

Aspects of Utopia, Anti-utopia, and Nostalgia in Irish-Language Texts

BRÍONA NIC DHIARMADA

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson talks about the utopian possibilities of language, in particular that of what he calls a “mother tongue.” This essay will discuss a variety of texts in the Irish language, still a distinct “mother tongue” (albeit a minority one) in an increasingly homogenised anglophone world, a language marginalised socially while simultaneously being accorded symbolic importance in state formation and legitimisation. In particular, I wish to examine the dynamics of the utopian, anti-utopian, and nostalgic imagination as they manifest themselves from eighteenth-century political poetry to contemporary texts.

Utopia in the form of a desire for a better future has been a marked feature of Irish-language poetry since the seventeenth century when the Gaelic polity collapsed under the weight of the Tudor conquests. This collapse marked the ascendancy of English power and the loss of Irish sovereignty with its attendant cultural and linguistic implications. Utopian longing, while present in much seventeenth-century socio-political poetry, reaches its apogee in the political *aíslíng*, or vision poetry, of the eighteenth century. Typically the poet’s desire for change is articulated by means of displacement. The poet falls asleep, a beautiful young woman (the “*spéirbhean*,” usually identified directly or indirectly as Ireland) appears to him and recounts her suffering and the dramatic changes that have occurred in her fortunes.¹ She will only be cured by the return and restoration of her lover, with her proper spouse identified as the Stuart king, “*Ar Stiobhard* (our Stuart)” (Kinsealla and Ó Tuama 190–191); or “*an duine ba ghile ar shliocht chine Scoit* (a man most fine . . . of Scottish blood)” (Kinsealla and Ó Tuama 152–153), as another poem has it; or by a variety of pseudonyms, as can be seen in one of the best-known poems of the genre, Aogán Ó Rathaille’s “*Mac an Cheannai*” (“The Redeemer’s Son”):

*Aíslíng ghéar do dhearcas féin
Ar leaba is mé go lagbríoch
An ainnir shéimh darbh ainm Éire
Ag teacht im ghaor ar maraíocht,*

*A súile glas, a cúl tiubh casta,
A com ba gheal is a mailí,
Dá mhaíomh go raibh ag tíocht 'na gar
A diogras, Mac an Cheannai.*

(A bitter vision I beheld
in bed as I lay weary:
a maiden mild whose name was Éire
coming towards me riding,
with eyes of green, hair curled and thick,
fair her waist and brows,
declaring he was on his way
—her loved one Mac an Cheannai).

(Kinsealla and Ó Tuama 156, 157)

The political *aisling* is a recasting, in the political terms of the eighteenth century, of the founding mythos of early Gaelic society: the sovereignty myth, where the land of Ireland in the personage of the Sovereignty Goddess weds the King, her rightful spouse, a wedding which results in a peaceful and fruitful society based on a proper cosmic order. If the king's role is usurped, however, disaster results for the land and its people.² In the Jacobite texts of the eighteenth century, that disaster is delineated in graphic terms in response to the specificities of dislocation and dispossession suffered by the poets and their patrons. The utopian urge in this poetry manifests itself, according to the foremost critic of the genre, Breandán Ó Buachalla, as a form of millennialism:

the prophetic message foretold the return of the natural order: the rightful king on his throne, the native aristocracy restored to their ancestral lands, the Catholic Church re-established, the rehabilitation of the native intelligentsia. But the restoration of the rightful king was not a goal in itself, it was the mechanism by which more universal changes would be brought about and from which would flow the realisation of the millennial dream. . . . In Irish political literature, as in other cultures, millennialism constituted the main structure of meaning through which the contemporary events were linked to an exalted image of an ideal world; it

provided a set of images in which people could express both individual and collective needs.

(Ó Buachalla, "Irish Jacobitism and Irish Nationalism" 109)

The utopian vision of the *aisling* was predicated on remembrance, on nostalgia, not however nostalgia as "an evocation of an idealised past" (Gibbons 47) but—following Nicholas Dames—nostalgia as "not only a mode of memory but also a mode of history . . . as a response to social conditions" (Dames, qtd. in Gibbons 49). Nostalgia, as originally defined and diagnosed in the eighteenth century, was a highly distinctive articulation of longing: a painful desire to return home, coined, of course, from the Greek *algos* (a condition of pain) and *nostos* (to return home). The pathologizing of nostalgia, which occurred throughout the eighteenth century following its diagnosis as a medical condition, was, according to Luke Gibbons, no accident:

it is no coincidence that intense attachments to home and place came to be defined as personality disorders at a period when the massive dislocations brought about by empire, revolution and capitalism were making their presence felt in even the most remote regions of the world economy. Mobility, migration and an ability to assimilate into strange (mainly urban) surroundings were essential ingredients of this new social order, which accordingly sought to pathologize forms of belonging that resisted this process. (48)

It is also no coincidence, given the dislocations occasioned by colonialism, that Irish-language poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is suffused with that sense of nostalgia which is both a mode of remembrance and, simultaneously, a mode of resistance. For, of course, to "go home," the cure for nostalgia in its eighteenth-century dispensation, would mean, for Gaelic poets and their patrons, being dispossessed and dislocated by confiscations and plantations, a reversal of the processes of colonialism. The memory of a better past was equally the wish for a better future, the trauma of a dystopian present heightening the trauma of remembrance.

Nostalgia, as it was understood in the nineteenth century, however,

underwent a significant and fundamental transformation. Again, according to Gibbons:

Instead of constituting a set of painful remembrances of uprooting and exile, nostalgia came to be seen as a *remedy* for the experience of dislocation that was becoming endemic to modernity. . . . [This] new form of nostalgia sought to anaesthetize the pain of loss and uprooting by severing the connection with the past as it was actually experienced. . . . [T]he past was idealized to the extent that it receded from the present. Memory, then, became a way of disconnecting from, rather than connecting to, the past. (49)

In her recent materialist critique of reconciliation and remembrance, postcolonial critic Benita Parry comments that it

is obvious that reminiscence is never a transparent rendering of the past but an experience after the fact and one which is necessarily permeated by desire and accented with judgement, and can be the occasion for confession, self-justification, concealment or catharsis. (180)

The use of memory and nostalgia in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century narratives of Irish political and cultural nationalism in its insurgent phase, however, invokes remembrance not as an attempt to recede from the present but as a tool for utopian yearning for a better future in much the same way as Irish language Jacobite poetry had done in the eighteenth century. This process has been described by Kevin Whelan as "the creation of an Irish radical memory . . . [which] deployed the past to challenge the present, to restore into possibility historical moments that had been blocked or unfulfilled earlier" (60).

In the late nineteenth century, the revival and restoration of the Irish language itself became an important part of the utopian project of cultural nationalism and can be read as a form of nostalgia in its earlier formulation—that of "a desire to go home." In other words, it can be read as the expression

of a wish to return to a remembered precolonial past where the deracinated colonial subjects could locate themselves again in their own/home language. That this narrative ignores the realities and complexities of language in Ireland does not negate its imaginative force or utopian nature. In the words of Walter Benjamin, "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'" (257).

After the 1920s, when the nationalist narrative assumed hegemonic status in the post-colonial state, the Irish language was retained as a symbol and marker of national identity in State ideology. There was a profound change, however, from its earlier signification. This change was reflected in a shift in the dynamics of remembrance, a shift from nostalgia as a mode of resistance, as a memory of trauma, in this case of dispossession and language loss, to nostalgia as a "source of *pleasure*, as a poignant but harmless dip into reminiscence" (Dames, qtd. in Gibbons 49). The Irish language was now seen as "the language of ancestors: the language of the nation used to reflect the nation back in time" (Tymoczko and Ireland 3), and, like the past itself, in Gibbons' formulation of the new nostalgia, as "idealized to the extent that it recedes from the present" (49). The Gaeltacht, the living repository of the ancestral language, thus became a fossilized, idealised embodiment of what had been lost, imagined through a haze of romantic nostalgia. For the State and many of its citizens, the Gaeltacht acted as the original negative from which the bright brand-new colours of modern Ireland could emerge. The idealization of the Gaeltacht, together with the Irish language more generally, was an integral part of what Sarah McKibben has described as "the calcified discourse of national identity . . . in post-independence Ireland" (38).

Within the Irish language itself, however, an alternative, if subalternised, discourse was articulated which deconstructed and problematised idealised representations of the Gaeltacht. Most of this work foregrounds rupture and discontinuity and is "anti-utopian" in its sensibility, a sensibility which challenged the official "utopian" idealization. The fetishization of the Gaeltacht and of the figure of the native speaker as the epitome and embodiment of the "true Gael" was the target of Brian Ó Nualláin's comic 1941 masterpiece, *An Béal Bocht* (*The Poor Mouth*). For example, Ó Nualláin fully unleashed his anti-utopian imagination in a hilarious parody of the genre of Gaeltacht autobiography, and created his own dystopian Gaeltacht, *Corcha Dorcha*. As McKibben points out, *An Béal Bocht* is a trenchant but humorous

critique of "the absurdity and immorality of nostalgia for nostalgia's sake" (45):

From the first page of his novel, Ó Nualláin subtly underlines the oppressive nature of the overarching nostalgia that surrounds the Gael. . . . In place of serious and measured lament, then, the book provokes more and more comedy at its promiscuous and preposterous poor-mouthing. Earnest mournfulness gives way to inexorable laughter, whose very energy belies the ritualized grief of hegemonic nostalgia. (45-46)

The anti-utopian, anti-nostalgic dynamic in the de-romanticisation of Gaeltacht life is also evident in social-realist texts such as the early short stories of Máirtín Ó Cadhain as well as in Bob Quinn's 1978 feature, *Poitín*, which, while unremittingly bleak, also has flashes of black humour.³ Set in Connemara, *Poitín* tells the story of an old poitín maker and his ultimate revenge on two local ne'er-do-wells who have double-crossed him. As Lance Pettitt tells us: "the film shows a rural Ireland of bleak landscapes, chronic unemployment, a black economy, petty officialdom, brutality borne of frustration and domestic sexual abuse" (103-104). Both stylistically and thematically *Poitín* refuses the nostalgic idealization of John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1953) and the earlier romanticized valorisation of island life in Robert J. Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934).⁴ In *Irish Film: the Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*, Martin McLoone comments that

Poitín offers a deliberately unromantic view of the west of Ireland which, in cultural nationalism, was the repository of those Gaelic, Catholic and rural values which were to be the basis of Ireland's anti-modernist and romantic utopia. Its study of the grim realities of rural life, including its endemic criminality, is neither Flaherty nor Ford and marked a key stage in the re-imagining of rural life. (133)

While *Poitín* certainly acts as a corrective to *The Quiet Man* and *Man of Aran*, I would dispute McLoone's underlying assumption that this work

marked a departure in the representation of rural and Gaeltacht life. The anti-nostalgic de-romanticization of *Poitín* follows a long established tradition in the Irish language from the short stories of Pádraic Ó Conaire to Irish language television drama of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, which included an adaptation of Máirtín Ó Cadhain's short story, "An Taoille Tuile" ("Flood-tide"). And indeed, Ó Cadhain's work, I would contend, is the main precursor of Quinn's *Poitín*. Ó Cadhain described his community in Connemara as "a local organic community," one where his family had lived "*cho fada siar agus bhí siar ann le míle bliain, b'fhéidir, ar an gceird chéanna a bhfuil siad fós, ina dtalamhaithe beaga, anois sa darna leath den fichiú céad*" ("as far back as one can go, maybe a thousand years, at the same trade as they are now, on their small holdings, in the second half of the twentieth century") (*Páipéir Bhána is Páipéir Bhreaca* 9). However, the political and economic realities of the Irish post-colonial state, in particular the State's neglect of the Gaeltacht regions—which led to economic stagnation and a higher than average level of emigration, often to the United States or England—made both Ó Cadhain and his contemporary, the Aran poet Máirtín Ó Direáin, internal migrants in a country where State ideology paid lip service to the Irish language, and idealized the Gaeltacht as a nostalgic utopia—the true repository of national identity—while allowing the living Gaeltacht to be denuded of its youth and vitality through emigration.

Ó Cadhain's Gaeltacht characters often suffer dislocation: whether as a result of emigration, in the story "An Taoille Tuile" ("Floodtide") or due to the strictures of arranged marriage in "An Bhearna Mhíl" ("Harelip") (*An Braon Broghach*). His Gaeltacht is a harsh and merciless environment wherein his female characters, in particular, find no redemption. In "An Taoille Tuile," Mairéad has returned home having spent ten years working as a servant in New York. What sustained her through the long years of menial labour in the United States was an intense nostalgia, a painful and powerful yearning for home which refused to allow her to assimilate and achieve the so-called "American dream." We learn through the device of flashback, for example, that Mairéad had refused an offer of marriage to a rich shopkeeper in New York in order to come home to wed Páraic, a neighbour whom she had promised to marry before she left. When we first meet Mairéad she has been home a month and married three weeks. It is early morning. Páraic has just got up. She makes a half-hearted attempt to rise herself but throws herself back on

the bed again:

Chuimhnigh sí ar na deich mbliana sin i Nua-Eabhrac a mbíodh sí ar an urlár le céadghairm an chloig roimh fháinniú lae. Rinne sí é go foighdeach fadfhulangach gach uile mhaidín ar shon . . . ar shon an lae seo—an lá a mbéadh lui agus éirí ar a toiliúna féin.

(She remembered those ten years in New York when she was on the floor before daybreak at the first ring of the clock. She did that, forbearing and patient, every single morning for the sake . . . for the sake of this day—the day that she could lie or rise as she wished.) (*An Braon Broghach* 35)

Mairéad, however, is abruptly awakened from her reverie by “*glór criotánach a máthair céile*” (“the not so dulcet tones of her mother-in-law”) asking “*Ar éirigh sibh fós?*” (“Are you up yet?”). The tone and the question immediately contradict her rosy view of what lay in store (35). It is a sign of things to come. As the story plays out, Mairéad is awakened from her utopian dreaming, time and again, by the harsh realities of community life, in particular the interdependence and interaction with a local patriarch Ó Liodáin and his two daughters, Nóra and Cáitín, the neighbouring family with whom they share the rights to seaweed on the foreshore.⁵ For Mairéad, the act of physically returning home does not provide a cure for her nostalgia. Rather than the utopian future she had dreamed of, she is condemned to a future predicated on a relentless struggle with physical hardship and with Páraic’s harsh words to her at the end of the story: “*fág mo bhealach*” (“get out of my way”). She is left bereft of even the consolation of her romantic and nostalgic fantasies (50).

This story acts not only as the debunking of the rural Gaelic idyll but also punctures the official utopian vision of native communitarianism—the *comhar* or *meitheal* idealised by the Irish Co-Operative Movement and revered in the canon of revolutionary nationalism.⁶ It also deconstructs the nostalgic wish-fulfilment of the figure of the returning immigrant. Instead of being welcomed back to the bosom of the community, Mairéad is treated as

an outsider, an interloper, and is mocked for what her neighbours see as her pretensions and her ignorance of the brutal realities of working the shore. Ó Liodáin draws attention to her shoes: "toy toys" as he calls them, more suited to the streets of New York than hard work on the shores of Connemara.

While most of Ó Cadhain's work can be read as a refusal of all nostalgia and is profoundly anti-utopian, we find in the work of Ó Cadhain's contemporary, the poet Máirtín Ó Direáin, a sensibility that moves between two different dynamics of nostalgia.⁷ In Ó Direáin's earliest work, the trauma of leaving home, of being uprooted and moving to the city, the trauma of being in what was for him economic exile was articulated as a form of original nostalgia. In one of his best known lyrics, "Faoiseamh a Gheobhadsa" ("I Will Find Solace"), a return home even for a short visit is posited as the cure "from what vexes the heart / from a troubled mind / from soured solitude / from wounding talk," a cure, in other words, from the alienation of the city (Ó Direáin 3):

*Faoiseamh a Gheobhadsa
Seal beag gairid
I measc mo dhaoine
Ar oileán mara,
Ag siúl cois cladaigh
Maidin is tráthnóna
Ó Luan go Satharn
Thiar ag baile.*

(I will find solace
For a short time only
Among my people
On a sea-girt island,
Walking the shore
Morning and evening
Monday to Saturday
In my western homeland.) (2, 3)

We find a growing realization in Ó Direáin's work, however, of the changes wrought in Aran by the realities of economic and cultural pressures, a realisation "that the ways of my people decay / the sea no longer serves as a wall" ("Tá cleachtadh mo dhaoine ag meath / ní chabhair feasta an tonn mar fhalla") (39, 40). There has been the End of an Era (Deireadh Ré), as the title

of one of his most poignant lyrics has it:

*Ní háil liom feasta dar m'anam
Dáimh a bhrú ar chlocha glasa!
Ní fáilteach romham an charraig,
Mé ar thóir m'óige ar bhealach,
Mé im'Oisín ar na craga
Is fós ar fud an chladaigh,
Mé ag caoineadh slua na marbh.*

(I no longer wish, by my soul,
To force friendship on grey stones!
The rock does not welcome me
As I seek my youth on the road,
And I am Oisín on the crags
And wandering on the strand
Making lamentation for the hosts of the dead.) (36, 37)

Aran as physical space, therefore, can no longer act as "home," can no longer act as balm for the poet's growing alienation from modernity, and from modern urban Ireland in particular. Aran now becomes an Aran of memory, an idealized space. The poet tells us in one poem, "*thosaigh na clocha glasa lag dul i gcruth brionglóide i m'aigne*" ("the grey stones began / to turn to dreams in my mind") (106, 107). Aran, synonymous with the "grey stones," now becomes an unattainable past utopia, which is contrasted with an increasingly dystopian version of the present categorised as *Ár Ré Dhearóil* (Our Wretched Era) (66–75). In Ó Direáin's work, nostalgia becomes, therefore, a refusal of the present and of the future combined, a reactionary and bitter insistence on the superiority of the past, a mode of memory as intimation of death with no future imaginings possible.

It is no surprise, however, to find an anti-utopian dynamic in the work of Irish language writers active in the 1940s to the 1970s. They were the first generation to come of age in post-Independence Ireland; and they tested the reality of their lives against the official utopian promises held out by the nationalist agenda. They found them wanting. Certainly in Ó Direáin we hear time and again the tones of bitter disappointment at a revolution betrayed and unfinished. But for a new generation of Irish language writers, a "more upbeat, optimistic generation" in the words of poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh, the past no longer has a stranglehold on future imaginings ("The

View from the Glen" 323).

In a recent poem entitled "Trasnú" ("Crossing"), Ó Searcaigh, speaking of the contemporary Gaeltacht, has commented somewhat ironically: "*tá muid leath réamhstairiúil / agus leath-postmodern intertextual*" ("we are half prehistorical / and half postmodern intertextual") (*Ag Tnúth leis an tSolas* 277). Thus, he echoes Declan Kiberd's recent remarks on the Gaeltacht being "the crucible of Irish post-modernity" (80). Ó Searcaigh finds himself and his community "astray / somewhere between / the Battle of Kinsale / and the Chinese takeaway. / Our story / entangled / between Túirne Mháire and Fruit of the Loom" ("*ar strae / áit inteacht / idir Cath Chionn tSáile / agus an Chinese takeaway. / Tá snáithe ár scéil / in aimhréidh / idir Túirne Mháire agus Fruit of the Loom*") (*Ag Tnúth leis an tSolas* 277). The act of remembrance is implicit not only in the Irish language that is widespread in the Gaeltacht and utilised here by the poet as simultaneously connotative both of continuity ("the language of the ancestors") and discontinuity (the creolized demotic form of Irish that is "rotting with the plaque of English") ("*ag lobhadh le plaque an Bhéarla*") (*Ag Tnúth leis an tSolas* 277). It is also in the act of historical memory that the link between the past and a yet-to-be-imagined future can be discovered. As the line used in a repeated and somewhat ironic refrain has it: "*Tá muid ag fi ár dtodhchaí as ár ndúchas*" ("we are weaving our future from our *dúchas*"). The word *dúchas* was glossed by Ó Searcaigh in a recent article:

Dúchas is a difficult word to explain in English but basically it means a connection, a feeling of attachment to a place, a tongue, a tradition, a belief that one belongs to a sustaining cultural and communal energy. . . . [F]or me the *dúchas* is not a flight into the past, rather a rejoining of the past, the present and the future. It is a quest, perhaps for an expanded present which flows backwards and forwards with the one and same movement. ("View" 232-233)

This "expanded present" takes into account "the multiple cultural realities" of contemporary Ireland: "the state of cultural multiplicity, of linguistic diversity, of inevitable hybridity" which Ó Searcaigh not only recognises but welcomes while harnessing a creative nostalgia in the "bold risk taking adventure of the present" ("View" 235, 234).

Poems such as “Mian” (“Desire”) articulate utopian longing for spaces where the plurality of identities—national and personal, sexual and linguistic—can be mapped and we can be brought, as he tells us, to “harbours / not yet marked on a map” (“*cuanta / nach bhfuil fós ar léarscáil*”) (*Ag Tnúth leis an tSolas* 276). Instead of being “mesmerised by the past,” defeated by the present, and fearful of the future, Irish-language writers of this generation are prepared to dream of “the creative and transformative possibilities of culture; its abilities to renew itself, to develop and evolve. To be fluid and dynamic, futuristic and forward looking” (“View” 229). Ó Searcaigh’s poetry, like the work of many of his generation, presents us with a new script—“script úr” as he tells us—a script which speaking in/from “the language of the ancestors” manages to negotiate a present which allows a future for us all:

*Tá caonach na staire ar inné
Sin thart agus fágtha i mo dhiaidh.
Tá mo spéis anois, a chroí
i dtíreolas na dtoghchaí.*

(Yesterday carries the moss of history,
That’s over. I have left it behind me.
My interest now
Is on the future’s geography.) (273)

Endnotes

¹ Literally, “skywoman.”

² See Herbert, *passim*.

³ *Poitín*, sometimes anglicised as “poteen,” is an illegal liquor brewed traditionally in the west of Ireland in isolated areas away from the prying eyes of excise men and police. It is the Irish equivalent of moonshine.

⁴ For readings of the subversive and self-conscious play at work in *The Quiet Man*, play which undermines the surface nostalgia, see Gibbons, and McLoone.

⁵ Harvesting seaweed was a very important part of the economy of the western seaboard until the 1970s. It was used as fertilizer for the stony fields and was also sold as a cash crop.

⁶ For a discussion of the Irish Co-operative Movement’s role in cultural nationalism, see Mathews.

⁷ Ó Direáin began to publish in the 1940s and is credited with being the first poet to bring the rhythms and speech of his native Aran into poetry in a form of indigenised free verse. He is one of a trio of poets acknowledged as the founding figures of modern poetry in Irish.

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