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Ailbhe McDaid

‘Breakfast-time back home’¹?: ‘New Irish’ poets Greg Delanty and Eamonn Wall.

The ‘winds of change’ blowing through Irish society in the second half of the twentieth century are well-documented. (See Brown 2004; Ferriter 2004; Lee 1989.) It might be argued however that, rather than clearing away collective cobwebs, these winds merely disturbed the latent dust of economic and social conservatism, leading to a resurgence of emigration that ravaged Ireland at the end of the eighties. This paper examines emigration to America during that period, with specific reference to the New Irish generation. The article will set out the context and history of twentieth-century emigration in Ireland and America. The poetry of emigration, in particular Irish-American poetry, is considered and the paper questions the peculiar void of (e)migrant poetry in the Irish canon. Finally, this article conducts an in-depth analysis of the poetry of Greg Delanty and Eamonn Wall and probes the ways their individual migrations affect their work.

‘Nothing But the Same Old Story’²?: Late twentieth-century emigration

The shifting fortunes of the Irish nation during the latter half of the twentieth century are evident through the prism of emigration. The economic stability of the sixties and membership of the EU had engineered massive reductions in emigration figures, leading to a total reversal of migration trends during the seventies, but by 1989 a record 44,000 people emigrated, a near ten-fold increase on figures for a decade earlier (Centre for Migration Studies). For many, this marked a symbolic regression to the well-established paradigm of emigration as a necessary, inevitable aspect of Irish life. Contemporaneous

¹ ‘Breakfast-time back Home’ is the title of a 1994 advertisement for Galtee Foods which captured the popular impression of the ‘New Irish’ emigration experience through its depiction of success, integration and prosperity, balanced by the requisite nostalgia for ‘home’.

² ‘Nothing but the Same Old Story’ is the title of the final track from Paul Brady’s *Hard Station* (1983). The entire album, and the song ‘Nothing but the Same Old Story’ in particular, considers the choices, chances, and consequences of contemporaneous emigration.

advertising campaigns, such as Aer Lingus's *You're Home* and ESB's *Going Back* deployed traditional and familiar tropes of parting and reuniting, promotion of familial bonds, and the comforting images of home, thereby reinforcing entrenched attitudes to emigration as it reemerged toward the end of the 1980s.

For the generation of emigrants leaving, the reality of their experience was, in fact, rather different to that of previous waves. While the emigrants continued to be drawn from across the spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds, Donagh O'Malley's 1967 free education scheme meant that the vast majority (up to 85% according to Dowling Almeida's 1992 study) had attained a minimum of second-level schooling. Furthermore, the Ireland into which these future emigrants were born was a modernizing society, a member-state of the European Economic Community, with the prospect of a new prosperity via the *Programme for Economic Expansion*. These changes brought about "new social and economic circumstances [that] began to loosen the hold of old ideologies on the minds of Irish people" (Brown 2004), contributing to a sense that the spectre of emigration, which had haunted generations since the Famine, might finally be exorcised during the sixties and seventies.

The Irish in America

That lull in departures had a profound effect on Irish citizens in Ireland, but its repercussions were equally acute across the Atlantic. Traditionally Irish neighbourhoods diminished as social mobility saw older immigrants moving out to the suburbs, while the regular reinforcements by new arrivals that had sustained these communities for generations ceased arriving during the sixties and seventies. By the arrival of the New Irish (the appellation given to the late eighties/early nineties generation), such distinctly Irish neighbourhoods no longer existed. Other Irish-American social structures were also weakened by the fracture in the diasporic lineage, especially sports and music clubs, religious groups, and county organisations. Perhaps most significantly, while the New Irish emigrants were conscious of their role within the historical epic of emigration, they

also conceived of their experience as different to the unidirectional migration of the past. Participation in established emigrant activities in order to develop and sustain expatriate relations was seen by many of this generation as futile, since they believed that these New Irish emigrations were temporary, lucrative, short-term, and ultimately, if so desired, revocable.

Irish emigration tends to be conceived of as homogenous throughout history, and there remains a reluctance to acknowledge that the delicate societal shifts on both sides of the journey impact upon individual and collective experiences of emigration and immigration. From the mass of New Irish migrants emerge the distinctive poetic voices of Greg Delanty and Eamonn Wall to narrate the process. These poets set to examining just how one can fit into the historical narrative of emigration while simultaneously acknowledging the altered conditions of their generational circumstance. In doing so, both poets face the challenge of retaining the artistic integrity of their creative process while acknowledging the socio-cultural context of migrant life. The academic neglect of Irish poets based outside of Ireland has been described by Michael Coady (1995) as an “extraordinary lacuna” in critical discourse, and nowhere is this so evident as in the silence surrounding Irish poets in America. Since the New Irish generation, significant numbers of poets continue to live outside Ireland, to such a widespread extent that any future interpretation of a ‘national literature’ will be crucially compromised without acknowledging the trend of poetic migration.

‘Good songs but bad verse’? – Irish poetry in America

The phrase ‘Irish-American poetry’ has negative associations for myriad reasons, most simply due to the perception of Irish-American verse as clichéd and uncreative. Charles Fanning declares that ‘the problem has been an endemic blight of programmatic melancholy or bravado that emerged from the experience and perception of forced exile. The stock-in-trade of Irish-American poetry has been the immigrant’s lament for a lost, idealized homeland and the patriot’s plea for Irish freedom from British oppression. Such

materials make good songs but bad verse that exhibits simplistic strains of nostalgia and righteous indignation.’ (Fanning 1998, 4) This classification of Irish-American poetry is based on the historical categorisation of the Irish as a ‘victim’ diaspora, in accordance with Robin Cohen’s (2008) five categories of diaspora, which also include labour, imperial, culture and trade. When one considers the statistic that 80% of all Irish emigrants in the nineteenth century crossed the Atlantic carrying and sharing the trauma of the Famine and its aftermath, it is perhaps unsurprising that the enshrined cultural memory amongst Irish-Americans is melancholic. Given that later waves of emigration favoured England, this cultural memory remained unchallenged through much of the twentieth-century. In her essay “Migration and Diaspora”, Mary J. Hickman argues for Cohen’s typologies of diaspora as providing “the means of differentiating discrete phases of the Irish migrant stream” (Hickman 2005, 120), and this essay supports the thesis that the flow of migration to America ought be distinguished and delineated as a set of different waves, acknowledging profound differences as well as obvious similarities.

The other complicating issue is that, despite the numbers of Irish writers who have resided in America for temporary or prolonged periods, there seems to be a reluctance amongst these poets to engage on a profound level with the United States, and with the history and ongoing reality of Irish emigration to that country. In this context, Terence Brown notes the surprising absence of the “actual and psychic landscape” of North America in recent poetry (2008, 42). This is perhaps not unrelated to the dominant perception of Irish-American poetry as trite, for it might be argued that one reason why Irish poets hesitate to write about emigration is the fear of trapping themselves within those ‘stock-in-trade’ themes. These preconceived notions of emigration have thereby resulted in a poetic hush around the real detail of living in America as an Irish emigrant. The personal, physical, psychological and philosophical challenges of New Irish migration, as testified by Delanty and Wall’s poetry, are complex and hybrid, and are infinitely more intractable than traditional ballad-style poetry allows. The early poetry of Eamonn Wall and Greg Delanty offers a glimpse of the lived life of the emigrant in America at the end of the twentieth century. Both poets are intensely aware of the

historical narrative into which they write and struggle to create a personal language in which the enormities of individual e/im-migration can be expressed. The concerns, both shared and discrete, of existing between cultures and countries dominate these poets' early work but, as this paper will show, Delanty and Wall inherit different burdens from the long history of Irish emigration to America.

'Lucky enough to have come this way': Greg Delanty's America

Delanty's poetry offers a unique glimpse of the evolving emigrant condition, tracing as it does the poet's conflicted reactions to the circumstances of his emigration and his attempts to poetically manage his emotionally-charged concerns. His work is considered by fellow Irishman-in-America Colum McCann as a catalogue "of an entire generation and its relationship to exile. He is the laureate of those of us who have gone" (2006). In spite of the occasionally sentimental or even clichéd tone of some early poems, Delanty's poetry offers a commitment to strong imagery and sustained motifs, with his refreshing voice emerging especially in the more mature works. His skill at working within formal structures such as the elegy and sonnet, as well as his ambition to move beyond those forms towards a looser style, is just one aspect of his development and maturation as a poet coming to terms with his split existence over three decades. This paper must however limit itself to his early collections, namely *Cast in Fire* (1986), *Southward* (1992), *American Wake* (1995) and *The Hellbox* (1998), which document the poet's initial engagement with emigration and its associations.³

Delanty departed his home city of Cork for America in 1986, the year his first collection was published. Composed of poems of farewell, separation and displacement, the volume establishes the dominant themes of his early work. 'Leavetaking' suggests the foundational dialectic of his aesthetic in the closing image of the poem: "[b]oth of you waving, eternally, to each other." The picture speaks to a duality of self and sense, and further dualities - of here and there, of home and away, of familiarity and estrangement -

³ Delanty, Greg *Collected Poems 1986-2006* (London: Dedalus Books, 2007), hitherto referred to as *CP*.

present themselves repeatedly in the poet's work. The opening lines from 'Home from Home' reach for a coherent identity by striving to synchronise the individual with the island:

Perhaps now I understand the meaning of home
for now I'm in a place, but it is not in me
and could you zip me open you'd see,
between the odd break in the fuming clouds,
an island shaped like a Viking's bearded head,
gasping & floundering in the invading sea,
with its crown crookedly stitched,
looking as though it will never heal. (CP, 23)

This attempted portrayal of harmony is undermined by the struggling, fractured images of the internal island and by the violence and ferocity of the language. Duality persists, even within the poet himself, and 'Home from Home' suggests an identity more discordant than the poet might overtly admit.

Delanty's deliberate personal identification with Ireland is a strategy of expressing his belonging as a means of mediating the psychic dislocation of emigration. The poet is distressed by the prospect of not belonging to either home- or host-country, of "being half and halfed" and the poem 'The Yank' is a key work as it expresses his developing doubts, not least in the dedication 'to the Irish-Irish'. These fears are directly addressed later in 'The Hellbox':

When push comes to shove, more than anything
I didn't want to feel a foreigner
In my own, what would you call it, homeland,
Or just the *Old Country*[.] (Delanty 2007, 11)

One way Delanty neutralises this anxiety is by performing his identity through

distinctive vernacularisation: he uses intensely local, Cork-city slang as an indicator of cultural affiliation. When he “let slip *restroom* or *gas station*” in ‘The Yank’, the poet is ridiculed by his community. Language locates, and simultaneously invalidates, sites and societies of belonging, and so through his poetic vocabulary in *The Hellbox*, and later in *The Blind Stitch*, Delanty defines his membership of a very particular community through his deft linguistic touch.

... Outsiders,

especially those from da Pale look down
dare snobby proboscises on our corker Corkonian
dat’s not just the closest ding in English to Irish,
but as nare to Elizabedan English freisin[.] (CP, 105)

Delanty’s insecurity around language and legitimacy signals a broader anxiety of identity and belonging in Ireland and America. His early poetry sees his attempt to locate himself within the emigrant narrative through an invocation of established tropes and familiar imagery. Indeed, certain poems from *American Wake* might be said to draw upon those clichés of Irish-American poetry decried by Charles Fanning. It is in this that we can perceive the entirely particular challenge of the New Irish emigrant, for Delanty’s poetry captures the collision between old and new. He deploys received paradigms of emigration in such poems as ‘The Emigrant’s Apology’, ‘Home from Home’, ‘On the Renovation of Ellis Island’, and ‘America’ in order to invoke a historical lineage for his individual experience. In seeing himself as one with “those shades [who] have disembarked/on this island after the limbo/of Ellis Island”, Delanty appropriates an identity from the legacy of archetypal emigrant experience (CP, 83) This assumed identity soon reveals itself as unsustainable, with the poet confessing in ‘The Lost Way’ to finding himself “wincing at the word *emigrant* / that, once uttered, seems to filch me of myself / the way they say a camera steals a soul.” (CP, 104)

The historical narrative of migration to the United States that offered comfort and accommodation to the younger poet becomes all-consuming, bleaching the poet of his

individuality by blending his story into millions of others. On behalf of “a bunch of greencard Irish” he declares “we’ll not play / the harp backward now”, a dismissal of those tired tropes in favour of playing “the harp right way round” in order to “reveal another side of the story” (CP,109). Delanty comes to address the complicated situation of the New Irish experience and the difficulties of using a vocabulary borrowed, not earned. Not only are the New Irish split between Ireland and America, but they must also try to carve out an authentic late-20th century identity from inherited emigrant representations that reflect a different time. Delanty, as a New Irish poet, must negotiate his alienation from the homeland *and* address the instability of the emigrant identity into which he has been delivered.

“I eschew such mimicry”, Delanty announces in ‘The Hellbox’ (CP, 118) and, sure enough, his later volumes, beginning with *The Blind Stitch*, begin to develop personal metaphors and an idiosyncratic vocabulary of his own. By moving beyond the borrowed language of traditional emigration towards a more intimate, while still universal, meditations on belonging and loss, Delanty maintains his individuality and reinvigorates the historical narrative. The essence of his poetic maturing is captured in these key lines from ‘The Hellbox’:

I want to home in on the newness, strangeness, foreignness
of everything, returning it to itself, its exile from itself,
the perpetual simultaneous goings and comings of life
while remaining always human, open, up front. (CP, 118)

“the busy work of forgetting”: Eamonn Wall’s migrations

Like Delanty, Wall’s poetry also demonstrates a kind of coming-to-terms with the realities of being an emigrant to America, a maturation that requires moving beyond inherited perceptions towards a personal understanding of the emigrant condition. But while Delanty’s poetry is underscored by departure, Eamonn Wall approaches his

experience from the opposite direction, as an immigrant in a new country rather than an emigrant sundered from his homeland. Although part of the same wave of 1980s emigration from Ireland, Wall is profoundly aware of his place within the huge arc of human movement to and within the United States. In his essay “Irish Voices, American Writing, and Green Cards”, the poet reflects on his shared “common bond – excitement mixed with loss – with all the other people living in America but born outside its borders” (Wall 1999). *Dyckman-200th Street* (1994), Wall’s first volume, sees the poet trying on the same emigrant identity initially fitted by Delanty by drawing upon stereotypical images in poems such as ‘Potato Poem 1845’, ‘The Class of 1845’, ‘A Christmas Card from Ireland’. Even from this early stage, however, the poet acknowledges the ways in which he is simultaneously immersed and inhibited by that very inheritance. The complex blend of antipathy and affection binding his work is encapsulated in ‘Men Sitting on the Bridge’:

the great mythology these
men present the walker with is useless, but I carry their
dumbness in my bag. Across the vacant sea.
Exile is death, Octavia Paz has said, but so too is this.

The poet is bound by his cultural heritage; useless as it may be, it cannot be discarded. Both the poet and “the great mythology” are diminished by the gap engendered by cross-cultural miscomprehension. The “great mythology” might well refer to the emigration narrative which has proven for an ill fit for Wall’s personal experience. The inadequacy of the Irish landscape to accommodate his poetic vision is made clear in ‘Courtown Strand’, as the poet, on return to Wexford with his American partner, finds himself muted by once-familiar scenes.

In this unnatural place
which I wanted to show you
there was nothing to compare you to.

I even tried hard to build your cheekbones
 from the debris of an old boat. (*Dyckman-200th Street*, 37)

Wall finds his Irish heritage stifling but America is not simply constructed as a liberating corollary, for the poet is equally distressed by the bureaucratic systems he encounters there. *Dyckman-200th Street* sets out the poet's "stunned ambivalence" at the processes of naturalisation required by the United States. So begins Wall's ongoing identification with other minorities in America whose voices, experiences and histories have been suppressed during the processes of migration, and this empathy will persist as a defining feature of his work. Wall is less concerned with being an emigrant than with being an immigrant, is less preoccupied with a lost homeland than with an eternally strange host-country, and he draws on a contemporaneous community of outsiders from all over the world instead of identifying with historic generations of Irish emigrants. The poem 'Outside the Tall Blue Building: Federal Plaza' features the offices of Immigration and Naturalisation Services as a modern-day Ellis Island. The dismantling of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* sculpture in 1989 becomes a chilling metaphor for the treatment meted out to "these dumb aliens" within the system of proving oneself worthy of legal entry to America. Wall's meditation on art, on value and cultural currency, on criticism and authorisation, considers the processes of approval entrenched in immigration, and the impossibility of breaking down a life into the answers required by the different sections of an application form. Just as Serra's installation art relies on a conceptual relationship to its specific environment, experiences cannot be reconfigured into an official document.

How will they take this sculpture away?
 You can't strip metal limb from limb
 apportioning moments spent by a river in another place
 to section ten, line four, please print or type:
 once I stared at your uncovered breasts,
 often they dried me in huge towels to have me clean

for Sunday mass. (*Dyckman-200th Street*, 12)

The sculpture functions as a symbol for the immigrants inside Federal Plaza, who give the United States its distinctive multi-culturality. Despite “the federal employees [who] do not like to look at it”, the sculpture is defining, in the same way as immigrants characterise America. The final lines of the poem refer ironically to both the artwork and the immigrant community: “when I came downtown to Federal Plaza it was this/eyesore which told me where I was”. His growing dissatisfaction with America and its hostility to immigrants finds its way into Wall’s poetic voice which, like Delanty’s in ‘To Mary Robinson’, occasionally undertakes a kind of critical interrogation on behalf of his community of immigrants. There is a certain resentment in the poet’s question in ‘New Words’: “have we given up our right to name / by walking through the electric doors / ... / into the gasoline air of Logan Airport?”

Wall’s relocation from the East Coast into the heart of the Midwest forms the imaginative journey of his next collection *Iron Mountain Road* (1997), and is a kind of second emigration for the poet. It is this journey that allows him to address and finally resolve (in a fashion) the fundamental tensions of his displacements. Wall is profoundly affected by the communities he encounters while travelling through the Black Hills of South Dakota. His excursions pushing the old frontier draw upon the American dream that seeks realisation in the ‘undiscovered’ lands to the west. The westerly impulse is complicated by Wall’s empathy for the indigenous peoples of these regions. The poet’s feelings of guilt at complicity in being a tourist are heightened by his awareness of the disrupted spiritual presences and the layered, troubled histories laid down in the dusty earth. Wall is careful to place the Irish experience within the infinitely more vast framework of international migration, and never privileges his inherited historical narrative over the others’ stories. In journeying to the Midwest, the version of history that places Irish immigrants as oppressed or victimized is complicated when the poet becomes aware of the complicity of the Irish in the destruction of native American communities:

we Irish know these bitter
woes and we sent our bitter
hardened hands to
build the railroad but
little did we know and
little did we care
our own despair enormous[.] (*Iron Mountain Road*, 54)

The historical forebears are not entirely forgiven or forgotten, as the poet goes on to remind us he has “found great spirits frightened” on his journeys on the Iron Mountain Road. This deliberate contextualisation of the Irish experience within the trajectory of American history obliges the reader to move beyond the sentimental emigrant narrative to acknowledge the reprehensible complicity of the newly-arrived Irish in racist and destructive practices.

Wall is drawn to the complex mingling of indigenous and industrial stories, to contested authority and confused allegiance, precisely because these complex stories have echoes of his own experience. Furthermore, the reverberations of collective emigrant and immigrant stories captivate Wall’s imaginings of the prairie’s past. The haunted landscapes of the American West are peopled by the ghosts of those stories; displaced natives, plucky pioneers, aimless wanderers. There is something of the poet in each of these figures, and his ability to find a shared essence of humanity gives a universality to his work. Wall’s migration takes him beyond the borders of the inherited narratives of Irish emigration and open out to a globalised, almost postmodern, comprehension of the multiple movements and memories of contemporary culture. The poet finds a certain liberation in this realisation, and in his ability to find a link to the landscape through his wife and daughter. Feminine figures are constructed as of the earth, and it is via these women that the poet can develop a rapport of his own with this new land of Midwestern America. His American-born wife enables the poet to navigate the geography of his new found country.

I trace from the
backs of your knees to your highest
vertebrae the cities of this state
from Omaha all the way to Chadron. (*Iron Mountain Road*, 5)

The easy synchronicity between land and local, between his wife and her homeland, is intimately inscribed as the curves of the female body and the pioneer-poet can traverse unfamiliar ground led by his wife. 'Freewheeling by the Platte River: A Song' can be read in conversation with 'Courtown Strand', for in this later poem, the poet resolves his crisis of simile:

When I woke this Wednesday your hair
was spread on the pillow like the
many channels of the Platte River. (*Iron Mountain Road*, 5)

Likewise, in 'Father and Daughter: Nebraska', his daughter is characterised as of the earth, essential and elemental.

Take it all away and
left will be shadows of trees,
ice & snow, birdseed,
a dancing child. (*Iron Mountain Road*, 31)

She is, in various poems, salmon-like, a coyote-child who "belongs to the woods"; he addresses her as his link to this American landscape. "Blue-jeaned girl, barretted hair,/you are all I have – snow and ice,/trees and music." This connection between his local-born family and the land is a 'fantastic language' which he cannot speak, yet he is captivated by the 'wild flowers with names so gorgeous/I cannot bear to hear you say them.' Wall is

beginning to find a way to relate, interpret and personalise the unfamiliar – the immigrant settling into his new space. The importance of land in the Irish tradition persists in Wall's work even as it unfolds in other places. The prairie offers a corresponding myth to the bog, as a repository of hidden stories, and by uncovering those lost narratives, the poet's presence is validated. His imaginative repossessions underwrite his physical investment in this country and its history and future, for the poet is eager to establish his own legitimacy. Despite all this, a residual anxiety remains, in his rumination in 'Yellow Band' he wonders '[w]ho can say to me you don't belong - pictures hung, / boxes folded in the basement.'

Following the maps laid out for him by his family, Wall is able to conduct a conversation of his own with the landscape of the American West, a dialogue fuelled by an urge to bilocate within the work. 'Driving to Kearney, Nebraska' depicts how the poet's two worlds blend together, the terrain returning the poet's imagination to Ireland, where "the past is as / bright as wounds opened by Hank / / Williams's songs". 'Kearney, Nebraska' recalls "Rostrevor, Co. / / Down" and "Athenry, / County Galway" in an impressionistic, fractured fashion, while 'Reverie: The Dublin-Rosslare Train' also employs a similar technique of intertwining of past with present, memory with impression, the actual with the induced.

...And I

remember last year driving from Omaha, Nebraska, to
 Custer, South Dakota,
 thinking as I saw the Nebraska Sandhills for the first time
 that I was once
 again in Ireland. Low hills, tufts of grass and if
 I keep on
 driving, I'll hit the sea somewhere between Courtown and
 Cahore. (*Iron Mountain Road*, 14)

The fluctuating allegiances and anxieties of immigrant life demand to be constantly (re)negotiated, and Wall's poetry can be read as an examination of the mutability of

(e)migrant identity which affects how the poet gauges the past as well as the present. 'Finding a Way Home' demonstrates the impermanence of the ongoing quest for certainty – the title conceding the impossibility of any definite in its choice of 'a' rather than 'the'. Dissolving the borders between his Irish and American consciousness "as the road you travel / and the road you dream merge like / the numbers of the interstate", Eamonn Wall's metaphor of the interstate is appropriate indeed for a New Irish pioneer-poet.

Conclusion

An evolving, fluid and nebulous experience, emigration is not easily classified or defined. The only inherent absolute is that it is never homogenous, neither for individuals nor generations. The New Irish experience in America, as mediated through the poetry of Wall and Delanty, offers a glimpse of the impact of the 'winds of change' on emigrant lives. Globalisation, mobility and postnationalism affect relations with both home- and host-countries, and cause a shift in the balances of national identity, displacement and belonging. The weight of historical narrative bears down on Irish poets across the board during this period of profound social change, and Delanty and Wall's negotiations around the emigration burden offer an interesting tangential view on how artists in Ireland deal with a similarly laden heritage. By attempting to understand the subtle difficulties of emigration, we can only improve our comprehension of the poetry of migration that seems to fold into a black hole at the centre of the Irish canon. By addressing the early migrations of the New Irish poets Eamonn Wall and Greg Delanty, this paper initiates the essential process of poetic recuperation that the changing experience of emigration has come to demand.

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