

'Ship of Fools': The Celtic Tiger and Poetry as Social Critique

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The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have these consequences systematically cared for. Officials are those who look out for and take care of the interests thus affected. Since those who are indirectly affected are not direct participants in the transactions in question, it is necessary that certain persons be set apart to represent them, and to see to it that their interests are conserved and protected. (Dewey 1927, pp. 15-16)

Politics, Public Art and Poetry

We might justifiably ask why we should pursue an examination of the relationship between poetry and the Celtic Tiger? Are there lessons to be learned from heeding the lyrical engagements with the ecological and socio-economic fall-out of the country's recent prosperity? In another, perhaps more universal, way we are concerned with the problematic of where and how poetry can intervene or speak out in contemporary 'public' debates? And if we consider this last point urgent in the Irish context, then one of Astrid Franke's arguments in her survey of public poetry in the United States could serve as a productive point of departure for our critique. In Franke's view, and this appears entirely apposite in reading Irish poetry under the recent and current conjuncture, what poets who participate in public dialogues:

have in common is that they understand the public role of poetry not as a given but as a challenge; to think the public anew and to devise ways in which common concerns could be expressed demands innovation in language, in subject matter, and in social

roles, not least that of the poet. Thus aesthetic innovation and public commitment, though there may be a tension between them, are yet intertwined. (Franke 2010, p. 5)

It would be presumptuous, and arguably misplaced, to advocate here that any of the poets under scrutiny have *consciously* assumed high profile social roles. But what is certain is that their combined, but differentiated, stylistic innovations and thematic preoccupations are forceful and varied affirmations of the necessity for poetry to partake in the public reckonings with the legacies of the Celtic Tiger. As Franke highlights, poetry's role in the public sphere cannot be taken for granted. Poetry must itself be challenging as it confronts the challenge of registering as an effective and an affective medium in on-going public debates in Ireland.

This very contention is apparent in a recent piece in *The Irish Times* by Fintan O'Toole, where he moves away from his more sustained anatomizations of the iniquities of Ireland's erstwhile political and financial elites, to focus on the role of culture in the post-Celtic Tiger era. For O'Toole 'the boom was resolutely unpoetic,' while 'its hard-faced greed' offered 'an impossible challenge to the lyricism that is the first resort of Irish writing' (2011). As we will detail below, Irish poetry did respond to the hypocrisies and the inequities of the 'boom' years in Ireland with frustration, irony, and black humour. We can intuit from O'Toole's argument that art and culture became commoditized during the Celtic Tiger years and, in addition, the idioms of Irish creative expression were too often warped by the imported and reifying codes of global capitalism. Where culture was not commoditized, it was alienated from Irish society, as the self-reflexive, often critical, function of public art was no longer relevant in a culture defined by consumption and self-congratulation. In O'Toole's estimation, since this triumphalist phase of recent Irish history is now past, 'there is now a need to somehow make up for that absence, to engage with the afterlife of a period that was hard to write about when it was unfolding' (2011). In what follows, we will see poetic reflections and critiques of the Celtic Tiger period in Ireland by Dennis O'Driscoll, Rita Ann

Higgins, Alice Lyons and, by way of preface, John Updike. These works were written, variously, during the ‘ascendancy’ of the Celtic Tiger and after its decline, and represent a range of poetry that responds to social dislocation, moral hypocrisy, cultural inauthenticity and ecological ‘ruination’.

Visiting the Celtic Tiger – John Updike

‘Too many plugs and switches in the room,’ John Updike writes at the opening of his poem, ‘New Resort Hotel, Portmarnock,’ thus capturing, metonymically, the culture of wasteful excess that prevailed during much of the Celtic Tiger years (Updike 2009, p. 67). Updike’s poem is part of a triptych of Petrarchan sonnets grouped under the title, ‘A Wee Irish Suite,’ and appeared in his 2009 collection, *Endpoint and Other Poems*. ‘New Resort Hotel, Portmarnock’ is the third sonnet in the sequence and the only one that deals with Updike’s localized impressions of Ireland’s, at that point, fading economic buoyancy. Yet it is Updike’s ironic take on the Celtic Tiger that proves most effective in this short poem, concentrated, primarily, in the octet, where he writes: ‘Too many outlets for the well-/connected businessman, too much Preferred/ Lifestyle, here in formerly lovely Eire’ (Updike 2009 p. 67). Notwithstanding the potentially grating nostalgia of the final clause, again it is the vision of excessive connectivity without actual connection that exercises Updike’s poetic irony. He condenses this in his selection of phrases, ‘Too many’ and ‘Too much’, which repeat and echo, in turn, the opening enunciation of the poem. These, then, work in combination with his ironic reference to the frequently circulated jargon of consumerism – ‘Preferred Lifestyle’ – to depict a country that is not only remote from the financial poverty of its historical and recent past, but is just as remote from itself in the present. Accumulation, liquidity and consumerist impulses do not seem to be symptoms of historical progress in Updike’s snapshot of Ireland, but, rather, they are those of cultural and social vertigo. At the same time as Updike subjects the Celtic Tigerishness of Ireland to poetic scrutiny, he also

identifies pitiable features of the fervent aspirationalism of its more materialistic citizens. In an image recalling Joyce's 'cracked looking glass,' Updike writes: 'The Celtic Tiger still has crooked teeth,/ the twinkle of the doomed-to-come-up- short' (Updike 2009, p. 67). There is either something tragic about what Updike perceives in Ireland's Celtic Tiger condition, or, we could suggest that there is a hint of dismissive condescension in his figuration. Regardless, the sense that Ireland's thriving economy was, in many ways, constructed upon temporary foundations and/or concealed deeper levels of ingrained material poverty lend legitimacy to Updike's lines.

Indeed, not only is there an echo of Joyce in the opening image of the sestet; Updike's idea of an impoverished anti-hero acquiring wealth, but who is tragically bound to failure or revelation as a fraud, casts the country as species of Victorian literary character, not out of place in Dickens. For Updike, there is a dishonesty and a shallowness to Ireland's transient embrace of hyper-consumerism. While some of his rhetoric skirts perilously close to a lamentation for a more 'authentic' Irish culture, his cursory poetic intervention is an instructive *international* perspective on Celtic Tiger Ireland.

The Celtic Tiger years – Dennis O'Driscoll

Originally published in his 1999 collection, *Weather Permitting*, and sharing a title with Paul Durcan's poem in *The Art of Life* (2004), Dennis O'Driscoll's 'The Celtic Tiger' offers a sequence of, by now, clichéd set-pieces from that period. Made up of nine stanzas, the poem displays superficial accommodation with, even unself-conscious indulgence in, the bounties of economic affluence. But in crucial ways, in tone and form, the poem betrays a healthy disquiet with the material fortunes of the 'boom' times in Ireland. Apart from the interconnected yet discrete vignettes from Celtic Tiger Ireland, one of the more revealing formal, linguistic features of O'Driscoll's poem is the fact that the poetic voice never once speaks in the first-person. Indeed, not only is the first-person singular absent, the first-person

plural is also omitted, which, again, suggests physical, financial or ethical distance from these scenes of copious consumption. The poem's 'narrative' is relayed entirely in the second and third persons, intimating a degree of removal or separation from the depicted theatre of conspicuous wealth. In aggregation these formal features of the poem, particularly given the historical context of the work, convey a sense that there may well be interaction and shared experiences of consumption, but these activities are devoid of authentic human relations and/or community. This simple tactic by O'Driscoll implies that the social sensibilities of the Irish have been altered under the sway of financial largesse – a trend that is further evidenced in the carnivalesque or baroque scenes depicted in the individual stanzas of the poem's first half.

The poem opens with a bald statement, immediately immersing the reader in, and preparing us for, the subsequent sights and sounds of the cityscape: 'Ireland's boom is in full swing' (O'Driscoll 1999, p. 15). But while this opening line clearly sites the poem in a specific location, it also hints at the impersonality characteristic of the narrative arc of the remainder of the poem. As if to make this point even more starkly, the following two lines revel in the abstract facticity of the country's economic ascendancy: 'Rows of numbers, set in a cloudless blue/ computer background, prove the point' (O'Driscoll 1999, p. 15). Abundance in abstracted statistics proves abundance in material riches; O'Driscoll here ironizes the impersonality of wealth creation and evaluation, an ironic gesture that is made all the more effective by the concluding plosives of 'prove the point.' Both ironic and defensive, these plosives, then, are also intimations that statistics are inherently contestable. Indeed the initial emphatic tone of this opening stanza firmly establishes the ironic register of 'The Celtic Tiger', and, in its reference to the statistical verifiability of Ireland's copious wealth, reminds us of the counter-arguments of critical voices in Irish society who have consistently highlighted the outrageous material disparities that accompanied the Celtic Tiger 'boom.'

The stanzas that succeed this abstract validation of the ‘boom’ portray a variety of performances of Irish Celtic Tiger identities, which are consonant with O’Toole’s argument in *Enough is Enough* that ‘[t]he Celtic Tiger wasn’t just an economic ideology. It was also a substitute identity. It was a new way of being [...]’ (2010, p. 3). As we noted above, from a contemporary vantage point, they read as stereotypical, yet from O’Driscoll’s perspective, at the cusp of the millennium, these are caustic and incisive descriptions. Formally these slices of Irish life are discrete within the poem, but, as we have suggested, their generic and anonymous qualities connote various levels of inauthenticity and vacuousness. Just as identity as performance changed during the Celtic Tiger, a significant fraction of this evolution manifested in linguistic forms and modes of verbal expression employed in the public and private spheres. As this poem displays, Irish citizens became adept at, even fluent in, new vocabularies of excess and consumerism. And it is in the third, fourth and fifth stanzas of ‘The Celtic Tiger’ that O’Driscoll dramatizes the most explicit theatrics of Celtic Tiger identity. With a microscopic attention to diction and syntax, the poem utilizes compounds, vague generic titles, alliteration and half-rhyme to establish its critique of un-ironic posturing and re-invention. While the three stanzas stand apart, they could well describe a single spatial location, as the poet once more reaches for the generic to undermine the authenticity of such individual and communal performances of *arriviste* identities. The third stanza ironizes a postmodernist and consumerist appetite for mediated ‘culture’ as the *nouveau riche* prostrate themselves ‘Outside new antique pubs’, the oxymoron suggesting a crude commodification of Irish history in the service of consumption. We are offered a picture of simulated authenticity as national identity is given as a hostage to new found fortune. The third stanza also sees the greatest concentration of compound adjectives, as the poet describes: ‘well-toned women, gel-slick men,’ who ‘drain long-necked bottles of imported beer’ (O’Driscoll 1999, p. 15).

There are erotic qualities to these lines, with a premium placed on physical appearance and on the sensuousness of physical consumption. The Celtic Tiger streetscapes possess a cosmopolitan feel, a globalized ambience, in which new identities can be shaped and explored. And this progression into the erotic and the sensual is further apparent in the following stanza, which, beginning with another compound adjective, takes on a specifically gendered form of sexualized performance: ‘Lip-glossed cigarettes are poised/ at coy angles, a black bra strap/ slides strategically from a Rocha top’ (O’Driscoll 1999, p. 15). Combining the generic with the specific – ‘Rocha’ – O’Driscoll suggests a level of liberated female sexual agency, and, at the same time, eroticizes, in contemporary form, a variant of national allegory. The coupling of the alliterated sequence, ‘black bra strap/ slides strategically,’ connotes sexual boldness, as well as a sensual performance. In these two stanzas, then, it is *action*, physical, bodily action, that counts and that is privileged. Yet in the next stanza, ‘talk’ enters, but is, firstly, centred on sterile property markets and, more significantly, is drowned out by another more insistent sound: ‘Talk of tax-exempted town-house lettings/ is muffled by rap music blasted/ from a passing four-wheel drive’ (O’Driscoll 1999, p. 15). Again we see a concentration of compound adjectives and impersonal nouns, as the poet details the commodities accumulated and traded by the affluent. What is more telling, though, is the content of the ‘muffled’ ‘talk,’ as O’Driscoll points to the re-calibration of language, of conversation topics and of personal priorities during the ‘boom’ years.

Once more the ways in which language was employed and the contents of public and private discourse became conditioned by the props and potential accruals of economic success. Across ‘The Celtic Tiger’ language, together with the poetic form and content, are laced with both local and international indices of cultural and social change, and many of these are ironized as superficial features of depthless Irish identities during the period of the Celtic Tiger. O’Driscoll’s poem ironizes the linguistics inventions and neologisms that

accompanied the altered socio-cultural sensibilities of the Celtic Tiger years. In the end, ‘performance’ seems to be a key issue for O’Driscoll in this poem, as new self-images are formed that are firmly wedded to what he perceives as transient and insubstantial brands of inauthentic consumerist identities.

Outside the ‘Boom’ – Rita Ann Higgins

In his piece on poetry and the Celtic Tiger, cited above, O’Toole proposes the work and the career of the Galway-based poet, Rita Ann Higgins, as exemplary of the unwavering honesty and integrity required of art as the unseemly aftermath of the ‘boom’ unfolds. Her poetic landscapes have always been marginal to political and economic hegemony in Ireland, and she has consistently been, and remains, the poetic voice of, what O’Toole terms, ‘the territory of abandonment’ (2011). And while such ‘territories’ were rendered invisible during the ‘boom’ years, we are now confronted with much more substantial ‘territories of abandonment’ in the contemporary moment. In a series of poems across her most recent collection, *Ireland is Changing Mother*, Higgins maintains her bleakly humorous and unsentimental exposure of the neglected and destitute recesses of modern Ireland. As we have said, such thematics dominate Higgins’ oeuvre, but in this context we will draw her most recent work into on-going debates on poetic meditations on the excesses and the privations of the Celtic Tiger. Dealing with desire, frustration, often in acerbic and witty terms, Higgins’ poetry is suitably pitched to engage with the deflated fantasies of Celtic Tiger Ireland.

The penultimate poem in *Ireland is Changing Mother* reminds us that Ireland’s ‘boom’ years were not just marked by relative experiences of material well-being and deprivation, but that the crises of the Celtic Tiger and its legacies are equally issues of ecological and social justice. ‘The Brent Geese Chorus’ narrates, in poetic form, the long-running tensions between a consortium of companies headed by Royal Dutch Shell and the activist-residents [and external supporters] in the north-west Mayo region of Erris. With a

more protracted pre-history than the immediate Celtic Tiger period, the poem is consistent with many others in the collection that rail against the social injustices and the environmental wounds that the 'boom' occasioned. Indeed, in reading Higgins' work in the context of the Celtic Tiger, it is worth attending to her poetic aggregation of ecological and social justice. The battle, physical and legal, over access to and potential exploitation of the Corrib Gas Field is the most ecological contention in modern Irish history, and Higgins' work provides a poeticised 'brief history' of the corrupted procedures of those intent on securing a viable and profitable pipe-line. Her poem details a corporate campaign of 'soft' and then 'hard' persuasion by Shell, until the State is revealed as comfortably complicit in the coercion of its own resistant citizens. And again, such alienation of peripheral citizens from and by the Irish State is symptomatic, not just of Higgins' body of work, but, more recently, of how the fantasy-drama of the Celtic Tiger played out.

Parodying the Messianism of the most extreme advocates of progressive liberal capitalism, the poem's opening two stanza express the contradictory relations that obtain between profit and environmental equilibrium: 'On the seventh day God rested,/ [...] And on the eighth day along came Shell/ at first with wheels and then with wings/ and later dozers, a lot of dozers/ two-legged and four legged' (Higgins 2011, p. 68). Not only are there echoes of Orwell's polemic on corrupted ideals in *Animal Farm* in the final lines here, but in the next line, which opens stanza two, we can visualize Wellsian intruders on a vulnerable world: 'They took long strides across your fields/ measuring profit with every step./ Then they flew over, looking down, coveting./ A voice in wellingtons and a suit said,/ People of North Mayo you will be rich/ you will have jobs a plenty/ the gravy train is coming/ but we want your fields to park it in' (Higgins 2011, p. 68). Progress takes the form of scale in this stanza, and it outsizes as it processes towards prosperity. Equally, Higgins' ironizes a common metaphor, one that coalesces easily with fantasies of easy and inevitable enrichment. The 'fields'

repeated in the stanza localize the promises of the disembodied prophet of wealth and, also, localize the ecological crisis, which is central to the entire Corrib dispute. This ecological sensibility is developed still further as we move from the landscape to include non-human species: ‘When we looked down on you, which was often,/ we decided that you were the chosen ones/ We saw a few geese, a whale or two, an old dolphin on his last legs/ and all that unspoilt beauty/ waiting to be spoiled,/ and god knows we can spoil’ (p. 69). The different resonances of ‘spoil’ resound beyond this stanza, even as they work to good effect within it to accent the brute transgressions of the solicitous corporation.

Yet Higgins alerts us to the agency of the local community in cultivating an efficacious campaign of resistance, and this appears to be metaphorized as the durable, migratory Brent Geese: ‘And there as a chorus of Brent Geese/ singing all over Erris/ Shell to hell, to hell with Shell,/ and that chorus ran in and out of the bog/ and it was everywhere in North Mayo’ (Higgins 2011, p. 70). Higgins’ localization of the politics of ecological despoliation is suffused with ethical indignation. These activist-residents thoroughly engage with the corporate transvaluation of their physical environment, and, as we shall see below, parallel the more lateral indignation about the ecological, as well as financial, legacies of the country’s property ‘boom’.

Higgins addresses the property frenzy of the Celtic Tiger in ‘Where Have All Our Scullions Gone,’ another relatively lengthy piece on the iniquities and inequalities of Irish casino economics. In an opening stanza that succinctly encapsulates the vanity and cynicism of those years, Higgins writes: ‘It was hard hats and photo ops,/ yella bellies and Gucci dresses/ cutting ribbons on concrete schemes./ They were kissing babies/ and talking roads,/ they knew the bankers/ would give them loads’ (Higgins 2011, p. 54). Once more the poetic voice is distanced from the dynamic players of the central drama described in this stanza. In fact, the poem is book-ended by this stanza. But as the poem develops, we notice the poetic

speaker of this first, and final, stanza is muted in favour of the voice(s) of the 'boom-time' economy. Again such a manoeuvre allows Higgins, firstly, and quite literally, to demonstrate the relative voicelessness of her familiar poetic constituency. In addition, giving over so much of the poem to the voice(s) of speculation and of development is way for Higgins to ironize further these social groups, as their chattering exposes the venality of their attitudes and actions. We read: 'Why have one tunnel/ when you could have two? Or as any fool knows/ two expensive tunnels/ are better than none/ bend over, spend over/ let's have some fun' (Higgins 2011, p. 54). Higgins is direct and playful in her evocation of this voice within the poem, yet the gross hyperbole does not blunt the incisiveness of the critical wit operative here. And this effective tone continues, as the speaker asks: 'Why have one motorway/ when you could have four? Not in your constituency/ but in mine, that's fine./ Bend over, spend over/ and don't fucking whine' (Higgins 2011, p. 54). The most obvious formal linkage between the two preceding stanzas is the concluding refrain; while not identical, they do articulate equivalent sentiments of wanton greed and violent acquisition. And versions of this two-line refrain are repeated seven times across the poem, as Higgins' lyric response to economic misappropriation begins to resemble the technical codes of the 'protest' song.

In common with the poems of Alice Lyons below, 'Where Have All Our Scullions Gone' also addresses the workings of Ireland's commercial and residential property 'boom'. In short, terse lines the poet exposes the waste and the excess fed by, and that fed, the accelerated transvaluation of 'fields': 'Millions for half empty office/ millions for fields/ not a brick laid/ not a thistle cleared' (Higgins 2011, p. 55). These private sector follies are joined in Higgins' catalogue by ruinous mis-investments of the state during the same period: 'Let's buy Thornton Hall/ for our gangsters galore./ At thirty million, it's a steal/ not a dollar more./ The money was spent/ not a brick was laid,/ another twelve million/ the legals were paid' (Higgins 2011, p. 55). Thornton Hall was a government-purchased site intended to house an

upgraded prison to replace Mountjoy. The site itself cost thirty million euro, as Higgins details, with a further fifteen million run up in associated legal and administrative costs on a site that remains unused. The later stanzas of the poem concern themselves with emptiness, with lavish waste and with incompleteness, and it is as if the disposal of money is an end in itself, rather than an act designed to realise a definite return. And it is the inequality associated with such lavish waste that not only animates Higgins in ‘Where Have All Our Scullions Gone’, but exercises her moral indignation across several of her poems in this recent collection.

‘After the Boom’ – Alice Lyons

Working in both visual, site-specific formats and in textual forms, the artist Alice Lyons has produced a compact but compelling body of works on the imprints of Ireland’s property developments in rural Ireland. Lyons is a resident of Cootehall in county Leitrim, and has used that locale’s acute experience of deforming property construction as the basis for several recent works. Of particular significance in terms of the ‘poetics of ruination’, are two poems published in the periodical *Poetry* in 2011, ‘Developers’ and ‘The Boom and After the Boom’, both of which centre on the disfiguring presence of unfinished housing estates in the Cootehall area. Lyons is not native to this region, though she is a long-time resident, and her poems articulate, in often curt poetic expression, the palpable human absences of these stalled housing developments. In a way that is familiar to an erstwhile Cootehall denizen, John McGahern, these housing estates, local sites of ruination, bear more universal significance in relation to the nation’s priorities and self-regulatory procedures during the peak years of the Celtic Tiger.

‘Developers’ opens with an unembellished statement, ‘Greed got in the way,’ and while the emphatic certainty of the culpability of material appetites is clear, what precisely it impeded or obscured remains open to speculation – though more egalitarian material and

moral economies are surely parts of Lyons' alternative (Lyons 2011a, p. 218)). The harsh plosives that initiate the poem, then, operate in alliterative conjunction as they signal the tonal pitch of the verse. But this is only one half of the first line, which is divided into two sentences; the first of 5 syllables, the second with 6. The second sentence complements, in a highly suggestive manner, the similarly declarative opening clause with, 'We built a fake estate' (Lyons 2011a, p. 218). Lyons compacts a great deal into this assertion, including, authenticity, history and collective responsibility. From a technical standpoint the assonant 'a' of 'estate', completes an internal rhyme with the opening line, but it is the evocations of the word 'estate' itself that are most arresting in both historical and contemporary contexts. Of course, the term is part of the contemporary moniker, 'ghost estate,' which haunts and defaces these landscapes, but the notion, and memory, of a landed estate is equally provocative in the longer term histories of Ireland's scattered localities. Perhaps it was crude and simplistic to align the country's appetite for property and fetishization of home ownership – the highest in Europe – with Ireland's colonial history of territorial dispossession. Yet there is a sense that through such heightened levels of acquisitiveness, we have, in fact, caused our own dispossession yet again. In another way, Lyons' diction brings to mind the rampant culture of absenteeism and irresponsible rack-renting practiced across Ireland under the system of landlordism in the nineteenth-century. Without constructing untenable facile historical analogies, Lyons does, however, gesture to the differential continuity of landed irresponsibility in Irish history. But from a figurative perspective, the 'fake estate', part of our propertied Ponzi scheme in Ireland, serves as a metaphor and metonym for Lyons. It is metaphoric of the country's dire economic condition; while at the same time metonymic of the larger overdeveloped whole of the country's geography.

The notion of collectivity, hinted at in the collective construction of and desire for these 'fake estates', and the use of the personal pronoun, first person plural, is expanded in

more empathetic ways in the ensuing couplets. Lyons remains with the idioms of hauntedness and ruination in the lines: ‘doorbells, rows of them, glow in the night village/ a string of lit invitations no elbow has leaned into/ (both arms embracing messages). Unanswered/ the doors are rotting from the bottom up’ (Lyons 2011a, p. 218). Reminiscent of the ‘candle in the window’ attached to Irish emigrant history and popularised by the former President Mary Robinson, the fixtures and fittings are an index of absence on this estate; these houses have never been lived in and the development remains structurally incomplete. Deprived of ever having functioned in the ways they are designed to, these houses, with their fittings, stand adrift as reminders of lapsed possibilities, of bankrupted lives and unrealized relationships. At the same time, Lyons imagines interpersonal relations, she imagines the cultivation of community even as she regards the unfinished husks of these buildings that never became homes and never became part of a living human community. These houses and estates can be read, as Lyons suggests in her opening line here, in relation to the personal motivations that once energized their unfettered construction. Reflections of these Celtic Tiger ‘ruins’ and ‘artefacts’ are not just suggestive of contemporary national penury, but must also be considered as revelatory of the compulsions and motivations so widespread in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger years. Public perceptions of ‘ghost estates’ across many localities in Ireland are conditioned by the absences that suffuse these locations. The sole remains of human presence are scattered detritus, once more suggestive of post-apocalyptic abandonment, if on a localized Irish scale in this case. In a pair of couplets Lyons later, and further, ironizes the country’s destructive obsession with property and construction in a series of harsh consonantal clauses.

The basic materials on which the country’s financial future was mortgaged, as well as that of tens of thousands of its citizens, are laid bare as little more than waste now by Lyons: ‘a petered-out plot of Tayto/ tumbleweeds, bin bags, rebar, roof slates, offcuts,/ guttering,

drain grilles, doodads, infill, gravel! A not-as-yet nice establishment, possessing potential'(Lyons 2011a, 218). Fashioning both alliteration and rhyme out of this inventory of waste, Lyons proceeds, almost breathlessly, beyond the exclamation mark to another identification of incompleteness and absence. From these lines, we note a crucial difference between traditional historical ruins and the 'ruins' of 'ghost estates': the absences and the fractures of these latter-day Irish ruins are not caused by the gradual mouldering of the buildings, but by the materials mentioned here were never adhered to or built into these houses in the first instance. Thus, contemporary 'ruination' is less about incremental decline and, with it, the assumption of 'damaged grandeur', but is linked with the legacies and the limits of unregulated material desire.

Lyons's 'The Boom and After the Boom' also deals with the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger building frenzy, but is equally concerned with the ecological imprints of the designer construction industry and with the migration patterns into Ireland occasioned by its era of economic solvency. Indeed, Lyons gestures to the notions of temporality and legacy in her title, which, tellingly, refers to 'After the Boom', rather than the more frequently employed and sharp-edged 'Bust' (Lyons 2011b, p. 222). The poem consists of four eight-line stanzas, the first three centre on the period during which luxurious riverside properties were built along the banks of the river Shannon. According to Lyons there is a deliberate cinematic form to 'The Boom and After the Boom' (Lyons 2011c, p. 224), but just as prominent as the visual structuration of the stanzas is Lyons' attentiveness to auralities across the first three stanzas. While the visual set-pieces provided by Lyons allow us to witness the insistent progression of construction along the course of the river Shannon, the aural register is just as effective in establishing a form of ecocritical response to the building culture of the Celtic Tiger. The poem opens with an anonymous, even generic, boat cruising the river – a further index of the commercialization of the Irish landscape to initiate this poetic critique of Celtic Tiger Ireland:

‘The Shannon when it washes/ the shoreline in the wake/ of a cruiser susurruses/ exactly like the Polish/ language you hear in LIDL/ on Friday evenings, 7pm/ payday. That’s what/ Gerry says’ (Lyons 2011b, p. 222). Though we initially assume that the poeticization of the river is performed by the ‘poetic voice’ there is, at least, some input from a friend or acquaintance in the fashioning of the central simile. Multiplicity of voice and sound effect, then, are condensed into this brief stanza by Lyons, as the whisperings of the river, caused by the moving presence of the river cruiser, are identified with the mobile populations of migrant workers one encounters in multinational supermarkets. The sibilance evident in the first half of the stanza is part of Lyons’ effort to highlight the interactions of human and non-human ecology during the Celtic Tiger property ‘boom’. Yet the choice of the word ‘wake,’ to describe the process and the departure of the human presence along the river – an intrusive presence in this scene – is not suggestive of an easy and enduring accommodation between the human and non-human in this location and on these terms. In a similar way to this opening stanza, the subsequent two stanzas foreground the aural presences of the human construction of property along this riverside location. Likewise, there is an attempt on Lyons’ part to ease the potential friction between an invasive human presence and the natural environment.

This is evident in the opening lines of stanza two: ‘The river surface offers/ space to the song;’ yet what kind of lyricism fills out this space? Nothing but the ‘hammer taps of Latvians/ and Poles nailing planks of a deck. The place/ between water and sky/ holding sound’ (Lyons 2011b, p. 222). Rather than carrying the sound effects of non-human ecology, the river side resonates with the timbres of construction. While the sibilance of the opening half of the first stanza edges towards some form of conciliation between surroundings and human presence, the sibilance apparent in the opening two lines of the second stanza is abruptly drowned out by the notes of the ‘hammer taps’ and the nailing of planks to decks. In

this technical manner we see how the tone of the poetic voice changes over the body of the poem, becoming more and more cynical about the human incursions into this resonant ‘amphitheater’ (Lyons 2011b, p. 222). The insistent hammering continues into the third stanza as we progress further away from the early sibilant identification of the river with the cadences of language. Significantly, in the third stanza the poetic voice alters tense, and the products of the ‘tapping’ labours of Poles, Latvians and Lithuanians ‘*will* be [...] nice features/ of that riverside property [my emphasis]’ (Lyons 2011b, p. 222). The migrant labourers are employed to realise, in physical constructed forms, the aspirations of the Irish nouveau-riche. Equally, the landscape, which reverberates with the mechanical processes of construction, must be ‘nailed’ and ‘decked’, fixed in place and pruned. And, again, this is brought out by the replacement of the softer sonics of the earlier parts of the poem with the emphatic and harsher consonantal sounds of the building process.

In the concluding stanza that we return to a scene of aftermath, and just as we witnessed in ‘Developers’, it is an aftermath of lives that were never actually lived at this location. Rather than presenting another ‘aural’ voice in this stanza, Lyons inserts a visual/verbal ‘sign’ in a register familiar across most of the Irish landscape in recent times. Presented in ‘small caps’, in typography that distinguishes it from the body of the poem, we read, ‘42 LUXURY BUNGALOWS ONLY TWO/ REMAINING’ (Lyons 2011b, p. 223). As the poem progresses from past to present, this bold ‘sign’ of the times is rendered redundant in the contemporary. At the same time as the houses it advertises stand incomplete and/or unoccupied, ‘Winter gales have made swift work/ of the billboard’ (Lyons 2011b, p. 223). There may have been a similed convergence of human and non-human in the opening stanza, but by the close the relationship is no longer so benign. In a concluding spectacle that combines pathos and bathos, Lyons describes the legacies of Ireland’s construction ‘boom’ in terms of waste and failure: ‘Crumpled up/ on the roadside now/ two-by-four legs akimbo - / a

circus-horse curtsy/ or steeplechase mishap' (Lyons 2011b, p. 223). This abject symbol of Ireland's economic decline and fall reprises the sibilance of the poem's outset, as Lyons formally conjoins beginning and ending, without suggesting such an accommodation in Ireland's ecological relationships. Lyons' poems, then, confront localized but resonant examples of property frenzy in Ireland, focusing on one facet, perhaps the most debilitating, of the financial excesses of the Celtic Tiger years in Ireland.

Conclusion

In the 'Introduction' to their 2009 volume, *Transforming Ireland: Challenges, Critiques and Resources*, Debbie Ging, Michael Cronin and Peadar Kirby, highlight the linguistic contortions that were, and are, characteristic of public political debate in Ireland during, and since, the Celtic Tiger. They identify 'the restricted vocabulary of the business studies vulgate [which] is applied indiscriminately to health, education, the arts, policing [...]' (Ging, Cronin and Kirby 2009, p. 4), as inimical to the cultivation of radical and progressive critical debate in Ireland. Yet, in the same piece, they retain a utopian faith in the transience of such hollowed-out idioms, arguing that 'it is important to bear in mind that languages have a past and future as well as a present. In other words, the present infestation of public language with the default rhetoric of the market is, in historical terms, relatively recent' (Ging, Cronin and Kirby 2009, p. 5). The poets under consideration here have each, differentially, but often in parallel ways, attended to these transient languages of consumption and moral corruption. Both critics and artists are keenly attuned to the semiotics of excess that structured public and private discourse in Ireland during the country's economic boom times. But what is just as true is that, as Higgins displays, much of this phoney discourse of acquisition and plenty was utterly alien to scores of lives and communities across Ireland. If public language has been 'infested,' as Ging, Cronin and Kirby attest, then these poetic artists avail of the creative contingency of language to expose and to critique further the legacies and the ruins of this

recent, passing, infestation. In another way, and if we return to Dewey's comments in our epigraph, these poets are representative of a critical mindset that can, potentially, speak out for those who have been victims of the Celtic Tiger's 'indirect consequences.'

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