

Irish Poetry - The Changing of the Guard

Connor Kelly

*The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch
and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.*

I had to learn this poem at school. These lines are from *Digging* by Seamus Heaney. I remember looking at the poem like a duck looking at thunder. 'What the hell is he going on about?' I asked myself. I'd never been on a turf cutting outing before and I rarely went digging for anything. The only thing in these lines that I could relate to was 'The cold smell of potato mould'. Obviously, now that I'm older and with hindsight I realise that *Digging* is a beautifully crafted poem that gently coaxes landscape visions and childhood experience into the reader's mind. However, I didn't get this at the time, and to be honest, even now, it wouldn't be the kind of thing I'd rush to the shop to buy. I'm from the city, from an estate, where the people have 'quicker tongues' as Heaney himself describes. I could only imagine this world of his, not imagine myself in it.

School was not a good place for me to learn about poetry. If anything, it put me off it. As well as a narrow view of poetry restricted to the confines of the curriculum, it was also, much of the time, taught badly. We read the older poems - Wordsworth, Tennyson, Yeats I found it all very boring. There were a few that stood out for me - Shakespeare, William Blake, Robert Frost, but even though I could appreciate the beautiful imagery and passion, I couldn't really get right into it, to stand in their shoes, to feel their feelings. I

started searching for poets, determined to find something I could love. I found that I really liked poets like Dylan Thomas, Norman McCaig and Stevie Smith, but still, something was missing for me. The music I was listening to at the time seemed to say far more than all the dead poets in the world.

Then two things happened, almost simultaneously. The first was that I bought a copy of Patti Smith's album, *Horses*. I didn't know who she was, had never heard of her, but I was attracted by the cover. It was a revelation. Here was a woman (who on the cover dresses like a man!) reading poetry over music. And it was brilliant! The first line of the first track *Gloria* - 'Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine' - was manna from heaven to my 16 year old self. This was the William Blake I'd read but different, modern, aggressive! I fell in love.

The second thing that happened, around the same time, was a chance stumbling upon a live performance of Allen Ginsberg's infamous poem *Howl*. Up until this point I had never heard of Allen Ginsberg, never mind any of the other beat writers. I stood and listened to the piece almost crying. Never in my life had I heard poetry like this. I didn't even know poetry like this could exist! The next day I ordered a copy of his book, *Howl and other poems* and studied it religiously. Every poem in it gripped me every line! It seemed that I had more in common with this New York poet than I had with poets like Heaney who lived just down the road. It gave me what I had been looking for it inspired me.

⁰I don't speak Irish and know very little about Irish language poetry. I apologise that this review only includes poets who write in English.

So why have I told you this? What have Wordsworth and Patti Smith got to do with Irish poetry? There are a few reasons. Firstly, I think many people shared a similar experience of reading poetry at school, and not enjoying it. Often this puts people off poetry for life. If you fit into this category, I hope this will be of service in giving you a summary of 'other' poetry. Secondly, I want to give you a heads-up on what sorts of poetry I prefer to read and listen to. All poets, all readers and reviewers are entirely biased towards 'what they like', it's just that not all of them admit it. Many of the poets that I didn't like at school have now grown on me when I look at them with another eye, but, some of them haven't. Thirdly, these experiences of mine have coloured the way I see poetry today, the way I read poetry, and the experience I expect when I read or listen to poetry. I will attempt to outline what I see as the failings of the 'establishment' poetry in Ireland today and my hope that the 'New Poetry', particularly poetry that is performed, can breathe new life into the Irish scene and even reach people that think they hate poetry.

Old Guard vs 'New Poetry'

In poetry, as in all art forms, there are innovations, breakthroughs, even what you might call revolutions. Often when a break-through happens, the innovators have to fight for their place in the art world. Many in the Old Guard react, sometimes simply by excluding new artists from 'their' world, and sometimes through downright condemnation (Famously *Howl* was banned after its first publication in 1956).

In Ireland at the moment, I think you see something similar happening, albeit on a much smaller scale. Poetry is largely split into two camps. These overlap in

many areas, and influence one another. They are not necessarily hostile to one another and often draw from and respect each other's work. I don't want to make sweeping generalizations here, just to outline two loose groupings of poetry in style and content.

The first is what I call the Old Guard (which includes many not so old poets). These poets write mainly for the page often focusing on more traditional styles, rarely making use of performance. This group is typified by the Northern school - Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon - and well known Southern poets like Paul Durcan. Many of the poets that I would place in this category are members of the Aosdana - an association of Irish artists, supported by the Arts Council. To become a member of Aosdana, you have to be nominated and elected by current members, so in a lot of ways, it is a closed shop.

The second are those poets who emerge from and are intertwined with the performance scene. These poets tend to write poetry for performance, though not exclusively, drawing on more modern (and arguably diverse) influences than the old guard. Their poetry is often inspired by R&B and rap music among other things. They tend to be heavier on rhythm, freer in form, more emphasis on performance value, and often aim to transmit a specific message or experience of life through the performance. I will mention some of these poets later.

When describing the group that I term as the 'Old Guard' I will quote only a few poets to give a general feel for the kind of poetry I'm talking about. I have chosen these few because they could definitely be considered as the most influential of the group, and many younger aspiring poets try to emulate their style. I may be unfriendly to some of them and I want to make it clear that this does not apply to all

‘page poets’ in Ireland. I write ‘page poetry’ myself and probably, in a lot of ways have many things, good and bad, in common with these poets.

The Old Guard

*Today I met David Kelly, actor, in the street
Outside Adam’s Fine Art Auction Rooms
On Stephen’s Green North.
Instantly in the sun we fell to reminiscing
About our dear dead mutual friend Donal
McCann
Who died almost to the day this week ten
years ago¹*

In this poem by Durcan, (who is regarded by many as Ireland’s unofficial poet laureate) describes meeting the actor David Kelly in the street. They talk about a friend of theirs who died years before. They go on to talk about the funeral of Kelly’s father:

*But Paul, I must tell you about my father’s funeral.
Well, there he was in his coffin in the hearse, you see,
And, of course, I was in the mourners’ car behind.
Now, my father was not merely an ordinary man
He was the most ordinary man in the universe.*

We should hope that these are actually the words of David Kelly, actor, and not the poetry of Durcan. Why did he write this poem? What relevance does it have to the reader? What relevance does it even have to him, the poet? He doesn’t seem particularly moved, or even overjoyed at this chance meeting on the street. So why write it? My feeling is that Durcan wrote

this poem (which was then published in the Irish Times), because it was David Kelly, Actor, that he met in the street, and not someone more ordinary. It is shallow, cynical, poetic name dropping and nothing else. He ends:

*This yoke - “ David Kelly, actor, twirls his Malacca cane
Across his garnet-buttoned, wine-red velvet waistcoat
Before swaying off into the multitude -
“It used be for style - now it’s- its simply to hold me up!”*

This is typical of the kind of poetry written by those that I term as the Old Guard. There are only so many poems you can write about picking fruit in autumn, idealized childhoods and the characters of the Dublin intelligentsia, before you start to disconnect from the times we’re in, from ordinary people, even from reality.

Seamus Heaney is a great poet, arguably one of Ireland’s best, but limited to a certain type of poem. His winning of the Nobel Prize for literature has made him Ireland’s most famous living poet. His poetry, most of it, is well written. Each line is considered, each word has its own particular gravity, and is delivered with the turn of phrase that is distinctly Heaney’s own. He has an appreciation and a connection with nature that shines through all of his work, but at times it can be overwhelming, stifling. In the poems where he does touch on political themes, it is with a cautious air, as an observer, rather than a participant.

Michael Longley, former ‘Professor of Poetry for Ireland’, a man described by Heaney as, ‘a keeper of the artistic estate’. He has been writing poetry for fifty years working closely with Heaney, Mahon and others from the ‘Northern School’. Far

¹From *Today I Met David Kelly, Actor, in the Street* - Paul Durcan 2009

more disconnected than Heaney, and far more pompous, he has a tendency to riddle his poems with faux intellect and so many in-jokes that they become almost impossible to read - unless of course, you're a poet. Recently, he seems to be trying to keep up with the times by parachuting 'controversial' lines into otherwise anemic poems in an attempt to look new. He is held in high regard by the Old Guard of poetry and he has no problem demonstrating the enormity of his self-regard too. He wrote in one of his most popular books *The Weather in Japan*:

*If you were to read my poems, all of them,
I mean,
My lifes work, at the one sitting, in the
one place,
Let it be here by this half-hearted waterfall
That allows each pebbly basin its separate
say²*

This half-hearted waterfall of self-praise won prizes. But, perhaps I'm being too hard, and singling out a few poets when this school of poetry is actually quite large and there are very good poets among them. I'm trying to demonstrate the disconnected nature of these poets. They don't seem to be writing poems for the people who might come and buy their books, but rather for each other. This is an endemic problem in established poetry.

The three I have just quoted are some Ireland's best known poets internationally, but incredibly Ireland's most famous poet short of Heaney at the moment is President Michael D Higgins.

Michael D Higgins is a special case - most people in the literary world would privately admit that he is no poet, but

publically, in Ireland at least, he is lauded. The amount of publicity and praise that was heaped on his recent book, *New and Selected Poems* was incredible. The remarkable thing was that a sizeable amount of this praise came from poets. Very few Irish poets dared to criticize it and those who did were vilified in the press. He didn't fare so well outside of Ireland being slated in many British reviews. Here are some lines from Higgins:

*And when the strangers
To whom I gave a lift
Spoke to me of the extraordinary
Light in the Western sky;
I often missed its changes.
And, later, when words were required
To intervene at the opening of Art Exhibitions,
It was not the same.³*

Paul Durcan defended Higgins' poetry saying, 'Many of us, as poets, have been trying for forty five years to achieve this quality, but he has had it from the start.' To think that a poet could seriously believe this to be of merit is worrying. But what I think is really happening, is a general suppression of real criticism. This comes from the fear that if free criticism were to develop in Ireland it might threaten the position (and the stipend) of the establishment.

The case of Michael D is indicative of general malaise in the established poetry scene. They are disconnected, materially and artistically from the lives of ordinary people, and most of them, as far as I have read are living in a recession proof world of back patting and closed readings.

² *The Waterfall* - Michael Longley - 200

³ *When Will My Time Come* - by Michael D Higgins.

The New Poets

Here I will refer mostly to the performance scene. As I said earlier, the categories overlap, and bleed into one another so 'performance poetry' is not one unified group, rather a collection of lots of different styles and influences, a lot of which are performed. There is nothing inherently 'better' about performance poetry but what I would argue is that in Ireland, at the moment, the most vocal, innovative and ambitious poetry is generally coming up out of this scene.

Performance poetry has been about for years. It originated in the 1960s in the U.S developing into a form in its own right through the 1970s and 80s. In Britain poetry slams and similar competitions have been around for decades, but in Ireland the performance scene is still relatively young. I think this is a great advantage to those involved in it. Contrary to much American and British performance poetry, which has become stylized and unambitious, in Ireland there is still the excitement and energy that comes with the new. In the same way as the 'Old Guard' can't be considered a homogenous group or school, that is all bad poetry or all good poetry, the performance scene includes a variety of different kinds of poetry, from rap poetry, to modernized Irish ballads, some it great, some of it dire. The thing that brings these poets together is the fact that most of them 'perform' their poetry. The performance originates partly from the fact that a lot of them can't get published, or even get readings at official poetry gigs. They are left with an audience that isn't necessarily accustomed to hearing poetry on a night out. Many start off at open-mic nights, where performance is key to engaging with your audience, holding their attention. The growth in performance poetry has a lot to do with working class young people seek-

ing out new ways to express themselves. They may feel disconnected from the established poetry scene, which doesn't represent anything close to the lives of most working class people. Some of these young people might not even consider what they are doing to be poetry. The first port of call for a lot of them is rap music and hip hop.

But, there are problems with the performance poetry scene too. One of the biggest problems is that the writing is limited by the performance. Some performance poets only write performance poems. A lot can be lost when the poem is written to serve the performance. Having sat through many performance poetry gigs, I've noticed good writing being substituted by rowdy performance too many times. And it needn't be. I think performance poets often underestimate their audience or have a preconceived idea of 'what the audience wants'.

There are some poets who are seemingly able to transcend this and create work that transposes easily on to the page or from the page to the stage. These are few and far between but stand head and shoulders above the rest in terms of artistry.

Here are a few poets that are operating in the performance scene that I would personally recommend. Most of them write poetry for reading, and poetry to be listened to and performed. Get to a slam or a performance poetry night in your locality and no doubt you will run into one or more of these bards.

Whos to look out for:

Dave Lordan (b.1975) surely has to be one of the most exciting poets to come out of Ireland in decades. Lordan is a poet who writes both for the page and performance and, unlike some performance poets, his written poetry works perfectly on stage and vice versa. In 2005 he won the

Patrick Kavanagh Award for poetry and his book *The Boy InThe Ring* (2007) won the strong award for best first collection by an Irish poet. His last book *Invitation to a Sacrifice* was a masterpiece in subversive verse.

In it, Lordan takes us on a frightening day trip around a very unsettling, though very real modern Ireland where the reader is at the center of the action. Lordan isn't afraid to talk about oppression and the lives of working people. He conveys the alienation created under capitalism with a vividness and dark humour evoking comparisons to the likes of William Burroughs.

Sometimes, when he performs, I feel that some of the delicacy of his beautifully crafted verse is lost in the sheer aggression of delivery. Nonetheless, this is no reason to avoid him. His mere physical presence on the stage is often enough to silence the room. Firmly rooted, with a menacing glare in eyes, he will launch into a tirade of rhythmic exorcisms:

*Hope, ya ould mutt, I hear yer in bits.
I heard somebody stomped on yer throat an
all ya can do now is grunt.
I heard six drunk jocks set ya on fire while
ya were goofin.
Ya ould trout! Ya look like ya were washed
up in an oilspill⁴*

If you get a chance, go and see Dave Lordan perform.

Scottish poet Abby Olivia is currently living in Derry. She has been around the poetry scene for quite a few years engaging in many different poetry and music collaborations including most famously 'The Poetry Chicks' with Pamela Brown. Abby as a performance poet and dramatist constructs her stage performances with great precision. Her initial aggressive

style, infused with elements of hip hop and punk poetry can unexpectedly mellow into touching personal verses which would melt you on the spot. Inspired by such greats as Amiri Baraka and Diane Di Prima, Olivia's writing style is free in form, using internal rhymes and R& B inspired rhythms. Also a committed activist, Olivia uses her poetic platform to demonstrate the need for social change. Her pieces *Death of Tree Hugger* and *Terrorist* are excellent examples of outwardly political poetry. Perhaps too many of her poems are 'issue based', not that this is necessarily a criticism, but sometimes poems just contain too much information and this can detract from the general mood of the piece. Still developing, and becoming more exciting every year, Abby Olivia is definitely a poet to watch.

*They are shivering in the cold
To the rhythmic quivering of begging bowls
Beckoning them to dance,
For the death of The Dollar.*⁵

Pamela Brown, from Donegal is the other half of the Poetry Chicks.

She merges the passionate jolt of Jack Kerouac with the primal buzz of ancient stones and holy wells. Drawing from influences as diverse as Allen Ginsberg, W.B. Yeats, and the traditional bardic poetry of Ireland, Brown's poetry is something which is entirely unique. She isn't afraid to make use of formal construction, but equally is a master of free verse. Often Brown will change rhythm mid-piece, suddenly making use of rhymes and lyrical patterns, completely changing the mood. Each poem is a rollercoaster ride of revolutionary verse. Though a lot of her poetry has an international feel, at the same time it is rooted in the time and the place, and

⁴From *Hope* by Dave Lordan 2011

⁵From *Death of the Dollar* - Abby Olivia, 2011.

the voice of an Irish woman. Brown writes for both the page and the stage and is hoping to have a book of poetry published in the next year. Her poem *Ireland Unfree* has to be one of her most outstanding works to date. In it she expresses the raw emotions of rage and despair at what Ireland has become:

*Ireland, you will not take away my voice
Ireland, I will not lie for you
Ireland, I am not constrained by any contract
of your controlled liberty
Ireland, unlike you, I am free*⁶

I first heard Elaine Harrington in Dublin last year at the Marxism festival and was immediately stricken. Elaine writes rap poems, in her own voice, wrapped in the rhythms of working class Dublin life. Her work is reminiscent of British poet/rapper Kate Tempest who has gone on to become famous in her own right but despite this obvious influence Harrington makes her poetry her own in a very Dublin way. Her performances are electric the crowd shouts and woops during the more rowdy pieces but is all ears for the tenderness that follows. From what I've listened to, I think that there are a few of her pieces that aren't particularly well written they have a bit of a thrown together feel. Also, not being a fan of hip-hop generally, I have an aversion to similar rhythms being used again and again in one sitting. But, even if only for the a few real gems in a show, she is well worth paying to see. You can find Harrington's pieces on YouTube and Facebook under the name Temper-Mental Misselayneous. She is a poet of the people if ever there was one.

Other poets to look out for include Galway poets Sarah Clancy, Elaine Feeney, and Seamus Barra O'Suilleabhain (an Irish language poet who won the 2011 Ireland

Poetry Slam). Dublin poets Karl Parkinson and Andre Kapor are also great poets and have a lot to offer.

To the Future?

Irish poetry is in flux. The new poets, coming out of the performance scene, usually working class young people, present a serious challenge to the established poetry world. They seem to be able to relate with much more ease and readiness to the new social movements evolving around the world and to the lives of ordinary people. This part of their popular appeal. More and more people are seeing the establishment poets as sort of fusty academics with little to say.

So what needs to happen? I think the established poetry world need to take stock, and acknowledge the existence of a separate and growing poetry scene in Ireland. They ought to make some moves towards including these poets in regular Irish poetry publications and events. First of all, they must start by re-evaluating their general view of poetry and acknowledging that performance poetry is poetry. This atmosphere won't be allowed to develop in a non-critical environment. How can art progress and develop if there is no argument, debate and conflict? Poets across the board need to look with a sharp eye at their own, and other's work and give an honest analysis of what they think could be better and where they think things should go.

However, the poets in the performance scene, and the more open minded 'page poets' in Ireland should not rely on the good will of the establishment to change things. They should set about (as much as is financially possible) publishing one another's work, and reviewing new poets. This isn't as airy fairy as it might seem.

⁶ From *Ireland Unfree* - Pamela Brown 2009

The Beat poets of 1950s America were, at the beginning of their careers, accused of being too far-out, lacking in form, and some even went so far as to say that Beat poetry wasn't poetry at all and had no artistic merit. They were excluded. But over years of hard work, persistent self-publication and co-operation, the Beat poets became internationally renowned, and today, are widely seen as trail-blazers in the history of poetry.

Poetry should be available to everyone. People should be able to relate to it in some way, and to experience it without having a degree in literature first. I should hope that in the next few years, the new and more accessible poetry will be able to amplify its voice and reach a far wider audience.

In the meantime, the Irish poets of the

performance scene should be wary not to limit themselves to particular styles, forms and themes, lest they lose that daring spark of rebelliousness that makes them so exciting.

Editor's note

As author of this article Connor Kelly was obviously not going mention himself but in fact he is a very talented young singer/song writer and poet (and political activist in Derry) and very much part of the young guard he refers to. He is launching his new album *Tell me that were human* at Sweeneys on Dame St. in Dublin, on 21 February. Check him out at <https://soundcloud.com/blastfurnacestudio/connor-kelly-tell-me-that-wereandwww.myspace.com/connorkelly>.