



AOSDÁNA

## **General Assembly 19 April 2013**

Afternoon session

### **Address by Anthony Cronin, Saoi**

Guests of Aosdána and the Arts Council, friends and colleagues, I'll have to ask you for some forbearance in speaking to the brief we were given. I happily enough adopted the brief and was pretty faithful to it, but it has involved me in some direct autobiography, and some advertence to my own work. Neither are activities I'm much practiced in, oddly enough perhaps, so there will be shortcomings that I must ask you to forgive.

I began to publish poems in 1948; not to write them – I had pretty well always done that, since I was 13 or so - but to publish them. 1948: it was a very peculiar time in Europe generally, the post-war. It is difficult to describe it now and to describe the kind of malaise that hung on the air; difficult also to decide on the reasons for this: was it the bomb that hung over people's heads? Was it the camps? I think the worst thing about the camps was the view, the aspect of human nature they revealed. It wasn't so much the suffering of the victims, but the appalling view of human nature we were forced to contemplate and indeed have been forced to contemplate ever since in new contexts.

This, of course, is reflected in the art of the period, but there was not only the bomb and the camps, there was also the cold war - a very peculiar business which darkened the skies undoubtedly in certain ways. Now art is not always and everywhere a direct response to public things like this, or a response of any sort to public things, but nonetheless they do have an effect. Something was having an effect and was reflected both in life and in art. The art was as never before a stripping away; sometimes literally

a stripping away as in the work of Giacometti or Beckett; sometimes a stripping away of illusion of all that humanity had accepted as giving meaning and dignity to life. This was the beginning of a new period in human consciousness.

Cyril Connolly famously said that from then on the writer would be known by the resonance of his solitude and the quality of his despair. He brought a new word, taken from the Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, into usage - the word angst. Auden called the time we were living in The Age of Anxiety. Paul Celan, a Romanian who lived in Paris and wrote in German, said the camps made poetry impossible. Now, I don't know that they did, but they certainly made changes in the accepted subjects of poetry. I didn't believe that poetry was impossible, or else I wouldn't have been writing or publishing it. But I did believe (this was not a programmatic belief but it was the way poems came to me and the forms they took) that poetry should be, had to be, the expression of discreditable emotions; of meannesses; of undercover mentalities, of all sorts of things that the word 'poetic' seems to contradict. The very word poetic, poetry itself, is so involved in heightened emotion, nobler emotion, better emotion, that it seems to rule out a good deal of human truth.

I didn't choose these subjects. We don't choose our subjects in any cold-blooded rational way. They choose us. Looking through those early poems now, I do find them perhaps, even to err on that side of things. "That we ask to be judged in the end by our own compassion", I wrote, "Thief, calling to thief from his cross with no Christ in between". And I wrote "Our happiness is easily wronged by speech / Being complete, like silence globed like summer / without extension in regret or wish / In suffering we call out for another, describing with a desperate precision / We must be sure that this is how all suffer, or be alone forever with the pain".

I'm surprised and, I may say pleased, by the advertences to failure. I had very little knowledge of Beckett at the time - that was to come a little bit later - apart from an extract from *Watt* that had been in *Envoy*, a magazine I had been associated with. There was nothing about failure there, but I find that I was fond of failure myself. "When the baffling god who is not now or here / But sees our life's map in the future's

round / (As even the dead may see from the rising ground) / Tries us by failure until failure found / Our nature which is formed by failure tries / No longer to compete in others' lies." The esteem in which Samuel Beckett held failure came as a pleasant surprise to me – he was very fond of it. I have tended to drop a lot of these poems from the various stages of publication – *Collecteds*, *Selecteds* etc. – it's natural to drop poems as you go along and I've dropped them more for their youthful inadequacies than for their subject matter. Though I may say I do sometimes find them a bit too anti-poetic myself. I believed then, and I believe now though that there is poetry in everything, every human emotion, every human situation and the only problem is the recognition and the abstraction of it.

I could find very little confirmation or encouragement in what I was doing among fellow Irish poets. Irish literature tended towards the picturesque, the nostalgic, the charming. It was also ebullient, with a sort of shallow, ungrounded ebullience.

"This is the evening the bleat of melodions / Buck leaps, fandangos and whips up the hobnails..."

A well known Irish poet had written "I showed it to Kavanagh and from it, he coined the word 'bucklepper'". There were many buckleppers. The nostalgic and the picturesque thrived, as much in painting as in literature, but in the work of one painter at least I found more identity with and confirmation of what I was doing myself than I did among writers.

My closest friend intellectually was the painter Patrick Swift. And when a little later, through him initially, I met and became friends with Lucien Freud, I rejoiced in both cases in the asceticism, the frugality, the almost monochromatic palate, the avoidance of richnesses, and I found this confirmatory. I, too, wanted an art that would be so frugal as to be puritanical; ruling out things, rather than including them.

I didn't change notably, I think, looking at my collected work, until about 1960 or so, when I wrote a long poem called *RMS Titanic*. How I came to write it was simple. We

were living in England in the country, in a place called Haselmere, in a cottage which the poet George Barker had bequeathed to me when his companion left him and he couldn't live there any longer. We used to go in to Haselmere to the movies occasionally and there, one evening, we saw a cinematic version of Walter Lord's book *A Night to Remember*. It's a very good film, with a strong documentary feel to it (50 times better than the rubbish they produced a couple of years ago) but it had an effect on me beyond its merits as a film. It was the story itself that interested me, more than interested me; I had found for the first time a contemporary story which was a myth, a true story of course (myth doesn't necessarily mean false), which would bear all sorts of things, and illuminate all sorts of things: the conflict of rich and poor; the misguided faith in technological progress; the collapse of dreams and wishes and hopes inevitably part of Capitalism; and the end of the morality that was part of the middle-class school system. They're all there in the Titanic story and much more, and I found myself embarking the following day on a poem.

Eliot said that in choosing the subject of a long poem, one should choose the one that offers most release and most secrecy. He was, of course, the great propagator of impersonality – you hid behind a work of art; you weren't the front man out on the stage; you were back behind in some way. I learned also - this is partly an aside - that a long poem is great stuff because you can go to work each day as you would on a prose work; it simply advances, you push it on like you would a novel or another prose work and that there's no excuse for not doing so. You're not waiting for a muse, you're not waiting for impulse, what's called inspiration – you're getting on with it. Also the poetry is being made to serve the circumstance or story and poetry prefers a taskmaster to its own dispositions.

I don't find the description of human sensibility in the poem much different, or much of a release from what I had been doing up to then, but I do notice that there is an outward turning (and about time too, perhaps); that I was beginning to look outward more. Not that I ever wrote the sort of semi-autobiographical poem that begins with the word 'I' and is often a little anecdote of a more or less, feeling-ful kind. In fact I think I have used the word 'I' very sparingly throughout everything and give myself

some credit for that. Looking outward led me to a kind of attack, confirmation, which I think was about time coming. I think it does you good to engage now and then, but somehow this sort of engagement hadn't gone into the poems as much as it should. One passage seems to me to have an advertence to the present situation in which we find ourselves *vis a vis* the powers of Europe; those 'great men' we see on television every night.

"O, if this face conceded great pain, we might  
Call it necessity, and concede its right,  
But multiplied in the racing mirrors here;  
The eyes of money vacantly severe,  
The polished surfaces, the silver knives;  
The gorgon heads which model the good lives;  
Presume a reckoning from the weak, beyond,  
The young to proffer to a glutton gone,

The face of justice does not mask its grief  
But emptiness and greed and disbelief  
A solemn bully's face, pretentious, grave  
Loathing the brother that it fears to save,  
Lest money in attendance might not get  
Their due reward, their prior claims regret

To all the decent scriveners it lied  
Who bit upon that coin before they died,  
And found it hollow and who took the blame,  
Bearing their own, their sons' and fathers' shame."

Another, very powerful and truly confirmatory influence from painting which I should mention in this context was the discovery of the German Expressionists of the post-first war/pre-second war era. Not the new expressionists, though they were beginning to thrive at the time I speak of. The expressionists gave me a sense of how thin a defence

ordinary living is, and what constantly lurks behind it. My knowledge of them came almost entirely from reproductions, but was maybe none the worse for that.

I've gone on writing long poems since, and in most of them I think there has to be some sort of ready-made myth or theme underlying the verse. I know Philip Larkin made a famously adverse remark about the use of myth, but he never wrote a long poem. You can do without, but it's tricky doing that, whereas a myth carries you forward because there is always the narrative to be advanced some way or another, and there is always a ready-made view of human nature, human action, human motive, which is something to have. It's ground under your feet, even if you adopt some other view.

It struck me about the European thing we were asked to deal with, one of these long poems – a fairly recent one – is about the Minotaur. Well, of course, the Minotaur is a Greek story, it's a European story, and Greece is the original European country. I wrote an even longer poem called *The End of the Modern World*, the story of which, in a way, is sufficiently conveyed by its title. I believe there was once a thing called the modern world, or a thing that could be called the modern world, but that it's over. We're in other territory now. Looking at this poem in the last few days, I found that it was a sort of elegiac history of Europe, a physis history, and its heroes (it *has* heroes) are Europeans. They are European thinkers, artists, and one statesman, Lenin. But with reference to this business of Europe, and I notice the briefing note does this, we should be wary of referring to Europe as if it was elsewhere. It's nobody's fault: it's just a habit we've all got into, as if it meant 'mainland Europe' and we islanders are not European in that full sense of the word.

We too are Europeans and we too should claim our 'Europeanness', but claiming anything consciously in a work of art is wrong; it's not what we should be doing, but what we should remember in those odd hours we see another great economist from the European system on television. It struck me the other day that they were the embodiment of the German philosopher Herbert Marcuse's idea – he called them one-dimensional man, and it struck me that we were in danger of becoming one-

dimensional man, instead of being multi-faceted which is one of the things that poetry enables us to be.

I have spoken exclusively of poetry at the expense of other forms of writing. This does not imply any sort of contempt for those other forms. It was partly to make things more manageable – I am truly very glad to have written some prose books which a number of people have read - but it was also because poetry can contain and illustrate those contradictions which are at the heart of many of our creative lives. Poetry is more immediately for me the taste on the tongue which evokes the past. Oliver Goldsmith also wrote many other kinds of books. Looking back in the last months of his life he addressed poetry itself and called it, in words which I should like to echo:

“Thou source of all my bliss and all my woe  
That found'st me poor at first, and keep'st me so”

Thank you for listening.

As will be occasionally evident from the syntax, this address was delivered impromptu and the version now printed has been prepared from a transcript with the help of the Liz Powell, Registrar of Aosdána, for which I am grateful.