

Remembering Michael Hartnett: A Language Seldom Spoken, edited by John McDonagh and Stephen Newman. Dublin: Four Courts Press, pages 146-159

*‘Both more than a language and no more of a language’: Michael
Hartnett and the Politics of Translation.*

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Abstract

This essay looks at the politics of translation through a specific focus on the poetry, in Irish and in English, of Michael Hartnett. It suggests a politics of translation that is emancipatory and creative, and deconstructs traditional hierarchies of source and target languages

On the rear cover of *Translations – A Selection*, the point is made that ‘for most of his life Michael Hartnett forded the languages and cultures of places and ages’. In this volume, complimenting Hartnett’s already published translations of the Irish poets Daibhi Ó Bruadair, Pádraig Haicéad, Aodhghán Ó Rathaille and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, there are translations from Old, Middle and Modern Irish, German, Chinese, Latin, Latvian and Spanish. The authors translated include Lao-tzu, Sikong Tu, Catullus, Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, Brian Mac Giolla Phádraig, Daibhí Ó

Bruadair, Aodhagán Ó Rathaille, Seán Ó Murchú Ráithíneach, Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, Heinrich Heine, Federico García Lorca, Horace, Imants Zeidonis, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Hartnett himself. This cosmopolitan list makes clear the value that Hartnett placed on translation of all sorts. His self-deprecating remark, in the introduction to *Haicéad* on the subject of translation provide an interesting contrast between his views of translation and what might be deemed the prevailing view:

I have tried to show the variety of Haicéad's metres and the variety of his themes. I have not, of course, caught the beauty of his Irish. Some of the close-lipped Irish-speaking writers of today do not approve of translations from the language: it is as if they do not wish to share poets they do not read themselves. A translation is, at best, an illuminating footnote to the original; and I hope that readers of this book will not be lead away from, but towards the real Haicéad.¹

If we return to the diverse list of authors in his *Translations* book,² and to his other published translations, it would seem that Hartnett spend an inordinate amount of time creating 'illuminating footnotes' to other writers. I would suggest that this term is, in effect, a rhetorical and suasive device on the part of Hartnett, in order to appease the 'close-lipped' cabal who would decry his work immediately. By proffering the olive branch of deferring to the primacy of the original, Hartnett was deliberately undervaluing the epistemological status of his translations. I further suggest that on closer reading, this quotation will be found to deconstruct what it seems to say, and functions instead, to underline the emancipatory potential of Hartnett's politics of translation.

Given his tremendous output, it becomes clear that there is more at stake for Hartnett in terms of the value of translation within his *oeuvre* than he is indicating, and in this chapter, I will demonstrate the powerful use to which he puts translation as he attempts to create a cosmopolitan worldview within which the Irish language and literature can take its place. Indeed, one could extrapolate from this

literary endeavour, a politics of translation wherein the flow from language to language is emblematic of a new order of literary politics with particular reference to the place of Irish poetry, whether that poetry be written in Irish or English.

In this context, it is interesting to look at the work of Jacques Derrida on the issue of language and translation. Writing in *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Derrida makes what seems to be a statement that is the total opposite of Hartnett's initial quotation:

– We only ever speak one language...

(yes, but)

– We never speak only one language.³

In this seemingly gnomic assertion, Derrida is bringing to bare his ideas on the need to interrogate notions of identity, monolingualism, fundamentalism, and ownership of language and culture. To see language as static organisms or as the possessors of a chosen few is to de-ontologize what languages are – modes of communication between self and other, structures that preceded us, into which we are inserted, and which will continue long after we are gone. Crucially, these structures are constantly changing, and given the increasingly globalized nature of the world, languages are changing ever more quickly.

Later in the same essay, Derrida makes the point that 'every culture institutes itself through the unilateral imposition of some politics of language. Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations'.⁴ This is precisely what Hartnett was referring to in terms of his original – translation binarism, and the adjective 'thin-lipped' emblematised this imposition of a politics of language. Here, Irish was the pure original, and the best one could hope

for from a translation would be that it would add some small qualia of understanding. More importantly, however, Hartnett was deliberately underplaying the status of the translation at an iconic level – the original Irish poem would appear on a page, while the translation was symbolised as a footnote, an explicatory device, a supplement to the original, which in no way could be seen as threatening that original. The iconicity of original/inferior copy is further foregrounded by the fact that footnotes are usually printed in a smaller font, with the lines being single, as opposed to double, spaced.

At the core of the politics of translation, then are the twin issues of linguistic ownership (this is our language and we don't want it diluted or adulterated into another language) and that of purity (only our language can convey the purity of our identity, our culture, our ideology). Here again, Derrida makes a telling point.

But for this very reason, the monolingualism of the other means another thing, which will be revealed little by little: that in any case we speak only one language – and, that we do not *own* it. We only ever speak one language – and, since it returns to the other, it exists asymmetrically, always for *the other*, from the other, kept by the other. Coming from the other, remaining with the other, and returning to the other.⁵

It would seem that here, too, Derrida is at odds with Hartnett, and yet, if we look closely at Hartnett's quote, we will find that all is not as it seems. He makes the point, we remember, that: '[s]ome of the close-lipped Irish-speaking writers of today do not approve of translations from the language: it is as if they do not wish to share poets they do not read themselves'.⁶ The interesting words here are 'do not read themselves'. At an initial reading, it would seem that these writers want to hoard the pearls of their own tradition and not share them or dilute their linguistic purity. However, in actuality, Hartnett is saying that these writers 'do not read' the works in the original. Not to read poems is to

allow them, and their tradition to die, and in a deconstructive reversal, Hartnett is claiming that to leave these works unread is to condemn the tradition to silence – and the imagery of ‘close-lipped’ underlines this. To speak through closed lips is a contradiction in terms; in fact these so-called purists are condemning their supposedly-loved tradition to silence and ultimate death – as it is only through communication that these poems can live. Ironically, however, as Derrida has noted in the previous quotation, to speak is to open up language to the other, and to give up any sense of mastery. It is also to give up any binary opposition between a hegemonic original and a supplementary translation.

Peggy Kamuf, in her introductory notes to a selected passage from Derrida’s ‘Des Tours de Babel’,⁷ makes the following interesting comments with regard to deconstructive perspectives on translation theory.

translation has always implied a secondary operation coming after the original. The deconstruction of this concept displaces that order with the almost unthinkable notion (almost unthinkable because it points to the very limits of thinking) of an originary translation before the possibility of any distinction between original and translation. But deconstruction does not only enjoin us to think translation differently, beyond the confines of its strict sense, that is, translation of thought from one language to another. It also displays the movement of the *trans* – translation, transference, transport, transformation – as the very movement of thought between points of origin and arrival that are always being deferred, differed one by the other.⁸

I would argue that this is precisely what Michael Hartnett is attempting in his own translations, an aim far more subversive of the close-lipped orthodoxy than he would overtly suggest. To illustrate this, I would like to look at some examples from his collection *A Necklace of Wrens*.

This collection is central to Hartnett's project as it is here, in the title poem, that he describes a vatic enculturation into the art and craft of poetry. He describes in this poem how as a young boy, he found a nest of wrens whose 'chirping young':

D'éirigh siad – is thuirling	Rose and re-ighted
Arís ar m'ucht	Around my neck
Ormsa bhí muinle clúimh	Made in the wet meadow
Sa mhóinear fliuch.	A feather necklet. ⁹

The climactic lines of the poem tell us that 'this was when the craft came / which demands respect'.¹⁰ So the primacy of this collection to what he saw as his poetic vocation is clear, and in this regard, the issue of translation looms large and it is an issue which strikes the reader graphematically on opening the book.

As is clear from the above quotation, in this collection, the Irish text and the translation appear opposite each other across two pages. In each case, the adequation between the two languages is set out on a line by line basis. Given that in our graphematic culture, we read from left to right, it would seem that this process enacts the primacy of Hartnett's initial quotation, privileging the original over the translation. So, as we read, for example, in 'The Hare':

Maith dom é, a chailín.	Forgive me, girl.
Ní raibh aon scian agam	I had no knife
Chun do chlann a shábháil	To cut your children free
Maith dom é.	Forgive me. ¹¹

The direct translation of the Irish third line is ‘to save your family’ [*my translation*], while the English version chooses ‘to cut your children free’. Given the line-by-line accuracy of Hartnett’s translations, this is an imaginative and linguistic choice, as opposed to any kind of infelicity. The other three lines of this stanza translate word for word, so Hartnett, far from creating an illuminating footnote, is in actuality, creating a different meaning across the page, and across linguistic systems. Where the ‘original’ meaning lies is very much a moot point, and here, Hartnett comes very close to Derrida’s ideas on the polysemic power of translation.

Is this not a *locus classicus* of the idea of translation as a powerful force for deconstructing possessive imperatives of ideology? Indeed, Derrida has made deconstruction and translation synonymous, deconstruction, he says, consists:

only of transference, and of a thinking through of transference, in all the senses that this word acquires in more than one language, and first of all that of the transference between languages. If I had to risk a single definition of deconstruction, one as brief, elliptical and economical as a password, I would say simply and without overstatement: *plus d’une langue* – both more than a language and no more of a language.¹²

Strictu sensu, this new level of meaning is only available to a reader who has some knowledge of the Irish language to begin with, as only then will the change in the line become clear. Thus, instead of just going from original to translation in a left to right motion across the page, the reader is now liberated. It is possible to flick back and forth across the page from the Irish language original to the English translation, with meaning residing in the process of transference. Paul de Man speaks of this process in the following terms, seeing translation as putting:

the original in motion, to de-canonize the original, giving it a movement which is a movement of disintegration, of fragmentation. This movement of the original is a

wandering, an *errance*, a kind of permanent exile if you wish, but it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland, nothing from which one has been exiled.¹³

In other words, meaning exists in the act of reading and writing, it is an intersubjective construct made by the speaking self and the listening other, who in turn interprets the meaning in polysemic ways.

This process of altered meanings can also be found in ‘Strained Mind’, where increasingly fractured images from a mind under strain are held together by the almost mantra-like repetition, in each alternate line of ‘cogar sa chúinne, cogar sa chúinne’,¹⁴ which is directly translated across the page as ‘talk in the corner, talk in the corner’.¹⁵ This process is repeated across seventeen lines, but in the eighteenth repetition, in the final line of the poem, there is a significant change:

cogar sa chúinne, cogar sa chúinne. Talk in the corner talk talk.¹⁶

The Irish version of the poem ends as it begun, with this linguistic mantra repeated *ad infinitum*: ‘talk in the corner, talk in the corner’ [*my translation*]; however in the English translation, the punctuating comma is removed, and thereby the symmetry of signifier and signified in the Irish version is altered. In this version, the mantra was inescapable; there is no way out of what has become a closed poetic system. In the English version, however, the final line appears to offer a way out, either to some form of further dialogue which allows for movement out of that corner of the paranoid consciousness, or else in terms of a further dialogue which can break out of the binary patterning which structures the poem. In other words, in the English version, there is a possibility of movement, either positive or negative, from this closed system, and as such, it makes the translation almost a different poem, and far from merely a footnote. The translation of the final ‘corner’ into ‘talk’ alters noun to verb,

with resultant possibilities. Meaning exists in the movement between versions, languages and poems; for Hartnett, the meaning is clearly liminal and hybrid.

The same structure is to be found in ‘Poem for Niall, 7’ where once again, the movement of the translation allows for different levels of meaning. In this poem, Hartnett is offering advice to his son, looking at different aspects of the boy’s future life, and exhorting him to ‘be happy but be tough’.¹⁷ However, again, in the final line, we see the translation and hybridity of meaning.

Beidh mé ann is tú i d’fhear óg –	I will be there as you grow older –
Ólfad pórtar leatsa fós	And some day I’ll buy you porter. ¹⁸

The literal translation of the Irish lines is as follows: ‘I will be there when you are a young man / I will drink porter with you yet’ [*my translation*]; the actual translation stresses the unconscious imperative towards the retention of some form of parental power in terms of the father actually paying for the drink. Here there is a deconstruction of what on the surface is ritual of adult male-bonding; at another intra-linguistic level, the father is still in the power position, at least in his own mind. At some level, Niall will be fixed in his mind at the age of seven.

Hartnett’s use of translation, as we have seen, stresses the importance of the genre, especially in an Irish context. Here, translation is defined very broadly, and one is reminded of the definition of translation offered by Terry Eagleton, which also espouses *différance*, and which sees all texts as being in the process of an ongoing process of translation:

Every text is a set of determinate transformations of other, preceding and surrounding texts of which it may not even be consciously aware; it is within, against and across these

other texts that the poem emerges into being. And these other texts are, in their turn, 'tissues' of such pre-existent textual elements, which can never be unravelled back to some primordial moment of 'origin'.¹⁹

I think that Hartnett's specific use of translations in the poems discussed underlines the importance of translation as a poetic device. Ethically, he espouses a pluralist and open dialogue with the other, and linguistically, he is clearly of the view that language is open, organic and operates most fully when in dialogue with itself, and with other languages.

At a structural level, as well as a thematic one, this is true of his well-known text *Inchicore Haiku*. Here the classic Japanese verse form of Haiku, a minimalist structure in which the poet has seventeen syllables or fewer in which to express an experience, is transposed to the Dublin area of Inchicore, where Hartnett lived for a number of years. This form is quite specific, usually each poem has three lines, with a template of 5-7-5 syllable structure. Ideally, each poem should be read aloud in one breath, there is an avoidance of rhyme, there is some form of juxtaposition, with two elements or lines indirectly related to the third line, a technique which provides a metaphorical adequation in the poem. What is achieved in this translation-driven experiment are 87 poems, each depicting various snatches of experience from Hartnett's interaction with Inchicore. Displaced from his native West Limerick, he is able to achieve that aesthetic distance that is one of the benefits of translation, on his own life and experience, and one of the most quoted of these Haiku foregrounds, yet again, the interfusion of Irish and English:

My English dam bursts
And out stroll all my bastards
Irish shakes its head.²⁰

The notion of hybridity in language is signified in the possessive use of ‘my bastards’ and the almost conflictual role of Irish and English in his *mentalité* is clear in this stanza. This is a gap that can only be bridged by translation. It is this ongoing notion of translation that has marked the themes found in his work, and it is with a ringing poetic assertion about the very nature of this interaction that this chapter will close.

As a final example, I would like to look at what is for many Hartnett’s exemplary text, ‘A Farewell to English’. This poem has become something of a cultural touchstone. Published in 1975, it is an elegy for the death of the Irish language and culture in a world full of ‘vacuumcleaner minds’.²¹ Hartnett sets out his stall and tells us that he will no longer write in English, but will henceforth write in Irish. Like his already cited comment on translation, the end of this poem would seem to brook no interpretation:

I have made my choice and leave with little weeping
I have come with meagre voice
To court the language of my people.²²

However, a hermeneutic examination of the context of this resonant phrase will uncover a level of nuance and complexity that parallels our earlier examination of those views on translation. The English that he examines in the poem is, we might expect, the narrow discourse of colonial mastery ‘the gravel of Anglo-Saxon’.²³ The poem encompasses both the anger of the colonised subject: ‘what was I doing with these foreign words?’, and the elegiac sense of loss of his native language, a loss that is enunciated in the anaphoric ‘*mánla, séimh, dubhfholtach, álainn, caoin*’.²⁴ However, there is also a sharp sense of irony, as, through the extended metaphor of cooking, he comments on the fusion and intersection of the two languages. Section 3 is composed of two sentences, both creative of this

metaphor of cooking. In the first, ‘Chef Yeats’ is praised for his ability to ‘raise mere stew to a glorious height’, because he was able to blend the ingredients into a coherent mixture which was ‘carefully stirred in to get the flavour right’.²⁵ This is in stark contrast to ‘[o]ur commis-chefs’ who merely ‘add to a simple Anglo-Saxon stock’, and Hartnett goes on to list the stilted ingredients of ‘Cuchulainn’s marrow bones’; a ‘dash of Ó Rathaille’ and a ‘glass of university hic-haec-hoc’ which culminate in ‘the celebrated Anglo-Irish stew’.²⁶

The essential difference here is that fluidity of linguistic interaction which Hartnett saw as possible though translation is not operative here. Instead, we see a stilted ‘stew’ where there is no interaction or transformation across any of the three languages: Irish, English or Latin. The necessary space of writing, that gap with which we have found Hartnett to be so interested, is not to be found in the type of writing he satirizes here. For Hartnett, as for Homi Bhabha, translation is a ‘place of hybridity’ where the final source of meaning is ‘*neither the one nor the other*’ [*italics original*].²⁷ The ongoing play of multilinguistic signifiers in the poem is paradigmatic of this play of *différance*, which ensures, as de Man observes that ‘meaning is always displaced with regard to the meaning it ideally intended – that meaning is never reached’.²⁸ The use of ‘displaced’ is pertinent here. In translation, the ‘meaning’ passes from language to language, there is little or no referential dimension brought into play, and so, the posited linguistic repossession of the place seemingly attempted by the quasi-translations at the beginning of each poem, is in fact dismembered and disarticulated by the processes of language itself. Indeed, translation, as set out in *A Necklace of Wrens*, would seem to be endemic to Hartnett’s view of poetry, as he puts it ‘their talons left on me / scars not healed yet’.²⁹

Hence ‘A Farewell to English’ can be read simplistically as a saying goodbye to writing or publishing in the English language. However, in the light of the politics of translation that we have been

exploring in this article, this poem can also be read as a seminal part of this project, as he invokes a blessing on a new linguistic journey which will usher in a new version of English, a version underwritten by the types of translation which have been the subject of this chapter. This reading of the title is validated by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines the term as ‘an expression of good wishes at the parting of friends, originally addressed to the one setting forth’. Here the good wishes are plain in the ‘English’ that Hartnett wrote in the wake of this poem – an English that has been shot through at all levels, with the discourses of its linguistic others. Indeed, the metaphor of ‘setting forth’ is continued in the root meaning of ‘translate’ itself. This is a combination of ‘trans’ and ‘ferre’ meaning ‘to carry across’, and this sense of movement and transfer is strong in section 5, where he cites the authors whom he found ‘in English nets’, and to whom he must now say farewell:

My Lorca holding out his arms
To love the beauty of his bullets
Pasternack who outlived Stalin
And died because of lesser beasts.³⁰

This pan-European tradition of literature is a tradition in which Hartnett feels at home. Writing in the introduction to his book of translations of the work of Dáibhi O’Bruadair, Hartnett tells of how he invented his own picture of O’Bruadair³¹ and this is a resonant image of his attitude to the English language, Irish culture and language and his own view of his role as a poet. In a way, Hartnett’s English is itself a translation, a series of movements between diverse influences, which enact Derrida’s idea of the movement of the *trans* – translation, transference, transport, transformation – as the very movement of thought between points of origin and arrival that are always being deferred, differed one by the other. In essence, this is Hartnett’s politics of translation; the English to which he wishes well is ‘both more than a language and no more of a language’.

Endnotes:

- 1 Hartnett, Michael, *Haicéad*, Oldcastle, Meath (1993), p. 13.
- 2 Hartnett, Michael, *Translations: A Selection*, edited by Peter Fallon Oldcastle, Meath (2003) passim.
- 3 Derrida, Jacques, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, translated by Patrick Mensah California (1996), p. 10.
- 4 *Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 39.
- 5 *Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 40.
- 6 *Haicéad*, p. 12.
- 7 Kamuf, Peggy (ed) *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. Hemel Hempsted (1991), pp. 241-242.
- 8 *A Derrida Reader*, p. 242.
- 9 Hartnett, Michael, *A Necklace of Wrens: Selected Poems in Irish with English Translations by the Author*, Oldcastle, Meath (1987), pp. 18-19.
- 10 *Necklace of Wrens*, p.19
- 11 *Necklace of Wrens*, p.11.
- 12 Derrida, Jacques, *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*, translated by Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava. Revised edition; first published 1986. New York (1989), pp. 14-15.
- 13 de Man, Paul, *The Resistance to Theory*, Theory and History of Literature, Volume 33. Minneapolis, (1986), p. 92.
- 14 *Necklace of Wrens*, p. 38.
- 15 *Necklace of Wrens*, p.39.
- 16 *Necklace of Wrens*, pp. 38-39.
- 17 *Necklace of Wrens*, p. 45.
- 18 *Necklace of Wrens*, pp. 44-45.
- 19 Eagleton, Terry, 'Translation and Transformation', *Stand*, XIX (3) 1977, 72-77, page 74.
- 20 Hartnett, Michael, *Inchicore Haiku*. First published 1985 Raven Arts Books. Dublin (1999), p. 9.
- 21 Hartnett, Michael, *A Farewell to English* (First published 1975). Oldcastle, Meath: Gallery Press, 1978, page 84.
- 22 *Farewell to English*, page 84.
- 23 *Farewell to English*, page 78.
- 24 *Farewell to English*, page 78.
- 25 *Farewell to English*, page 80.
- 26 *Farewell to English*, page 80.
- 27 Bhabha, Homi K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, page 25.
- 28 *Resistance to Theory*, page 91.
- 29 *Necklace of Wrens*, page 19.
- 30 *Farewell to English*, page 82.
- 31 Hartnett, Michael (1985) *Ó Bruadair: Selected poems of Dáibhí Ó Bruadair* translated and introduced by Michael Hartnett. Oldcastle, Meath: Gallery Press (1985), p. 9.

