the one reflects the other. The difficulty lies in doing this and not losing spontaneity: a poem must never become an exercise in word-plays; a solemn game. At that stage a loss of focus has occurred, allowing self-consciousness to enter and destroy. Much of Austin Clarke's writing is reduced to form for that very reason. A poem should attempt to encapsulate an emotion, an experience, a complex *gestalt* of reaction to life; it should employ the resources of language in order to convey that content. If it degenerates into empty virtuosity it is nothing. The same principle holds, of course, in all the arts and explains for example why I so value the great Swedish pianist Hans Pålsson whose playing goes down into the music, taking technique for granted—as against the superficial virtuosity of lauded performers.

Keat's idea of the 'negative capability' of the true artist—that willingness and ability to 'negate' oneself out of the way so that the experience or vision takes over—is really the same concept.

I also applaud Shimane's adverting to the creative ambiguity of words and sounds. If poetry does not exploit all the resources of language, what will? Might I suggest in passing that whereas English is phonetically consonant-rich, some of the attention of Irish poetry to vowel-sonorities may well derive from the Irish language itself: it has strongly assonantal and musical character. I believe that the influence of Irish on writing in English is so crucial as to make of Hiberno-English the equivalent of a dialect of English. Perhaps this helps explain why so disproportionately large a number of great writers in English come from Ireland.

Desmond Egan

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Notes

1 From the point of view of experimental phonetics English can be described as both consonant and vowel-rich. This is very evident when it is compared with a language like Japanese which is very vowel-rich but with an inferiority of consonants.

References

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