

# Bernard O'Donoghue: Poems

## **'Stay, you imperfect speakers'**

My dreams now increasingly move along  
the unmetalled roads of childhood: sometimes  
I'm already on them before I fall fully asleep,  
watching the camber edging round the corner.

But often too I dream of a wrecked room,  
unreclaimed when the old house was done up.  
There's mould on everything, and grass  
invading from the broken chutes outside.

My clear duty is every time the same:  
to clean it out, ready for the nextcomers.  
But then something intervenes to mean  
I don't need to prepare it after all.

And then I am back out on the roads again,  
at the turn by Julia's well, or further down  
by Dan Jims' boreen, by the primrose stream  
that Dominic dammed to make pools for his cows:

where I once really met a tinker couple  
trudging through the rain ahead of me.  
No matter how slow I walked, I couldn't fail  
to overtake them, when they stood and watched

a donkey grazing by the verge, a ravelled rope  
around his neck. The woman drew her shawl aside,  
showing her face, and questioned me directly:  
'Do you know is anyone the own of him?'

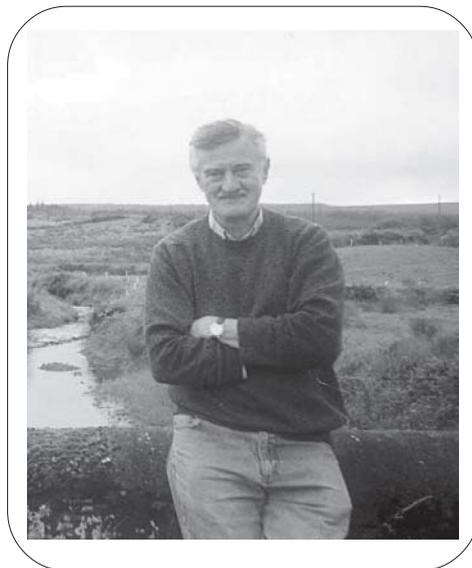
## **Amicitia**

*to Gemma from Alice*

When Dante's life-and-death love Beatrice, his grace-conferring lady, died, they sought to stanch his grief by marrying him to Gemma Donati, his close friend's kinswoman. But the story goes he was not comforted, even after the birth of their four children, forbidding her to visit him in exile.

Yes, we know these tales of unrequited love and lifelong hang-ups. And we also know what truth they have. A guess based on ourselves is more persuasive: that he kept in touch through friends and relatives; that he wrote to her, saying how wearisome it is to climb unfriendly stairs, and how salt-bitter the taste

of food prepared by other hands. And that the memory that had the sweetest poignancy was themselves, young, going out at student weekends to eye the talent along the Ponte Vecchio.



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## From Seamus Heaney to Bernard O'Donoghue: Visions of the Real and the Unreal Ireland

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### 1. Landscape

When I visited Ireland in the summer of 2002 I intended to meet the Cork poet, Bernard O'Donoghue, in Sligo, under the solemn shadow of Ben Bulbin mountain. It was not a difficult task. Professor Antonio Raúl de Toro had previously introduced me to the poet, during an academic event at the University of A Coruña, some months earlier. I resolved to devote my research period to the study of contemporary Irish poetry, perhaps because I had become greatly impressed by the words of the Nobel Prize Winner, Seamus Heaney, pronounced during the ceremony in which he was named doctor *honoris causa* by the University of A Coruña, in 2000. Heaney was, in fact, my first real link with Irish culture. Still today, I think that reading *Death of a Naturalist* for the first time contributed very strongly to the decisions I took as a university student. Bernard O'Donoghue was in Sligo that summer, as the Director of the Yeats Summer School, and I found that attending the lectures would be the best way to have a good opportunity of interviewing him. Not only did I have the chance to listen to his profound analysis of Yeats's poems, but also I discovered that O'Donoghue was a very approachable and supportive person. Every day we met at The Silver Swan, before the seminars. The summer afternoons were filled with metallic sounds and murmuring voices but also with proper names such as Dante, Knockduff, Beara, Shrone, Finn, Fuller, Dan Riordan, Dafydd ap Gwilym or Heaney himself. This is how I got the chance of becoming immersed in both Yeats and Bernard O'Donoghue's poetry almost at the same time.

Some days later, once the summer school had finished, I went back to Dublin and phoned Bernard again. I asked him if I could go down to Cork to visit his literary territory. After so many conversations in Sligo, I already knew that most of his poetry was based on the energy contained in the native place, the luminosity of childhood memories and the mythical

interpretation of apparently meaningless domestic events. I felt I needed to see and touch the real world in which his literary world had been constructed. As warm as always, he said of course I could. And so I went. It was a pleasant train journey. Bernard was waiting for me at the railway station, in Millstreet, with a broad smile, in heavy rain that had been pouring for at least twenty-four hours. It was rather dark, but I noticed the thick greenery around, the lovely silence wrapping the day. He invited me to get in the car and drove to his country house for dinner. A winding road led us to a house among the trees, the place in which the O'Donoghues spend part of the summer, after the academic year in Oxford. This was in Knockduff, in Cullen, Cork, very close to the Kerry border.

Bernard seems to be very proud of being born there. He knows every single piece of land, he waves to the neighbours as he passes by their houses. Not many, indeed. Millstreet is the largest town and it is very close. But the countryside around Knockduff is picture-postcard Irish. Houses placed here and there, some rather surprising blue mountains floating in the distance, the Paps, the Blackwater River meandering across the fields. Some peat piled in the shed and a warm welcome in every house. Bernard spent the whole next day, together with Heather, his wife, and Tom and Josie, the kids, taking me to some of the most relevant literary landmarks in the area. I felt inserted in the landscape that is part both of their lives and his poetry. I discovered the place in which the Iron Age Boat had been buried at Caumatruish. I also went to Shrone (*An Cathair*, in Irish, which means 'The city'), a place containing rather enigmatic remembrances, fruitfully used as literary material. And I went past the Paps, perhaps two of the most famous mountains in Ireland, and the Kerry border, and also spotted the scattered churches, some built by emigrants to America. I entered

the local pub, and talked to the locals, and saw the plaque honouring Padraig O’Keeffe, a local fiddle player, and walked the same road Bernard walked to school when he was a child. I suddenly felt that the well-known concept of Irish Parochialism could be represented by all those elements, as it was described by Kavanagh: “Parochialism had demanded that the writer be rooted in a local community so as to represent it authentically” (Kavanagh, 1996: xxiv). Bernard O’Donoghue, like Heaney, for instance, or like Kavanagh himself, is a poet firmly rooted in his native ground, despite living in Oxford for the major part of the year. His poetry is telluric in a sense, though probably not as much as Heaney’s. He cultivates a softer kind of poetry, less solemn, rather ironical at times, warm and compassionate. But the so-called Irish ‘sense of place’, as described by Seamus Heaney in *Preoccupations*, is always present in his lines.

## 2. The poet

Bernard O’Donoghue has become an acclaimed poet, both in Ireland and England, after publishing five major poetry collections. His popularity increased thanks to *Gunpowder*, which was awarded the Whitbread Poetry Prize in 1995. His first book (apart from some literary studies, and a small collection published in 1984, *Razorblades & Pencils*, now out of print) was *Poaching Rights* (The Gallery Press). Since then, he has published regularly, but keeping his own pace. *The Weakness* (1991), the aforementioned *Gunpowder* (1995), *Here nor There* (1999) and *Outliving* (2003), all published by Chatto & Windus. He is preparing *Selected Poems* for 2007, and his translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has just come out in Penguin Classics (August 2006). O’Donoghue is also the author of one of the most celebrated studies on Seamus Heaney’s work, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry*. Though we’ll refer to the profound relations between Heaney and O’Donoghue’s literary, and even personal, territories below, I would like to emphasize the relevance of this book. It gives the reader a quite uncommon approach to Heaney’s poetry based on an

accurate and complex dissection of the linguistic elements present in Seamus Heaney’s poems. Bernard O’Donoghue, despite the acclaim awarded to his poetry, insists on maintaining a low profile in the literary landscape, considering himself more an academic than a writer. He is an academic, of course. He works currently as a professor of Medieval Studies at Wadham College, Oxford, and has published numerous and noted critical pieces. He is also a regular contributor to a wide number of well-known cultural publications such as *The Times Literary Supplement*, and also takes his seat at poetry readings throughout the year.

O’Donoghue represents, together with many other Irish poets and scholars, the not very uncommon sentiment of being in a “no place”, as he says in ‘Westering Home’, a poem included in *Here nor There*. He refers to the experience of spending the academic year in England and returning to Ireland just for the holidays. Yet O’Donoghue speaks here in a more general sense. There is a strong mythical bias behind his serene description of displacement, or dystopia, as can be easily proved by reading ‘Nechtan’, the last lines of the second poem in the same collection: “so now we are fated / to sail for ever in the middle seas, outcast / alike from the one shore to the other”. Probably, this is the reason why Irish poets tend to insist on the importance of the so-called ‘sense of place’. For those living far from their childhood land, language becomes the real place to live in. As Eavan Boland said: “That is what language is: / a habitable grief” (Boland, 1988). So place is both physical and metaphysical, a chronotope, in Bakhtinian terms, in which time and place form a singular entity: “The aura of place imposes itself on one poet’s imagination”, as Ron Schuchard explains in his introduction to *The Place of Writing* (Heaney, 1989: 4).

O’Donoghue, however, looks back to his early Irish years with a non-confessional perspective. It is true that most of his poems deal with small anecdotes of past and present domestic events, many of them belonging to his Irish experience: anecdotes concerning apparently meaningless moments of our existence, which often develop into unpredictable, even frightening situations. Bernard uses the common materials of daily life,

reproduces small fragments of conversations which presumably took place in very concrete circumstances, but each single word, object or gesture has to be taken into account. We know the magic of the place can be revealed in the most unexpected moment. Sometimes, a mythical energy intervenes and transforms the daily events into symbolic and transcendental entities. Solemnity, however, never appears. Bernard O'Donoghue contemplates the amazing facts of life and, using his elegant narrative style, tries to communicate to the reader his scepticism: absolute truths simply don't exist. His poetry is often an elegiac chant, a homage to the purity and beauty of the childhood territory, a remembrance of a bygone time in which the simplest things worked miracles. He knows, however, that real life is hard to understand. Robert Potts, in a critical article published in *The Guardian*, comments on O'Donoghue's literary personality in a very clear way: "... it is in the unfussy details that he gets to the heart of the significance of the smallest gestures and the quietest lives" (Potts 1999). And Michael O'Neill, who wrote in *The Times Literary Supplement*, reflects on O'Donoghue's tendency to lead us to find out the underlying tragedy:

O'Donoghue is most persuasive when his use of indirection and understatement connects with some latent emotional drama, and he reveals a dry-eyed, haunting compassion for suffering (O'Neill 1999).

As Peter McDonald has pointed out, "nothing in O'Donoghue's poetry is easy" (McDonald 1988: 106).

### 3. Myth and religion

I have pointed out that the celebration of place, as an icon of one's identity but also as a reservoir of memories, is quite common to many Irish poets. Religion and myth have also been inextricably linked to the concept of place. This is highly relevant in Ireland, for it contributed to the redefinition of reality after the tremendous impact of the colonizer. Irish places were charged with myths and religion, becoming emotional entities, space-time capsules in which common lore created a new cultural imaginary.

This task has mostly been carried out by poets. As Patrick Kavanagh once pointed out, "Ireland has a standing army of at least five thousand poets" (Cit by Thomas E. Kennedy, 1997). Yeats represents, of course, the solemn poet who redefines Irish cultural history by means of the so-called Celtic revival at the beginning of the twentieth century, bestowing on the Irish land a renewed epic and heroic background. However, it is Kavanagh who best represents the decisive transformation of the concept of 'sense of place': his defence of parochial universalism has been pivotal for the subsequent poets, namely Seamus Heaney. "Clay is the word, and clay is the flesh", Kavanagh says. This verse includes his commitment to his own home town, but also his communion with the Earth. It is a veritable telluric commitment, as we suggested above. A kind of pantheism encapsulated within the strict limits of County Monaghan. Religion recovers here its etymological meaning: *Religare*, meaning to fasten or to bind. This devotional attitude to the soil, to the Mother Earth, as Kavanagh puts it, can be compared to a priestly rite. By doing so, the poet conveys to the audience the healing powers of nature, the landscape, the essentialism of the Irish soil to which he must be utterly attached for good. The poet performs a shamanic task consisting of a return to his native ground, it is a quest for ancient history and buried memories. Bringing the real (but hidden) Ireland to the surface implies digging in its mythical past and also a religious commitment with the Earth. So, myth and religion seem to act as complementary elements. The poet is able to bring the past to present, to heal the wounds of history, to redress and renovate the older injuries by means of language. This is exactly the task carried out by poets such as Seamus Heaney and, to some extent, by Bernard O'Donoghue.

Seamus Heaney, in his well-known collection of essays, *The Government of the Tongue*, writes: "poetry can be as potentially redemptive and possibly as illusory as love" (Heaney, xxii). In fact, Heaney's early poetry seems to share Kavanagh's view of poetry. His farm poems are also deeply attached to his native ground. The use of place names such as Mossbawn and Annahorish reveals his interest in recovering the essentials of ancient Ireland. Heaney writes

profusely about the importance of place-naming poems, the potentialities contained in the Gaelic geographical names, and also uses the soil, the bog, the turf as symbolic elements of connection with the ancestral country.

As a result, we can conclude that the mythical concept in Heaney's early poetry is connected with the emotional communion with his childhood territory. So it happens in Bernard O'Donoghue's poems. While Heaney uses symbolic elements to represent this ascetic, spiritual redressing of the native ground, such as buckets, water, the pump outside in the orchard, the sound of the pump itself, O'Donoghue returns to the winding roads of his childhood. He gathers small fragments of past stories and never-forgotten conversations which become meaningful when revisited in the present. Places such as Shrone, or Caumatruish, contain the energy and perhaps the power of healing. The same happens with the human beings who peopled the scenery of the early days and come back to tell their tales thanks to the poet's voice. Of course, all these elements are depicted with a special aura: the aura which can only be perceived by the eyes of a child. No doubt, Heaney will use language as a vehicle of collective purification, as an instrument which will allow him "[to make contact] with what lies hidden". As Irene Gilsenan has pointed out, making things come alive, restoring the past: "Language is seen as a source of renewal and rebirth, whereby past phenomena are not only recalled but also recreated in the liminal moment, and through the transforming energies of language are seen in a new way" (Gilsenan, 1999: 20). O'Donoghue remains attached to the task of a storyteller ready to discover the values of the unfamiliar. As Ian Sansom pointed out in his critical review of *Outliving*, published in *The Guardian*, "the poems are possessed of an eloquence which is not intrusive: they are not grandiloquent" (*The Guardian*, 14 June 2003). Alan Brownjohn, writing for *The Sunday Times*, goes even further:

His writing is simple and unadorned. His hospital scenes, the truthful anecdotes that convey a peculiarly Irish sense of exile, and the unapologetic nostalgia gain by being truthful and

plain. (*The Sunday Times*: 11 January, 2004).

Though belonging to different Irish scenarios, and currently writing in a softer and less vindictive tone than Heaney, Bernard O'Donoghue's poetry is also informed by the interpretation of daily life through the parameters of myth and the influence of religion. As we have said above, O'Donoghue's poetry is mostly narrative, probably determined by his teaching of English Medieval Literature at the University of Oxford. His context is modest; his background is hardly historical, but domestic. However, echoes from Heaney's interpretation of myth and religion can be detected in several of O'Donoghue's poems. One of these poems is 'The Iron Age Boat at Caumatruish', in fact one of O'Donoghue's favourites. This poem, in my opinion, constitutes a magnificent example of how myth and religion can be found deeply attached to Irish roots. In addition, it is a good example of how often we need both interpretations to get the whole picture. I have to admit that there is also an emotional element present at this point. As I said above, I had the opportunity of visiting the very spot described by O'Donoghue in this superb poem. The collusion of the real and the unreal Ireland, the real and the imaginary Ireland was so vivid there that from my experience onward I attributed an iconic meaning to the relics of the Iron Age boat buried in the bog. The archaeological finding, of course, can be considered to be very similar to Heaney's bog corpses. Again, we deal with the sacred significance of buried things and with the magical, or religious, nature of the object recovered from the past. Both Christian and pagan issues are embodied in this poem, as often occurs in Heaney's work. Though it is not necessary to dig to touch the structure of the boat, it has been preserved throughout the ages in the black waters of the bog, and it serves to establish a historical *continuum* from the Iron Age to the present time. Magically, the essential Ireland comes to light and brings the splendour and the scent of bygone times. As in Heaney, there is a strong ritualistic aspect in this poem. The ritual, again, is Christian and pagan, religious and mythical at the same time. The poet has to touch the ancient wood in order to believe. But

also, in order to link the present to the past:

If you doubt, you can put your fingers  
 In the holes where the oar-pegs went.  
 If you doubt still, look past its deep mooring  
 To the mountains that enfold the corrie's  
 Waterfall of lace through which, they say,  
 You can see out, but not in.

The poet is not an archaeologist. He acts as the mediator, as the priest, as the shaman, and language is the powerful tool which, as Heaney said in 'Digging', lets us unearth the treasures of our memory. We unbury memories and also emotions.

In 'The Iron Age Boat at Caumatruish' there is a strong religious bias. The poet, probably influenced by Catholic tradition, identifies the act of touching the wood with the Biblical scene in which St. Thomas has to touch Christ's stigmas and wounds in order to believe. By doing so, the boat is immediately tinged with sacred connotations. The communion with the historical past has to be performed by means of the rite of touching the object. As a result, we receive the healing and restoring energy of both the object itself and the place that, by the way, bears a vernacular name. And this is something people do today when they touch relics, touch holy water (which has a strong mythical and even Celtic connotation), or, as in Compostela, they put their fingers in the holes of the main column of The Pórtico de la Gloria. Similarly in O'Donoghue's poem, it is possible to put your finger in the holes where the old pegs were.

There is still another theme here with is also remarkably recurrent in Irish poetry, and particularly in Heaney's: the mythical references to the underworld. Coming back to light means coming back to life: Resurrection. Darkness is converted into light, *claritas*, the Latin term, *lux perpetua*, which is also the metaphor for eternal life in Heavens. The domain of obscurity is, of course, the same as in Dante and Aeneas. It is also recurrent in O'Donoghue's poetry, in other poems such as 'The Potter's Field' or 'The Mark of Cain'.

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O'Donoghue celebrates the energy of his native

place and the relativity of everything that happens there. The traditional security and predictability of urban landscapes, where everything is supposed to work according to the rules, is suddenly replaced by the magical components of the Irish rural landscape. As in Heaney, time and space collude to form a solid piece of knowledge. The poet helps to complete the puzzle of our biographies and our identities. It is a curative task, as already mentioned. In 'The Iron Age Boat at Caumatruish', one of the O'Donoghue's key works, the poet refers to the memory accumulated in buried objects. As happens with Heaney's bog bodies, the ancient Iron age boat acts as a magical element that binds the past and the present. You have to touch it if you want to believe: as in the Bible, you need to be sure, you need to have the physical experience. O'Donoghue mixes up the mythical background, the historical background and the religious background in only twelve lines, and, as a result, achieves a magnificent picture of the Irish soul.

#### 4. Two new poems

'Stay, You Imperfect Speakers' and 'Amicitia', the two new poems by Bernard O'Donoghue published beside this article, reflect some of the poet's favourite topics. The first one's title contains the famous line used by Shakespeare in *Macbeth*. It is pronounced when Macbeth is talking to the witches and prompting them to reveal their secrets and omens. It is not unusual for O'Donoghue to include in his poems classical quotes and somewhat enigmatic references. He makes use of direct or oblique references to medieval pieces, some of them quite obscure, but some as celebrated as *Beowulf* and Shakespeare is clearly one of his favourites. (There are several examples: in 'The Courtesy Stone', belonging to *Gunpowder*, he says, as in *Hamlet*, Act 3: "and yet it is very like a camel"). The context here is a quite domestic one, it is clear he refers to his 'literary territory', so to speak, but, again, he plays with enigmas and secret codes. 'Stay, you imperfect speakers' describes an actual, recurrent dream. But, as Bernard explains in private conversation, "at the end it moves to a real event on the roads that

recur in the dreams, the way I walked home from school. The last line quotes exactly what the woman said (in about 1957!): it is a familiar (now, I think, gone) local idiom. Instead of ‘Who does he belong to?’ or ‘Does anybody own him?’ the idiomatic expression was ‘Is anyone the own of him?’ So, here we have one of O’Donoghue’s incursions into the universe of words, into the nature of language. The language tends to reveal the real nature of human beings more than any other thing. “I suppose the link with the poem is to do with obscurity of interpretation. The woman is ‘an imperfect speaker’ by the standards of good English; but is there something to be learned from her or her language? It is my usual stuff about the value of the unfamiliar, I think”, Bernard tells me. As often happens, however, there is some obscurity here, some alarming or frightening event behind the scene, as with Macbeth and Banquo’s meeting with the witches. Perhaps we need to go a bit further, to uncover the secrecies of the words, and to enjoy the many possibilities and interpretations of an obscure piece of language.

The second poem published here, ‘Amicitia’, deals with some of Bernard O’Donoghue’s

favourite subjects again: medieval times, the difficulties inherent in love, and the human quest for comfort and friendship. Dante is present, as in many of his poems, and also a nostalgic reference to youth referencing the medieval idea of *carpe diem*. As in many other occasions, the two final lines seem to hide some further meaning or suggestions to the reader. Bernard explains that ‘Amicitia’ is an occasional poem, written for one of my students (Alice Oven) to give as a birthday present to another student, Gemma Varley. Gemma happens to share the name of Dante’s wife, so I took it from there!” Bernard O’Donoghue devoted a great part of his doctoral studies to courtly love, as reflected in medieval literature. And from time to time, courtly love comes to the surface, elegantly flavoured with historical details and classical ambience, as is apparent in this poem. It is a poem about the pre-eminence of friendship and the necessity of a place in the world. “It is just about young people going on the town to socialise, in 1284 as in 2004! ‘Amicitia’ is a big word, of course; these girls were ‘best friends’, and friendship – from Cicero to the Middle Ages – was seen as a major virtue”, Bernard concludes.

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## ESSE Book Award 2008

The second ESSE Book Award competition will be organized in 2008. The three new evaluation committees, for **Cultural Studies**, **Linguistics** and **Literature**, will be selected at the next ESSE Board meeting, in August 2007, in Vilnius. The names of the winners will be announced during the next ESSE Conference, ESSE-9, due to take place on 22-26 August 2008, in Aarhus. The books entered will have to be books published in the calendar years 2006 or 2007, and the deadline for submission will be 1 February 2008. All further information, and the address to which the books will have to be sent, will be posted on the ESSE Website in early September 2007, and published in *The European English Messenger* 16.2 (Autumn 2007).

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**THE LINGUISTICS OF ENGLISH** **John Holm** (University of Coimbra, Portugal) for his book *Languages in Contact: The Partial Restructuring of Vernaculars* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004). <<http://www.uc.pt/mes.ling.des/>>

**CULTURAL STUDIES** **Stavros Stavrou Karayanni** (University of Nicosia, Cyprus) for his book *Dancing, Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005). <<http://info.wlu.ca/~wwwpress/Catalog/karayanni.shtml>>