

**"OUT-AND-OUT WEARY OF EXCAVATING IN THE PAST":
THE NEW IRELANDS OF CATHAL Ó SEARCAIGH AND DENNIS
O'DRISCOLL**

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In the wider world and far beyond Europe, the predominant and memorable images of Ireland have often been those selectively inscribed in literature by giants of Irish poetry and prose. William Butler Yeats and James Joyce have been responsible for a diverse collection of portraits, from the nature scenes of "The Wild Swans at Coole" and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" to the early twentieth-century economic and social stasis, political struggles, and religious preoccupations of Joyce's *Dubliners*. For a long period, Celtic Revival and Celtic Twilight atmospheres continued to overhang and to colour the portrait of Ireland, despite the political actuality of national uprising and emergent republic that featured in "Sixteen Dead Men" and "Parnell's Funeral." The later poetic landscapes of Austin Clarke and Patrick Kavanagh contributed different snapshots of a struggling people, whether or not on a "stony gray soil," and, in due course, the excavation of place and memory was once again undertaken, this time in multidimensional constructs by Seamus Heaney. However, a fresh millennium and current prosperity deserve to be reflected by a more recent generation rather than by those born before World War II, and there is no shortage of Irish poets who provide diverse glimpses of new developments in Irish life and land. This essay will suggest that the perspectives of two younger, but established poets, Dennis O'Driscoll and Cathal Ó Searcaigh, provide some surprise vistas and yield up patterns of recollection that are true to urban and rural experiences of the twenty-first century in Ireland while yet connecting with the mythical and historical pasts.

In documenting a changing society, the choice of particular poetic sources must always owe much to personal preference, but, in this case, the selection is also based on the wide panoramic view afforded by their combined insights: from disparate locations, with divergent preoccupations, attitudes and subject matter, and writing in two different languages, Ó Searcaigh and O'Driscoll must inevitably provide a range of widely-assorted sketches of contemporary Ireland. Dennis O'Driscoll is an urban-based, career civil servant and lawyer, a perspicacious reviewer and critic; he is a poet after hours, and his poetry, in the English language, bears witness to our electronic and telecommunications age. Cathal Ó Searcaigh is a full-time poet who has returned to live in his birthplace in rural Donegal; widely travelled and open to new horizons, he spends months of the year in Nepal. Although for a brief period Ó Searcaigh wrote poetry in English, he now writes mainly in Irish, his first language. If the linguistic equilibrium is not exactly mirrored in the population at large, it is merited by the numbers and vibrancy of Irish-language poets; the urban/rural balance is actually

reflected in the latest census figures that show 40% of the population still lives in rural Ireland, and many more again are country-born and maintain strong links with their place of birth.

"Out and out weary of excavating in the past" is a direct translation of lines in the poem "Miontragóid Chathrach" by Cathal O Searcaigh,¹ and his purposeful path away from digging might be read, in part, as a determined avoidance of the Heaney heritage. Dennis O'Driscoll does not "dig" in the past either, although he is often identified as an elegiac poet, preoccupied with death and the dead and remembrance – and also, apparently somewhat incongruously, as an office poet. On occasion, those two facets, of yesterday and today, mesh and overlap. O'Driscoll has admitted to being intrigued and repelled by the language of commerce; he is determined not to represent it in a totally hostile and satiric way, and yet he clearly feels impelled to present the fears and failings of those who people that world. That acknowledgement of complexity underlies his dispassionate dissections; in mounting the scrutinised specimens for the reader, the assemblage is given its own distinctive tone or discrete slant, its wide or narrow focus. Personal experience is distilled rather than bulk-dispensed and the range of observations runs from birth to death. Lines from his poem "Someone" offer typically unsettling juxtapositions of life and mortality: "someone is dressing up for death today, a change of skirt or tie / eating a final feast of buttered sliced pan, tea," "someone today is leaving home on business / saluting, terminally, the neighbours who will join in the cortege," and "someone's coffin is being sanded, laminated, shined / who feels this morning quite as well as ever."² A certain distinctive flavour of O'Driscoll's poetry can be discerned in those lines: its matter-of-fact, yet faintly ominous approach; its anonymous location; its reverse gear away from an older-style lyric poetry; its blending of the perennial with the ephemeral and modern; the slight distance of its speculation; its provision of the moment's markers for latter-day sociologists and historians in the mention of sliced pan, laminated coffin, and business trip. On the page, the absence of capitals and punctuation emphasises the arbitrary nature of time allocation and demarcation.

Echoes of the same inevitable mortal fate sound in "Kist," but this time weighed by a sense of personal loss:

Preparing me for your
 death, strands of silver,
 coffin-handle bright,
 thread your oak-brown hair.
 And, as I pace behind the hearse,
 my own face in its glass

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- 1 "Miontragóid Chathrach" was first published in the collection of the same name in 1975; a later version of the poem was published as "Déagóir ag drifteáil" (*trans.* 'Teenager Drifting') in *Out in the Open* (152-159).
 - 2 This poem originally appeared in O'Driscoll's 1982 collection *Kist*. It is also the poem chosen by him to open his 2004 collection, *New and Selected Poems*.

takes on the wrinkled grain
of coffin wood. (*New and Selected* 14)³

Those lines sing, they hint, they warn and toll, and they advance with the pace of a dead march. O'Driscoll, still in his twenties when he wrote that poem, was perhaps supersensitive to the issues of death and bereavement because of the early deaths of his parents; perhaps, too, it was the era of nuclear holocaust fiction, of the early warnings by Greens of the planet's destruction. But illness and loss continue to feature in O'Driscoll's collections and they emerge in "Residuary Estates (IV)" with a blend of news bulletin tone, sad portent, and chilling banality:

the calm between the storms
is the silence in which
the dead are not named
until relatives have been informed (*New and Selected* 63-64)⁴

Here again, the lower-case letters and the absence of punctuation evince an unpretentious and minimalist floating of an instant and a thought, with a certain warning-bell rhythm, and it is left suspended on the page – in a way mirroring the temporal hiatus of that endangered calm.

Death reappears repeatedly, rather bleakly and terrifyingly so in "Towards a Cesare Pavese Title": "Death will come and it will wear your eyes"; "You are up to your eyes in death. / Death takes after you, eyes the image of yours," and "Death makes eye contact at last. / Death will come and it will steal your looks" (*New and Selected* 156).⁵ Its presentation in "Saturday Night Fever" is saturated in a rather Beckettian black humour:

Playing tonight at the X-Ray-Ted Club,
The Chemotherapies, drugged to the gills,
the lead singer's pate modishly bald.
And who will your partner be?
Alzheimer, the absent-minded type,
with the retro gear, everything a perfect mismatch?
Huntington, grooving his hippy-hippy-shake routine?
Thrombosis, the silly clot, trying to pull a stroke?
Angina, who can be such a pain, and yet is all heart? (*Exemplary Damages* 19)

The distance, coolness and penetrating objectivity of O'Driscoll's diagnostic skill are qualities clearly seen in his more recent collections such as *The Bottom Line* (1994), *Quality Time* (1997), *Weather Permitting* (1999), *Exemplary Damages* (2002), and "Foreseeable Futures" (2004, in *New and Selected*). Not alone are those volume titles brief and pithy, but the phraseology recognisably pertains to the lived experiences of the Irish in the past decade or so. Very suitably a part of *Weather Permitting* is the poem "Celtic Tiger," an appellation that, however unsuitable, is the journalistic

3 It had been the title poem in the 1982 collection *Kist*.

4 The poem was originally published in *Long Story Short*.

5 Originally published in *From Weather Permitting*.

shorthand for Irish economic advancement in the last fifteen years. Dennis O'Driscoll's poetic collage paints us, warts and all, and the following extracts constitute an atmospheric trailer for the totality:

Ireland's boom is in full swing.
 Rows of numbers, set in a cloudless blue
 computer background, prove the point.

The poem is dotted with "young consultants, well-toned women"; it alludes to "tax-exempted town-house lettings," and the "passing four-wheel drive." The older generation earns but a three-line mention:

The old live on, wait out their stay
 of execution in small granny flats,
 thrifty thin-lipped men, grim pious wives ...

That latter one is a grey picture, far from the international flavours of the final three lines:

Time now, however, for the lunch-break
 orders to be faxed. Make yours hummus
 on black olive bread. An Evian. (*New and Selected* 145)⁶

That was O'Driscoll's astringent mapping of Ireland 1999, and, in its recognition of a land of youth and a work-centred existence, it leads on from the lines in section 38 of "The Bottom Line," where it is confirmed that "Over decades, I have said goodbye / to my retiring colleagues" and "We promise to stay in touch but, of / course, we never do," "they drop out of our cast" (*New and Selected* 107).⁷

In addition to the Irish human cast, there is a built landscape and O'Driscoll contributes disparaging detail to that topography in "The New," a section in the poem "Foreseeable Futures":

The distinctive
 Irish bungalow
 built by instinct,
 needing no plans,
 just the heft
 of direct labour
 and the odd day's
 back-up from
 a local handyman.
 Look how quickly
 it takes shape,
 breeze block showing
 through plaster
 like visible panty line. (*New and Selected* 241)

One could suggest that the physical arrangement of the lines bears a certain similarity to the geometric predictability and lack of architectural excellence in some of those

6 The poem was originally published in *Weather Permitting*.

7 The poem was originally published in *The Bottom Line*.

Irish bungalows. In the construction of this more recent Ireland, the older world still lurks though, apparent sometimes by its absence, and sometimes when lamented, even with the cynical perspicacity of section II of "Exemplary Damages":

Our one true God has died, vanished under
a rainbow's arch, banished like a devil
scalded by holy water; but our lives remain
eternally precious in the eyes of man.
We love one another so much the slightest
hurt cries out for compensation: sprain your
ankle in a pothole and City Hall will pay
exemplary damages for your pains [...].

A similarly caustic evaluation of consumerist and big brother society features in the subsequent eight lines:

We are equal under law as we once were
in His sight – just as He kept tabs
on the hairs of our heads, the sparrows
surfing the air, we are all accounted for,
enshrined in police department databases,
our good names maintained by the recording
angels of mailshot sales campaigns,
rewarded with chainstore loyalty points. (*Exemplary Damages* 23)

The Irish society that is thus enumerated and listed is also divided, and yet coupled, by O'Driscoll in the contrasting vignettes of "Them and You":

They wait for the bus.
You spray them with puddles.
They queue for curry and chips.
You phone an order for delivery.
They place themselves under the protection
of the Marian Grotto at the front of their estate.
You put your trust in gilts, managed funds,
income continuation plans.
They look weathered.
You look tanned.
They knock back pints.
You cultivate a taste for vintage wines.
They get drunk.
You get pleasantly inebriated.
Their wives have straw hair.
Yours is blonde.
They are missing one football card
to complete the full set.
You keep an eye out for a matching
Louis XV-style walnut hall table. (*New and Selected* 137)⁸

If Ireland was once the island of saints and scholars, and later the alleged site of repression by a bourgeois clergy, its current negotiation of God and Mammon is not

8 Originally published in *Quality Time*.

neglected by O'Driscoll. In "Missing God," the poet says, "we confess to missing Him at times," and one of those occasions is the wedding day:

Miss Him during the civil wedding
 when, at the blossomy altar
 of the registrar's desk, we wait in vain
 to be fed a line containing words
 like everlasting and divine. (*Exemplary Damages* 29-31)

In the middle of a nearly godless society, working on its smooth image, sophisticated in its business methods and its epicurean tastes but yet divided between "them and us," we find the humans who are caught in the whirl of commuting, living, loving, marrying, raising families. Imprisoned by timetables, they still have a nostalgic twinge for the Home Town, and for the "red barn," the place "you fled from to the city / or vowed you'd retire to some day." Those extracts come from "So Much Depends," and the poem concludes:

Come back, Grandma Moses, lead us
 from the desert of downtown
 to the promised land of the red barn. (*Exemplary Damages* 77-78)

As in the case of Dennis O'Driscoll's other insights into, and portrayals of, today's Ireland, that yearning rings true – as does the restrained and intertextual method of its presentation.

* * *

Tension and disconnectedness between Ireland past and present, urban and rural, and young and old, are also apparent in the work of Cathal Ó Searcaigh, whose poetry contrasts markedly with the work of O'Driscoll in that it displays an immediacy, an engagement, and a passion that are not features of O'Driscoll's lines. Ó Searcaigh admits to being keenly influenced by the strong storytelling tradition of his Donegal youth, but that sway does not result in shades of a Wandering Aengus. Without any anxiety of influence, the divide between past and present appears in many different poems and guises, and its manifestations include gently ironic and intertextual pokes in the direction of a twentieth-century James Joyce and of the early nineteenth-century Irish poet Antoine Ó Raiftearaí. Those could be deemed to be rather daring assaults on two stars of the Irish literary firmament, and they establish both the original, independent outlook and the fearlessness of Ó Searcaigh. Instead of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Ó Searcaigh writes a "portrait of the smith as a young artist" in his poem "Portráid den gabha mar ealaíontóir óg." This young artist is not leaving Ireland "to forge in the smithy of his soul" etc.; this one is coming back, seeking a return to his native place, from both exile near Dublin and from further away. He is heading back to the home sod where he could really be a wordsmith, hammering out the shapes of local idiom. The sounds and sparks of the forge are to be heard in the lines:

. . . Ach i gceárta na teanga
bheinnse go breabhsánta,
ag cleachtadh mo cheirde gach lá;
ar bhoilg m'aighe ag tathant bruine
ag gríosú smaointe chun spréiche
ag casúracht go hard
caint mhíotalach mo dhaoine.

. . . But in the smithy of my tongue
I'd be hale and hearty
Working at my craft daily
Inciting the bellows of my mind
Stirring thoughts to flame
Hammering loudly
The mettlesome speech of my people.
(*An Bealach 'na Bhaile/Homecoming* 84)⁹

Antoine Ó Raiftearaí's poem "Mise Raiftearaí!" (or "I am Raftery") is etched into the memories of millions of Irish people because it featured on school curricula for generations. Thus, there would be immediate and widespread recognition of the metrical and assonantal link between "Mise Raiftearaí an file lán dóchas is grá" (*trans.* "I am Raftery the poet, full of hope and love") and Ó Searcaigh's version: "Mise Charlie an scibhí, lán éadóchais agus crá" (*trans.* "I am Cathal the skivvy, full of despair and torment"). There are parallel associations, and chasms, between the next lines of both poets:

Mise Charlie

Mise Charlie an scibhí
lán éadóchais agus crá
ag caidreamh liom féin
ar mo lá *off* ón Óstán;
síos agus aníos Hyde Park
ar fán i measc scuainí
doicheallacha an Domhnaigh
is, a Raiftearaí, *fuck this for a lark.*

(*An Bealach 'na Bhaile/Homecoming*
202-203)

Mise Raifteirí

Mise Raifteirí, an file, lán dóchais is grá
le súile gan solas, ciúineas gan crá,
ag dul síos ar m'aistear le solas mo
chroí
fann agus tuirseach go deireadh mo
shlí;
tá mé anois lem aghaidh ar Bhalla
ag seinm cheoil do phócaí folamh.

(*trans.*) "I am Cathal"

I am Charlie the skivvy
Full of anguish and despair
Keeping myself company
On my day off from the Hotel;
Up and down Hyde Park
Wandering among the hostile
Sunday queues
And Raftery, fuck this for a lark.¹⁰

(*trans.*) "I am Raifteirí"

I am Raifteirí, the poet full of hope and
love,
With lightless eyes, in peace free of
anguish,
Going my way by the light of my heart,
Weak and tired to the end of my jour-
ney:
I'm now turning for Balla
Playing music for the empty pockets.

Here is Ó Searcaigh engaging with the Irish literary heritage, taking it on, but on *his* terms and using its structures to announce a new era, rather strikingly in the vernacu-

9 The poem was first published in *Súile Shuibhne*. English translation by Gabriel Fitzmaurice.

10 The English translation of this poem from *An Bealach 'na Bhaile/Homecoming* is by Lillis Ó Laoire.

lar of "is, a Raiftearí, *fuck this for a lark.*" If one expected a minority-language poet to be weighed down by angst, or to be hide-bound by insular tradition, this poet is not, any more than he is a clone of any so-called "foreign" predecessor.

From the time of his early attraction to the Beat poets, to Ginsberg, Corso, and Ferlinghetti, all mentioned in his 1975 poem "Déagóir ag Driftáil" / "Drifting" (*Out* 152-153),¹¹ Ó Searcaigh has publicly delighted in exploring world literature and poetry. He has enthused about his finding of, amongst many others, Kerouac, Tennessee Williams, Umberto Saba, Emily Dickinson, Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, André Gide, and Constantin Cavafy. The latter four names are part of what Cathal Ó Searcaigh calls his "Who's Who of Homos," his gay fraternity of literature, "a pinkish place" ("Challenging" 222). Being a gay poet makes Ó Searcaigh even more of a rarity, a gaily pink poet in the hither fastnesses of conservative, rural Donegal, one who publishes poetry and travel literature in Irish and who embraces Buddhism and oriental influences, while simultaneously weaving them all into a myriad shapes, some classical and traditional, others new either in their vision or their combinations. In his visibility, in his cosmopolitanism, his awareness of history and place, his refined and stylish analysis of poetic structures, his appreciation of simplicity, his artistic craft, Cathal Ó Searcaigh constitutes a most significant indicator of aspects of today's Ireland.

In Ó Searcaigh's long poem "Gort na gCnámh" / "Field of Bones,"¹² the title may refer to a physical place but the content, while meshed with the landscape and the seasons, is, primarily, a devastating representation of a phenomenon that long remained unspoken, or unrecognised, in Irish society: incest. Even with today's greater awareness of child sexual abuse, the lines stand out as a truly shocking evocation of the crime and an empathetic exposé of the female victim's torture, bound up with a place, that field of bones. It is a powerful poem, from which the only adequate quotation would be its entire length. When talking about place and memory, Ó Searcaigh says that the notions of memory and sense of place, as expressed by the Greek poet Cavafy, appeal to him: the exploration of buried selves; memory as a redemptive power that can hold and transform into art the ephemeral life of the senses. Interestingly, he says "Memory is the means to dig, to unearth, to discover the ages of our Being, the artefacts of our feelings" ("Challenging" 223-5). This is the mature Ó Searcaigh, reversing the rebellious decision of his furious seventeen-year old self, who wrote: "Tá mé dubhthuirseach de rútaí, / de bheith ag tochailt san aimsir chaite" (*trans.* "sick-to-death of roots, / of digging in the past tense").¹³ While this is a very early poem, it demonstrates salient features of Ó Searcaigh's poetry: his preoccupation with sound, with assonance and consonance; the richness of his vocabulary;

11 Translations by Frank Sewell. "Déagóir," an earlier Irish-language version of the poem, dates from 1973.

12 *Out* 66-76. The translation is by Frank Sewell. The poem was previously published in Irish in *Na Buachaillí Bána* (63-69).

13 The translation is by Frank Sewell.

his facility for working within recognised poetic structures (in this case, the complex rhyming system of classical Irish poetry); his awareness of place; and his sense of difference. The English translation takes poetic licence, but, as happens with several translations into English, it misses the mixture of sound power, heartfelt angst, and stamp-the-foot teenage desperation of "Teastaíonn fuinneoga uaim! Teastaíonn eiteoga uaim!" This would translate literally as "I want windows! I want wings!" but its frantic "Let me out" message has been rendered poetically, gently, and anaemically as "wanting windows, wanting wings."

Where place is concerned, the place names of Ó Searcaigh's Donegal are recorded for posterity in his poems. It is part of his homage to tongue, place, and tradition; it follows the Irish poetic tradition of according sacredness to place. However, it also arises to a certain extent from his sense of crisis, since, as English invades his Irish-speaking area, original place names and language are being forgotten (see *Caiseal* n.p.). The priority he attaches to record of place and its celebration is evident in the complex *fuaimneacht* or resonance of the poem about Caiseal na gCorr, where he lives and where he feels his relevance and importance, "ag feidhmíu mar chuisle de chroí mo chine" (*trans.* "operating as the heartbeat of my race").¹⁴ On a lighter note, he says that he wants "to give Caiseal na gCorr and its environs a literary aura [...] so that the local place An Bhealtaine would become as erotically charged as Byzantium in the gay imagination." His playfulness with words spurs him to give what he calls an "etymologically bent reading" to that name, to translate Caiseal na gCorr as stone fort of the queer (rather than any of the many other meanings of *corr*). He jokes too about how the local Baile an Gheata or Gate Town became corrupted into Gaytown in English. While this verbal sporting is part of Ó Searcaigh's liveliness, his underlying concern is serious: "My persistent recitation of these names is a way of making memorable what is being forgotten. It is an act of repossession in the face of communal amnesia." (*Caiseal* n.p.).

Ó Searcaigh can be quite apprehensive about the situation of his native language, while being very aware that translation of his poems into English (by Seamus Heaney, amongst others) has given him a new lease of life, has led to translations into many other languages, and provided him with an international profile. He identifies the importance of Irish-language heritage for others who write in English, and he sees the ghost of Irish structures, words, and ideas in the English-language poetry of several of today's Irish poets, amongst them Heaney, Montague, Muldoon, and Meehan ("Challenging" 219). Ó Searcaigh strongly welcomes the influences of English-language poetic scope, range, and influence. However, he is convinced that if the Irish well-spring were to run dry, the result would be impoverishing for all. His 1997 poem "Cainteoir Dúchais" (*trans.* "Native Speaker," *Out* 134-135) provides a

14 From the poem "Anseo ag Stáisiún Chaiseal na ngCorr" in *An Bealach 'na Bhaile/ Homecoming* (94-97).

wry image of the invading forces, and it confirms the globalising waves and commodity domination seen by Dennis O'Driscoll:

Cainteoir Dúchais

Bhí sé *flat-out*, a dúirt sé
i gcaitheamh na maidine.
Rinne sé an t-árasán a *hooveráil*,
na boscaí bruscair a *jeyes-fluideáil*,
an *loo* a *harpiceáil*, an *bath* a *vimeáil*.
Ansin rinne sé an t-urlár a *flasháil*
na fuinneoga a *windoleneáil*
agus na leapacha a *eau-de-cologneáil*.
Bhí sé *shagáilte*, a dúirt sé,
ach ina dhiaidh sin agus uile
rachadh sé amach a *chruiseáil*;
b'fhéidir, a dúirt sé, go mbuailfeadh sé
le boc inteacht
a mbeadh Gaeilge aige.

Native Speaker

He was flat out, he said
during the morning.
He managed to *Hoover* the flat,
to *Jeyes-Fluid* the bins
to *Harpic* the loo and *Vim* the bath.
Then he did the *Flashing* of the floor,
the *Windolene*-ing of the windows
and *Eau-de-Cologne*-ing the beds.
He was shagged, he said
but no matter
he'd go out cruising;
Maybe, he said, he'd meet
some game fella
with Irish.

The typical tolerance, self-deprecation, and self-mocking tone in "Cainteoir Dúchais" is also to be found in Ó Searcaigh's poem "Trasnú" (*Ag Tnúth* 277-279). That word *trasnú* epitomises the hidden complexities in Ó Searcaigh's deceptively simple presentation of it – it can mean crossing, traversing, contradicting, intersecting, heckling, interrupting, and all of those meanings might apply. The uncertainty adds a strong note of unease and a degree of regret to the poem; the invasions by another language, and by an international culture, are seen to be embedded in the Irish lines, places, and memories:

Tá muid ar strae
áit inteacht
idir Chath Chionn tSáile
agus an *Chinese takeaway* [...]
Tá muid leath réamh-stairiúil
agus leath-*postmodern intertextúil* [...]
ag buaiceallacht *dinosaurs*
le Fionn Mac Cumhaill [...]
ag súgradh go searcúil
le Cáit Ní Queer [...]
Tá muid teach ceanntuách
agus bungaló *mod conach* [...]
Tá muid rince seiteach
agus hócaí pócaí cairiócaíach.

We are wandering
somewhere
between the Battle of Kinsale
and the Chinese takeaway.
We are half prehistoric
and half postmodern intertextual.
herding dinosaurs
With Fionn Mac Cumhaill;
playing lovingly
with Cáit Ní Queer;
We are thatched-cottagey
and mod-con bungalowed;
We are set-dance-ish
and hokey-pokey karaoke-ish.

The intertextuality and wide range of references in "Trasnú" are somewhat camouflaged by the half-humorous, bittersweet couplings. However, important memories and traditions of an older Ireland are recorded for the present and for posterity: the inspiration of heroic memories of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, and the literary structures of the Fiannaíocht cycle stories; the built heritage of thatched cottage; the recreational dances of the ordinary people; the Irish aisling or vision poetry in which, from the

eighteenth century onwards, political longings took the place of previous amatory addresses. The substitution of "Cáit Ní Queer" for Kathleen Ní Houlihan¹⁵ (or for Dark Rosaleen) evinces a cheeky familiarity with Cáit and makes it clear that the vision is neither on a pedestal nor burdened with a nation's woes; the reference brings the poem right into the present, links it with the earlier Irish models, and sets the stage proudly for Ó Searcaigh's homoerotic poetry, a sub-genre that would not have seen the light of day when the wider world received its pictures of Ireland from the pens of Yeats and Joyce, Clarke and Kavanagh.

The poetry of Dennis O'Driscoll and Cathal Ó Searcaigh, both widely-esteemed and gifted writers, could hardly be more different. Yet, in terms of conveying an accurate image of a twenty-first century Ireland, their contributions are not contradictory. Rather they are complementary in their depictions of the present and in their prognostications and intimations concerning the future. In an attempt to provide a brief poetic portrait of today's Ireland, the extracts and allusions in this essay are necessarily brief. It would be a pity if readers were to limit themselves to those few poems when the surprises and delights of their collections are widely available. The music, drama, and word-painting of their poetry comprise a valuable and exciting artistic store; it is wholly a spin-off and a bonus that they also furnish an honest and comprehensive account of the compounds and complexities of Ireland today.

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15 Kathleen Ní Houlihan was commonly used as a coded, poetic name for Ireland in *aislingí* and in later poetry.

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