Essays on the Poetry of Trevor Joyce
Essays on the Poetry of Trevor Joyce

edited by
Niamh O’Mahony

Shearsman Books
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Preface: Spandrels

Peter Manson

The lyric self is a lonely place, and the life’s work of Trevor Joyce can be read as a search for its hidden populace. Translation has been Joyce’s primary means of establishing the presence of more than one human consciousness at a time in the same set of words. The Poems of Sweeny, Peregrine occupy a position in Joyce’s work not unlike that of Ezra Pound’s complex early essays in translation (‘The Seafarer’, Cathay and ‘Canto 1’). The Pound of ‘The Seafarer’ was still concerned with the purging of supplemental voices from the history of his text, translating a word meaning “angels” as “English” and rejecting the final lines of the poem as an improvement made by “a monk with literary ambitions” (Ruthven 214). Joyce’s Sweeny, by contrast, is explicitly “A Working of the Corrupt Irish Text (1966–1976)” and, as a voice in Joyce’s ‘Trem Neul’ has it, “corruption is fertility” (first dream of fire 203). I read the incorporation of Sweeny’s ten-year gestation into its subtitle as marking a further series of intrapersonal fault-lines in the already heavily sutured and multiply-mediated outcome of this textual relay: Trevor Joyce aged 19 is not Trevor Joyce aged 29 (“With the exception of your neurons / and your muscles, the cells of your / first body are long gone”, as another voice in ‘Trem Neul’ notes) (223). It may be that any honest act of introspection must find the individual divided, and the space of language itself is haunted, for Joyce, by the numberless human lives that have shaped it and been shaped by it. Joyce quotes with approval James Clarence Mangan’s description of his own inventive translations as “the antithesis of plagiarism” – if plagiarism is the failure to acknowledge one’s sources, then the true plagiarist is the one who imagines his work to have no other source than his own imaginative invention (234). Joyce’s writing is that antithesis, a highly sociable matter of workings and versions of prior texts (which themselves are often drawn from folk tradition or popular song), of writings “with” other writers, and of deliberate, exploratory subversions of his own “free” writing, recombining its constituent parts according to predesigned permutational schemata. Joyce has written of the long and ongoing process by which he has come to understand and to imaginatively inhabit the output of his own textual machinery in Syzygy – the self in such writing is a destination rather than a point of origin, or,
rather, it is a staging-post on a way characterised by perpetual openness to change.\(^1\)

Joyce’s last word on the self may well be ‘Trem Neul’, “an autobiographical essay in prose and verse from which everything personal has been excluded”.\(^2\) The self in ‘Trem Neul’ is defined by the points of intersection of an intricate golden braid of strands of appropriated language, often from scientific or folkloric sources. There are constant shifts of scale and perspective: highly figurative descriptions of neuronal activity in the brain, or the “hive mind” of insects in a termite colony, could equally well be read as the choreography of a complex human dance, or the chaotic gravitational interactions of massive objects in space. With the constant accompaniment of human and avian music, the total effect is both true to experience and extraordinarily moving – I know of nothing else like it.

Joyce’s use of formal constraint always carries an emotional charge, and its implications can be disturbing in a way that OuLiPian constraints rarely are. There’s an aspect of gleefully violent revenge in an Irish poet’s rewriting of the poems of Edmund Spenser (author of ‘A View of the Present State of Ireland’) in words of one syllable.\(^3\) Joyce has written a remarkable account of his elaboration of a complex mechanism (“the hypersestina”) for generating poems from a structural analysis of Botticelli’s illustrations for a violently misogynist tale, from Boccaccio, of hell, repetition and social control (‘Phantom Quarry’).\(^4\) The shared characteristic of most of Joyce’s structures and symmetries is that at some point they break down or prove unsymmetrical.\(^5\) Joyce’s use of a structure derived from a palindromic musical form in _Syzygy_ develops a flaw as soon as words are added to the structure (since a word is not the same thing as a musical note). The original intention with the hypersestina was that the poems generated by it should also function as clues, enabling a committed reader to work backwards and deduce the properties of the original structure for themselves. Joyce has described his own developing need to move onwards and outwards from the seed-words of his generative scheme towards its realisation in actual human language – he came finally to value the resulting swarm of 36-word poems for the poems’ own intrinsic properties and to accept that, for the reader, there was no road back to the source. It’s the lesson of entropy that you can’t unbake a cake, and it’s the Universe’s overall tendency towards increased disorder that gives time a fixed direction.\(^6\) The breakdown of Joyce’s permutational structures implies a transition from cyclic to linear time. Since the hypersestina had its origins in a vision of eternally repeated violence experienced in hell, the escape from that cycle on to the straight
road leading to the future is clearly optimistic, but it carries with it the uneasy awareness that not all cycles are hellish. Human life is sustained by the cycles of sleep, breath, menses, brainwave and heartbeat, and one day they all must stop.

The effects of constraint on the perceptible qualities of Joyce’s work can be paradoxical. We are used to a poetry whose “measure” is defined by the audible patterning of various surface features of the language, from alternations of stressed and unstressed syllables to rhyme and alliteration. In Joyce, the underlying pattern – whether it’s a generative structure like the hypersestina or the Rome’s Wreck constraint, where each line has exactly eight words, all of one syllable – often can’t be heard at all. What we perceive is its upshot, an unusually complex and irregular sonic surface which challenges our inevitable tendency to grasp at any hint of pattern. John Goodby, in his essay in this book, hears Rome’s Wreck in terms of hexameters, and I remember one listener who commented on Joyce’s seven-stress line after hearing a reading of Rome’s Wreck at the SoundEye festival in Cork. It might be useful to think of Joyce’s prosody as a “spandrel”, the architectural term borrowed by Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin to denote a biological characteristic or structure which is not explicitly coded for in an organism’s DNA, but which occupies the space “between” other structures which are explicitly coded for.7 Such characteristics do not directly arise from the workings of natural selection but can confer a survival advantage on the organism – Noam Chomsky has suggested that the language faculty itself should be considered a spandrel, arising as a consequence of the growing size and complexity of the human brain. On this view, the remarkable freshness and unpredictability of Joyce’s prosody arises by quite different means than a trivial virtuosity of sound-effect: this is a poetry which astonishes because no room has been left for it to do anything else.

Notes

2 Anonymous note on the back cover of the 2001 edition of with the first dream of fire they hunt the cold.
Joyce’s ‘Phantom Quarry’ essay is available online at http://enclavereview.wordpress.com/er8/.

Joyce’s title Pentahedron may be an early signal of this tendency. There are no “regular” pentahedra, since it is impossible to construct a five-sided solid, each of whose faces has the same shape (as the faces of a tetrahedron or octahedron are all equilateral triangles, and those of a cube are all squares). The name “pentahedron” is given to two quite different five-sided solids: a pyramid with a square base, and a triangular prism. These solids are probably not to be read (though I’m tempted) as a shorthand for the span of human history from the pyramids to Sir Isaac Newton.

In the notes to his poem ‘The Turlough’ (1995), Joyce mentions the possibility of the Universe eventually halting its expansion and beginning to contract again. In a nice instance of physics imitating art, this cyclic possibility was ruled out in 1998 by the discovery that the expansion of the Universe, far from slowing, was accelerating.


Works Cited


Introduction

Niamh O’Mahony

It is nearly fifty years since Trevor Joyce published his first collection of poems in Dublin, and the wealth of his writing since 1967 has been alternatively, and often simultaneously, fierce, challenging and familiar. This book is the first collection of essays to discuss Joyce’s poetry and the distinguished contribution it makes to the development of Irish literature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Joyce was born in Dublin in 1947. His mother was born in the Galway Workhouse and his father grew up in south Tipperary, near the Joyce stronghold of East Limerick. The family moved from Mary Street in Dublin city centre to Glasnevin on the north side of the city in the mid-sixties, by which time Joyce was already an avid reader and collector of books. His library began with disintegrating nineteenth-century volumes on classical history, medical textbooks, and the archaeology of Nineveh, and quickly lined the walls of his bedroom, winding its way around the small landing and down the stairs, where his books vied for space with his mother’s newspaper collection. It was about this time that Joyce met Michael Smith, which was the beginning of a life-long friendship. Smith was five years older than the poet, and had more experience of printing and publishing which he gained during a period working at a Dublin newspaper. Joyce had already made his first attempts at poetry when he met Smith, but Smith’s friendship became a central source of motivation and encouragement for the poet in the following years.

In 1967, Joyce, established New Writers’ Press [NWP] with Michael and Irene Smith to provide a publishing outlet for young poets, Irish and international, who were not receiving an audience through the available channels. In Smith’s ‘Introduction to New Irish Poets’ published as a prospectus with Joyce’s Sole Glum Trek, NWP’s first issue, the editors set the parameters of the press as follows:

Most of the poets whose work will be included in this series are Irish and under thirty. Believing poets should be beyond the herd-instinct, they belong to no school, movement, club or clique. They
are all serious poets – that is, human beings for whom writing poetry is a profoundly central activity, not a mere hobby or ornamental grace.

The essays gathered here offer various perspectives on the experimental nature of NWP publications, and yet it is worth considering Smith and Joyce’s agenda for the press as it diverged from their contemporaries in Irish poetry publishing. At the same time that NWP was preparing the first issue of its in-house journal, *The Lace Curtain*, Liam Miller of Dolmen Press was collaborating with Michael and Anne Yeats and Thomas Kinsella on a revival of Cuala Press, originally edited and managed by W.B. Yeats, Lily and Lolly Yeats. Every effort was made to ensure that the new Cuala Press would be as authentic as possible and yet the editors were aware of the difficulties this would create. The first volume to be published by the Press was “inevitably, slow to come to completion” Miller acknowledged, and “it was almost a year before the book, *Reflections*, an unpublished section of the journals of W.B. Yeats, was ready” (100). In the same period that the new Cuala Press prepared one book, NWP published eight of the forty-four publications that appeared in the first ten years of NWP activity. Jorge Luis Borges’ *Poems* was published in August 1969, an edition which Joyce believes to be “the first collection anywhere, in English, completely given over to his poetry” (Joyce ‘History of a Project’ 276). Alongside the Borges collection, NWP also prepared two issues of *The Lace Curtain* during this time, as well as *No Die Cast* by Brian Lynch, *Watches* by Joyce, *Homage to James Thompson (B.V.) at Portobello* by Smith, a translation of *The Hag of Beare* from the Old Irish by Michael Hartnett, *The Flags are Quiet* by Gerard Smyth, *Survival* by Augustus Young and three further collections from Pearse Hutchinson, Leland Bardwell and Macdara Woods. NWP made speed and immediacy their purpose so that the published book became a “cheap, fast, and effective means of getting new poetry before its prospective public”. The difference between NWP and the new Cuala Press is compounded by reference to Lynch’s *No Die Cast*. In a note to the collection in his NWP checklist, Joyce describes the title of Lynch’s book as “the longest meaningful phrase” the editors could “extract from the few letters of display-sized type” they had available – those used for the title of Smith’s *Dedications* (288). The innovative quality of NWP publications has been debated but clearly the material production of the press sets Smith and Joyce very much at odds with their peers in nineteen-sixties Ireland. The editors were content to depart from “the legacy of Yeats” which “favoured
the book as art-object” in order to publish more poetry faster, and to a wider audience (278).

After Sole Glum Trek (1967) and Watches (1969), Joyce published two more collections with NWP in the seventies. Pentahedron (1972) gathered a range of new poems together with selections from the two earlier collections, and The Poems of Sweeny, Peregrine (1976) presented a translation, or “working” of the eighth-century Irish myth of Buile Suibhne. Joyce’s father had died in the intervening years, and the poet also had his first brush with university, registering as a mature student at twenty-one to study English and Philosophy at University College Dublin. A lack of funds was primarily to blame for Joyce’s repeated deferrals. By 1976, Joyce had withdrawn from active involvement in NWP and was beginning to lose faith in the poetic means he had available in his writing and in its ability to do what he required of it.

NWP now entered what Joyce calls the “second phase of its activity” guided by Smith’s correspondence with Brian Coffey (‘Irish Terrain’ 159). Coffey supported NWP’s work and helped Smith recover a generation of poets that Coffey had written and published alongside in the nineteen-thirties such as Denis Devlin, Thomas MacGreevy, Charlie Donnelly and Niall Montgomery. Joyce had worked as a clerk in the Planning Departments of Dublin Corporation and Dublin County Council on and off since 1967, but he soon moved on to a position in the IT sector of P.J. Carroll’s, a job secured for him by Montgomery. Over the following years, Joyce set about providing himself with the education he believed necessary for a poet. He read widely in Philosophy, I.T., Politics, Literature, Economics and Chinese and Japanese poetry, even teaching classes on classical Chinese poetry as part of the Ireland China Cultural Society in Dublin. In 1984, Joyce moved to Cork and enrolled to study Mathematical Sciences at University College Cork. Within months of moving to Cork, Joyce founded The Melmoth Press. In a 1984 funding application to the Arts Council, Joyce outlined the purpose of the press as follows: “to sustain the cosmopolitan tradition of writing in Ireland” by publishing “forgotten classics, the neglected work of living masters and the work of emerging writers who show promise of continuing the tradition of Irish avant-garde experiment and innovation” (personal collection). Among the press’ projected publications, Joyce listed the selected works of William Dunkin, James Clarence Mangan and Niall Montgomery, as well as a first collection by David Lloyd. The press would also acknowledge the “importance of translation” as a symptom of the “internationalism” characterizing Irish

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poetry. In 1985, Melmoth Press published two volumes, *Chanterelles* by Brian Coffey and *Selected Poems* by Michael Smith. It wasn’t long before the practical difficulties of commissioning, preparing and publishing books at a remove from the Dublin printers and the local impositions of life and work made it impossible for Joyce to continue, and soon both Melmoth Press and NWP went quiet. By this time, Joyce had not published any of his own poetry for nearly ten years, and this period of quietude continued well into the next decade.

Joyce has acknowledged that his was not the self-imposed silence of George Oppen or Paul Valéry and he has spoken about his struggle to write during this time. He remembers poets and peers commenting, ‘Trevor Joyce stopped writing’, and yet there are boxes of notes which record his efforts to discover a form or language adequate to his needs. In a 2013 interview with Marthine Satris, Joyce explains his aversion to what he saw as a pattern for poets around him in the seventies to “get bogged down and settle on a personal solution or… style and then stick with that as their trademark” (14). Unwilling to settle and unable to write in a way that satisfied him, Joyce chose instead to spend his time seeking out “alternative approaches”. Among the various “alternatives” Joyce would discover over the following years, one of the first to emerge was the work of Raymond Roussel, a French poet and novelist whose modernist writings contributed to what would later be named OuLiPo. Soon, Joyce returned to the detective classics of Arthur Conan Doyle and Sax Rohmer he had read as a child, with the protagonists Holmes and Smith deducing from even the most arbitrary item a central clue in identifying the villain. It wasn’t long before Joyce read these stories as confirming rather than undermining the hierarchies of “observation, inference and deduction” which had reduced his poetry to “argument, deploration, pleading [and] threats” (“Why I Write Narrative”). Joyce’s increasingly specialised knowledge of computer systems and information flow provided a more profitable avenue of exploration, and it was around this time that Joyce first conceived of the three-dimensional structure that would provide a conceptual basis to the 36-word poems that populate *What’s in Store*. His experience with information systems benefited him both poetically and professionally, leading him to join Apple as a Business Systems Analyst in 1992. Soon, Joyce encountered John Cage’s chaotic and innovative forms for a second time and with the benefit of the intervening years. For Joyce, this second encounter was characterised by “more understanding of how the play of ambient noise across the receptivity of [Cage’s] spaces might circumvent”
the full extent of authorial intention ("Why I Write Narrative"). In Cage, the poet recognised an “alternative approach” to writing which avoided the “exclusions” of the incoherent world that characterised accounts of Sherlock Homes and Fu Manchu, and an ability to “admit what might otherwise not be acknowledged”. From here, Joyce could begin to imagine how he might establish the parameters necessary within poetry for the aleatory to intervene. Such “alternative approaches” made a significant contribution to Joyce’s return to writing in the mid-nineties, and yet they were, in themselves, not enough to inaugurate this return.

One significant impetus came with J.C.C. Mays’ 1990 essay, ‘Flourishing and Foul: Six Poets and the Irish Building Industry,’ an historically-attuned analysis of Joyce’s poetry and the first academic recognition of his writing. The “health or otherwise of Irish poetry is to be measured in what it has chosen to do without,” according to Mays, and Joyce is numbered among those poets whose poetry stands outside the parameters provided. Here, Mays aligns Joyce with “James Hogan (‘Augustus Young’) and Geoff Squires… as the most original poets of their generation” (10). For Joyce, the essay was “ground-breaking,” and when one considers the publication of two of Joyce’s poems in the same issue, Mays’ essay does indeed constitute a significant point in Joyce’s return to writing (‘Irish Terrain’ 162).6 With Mays’ essay supplying a critical imperative, Joyce’s encounter with Federico García Lorca’s final publication, Tamarit Poems, equipped him with a poetic incentive for his return to writing in the early nineties:

I remember coming across it [Tamarit Poems] and thinking it was just marvellous, absolutely gorgeous… [T]here’s one poem in it… ‘Casida of the Weeping’ that just stunned me… I wrote a poem which was my response to it and from that the rest of the book [stone floods] just branched out. (Keohane 9)

In 1995, Joyce published stone floods with NWP, his first collection in almost two decades, which inaugurated a strikingly prolific period for the poet. At Romana Huk’s Assembling Alternatives conference in New Hampshire in 1996, Joyce met Geoffrey Squires, Maurice Scully, Catherine Walsh, Billy Mills and Randolph Healy for the first time.7 The energy and enthusiasm Joyce gained from this event was reflected in the myriad of publications that followed and the consequences of the conference are “still resonating” in Ireland nearly twenty years later (Joyce ‘Irish Terrain’165).
The immediate effect of Assembling Alternatives was the founding of the ‘Cork Poetry Conference’ [later the ‘SoundEye Festival’] by Catriona Ryan, Matthew Geden and Trevor Joyce the following year in 1997. Ryan and Geden were graduate students in English at University College Cork when Ryan posed the idea for a conference celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of New Writers’ Press. Together, she and Geden developed the idea and then met with Joyce to seek his suggestions on poets to invite, contact details and advice.

The Cork Poetry Conference featured readings by Squires, Mills, Healy, Walsh, Scully, and Joyce along with Judy Kravis and Michael Smith, as well as papers on Irish experimental writing by Mills, Joyce and Alex Davis, in acknowledgement of the living tradition of innovation in Irish poetry. In a recent history of the event, Joyce identifies the “primary intent of the festival” being to “provide a forum for poets (and, perhaps, as it turned out, certain strains of poetry) overlooked by other poetry events in Ireland” (‘History’). The success of that first year of the conference prompted a second the following year; it soon became less conference-oriented and more of a poetry festival. As the festival became an annual event, it also expanded its range and David Lloyd, Mairéad Byrne, Fanny Howe, Tom Raworth, Keith Tuma, Alison Croggon, Stephen Rodefer and Fergal Gaynor became regular readers at this most international of local festivals. SoundEye is as much about the conversations between guests as it is about the readings, and while the festival has occupied a variety of locations across the city, activity still revolves around Joyce’s house in Shandon. Ryan left the city in 1997 and relinquished her involvement with the event, and by 2006 Geden too stepped down from a direct role in the festival. As the festival became an annual event, it also expanded its range and David Lloyd, Mairéad Byrne, Fanny Howe, Tom Raworth, Keith Tuma, Alison Croggon, Stephen Rodefer and Fergal Gaynor became regular readers at this most international of local festivals. SoundEye is as much about the conversations between guests as it is about the readings, and while the festival has occupied a variety of locations across the city, activity still revolves around Joyce’s house in Shandon. Ryan left the city in 1997 and relinquished her involvement with the event, and by 2006 Geden too stepped down from a direct role in the festival. By 2007, Gaynor was assisting Joyce with organisation and in October that year, Lloyd invited Joyce, Gaynor and Mairéad Byrne to attend ‘SoundEye West’ at the University of Southern California. If 2005 marked a highpoint of the festival as a “nexus of New Writers’ Press, the legacy of New Hampshire and [the organisers’] engagement with many other forms of contemporary art,” the years that followed did not provide the same opportunities for funding and support. For Joyce, the struggle to “sustain… SoundEye in the financial desert” was eased somewhat by the contribution of James Cummins and Rachel Warriner who took over the organisation of the festival circa 2009. After several years in attendance both as poets and audience members, and arranging readings under the aegis of DEFAULT Press, Cummins and Warriner soon became co-organisers with Joyce and Gaynor, and it is because of their work that the...
festival continues today. In 2005, Charles Bernstein described SoundEye as “without question… the most innovative and most important literary gathering to take place in Ireland—or just about anywhere else—over the last decade” and having now reached its nineteenth year, SoundEye is one of the most enduring poetry festivals in Ireland.

Joyce published three more chapbooks in the late nineties, and in 2001 his collected works, *with the first dream of fire they hunt the cold*: *A Body of Work* appeared from Shearsman and NWP. The 2001 collection was followed by *Take Over* and *Undone, Say* in 2003, and by 2007 Joyce had prepared another 300 pages of poetry for publication under the title, *What's in Store*. *Courts of Air and Earth* followed in 2008, gathering together Joyce’s translations from Old and Middle Irish including the *Poems of Sweeney, Peregrine* and selections from *Dánta Grádha* and ‘Love Songs from a Dead Tongue’. After translating a volume of Finnish dystopian prose poems with Seija Kerttula entitled *Poems of Aregemia* in 2012, Joyce published his next collection, *The Immediate Future* with Runamok Press in 2013. In 2014, *Rome's Wreck* was published by Cusp Books and a further collection entitled *Selected Poems 1967-2014* has just appeared from Shearsman Books.

Much has changed in literary criticism over the past twenty-five years and yet these changes have been slow to influence the critical reception of Joyce’s oeuvre. When one considers that Joyce’s first collections appeared con-currently with those of Seamus Heaney, Paul Durcan, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Eavan Boland, Michael Hartnett and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, all poets well-received and much-discussed in Irish Studies, this lack of critical attention is all the more striking. The upswing in Irish Studies in the nineteen-sixties established a critical commitment to Irish writing and culture among an international community of scholars. Timothy J. Meagher attributes the development of the discipline to the “rebirth and reinterpretation of Irish ethnic identity in the 1960s,” and this in turn prompted an unprecedented critical interest in Irish poetry (270). Smith took his opportunity in a 1971 essay to inform American and British readers of the redundancy of “that whole body of painstakingly accumulated, mainly useless information called Anglo-Irish Lit. Studies” which granted an “imprimatur” to “Irish poetry of the Yeatsian Dye” (17). Later, Smith explained his difficulty with the discipline, stating that “outside Ireland there is little or no interest in contemporary Irish poetry,” so concerned is the scholar of Irish studies “with his Joyce or his Yeats or his Synge” (‘Contemporary Situation’ 154). While rejecting the “gross process
of simplification,” “abetted by Anglo-Irish Lit. scholars,” that effaced the poetry of Beckett, Devlin, Montgomery, Coffey and MacGreevy,” Smith was aware that these scholars emerged both “indigenous and migrant,” and the nationalist definition of Irish writing was very much home-grown (‘Since Yeats’ 18). Smith’s affirmation of the value and importance of the “European Irishmen” writing in the thirties also validates that later generation of poets including John Montague, Seamus Heaney, John Jordan, Paul Durcan and Trevor Joyce (20).

If Smith was not concerned to distinguish Joyce’s poetry from that of Montague, Heaney or Durcan in this essay, it was because the nationalist trajectory of poetry and criticism he was attacking had yet to exert its full effects on this younger generation of poets. Marcella Edwards’ account of poetry and publishing in Ireland in the nineteen-sixties does much to demonstrate the impact of this nationalist imperative on the “new literary renaissance” in Irish writing and the distinctions which would emerge over the following decades (Martin 17). Edwards points to a 1965 essay by the Irish critic, Augustine Martin, which she says tasks writers of the “new literary renaissance” with the responsibility to “express… a national cultural identity freed at last from derivative or petrified attitudes, where the writer assumes a central role in the development of national self-awareness” (68). Here, Martin affirms this new era in Irish writing as challenging the dominance of Joyce and Yeats and their negative appraisals of Ireland and the Irish. A writer must “know his people directly, minutely, omnivorously,” Martin says, if the resultant literature is to be “alive and authentic” in its representation of contemporary society (14). Instead of “repudiating the social and religious pieties of Ireland” as Yeats and Joyce did, Martin encourages the new generation of Irish writers towards a mode of reflection and representation which is “not only for the good of literature but for the good of society” (14). Two years later, Martin would write a positive review of Joyce’s *Sole Glum Trek* and the NWP enterprise, an unexpected move perhaps given his 1965 essay, and one that does not reflect the complexity of the situation. For Edwards, Martin’s instruction to young writers to absolve themselves of James Joyce’s “vision of Ireland” which “is so grievously compelling” is indicative of the “modernising process” affecting “industry, economics and social policy changes” in the nineteen-sixties ( “a scheme of echoes” 3). The debates surrounding Irish poetry and publishing at the time “testify to the endurance of certain nationalistic and essentialist tendencies,” Edwards says, “and give the lie to the easy assumption of a modernising, let alone a modernist ethos.
within Irish poetry of the nineteen sixties” (4). The revival of the Yeats family enterprise, Cuala Press, towards the end of this decade serves as evidence of the “regressive poetics” which, for Edwards, manifested an acutely nationalist mode of cultural self-reconstruction in Irish poetry and publishing of the era.

Joyce was vocal in his rejection of what Brian Coffey called the “recognizably Irish quality” of conventional Irish poetry which Coffey said was “bad” for the poet because it exacts one of two effects: “either it refers to the purely physical effects of biological kind and as such says nothing of interest about the poetry, or it sets up a very dubious criterion of a limiting kind almost certainly bound to bias the critical judgement which accepts it” (‘Irish Terrain’ 159). Joyce’s repudiation of the existing parameters of Irish poetry evokes a critical binary of mainstream and avant-garde familiar in the debates surrounding contemporary poetry and which goes some way towards explaining the paucity of critical attention to his work.

The narrative of ‘mainstream versus experimental’ writing so prevalent in critical accounts of twentieth and twenty-first century poetry in Ireland, Britain, and beyond, has come under scrutiny in recent years from critics on both sides of the divide. Seamus Heaney reflects a seemingly general position when he says that “avant-garde” is “an old-fashioned term by now” because “in literature, nobody can cause bother any more” (Heaney 451). Joyce himself has commented that critical terms such as “innovative” and “experimental” are “boring” when applied to poetry and “don’t really matter… anymore” (‘Interview’ Jacket2). Heaney might be correct in his assertion that celebrated contemporary writers rarely provoke the controversy and notoriety that followed Ezra Pound, but while in other contexts some of the most contentious of contemporary schools have been welcomed into the fold of late, there is a long-standing and residual history of opposition in Irish poetry which is readily recognizable in the diverse publishing histories and critical receptions of Heaney and Joyce. Joyce’s affiliation with small-press publishing in NWP was prompted, in part, by the anticipated negative response from Dolmen Press to his and Smith’s first collections in the sixties. By the time Joyce returned to publishing in the nineties, no presses were actively seeking to publish his work, if indeed they were aware of it. Randolph Healy’s Wild Honey Press published Syzygy and Without Asylum in 1998 with print runs of 228 and 98 respectively, and the remainder of Joyce’s work has been published with Shearsman Books, The Gig, and New Writers’ Press, with one collection each from Runamok Press and Cusp Books. These are all small presses, some of them
very small. For contemporary poets such as Joyce, a commitment to small-press publishing is often interpreted as a personal or political preference on the part of the poet, but the politics of small-press publishing are as particular in Ireland as they are anywhere else, and it is worth noting that even the most recent NWP publications do not resemble the “exquisite,” “beautiful objects” published by Punch Press in the US and Crater Press in the UK (Cooke). Working at a “remove [ ] from economic thinking,” both presses foster a particular ideological remit for the contemporary late-modernist British poets they publish. Joyce’s publishing history provides the clearest example of the restricted opportunities for publishing poetry that does not conform to the conventions provided for Irish writing over the past decades. That Joyce has continued to publish poetry in Ireland and seen his poetry receive critical attention is evidence of the opportunities poetry affords for one to create oneself and one’s audience over and against the odds.

It would be unfair to suggest that Joyce and Smith did not contribute to the culture of opposition that they themselves experienced; The Lace Curtain featured some rather trenchant editorials over its short span, and several of Joyce’s essays bear witness to a very rigid divide between the mainstream and avant-garde communities of poetry. That said, Joyce did not have the benefit of control over, or even access to, the powerful institutions of publishing and criticism that play such a constitutive role in the definition and delimitation of Irish writing. Edna Longley’s refusal to consider the existence of traditions of Irish modernism other than the Yeats line, including the line of Brian Coffey, Denis Devlin, Catherine Walsh and Trevor Joyce, goes some way towards demonstrating the divide. “These people are confused” was part of her response to Keith Tuma’s question about the possibility of an alternative tradition in Irish modernism at a conference on Post-War Anglo-American Poetic Relations in 1998. Longley elaborates on this perspective in a review of Tuma’s Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry. Here, Longley discredits Tuma’s inclusion of Joyce, Walsh and Maurice Scully in his Anthology, describing them as “poets who feel marginalised by what, in a common paranoid and superior vocabulary, is invariably called the ‘mainstream’” (56). It becomes harder to sustain Longley’s rejection of this critical opposition when one considers that it wasn’t until 2002 that the first essay solely devoted to Joyce’s poetry was published. The papers presented at the inaugural SoundEye festival in 1997 offer a variety of responses to this common and deficient critical reception of Joyce’s poetry and that of his peers. Joyce,
Davis and Mills each discuss the diverse understandings of and trajectories for the critical analysis of innovative Irish poetry. These essays serve both as a record of a particularly self-conscious moment in the history of Irish writing and as a marker against which to judge the recent developments in Irish poetry criticism.

Joyce’s essay, ‘The Point of Innovation in Irish Poetry,’ constitutes a critical history of the mainstream versus avant-garde divide in Irish poetry and his own position within that history since the nineteen-sixties. Joyce begins by aligning the final poem from *Pentahedron* with the work of Boland and Mahon as exemplifying the “poetry of expression” characteristic of conventional Irish poetry (46). This work is criticised as “merely imitating the images of beauty with which they are already familiar” and submitting “occasionally towards the mess that is the world, only through a sense of guilt… at perpetrating such works of beauty in such a foul environment” (49). The difficulty that such poetry experiences is in “representing” the “reality” of the world and “the irreducible experience of real pain… pressed on us by media” which cannot register in a poetic language “in which all positive terms have been appropriated by advertising” (46). The danger for the poem, then, is that any attempt to represent or respond to the world is “left, once elicited, without possibility of external effect”. Joyce is clear that he and Smith certainly conceived as NWP as “alternative to the status quo, but [never]… as eccentric” since to do so “would have been to accede to the claims made by the ‘mainstream’ for its own centrality” (47). The statement problematises critical attempts to situate Joyce’s poetry because it sets NWP activities at a remove from the “mainstream” while also undermining the “centrality” of the mainstream as the prevailing form or style.

Joyce has argued for the ill fit between the critical rhetoric of mainstream and avant-garde and the nuances of the Irish context. In his essay published in *Assembling Alternatives*, Joyce emphasises that “there are no second-generation Beats, or Black Mountain, or New York School” in Irish literary history for contemporary poets to “react to” (165). The Celtic Twilight was the sole literary movement to “achieve prominence” in the early twentieth century, on account of its “links with nationalist politics” and the “quality of its major figure, Yeats”. Mays describes how James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Flann O’Brien were each subject to the phenomenon of “incorporation,” assimilated into Irish literary history after the fact of international recognition in a process designed to quash the more incongruous elements of the writer’s oeuvre.21 That each of these
writers had to be recovered affirms Joyce’s assertion that the majority of Irish writers up until the nineteen-sixties “defined themselves in relation to [The Celtic Twilight], “either working from within it, as did [Austin] Clarke and, to some extent, Kavanagh, or explicitly opposing it from the outside, as did Beckett and his associates”. Mays and Joyce are alert to the lack of a consolidated avant-garde tradition in Irish writing. The recent commitment of Irish poetry to an aesthetics of nation-building means that poets such as Joyce suffer the same exclusion from literary and critical institutions that afflicts avant-garde communities in Europe, but without the benefit of a history of avant-garde poetry to react to or an avant-garde community to join. Alex Davis explains the emergence of a generation of experimental Irish poets in the closing decades of the twentieth-century in terms of “deferred action” as per Hal Foster’s The Return of the Real (82). That Joyce and his peers constitute an “Irish neo-avant-garde” which has “no immediate or national historical precursor upon which it can act” is not in question for the critic. Rather, Davis is concerned with the “trauma” effected by this poetry which he says “cannot be domesticated as an Irish adjunct to a global (read: North American) neo-avant-garde” while, at the same time it “obdurately refus[es] to conform to the dominant procedures of contemporary Irish poetry” (83). If the lack of critical attention to Joyce’s poetry provides one impetus for this book, it also suggests its corollary, that of consolidating the existing critical analysis of Joyce’s poetry, and it is here that this collection aims to contribute to Irish poetry criticism.

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Poetry magazines, “like butterflies,” have “all too short a life,” Joyce and Smith state in their first issue of The Lace Curtain, and while the editors were content that “this brief span” saves magazines from “becom[ing] institutionalised and editorially retrogressive,” the consequences for the poet writing are more problematic (Editorial). This book is the first collection of essays on Joyce and is intended to consolidate the critical response to his poetry which got underway nearly thirty years after the publication of his first collection and still resides for the most part in small press magazines, one-off journals and blogs. David Lloyd, Keith Tuma and John Goodby are long-time readers and critics of Joyce’s poetry and the essays they contribute here extend and develop the critical reception of Joyce’s oeuvre which they themselves helped to establish. Geoffrey Squires and Fanny Howe have both played important roles in Joyce’s

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writing life. Squires was an early contributor to NWP and a compatriot to Joyce in Irish experimental poetry, while Howe's writing has served as inspiration and she herself championed Joyce's poetry. Gaynor's poetry and his work curating and collaborating on artistic performances and festivals in Cork have provided parallels for Joyce's activity. Manson's readings at the SoundEye festival consistently challenge and reinvigorate audiences, while the "lightly-worn scholarship" and "quotidian bathos" of his poetry reflect and provoke Joyce's poetic commitments (Brahic n.p.; Noel-Tod 127). The essays by Marthine Satris, Eric Falci and Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas demonstrate a growing critical interest in Joyce's poetry internationally, and Lucy Collins' contribution bears witness to a renewed commitment in Irish criticism to alternative literary traditions.

Alongside these writers, there are a number of others whose names are not included in the contents page but who must be acknowledged for their importance to Joyce's writing life. In his essay in *Assembling Alternatives*, Joyce states that Mays and Davis are the only two academics "working in English studies in Ireland who have demonstrated in print any interest in or understanding of experimental Irish poetry" (162). Their critical attention and analyses have provided a vital source of enthusiasm and encouragement for the poet, and this is reflected in the many references to and invocations of their criticism over the course of this collection. Nate Dorward, founder and editor of *The Gig* magazine and publishing press, is another individual of crucial importance to Joyce's poetry, and very much outside of the academy. After hearing Joyce read at the 1996 conference in New Hampshire, Dorward got hold of Joyce's recent poetry and soon came to recognise him as "a major writer" (Dorward n.pag.). Dorward took it upon himself to establish *The Gig* magazine to publish the poems Joyce emailed to him. Dorward also co-published *What's In Store* in collaboration with NWP. Alongside Mays, Davis and Dorward, Michael Smith occupied an essential position as fellow-poet, publisher and friend to Joyce. Smith was the first interlocutor for Joyce's poetry for many years, and he continued to publish his poetry and critically-acclaimed translations for many years.

The essays gathered in this collection address the earliest of Joyce's collections right through to his most recent, including *Rome's Wreck*, a collection still forthcoming at the time these essays were being written. *With the first dream of fire they hunt the cold* and *What's in Store* feature across the collection. The essays succeed in demonstrating the range and remit of Joyce's poetry. From the full-length essays on individual poems by Satris, Gaynor and Lloyd to the thematic analyses of Goodby and Twitchell-Waas,

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the contributors to this collection offer diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives on Joyce’s oeuvre. Howe offers an impressionistic response to various poems and collections combined with a personal recollection of her experience at SoundEye. Squires traces Joyce’s negotiations with prosody in an essay which manages to be both genial and declarative. Collins presents a necessary back-history of Joyce’s earliest collections from Sole Glum Trek and Watches through Pentahedron and up to The Poems of Sweeny, Peregrine. Tuma surveys What’s In Store asking how and why Joyce determined to gather in one collection the various sections and sequences of that book. These essays ask compelling questions about Joyce’s poetry, its place in the history of Irish poetry, and the meaning and definition of the term ‘Irish poetry’ as it is and might be received.

The authors contributing to this book offer several sets of parameters useful for the growing critical attention directed towards Joyce’s poetry; however, as with any collection of essays, not every poem and project is assessed. Beyond this introduction, the Offsets project is mentioned only in passing throughout the book, and Joyce’s knowledge and use of information systems in his writing merits more focused attention than it receives here. Meanwhile, the critical concern to locate Joyce’s poetry as part of the Irish poetry canon, which is perpetuated in this introduction, elides potentially more revealing comparisons of Joyce’s poetry with that of his European and American counterparts. So far, criticism has been slower to relinquish the rhetorical and conceptual models it has inherited than Joyce and his poetry have been to demand new approaches to reading and reception. The essays presented in this book are, in effect, catching up on an Irish poet very much in his prime and whose writing continues to outpace its critics.

The editor would like to thank Graham Allen, Alex Davis, Nate Dorward, Keith Tuma and, of course, Trevor Joyce, for their invaluable help with this project.

Notes

1 Miller outlined the reasons for the revival and the new editors’ intentions to remain as faithful as possible to the Press’ original aims: “The new Cuala Press books will continue the traditions first set in the original prospectus of 1903… The typographical standards set by Emery Walker will be adhered to. The same typeface, Caslon, in the same size, will be used. The books will be printed at the original handpress used since 1903. The paper, as in the earlier books, will
be specially made at Saggart, County Dublin, by the Swiftbrook Mills and bindings, in linen with coloured boards, will also remain unchanged. The publications will include the best new work being written in Ireland, printed with the same craftsmanship that made the Cuala Press famous amongst book collectors everywhere” (99-100).

2 Joyce included a ‘Checklist of Publications’ by NWP with his essay on the history of the Press in *Modernism and Ireland* edited by Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis.

3 This work led to Joyce’s presentation of a paper at the Europe-China Association Annual Conference at the University of Oxford in 1982 where he spoke alongside Joseph Needham. Joyce’s work with the Irish-Chinese Cultural Society prompted an invitation from the Chinese Government for Joyce to join an Irish delegation on a three-week tour of China in September 1983.

4 A collection by Lloyd entitled *Arc & Sill: Poems 1979-2009* was finally published by NWP in collaboration with Shearsman Books in 2012. The fact that a poet such as Lloyd would want his 2012 publication to appear under the aegis of NWP is indicative of its enduring role in Irish poetry, and of the enduring nature of the debates surrounding mainstream and avant-garde in Irish poetry criticism.

5 *Offsets* is archived online at the following address: http://web.archive.org/web/20050209121859/http://www.soundeye.org/offsets/

6 Several more poems were published between 1990 and 1995 in *The Irish Review*, in Michael Smith’s 1994 English textbook, *Pathfinder*, and in *The Irish Times*.

7 Assembling Alternatives brought together “five English-speaking communities—the U.S., U.K., Canada, Ireland and Australia—to discuss how national differences have inflected poetic experimentation” and the proceedings were published in 2003 under the conference title.

8 Another major consequence ensuing from the conference is the establishment of Randolph Healy's Wild Honey Press.

9 ‘SoundEye West’ aimed to create an encounter between the Irish poets and California-based poets such as Alfred Arteaga, Jen Hofer, Daniel Tiffany, Gabriela Jauregui (Mexico City) and Fred Moten to discuss the “theory and practice of interlingual and cross-cultural poetics”. The SoundEye West schedule of events is available online at: http://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/39/docs/Flyers/2007/flyersoundeye.pdf

10 Sarah Hayden joined as co-organiser with Cummins, Warriner, Gaynor and Joyce in 2013.


12 The American Conference for Irish Studies (ACIS) was founded in 1960, holding its first conference in 1963, and the International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures followed in 1970. By 1982, ACIS could identify “365 colleges and universities offering Irish Studies courses or programmes” across the United States and Canada, and that number increased to 454 by 1994 (Meagher 270).
The fact that Smith was invited to contribute essays both to the Denver Quarterly and to Douglas Dunn’s Two Decades of Irish Writing might appear to undermine the urgency he felt to present a “Corrected History” of Irish poetry for an American audience. When one considers that Heaney was granted the E.M. Forster Award to travel to the U.S. just four years later in 1975, and became Professor of Poetry at Harvard the following decade, the publication of Smith’s essay is revealed as not only unusual but also tokenistic.

Augustine Martin traces the term back to the British-born critic and poet, Robin Skelton.


“Poets work in words,” Coffey continued, “and how they work in words is the first object of a critic, not whether they are actually, nearly or remotely Irish” (159).

Conceptual poet and co-editor of the first anthology of conceptual poetry Kenneth Goldsmith was invited to read as part of Michelle Obama’s ‘Celebration of American Poetry at the White House’ in May 2011. Heaney’s poetry has attracted more than fifteen critical studies and the same number of major prizes and honours. Joyce is a Fulbright Scholar, a member of Aosdána, and he has been awarded numerous residencies; however the current volume constitutes the first collection of essays on Joyce’s poetry.

The differences between the Irish and British contexts for small-press publishing are compounded by the critical penchant for Parker’s Crater books published on “a fine textured creamy paper, hand-sewn and with pages ready to cut” which, in the Irish context, explicitly recall “Yeats’ legacy” of the “book as art object” which was fostered by Cuala Press and continued by Dolmen Press (Wilson).

Longley’s response and the question which prompted it are included as part of a conference report by Keith Tuma which is available online at the following address: http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/documents/anglo.html

As well as the late date of the essay, it is also significant that the piece was not written by an academic critic but rather by Nate Dorward, Joyce’s publisher and friend.

In the rush to incorporate Beckett into the Irish literary canon, several significant issues went unnoticed, that the writer “preferred the [Irish] landscape to the people,” “that he preferred to live in France under the Germans than in Ireland under de Valera,” and “that the books put in question everything the Irish constitution stands for” (Mays 8).
Works Cited


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