

Love, Sorrow and Joy

Love, Sorrow and Joy:
A New Voice in Irish Avant-Garde Poetry

Graham Gillespie

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P U B L I S H I N G

Love, Sorrow and Joy: A New Voice in Irish Avant-Garde Poetry
By Graham Gillespie

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For Rosarie my inspiration and companion.
For all my nephews and nieces,
David, Adam. Anne-Marie, Tara, Ella and Leah.
And also for Ger and Caroline, for their encouragement and support.

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INTRODUCTION

This essay explores the avant-garde poetry of Graham Gillespie and argues that his poems destabilize many of the ideological discourses that define what, until recently, was perceived to be the traditional function of the male poet or the masculine artistic sensibility. When discussing the avant-garde in the cultural realm it is worth alluding to the original meaning of the term. The *avant-garde* originally signified the vanguard of an army, the first people to feel the heat of battle and smell the blood, the suffering. Once adopted within the artistic realm it came to be considered a reflection of anything new in artistic consciousness or impetus, anything that was of itself innovative. That which was different from the “rest of the pack”. In the past the term “avant-garde” was frequently applied to the artistic philosophy or work of small collectives of intellectuals or artists, people who dug new ground. Graham Gillespie is one such artist. His language and his artistic sensibility are new and exciting. He breaks fresh ground; he scouts out new aesthetic and artistic terrain. In an era when many artists have retreated into themselves and where large swathes of the public may question the efficacy of art to generate change, philosophic or practical, Gillespie is an element within a new Irish artistic spirit. This element is part of the newer “exilic” energies that define modern Ireland’s changing cultural landscape. In artistic terms this fresh cultural dynamic gives witness to Rodrigues’ original avant- battle-cry for the avant-garde artist: to “serve as (the people’s) avant-garde,”¹ a process whereby poetry and art can function as an important and powerful impetus for social, political, and economic reform.² That a struggle currently rages in Western culture as regards the true nature of the role of culture, art and tradition is unquestionable. Not unnaturally, those artists whose lives straddle the birth of another century are re-interrogating art forms and forms of aesthetic expression which are reflective of the enormous changes in modern social and cultural life. Within this ever-changing cultural landscape, literary theorists and intellectuals including Barthes and

¹ Olinde Rodrigues cited in his essay, “L’artiste, le savant et l’industriel,” (“The artist, the scientist and the industrialist”), published in 1825.

² See Calinescu, Matei (1987). *The Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Duke University Press.

Kristeva have pointed to the privileged position experimental artistic forms including avant-garde writing hold as conduits for insights or those knowledges deemed radical or counter-hegemonic. The production of such artistic knowledge is not an easy process, however. It involves its own struggles and the artist's work is more often than not formed within the kilns of confusion, soul-searching, despair and a fear of the unknown. Take the sentiments of Gillespie's *Pinnocchio and Gepeto*, for example:

Pinnocchio and Gepeto

Lost in a fairytale wood
 With a hungry wolf prowling.
 Father is woodsman
 So I've no reason to fear.
 I'm his possession, the craftsman's masterpiece.
 With a suffering blade, another part of the heart he chips away,
 Chiselled now into the shape of a cross.
 I ask Daddy what he's making?
 He tells me it's my crown.

The literary avant-garde experience as defined in the postmodern era is a testing ground for new discourses and subversions. It channels novel forms of experience and permits the reader new "spaces" within which to meditate on the nature of beauty, time and art. In Gillespie's poetry this is a process which is constantly evolving; it is something which develops at the very earliest stages of the human journey:

Child's Play

She stands at Father's side
 In front of officialdom's formal welcome.
 Dark-skinned, dressed in uniform school-blue
 She is Papa's tongue.
 Erect and proud,
 The spokesman for her race
 Ambassador of an unimportant people.

She twists between languages and accents
 The virtuosity of a conjuror
 Bridging the divide
 Between the muteness of subordination
 And the dignity of voice...

In the hurried era we live in, childhood and the insights of the child are frequently denigrated or forgotten. Gillespie reminds us of the fact that the poet must assume a childlike approach if he/she is to truly “see” or represent the world fully:

The Treat

She came wheeling in the café door
Her face a frenzy of expectant delight.
Thin, pale and frail in flimsy coat
She grabbed Daddy’s hand, pleading
“That one please please!” pointing at the advertised ice-cream.
Father shuffled the change in his pocket
Counting the cost of a dream.
Then chest expanded
He met the price and made the order.
She screamed again
Paradise found, lost childhood redeemed.

In doing so Gillespie is reiterating the nexus that is childhood and the artistic vision outlined by writers and intellectuals – including Irishman Pádraig Pearse - who, for many centuries have advocated the legitimacy and vision of children and “untrained” artists, those for whom true freedom is the utilization of imagination and “make-believe”. As with many avant-garde writers before him, Gillespie’s work rejects that which smacks of a “stuffy” or overly-linguistic hue. This includes anything which approaches life’s important moments and questions from an overly-academic perspective. Instead, Gillespie puts his shoulder to the wheel of writing; he carves up language as a tradesman works wood. He moulds and fashions his medium to suit the message. The results are never less than exciting:

Millennium

Write (a voice whispered)
With the feather of an angel’s wing.
Leave the barren nest of this world
Fly and sing
Of beautiful things
Beyond eye and ear.
Paint a radiant dawn without compare.

11

Pick up the pen
 And spell up a well
 Of spirit, truth and deeper meaning.

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Mix thunder, lightning and God's breath
 The tears of saints and blood of Christ.
 And bear the brew in bright parade
 Burning into the mist of our dying last hour...

It is a cliché to say that we live in an epoch of global and economic crisis, a time of widespread unrest and war, an epoch where many see poetry and art as an “irrelevance”, a luxury we cannot afford.

Gillespie is not afraid “to get his hands dirty” or speak his mind, however. He is not afraid to put art and literature forward as a more sophisticated means of accessing meaning, as a means for redemption and dialogue, as a source of collective reality:

Runaway

If ever you decide
 To disenfranchise from reality.
 Throw your vote
 After your coat
 And jump a boat to looneyville.
 Don't bother with a return ticket
 Anywhere round the river bend beats this place.

“If the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise.”
 —William Blake

Laugh in spite of the pain
 For somewhere in the midst of agony
 Lies ecstasy or so said a song
 Once taught me by a wise man
 Who, learned it from a fool
 So I supposed it to be true.
 They say the king knew wiser things
 When he was alive.

For some say that he's dead now
 Though no one can quite tell
 As he always was so silent and often stayed quite still.
 The fool he thinks he's king now and many bow down and agree.
 All except the wise man
 Who couldn't give a damn.
 He's gone to a foreign country
 Where true knowledge isn't banned
 And nonsense a currency.

“The last judgement is necessary because fools flourish.”
 —William Blake

Madman's Springtime

If I should slip into the garden of make believe
 And become trapped in the scent of the flowers,
 Will you join me there to sing a song of nonsense to the moon
 And dance in everlasting April showers.

As an Irish poet of the present-day it would be strange if Gillespie was not taken with the question of identity, whether individual or communal.

Who Are You?

They say
 Every person is a riddle
 The answer known only to themselves
 Wrapped up with special care and hidden in the secret places of the heart
 (Except for those who cannot bear, or be bothered
 to ask the Question
 but sell it for the answer to another vain and fruitless query.)
 So as I stand now on the point of
 Revelation or retreat.

“Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.”
 —W. B. Yeats

This is a theme currently explored by a range of artists in Ireland and amongst the wide-ranging Irish diaspora, a subject area which has been made more eclectic and exciting by the range of ethnicities, languages and peoples that have made the country their home in a newly-prosperous

Ireland. Once defined by its association with poverty, rural living and an apparent insularity or “inwardness” as a consequence of its isolated location on the western Atlantic seaboard, Ireland’s artistic consciousness now speaks in a plethora of voices and from a diversity of perspectives.

The Universal

Hands clutching guide books
 They move forensically
 Up and down the aisles of the cathedral
 Exclaiming their admiration in babbling tongues.

In the pews
 The parishioners
 Heads bowed
 Welcome the Eucharistic King to Galway.

At the moment of consecration
 From His throne of bread
 The Shepherd of all nations
 Surmises the world at a glance
 And blesses the conscious and unconscious congregations
 At once.

For grace, a blind arrow
 Pierces the heart that is searching
 Even in the temporal corners of a cold Irish Church.

Gillespie’s poetry is an example of the artist who sees cultural exchange and creativity as the lifeblood of humanity, of community. To be successful, the search for human meaning or the sacred aesthetic needs to be pursued within a range of inter-related cultural frameworks and contexts. The mundane nature of modernity, its incessant or banal aspect; all of this requires resistance and usurpation if we are to get to the heart of things and capture the beauty that is a more complete experience of reality:

An Turas

Ní bheidh mé choíche chomh naofa is atá an fear seo.
 Tá an Spiorad Naomh ina ghnúis,
 Críost ina shúil agus Muire ina mhiongháire.
 Tá a sparán spfónta le grá,
 Tá a phócaí folmha lán de ghliondar.
 Tá scata páistí aige – athair, uncail is seanathair is ea é –
 Cé nach raibh clann aige riamh.
 Seacht n-íontas an domhain a thaispeáin a scéalaíocht dom.
 Fuair mé faoiseamh ó fhulaingt
 m'óige ina bharróg.
 Níl sé imithe anois,
 Ach ag dul ar thuras.
 Is é ceann scríbe filleadh ar ais abhaile.

Journey

I will never be so holy as that man.
 The Spirit is in his complexion
 Christ in his eyes and Mary in his smile.
 His purse is spent with love
 His empty pockets are full of joy.
 He has a litter of children – Father, Uncle and Grandfather
 He is to them – even though he never had a family.
 His storytelling showed me the Seven Wonders of the World.
 I found refuge from the suffering of my youth, in his hugs.
 He is not gone now, but only left on a journey
 And his destination is to return back home again.

Until recently, certain scholars of the postcolonial would have argued for a binary division which saw the modern world as the West and the rest (or the “Other”) Gillespie’s observational poetry would deem different; in reality, it is hybridity and the cross-fertilisation of ideas and human existences which has always been central to the Western paradigm. It is only through the shift and play of difference that identity and narrative possibility reveal themselves and Gillespie, a Galwayman, drives home the essential core, the exilic energy that lies just beneath the surface of things and takes the form of the Gaelic tradition.

An Fánaí

Níl tada i ndán dom,
Tá m'óige á díbirt
Is táim i mo chónaí i
Ríocht na sean-aoise anois.
Is iad cuimhní an t-aon chairde atá agam.

Faraor easpa dílseachta ag baint leo.
Imríonn siad cleasanna orm,
Ag insint dom bréaga faoi nádúr an ghliondair.
Táim ag fanacht le dul ar ais chugam féin
Ach ní féidir liom teacht ar an doras.
Táim ag cuardach chomhluadar Oisín
Agus a dhraíocht, a chumhacht agus a eolas
Faoin turas.
Ach is seanfhear anois é cosúil liom féin.
Níl a dhothain fuinnimh ná cairdis aige
Chun cabhair a thabhairt dom.
Agus rinne mé dearmad ar mo phaidreacha.
Éadóchas fite fuaite i ndóchas ach is oth liom a rá
Go bhfuil an lámh in uachtar ag an gcéad cheann.
Tá tuirse orm.
Táim lán de bhrionglóidí
Ach ag fáil bháis le heaspa grá.
Chuala mé faoi rí
Atá lán de thrócaire, grá agus maithiúnas.
N'fheadar an bhfuil spás aige ina chaisleán.
Táim réidh chun dul agus fanacht ansiúd.

Is é féin an bealach agus b'fhéidir gurb é
An cosán abhaile é -
Bheith ina sheirbhís go deo.

The Wanderer

There is nothing in store for me.
My youth is banished
And I am living in the kingdom of old age now.
Memories are my only friends
But they lack loyalty
Play tricks on me
Telling me lies about the nature of joy.
I am waiting to return back to myself
But I cannot find the door.
I am searching for the company of Óisín³ and his magic
Power and lore of the journey.
But he's an old man now like myself.
He does not have enough energy or friendship in him to give me help.
And I have forgotten my prayers.
Despair intertwines with hope but I regret to say
That the first is gaining the upper hand.
I am tired, full of dreams
And dying for lack of love.
But I have heard of a King
Full of mercy, love and forgiveness.
I wonder if there is a place for me in his castle.
I am ready to go and stay there.
He himself is the way -

And perhaps my path home
Is to be forever in his service.

Despite the official rhetoric, Ireland has always been a multicultural country, it has always been a river with many streams and we do well to remember this:

³ A character in Irish mythology who travelled to a land of eternal youth.

Nazareth

I watched a young Polish man in a restaurant today
 Look on at his wife
 As she tended to their child.
 He observed her with the demeanour
 Of a spectator at an art gallery
 View a work of art.
 All awe, respect and admiration.
 And the analogy extended and held true
 For they were like a renaissance masters mother and child
 Jewish maid and infant Hebrew king.
 My revived eye made him St. Joseph
 Spouse of pure love, heavens escort.
 But I, not a wise man or holy shepherd
 Felt a thrill still, to be a sinner redeemed
 By this simple domestic scene
 Two thousand years old yet forever new.

Exile

Two African boys
 Brothers perhaps
 Alone outside the cathedral;
 A pair of strange exotic islands
 Marooned from the mainland of their peers
 Who go laughing by
 Masters of their world.

One boy in the rain
 Squints after the gang as they pass
 Wiping his spectacles
 Like a fortune teller's crystal ball.
 What does he see?
 Does he wish for blanched skin,
 An Irish brogue or some faraway home?

But 21st century lepers are still unclean
 And too few Christ's walk the streets of Galway
 To heal a child's hurting heart.

Previous decades have seen the avant-garde function as a cultural discourse with a raw edge, an impetus that is politically-engaged. So too in the case of Graham Gillespie:

Grace

Talk now and worry about the meaning later.
 For the answer to every question is given
 Found in the right reflection of God's bright mirror.
 Why we are
 And what is meant to be.
 Why we live the truth and not the lie.
 For redemption is found not just through holy men and sacred book.
 But in the painful innocence of a suffering look.

George Lee Junior⁴

Grey day to match the economic forecast.
 Sombre minds debate the issues on the doorstep
 Neighbour to neighbour
 While a young child runs round in rings
 Trying to make Daddy dizzy.
 Rain comes down in light showers
 Then clears
 To let a sliver of sun shimmer through.
 The little one looks up at the sky
 And announces with all the gravitas
 of a Commons Chancellor of the Exchequer
 "Don't worry Dad, it's only a shower."
 Laughter rings out.
 Confidence restored.

Gillespie's avant-garde is raw and brutal at times. Being true to the poetic oeuvre involves a deep engagement with the questions of meaning and rejection, and with the very nature that is abandonment or human suffering:

⁴ An Irish economist and broadcaster.

Dust

A Poor Failure
Destined to die
With a million sighs
And be buried in the back of a horse trailer,
Amongst the cardboard boxes
Plastic bags and piles of old newspaper.

Or tossed upon the wind
Like dust on a blustery day
To sting the eyes of
Little children as they play.

Look Away

As you stare straight in at the setting sun
Beware of the menace in the west wind.
Close your eyes to the pain
Of the heartbreak meadow
And the silver sorrow of the falling dew
Weeping with you
Over love's lost dream stillborn.
Walk on.

Human suffering, as explored by Gillespie may be expressive of an inner turmoil or a sense of doubt but it is something that each human being has to engage with at some stage of their lives. This is where Gillespie's social vision is important. His poetic heart is one which beats with and alongside that of the "stráinséir", the person who is marginalised or who doesn't "fit in" to the carefully-constructed shoe-box of modern living. Such a dialogue is a complex and contradictory one and yet it links to one of the oldest traditions in Irish (Gaelic) literature – Jesus in the guise of the wandering beggar or stranger.

The Bum's Prerogative

Once upon a mad time
As I lay smiling in the gutter
A passer by threw a penny
Out of pity, at my world
I laughed all the louder
And threw a pound back at him.
For pride, though expensive is always worth the price.

Man of Sorrows/Fallen Christ

A stranger appeared dark against the horizon.
 Stooped, he seemed to carry the weight
 Of the world's worry
 Strapped to his back
 Like a cross of black wood
 The sins of his generation written along it's length.
 He howled aloud
 Like a creature mad with pain
 And sat and rocked too and fro
 Cradling the despair of a people in his heart.
 For this time as the sky darkened
 There would be no redemption or salvation.
 The son had run and would never return/nor
 Ever rise again.

In the final analysis, the most radical and innovative aspect of Gillespies' poetry lies in its philosophical dimension. His poetry is important and challenging because it speaks to us of hope and possibility in an epoch where the sacred is tarnished or thrown on the rubbish-mound for useless things.

'Pouring Redemption For Me' (Patrick Kavanagh)

Winter rain water falls from heaven
 Like a cold baptism
 Torrents of grace with the deluge.
 Feet sopping wet
 Coat sodden
 Hair matted
 Yet the heart drenched with an impenetrable delight.
 Dry within love's shelter
 Nestled beneath the umbrella
 Of the hand of his friendship again.
 Like a redeemed purgatorial soul
 Grateful for his forgiveness
 Sin forgotten
 Facing the wonderful purification.
 Like me caught in this terrific downpour.
 Immortal, imperishable
 His!

His poetry is contemplative in the way of the great mystics, those who sought the transcendent through art and suffered on the journey. His poems are radical in an age of conformity. His is an artistic consciousness which seeks the transcendent and endeavours to see beyond the limited impasse that is the reality of sensation, a ditch into which many a modern-day artist has tumbled. His poems reassert man's natural desire "for the exalted, for a concern with our relationships to the absolute emotions".⁵ No higher praise can any artist garner.

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⁵ HARRISON, C. & WOOD, P. (Eds.) (2001) *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Massachusetts, Blackwell Publishing.

GRAHAM GILLESPIE: A BRIEF INTERVIEW

Q1 Background?

I suppose I am a west of Ireland man. My childhood was spent between a number of provincial Connaught towns. I was born in Tuam and have a strong identification with Galway. I have lived in Galway City since I was seventeen. My mother is from Derry and we visited that city often as children. There are seven in the family, four girls and three boys. The extended family especially my nieces and nephews are very important to me. I suppose you could say we are a close family and very protective of each other.

Q2 First interest in creative writing?

Various teachers fostered a love of reading and writing in me. In national school Mrs Gallagher and Mrs McGreevey were formative influences. In secondary school, Mr Mulligan, Fr. Finan and Mr Molloy were all very encouraging. At the age of thirteen I wrote a selection of prose and poetry for a national competition. My themes were very heavy and serious for a child with titles like 'Aids – an appointment with death'. I never got anywhere I suppose I must have scared the judges off! The first poem I wrote voluntarily was at 18 for a girl I fell for. Unrequited love like all the best poets experience!!

Q3: Preferred writing style/genre?

In prose I look for the elegance of the poetic. A book must be well written for me, lyrical. Steinbeck, for example, has a beautiful balanced style. Poetry is closer to the truth rhythms of the human psyche. It is not coincidental that religious inspiration (the psalms, the Hindu scriptures and the Sufi mystics) communicates itself through poetry.

Q4 Significance of Nationalism and cultural identity?

My mother, as I said, is from Derry City so the Northern perspective was a presence in the house. As a young child I was

aware of northern Irish politics and violence and this made a deep impact on me. I remember the hunger strikes and the deep pallor of gloom and anger in society, marches, black flags, flux. A few years later I remember my naive excitement at and certainty that the Anglo Irish Agreement would leave us with a united Ireland. I was eleven at the time, seven at the time of the strikes. Republicanism is not necessarily socialist or expressed in terms of the arms struggle. The question of national identity is a live one for both southern and northern Irish poets' still.

Q5 Spirituality in your poems?

The spiritual is impossible to divorce from the human condition. The supernatural and inexplicable are all around us. I always had a palpable sense of the divine; Christ was a childhood friend, someone I spoke constantly to, played football with him in the back garden. I can't write without the spark that comes from my faith. It is necessary to my world view. I hope I am not didactic or doctrinal in my poetry. The spirit will speak but we must heed and allow him to. As Hopkins says "For I greet him the days I meet him and bless when I understand".

Q6 First memory?

I was very sickly as a child and almost died at birth and so was baptised a number of times. My first memory is being in a dark room with a kettle steaming to help me breath. My breathing was laboured, heavy and uncomfortable and I was afraid. This may have marked me in some way, I do not know.

Q7 Suffering?

The Christian vision is *without the cross there is no crown*. The poem Pinnocchio and Geppeto expresses this concept. There is no avoiding suffering, it can make us or break us depending on our reaction to it. Suffering can make us more loving, more sensitive to each other. My writing comes, at times from a brokenness within, a pain which sometimes acts as a crucible or forge for the making of art and poetry. I hope that people can identify with or find consolation in knowing that especially with emotional sadness, mental anguish or depression, that they are not alone.

Q8 Favourite poets and writers?

My favourite poet is Patrick Kavanagh, he has supplied me with a motto, a touchstone for my writing ; “simplicity is the ultimate in sophistication.” Simplicity is not simplistic and can be evolved and elaborate and still intelligible. Kavanagh had a wonderful spark of the spirit, especially the later poems like *Hospital* and the Canal Bank poems. He was alive with excitement of being alive. I also admire T. S. Eliot especially ‘*Prufrock*’. Here he expresses what seems at times the ridiculous and random nature of existence. He too found faith and explanation in the divine in his later work. Blake is my favourite Romantic. Simple and radical; visionary and unstable. Modern Irish poets I admire include Durkin for his accessibility and humour, keen eye and intelligence; Paula Meehan for her beautifully lyrical writing; Michael Hartnett for his projects of cultural retrieval. A poem which I read recently which really delighted me was ‘*While they were sleeping*’ by Sharon Olds, an American poet, where she describes the demeanour of her sleeping children.

The earliest novel I read was Walter Macken’s *Seek the Fairland*. I was fascinated by the adventure and later came to know his son Walter an Opus Dei priest in Galway. J. D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* made a deep impact. I return to it again and again and identify with the feelings of loneliness and alienation.

Q9 Engagement with the unconscious mind and spiritual realm?

Language is essential to thought in my view. As a child I was fascinated by language and collected words like football stickers. I wonder about the Jungian collective consciousness, maybe as he says, we all share common archetypes, symbol, fears and dreams which go towards making us human. Perhaps this is the nuts and bolts, the building blocks of poetry. Poetry is the closest to ecstatic speech. I am reminded of Kavanagh again when he says “give me ad-lib to pray unselfconsciously with overflowing speech”.

Q10 Function of poetry in modern society?

All societies, especially ancient Ireland valued the poet, the bard, the minstrel, the troubadour.

The poet is like one taking the temperature of his times. He is commentator and chronicler. He holds a mirror up to the world

he finds himself in. Poetry is as accurate a reflection as journalism or politics or historiography. It taps a nerve or chrysalises in a single image what prose can never approach. Think of Yeats '1913 and 1916' *a terrible beauty is born*. Also his 'Meditations on a Civil War'. Similarly Michael Longley's exploration of the Troubles serves this effect.

Q11 The male perspective in your poetry?

There is one deliberate and conscious engagement with feminist thought in the collection 'Sisters'. Others such as 'Love Pledge' explore the dynamics of flirtation fidelity and loyalty in relationships. I am pro equality between the sexes but an equality that preserves the differences between the genders. We are equal but different, there should at no time, be any antagonism between the sexes. We complement and enhance each other not compete. I hope I offend no one when I say that some brands of the more radical feminism work often on the supposition that all things masculine are by nature oppressive. I am thinking of some feminist poets like Adrienne Rich and her poems such as *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* and *Trying to Talk to a Man*. The symbol of the wedding band as a weight dragging down the freedom of Aunt Jennifer in her personal and artistic life embodies the antipathy of some radical feminist perspectives on marriage and family life. This lies counter to my own view of the sanctity of marriage and the family. My perspective as a male poet is obviously male though this is a subconscious stance. Gender and poetry is not of prime consideration to me. It is never *them and us*, my themes – spirituality, loneliness, mental anguish are universal and not gender specific.

Q12 Writing process?

My writing depends very much on inspiration. This may sound clichéd but it is true, I cannot write to order as you must do in poetry workshops or classrooms. I have been advised to allocate time each day to writing, it doesn't work for me, I try to carry a pen and paper. I am influenced by people in the street, conversations and interactions – poems like *Exiles* and *Sisters* were scenes directly encountered on the street. My writing is very fluid, very few revisions or re-workings. If I struggle it is usually not a good poem. A single sharp image can make a poem when one builds round it.

Q13 The Irish language?

The Irish language is a living ancestral folk memory preserved in language. It offers the artist freedom from worn out thought patterns. Our language is a rich and poetic one. I am not word-perfect but a large vocabulary is not necessary or even perfect grammar. The rudiments of language give a licence to write in a second language. The poetic vision and insight is preserved. I saw a poem by Rita Ann Higgins in Irish recently. With an economy of vocabulary and grammar she succeeded in writing a very fine and finished poem.

Q14 Idea for book?

The book evolved organically, I began to write and collect poetry on bits of paper, beer mats, receipts and the-like. Sometimes I wrote my poems without a pen, in my head as I walked and day-dreamed. I then poured them out on the page when I returned home. I originally thought to divide the book into three divisions modelled on the three original mysteries of the Rosary. I finally resolved to disperse the different themed poems throughout the book. The thematic structure, mood and tone dictated itself to me without struggle or over- elaboration.

Q15 Hobbies and interests

I am interested in Gaelic games especially Galway hurling and football, music (with the lyrics of Bob Dylan influencing my writing) history and politics and good food!

POETRY

Billy and the Kingdom

You came into the kitchen
Looking for a drink of water
To tame the thirst of hay-making.
Sixty five with the sensibility of a seven year old
Small, bald, smiling,
Your innocence filled the room
Like an August sunset,
The light penetrating the dark corners
Of my sinfulness.
You told me your story again
How they had taken you from your Mother
Told you she was dead.

I mourned once more with you;
The words of one who knew
Who loved little innocents
Speaking to me
About the sanctity of childhood
And the need to protect the likes of you
As you were then, are now.
To speak of you as child is no insult.
I have grown
But have fallen short of the stature of Christ,
Of the world still
Not so near as you to him.
“Unless you become like a child
You will never enter the kingdom of God”.
Billy, will you welcome me inside its walls one day?

The Treat

She came wheeling in the café door
Her face a frenzy of expectant delight.
Thin, pale and frail in flimsy coat
She grabbed Daddy's hand, pleading
"That one please please!" pointing at the advertised ice-cream.
Father shuffled the change in his pocket
Counting the cost of a dream.
Then chest expanded
He met the price and made the order.
She screamed again
Paradise found, lost childhood redeemed.

Birdbrain

My thoughts are black crows circling the skies.
Now and then, one ragged one
Perches on the treetop of my worried mind
And I give it my full neurotic attention.
One displaces the other
According to the pecking order
Of obsession and compulsion,
Till the roar of cocky dreams
Strutting fantasy and brash, jazzy madness
Shoos them all away.
But I make a poor scarecrow,
So they're always back to roost
Some other day.

Pinnocchio and Gepeto

Lost in a fairytale wood
With a hungry wolf prowling.
Father is woodsman
So I've no reason to fear.
I'm his possession, the craftsman's masterpiece.
With a suffering blade, another part of the heart he chips away,
Chiselled now into the shape of a cross.
I ask Daddy what he's making?
He tells me it's my crown.