

GOOD WILL ~~BAD~~ PRACTICE

An Open Letter from Ghetto na Gaeilge by Caitlín Nic Íomhair

2016, *annus horribilis* though it was in many ways, saw the mending of a few fences between Irish- and English-language writing camps. It was another year of being overlooked with the best will possible by the mainstream scene – column inches shrank in the *Irish Times* as did shelf space in bookshops, Irish writers were ineligible for major prizes, and I could go on. Yet there were still a few signs that we might be slowly moving towards inclusion.

Several high-calibre Irish writing journals (*Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Gorse*) have appointed Irish-language editors of late, a move as welcome as it is overdue. Major Irish writers like Máirtín Ó Cadhain and Seán Ó Ríordáin are finally turning heads now that their work is available in translation. The publication of Louis de Paor's landmark bilingual anthology *Leabhar na hÁthghabhála / The Book of Repossession* was a highlight, at last providing a just-about-portable canon for 100 years of poetry as Gaeilge. That most of the translators were themselves English-language Irish poets was an extra bonus, signalling that our writing is not as irrelevant to our contemporaries as it at times feels when strolling through a bookshop or leafing through a festival catalogue. (*Cúirt*, *Irish Pages* and *Strokestown* continue to be honourable exceptions for whom Irish is not an afterthought).

The lowlights of the year, to me, were the continued failure by the Hennessy New Irish Writing prize (among others) to accept entries in Irish, and the ineligibility of a number of up-and-coming poets to classify as part of *PIR*'s Rising Generation on a technicality because chapbooks, one of the criteria, have never been financially worthwhile in Irish-language publishing

– nor, I'd imagine, in English-language publishing. Yet these are just two examples of a door unintentionally shut on Irish writers, not out of spite but out of carelessness. Bilingualism should, at this stage, be a fact of Irish life. It should be fitted into our infrastructure and forgotten about. It should be a reflex, not an afterthought. But it simply isn't.

The worst thing about all this is that it is nobody's fault. No one person is sitting in a room somewhere chuckling about the hurt feelings and bruised egos and conspiracy theories of Irish-language writers. We ghosts at the feast can't congregate *en masse* with placards. The grayscale truth is that editors and festival organisers inherit infrastructures and for the most part, they try their best to deal with us in good faith. Plus, of course, it is a touchy issue: not all editors speak Irish and none of us want to publicise the missing links in our competencies for the job at hand. But the bilingualism I envisage does not mean that editors and organisers have to speak Irish. It simply means that they have to take into account those who do *as a matter of course* – not just a token cúpla focal during Seachtain na Gaeilge or Easter week.

Wondering if my perception of shrinking public space for Irish was accurate or merely the chip on my shoulder acting up, I asked one journal, *Poetry Ireland Review*, for permission to snoop in their archives and examine issues of the journal since 2000. I focused more on *PIR* than any other journal for two reasons: firstly, because of its importance, and secondly, because I know *Poetry Ireland* is not anti-Irish language, so the fluctuations described below may show why a binglingual infrastructure is vital.

I do not like crunching numbers, and it would be in nobody's interest for poor poems to be published to achieve some artificial balance between Irish and English. Yet few of us would deny the importance of a milieu if good work is to emerge, and it seems to me that creating or curating that milieu is a big part of a journal's job. The *PIR* has excelled at doing so for English writers, but whether the same can be said for Irish writers seems to depend to a great extent on the editor at the time. Having a poem published in the review is an important landmark for an emerging poet and, as a believer and supporter of Éigse Éireann, I would like to see Irish-language poets cutting their teeth on the pages of the *Review*, something which doesn't seem to be happening at the moment.

What I found combing through old editions of the *PIR* is nothing surprising: particular editors were especially strong or weak on including Irish entries. Irish-language or bilingual writers were, again unsurprisingly, much more likely to publish poems and, more rarely, essays or reviews in Irish. Some editors performed so poorly that one would be tempted to interpret the lack of Irish as a statement. For the most part, though, it was as I suspected; haphazard, 'ann-agus-as', though never particularly strong on reviews or essays in Irish. 14 editions or one fifth of *PIRs* over 16 years featured no poetry in Irish. It is difficult to know what to do with this data, since editorial decisions are highly personal and we do not know how many submissions were received and refused on those occasions. It is conceivable that at least sometimes the poems submitted simply weren't good enough. Fair enough. I'm not suggesting an Irish quota, which would be tokenistic rather than inclusive and only lead to more raised eyebrows about the faceache Gaeilgeoirí (that's right, we know). I'm also told that the Irish submissions rate to *PIR* is extremely low at the moment, yet the numbers writing poetry in Irish are very healthy. A chronic lack of submissions from a particular

community of writers suggests to me a vote of no confidence or a disinclination to wait for the next favourable editor, something which is hopefully moot now that *PIR* has an Irish-language editor, currently Liam Carson.

I reiterate that I believe this is due more to carelessness than to spite, and so I would like to make a few simple suggestions to editors and organisers for how to proceed in building an infrastructure that includes us so that we don't need to be fed token gestures after a particularly barren period. 'Infrastructure' might sound high-falutin', but what it really means is that Irish writing becomes part of the process automatically, rather than at the whim of the current editor. Why shouldn't all journals of Irish writing have an Irish-language editor, if the general editor doesn't feel able to assess work in the dá theanga náisiúnta?

The whole nasty business of prizes could be resolved simply by the appointment of bilingual judges – the publication of *Leabhar na hAthghabhála* shows there are plenty. Boards, too, for journals, festivals, theatres and competitions, should contain a member who will be a point of contact for Irish media and writers groups, someone who will remind their colleagues of our existence without interfering with editorial decisions. Include Irish media and writing groups in press releases and scáip an scéal that Irish submissions are welcome. Embarrassing oversights like the Hennessy New Irish Writing Prize criteria could be automatically avoided if only these structures were in place, as would the risk of apologetically publishing a sub-par poem as a tokenistic gesture.

If you build it, tiocfaidh muid ...

Caitlín Nic Íomhair is a poet and lecturer in Irish at the University of Limerick. She has just completed a PhD on the poetry of Biddy Jenkinson.
