

DESMOND EGAN'S ELEGIES IN THE CONTEXT OF IRISH POETRY¹

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ABSTRACT

The Irish poet, Desmond Egan, despite having written over a dozen books of poetry and being widely acclaimed in Ireland, America and in many European countries (into whose different languages he has been translated), is practically unknown in Spain. His poetry, of which *Elegies* is arguably the most representative volume, can be placed inside a tradition of two thousand years of Irish poetry but it also reflects many and varied influences, from Ireland and abroad, as the style and subject matter of his poems show. We feel sure recognition will also come in Spain, but when?

Elegies is without doubt the best known book of the important Irish poet, Desmond Egan. The author is a highly considered poet both within and outside his native country, but here, in Spain, his work is scarcely known, despite his having written more than a dozen books of poetry, a book of literary criticism and two translations into English from classical Greek drama². His output has been steady over the past three decades and the list of themes he has written about is as extensive as the

(1) The following article contains the gist of the "Introduccion" written for the translation into Spanish of Desmond Egan's book *Elegies*, which has been translated by Enrique Cámara and the present author under the title of *Elegías*, and which is currently gathering dust in the Secretariado de Publicaciones of this university, and with a rather uncertain future ahead of it. If it is eventually published, it will be the first book of Egan's to be translated into Spanish, despite his desire to be published in that language. He has already been translated in several European languages, including French, Italian, Czech, Swedish, etc. The French translation of *Elegies*, by Bruno Gaurier, was launched by the present author in the Hopkin's Festival at Monasterevin, in July 2000. Some poetry of Egan's has been translated into Spanish, though not published in book form; among this we would distinguish that by Marcus Hormiga of *Famine*.

(2) See "Bibliography" for details of all of Egan's publications.

“Central Plain” of his native soil. Egan does not fit nicely inside any poetical grouping, like the so-called “Ulster Group”, who began to be known as such around the time Egan published his first collection of poetry, *Midland*, back in 1972, but who, apart from some obligatory poems about the “Troubles”, have about as much in common thematically as a group of Dublin or Munster poets, or, to go further back, like the group of “Celtic Twilight” poets who, under the tutelage of Yeats, wrote about specifically Irish themes at the turn of the last century.

He is one of the six or seven best Irish poets of the last quarter of a century. His work is firmly rooted in the Irish poetical tradition, although it is also subject to other influences, as we will see later. In order to understand his poetry we have to consider it within the context of modern Irish poetry, which to be properly understood has in its turn to be considered within the wider context of Irish poetry of the past two thousand years.

Irish poetry written in Gaelic

Gaelic is one of the oldest vernacular languages in Europe. It was spoken by the waves of Celtic invaders, who reached Ireland from Central Europe, or, in the opinion of some, from the north of Spain, and who settled in the “Emerald Isle” between the fourth and third century, B.C. As they had not mastered the art of writing, if we exclude the system of graphic communication known as *ogham*, their literature, including their poetry was preserved in oral form. It was recited or sung by the *file* or the *bards*³, in the *feis*, or assemblies, such as those celebrated every four years in the seat of the *Ard Rí*, at Tara.

In the fifth century, A.D., with the coming of Christianity, came also the Latin language and its alphabet, and then the great sagas, such as the *Ulster Cycle*, *Fionn Cycle*, the *Imrama*, etc., which had already existed orally for centuries began to be written down. Poetry now for a time ceased to be the exclusive domain of the *bards* and *file* to become something that the less privileged could enjoy, and in a short time it flourished in a way which would have been impossible in the closed society which existed before St. Patrick’s coming, although we must not understand by this that the

(3) The distinction between *bard* and *fili* in ancient Irish society is not very clear. We can merely state what Eleanor Knott writes in her *Irish Classical Poetry*, (See “Bibliography”) “... *the bard* was simply a poet and a versifier; the *fili* a poet, but also a scholar and a guardian of traditional knowledge.” (p. 7). The point is the *fili* seems to have occupied a superior station to that of the *bard* and his functions included some more proper of the druids, such as prophecy.

professional poets were left without work; far from it, they had more of it than ever. Now, apart from the sagas, mentioned previously, and other traditional tales, there began to be written what we can call a more spontaneous kind of poetry, which was often scribbled down by the monkish scribes on the margins of the sacred manuscripts they were copying or translating.

So it was that in Irish monasteries, like Clonmacnois, Monasterboice, or Glendalough, or in different European countries where Irish monks had gone to preach the Gospel, there were written those short poems at once so simple and so sophisticated and, above all, so "modern" that bear the stamp of what we know as Gaelic poetry - like the poem "Pangur Bán" written by an Irish monk in an Austrian monastery about his cat, "Pangur":

"Meisse ocus Pangur Bán
cechtar nathar fria shaindán;
bíthe a menma-sam fri seilgg
mo menma céin im shaincheird."

(I and Pangur Bán my cat,
'Tis a like task we are at;
Hunting mice is his delight,
Hunting words I sit all night.)

(Translated by Robin Flower)

Among the first poems written in Gaelic we can find a great diversity of themes, such as the celebration of common things, the love of nature, and by extension, of solitude and, as is to be expected in the case of "religious" poets, the love of God. In fact the saints, Patrick and Columcille are the supposed authors of hundreds of poems - which it would have been impossible for them to have written and which were most probably penned by scribes in some monastery. Perhaps, the most striking element about this early poetry is, as has been stated previously, its "modernity": when we read it now after a span of over a thousand years it seems to have been written yesterday - something which can't be said about the great majority of pre-Renaissance (and later) poetry.

It would be unreasonable to expect that this poetry could keep its freshness, spontaneity and originality for centuries; it inevitably developed into classical, rigid and conservative lines, thanks to strict rules of prosody exercised by the once more professionals: the *bards* and *file*, in their "poetic schools". Poetry once again became something too important to be left in the hands of "dabblers" and was consigned to those who made a living out of it; "poetic families" were established and the art of composing was passed down from father to son. Poets had great privileges, being

able to pass freely from one territory to another, always being well received at feasts and banquets and being handsomely recompensed by their patrons, the petty kings or nobles. These, in turn, expected their protégés to return the favour by singing their praises in eulogies and by composing satires against their enemies. These two genres, consequently, the eulogy and the satire, assumed great importance then, but it must be noted that their authors almost always showed great skill and ingenuity in their composition.

Spontaneity was not completely lost either; we only have to read the lament by Muireadach O'Dalaigh for the death of his wife (early 13th century) or the plaint by Giolla Brighde MacNamee on not having children to brighten his old age and assure his lineage (end of the same century), or any poem by Tadhg Dallo'Huiginn, Egan O'Rahilly or Eibhlin Dubh O'Connell - all full of passion and feeling, but yet written according to the strict rules of Gaelic prosody established in the bardic schools of the day.

Poetry written in Gaelic began to lose its importance in the 18th century, thanks principally to the decline of the Gaelic aristocracy after the Plantations of the 17th century. The *bards*, who had been the principal upholders of Gaelic poetry and Gaelic society, could not now seek protection from the nobles and petty kings because these had been dispossessed and/or exiled and the new ascendancy nobility had little to gain and much to lose by giving protection to those who had the reputation of being agitators. However, we can still find, especially in the south of Ireland travelling *bards* who wandered the country seeking shelter in the houses of the last nobles left with their lands or the well-meaning among the new aristocracy, who often regarded them as harmless relicts of a bygone age. It goes without saying that Gaelic poetry declined greatly in this century, with the exception of some poems by Eibhlin Dubh or Brian Merriman, and a few pieces by O'Carolan, Owen Roe O'Sullivan and Anthony Raftery - at the beginning now of the following century.

Irish poetry written in English

Until the 18th century we can't begin to speak of important Irish poets who wrote in English. The first of them were, logically, of ascendancy descent - the arch-known Jonathan Swift and Oliver Goldsmith. The poetry of Swift is of lesser importance than his prose but it has the same humoristic and satirical vein. One of his poems which deals with a specifically Irish theme - since the majority of his compositions are the typical *jeux d'esprit* of English Neoclassical poetry - is the translation into English of the satirical Gaelic poem, "Pléarcha na Ruarcach", which he titled "O'Rourke's Noble Feast". Also, the poem in which he reflects on his own

death, "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift", contain some very biting references to the country of his birth, as this last verse, which says:

"He gave the little wealth he had
To build a house for Fools and Mad:
And shew'd by one satyric Touch
No Nation wanted it so much; ..."

Swift, as we have pointed out, was not a great poet, but no Irish writer since his day can afford to, or would want to, leave him out of his reckoning.

A poet of a totally different character is Oliver Goldsmith. Born in the centre of Ireland, in the county of Longford, he went as so many Irish writers since have done, to seek his fortune in the literary *salons* of London. As a poet, he is remembered principally for two long poems, *The Traveller* and *The Deserted Village*; the latter, considered one of the great poetical compositions in the English language, contains some beautifully nostalgic references to the village where Goldsmith spent his childhood: Lissoy, in the county of Westmeath. In the poem Goldsmith calls it "Auburn".

"Sweet Auburn, loveliest village of the plain
Where health an plenty cheered the labouring swain,
Where smiling spring its earliest visit paid,
And parting summer's lingering blooms delayed."

These two poets, descendents of the English Protestant ascendancy class, laid nevertheless the foundations of what would be Irish poetry written in English. They were followed in 19th century by poets either of the native Irish Catholic class or Protestant ascendancy class who had at least one thing in common: their verse was written in English, since, for the reasons given above, the market for poetry written in Gaelic had practically ceased to exist.

To understand poetry written in Ireland in the 19th century, we must take certain facts into account. On the one hand, and perhaps of lesser importance is the fact mentioned above, there was no market for literature written in Irish. I say, of lesser importance, for though money is necessary for the survival of literature, patronage is not absolutely necessary for the survival of poetry: a poet can write his verses and leave the sheet of paper in some place where future generations will come across it, as happened in the case of the first monkish scribes who penned their compositions on the margin of sacred manuscripts in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries.

But, it was not only the lack of money that made Irish poets turn from writing in Gaelic to writing in English. A poet needs an audience and the audience was to

be found among the English speaking people, either in the island of Ireland or in the much more populous island of Great Britain: Irish poets had things to say and they wanted people to listen to them.

On the other hand, and here we come to the second fact mentioned above, there was a complete language shift in Ireland throughout the 18th and 19th centuries on a scale perhaps never witnessed before or since. From the overwhelming majority (90%) who spoke in Gaelic at the beginning of the 18th century, there remained at the end of the 19th century a bare 10% of Gaelic speakers. This may have been beneficial from the purely economic point of view - it was easier to find work if you spoke English - its effect was totally devastating from the cultural point of view, and doubly so in the case of poetry. Poets had to find a new *metier* for their expression: the two millenia of tradition and expertise in the composition of Gaelic poetry now served the Irish poets for naught. They had to start from scratch and, moreover, contend with the flourishing tradition of English poetry at the most unpropitious moment.

What is remarkable about Irish poetry written in English in the 19th century is not the great number of poets who expressed themselves in that language, though this is worthy of mention, but the fact that they were able to write poetry in English at all. If a rather crude comparison may be accepted, it's like asking someone who's been painting landscapes all his life to suddenly draw up the plans for a new urban development: the best he can do, once he has learned to manage the new instruments, the T square, the drawing pen, the drawing board, etc., is to copy what someone else has done; it is asking for too much to expect originality from him at the same time.

So, the Irish poets writing in English at the beginning of the 19th century, at a time when English poetry had reached full flower, were at a disadvantage, from a linguistic and a political point of view. They were, as John Montague has pointed out in his introduction to the Faber Book of Irish Verse, titled "In The Irish Grain", in an inferior or satellite position:

"Whereas Swift and Goldsmith were leading figures within the Augustan tradition, the Act of Union had the psychological effect of placing our poets in a subordinate or satellite position, as Aubrey de Vere was to Wordsworth, Moore to Byron, and Allingham to Tennyson. If one might risk a summary: our Anglicised writers did not exist in their own right and our Anglo-Irish had yet to learn to speak for themselves."⁴

(4) Montague, John: "In The Irish Grain", introduction to The Faber Book of Irish Verse, (1974), p. 30.

Yet, the number of Irish poets who wrote in English in this century is surprisingly large. Of Catholic or Protestant ascendancy, they filled the pages of the few periodicals which dealt with poetry, notably *The Nation*, a nationalist newspaper, and *The Dublin University Magazine*, a unionist journal, with fiery poetry, admittedly of an inferior quality, but one which expressed their view on the plight of their country, on its history and its aspirations. For better or worse, these poets: Moore, Mangan, Davis, Ferguson, Allingham, De Vere, Callanan, etc., etc., set the course of Irish poetry for the next generations, and they had their followers even a hundred years after their death. Practically nothing of what they wrote finds its way into any worthwhile anthology of modern English poetry, simply because it cannot stand comparison with what their contemporaries in England were writing at the same time, and because the themes are so limited and reiterative.

It wasn't until the last decade of the 19th century that an Irish poet of real prestige arose. That was William Butler Yeats, and he, in his own way, dominated the course of Irish poetry for the next fifty years. To a certain extent, Yeats built on the Irish poets who had preceded him - not in the question of language, for Yeats soon created his own distinctive "style", but something in the question of themes and, particularly, in the question of continuing a tradition. In one of his poems, "To Ireland in the Coming Times", he recognized this indebtedness:

"Nor may I less be counted one
With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,
Because, to him who ponders well,
My rhymes more than their rhyming tell
Of things discovered in the deep,
Where only body's laid asleep."

Yeats, of course, not only drew on the 19th century Irish poets who had preceded him; he drew on a multiplicity of influences: symbolism, transcendentalism, modernism, but also, and especially, on the vast reservoirs of Irish mythology, which poets like Moore and Ferguson had barely tapped. Yeats practically made the great Irish mythological sagas, the *Ulster Cycle* and *The Fianaigeacht*, his own, they feature to such a great extent in his early poetry. Like the earlier 19th century poets he also dealt with themes from Irish history, but unlike them, he dealt with contemporary historical events, as titles like "September 1913", "Easter 1916" and "Nineteen Hundred And Nineteen" attest.

In fact, the theme of Ireland is the predominant theme in Yeats's poetry. His aim was to give his country a truly national literature - written in English - one which could rub shoulders with the literature of other European countries, and the fact that this has been achieved is in great part due to him. He was a tireless worker; writing

poetry, plays, founding, directing and maintaining the Abbey Theatre, encouraging new Irish writers, collecting Irish folklore, selling the image of Ireland abroad. His early poetry, imbued with the spirit of Irish mythology and the world of faery, has a crepuscular, *fin-de siècle* atmosphere which gave title to whole body of literature, written by himself and his followers in the first two decades of the 20th century, and known as "Celtic Twilight". These writers, followers of Yeats, were never properly a group, for to form a group supposes an element of equality among its components, and where Yeats was concerned, one cannot speak of equality. Also a "group" means common interests, themes and approach, and the only thing common to this coterie of writers was the subject of Ireland.

The question of Ireland is not the only theme in Yeats's poetry: if it were he would not be considered a universal figure. He is the foremost love poet in Ireland since the time of the Gaelic poets of the 16th and 17th centuries. Practically all his love poetry was centered, not on his wife, Georgina Hyde Lees, but on the woman who rejected his proposals of marriage innumerable times, Maude Gonne, which bears witness to the fact that unrequited love is a more memorable subject for poetry than the satisfaction of requited love. His prophetic voice is also an important element in his poetry, as are the many important symbols and images he uses with such mastery, not to forget his celebrations of his friends and the themes he draws from other mythologies and other literatures. The concession of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923 is a mark of international recognition for his work.

Of the poets who surrounded Yeats in these first decades of the 20th century (his followers, really) few of them will stand the test of time. They are interesting examples of the fact that growing up in the shadow of a great poet stunts one's own growth. Names like Padraic Colum, Seamus O'Sullivan, F.R. Higgins will always be associated with Yeats's name - they could never achieve poetic distinction on their own. A different case is presented by Austin Clarke, who grew up under the aegis of "the great man", but who eventually gained independence and found his own voice, first by emigrating to England and later, on returning to Ireland, by 17 years of self-imposed silence. He is, consequently, now considered as one of the outstanding modern Irish poets, whose fame has not ceased to rise since his death in 1974.

Yeats himself died in 1939, and his death left a gaping void in the Irish poetic scene. Some poets who had never succumbed to his overpowering influence basically for the reason that they were living partly or wholly abroad were writing quite good verse, but which could not be called great verse nor particularly "Irish" verse: I am thinking of poets like Thomas MacGreevy, Denis Devlin, Brian Coffey and, even, Samuel Beckett, all of whom show influences which can be described as "international" rather than particularly "Irish".

Luckily, the void left by Yeats's death was quickly filled, and in spectacular fashion, by the upsurge of a new Irish poet. I am thinking of Patrick Kavanagh, who is generally recognized as the "greatest Irish poet since Yeats", but whose background and approach to poetry could not be more different. Kavanagh, the son of a "small farmer" and cobbler from the county of Monaghan, was basically self-educated, having left school at the age of thirteen, but who taught himself to write poetry and who modelled himself on the poets he had read in his school books. As he worked on his little farm he composed his first faltering verses but quickly gained confidence to write poetry which shows an insight into the life of the countryside, the work on the land, and the awakening of the poetic spirit that is new in English verse since the time of John Clare.

Kavanagh adopted the only possible attitude to Yeats - he deliberately ignored him. In fact, the vision of Ireland adopted by Yeats and his "Celtic Twilight" followers was complete anathema to Kavanagh; the national, or political, aspect killed poetry. For Kavanagh, poetry was a very personal and at the same time a very universal thing. Its themes were to be found in the common "banal" (a word which he used on several occasions) things - the things which are in front of our very eyes and which often we don't notice or give importance to. Kavanagh's recognized masterpiece is the long poem, written in 1942: *The Great Hunger*⁵. It is no exaggeration to say that this poem changed the course of Irish poetry just at the critical moment in the void left by Yeats's death. Its bleak vision of the land-hungry, sex-starved old peasant, Patrick Maguire, whose life Kavanagh reels off in cinematographic fashion, gives a far more realistic picture of the real plight of the rural poor in the 30s and 40s than the idealized portraits painted by Yeats and his followers. The poem is not just a social tract: it is full of poetic vision and has moments of great lyric intensity: it rejects all types of rhetoric, which was so beloved by Yeats and launched Kavanagh on a career which showed great promise but which, unfortunately, he was not able to fulfill, though he was to write several more poems of great beauty.

The really important thing about Kavanagh is that he showed the way to contemporary Irish poets, just as Joyce had shown the way to prose writers, to write freely, to "do their own thing". And this is what Irish poets have been doing ever since. From the nineteen fifties onwards, poets of real stature have arisen: in the fifties we saw the emergence of poets like John Montague and Thomas Kinsella, and the reappearance of Austin Clarke after his long silence. The sixties ushered in the

(5) This poem has been translated into Spanish by Patrick H. Sheerin and published by The University of Valladolid Press, under the title *La gran hambre y otros poemas: una selección de la poesía de Patrick Kavanagh*, in 2000.

so-called "Ulster Group": Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, etc. The only thing they had in common really was in belonging to Ulster and in some references in their poetry to the question of terrorism - unfortunately too common at that time. It wasn't long until they ceased to be considered as a "group", once Seamus Heaney raced ahead of the others and left Belfast to fix his residence in Dublin. Heaney is, of course, now generally considered to be the best contemporary Irish poet, especially since his "santification" by the Nobel Prize Committee.

THE POETRY OF DESMOND EGAN

i) Desmond Egan: The Man and the Poet

And, where does all this leave Desmond Egan? Egan is one of the best Irish poets to have emerged in the nineteen seventies. He published his first collection in 1972, under the title of *Midland*⁶, the same year as Heaney's *Wintering Out*, Derek Mahon's *Lives* and John Montague's *The Rough Field* came out, and every two or three years since a new collection of his poetry has appeared on the market. He is one of those contemporary Irish poets who have been influenced by Patrick Kavanagh, if not directly in the way that John Montague and Seamus Heaney have, at least in a more subtle form, like poets such as Paul Durcan, Thomas MacCarthy, Tom McGurk, Paul Muldoon, etc. have. This influence is evident in his selection of themes, and in his easy-going forms of expression, though there are multiple influences, as there are in the case of all poets, which we will endeavour to analyse in the following paragraphs. But first, and before we go deeper into his poetry, analysing its themes and treatment, with special emphasis on the case of *Elegies*, it is necessary to say something about Desmond Egan the person. This will involve a brief examination of his background as well as the manifold influences on his life and work⁷.

Egan was born in 1936 in the town of Athlone, which is the geographical centre of Ireland; consequently, no connection can be claimed with the "Ulster Group" nor

(6) See the "Bibliography", which follows this "Introduction" for details about all of Egan's publications as well as for critical works about him.

(7) I am heavily indebted to Brian Arkins' excellent book, *Desmond Egan: A Critical Study*, (see "Bibliography for details) for many of the details mentioned in the following paragraphs.

with any other "group", nor would Egan wish to claim any. His father, Tom Egan, the subject of the first section of *Elegies*, owned a shop in that town. His mother, Kathleen, was a primary-school teacher for some 40 years in the area and she taught Desmond to read at the age of three. Egan was thus a precocious learner and attended school first in Athlone at the Marist Brothers' College for two years before moving as a boarder to St. Finian's, the diocesan secondary school in Mullingar, the principal town in Westmeath. Here, in the first half of the decade of the fifties, Egan studied among other subjects Irish, Latin and Greek. As Brian Arkins comments:

"...this school was obviously of major importance for his development. He writes in English, is fluent in Irish, which he loves, and regards Latin, and especially Greek as very important."⁸

After leaving secondary school, Egan proceeded to the, now, University of Maynooth, then called St. Patrick's College, and in the year 1962 obtained an Honours B.A. majoring in English Language and Literature but taking as subsidiary subjects: Greek, Latin and Logic. Egan was the top student of his class during his stay at St. Patrick's College. When he left there, Egan taught Greek for a few years at his old school, St. Finian's, before moving to University College Dublin, where he took an honours Higher Diploma in Education and, later, an M.A in English: the topic of his thesis being "The Modern Irish Novel", with especial emphasis on the comparative treatment of religious themes in Continental authors such as Mauriac and Bernanos.

After finishing his M.A., Egan returned to teaching, specializing in English and Classics, until 1987, when he devoted himself full-time to writing. In 1981 he married Vivienne Abbott a lecturer in French and author of several books. They have two daughters and live in Newbridge, Co. Kildare. Egan is the artistic director of the Gerard Manley Hopkins Summer School, which is held annually in Monasterevin, Co. Kildare.

When we mention Gerard Manley Hopkins we must also refer to the many influences in the poetry of Egan. We have already mentioned Patrick Kavanagh, whose influence on Egan is undoubted and pervasive but not noticeably evident in his way of expressing himself in poetry, rather in his range of themes, the exalting of the commonplace and his freedom from restrictions. For example, let us compare the celebration of the ordinary in some lines from Kavanagh's "The Hospital" and Egan's "Almost February". In the former poem, Kavanagh makes the well known statement that naming things is a kind of act of love and he goes on to stress the

(8) Arkins, op. cit. p. 16

urgency of declaring one's love at this very moment. In the latter, Egan in his own way expresses the same emotions and emphasises the urgency required.

"This is what love does to things: the Rialto Bridge
The main gate that was bent by a heavy lorry
The seat at the back that was a suntrap.
Naming these things is the love-act and its pledge;
For we must record love's mystery without claptrap,
Snatch out of time the passionate transitory."
(*"The Hospital"*)⁹

"I make myself a promise once more
to love every minute of this morning coming up like a
snowdrop
this day this fresh time
simple as joy that is also old as the hills"
(*"Almost February"*)

Hopkins too, who can doubt it, is an influence, as he is on so many modern British and Irish poets, but not an overriding one, and the same could be said of Yeats. Modern poets have learned that it is better to admire such giant figures from a distance than to get caught up in the whirlpool of their poetic personality.

ii) The myriad influences in Egan's poetry

As we go on to mention the multiple influences and echoes in Egan, we are obliged to examine at the same time his poetic output. We have already mentioned the powerful, pervasive influence of Kavanagh, a poet which Egan vastly admires, though we must not be blinded to the fact that Egan sees Kavanagh's defects as well as his virtues. In an article, written in 1987, Egan says with reference to Kavanagh's influence on modern Irish verse:

"As with all great writers, that influence has been for worse rather than for better and some genuine but smaller talents have been swallowed up in the trough of his wave. The amount of pseudo-folksy writing, of uninspired exploration of the hayrick

(9) For a translation of this sonnet into Spanish, see *La gran hambre y otros poemas:* (op. cit.) p. 115

and the dunghill, the very proliferation of proper names ... attest to the influence of Kavanagh on his followers."¹⁰

Before we leave Irish writers who have influenced Egan, we must mention the special, surprising, case of Samuel Beckett. In the opinion of Brian Arkins, this influence is due to the fact that "What Beckett offers is both an avant-garde technique and a refusal to be silent in the face of the horrors of 20th century living; ..."¹¹. Egan met Beckett at least twice, in Paris in the nineteen eighties, as Beckett resolutely refused to return to Ireland even on a visit, and gave an account of his meeting both on R.T.E. (Irish Radio) and in an article in his *The Death of Metaphor*¹². In his Radio talk Egan explains what it is that makes Beckett a model for the contemporary writer:

"Beckett is the best we've got because he looks at the abyss, he looks at the meaningless, the chaos, the tragedy, he's aware of it in the marrow of his bones, he lives it, it's him. And in spite of that, in spite of his recognition of the awfulness of living in modern times, he still finds something to say and to live for. The thing about Beckett is that he's life-affirming. Everybody says he's pessimistic but he's exactly the opposite. He affirms life in the face of an extraordinary sense of meaninglessness, of chaos, and he still says, 'I can't go on, I must go on, I go on.'"¹³

In his poem from *Elegies*, "For Samuel Beckett", Egan mentions the Paris meeting with the author of *Waiting For Godot*, and he ends the poem with these lines:

"and you Sam our navigator our valiant necessary
wanderer to the edges of this interpreted world
God bless"

Another writer whom Egan admires greatly - and I think we should speak of admiration rather than influence - is Ezra Pound. He admires Pound's clarity of expression, his sense of the classical, his unblinking honesty with regards his own work, the same honesty that he finds in Kavanagh, ...or in Virgil. In his *Death of*

(10) Egan, "The Poetry of Patrick Kavanagh", in *The Death of Metaphor*, p. 22 (See Bibliography for details)

(11) Arkins, op cit, p. 22

(12) Egan, *The Death of Metaphor*, pp. 101 - 113. (See Bibliography for details)

(13) Quoted in Arkins, op. cit. p. 22.

Metaphor he has two short articles on Pound: "A Word on Ezra Pound" and "Pound's Silence"¹⁴. He is particularly admiring of Pound's *Cantos*, which he calls "our particularly twentieth century equivalent of the epic". Egan also admires the American John Berryman, who took his own life in 1973. In the present book there are elegies for Pound and for Berryman: "Late but One for Ezra Pound", and "For John Berryman".

After the Americans, we can speak of the other great foreign influence on Egan in the persons of the Russian and the Spanish writers. Again as with the case of the Americans, influence is mixed with admiration. Of the Russians, Egan particularly likes Dostoevsky and the poets Akhmatova, whose "words still follow me like sad eyes", Mandelstam, "whose longing speaks straight to the heart" and Mayakovsky, who "became a pal"¹⁵

But of the Continental poets, it is the Spanish whom Egan most admires, and among them Antonio Machado takes pride of place, followed by Lorca and Miguel Hernández. In a list he made of the ten books he would prefer to take with him if he were marooned on a desert island, he puts Antonio Machado's *Poesías Completas* in fifth place, just one behind Patrick Kavanagh's *Complete Poems*. What Egan admires in Machado is his pure lyric note, his simple intensity; Lorca is admired for his dislocation from prose statement, his imagination and the rare excitement that results and of Miguel Hernández's poem, "Como el toro", he says,

"In its mixture of passion and detachment, of realist metaphor and surrealist conceit, of personal dilemma and universal application it seemed not only a fine Spanish poem but a great human drama."¹⁶

Other literary influences which cannot be denied in the case of Egan are those of the Gaelic writers of past centuries and of the classics, especially of the Greeks. This veneration was instilled in Egan with his studies at St. Finian's College and later at Maynooth. Egan has translated two classical Greek plays: Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes*¹⁷. In an article, "Thucydides and Lough Owel: The

(14) *Death of Metaphor*, pp. 95-97 and 159, respectively.

(15) See Arkins, p.24

(16) See Arkins, p. 24. Also for Egan's impressions of the Spanish poets just mentioned, see the various references in *Death of Metaphor*. Egan told the present translator that he had made the visit to Soria to see the tomb of Leonor Izquierdo and the "old elm tree, split by a lightning bolt", and on various occasions he expressed his admiration for Spain and its literature.

(17) See Bibliography for details.

Greek Influence", in *Death of Metaphor*, Egan says what it is that draws him to the Greeks:

"I have always felt a special affinity with things Greek, with the literature and the language, the art, myths and general mystique. Over the years this rapport has not been broken (...) Because "The Classics" for me has always meant Greek rather than Latin, I welcome the opportunity to see why this has been the case and to discover what I have gained most from the Greek."¹⁸

From the Gaelic, Egan has come into a whole inheritance as all Irish poets, especially those who are fluent Gaelic speakers, like Egan himself, have. The inheritance is not always to his taste as he makes clear in this extract from the article "The Room Upstairs: Poetry in Modern Society", in *Death of Metaphor*:

"One country has tried to support poetry in a way different from any we have glanced at. I mean, of course, Ireland with her Bardic schools - which lasted into mid-seventeenth century. Here the file (or lower-ranked bard) enjoyed a recognized standing in society (...) It has become common nowadays for writers to look back on these as golden days. But if we examine the results of it all, the glitter fades. (...) The system produced no supreme poet: no Chaucer, Goethe or Pushkin; but it did not even lead to the emergence of any notable minor figure either."¹⁹

We must not finish with the question of the influences on Egan's poetry, without mentioning other artistic manifestations to which he owes allegiance: music, painting and sculpture. The music that Egan likes, and which features to such a great extent in his different poems, is of three kinds: Classical, Irish traditional and Jazz. He has no time for contemporary pop-music, which he regards as a "dead end". What he admires in the three kinds of serious music mentioned above is, above all, the tragic sense of life, as in Beethoven's quartets, the piano concertos of Mozart and Sibelius. What he likes about jazz is its experimental nature, its continual inventiveness and, above all its rhythm. Like Irish traditional music, jazz tunes are never repeated twice in exactly the same way, nor is the same tune played twice in a night.²⁰

(18) *Death of Metaphor*, p. 113. Egan goes on to mention some of the things he has "gained" from the Greek: "simplicity", "a sparingness with adjectives", "a tendency to avoid metaphorical language", and the epigrammatic quality of its best verse.

(19) *Death of Metaphor*, pp. 76-77.

(20) See Arkins, p. 25

With regards painting and sculpture, it is sufficient to say that Egan is the friend of various Irish artists and sculptors, with particular admiration for the poet-sculptor, James McKenna²¹. He regards visual art as very important and has used drawings and photographs by a number of artists, both Irish and foreign, to illustrate his poetry. All this reflects the fact that Egan painted a lot himself when younger. Needless to say, as a classicist, Egan greatly admires greek art and sculpture, especially that of the Archaic and Hellenistic periods, and his tastes extend to Byzantine, Gothic and Modern artistic expression.

iii) Egan's poetry: Themes and output

Up to date, Egan has published fifteen collections of poetry: the first being *Midland*, in 1972 and the latest *Music*, in 2000. His range of subject matter is wide and varied but some themes stand out as they do in the work of all poets. The first thing we have to take into account is that Egan is from the Irish Midlands, that large central plain which, with Athlone as its hub, extends in roughly circular fashion from the Dublin Mountains in the east to the Twelve Pins of Connemara in the west and from the Ulster border in the north to Slieve Bloom in the south. It is no coincidence that Egan's first book of poems is titled *Midland*, and that his fifth book, published eight years later is called *Athlone*. The Midlands are often associated in people's minds with dreariness and complacency, the former because of the landscape, the latter because of the people. But as with all epigrammatic judgements, this needs qualification.

The landscape, it is true, is flat without mountains or even high hills and there are extenses of bog which give a dun colour to the fields. But it is dotted with lakes, some of them large lakes, and criss-crossed with rivers and canals, and the majestic Shannon flows right through the centre of it. So "dreary" is not the exact word to describe it; it is better left for describing the tundras of Siberia or Mongolia. The people are accused of complacency often and often by people who don't know the meaning of the word. It is true, that The Midlands is an area where things seem to move slower and the people in consonance with them, but they are far from complacent. Some very committed writers come from the Midlands: Goldsmith is a placid man but a committed one; Maria Edgeworth, who lived next-door, though born in England, is one of the most committed novelists of the 19th century and in modern

(21) See, for example, his article in *Death of Metaphor*: "A Lack of Beauty in our Lives: James McKenna's Achievement", pp 136 - 142. In it Egan says: "McKenna's essentially tragic viewpoint never becomes a despairing one. His sense of defeat or of its probability does not lead to any hint of pessimism." (p.137)

times, we can hold up the example of Brinsley MacNamara from Devlin, Co. Westmeath, whose novel, *The Valley of the Squinting Windows*, was a virulent rebuttal of the false idealization of Irish country life, which caused a furore in his home town and MacNamara's own family suffered the ire of the infuriated populace. So, the Midlanders, like the rest of the population, have their own convictions and emotions and are not afraid to express them.

Egan expresses what he feels about the Midlands in these two volumes of poetry mentioned. The first, *Midland*, is a book of poetry in which the influence of Kavanagh is evident, the naming of names, the chronicling of commonplace events:

a house steamed down the horizon afternoon
the bog sea calm
flat as drainwater the swells of brown rising

But there are references to, or echoes of, other poets, like Goldsmith and Yeats. The latter's "Inisfree" is gently parodied by Egan in his closing poem, "Dialogue":

there is very little I want really –
a stone cottage on the edge of a lake
darkened with woods
(there would have to be woods)
and of course some someone special
we could live there quietly with the birds

There are especially many poems which deal with the flora and fauna of the area. Of special mention are the poems with the titles reminiscent of Ted Hughes, "Pike", "Perch", or the surprisingly-titled "Nettles", a plant which surely no other poet before or since has written about.

The book, *Athlone*, is in the opinion of Brian Arkins, "One of Egan's most homogeneous volumes"²² It contains twenty two poems, which are all about this Midland town, a town of narrow streets, straddling the Shannon. The book is given graphic atmosphere by photographs which appropriately illustrate the themes and places mentioned. The author makes his presence very felt in this volume, lovingly chronicling the life of the town, mentioning the names of the streets, the shops, the people and their foibles. (We can see this manifested also in *Elegies*, in the first section, about his father). But Egan is not a satirist, as Brinsley MacNamara was; what he tries, and succeeds in doing, is to depict the *whole* atmosphere of a place which he so obviously loves.

(22) Arkins, p. 33

Love is a recurrent theme in Egan's poetry. His second collection, *Leaves*, and his slim sixth volume; *Snapdragon*, deal respectively with the themes of unrequited and requited love. The former volume, with its ambiguous title- "leaves" can mean the leaves of trees, often associated with autumn and the end of "joyous" summer, or it can be the third-person singular present of the verb leave - deals with the idea of separation or loss and is structured in a way that Egan himself explains: "*Where Midland* is landscape, *Leaves* is figures in a landscape and maybe one figure in particular"²³. Undoubtedly, as we mentioned previously in the case of Yeats, unrequited love is a more memorable theme than requited love, and Egan's *Leaves* is remembered while his *Snapdragon* is practically forgotten or unmentioned, though Arkins considers it a "superb volume"²⁴.

The volume, *Leaves*, deals with the break-up of a relationship. The process of separation of the lovers is mirrored in the fluxes of nature, especially in the two key images, the leaves and the river - and I think here we are meant to envisage the river Liffey, "running / with leaves". The transitoriness of things, Heraclitus' symbol of flowing water, and Homer's comparison of the generations of leaves to the generations of men, are the two key ideas in the sequence of poems. The general air is one of poignancy and that poignancy is given substance by the scrupulous geographical descriptions given in the poems. *Snapdragon* consists merely of twelve poems. Though the poems touch on the idea of loss, the poem titled "Crows are clamouring on the low roof", for example, describes the departure of the lover after a quarrel, the predominant sensation is that of happiness and satisfaction. Love poetry is not the *forte* of modern Irish poets, though most of the major poets deal with this theme: Heaney, Montague, Kinsella, Clarke, etc. Some love poems of the first-named and the last-named stand comparison with the best, but the others are too often soon forgotten. Patrick Kavanagh, who wrote no explicit "love poetry" is, paradoxically, one of the best modern Irish love poets, for his poetry oozes with love. I think Desmond Egan himself would consider his own love poetry of lesser importance than other themes he has dealt with.

Other themes which recur in Egan's poetry are politics, religion, music, classical allusions, poems celebrating friends, etc. Politics is nothing new in Irish poetry. In the past it was mixed with history, generally, sad history, with accounts of battles lost and causes betrayed. Even Yeats himself was not remiss to using history for his own ends, though he was one of the few who could manage to do it memorably. John

(23) Roche, A., "Q. & A. With Desmond Egan", *Irish Literary Supplement*, (Fall 1989), p. 22

(24) Arkins, p. 61

Montague is an example of a contemporary Irish poet who brings politics and history into his poetry to an excessive degree, with the result that the poetry often degenerates into mere propaganda. Patrick Kavanagh is an example of the opposite: he resolutely refused to deal with either history or politics and his poetry gains as a result. And we must not forget that there exists a tremendous temptation for the Irish poet to bring in history at one time or another in his work, a temptation not resisted by poets of the stature of Heaney or Kinsella; hence the restraint of Kavanagh seems all the greater.

Egan uses Irish history quite frequently as a theme in his poetry: the volume *Famine* is an example. He also uses contemporary events, especially those dealing with the "troubles" in Northern Ireland. One example is found here in *Elegies*: "The Northern Ireland Ireland Question", which in form reminiscent of the Greek epigrams, considers the tragedy of a girl being mutilated by a car bomb as being more important than the whole question of the "Six Counties". Another poem dealing with the situation in Ulster is "Hunger Striker", based on the ten hunger strikers who died in Belfast jails in the 1980s. Egan also deals with the political situation in the Republic of Ireland, in a sequence of poems, called "Siege", and his opinion of the Southern Irish authorities is not very different from that of the British who control Northern Ireland.

Egan doesn't limit himself to themes dealing with Irish politics or history. He also considers the broader canvas of world history and politics, both contemporary and past. He gives voice to his indignation at injustices wherever they happen, be they in America, Japan, Germany, the Soviet Union, the Philippines or South Africa. His poems of denunciation are particularly memorable, such as those titled: "For Benjamin Moloise" and "For Father Romano on his 45th Birthday", both of which appear in *Elegies*. Egan not only denounces injustices committed against people he cares for or admires, he also celebrates people he has met or known. Among the latter, he catalogues his meeting with Samuel Beckett, his admiration for Ezra Pound, his memories of artists like Eoghan O'Tuairisc, "Eugene Watters is Dead" or John Berryman, or simple, unchronicled people, like Mrs Ned:

"and my mother cried a long time
the evening Mrs. Ned died"

iv) Elegies

This book of Egan's brings together poems and sequences from different periods of his work. It is divided into seven sections with varied subject matter but

they all have one thing in common - their note of elegy or remembrance. Elegies, which comes from the Greek, *elegos*, a song of mourning, is common in most European literatures from the time of the Greeks. It is particularly notable in English literature through certain poems of Milton, "Lycidas"; Shelley, "Adonais"; Arnold, "Thyrsis"; and Tennyson, "In Memoriam"; which are laments for dead friends: Henry King, John Keats, A. H. Clough and Hallam, respectively. But "elegies" can also be laments for the passing of a way of life, like Grey's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard", and the term can be stretched even to include parts of Goldsmith's "Deserted Village". In Spanish poetry, of course, Juan Ramón Jiménez's *Elegías puras, Elegías intermedias y Elegías lamentables* are particularly noteworthy.

The first Section of Egan's book, Elegies, "For a Father", published previously as a sequence: *A Song For My Father* (1989), is the longest and most concentrated. It is about the poet's father, Tom Egan, who died of cancer. Divided into 18 sub-sections, the last two of which are titled: "Cornamagh" and "Epitaph", respectively, it goes backwards and forwards in time to highlight the most memorable, tender or heart-wringing moments in the life of the subject and the effect on the family, especially the author, of the downward graph of the devastating illness. Like classical elegies, it begins in a pastoral setting - a family lunch in the open air captured forever in a photograph - and ends in a cemetery, in Cornamagh, in Athlone. But the pastoral tranquility is shattered in the second sub-section with the description of the hospital ward as the patient's heart-beats were monitored like bleeps on the screen. The alternation is continued practically continuously in the succeeding sub-sections as we are shown tender moments of togetherness to be followed by harrowing episodes of the hospital or the effects of the illness.

The second Section, "For a People", is overtly concerned with poems of denunciation and those with a marked political content. As we move in search for the peace expressed in the first poem, we are taken to places where violence and injustices are still the order of the day; Northern Ireland, Pretoria, Hiroshima, Phillipines, or where history leaves its bloody mark; "In the Holocaust of Autumn", "Dún An Óir", "The Great Blasket", and we are returned at the end of the section to the garden of peace and remembrance which each bears within himself and which both Kavanagh and Machado expressed so well, the scene of one's youth.

The succeeding Sections: "For The Artist", "For Friends", and "For A Child" are practically all concerned with people known to the author who have died. In these the note is truly "elegiac", less harrowing than the first Section and less denunciatory than the second Section. As we have commented on many of the titles in previous paragraphs there is no need to repeat what we have said. Suffice it to say that particularly in the two last-mentioned Sections as well as the Section titled

"For Things", the Midland landscape and atmosphere is everywhere lovingly celebrated:

"and since the spirit alone is real
we shall all meet again in
some other Monasterevin

summer will be rising along the Barrow
with trees and high fields
poppies a lark's song climbing"

As we say "amen" to that, we bring to an end this Introduction, which, extended as it is, can hope to be no more than a first step to the understanding and appreciation of Desmond Egan's work. The Bibliography which follows shows that as well as having written extensively himself, Egan has been the subject of many critical studies, interviews, etc. We think that it is about time that his work began to be better known in Spain, which is the reason why we have written this introduction.

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