Meeting the English: Hard and Soft Borders in Recent Irish-Language Poetry[1]

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ABSTRACT

Following George Bornstein on "the politics of the page", this article contends that, by examining the material decisions of writers, editors, and publishers on the design of recent bilingual editions of Irish-language poetry, one gains insight not only into Ireland's shifting attitudes toward Irish Gaelic and its place in society, but also into the changing conceptions of "Irishness" itself. It distinguishes three stages in the evolution of bilingual publishing in Ireland: collaborative, adversarial, and deconstructive, with each stage represented by a slightly different "generation" of poets. Representative of the first wave is Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 1990 collection, The Pharoah's Daughter, *the design of which suggests a collaborative venture, of Irish poet with Irish poet, who together realize a bilingual diptych of interdependent texts. Rather than a mutually beneficial enterprise, the second wave of Irish-language poets viewed translation as an extension of the linguistic imperialism that had marginalized Irish in the first place, and that may yet bring about its extinction. Second wave reactions ranged from outright rejection of translation into English, to a reversal of accepted layout practices by moving the Irish poem to the dominant recto position. The third wave of recent Irish-language poetry is "deconstructive" in that its practitioners have sought to undo the original/translation and Irish/English binary, either by mixing the two languages, producing bilingual versions in which neither version claims the status of "original", or problematizing the cross-page correspondence of original and translation. All three developments have implications for how books are read, and how poetry in translation is best presented to its target audience.*

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1. As with books of translation, many people contributed to the making of this essay. Here I will single out just two: Sarah Sherman, my "coach' at the University of New Hampshire Summer Writers Academy, who shepherded this to its first complete draft; and Deirdre Learmont in Ireland, whose linguistic insights added substance to my bibliographic speculations. Neither is responsible for its final form.

(A)symmetries

Publishers of bilingual editions of poetry have several options open to them in terms of layout and design. One possibility is to provide translations in prose at the bottom of the page, under the original; another is the toe-to-head arrangement favored in some literary journals and most electronic platforms, in which the translation immediately follows its original on the page, or, more often, the original immediately follows its translation. Occasionally — in certain editions of the Bible, for instance — one finds interlinear or inter-stanzaic arrangements, in which the original and its translation engage in a kind of leapfrog down the page. And occasionally, originals are consigned to the back of the book, in effect an appendix for those with knowledge of the source language. These alternatives can be diagrammed as follows:

Figure 1. Layout Options for Bilingual Books of Poetry

But customary practice for single-author collections and anthologies is the parallel-text or *en face* format, in which the original poem appears on the left-hand page of the open book, and the translation on the right, as in Figure 2. The rationale for this standard practice is rarely if ever dwelt on, and just as rarely questioned. Its advantages are obvious. In terms of utility, parallel text makes for easy cross-referencing between the two versions, "helping those who are unsure of their ability to read the original", writes Irish poet and translator Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin,

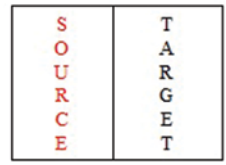


Figure 2. Parallel Text.

while "allowing a competent reader to glance back and forth and share in [the translator's] reading" (2016, 505). Parallel text is arguably the most aesthetically satisfying as well, its symmetricity suggesting a figure (the original) standing before its likeness (the translation) in a mirror — though technically not an instance of reflection (or bilateral) symmetry, in the language of geometry, but of translatory symmetry. Switching to the language of set theory, it constitutes an example of bijection, as seen in Figure 3, with X representing the original or source text, and Y the translation:

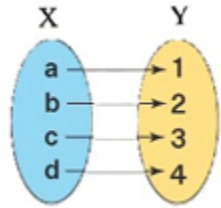


Figure 3. Bijection.

As the previous two figures suggest, parallel text has the added advantage of duplicating the temporal and genetic sequence of composition: the original always precedes its translation. In terms of the material book, however, this latter statement requires clarification.

The basic unit of parallel text editions, as described above, is not the individual page, but the two-page spread, the double-page of the open book. This is, of course, a quality of all books or codices; as Bonnie Mak writes, "the recto and verso . . . are in close conversation with their facing counterparts, often depending on this proximal relationship to sustain the rhetorical coherence of their message" (2011, 14). By convention, the original or source poem is printed on the verso or the left half of the spread, the translation on the recto or right, an arrangement that theoretically reproduces the compositional sequence of the two texts: the original coming first, followed by its translation. This formulation, however, presumes a fixed progression identical to the sequence of page numbers: page one coming before page two, page two before page three, and so on. In languages written from left to right, such as English, books are read by turning the pages over from right to left. When opening a book, with the page edges at the reader's right, it is the right-hand page that first draws

the eye. So it is that, as Douglas Martin observes, "A right-hand page [is] acknowledged to take visual precedence over the verso or left-hand page" (1989, 200). This optical fact grants the recto half of the "opening" — as the two-page spread is also known — priority over the technically *prior* verso half. In other words, to come first is not always to "come first."

Because of this, Martin goes on, "the opening of the text and certain preliminary and end pages" — and, one might add, section headings and occasionally chapter openings within the text proper — "fall on the recto side". So, we are left with a paradoxical situation in which for a text to *precede* another text serially — as does the source poem in standard dual-language editions — is not the same as having *precedence* over it. On the contrary, for an original to come first in sequential terms (that is, on the left) means to yield the structurally privileged recto — the place of title and section headings, the place where tables of contents, indexes, and appendices normally begin — to a secondary formation, an image of itself captured in the inevitably distorting mirror of a foreign language.

Normally, this inherent asymmetry in page layout occasions little or no comment: A publication supplying an English version of a foreign text is a book designed with readers of English in mind and so can be expected to privilege the so-called target language; here, printing the translations on the recto makes sense. But can the same be said of books produced in a bi- or tri-lingual country, when the original poem is in the "other" or minoritized language, and the translation in the language of the majority? In multilingual societies, true linguistic parity is hard to come by; one language invariably plays an outsized role in the society's affairs, whether by virtue of numbers, extranational utility, or the socio-economic status of its speakers. Whatever a nation's constitution might proclaim, the relationship between languages comes down to major versus minor, of a dominant language and one or more subordinate languages. One might question the rationale in such a context, in the case of intra-communal translation, of translation between national languages, for designing a book of poetry with facing translations that reproduces and reinforces the power differentials prevailing in that society by honoring the majority target language with the more dominant recto, while assigning the minority source language a supporting role on the facing page? The present essay addresses this and related questions in terms of what George Bornstein describes as the "politics of the page", using as its case study contemporary Ireland, where the new prominence of poetry in Irish Gaelic (hereafter simply "Irish") both domestically and abroad has given rise

to just such discussions among poets and those who write about poetry, which in turn have challenged traditional assumptions and practices in Ireland's publishing world.

The Language Question

Like most countries that came to modernity late, Ireland is a nation in constant dialogue with itself. The participants and subjects of this dialogue have assumed different guises over the century of the country's existence. As in many postcolonial nations, one area of especially intense debate in Ireland has been the question of language. In the contemporary version, the issue can be reduced to a single question: How essential is the Irish language — to the identity of Irish citizens and the Irish state? In civil society, where most people live their daily lives, the contest between the "old" and "new" languages — between native Irish and colonizer's English — has mostly run its course, with English consolidating the dominant position it has held since at least the mid-nineteenth century, helped by the rise of mass media in the second half of the twentieth century, and the country's spectacular emergence as a global economy over the last thirty-plus years. But points of cultural friction remain: should Irish be a compulsory subject in primary education? (It remains so.) Should competency in Irish be required of those wishing to enter the civil service? (It no longer is.) As to the question raised more than a century ago by the Gaelic League, of whether Irish literature can be written in a language other than Irish, we can assume that four Nobel Prizes in literature have shown that it can. The Irish language continues to lead a demographically marginal and numerically endangered existence to one side of the main current of modern Irish life: a shrinking aboriginal presence in the Gaeltacht regions, along with an indefinite number of second-language speakers elsewhere in Ireland — individuals, families and micro-communities motivated by political, professional or cultural interests to build on the rudimentary language skills acquired in school. In recent decades, however, the linguistic debate has been stirred back to life, in the cultural sector at least, by the emergence of a new generation of Irish-language poets.

Along with the emergence of women's poetry and the renaissance of poetry from Northern Ireland, the rise of poetry written in Irish has been one of the major developments in Irish literature over the past half-century. Much of this rise was due, beginning in the 1970s, to the initiatives of

a handful of Irish-language poets at University College Cork connected with the journal *Innti*, especially once their work became available in bilingual editions over the following decades. In the words of critic Declan Kiberd, "to most readers of poetry in Ireland" the *Innti* revival "remained a closed book" until the arrival of the first bilingual editions (2018, 294). My purpose here is to explore the ways the language question as outlined above plays out across the pages of three dual-language editions of poetry in Irish: *The Pharaoh's Daughter* by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *agus rude eile de / and another thing* by Louis de Paor, and *Criss-Cross Mo Chara* by Gearóid Mac Lochlainn.

Not surprisingly, given the global stature of Irish poetry generally, this New Wave of writing in Irish and the English translations it has generated have already been the subject of extensive scholarly attention. While there is a meta-critical element in what follows, I hope to add a new dimension to these discussions by focusing on visual rather than verbal cues; on what Jerome McGann defines as a book's bibliographic code, as distinct from the linguistic code of the poems it contains.[2] Design theory tells us that the effect of design is to "synthesize a variety of issues, concerns, ambitions, and ideologies into a technically constrained final 'whole'" (Erlhoff and Marshall 2008, 390) — in the present context, a book. By analyzing the resulting synthesis through the lenses of conception and design — that is, considering the "final whole" as a material artifact and a spatial arrangement of language — and tracking the interactions of the two languages across the book's gutter,[3] the pages that follow will provide insight into the "issues, concerns . . . and ideologies" surrounding its creation. If the essay thereby falls under the rubric of the history of the book, it more narrowly answers to the concept of "textual materialism" as defined by Bill Brown: "a mode of analytic objectification that focuses on the physical properties of an embodied text" (2010, 25) — with my emphasis here on the visual properties of the page.

My discussion is structured around three phases that I discern in the evolution of bilingual publishing in Ireland — collaborative, adversarial, and deconstructive — with each stage represented by a slightly different "generation" of poets.[4] Representative of the first wave, which includes the

2. This aspect is mentioned in passing in articles by Clíona Ní Ríordáin (2010) and Eric Falci (2011).
3. The white space separating the right- and left-hand pages.
4. "Generation" here is not strictly tied to date of birth.

poets associated with the *Innti* group,[5] is Ní Dhomhnaill's *The Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990). The impression conveyed by this book's design, which I examine in detail below, is to present translation as a collaborative venture — of poet with poet, of *Irish* poet with Irish poet, one Irish-language and one Anglophone, who together realize a bilingual diptych of interdependent texts.

Three interrelated factors likely influenced the second wave of Irish-language poets: anxieties about globalization and its erosive effect on cultural and linguistic diversity, the ongoing Troubles in the North, and the postcolonial turn of Irish studies starting in the mid-1990s. Where the first wave viewed translation as a mutually beneficial enterprise, second-wave poets like Biddy Jenkinson and Louis de Paor regard it instead as an extension of the linguistic imperialism that marginalized Irish in the first place, and that may yet spell its doom as a living language, along with hundreds of other minor languages worldwide. Second-wave responses to the *Innti* phenomenon ranged from the outright rejection of translation into English, to a modification of standard practice for dual-language editions. Representative of this wave is de Paor's *agus rude eile de / and another thing* from 2010.

The third wave of Irish language poetry, currently ascendent, can be supposed to have been inspired by the end of the Troubles, the increasing liberalization of Irish society, and increased recognition for Irish-language poetry by the Irish poetry establishment, largely thanks to the first wave described above. I call this the "deconstructive" phase because of the way that these poets — most of them bilingual in their creative work — have sought by various means to undo the Gordian binaries of original/translation and Irish/English. Here I take as my primary example Northern Irish poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn's *Criss-Cross / Mo Chara* (2011), a book that radically extends the macaronic elements found in his previous book, *Sruth a Teanga* / *Stream of Tongues* (2002). These three books by Ní Dhomhnaill, de Paor and Mac Lochlainn were selected precisely because in one way or another their design or conception diverges from convention, and as such can be said to be the product of conscious editorial decisions and specific creative practices, which themselves reflect particular attitudes on the part of poets and their publishers toward translation and the place of English in the subcultural world of poetry in Irish.

5. These include, in addition to Ní Dhomhnaill, Michael Davitt, Gabriel Rosenstock, Liam Ó Muirthile and, indirectly, Cathal Ó Searcaigh.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's "The Language Issue"

If Seamus Heaney was the most prominent of the Northern Irish Pleiades, and Eavan Boland stood out in the late-century wave of women poets, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has been the unmistakable star of the Irish-language scene. Some of the credit for this must go to her second bilingual collection, *Pharaoh's Daughter*, conceived and published by Peter Fallon at Gallery Press. If one had to choose a single volume that gained contemporary poetry in Gaelic — and Ní Dhomhnaill herself — an Irish and international audience, it is *Pharaoh's Daughter,* published in Ireland in 1990, with the first American edition appearing three years later. Robert Welch describes it as "a turning point" in the history of Irish poetry in translation (1992, 128). The book takes its name from the last line of the last poem of the volume, fittingly titled "The Language Issue" (in Paul Muldoon's translation), and it is with this poem rather than the book it is taken from that I will begin, because of what I believe the poem has to tell us about Ní Dhomhnaill's views at the time on the translation of her work into English.

"The Language Issue" ("Ceist na Teangan") is based on the biblical story of the infant Moses, set adrift on the Nile by his mother Sarah in order to evade the Pharaoh's edict against the Jews. In the poem, the speaker narrates her actions as she places her hopes (in Paul Muldoon's translation) in "this little boat / of the language" the way someone would put "an infant / in a basket," and then the basket in the river —

féachaint n'fheadaraís	only to have it borne hither and thither,
cá dtabharfaidh an sruth é,	not knowing where it might end up;
féachaint, dála Mhaoise,	in the lap, perhaps,
an bhfóirfidh iníon Fharoinn?	of some Pharaoh's daughter.

Like the book as a whole, "The Language Issue" has received its share of commentary, most comprehensively in Declan Kiberd's retrospective look in *After Ireland* (2018). Ní Dhomhnaill's own prefatory remarks at readings make clear that for her it is a poem about the Irish language, and the possibilities of its future survival. Kiberd sees its ultimate subject as the need for the artist to relinquish control of her work once it enters the world: "The poem is an example of its own process: an account of how an image, once created, must be let go, because it cannot indefinitely remain the possession of its creator, just as a child cannot always be the captive of its parent" (2018, 299). Taking Kiberd's interpretation to

its logical next step, I read the poem more immediately as a reflection on translation: on the necessity as well as the hazards of translation for a poet writing in a minority language under threat of extinction. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish patriot Thomas Davis warned against "setting one's culture adrift on the vicissitudes of translation" (1914, 96–97), but Ní Dhomhnaill is prepared to take that risk, just as this mother of a child of a subject people, in the face of state persecution, understands what must be done if her child, and ultimately her people, are to survive. Translation, as Alan Titley reminds us in a parallel context, is a hit-or-miss affair, "a game of chance" (2016, 504) whose vagaries are brought home, in Muldoon's translation, by the pinballing "hither and thither" of the child's basket.[6] What is striking is the mother's — and by analogy the poet's — acceptance of and even trust in the process, despite "not knowing where [her poem-child] might end up," and the recognition that there is no sure thing when it comes to interlingual and trans-poetic exchanges. This attitude is reflected in comments Ní Dhomhnaill made on the subject in a 1998 interview in *The Edinburgh Review*: "I am so constantly plagued by the seeming arbitrariness of so much that finally finds its way onto the page, and the compromises and accommodations necessary in even getting it that far, that I suppose it does cause me to have a pretty 'laissez-faire' attitude to subsequent translations of it" (Hollo 1998, 106–7). Furthermore, Ní Dhomhnaill seems untroubled by the power differentials inherent in the biblical story: the poem-child arrives in the lap not just of any Egyptian, but of a Pharaoh's daughter, something that only translation into the imperial language makes possible. Yet of greater importance for the poet than her imagined reader's place in the power structure is her gender: the Pharaoh's daughter is female. Ní Dhomhnaill's use of Irish seems free of the political passions that often attend discussions of language and nation. The primary target of her linguistic rebellion is not "England and the Anglo-Irish" (Freeland Thompson 2021, 226), nor the "lazy

6. This is close to the sense conveyed in Ní Dhomhnaill's literal crib of the poem, a typescript of which is found in Burns Library of Boston College: "Thinking how *you never know / Where the current may take it* / Hoping, *on the off shot,* like Moses / It might be saved by Pharaoh's daughter" (emphasis mine). Unlike these two, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's notably faithful rendering retains the question that ends the Irish poem, and which presumably gives the poem its title (literally, "Language Question"). Muldoon's rendering of the title plays with the secondary meaning of "issue" in the sense of offspring.

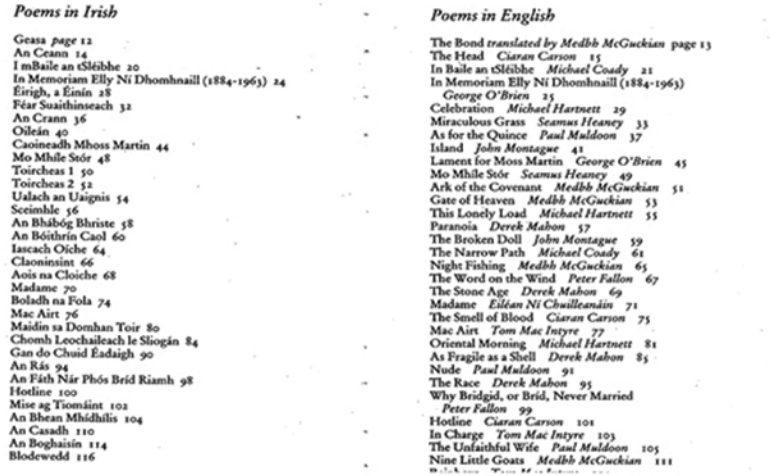
Irish ears . . . . of self-satisfied monoglots" called out by Gearóid Mac Lochlainn in his poem "Translation" (2002, 62), but what Ní Dhomhnaill calls the "misogynist," "purer-than-pure male revivalist" crowd, and "the form of revivalist Irish [that] was practised over the backs of silenced women and children" (1995, 588–89). She continues:

> One of the things that causes me to get up in the morning is the desire to take Irish back from that grey-faced Irish-revivalist male preserve. I'll be damned if I'll let them monopolise the language. (589)

As she pursues this end, as she intervenes in the predominantly male tradition of Irish Gaelic poetry, English serves an ally rather than an adversary, a means of reduplicating the pressure her poems exert on that tradition in its revived masculinist form. So while Irish's status as a minority language might force Ní Dhomhnaill to surrender her poetry to the capricious waters of translation, it is not without the hope or expectation of achieving something in return.

Pharaoh's Daughter

All books are the product of collaboration, as McGann reminds us, and nowhere is this truer than with works of translation. Some of the credit for the success of *Pharaoh's Daughter* must go to Peter Fallon of Gallery Press, who, in addition to translating four of the poems himself, hit upon the idea of having "a baker's dozen" of poet-translators — poets more than they were translators, really — render Ní Dhomhnaill's charismatic poetry into English. Fallon can also take credit for the book's layout, which surely owes something to the nature of the names on the marquee: in addition to himself, the translators include Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, Medbh McGuckian, in other words, virtually every Northern Irish poet of note, along with a handful of equally well-known names from the South. The first conspicuous bibliographic feature the book presents — aside from the English only cover and title page — is in the Table of Contents (Figure 4) where, on the lefthand page we find the titles of the "Poems in Irish", and on the righthand page, the titles of the "Poems in English". "Poems in English", not "Translations", or "English Versions".



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Toircheas 1 50
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Ualach an Uaignis 54
Sceimhle 56
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Poems in English

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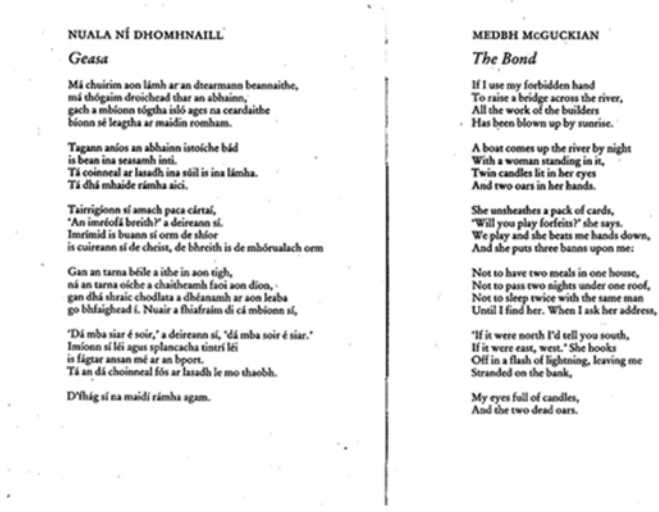
The Unfaithful Wife *Paul Muldoon* 105
Nine Little Goats *Medbh McGuckian* 111

Figure 4. *Pharaoh's Daughter*, Table of Contents

Just as the list of Irish titles is given a page to itself, so too the list of English titles. The first title on the right, the English side, a poem called "The Bond", is followed by the italicized phrase "translated by", in this case Medbh McGuckian. That phrase does not occur in any of the subsequent entries; immediately after the title of the "English Poem" comes the author's name. The two texts — the Irish and the English — are granted equal footing, neither one asserting priority over the other, neither identified as a copy of the other, as if they were two version of one poem. In fact, if not for those two words, easy enough to miss, looking at these two pages we would be uncertain of the exact relationship of the facing titles, and which direction they should be read in. Is this a book of translations into Irish Gaelic, by one Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, of some of the finest Irish poets writing in English? Or is it a game of poetic tennis, in which versions in Irish and English are lobbed back and forth across the book's gutter in rivalry and play? Even when alerted to the true nature of that relationship (by the fine print on the cover, or the two words embedded in the first entry on the right), the reader is encouraged by the layout to see the paired titles as independent entities. And to a degree they are: after the fourth entry, which on the English side, but not the Irish, spills over into the next line, the two columns are no longer aligned; one needs to search before mentally pairing an Irish title with an English one — not always easy, given the liberties taken with a few of the latter. As presented, it is no longer a case of Irish original and English translation, but of two independent poems equally deserving of the reader's attention and esteem.

This equal treatment of poem and translation, of poet and translator, is carried on in the pages of the book proper (Figure 5), where we find, again on the left, Ní Dhomhnaill's name at the top of page followed by the poem in Irish, and on the right, also in the banner, the translator's name in the same font and size as the poet's, followed by the poem in English. If anything, because of the greater stature traditionally accruing to the righthand or recto page of a book, the translator's name arguably has an edge. The effect is unique. In a world where the comparative size of lettering is contractually negotiated, and translators are often invisible (in the everyday sense of the word), insofar as their names are routinely left off book covers,[7] omitted from tables of contents, and overlooked in book reviews, *Pharaoh's Daughter* gives them extraordinary prominence. When one considers that American editions of poetry in translation are often content to identify translators by their initials, bracketed at the foot of the English version, even when those translators include a John Ashbery or a Frank O'Hara,[8] in *Pharaoh's Daughter* the translator and the poet, and consequently the translation and the original (there is no "translated by" here) are given equal billing.



NUALA NÍ DHOMHNAILL

Geasa

Má chuirim aon lámh ar an dtearmann beannaithe,
má thógaim droichead thar an abhainn,
gach a mbíonn tógtha isló ages na ceardaithe
bíonn sé leagtha ar maidin romham.

Tagann aníos an abhainn istoíche bád
is bean ina seasamh inti.
Tá coinneal ar lasadh ina súil is ina lámha.
Tá dhá mhaide rámha aici.

Tairrigíonn sí amach paca cártaí,
'An imréofá breith?' a deireann sí.
Imrímid is buann sí orm de shíor
is cuireann sí de cheist, de bhreith is de mhórualach orm

Gan an tarna béile a ithe in aon tigh,
ná an tarna oíche a chaitheamh faoi aon díon,
gan dhá shraic chodlata a dhéanamh ar aon leaba
go bhfaighead í. Nuair a fhiafraim dí cá mbíonn sí,

'Dá mba siar é soir,' a deireann sí, 'dá mba soir é siar.'
Imíonn sí léi agus splancacha tintrí léi
is fágtar ansan mé ar an bport.
Tá an dá choinneal fós ar lasadh le mo thaobh.

D'fhág sí na maidí rámha agam.

MEDBH McGUCKIAN

The Bond

If I use my forbidden hand
To raise a bridge across the river,
All the work of the builders
Has been blown up by sunrise.

A boat comes up the river by night
With a woman standing in it,
Twin candles lit in her eyes
And two oars in her hands.

She unsheathes a pack of cards,
'Will you play forfeits?' she says.
We play and she beats me hands down,
And she puts three banns upon me:

Not to have two meals in one house,
Not to pass two nights under one roof,
Not to sleep twice with the same man
Until I find her. When I ask her address,

'If it were north I'd tell you south,
If it were east, west.' She hooks
Off in a flash of lightning, leaving me
Stranded on the bank,

My eyes full of candles,
And the two dead oars.

Figure 5. "Geasa" / "The Bond"

7. This despite advocacy by the Society of Authors and the recent #TranslatorsOnTheCover social media campaign.
8. As in the *New York Review of Books* edition of the poems of Pierre Reverdy. One must consult a key elsewhere in the volume to find out that MH are the initials of Marilyn Hacker and KR are those of Kenneth Rexroth.

Without attributing too great an intentionality to these features — which after all are a matter of book design and to a degree out of the poet's hands (though as the correspondence between Fallon and Ní Dhomhnaill in the latter's archive makes clear, the two were in close contact throughout the project) — I will suggest that the effect of the book's layout is to emphasize the collaborative nature of the enterprise, the mutual dependency of the paired texts. The English poem, for obvious reasons, would not exist without the Irish poem; and the Irish poem in turn, would not exist for a substantial majority of its readers, within Ireland and elsewhere, were it not for the English poem. One could go further and say that the Irish poem and its English double, the one destined for a royal lap, together make up a single text reflective of the bilingual culture from which they emerge, answering to Thomas Kinsella's Möbius-like conception of "the Irish tradition [as] a matter of two linguistic entities in dynamic interaction . . . asking to be understood together" (1986, xxvii).

False Symmetries

Pharaoh's Daughter projects a utopian image of translation as a cooperative, egalitarian undertaking — Irish poets working with other Irish poets, "kindred spirits [communicating] across the gulf of language" (Titley 2005, 19) — in a laudable cause (the promotion of Irish writing), a perception which doubtless added to the book's appeal. At the same time, its very success among readers of English on both sides of the Atlantic guaranteed it intensified scrutiny from practitioners and critics sensitive to the linguistic realities of Ireland, and made it a locus for discussions about the role English translations should be allowed to play in the production and dissemination of poetry written in Irish. As Lucy Collins observes, Ní Dhomhnaill's "willingness to allow her work to be freely translated by other poets has disturbed those who argue that this subverts the original act of linguistic independence asserted by the decision to write in Irish" (2003, 223). Declan Kiberd, whose *After Ireland* doesn't so much offer a unified critical stance on its subject as an array of possible stances, provides a retrospective glimpse into the sorts of anti-utopian questions the volume raised (here in response to the high-profile names of its translators).

> Is Ní Dhomhnaill seeking an even wider fame through validation by these authoritative figures? Are they offering some sort of condescending, protective (mainly male) embrace to a vulnerable Gaelic poet? Or are

> they, like so many poet-translators, "blocked" in some sort of writing impasse and using the turbo-charged lyrics of Ní Dhomhnaill to rekindle the creativity within themselves? (2018, 301)

Instances of "[c]reative hybridity" exemplified by *Pharaoh's Daughter*, Tok Freeland Thompson writes, are shown to be problematic in the context of the "political minefield and threatened linguistic zone" that characterize the field of Irish language writing (2021, 219). Timing may have had something to do with the book's reception.[9] *Pharaoh's Daughter* appeared in Ireland in 1990, and the 1990s, among other things, saw the explosive rise of postcolonial theory in literary studies, and with it an awareness of the historical role translation played in the political and cultural machinery of empire. Irish literary critics and thinkers were not slow to follow Edward Said in applying the postcolonial paradigm to Ireland and its centuries-long subjugation by the English.[10] From a postcolonial perspective — a perspective anticipated by Brian Friel's 1981 play *Translations* — English was no longer simply the language wielded with such command by a W.B. Yeats or a James Joyce, by a Paul Muldoon or an Anne Enright, but a medium of colonial domination, what Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls "the language of imposition". So, while in practical terms *Pharaoh's Daughter* was a matter of Irish poets translating an Irish poet, the seeming harmony of this formulation ran afoul of historical memory and linguistic actuality.

One of the more forceful voices questioning the role of English in boosting the profile of writing in Irish is that of the poet Louis de Paor. His article, "Disappearing Language: Translations from the Irish", rings with the conviction of a manifesto:

> The history of translation from Irish to English is characterized from the outset by the unequal relationship between the two languages, a product of sustained colonial pressure to undermine the authority of a separate Gaelic culture whose independence is guaranteed by the irredeemable otherness of its language (1996, 61).

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9. Paul Muldoon's translations in *The Astrakhan Cloak* were another point of discussion.
10. Declan Kiberd's sweeping account of twentieth-century Irish literature, *Inventing Ireland* (1995), set the standard. David Lloyd's earlier *Anomalous States* (1993) adhered more closely to a poststructuralist agenda.

At the very moment translation was providing Irish-language poetry with its first transatlantic and indeed global audience, and soon after Ní Dhomhnaill's *Pharaoh's Daughter* and *Astrakan Cloak* had become "crossover" hits in Britain and America, de Paor was writing of the "suspicion and ambivalence" among Irish language writers, who like him fear that "translation from Irish to English is as much an act of obliteration and annihilation as it is one of discovery and exchange" (63, 61). The mechanism of translation takes a dark turn in his formulation: "The English translation" (or, as *Pharaoh's Daughter* would have it, the "English Poem") "replaces the Irish while appearing to replicate it, insisting it has redeemed the original while suggesting itself as a legitimate substitute" (62) — a vision of translation as trojan horse.[11] This dystopian note was taken up by others in subsequent criticism,[12] and lies behind my choice of title, which is meant to recall the poem "Meeting the British," Paul Muldoon's oblique take on an infamous episode of colonial duplicity.

"Disappearing Language" was published the year after Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* (see above), the first book to systematically examine Ireland and Irish literature using the fresh insights of postcolonial theory. De Paor's debt to Kiberd and to postcolonial criticism generally is apparent in his emphasis on the same power differential Ní Dhomhnaill's "The Language Issue" elects to overlook; a structural imbalance manifested, to use de Paor's own words, in "the colonial power of English to obliterate Irish in the process of translation" (65). Where Kiberd, in his chapter on *Pharaoh's Daughter* in his later book, is willing to see the original and its translation as "twins who resemble one another" (304), de Paor eschews any hint of organic symmetry, preferring to see the English version as "the forgery on the facing page" (67). Such views are not unique to de Paor or to Ireland; as Emily Apter points out in *The Translation Zone*, "All translators are to some extent counterfeit artists, experts at forgeries

11. Ní Dhomhnaill later acknowledged these dangers in her essay "Linguistic Ecology", where she closely echoes de Paor: "[T]ranslation from Irish to English in contemporary Ireland, can be as much an act of obliteration or forgetting . . . as one of recuperation and remembering" (Ní Dhomhnaill 2009, 89); yet in the same essay she writes, in a near non sequitur, that her refusal to self-translate "leaves me rather at the mercy of my translators, but what is surprising is how many people have done me the enormous favor of translation" (88).
12. Subsequent writers express a concern that the English translation will "eclipse", "distort", "displace", make "invisible", "erase or subdue" the original Irish. Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, also from the mid-1990's, is another common point of reference.

of voice and style," whose versions cater to the metropolitan reader's fantasy of "conquering the other's language without having to actually learn it" (2006, 220). Still, de Paor's remarks can be linked to anti-English attitudes that have a long history within nationalist Ireland, and that were still playing themselves out in Northern Ireland at the time de Paor was writing. Moving beyond this heavily polarized environment, however, we see that de Paor makes visible the complex literary politics that confront a writer in a minor language:

> In literature English is now the language of status and prestige and writing in Irish for most of the twentieth century has been invisible except where it has been assimilated through translation into the mainstream English language tradition . . . . It is as though English were a mark of distinction, a category of excellence, and to be translated from Irish an achievement, a granting of aesthetic value and critical approval (63).[13]

In his essay de Paor's hero is not Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill but Biddy Jenkinson, who famously has resisted what de Paor calls "the business of translation" by refusing to have her poems in Irish rendered into English — or, in de Paor's terms, rendered invisible.[14]

One of de Paor's observations bears keenly on the bibliographic concerns of this article. Conceding "the sincerity of the translator", de Paor nevertheless notes that "the imbalance of power between the two languages ensures that English commands the page" — usually the recto or right-hand page — "while Irish looks on from the margins, its prompting for the most part unheard by the audience" (64). From de Paor's perspective, when Irish publishers relegate Irish to the weaker verso, the B-side as it were, as in *Pharaoh's Daughter*, they are reenacting the colonial practices that reduced Irish Gaelic to endangered status in the first place. When it comes to the pages of a book, at least, space is not homogeneous. The symmetrical schema in Figure 2 above is in need of correction; a truer

13. Here de Paor anticipates Lawrence Venuti's interrogation, in "Translation, Interpretation, Canon Formation", of translation's "role in the canonization of a foreign text", whereby "the foreign text undergoes a radical transformation in which it comes to support a range of meanings and values that may have little or nothing to do with those it supported" in its original linguistic community (2008, 29–30).
14. A principle she applies only to works published *in Ireland*, as de Paor makes clear, though she has yet to publish a bilingual edition of her work outside of the country either.

representation of a double-page spread would weight each page differently, as shown in Figure 6 below, for reasons set out at the start of this essay.

Figure 6. Weighted representation of two-page spread

If "Disappearing Language" articulates a platform, de Paor's own bilingual volume *agus rud eile de* / *and another thing* (2010) presents an alternative model for book design that addresses some of the issues raised in that essay; in the process, it pointedly inverts one or two of the key design features of Ní Dhomhnaill's *Pharaoh's Daughter.* A comparison of the two editions makes for a telling study in contrasts.

Turning first to the two title pages, we see that in de Paor the Irish title is given top billing, as opposed to *Pharaoh's Daughter* where no Irish title is provided at all (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. A*gus rud eile de* and *Pharaoh's Daughter,* title pages

Similarly, de Paor's title page denaturalizes English by printing it in italics — both for the title and the note on the translations — thus marking it as the foreign or secondary language, as in standard editorial practice. The most significant inversion, however, comes in the body of the text, where the two languages have exchanged places; now it is the Irish that "draws the reader's attention", as Clíona Ní Ríordáin writes of an earlier de Paor volume, "because of its ease of access on the right hand side" (2010, 23),

while the English on the facing verso has implicitly been assigned an ancillary role as an appendage or a supplement to the original, no longer its usurper. By the same token, the Irish no longer looks on from the margin, its "prompting" scarcely heeded. This clearly has symbolic value for de Paor, but one could also argue for its practical effect. In this ENGLISH | IRISH configuration, upon opening the book the reader is confronted with the Irish text, and at least for readers in Ireland, asked to engage with it; the English is there as an aid to reading, a gloss for those who require it. In this manner, those readers without adequate Irish are made to face up to their own (and their country's) "cultural deprivation," in Michael Longley's phrase (1993, 92).

Translation suffers a similar demotion in de Paor's book. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's stellar cast of translators figured prominently in the design of her book, their names given equal stature to that of the poet. In *agus rud eile de*, by contrast, the English translations appear without attribution: neither at the top of the page, as in *Pharaoh's Daughter*, nor at the foot of each poem, as in most books of poetry involving multiple translators. Nor are the three translators (four including the author) anywhere matched with specific titles: not in the table of contents, nor in any other paratextual material. Their names, as we saw in Figure 4, appear collectively on the title page; otherwise, their contributions remain as anonymous as the work of medieval scribes. Through such strategies de Paor and his publisher endeavor to reconstruct the hierarchy of languages, to de-privilege English and indeed translation in the life of Irish-language poetry.

Poetry of the Gutter

The "hard and soft" in my subtitle points to recent disputes between the European Union and the U.K. concerning the nature of the post-Brexit border between the British province of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to the south, which remains in the EU. More immediately, it seeks to draw a parallel between that border and the gutter running down the middle of an open book. Marshall Lee, writing from a design perspective, describes the gutter as "a substantial obstacle. Not only does it create a physical break . . . it's also a psychological barrier" to be crossed at one's peril (2004, 373). In parallel-text editions, the gutter serves to keep the source and target languages well apart, as is the case with the two books I have discussed so far. Both books are instances of hard borders, where the languages keep to their side of the line; visually, there is little if

any direct cross-border activity, excluding that of the reader's eyes and the "mode of chiasmic reading" Eric Falci ascribes to them in *en face* editions (2011, 164). From the gutter's perspective, it doesn't much matter which language appears on which side; the result is the same: a strict cordon is in place to discourage the intermingling of tongues. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, among others, has compared the exclusion of writing in Gaelic from the Anglo-Irish mainstream to a form of apartheid (2003, 89), but certainly a parallel closer home is the English Pale that was established to protect medieval colonists on Ireland's eastern seaboard from the marauding Irish and their language. (The fourteenth-century Statute of Kilkenny forbid the speaking of Irish within the Pale, a prohibition that proved ineffectual.)

Most of the poets identified with *Innti* — the first to benefit from Irish-language poetry's "renaissance in national consciousness through translations" (Freeland Thompson 2021, 227) — notionally reinforced this division by their reluctance to translate their own work, despite their understood status as bilingual speakers. It may be that they are unconsciously adhering to what Robert J. C. Young terms "the literature/state/language ideology," whereby "[a]s a writer, you are supposed to choose just one [language], and certainly not move between languages" (2012, 176). Cathal Ó Searcaigh gives the following justification for avoiding self-translation: "I don't do translations. If I did, I would be listening to the whisperings of English when I was writing, and if I were to use a saying or wordplay in Gaelic that I could find no equivalent for in English then I would be under pressure to leave it out entirely" (2003). The community of writers in Irish as a whole share the desire to hold the line against further incursions of English idioms and vocabulary into the linguistic fabric of Irish, a centuries-old seepage whose contemporary form Ó Searcaigh portrays in the ironically titled "Native Speaker," the first stanza of which runs:

Cainteoir Dúchais

Bhí sé *flat-out* a dúirt sé
i gcaitheamh na maidine.
Rinne sé an t-árasán a *hoover*eáil,
na boscai bruscair a *jeyes-fluid*eáil,
an loo a *harpic*eáil, an *bath* a *vim*eáil.
Ansin rinne sé an t-urlár a *flash*áil
na fuinneoga a *windowlene*áil
agus na leapacha a *eau-de-cologne*áil.

(1997, 135)

Ó Searcaigh takes care to highlight the commercial basis underpinning the global spread of English by showing the assimilation of brand names at the level of grammar, as they are converted into Irish verbs by the addition of the "-eail" ending.[15]

The either/or stance governing these poets' creative use of language (all of them write expository prose in both Irish and English) may owe something to the memorable gesture of Michael Hartnett, an Anglo-Irish poet who, in midcareer, famously bid "A Farewell to English", naming it "the perfect language to sell pigs in". "I have made my choice", he wrote in his best-known poem, a choice that he bravely stuck to for the next ten years, during which he published three volumes of poetry in Irish, before finally reverting to the language of his birth. For the *Innti* poets, having thrown in their lot with a minority language, to then go on to compose secondary versions of their work in the majority tongue might well have seemed, from an ideological perspective, unsound praxis. The English page was thus left for others to fill with their own interpretations of the Irish text and their own conception of fidelity.

With the turn of the twenty-first century, the power of the gutter as a line of division between Irish and English in bilingual editions seems to have receded. I have space here only to indicate a handful of recent trends in what I referred to earlier as the "third wave" in contemporary poetry in Irish. This wave is characterized by the general easing of the Irish/English binary that has governed and bedeviled discussions of modern Irish literature from the beginning. It coincides loosely with the cessation of sectarian violence in the North and with the increasing liberalization of Irish society, and we may speculate on the role such sociopolitical factors played in these developments. The growing recognition of Irish-language poetry by the literary establishment, largely thanks to the first wave described above, may have been an additional factor.

The first barrier to come down was the unwritten stricture against self-translation that had prevailed during the *Innti* period in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Younger poets like Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Aifric Mac Aodha have published English translations of their own work as well as the work of others, part of what Daniela Theinová describes as "the current trend in Irish poetry to dispense with clear-cut distinctions"

15. The poem translates in part as, "He managed to *Hoover* the flat, / to *Jeyes-Fluid* the bins / to *Harpic* the loo and *Vim* the bath. / Then he did the *Flashing* of the floor, / the *Windolene*-ing of the windows / and *Eau-de-Cologne*-ing of the beds" (adapted from the version by Aodán Mac Poílin in De Paor 2016).

(2017, 205). To this must be added the emergent phenomenon of bilingual composition; that is, verse collections in parallel format where neither the Irish nor the English version is accorded the status of "original," or presented as a translation of the other, however much the two texts mirror each other in semantic terms; their genetic relationship is left undefined, and is perhaps undefinable. Such is the case with a series of books published by Arlen House, two of which are *Trespasser : Treaspásóir* by Mícheál Ó Ruairc (2019) and *Fe Gheasa : Spellbound* by Dairena Ní Chinnéide (2017), where the colon in the title represents a center of balance rather than any transactional relationship. Though primarily an English-language press, Arlen House nevertheless makes room in its stable for titles in Irish, and titles in both Irish and English, which by policy honor the Irish texts with the recto position. Colette Nic Aodha's 2006 volume *Between Curses : Bainne géar*, also from Arlen House, disrupts this pattern by alternating poems in English and Irish, not as facing versions of each other, but as independent poems without a counterpart in the other language. While initially, per tradition, the English poems appear on the right and the Irish poems on the left (I|E), after eighteen pages this pattern is reversed (E|I) when an Irish poem runs to two pages, only to revert to the original sequence (I|E) twelve pages later, and so on through the collection. These random shifts can be disorienting for those habituated to bilingual editions in which each language can be relied on to keep to its designated half of the two-page spread; as such, it represents a further undermining of the structural binary found in conventional bilingual editions.

While such publications and creative efforts attest to an increased pluralism in the field of Gaelic poetry and serve to complicate oppositional models of Ireland's "language issue", they nevertheless continue to respect the linguistic integrity of the individual page. An exception is the work of Belfast poet Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, whose two bilingual volumes, *Sruth Teangacha / Stream of Tongues* (2002) and especially *Criss-Cross / Mo Chara* (2011) represent landmark instances of gutter subversion. Michael Hartnett writes of his distress at finding himself "enmeshed in a bilingual chaos" prior to his conversion to Irish, with poems "abruptly changing languages in mid-verse, words from one language insinuating themselves into poems written in the other" (2001–2, 134). Hartnett could be describing the world of Mac Lochlainn's poetry, with the understanding that chaos is in the eye of the beholder. The macaronic nature of much of the verse in his first volume has been well documented by Laura O'Connor. Equally noteworthy is the wildly unreliable nature of the "translations" themselves, in particular those by the poet alone; Mac Lochlainn describes them in his

Author's Note as "a playful jibe thrown out at the monoglot who seeks truth in translation" (2002, 190) — a tricksterish alternative to Jenkinson's outright rejection, whose effect is to undermine the faux symmetry of the parallel-text format, the assumption of congruence between languages. Through such methods Mac Lochlainn seeks to chide those among his Celtic brethren who "[don't have] the Irish" (2002, 63). His 2011 volume pushes these strategies even further. First, *Criss-Cross* / *Mo Chara* is not primarily a book of translations, but like Nic Aodha's 2006 volume, a collection of poems in Irish and English; as in her book, no recto-verso pattern is established. Having written "poems in Irish and English", however, I should quickly add that here Mac Lochlainn fully embraces the macaronic technique initially explored in his previous book, so it would be more accurate to say "bilingual and trilingual poems": an English or an Irish stock with, respectively, an admixture of Irish or English, along with a sprinkling of Spanish to accent the author's affiliative adoption of a *frontera* or borderlands aesthetic. The only credited translations are of two poems in English done into Irish by *Innti* alumnus Gabriel Rosenstock; a few others are imported, with minor variations, from *Sruth / Stream*, where the English versions had been identified as translations. Otherwise, one can no longer really speak of translations, only of "pairings": poetic texts in Irish and English whose dual storylines occasionally coalesce but rarely end up in the same square. There is a spirit of play in his work that may try some tastes, but it is a style of play that compels the reader to grapple with both sides of the book's open pages, to "criss-cross" the no-man's-land of the gutter in pursuit of an elusive point of vantage. Similar effects have been achieved in the border poetics of some Latinx poets,[16] but within the context of modern Irish poetry and its publishers, Mac Lochlainn's innovations stand comparison with the breaking of the theatrical "fourth wall" that was a trademark of the twentieth-century avant-garde.

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes conceives of the ideal book as a sort of "sanctified Babel," where "the Biblical myth is reversed [and] the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment"; where one beholds "the cohabitation of languages *working side by side*" (1975, 3–4). *Pharaoh's Daughter* provides one version of that "side-by-side", though others have pointed out the tensions and contradictions inherent in that project, the asymmetries that Barthes' vision of linguistic harmony occludes. (Barthes himself was writing in one of the world's major colonial languages.) Beyond

16. See, for instance, the work of Nuyorican poet Tato Laviera, or the Spanglish lyrics of the rap group Cypress Hill.

that, languages are not truly interoperable, and borders — as Brexit itself demonstrated — are not going away anytime soon. We would do well to balance Barthes's conception with George Steiner's observations in his nearly contemporary study of language and translation, *After Babel,* on the centrifugal nature of languages, which, he contends, can be as much about constructing fences to keep others out as about building bridges to bring them together (1975, 31–33). We may want to identify this tendency with the protectionist strategies shared by some post-*Innti* poets who sought and seek to hold the line against "the contagion of English", as Aifric Mac Aodha puts it (2011), by minimizing or eliminating its role in the diffusion of Irish-language poetry in Ireland.

Such activism notwithstanding, the future of Irish as a viable community language remains in doubt; some, including Mac Aodha, describe it as already dead (Theinová 2017, 206). Fellow Irish-language poet Tomás Mac Síomóin views contemporary spoken Irish as fatally compromised, no longer deserving the name "Gaeilge":

> The boundary between the two languages was breached and *Géarla* [a portmanteau combining *Béarla* and *Gaeilge,* the Gaelic words for English and Irish] was born. Code-switching, a jumping back and forth between Irish and English, gradually established itself as the conversational norm, both in the *Gaeltacht* and . . . among Irish speakers in the rest of the country (2014, 102).

"Code-switching, a jumping back and forth between Irish and English" are the very qualities that distinguish Gearóid Mac Lochlainn's creative practice; at any rate, a prescriptive approach to language has never been one of modern poetry's mandates. The work of Mac Lochlainn and other twenty-first-century poets suggests that the future of Irish language poetry, and perhaps of Irish poetry as a whole, lies not in the narrow channel of monolingualism or in linguistic separatism, but in a mixed idiom that accounts for the linguistic realities of Irish-speaking Ireland, and for the ethno-linguistic diversity found in twenty-first century Ireland as a whole.

The Irish term *breac*, meaning speckled, is applied to districts made up of mixed populations of English and Irish speakers, a border-zone of sorts between the dwindling Gaeltacht and the looming mass of English-speaking Ireland. The poem "An Fearann Breac" ["The Speckled Land"] by Colm Breathnach (1992, 57) — a writer of the post-*Innti* generation — manages to capture in its concrete poetics the overlapping and interlocking

nature of Ireland's linguistic landscape, past and present, in all its Escher-like perplexity. The poem's alternating lines repeat each other in Irish and Gaelic, except that in one the speaker rides a white horse, and in the other a black horse.

An Fearann Breac

Tá capall bán fúm
I ride the black horse
'dul an fearan breac anonn
All the speckled land across.

(Aistriúchán/Translation)

I ride the white horse
Tá capall dubh fúm
All the speckled land across
'dul an fearan breac anonn.

Exploring, testing and transgressing that shadow line between two worlds is the task that Irish-language poets have before them. And until the time when electronic media — e-books, hypertexts, the multiverse — take over the business of publishing Irish-language poetry, the material book, with its unique limitations and limitless potential, will continue to be the place where these creative conundrums work themselves out.

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