



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Contemporary Irish Women Poets

Lucy Collins

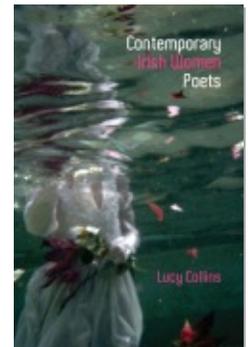
Published by Liverpool University Press

Collins, Lucy.

Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Memory and Estrangement.

Liverpool University Press, 2015.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/72667](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72667).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72667>

## CHAPTER TWO

### Between Here and There

#### Migrant Identities and the Contemporary Irish Woman Poet

Ireland's dual tradition is a catalyst for debate on cultural diversity in both language and literary production. For more than a century Ireland's relationship to its diasporic populations has been important in the formation of a body of literature that exceeds the territory of Ireland itself and facilitates new relationships between the Irish tradition and writing in other languages and from other cultures. From the 1990s until the onset of recession in 2008, the direction of this movement was reversed, so that Ireland became home to a significant immigrant community, enriching its cultural and linguistic life.<sup>1</sup> In an era of global mobility, geographical movement becomes an important part of artistic formation, as well as a human experience shared by many; recent critical perspectives reflect the significance and connective potential of this phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> This mobility can vary in expression from writers who choose to live and work abroad for months or years, to those who, for economic or political reasons, need to leave their place of origin. Irish writers have a long history of emigration, and for the most famous exemplars – James Joyce and Samuel Beckett – both exposure to new cultural environments and distance from Ireland provided a fruitful perspective for innovative creative work. In recent decades migrants coming to Ireland have also challenged traditional representations and offered collaborative potential to resident writers.

Migration has often been linked to marginality, as both the cause and the effect of the journey away from a place of origin. This dynamic calls attention to the subjectivity of the individual migrant, and to their particular relationship to place: for this reason the migrant's 'departure'

from their home may precede the actual journey, marking a detachment from that society which is later articulated in geographical movement.<sup>3</sup> For contemporary Irish poets who have chosen to live abroad, the decision to leave is often framed by careful reflection – a process exemplified by Thomas Kinsella's long poem 'Phoenix Park' that immediately preceded his departure for the USA.<sup>4</sup> For women poets there may be less textual deliberation, though attentiveness to the journey itself and to the early days in a new country can yield significant poems as Mairéad Byrne and Vona Groarke have shown in their writing of America. Often, questions of identity, and of belonging, are raised by the process of movement itself – it is the experience of being an outsider that prompts the individual to reflect on his or her own subjectivity in new ways. Exposure to forms of thinking and expression that are distinctly different from our own also challenges our customary intellectual and creative practices. For some writers, such as Byrne, this has meant an increasingly innovative approach to form and style; others choose to extend theme and idiom within the lyric mode. For any artist or writer, not consciously knowing 'what she or he will be in the next time and space' has a significant impact on both the imaginative roots and the aesthetic execution of the work.<sup>5</sup>

Temporality is key to the interpretation of the migrant state, and to the way in which home is conceptualized. Philosophical writings by Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard, among others, develop an understanding of home that is bounded and therefore marks a special relationship between the individual and place.<sup>6</sup> More recent thinking, however, construes home as dynamic and in flux, as globalization changes the nature of attachment to place and community. This change has prompted a radical re-evaluation of the concepts of home and belonging:

'Being home' refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; 'not being home' is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself.<sup>7</sup>

This fundamental change in how home is read finds expression in the work of contemporary women poets through their questioning of private or domestic spaces,<sup>8</sup> as well as through their reflection on connections to place that are simultaneous and overlapping: 'Rather than movement from one place to another uprooting or deterritorializing migrants' identities – as has been intimated – what scholars witness

among contemporary migrants is a strengthening and deepening of ties to multiple places.<sup>9</sup> Thus migrants themselves do not have singular identities but rather networks of connection with the places where they have lived. Mairéad Byrne exemplifies this condition, as her comments in a conversation with Rob McLennan suggest:

Before I lived [in Providence, Rhode Island], I lived in Oxford, Mississippi, before that Ithaca, New York, and before that Lafayette and West Lafayette, Indiana ... I'm very aware of place but move on easily, or at least I have so far. But I still think about the places I have lived; and the places members of my family have lived: all their smells and atmospheres.<sup>10</sup>

Byrne values the mobility that her life choices have offered but still retains an artistic, even sensory, attachment to the places of the past. Similarly, Mary O'Malley's work reflects her close links to the west of Ireland, but also to Lisbon and to Paris – places where she has spent formative periods of her life; in a somewhat different mode, Celia de Freine moves among different geographical spaces of reflection and creativity.<sup>11</sup> For some the new place quickly becomes 'home' and the self/other binary that informs all migrant experience is changed by the process of integration. For others, the idea of returning home remains a stable element in their ever-changing life, and its articulation emphasizes what John Steinbeck has called the 'outward sign of want' that marks all migrant lives.<sup>12</sup>

Migrants may come to express the problematic boundaries between individual and collective positions in important ways, and in doing so to highlight the role of language, and of literature, in exploring these dynamics. To join an immigrant community is often to question the relationship between individuality and group identities, in part because of the discursive tendency to homogenize diasporic experiences in spite of their 'contradictions, diversities and instabilities'.<sup>13</sup> For example, none of the contemporary Irish women poets who has lived in the USA identifies directly with Irish America, preferring instead to reflect on cultural difference in more contingent ways. Yet many of these poets do contemplate their life outside Ireland as one of private and public significance, insofar as their cross-cultural movement prompts reflection on patterns of historical and cultural particularity. For this reason there are close, if subtle, links between the consideration of personal experience and identity politics in these poems. The concept of home at once shapes private aspirations and operates as a founding principle of the nation state that in turn unifies the spatial and temporal aspects of home. Though this association has tended to obscure its personal

resonance, ordinary people nonetheless 'engage in theorizing about and acting in the narrative(s) of nation'.<sup>14</sup> This privileging of the conceptual over the experiential may itself mask the capacity for individual circumstance to be delimited by larger symbolic structures, an issue that relates not just to nationalism but also to movements specifically hospitable to the marginalized. Some of the key critical interventions in this area, including Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders*, have problematized the identification of feminism itself as a 'home': Mohanty expresses the desire to unsettle 'not only any notion of feminism as an all-encompassing home but also the assumption that there are discrete, coherent and absolutely separate identities'.<sup>15</sup>

Salman Rushdie sees migrants as metaphorical beings, suggesting that the spatial journey is expressive of less visible forms of border crossing – between one political or ideological belief and another, for example, or between the past and the present.<sup>16</sup> This temporal shift is an important one for migrants, giving memory a particular valency in defining their past selves and in recording the transition they have undergone:

Memory – understood as the complex relation of personal experiences, the shared histories of communities and their modes of transmission – must be seen as a privileged carrier of diasporic identity ... It is not by chance that the *right* to remember, the *responsibility* to recall and the 'sense of the dangers involved in forgetting' are central issues of debate among diasporic communities and in their relations to their cultural and political surroundings.<sup>17</sup>

The originary identity of the migrant is held in memory and is capable of transcending the specific circumstances of his or her present experience, yet it does not facilitate the direct retrieval of the past but rather a continuing state of being that juxtaposes the lost past and a yet-to-be-achieved future. The process of remembering is an unreliable one, however, further adding to the instability that displacement brings.<sup>18</sup> Since memory is not reproduced from the original conditions of experience, but rather represented from the perspective of present conditions,<sup>19</sup> it becomes transcultural, interweaving distinct forms of habit and identity together. The mixed character of memory's form and function leads to original perspectives from migrating poets.

### Remembering the Future: Mairéad Byrne in America

Mairéad Byrne's work shows a complex alignment between her evolving poetic style and the cultural space in which this occurs. Born in Dublin, she moved to the USA in 1994 (with \$400 and a seven-year-old child) and now teaches poetry at the Rhode Island School of Design.<sup>20</sup> The relationship between Ireland and America plays an important part in her work, especially in the earliest poems, which combine lyrical elements with found poems to create formally challenging texts, laying the groundwork for her more radical experimentation of recent years. The evolution of her style is crucially linked to her cultural position, and this is often the subject of deliberate scrutiny in her poems. Ireland is at once past and present in these texts – a memory of earlier experience and a continuing part of her creative life. *Nelson and the Huruburu Bird*, published by Wild Honey Press in 2003, expresses the importance of these transitions in shaping Byrne's ongoing work. The poems in this volume are taken from three unpublished books, *An Interview with Romulus and Remus*, *Cycling to Marino* and *The Pillar* – all are maintained as separate groupings in this printed volume. This structure does not privilege a narrative of poetic influence and development, however, but rather presents an intermingling of Irish and American material and experiences. This is indicative of Byrne's close creative connection to her immediate environment, which questions, rather than affirms, notions of national affiliation and tradition.

Many of her early poems engage directly with Dublin, specifically the Dublin of her childhood and early adulthood. 'Cycling to Marino' begins with an evocative description of cycling to school in autumn, but soon becomes more concerned with the classroom as a place of difference: 'We know someone's / not clean, and someone's poor ... Where are those places / other people live?' (*NHB* 46). The shift from a singular to a collective viewpoint marks the speaker's arrival at the school and her entry into an undifferentiated world of childhood experience, where the individual conditions of each child's life become visible only when they mark a variation from some unstated norm. Both the particularity and the ephemeral quality of these early experiences are rendered here, and, with these, a sense of what the craft of making can yield:

We're learning how to sew, to knit,  
each stitch has singularity, then holds its shape  
in partnership with the next, and next –

(*NHB* 47)

The initial Yeatsian resonance here (“The children learn to cipher and to sing, / To study reading-books and histories, / To cut and sew, be neat in everything”) is turned against itself in the singularity of the young girl learning a craft.<sup>21</sup> As the metaphor demonstrates, the unique creation becomes an essential part of the collective entity, just as the individual perspective is inextricably linked to its cultural context. The complex relationship of part and whole may be framed aesthetically too: each line of the poem ‘holds its shape / in partnership with the next’. The energies of the young girl give rise to abrupt and exhilarating changes in language and perspective from ethically curious ‘*but what does poor mean?*’ to the self-consciously poetic ‘I dismount, / escorting her through the bowers that I know best, / stern arch of branch, cascade of leaf’ (NHB 46–7). In the child’s response to place the sensory immediacy of present engagement – the sound of rain beneath the tyres of her bicycle, the ‘Metallic taste of ink on lips’ – is tempered by a growing awareness of the need to withhold these experiences from adult awareness. In this way the personal past remains interiorized until the poem at once records and breaks this privacy.

Elsewhere too, the relationship between individual and collective experience is probed. ‘The Pillar’, explores Dublin in both space and time, using Nelson’s Pillar as a pivotal point around which private and public observation moves.<sup>22</sup> In this way, Byrne uses the physical environment of the city and its monumental history to create a dynamic space in her poem, in which the relationship between what is fixed and what is changing is a key both to ideas that circulate in the poem, and to the formal strategies she adopts.

Clouds scud, what else, in the gray sky, and yes,  
gulls hang all the way out, to the bay, I guess,  
[...]

that old familiar drizzle  
emptying the dawn, down all the days,  
the yellow city nights; and his head sleek  
like a lizard, like a cobra, like a basilisk  
inserted in our heavens, in the bells’  
clamor, clangor, Nelson, lord of us all.

(NHB 82)

Nelson’s head, in the sky, typifies British ambition, but offers a point of surveillance that serves the poet well in her investigation of the relationship between the larger patterns of history and the materiality of lived existence in the city – a concern that will persist in her later

work. Even in this early poem her treatment of temporality is already striking: Dublin life is first seen in dynamic terms ‘battering’, ‘clattering’, ‘clip-clopping’ and then with a kind of trapped energy – ‘Henry Street, / the gorge chock-a-block, rain melting down its windows, / and the women’s rough mouths like O’s roaring *Toblerone* or / *Get the last of this or that*’ (*NHB* 82). In this crowded sensory world, words and phrases in the Irish language brim over at intervals, together with the hibernicisms that bridge the two languages with sound patterns familiar to the Irish ear:

So this was *dubh le daoine* and we were shoulder to shoulder  
*ag baint dhá thaobh den bóthar*, drink or no drink, for sure,  
 we were *íseal*, right enough, as *íseal* as *íseal* could be  
 beneath our *uasal*, casting his long shadow on us, and we  
 in our stew, in our soup, in our mate and potatoes mess.<sup>23</sup>

(*NHB* 83)

Sounds are vital to the energy of this poem and internal rhyme is often used as a vehicle for wit, and to knit together a wide range of experiences, past and present. This strategy demonstrates the uneasy mix of tradition and modernity that shapes Dublin. Events – both historical and everyday – are telescoped, leaving Nelson on his pillar as the still monumental centre around which frenetic action takes place: ‘He was there all that time and before that time. / He was there through Cinerama and Panorama and Senssurround / He was there in all the pantomimes’ (*NHB* 85). Nelson’s omnipresence in the life of the city robs him of his real significance, however; all his exploits – both attested and apocryphal – are denied: ‘He never routed privateers from Montego to Honduras / nor terrorised Americans as captain of the *Boreas* / [...] / nor lost an eye at Calvi an arm at Tenerife / in the dog-days in the lion sun nor his heart to Lady Hamilton’ (*NHB* 86). In 35 lines, his rich and varied career is reduced to his symbolic presence at the centre of Dublin, a testament to the capacity of the Irish to make all things relevant to their predicament. Yet the textured and jaunty rhyme scheme at once makes much, and makes light, of the admiral’s exploits. The blowing up of Nelson’s Pillar by the IRA in 1966 dismantles the myth of Nelson and the literary associations of the monument. Though Byrne does not dwell on the political connotations of this event, it is nonetheless present in the poem and resonates with the social instabilities also revealed through observed detail.

This view of Dublin, and of Ireland, is far more complex than the energetic, often flippant, tone suggests and it is a hallmark of Byrne’s

work that difficult social and emotional states are carried by a vivid materiality in her texts, highlighting the varied human responses to place. As Rebecca Seiferle has commented, Byrne ‘eschews the poetic “I” in favour of a listening to other presences’.<sup>24</sup> This dynamic reveals her awareness of the relationship between physical and creative spaces, and her recognition of the distance between her work and much of what was being published in Ireland at that time:

before I left Ireland, a poet called Joan McBreen said to me, ‘Your poems are not lyrical.’ I was surprised but it seemed true. In the context of Irish poetry it was sort of like hearing, ‘Your poems are not poems.’ It was time to go.<sup>25</sup>

Humour is vital to Byrne’s creativity and often determines the way she frames her work: ‘Humor in women isn’t valorized. Humor in poetry isn’t valorized’, she observes in her 2010 conversation with Sina Queyras; later she admits ‘I should be thinking about global warming but I like to laugh’, a comment ironically revealing the seriousness of conviction underpinning her poetry. This playful quality is present from her creative beginnings. In *Nelson and the Huruburu Bird* memories of her early working life – ‘Cycling to Marino’, ‘Early Morning, Dublin’ – mingle with alphabet games that play with the cultural resonance of car brands: ‘A is for Acclaim. / B is for Buick. / C is for Chevy’ (*NHB* 34–5). In this way Byrne productively disturbs the linearity of memory, which would place the structures of childhood in an Irish context and those of more recent adulthood in America. This mingling of effects shows the broader cultural interpenetration of Ireland and America, especially from the 1960s onward, and the extent to which globalization subverts narrow national boundaries.<sup>26</sup> In ‘The Irish Discover America’, Byrne reflects directly on her own move to America, emphasizing the sensory nature of the experience:

We hit land and suddenly  
everyone has an American accent.  
How did I get here?  
I traveled the few inches, thousands of miles,  
in my own skin boat, my currach, my Boeing.  
For the first time I look at the outside world.

(*NHB* 32)

In likening her journey to America to the Brendan voyage, which claims that Irish saint Brendan traveled across the Atlantic ocean before Christopher Columbus, Byrne not only highlights the importance of the step but also its perilous nature.<sup>27</sup> From the beginning, a sense of the

provisional shapes the poem – ‘If Saint Brendan crossed the ocean ... if I have flown the same trail’ (*NHB* 32) – and this act of questioning is matched by the fragmented memory of the journey itself: ‘I have turned the world inside out. / I know it in my bones but can recall fragments only’. Contemporary and historical perspectives mingle in the poem, linking the insular experience of flying across the ocean to the physically and psychologically demanding character of early voyages. Language is one of the casualties of this radical experience – ‘language, / at this altitude, ceases to exist’ (*NHB* 33) – and with it the historical perspective necessary to understand complex cultural relationships. Here the ‘Red Indian’ is envisaged arriving on a jumbo jet in a strangely disorientated version of American history. Yet this native girl ‘who stares so calmly and so long’ may be linked to the speaker’s young daughter, so that what was once so intimately known becomes other in this new and strange space.

‘Reflex’ is another poem that links geographical change with important alterations of personal circumstance. Its title suggests the instinctive reaction that the subject may make to such changes. From its opening, then, this poem interleaves the immediacy of emotional response with the considered process involved in the making of a poem, and alerts us to the fact that so much of Byrne’s work keeps these elements in delicate balance:

It is not, after all, the water,  
 slate of the bay, nor the promontory,  
 curve of the regulated city,  
 salt rush, that I miss,  
 nor heading out somewhere with you.

(*NHB* 45)

The remembered place is already a boundary, a place on the edge of land, telling us much about the speaker’s sense of being in the world. The first line of the poem also foregrounds the relationship between feeling and thinking – on reflection, it is not the sight and smell of the coastline that evokes the sensation of loss, nor even the experience of sharing that place with someone. Instead it is what is beyond description – ‘some things which never / got a name’ – which tethers the speaker to the past (*NHB* 45). Yet by the end of the poem we learn that this is only part of the story. It is the ‘you’ invoked in the opening stanza whose loss finally moves the speaker: the sight of the ‘full / lips of a stranger’ calls forth a strong emotional response that relates not only to similarity of appearance but the complete sensory connection to another person, and the tears this prompts are an answering response from the eyes

that witness the scene. In this short and seemingly simple poem Byrne conjures the circulation of emotions between places, objects and people, and, though the poem suggests the displacement of loss from the deeply personal connection to one more broadly cultural, instead we might read all forms of connection as valid – each one proximate to the others.

Byrne's American poems in this volume have a dramatic energy that partakes of the confidence of the culture in which she has settled. Marked by the prevalence of verbs, and by their exclamatory style, they are indicative of the ways in which language itself is shaped by shifts in culture and perspective, as the poem 'Commercial Street' demonstrates:

This is not home and I don't have to stop  
to pass the time of day or night with you  
or anyone. I'm free of that, home too,  
and greedy for the sights

(*NHB* 40)

By linking 'home' with the demands of community and connection, Byrne at once suggests the freedom and limitation of American materialism. Her new twist on an old-fashioned phrase, such as 'to pass the time of day', shows American expansiveness in subtle ways – 'day or night', 'you / or anyone' – calls up the range and multiplicity of American experience over its more muted Irish counterpart. This variety is figured in terms of appetite – the speaker is 'greedy' for the sights, wants 'to gobble this week's crop / of extras' – and she devours the new vocabulary as eagerly, wanting to 'cruise / the block, the beat, this neat New England zoo' (*NHB* 40). This particular line exemplifies not only the incorporation of an American idiom but the desire to play with this language shift as constitutive of the poetic line. Her choice of the 'block' as a descriptor of urban space invokes the origins of rap music, which has already been rendered in the tightly repeated sound patterns of 'shop ... sort ... sift' and is in turn reinforced in the alliterative 'beat', with its suggestion of the cruising car, loud with rhythm. The 'beat–neat' rhyme is the outcome of this MCing technique but is only made possible by the American meaning of 'neat' as pleasant or excellent, marking a shift away from urban subculture towards small town American boosterism. In taking in this new language – in its many forms – Byrne also transforms her tone towards the cheerful exclamatory presentation that is associated with the positivity of American life, a strategy that for her combines optimism and irony. This 'trying on' of language is both a sharp cultural observation and a natural play of voice that will become still more important in her later work.

The adaptation of lifestyle and of language that Byrne's poetry fundamentally addresses can be seen strikingly in *Talk Poetry*, a volume of short prose poems published in 2007 and which Byrne herself describes as a 'breakthrough'.<sup>28</sup> The volume itself, like the 2010 *The Best of (What's Left of) Heaven*, reveals how Byrne's innovative approach to language drives her handling of found and imagined texts. She has commented on the importance of performance to her creativity and this clearly influences the combined intimacy and reach of her work: 'Public readings are integral to my practice and process ... [They] are a type of interdisciplinarity, or collaboration for me'.<sup>29</sup> Her evolving practice has shaped the reception of her work in other ways too. *The Best of (What's Left of) Heaven* is a volume comprised of blog poems, intensifying the role of the internet in Byrne's writing. She discusses how this has shaped her practice in the Queyras interview, revealing the role of technology in the change:

As far as writing goes, the title or concept and a cluster of lines, maybe the first few lines, usually came first. I collected those immediately in a notebook. Then I'd put them in Word documents ... These days I am much more inclined to compose in HTML, or Photoshop. I like to compose in the medium of publication; it's also a way to learn.<sup>30</sup>

In this way the poem, as well as the poet, are shown to have migrated to a new environment – one that is closer to the energies of the public space. The present moment shapes many of Byrne's preoccupations too, yet, though much of her recent material emerges from the immediate environment, there are other, less direct, influences at work. These demonstrate how significant the act of border crossing can be in shaping aesthetic practice: '*The Best of (What's Left of) Heaven* doesn't mention Ireland once,' she observes, 'but it's an intensely Irish book, in structure and attitude' (Queyras interview). The virtual world has also helped her to create a new kind of mobility as an artist: 'Regarding Ireland: I did not fit the role of poet in Ireland in any way ... The internet gave me a shoe-horn. Now I can walk around quite happily there'.<sup>31</sup> In this way, cyberspace, though less intimate than a personal encounter in real time, offers Byrne a way of dealing with the estranging effects of exclusion from a national literary culture. It does this not only by reconfiguring the concept of community but by offering a compositional space that validates her desire for experimental modes. Likewise, 'A Hive of Home' from *Talk Poetry* returns to the idea of home as a concept constantly remade. The person who is 'unreasonably fond of home' (*TP* 37) is not rendered immobile but

rather seeks home everywhere: ‘Libraries are *de facto* homes. Bookstores are hotels. Hotels are homes though I don’t usually stay in them in Providence. A bus can be a good home’ (*TP* 37). This attitude obliquely clarifies the relationship between Ireland and America in her work – both environments are constantly evolving and thus the relationship between them is in a productive state of flux.

‘After Valentine’s Day’ is a poem that examines the dynamics of separation and connection more distinctly. It captures the beginning of the thaw, towards the end of a harsh winter, suggesting both the potential for greater ease and a degree of exposure as the insulating snow retreats. The formal regularity of the poem – four stanzas alternating between ten and twelve lines each – marks the containment of the subject position, and the structures underpinning this uncertain life. From the beginning, though, the thaw suggests a transition with power to disturb: the opening image of lost gloves ‘sprouting’ on the sidewalk hints at the speaker’s own sensation of being separated or adrift in a strange landscape. The possibilities for communion with others are impressive but fleeting:

Strangers move toward me  
as if to say hello;  
they carry their faces like cups,  
which tilt, at the instant of passing,  
spill out such radiant smiles!

(*NHB* 67)

The neighbours who come bearing red roses, in an approximation of a Valentine’s gift, make no impact on the speaker, however, who ‘takes[s] what’s given’ and resumes her work. The poem suggests the difficulties in giving and receiving the appropriate meaning in a culture within which one is isolated: neither poetry nor roses functions as a means of communication, except to the extent that they provide material for this poem. This consciousness of the poem as the space within which life unfolds, at once randomly and deliberately, sees language as an instrument of estrangement as well as of connection. Byrne’s increasingly self-reflexive mode of writing suggests that this may be the truest reflection of mobility and change – a poetics always aware of its own contingency and attentive to the larger cultural meanings this generates.

### Sinéad Morrissey between Belfast and Japan

Sinead Morrissey is a poet for whom movement, transition and adjustment are key explorations. Her most recent collection, the award-winning *Parallax* (2013), draws attention in its title to the relationship between the object under scrutiny and the angle of view.<sup>32</sup> A collection filled with visual and material signifiers of the past – from Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journal* to John Wright’s electroplating workshop – it marks the poet’s awareness that material culture offered more evidence of the world’s flux than of its stability. Throughout Morrissey’s work to date, that sense of changing perspectives has been key to the responsiveness of her poetic voice as well as to her aesthetic evolution. Growing up in Belfast, she was struck early by the complications of religious faith and the difficulties involved in the growth towards autonomy. Many of the poems in *There was Fire in Vancouver* (1996), her first collection, are strongly anchored in childhood – in the streetscapes of Belfast and the communist politics important in the lives of her parents. This ideological background, to which she returns in later poems, meant she identified with neither community in Northern Ireland and was beginning to problematize the process of identity formation before she ever left the province. Gerald Dawe has drawn attention to the capacity of poetry to transcend simplified forms of cultural memory,<sup>33</sup> and in mediating these political territories Morrissey acknowledges their importance for poets and readers: even indirect representation reveals the subtle ways in which memory is politicized. The violent weather of this first book – with its ‘frightening rain’ (*TFV* 12) and a wind that blows ‘as though the angels are angry, sitting in the sky / With heads in hands and howling it out all over us’ (*TFV* 17) – contributes to its risky handling of spiritual matters as well as of the realities of terrorist violence. At times, this early poetry lacks subtlety but it provides an important foundation for Morrissey’s later, more assured and complex poems and prepares the reader for the unflinching quality of her art. This early work also prompts reflection on the role of textual memory in Morrissey’s work; the way in which later poems return to images and ideas already explored.

One of the enduring strengths of Sinéad Morrissey’s work is her exploration of the poet as a conduit between people and cultures. Morrissey’s 2002 collection, *Between Here and There*, captures formally the sense of liminality that has been present in her poems since the start. The second of her five published collections to date, this book

marks a significant consolidation of both theme and form. The structure of this collection traces the specific cultural transition that lies at the heart of this volume: the period that Morrissey spent living and teaching in Japan.<sup>34</sup> The second half of the book is dedicated to this experience and presents a series of poems with interwoven themes and images, rendering her engagement with Japanese culture in succinct, even minimalist ways. The extent to which her own poetic style is shaped by this cultural encounter indicates the formative nature of this period for Morrissey, and reflects both the strange and enlightening quality of the experience. She has acknowledged the extent to which Japan helped to shape her creative development at this time: 'When I went to live in Japan my writing changed immediately and profoundly. My line became much longer, the imagery more surreal. The poetry became a great deal more ambitious.'<sup>35</sup> *Between Here and There* is prefaced by a poem that contemplates this significant change of voice: 'My voice slipped overboard and made it ashore / the day I fished on the Sea of Japan' (BHT 9). This prefatory poem is divided into two parts, mirroring the shape of the collection and suggesting the precision and balance required in embedding these experiences in the larger trajectory of her work. The escape of the voice, and its 'lonely sojourn' on the Honshu coast, happens almost imperceptibly while the speaker is preoccupied with the mastery of a new language and of different and challenging circumstances. The return of the voice, now marked by its new experiences and discoveries, is essential to the achievement of this volume, suggesting that shifts not only in culture but also in language, are essential to creative development.

The first poem in *Between Here and There* is 'In Belfast', so that it suggests a writing process that is both other to, yet the same as, her initial collection, which also places Belfast in the foundational opening text. This act of 'writing back' to her first book reminds us that the *Here* and *There* of the title are not only spatial but also temporal; Morrissey wants to remember her earlier poetic self and to contemplate obliquely what this growth and change have meant for her as an artist. 'In Belfast' is a poem in two perfectly balanced parts, affirming the dialogue between the halves of Morrissey's creative life at this point. Just as the voice of the prefatory poem goes out and returns, so this poem concerns itself with the place and the dynamic movement associated with it. In the first part of the text the relationship between place and history is investigated through the city's architecture and the atmosphere that surrounds it: City Hall is a ship 'steered'

by Queen Victoria; shop fronts breathe the air of the city, while the headquarters of the Transport Workers' Union 'fights the weight of the sky' (*BHT* 13). Here the elements seem to encroach on the city, shaping its mood and indicating the challenges of pursuing normal life there. The opening line of Part II of the poem declares the speaker's return 'after ten years to a corner', interweaving ideas of shelter, entrapment and punishment in that single word. This process of return is a sensitive one for the migrant: as Paul Walsh acknowledges, to return may in fact be to begin again, in a place that resembles the past but can never be identical with it.<sup>36</sup> At first Morrissey must convince herself that the city is 'real' before concluding that it is 'More real, even, with this history's dent and fracture / / splitting the atmosphere' (*BHT* 13). This sense of Belfast as a place apart complicates the poet's treatment of it as home, since not only the physical structure of the city and the lives of its people but the very mood of the place is shaped by its history of division and violence. The speaker's own ambivalence adds to the feeling of uncertainty – the 'unravelling of wishes' suggests a reluctant re-engagement with the city of her birth, but with an 'unencountered' past and an 'unspoken' future it is the immediacy of the present moment that strikes the reader most vividly. In some ways she remembers the city only through the evidence of its troubled past, not through her direct recollection of these actions unfolding. Its intensity is also a form of privacy, so that in spite of its visibility to the world it is hard to 'see' clearly.

'In Belfast' is balanced by the text that follows it. 'Tourism' positions the speaker now on the inside of this city, observing the influx of visitors with an ironic air. This pairing of poems is significant in drawing attention both to the shift in perspective and to the complex temporality that Morrissey invokes in this collection. Though our attention is directed towards transitions between spaces, the poet is also concerned with the passage of time, and with the severance between different stages of experience. As Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning have argued, past events can be remembered in many different ways; this often reflects both temporal and spatial relationships to these occurrences.<sup>37</sup> 'Tourism' deliberately exoticizes Irish heritage sites from its opening, linking Newgrange – a Stone Age passage tomb in County Meath – with Eastern Markets and purification rituals. From the start, commerce and spirituality are yoked together, and their impact on space and its representation obliquely suggested: 'the relief of markets' captures the vibrant, uneven texture of a foreign city at the same time as it hints at the

financial stability brought about by the ceasefire in Northern Ireland.<sup>38</sup> The manipulation of meaning through image suggests the power of visual culture to influence public perception and the role of language too as a way of mediating the presence of the past in everyday life. The arrival of ‘the Spanish and the Dutch’ is a testament to the ability of Northern Ireland tourism to return the province to the European tourist map and a hint at earlier politics of allegiances with Spain and Holland that helped to shape the fates of both Catholic and Protestant communities in Ireland.<sup>39</sup> In declaring ‘Our day has come’, the poet ironically resituates the catchphrase of resurgent nationalism – *Tiocfaidh ár lá* – in the context of renewed commercial buoyancy. The optimism offered by this new status remains in a language caught between holy war and political negotiation – ‘They bring us deliverance, restitution’ (*BHT* 14) – but northern pragmatism prevails and the people provide what the visitors want: a complex combination of global sophistication and primal violence:

We take them to those streets  
 they want to see most, at first,  
 as though it’s all over and safe behind bus glass  
 like a staked African wasp. Unabashedly, this is our splintered city,  
 and this, the corrugated line between doorstep and headstone.  
(*BHT* 14)

The containment of past violence here is illusory: the subtle shift between four-line and three-line stanzas suggests only a tentative stabilization and the ‘corrugated line’ is a crude and temporary barrier between life and death. Nevertheless, the tourist strategy – which begins by touring the sites of the Troubles, and ends with a visit to the shipyard where the ill-fated Titanic was built – permits a convivial interlude, ‘a pint with a Bushmills chaser’, to contain the visitors’ engagement with the violence of Belfast’s recent past. This movement is a microcosm of the longer journey envisaged in the poem ‘In Belfast’, and its containment limits the potential for deeper reflection. The approach in ‘Tourism’ also signals a position that is the opposite of the emphasis on present experience in the previous poem – the tourist version of the city treats everything as though it is safely past; a practice in direct opposition to the notion of trauma as belated experience, always present to the affected person.<sup>40</sup> As Aleida Assmann has argued, however, forgetting becomes a crucial means of overcoming violent cycles of history.<sup>41</sup> Thus absence proves more potent than presence here and ‘Our talent for holes that

are bigger / than the things themselves' suggests the hollowing out of cultural meaning in the exhibition of loss. Finally, the poem presents a deal to the tourist: an unpredictable optimism in exchange for the paraphernalia of 'the European superstate / we long to join ... new symbols, / a new national flag, a xylophone' (*BHT* 14). The emptiness of imported symbolism and the incongruous appearance of the xylophone suggest the limits of superficial engagement with the other.

The Japan sequence marks a significant shift of tone and perspective from the sharp observation of Belfast at the turn of the twenty-first century. Its more meditative approach reveals the shaping effect that a new cultural experience has on the observing self. Not only is the sense of the past radically changed for Morrissey by this experience but her relationship to language is reshaped to accommodate a strongly visual dimension that reflects not only this important stimulus in her adopted culture but the poet's specific interest in the pictorial qualities of the Japanese alphabet. 'Goldfish' begins by recording the complex imaginative debt that Morrissey owes to Japan:

The black fish under the bridge was so long I mistook it  
for a goldfish in a Japanese garden the kind the philosophers  
wanted about them so much gold underwater to tell them what waited  
in another element like breathing water they wanted to go  
to the place where closing eyes is to see

(*BHT* 43)

The transition recorded in this opening stanza is accompanied by a new fluidity of line and a renewed openness to other states of being. This aligns the act of observation with that of inner perception that transcends the limitations of the material world. The significant relationship between self and environment is mirrored in the attention of the philosophers to the particular conditions in which they live and work. The speaker herself enacts this close connection to her surroundings by realizing the power of all her senses. Closing her eyes, she learns what it is to 'see' with her hands, to apprehend the smallest changes in her surroundings and to 'read' their meanings. The language of the eyes ('I closed my eyes ... I saw ... saw what I had seen') gives way to a more tenuous grasp on presence and absence, and with it a more finely tuned awareness of the self's place in the world. The endless speeding freight trains configure the space-time continuum in a completely different way. They exemplify the continuous presence of commodity culture in all parts of Japanese life, even while the meditative connection with the natural world is revered and preserved. Led by the

'you' who offers a narrative to guide the speaker through these new and diverse experiences, a kind of synaesthesia is produced whereby images are communicated in a range of sensory ways: 'I saw / music as pulled elastic bands drums as the footprints of exacting gods' (*BHT* 43). Just as the Zen masters descend into an element devoid of sensory distraction, so this poem reveals the emotional significance of a similar deepening of meaning through storytelling – 'I, / falling into you, story by story' (*BHT* 43). The otherworldly quality of the love connection here sees the encounter with otherness as a profoundly sustaining one in which difference is a mark of unity and growth.

The title poem marks another form of engagement with Japan's complex spiritual identity. In four stanzas separated by asterisks Morrissey explores the sacred spaces she encounters, questioning the symbols and practices she observes and exploring a form of cultural memory that is entirely new to her. This encounter creates both exhilaration and anxiety in the speaker; if, as Minnie Bruce Pratt suggests, loss of home is a fear of loss of selfhood – a fear of 'going too far' – then involvement in the ritual of a strange religion faces the possibility of such loss directly.<sup>42</sup> From the opening lines, symbolic and pragmatic merge: the stone babies in temples are dressed in aprons and consoled with teddy bears and toys. This warm human response is starkly contrasted to the graveyard for miscarriages in the second stanza. '[A]s stark as a bone field', this process separates the head from the body, fundamentally severing the unity of personhood. The breaching of these structures reveals the impossibility of containing life – no matter now briefly manifest – in rigid categories. Even the dead possess energy here, and a corresponding ability to inspire. The encounter with 'Japan's greatest Buddha' in 'the biggest wooden building in the world' is at once transcendent and ironic: enlightenment is figured as an act of falling but this fall is also an elevation to the heights of the very building within which the Buddha is found. So the meaning must be constructed in material human terms: the limits of human understanding risk belittling the spiritual power of the experience and Morrissey captures both the possibilities of spiritual growth and its material containment here. This dichotomy is developed in the final depiction of Nagasawa who must set aside essential parts of himself in order to reach a prayerful state.

When Nagasawa visits the house of the dead  
 he leaves at the door his camera and tripod  
 his champion karaoke voice his miracle foot massage  
 his classroom dynamics his rockhard atheism

and slips onto the tatami of the prayer room  
 as the man who can chant any you-name-it soul  
 between here and Ogaki to paradise

(BHT 46)

The coexistence of both atheism and spiritual connection in the single being is testament to the capacity for dual perspectives, so that the form of the poem itself, its dialogic arrangement, reveals the essential importance of doubleness, not only in the observer but also as an integral part of the culture itself.

The four-part structure of this poem is mirrored in ‘Night Drive in Four Metaphors’, which uses the form of the pictogram as an organizing principle for unfamiliar landscapes and experiences. This process by which lived experience and the artifice of language itself are drawn together reveals this country in vivid ways and examines how form is used to create meaning. The landscape, viewed through the window of the car, is creatively reassembled by the speaker to approximate the shapes of Japanese writing and thus to create meaning directly out of the strangeness of unfamiliar territory. The rhythm of the poem itself indicates the delicate balance that exists between observed reality and the imaginative schemes that shape metaphorical meaning. The speaker and her companion are being driven at night ‘by rice fields on the narrowest roads’, but once the likeness between the straight road and one stroke of the pictogram has been established the sky is read solely in terms of its visual meanings:

A moon on its back under the shadow of its circle is a unique moon.

It means home is under the weight of a stone and that brightness can come  
 from under a shadow –

*The whole weight of a cold ball breathing on it and look how it smiles.*

(BHT 45)

By interspersing these metaphorical structures with the vivid image of the shirts of Brazilian factory workers hanging over balconies to dry, Morrissey grounds the larger meanings of the scene in its specific cultural conditions, tethering cosmic metaphor to the reality of clothing and hair. This diversity is expressed in the vastness of the scene that the poem attempts to comprehend: from the window at the other side of the car, a different sky can be seen and a different reading of the cosmos formed. The final image of the poem is important in bringing these readings together, however: ‘*Two worlds split open to each other, stars spilling from each*’ (BHT 45) suggests spaces that are at once distinct and together.

In asserting their separateness, these worlds reveal their secrets to one another, just as the intimate relationship that is glimpsed in this poem does not overwhelm the singular vision of the speaker but prompts her to reflect on the nature of perspective itself. Morrissey's attentive treatment of cultural transition here signifies the growing maturity of her aesthetic and a deepening of her engagement with a variety of material contexts in her work.

### Eva Bourke: The Music of What Happens

As well as Irish-born poets who have travelled and written abroad, there are others, born outside the country, who have made their homes in Ireland and built a creative life there. Eva Bourke, a German-born poet resident in Ireland for many years, carries with her a European past that is a complex blend of personal and culture references. Her imaginative engagement with the phenomenological world does not employ Morrissey's strategy of setting real and imagined in dialogue but rather uses observation and experience to engage with philosophical concepts which themselves attempt to tease out human meaning in its particular context. While much of her work is grounded in Irish landscapes and materials, the European city – and its intellectual traditions – is a recurring presence in her work. Just as Eavan Boland's work draws on the city as a space in which to explore the dynamics of familiarity and estrangement, Bourke considers the temporally layered and spatially complex character of urban life. 'Berlin Notebook', the final sequence from *Travels with Gandolpho* (2000), exemplifies her engagement with European history through the unifying lens of place. It reveals the vital importance of cultural memory to her aesthetic, explored by means of transporting the reader back in time to the lived experience of the past. Like so many of Bourke's poems, it uses the epigraph to prompt the reader to think deeply about key issues underpinning the poem. This strategy emphasizes the ways in which intellectual and experiential processes are entwined and makes us consider too the relationship between philosophical and poetic discourse. 'Berlin Notebook' has not one epigraph, but two; the first is from Samuel Beckett – '*There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us or been deformed by us*'. It is significant that memory is linked here to a practice of mutual distortion: here the extent to which the past is shaped by the needs of the present is clearly suggested. The second epigraph, from Walter Benjamin, roots our thinking further in the tradition of German intellectualism:

in using a photographic trope to argue that only the future is capable of developing the images of history he also sees the relationship between present and past as a two-way process. Bourke's eight-part sequence probes this important dynamic in a variety of ways.

The poem opens with a vision of order that at once evokes the military discipline of Germany at the start of the First World War and the imaginative power that draws aesthetic order from disparate energies. The regularity of the Huzzars who 'clack down the streets / in twos and twos, strait-laced as rhyming couplets' (*TG* 80) suggests a discipline at once purposeful and elegant. Yet in spelling this 'strait-laced' rather than 'straight-laced' here, Bourke chooses not to send us back to the opening image of the poem – 'Drawing board avenues in straight / double rows' (*TG* 80). Instead, she emphasizes the perilous consequences of military confidence. These young men who are 'trying to steal a march on death' confirm the gulf between reality and ideal states, yet they exist in a charmed world held in delicate balance between the hellish underground, complete with Cerberus and overheated air, and the sky 'closed as the grave' (*TG* 80). This image provides the title for the second poem, which opens in contemplation of anti-war graffiti on a graveyard wall. At the centre of this poem, E. T. A. Hoffmann lies buried – a name that subtly draws together the literary and musical references here, and whose gothic significance increases the deathly quality of the sequence.<sup>43</sup> Yet it is nature, rather than art, that binds this poem with the next. The dead rabbit found in the graveyard draws animal life into the orbit of human activity, emphasizing the uncanny witnessing of death. This is picked up in the nightingale whose song shapes the third poem in the sequence – a poem in prose with the wrought sentences of the sensitive observer. Potsdam at midnight offers a means to contemplate the relationship between present and past, the 'old music box city' set alongside the 'to and fro' of train engines. This poem presents a moment of delicate balance for the individual standing on the railway bridge viewing the city below: 'Down there my old life con- / tinues while here on the bridge I have started something new' (*TG* 82). This doubleness of perspective exemplifies the multiple existences of the migrant writer, who draws life and inspiration from both 'there' and 'here'. Though the speaker is stopped and asked for identification, the elevated perspective of the poem is suggestive of freedom, in contrast to the underground dimension of 'Bunkers':

No other place seems so versed in death and water –  
so many graveyards, so many rivers, canals, watertowers

and the soil light to the spade, liquid almost.  
 A special gate in every street for refugees, asylum seekers,  
 another admits winter only sailing down from Siberia on its ice plough.  
 (TG 82)

Here the dampness of the city is not suggestive of its fertile or regenerative nature, but rather of transience, of its capacity to degenerate or be swept away. Yet this urban space is a guarded one, with its 'special gate' for refugees. Moses ben Mendel (renamed Mendelssohn)<sup>44</sup> must pay to be admitted: though the subject of his writing is transcendence, he too must attend to the commercial side of personal and political freedom. The city has been regenerated with 'glass, marble and steel ... like polished crystals dropped from the air' (TG 83), yet the centre of this poem remains below ground, in the bunkers and cellars that provided hiding places for the persecuted. In this way, the city space becomes an important repository of cultural memory, which – though buried beneath a new and glossy surface – remains present to contemporary urban life. The deathly current that runs through the sequence sparks through the character of Lily, who unites sex and death in her tenement existence. She draws death into the life of the city, telling 'how coffins used to be stored in trees, / market was held in the graveyards' (TG 85). This acknowledgment of the darkness of the past is important in that it moves the interpretative centre away from the speaker and towards a character permanently inhabiting Berlin and a part of its evolving history. Here networks of memory connect those still living in the city to those who have moved away, confirming the possibility of both imaginative and actual return. 'Kreuzberg Nuptials' has a similar focus on the life of the building, and the wedding celebrations that mark an important moment of transition in the lives of those living there. As well as developing the investigation of Jewish–German heritage, this wedding scene draws together ideas and images from elsewhere in the sequence: the contrast between family and community and the built space of the city, in particular its bleaker elements; the 'outburst of cymbals' and 'clashing bells and gongs' are closer and more vigorous version of the 'tin- / kle and chime of bells and gongs' in 'Nightingale' (TG 82). The name 'Meyerbeer', barely discernible above the door of an adjacent building, echoes the figure of Mendelssohn in being the name of his great-grandson. These details record the subtle ways in which the relationship among the sequence of poems becomes closer as we read, the laces of history tightening on the city.

The auditory quality of these poems does not just add to their

sensitive rendering of the city space but is suggestive of the need to be attentive to the past as it emerges in word and sound. This dimension of the sequence becomes thematically important as this work draws to a close: 'The Nightsinger', the second to last poem, directly addresses the meaning carried in sound, especially as night draws in and the city's soundscape becomes more subtle. The singer, who turns up 'at exactly the hour / / when ears are most receptive' (*TG* 88), is a universal figure, tantalizing the urban listener with the power of song. Yet part of this power is the fleeting quality of the experience, the fact that the singer may already have passed before we become aware of the song. It draws particular attention to the relationship between the song and the listener, and implicitly then between poem and reader. Bourke's art is one requiring concentration and a mind open to ideas and associations, at once involving us in the world of the poem and reminding us of the necessary distance that reflection demands. In closing the sequence with a poem on amber, Bourke draws us back towards the spatial configuration of time. The opening image of the bright train rushing through a submerged space is a startling reminder of the relationship between material meanings and the act of observation itself. This image is striking by virtue of its ability to conjure at once what is seen and unseen: the fast-moving object 'below the water table' challenges the actual power of witness, but it can be seen in the eye of the imagination, which emphasizes the fixed yet dynamic character of the scene. In the train, a woman fingers an amber pendant, an object that conjures multiple layers of memory from 'mother's necklace from holidays / at Travemunde' to the ancient insects embedded in its glowing substance (*TG* 89). Recalling the flea markets where Polish women sell amber, the speaker links the female figure (as purveyor and wearer) to this capturing of the past, in both its deliberate and random forms. Opening with the very shape and order of the city, and its masculine, military dimension, this sequence moves gradually inwards towards enclosure and acute observation of the private lives of subjects, tracing the necessary centring of perception and concentration of meaning in the individual figure.

More than ten years later, Bourke is representing that city again, in 'A View of Berlin' from *Piano* (2011). This poem presents an interesting counterpoint to 'Berlin Notebook' in its return to key elements of the city explored in that earlier poem. As a single unified work, though, 'A View of Berlin' presents a smoother perspective and highlights the visual quality of the act of present and past engagement. It is sunset in late May and 'wispy grey / fabrics are lowered over rooftops, dreary

post-war / tower blocks. Darkness embraces the lindens' (*P* 14). The watery quality of the city persists, both in the situation of the speaker, seated on the deck of a boat, and in the 'flow' of darkness across the city. This trope has a less sinister dimension here than in the earlier poem, and the movement of the past through the built and human spaces of the city has a stimulating though not a traumatic effect. The small boats are buffeted by the wake of the coal barge, just as the different dimensions of the city record and respond to the actions of others. Once more we sense city and poem operating on different levels, and, just as Bourke dwelled on both submerged and elevated perspectives in 'Berlin Notebook', here too the speaker watches 'tourist boats being lifted to the next level, / strings of light bulbs looped around prow and rail' (*P* 14). The new 'diaphanous' city can be seen in the distance and once again the lightness of glass is contrasted with the signs of war, here in the recollection of bombers 'spilling their cargoes' on the blacked out streets (*P* 14). The onset of night gives these cultural memories particular power:

And now the night releases its spillage of black  
 oil and the gas lanterns lining the long  
 streets spread the dim glow of bad  
 memories. Again the rough drafts of yet  
 another beginning – but how could one on such nights,  
 you ask, imagine the perfect machinery of control  
 that severed the river once

(*P* 15)

Yet even in this dark mood the speaker acknowledges how distant the images of war and the terrible aftermath of a divided Germany have become – the 'barbed wire, mines / watch towers, guards' to prevent people attempting to swim across the river to freedom. This imaginative distance is bridged, however, by the power of poetic language itself to conjure up these vivid scenes, and to strike both poet and reader with their capacity to shape present experience. This power is broken by music: the nightingale – already heard in 'Berlin Notebook' – 'strikes up its midnight song' (*P* 15) swelling to fill stanzas with its Classical and Romantic associations and its arresting beauty 'calling across distances as the world goes round / on tiptoe forgetting all about its business' (*P* 15). As all who can hear it pause to listen, the song becomes associated with the wildness of nature and thus with a beauty that precedes human power and wilful destruction. The bird calls 'to return to the

unmutilated garden' and thus is both a reproof to human vanity and a potential agent of transcendence.

For Bourke, Berlin itself carries an enduring capacity to prompt reflection on the relationship between the weight of history and the immediacy of lived experience. While the legacy of the Second World War plays an important role in her work, it is mixed with a longer view of Berlin's cultural identity and a strong sense of personal connection. Her treatment of Ireland has very different resonances, moving away from a concern with family and cultural history towards acute observation of the radical changes that Ireland has undergone in the years that she has been resident here. 'Notes from Henry Street', a two-part poem from her most recent collection *Piano*, again constructs a dialogue with her earlier collection from 2000 and uses the concept of 'Notes' to create a sense of continuous thoughtful engagement, as well as an auditory dimension. In the opening section, Henry Street, near the centre of Galway city, becomes the epicentre of recessionary affect. Opening in the aftermath of a storm, the speaker observes the detritus in the garden, a microcosm for 'our street of Club Paradiso, sex shop / plus blackjack club' with its For Sale signs and dispiriting new apartment blocks. The speaker here is a letter writer, and addresses someone due to return home to this scene: 'the fireplace / with its dusting of ashes, the veins / of slug slime and mould' (*P* 71). Again, dampness pervades the environment, because this is a coast on the edge of Europe and its exposure – climatically and economically – is intimately linked to this location. The speaker's own life is 'full of bluster' suggesting both the turbulence of contemporary existence and the need to talk over and around it, to avoid confrontation with the darker realities of experience. The poem acknowledges 'apologies to Montale', perhaps referring to the tendency of the Italian poet to address poems to an absent other. The second part of the poem directly addresses Montale himself, contrasting the fountains and courtyards of Italian urban life to the Texaco stations and investment premises of Celtic Tiger Ireland. Though this night is as bright as day – aided by the omnipresence of street lighting – it again prompts sombre reflection on Bourke's part: 'memories return nocturnally, sere and raw' (*P* 72). For this reason, the speaker welcomes the return of storm winds as a way of clarifying ethical and personal quandaries and introducing a cleansing energy into a world racked by endless political and economic strife. Instead, the movement remains muted, as the striking rhyme between 'flickering' and 'bickering' suggests, together with the parallel juxtaposition between 'critical mass' and 'trickling down the glass'

that mark these four lines out in rhyming containment. Ending with an affirmation of speaking to the dead, Bourke interweaves the poetic conversation with Montale with her habitual sensitivity to familial precursors. Yet, in asserting the presence of the dead in contemporary life, she at once emphasizes the continuities of inspiration and experience and the haunted quality of contemporary life in Ireland.

All three poets show how the processes of travel and migration alter their understanding of the past, bringing concerns of time and space to the forefront of their creative work. Their poems constitute a dialogue with distant cultural spaces and in doing so embrace the particular formal and linguistic challenges that this diversity brings. These experiences have proved productive of experiment for these poets, whether formally, in their engagement with new poetic modes, or philosophically, in the dialogue they construct with their earlier selves. To live in an entirely new culture is to court estrangement, but also to be made sensitive to both cultural and linguistic differences. These poets show how a migrant perspective not only informs a particular phase of their work but also alters their aesthetic development in fundamental ways.

### Notes

- 1 The growth of significant migrant communities in Ireland has given rise to a greater diversity in literary production. *Landing Places: Immigrant Poets in Ireland*, an anthology edited by Eva Bourke and Borbála Faragó (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 2010), represents a range of poetry produced by writers born outside Ireland. Some of these settled in the country decades ago; some are recent arrivals. See also Borbála Faragó, ‘I am the Place in Which Things Happen’: Invisible Immigrant Women Poets of Ireland’, in Patricia Coughlan and Tina O’Toole (eds), *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), pp. 145–66.
- 2 Nadia Setti notes that the crossing of borders ranges in significance from ‘an ordinary act without consequences (study, business, tourist journeys) [to] ... an act of survival for those who leave their homes to escape disease, war and poverty’: ‘Migrants’ Art and Writing: Figures of Precarious Hospitality’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 16.4 (2009), p. 326.
- 3 Paul White discusses this dual process of departure in the introduction to Russell King, John Connell and Paul White (eds), *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 2.
- 4 This poem was first published in *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1967).
- 5 Setti, ‘Migrants’ Art and Writing’, p. 327.
- 6 Among more recent critics, Douglas Porteous, David Sopher and Yi Fu Tuan offer a stable, even soothing, reading of ‘home’, argues Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-century Fiction* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 22.

- 7 Chandra Talpade Mohanty (with Bidddy Martin), 'What's Home Got to Do with It?', *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonising Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 90.
- 8 The idealization of home is linked to its significance as a gendered space, to which men may choose to come for comfort and sustenance but to which women remain tied.
- 9 This changing philosophical conceptualization of home is traced by David Ralph and Lynn A. Staeheli in 'Home and Migration: Mobilities, Belongings and Identities', *Geography Compass* 5.7 (July 2011), pp. 517–30 (p. 521).
- 10 Rob McLennan, '12 or 20 Questions: with Mairéad Byrne' (November 2007), <http://12or20questions.blogspot.ie/>.
- 11 De Fréine has participated in writing residencies in the USA (Connecticut), Portugal (Coimbra) and Slovenia. These periods abroad have shaped her work since 2010 in important ways.
- 12 White, 'Introduction', in King, Connell and White (eds), *Writing Across Worlds*, p. 7.
- 13 Sheobhushan Shukla and Anu Shukla, *Migrant Voices in Literatures in English* (New Delhi: Sarup, 2006), p. 2.
- 14 Mary Layoun remarks on this apparent contradiction. See Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home*, p. 16.
- 15 Mohanty, 'What's Home Got to Do with It', pp. 85–105.
- 16 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 278.
- 17 Marie-Aude Baronian, Stephan Besser and Yolande Jansen (eds), *Diaspora and Memory: Figures of Displacement in Contemporary Literature, Arts and Politics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 11–12. This includes a quotation from Paul Gilroy, 'Diaspora and the Detours of Identity', in Kay Woodward (ed.), *Identity and Difference* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 318.
- 18 Baronian *et al.*, *Diaspora and Memory*, p. 12.
- 19 See Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).
- 20 Mairéad Byrne in conversation with Rob McLennan. At the opening of a 2005 interview with Rebecca Seiferle, Byrne is described as 'both an Irish and an American poet; the first by birth and the second by choice'. Rebecca Seiferle, 'An Interview with Mairéad Byrne', *The Drunken Boat* 5.3/4 (Spring/Summer 2005), [www.thedrunkenboat.com/byrne.html](http://www.thedrunkenboat.com/byrne.html).
- 21 W. B. Yeats, 'Among School Children', in Daniel Albright (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: The Poems* (London: Everyman, 1992), pp. 261–3.
- 22 Nelson's Pillar was a key Dublin landmark. Erected in 1808–9 at the junction of Sackville Street and the Carlisle Bridge, it was blown up by an IRA bomb in 1966. It appears in many literary representations of Dublin, most notably James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939). See Yvonne Whelan, *Reinventing Modern Dublin: Streetscape, Iconography and the Politics of Identity* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2003), pp. 44–50.
- 23 *Dubh le daoine* means 'black with people', that is, crowded. *Ag baint dhá thaobh den bóthar*, 'taking both sides of the road' or weaving from side to side, whether from drink or another cause. *Íseal* and *uasal* are antonyms: *íseal* meaning lowly or common, *uasal* noble or lofty – this is especially suitable given Lord Nelson's

- social and physical elevation here. ‘Stewed’ as slang for drunkenness leads easily to soup (redolent of the soup kitchens of the nineteenth century) and to ‘mate and potatoes’, meat and potatoes hibernicized. This movement between languages and registers makes use of patterns of alliteration and assonance in both languages as well as the auditory links between *iseal* and *uasal*, suggesting the noble and the common may not be so far apart after all.
- 24 Seiferle, ‘Interview with Mairéad Byrne’.
  - 25 Kent Johnson, ‘Poetic Comedy, September 11, Truth, the Lyric, Mississippi, the Persecution of Gabe Gudding by Trent Lott Radio, the Cohabitation of Poets, and Prison Teaching: An Interview with Mairéad Byrne and Gabriel Gudding’, *VeRT* 6, <http://epc.buffalo.edu/mags/vert/index2.html>.
  - 26 Christopher Morash’s examination of Irish media from the 1960s onward shows Telefís Éireann’s reliance on American programming. He attributes this to economics – the cost of screening an American series was just £20 per hour and this proved the only way that Irish television could compete for viewers with its British counterpart: ‘To put it simply, without American television, there would have been no Irish television’. Christopher Morash, *A History of the Media in Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 175.
  - 27 St Brendan is known for his legendary journey in search of Hy Brasil, or the Island of the Blessed, described in the ninth-century manuscript ‘The Voyage of St Brendan the Navigator’. Though the location of the island is unknown – and often assumed to be allegorical – it has been speculated that it is North America. Tim Severin’s 1978 film *The Brendan Voyage* demonstrated that it would have been possible for St Brendan to have made the crossing to America in a leather boat. See also Glyn S. Burgess and Clara Strijbosch, *The Legend of St Brendan: A Critical Bibliography* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2000).
  - 28 ‘Patrick Kavanagh used to talk about wanting to “play a true note on a slack string”. There’s some of that in *Talk Poetry* ... The textured, collaged, appropriated work of my chapbook *An Educated Heart* (Palm Press, 2005) seems a long way from me now’. Rob McLennan, ‘12 or 20 Questions: with Mairéad Byrne’.
  - 29 Rob McLennan, ‘12 or 20 Questions: with Mairéad Byrne’.
  - 30 Sina Queyras, ‘A few words and poems: Mairéad Byrne’, *Harriet*, April 30, 2010, [www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/04/a-few-words-and-poems-mairead-byrne/](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/04/a-few-words-and-poems-mairead-byrne/)
  - 31 Seiferle, ‘Interview with Mairéad Byrne’.
  - 32 ‘Parallax’ is defined as ‘the effect whereby the position or direction of an object appears to differ when viewed from different positions’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Fran Brearton draws attention to the relevance of this to Morrissey’s poetic practice in her review of the volume in the *Guardian*, September 6, 2013. *Parallax* won the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Poetry Now Award for 2014.
  - 33 Gerald Dawe, ‘Poetry as Commemoration’, in Eberhard Bort (ed.), *Commemorating Ireland: History, Politics, Culture* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004), pp. 216–17.
  - 34 The influence of Japan on Irish poetry has been explored in a number of publications, most notably in Irene de Angelis and Joseph Woods (eds), *Our Shared Japan: An Anthology of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Dedalus, 2007) and in Irene de Angelis’s monograph, *The Japanese Effect in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
  - 35 Irene de Angelis, ‘Sinéad Morrissey: Between Northern Ireland and Japan’, *Journal of Irish Studies* 20 (2005), [www.carcenet.co.uk](http://www.carcenet.co.uk).

- 36 White, 'Introduction', King, Connell and White, *Writing Across Worlds*, p. 14.
- 37 Erll and Nünning point out that a war can be remembered as a mythic event, an aspect of political history, a traumatic experience or as a part of family history. *Cultural Memory Studies*, p. 7.
- 38 In December 1993, a Joint Declaration on Peace, more commonly known as the Downing Street Declaration, was issued by John Major, then British Prime Minister, and Albert Reynolds, the Irish Taoiseach at that time. On August 31, 1994 the IRA announced a cessation of military activities; this lasted until February 1996 when an IRA bomb was detonated in the London Docklands. After a renewed ceasefire in July 1997, the Good Friday Agreement was reached in April 1998. This agreed mechanisms for devolved, inclusive government in the province as well as arrangements for prisoner release and decommissioning. See Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie (eds), *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles, 1968–99* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999); also Graham Spencer (ed.), *Forgiving and Remembering in Northern Ireland: Approaches to Conflict Resolution* (London: Continuum, 2011).
- 39 The involvement of the Spanish in the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, which saw the defeat of Gaelic Ireland by the English, situated this event within the larger conflict between Protestant England and Catholic Spain. Nearly 90 years later, the Battle of the Boyne was fought between two rival claimants of the English, Scottish and Irish thrones – the Catholic James VII and the Protestant William III who had deposed James in 1688. William was also governor of Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelderland and Overijssel of the Dutch Republic. The battle, fought near Drogheda, was won by William. This ensured the continuation of Protestant ascendancy in Ireland. See Pádraig Lenihan, *1690: The Battle of the Boyne* (London: The History Press, 2003).
- 40 See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 7.
- 41 Aleida Assmann, 'To Remember or to Forget: Which Way Out of a Shared History of Violence?', in Assmann and Shortt, *Memory and Political Change*, pp. 153–71.
- 42 Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home*, p. 27.
- 43 E. T. A. Hoffman (1776–1822) was a German Romantic author as well as a composer and music critic. Offenbach's opera, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, was loosely based on his writings; he also wrote the stories from which the famous ballets *The Nutcracker* and *Coppélia* were derived.
- 44 Though this poem depicts 'the gate keeper' as changing the name from ben Mendel to Mendelssohn, the decision to do so was in fact taken by Moses Mendelssohn himself. See Michael P. Steinberg, 'Mendelssohn and Judaism', in Peter Mercer-Taylor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mendelssohn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 35.