

Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies, n. 4 (2014), pp. 69-84

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-14307>

The Language of Globalization in Contemporary Irish Poetry

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Abstract:

This essay considers how contemporary Irish poets have responded to the changing socio-economic realities of Irish life since 1990. Through an examination of themes of work, consumerism, the encroachment of cyber-space and changing urban lifestyles, the essay demonstrates how Irish poets have risen to the challenge of finding a language to capture what Zygmunt Bauman characterizes as “liquid modernity”. A range of poets are considered, including the late Dennis O’Driscoll, Rita Ann Higgins, Peter Sirr as well as Billy Ramsell, Kevin Higgins and Iggy McGovern. These poets’ musings provide excellent examples of how the poet can turn the language of globalization into a critique of globalization’s economic hegemony.

Keywords: consumerism, globalization, Ireland, language, poetry


1. Introduction

In her 2012 novel *The Devil I Know*, Claire Kilroy captures the spirit of economic frenzy in Ireland during the dying days of the Celtic Tiger:

Calls had been made across the world. Contracts were being drawn up in various international financial institutions. Things had started to happen. We had flipped one of the hotels in London and shifted a shopping mall in Dubai, extracting value of over €100 million from those two alone, every cent of which we moved like a stack of poker chips onto the Pudong site, stationing our army at the mouth of this most strategic of ports [...] We kept an eye on the row of clocks, trying not to. Dublin, Dubai, Shanghai; not London, New York, Tokyo as of old. The axis of world power had shifted. [...] I was pleading for us to win. Every fibre of my being was focused on that outcome. *Bona fortuna*. That’s when I experienced the startling revelation [...] Maybe wealth could be created out of debt and fortunes amassed overnight. (2012, 239)

All the essential ingredients of the economic mirage in Ireland are here, mediated through the preposterous narrator Tristram St Lawrence: the gamble on international and domestic property, the instantaneous money transfers across financial centres, the loans carried over by developers from previous

ISSN 2239-3978 (online)

 <http://www.fupress.com/bsfm-sijis>
2014 Firenze University Press

investments, the new financial networks of power and the sheer belief that the money would never dry up and that the property business was a one-way bet on success and wealth. Of course, Kilroy's novel is a wry morality tale in which Tristram and his business partner, the developer Desmond Hickey, lose everything on this final roll of the dice. Meanwhile, the mysterious M. Deauville, Tristram's mentor, evaporates at the end of the novel in a Faustian denouement where all of the protagonists enter the damnation of post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland.

The period since the bank guarantee of 30 September 2008 and the EU-IMF bail-out announced on 21 November 2010 has been a period of consolidation and reflection, as well as deep social frustration and anger, as the consequences of Ireland's economic boom have become clear. The collapse of the Irish economy stemmed from a unique confluence of local and international factors, among which financial deregulation and globalization are of major importance. Economic experts have suggested that up until around 2001, the economic growth enjoyed in Ireland was still relatively healthy and perhaps sustainable, if prudently managed¹. Growth had been export-driven, based on the investment of largely American capital in an Irish economy which boasted low corporate tax rates, a skilled workforce and access to European markets. However, in the period 2001-2007, the economy veered towards a construction and property boom which led to wild speculation by property developers, frenzied levels of building, irresponsible bank lending and an inflationary spiral. All of this was made possible by the globalization of the banking and financial sectors which enabled Irish banks to borrow money internationally in order to lend to Irish developers. When the credit crunch came, Irish banks were effectively insolvent, and only the infamous bank guarantee prevented bankruptcy of all Irish financial institutions. Nevertheless, the consequence of the guarantee has been the bankruptcy of the Irish state and has necessitated the draconian cut-backs implemented by the Irish government under the National Recovery Plan 2011-2014 which in turn has been a consequence of the Irish state's recourse to the International Monetary Fund.

While the international banking crisis may have been the immediate cause of the Irish crash, it is also clear that Ireland's predicament is the outcome of deeper external and internal social and economic processes and uniquely Irish cultural mores. This predicament could be summarized in one word – property. Although Irish home-ownership levels are not outstandingly high by European standards (in the 2006 census, 75% of Irish residential property was owner-occupied), home ownership is still highly-prized in Ireland, especially house ownership, as opposed to more Continental-style apartment living. When wealth began to circulate in 1990s Ireland, many beneficiaries' first instinct was to invest in property; property speculation became, during the 1990s and 2000s, a national pastime. Another local factor has surely been Ireland's historic poverty. When the Irish economy began to grow, Irish

people understandably rejoiced in their new found wealth, but did not always use it responsibly. The lack of economic management, both on a micro- and macro-economic levels has led to the charge that the social and infrastructural benefits of the boom have been minimal and the fruits of prosperity have been squandered on the conspicuous consumption which was a feature of Irish life during the Tiger years.

No amount of poetic condemnation or criticism could have altered the political and economic direction Ireland followed during the Tiger years. Nevertheless, poets have enjoyed their traditional role of guarantors of the integrity of language in an environment where the devaluation and bowdlerization of language has been widespread and where the dictates of the market have created a newly vacuous vocabulary and set of ideas. Many examples of such vocabulary will be cited in this essay. I will argue that several Irish poets have written persuasively about the dangers of consumerism and of allowing the language of the marketplace too much sway. Political and social satire has enjoyed something of a revival in Irish poetry and one of the characteristics of good satire is to use the vocabulary of received ideas in order to mock those same ideas. At the same time, globalization and the modern economy have led to profound transformations in lifestyles and communications which go to the core of our relationships and private selves. Therefore, poets have had to find a language to describe new modes of existence in the twenty-first century, modes which reflect a globalized social reality.

The benefits and disadvantages of globalization are disputed by academics and laypersons alike and there is no poetic consensus about how Ireland's economic (mis)fortunes should be presented. The fact that, since 1995, Ireland has been ranked (in accountancy firm Ernst and Young's annual globalization index) as among the top three most globalized economies in the world, is represented poetically in many reflections on how Ireland's social fabric has been transformed. Most visibly, immigration to Ireland – of migrants from Eastern Europe, from Nigeria, from China and elsewhere – has given the major cities, especially Dublin, a newly cosmopolitan feel. Equally, the decline of the Catholic Church, in the wake of clerical abuse scandals through the 1990s and 2000s, has changed entirely the relationship of Irish people to traditional sources of moral authority. It has also opened up Irish people to the presence of other faiths, especially Islam, in their midst while also breaking the ties of Church and State in the realms of education, healthcare and social provision. The fact that international corporations have been attracted to Ireland by a low tax regime, but are now leaving, often with unseemly haste, has reminded all of us that international corporations and local communities are divergent entities; the profit motive does not consider local community interests. Clearly, poets are not economists, but they can observe and reflect on the changes which manifest themselves in Irish society as a direct or indirect result of the globalized economy.

This essay will consider globalization as a theme and phenomenon *in* contemporary Irish poetry. It will be less concerned with what might be termed the globalization *of* Irish poetry, or, indeed, of poetry in general. In an age of travel where writers and academics can appear at festivals and conferences in almost any part of the world, poetry and its practitioners are more than ever themselves part of a globalized environment. This situation is reflected in the number of noted Irish poets who live outside of Ireland – Paul Muldoon, Eavan Boland, Tom Paulin, Justin Quinn and (until relatively recently) Harry Clifton, to name just five émigré Irish poets. It is even reflected in the ambiguity of what, in the twenty-first century, constitutes an *Irish* poet. Historically, writers such as Louis MacNeice and Oscar Wilde, even Yeats himself, have been less than fully indigenous either in their country of residence or in their commitment to aspects of Irish nationalism. In more recent times, several Irish poets are equivocally Irish or Irish by conviction, if not birth. Richard Murphy, Ian Duhig, Peter McDonald and Eamon Grennan might all be seen as Irish in ways which serve to underline the difficulties of defining such identarian boundaries. All of this points towards what poet and critic Justin Quinn has termed “the disappearance of Ireland” (Quinn 2008, 194) as a focus of contemporary writing. According to Quinn, in an increasingly post-national environment, poets are less troubled by the matter of Ireland and he cites several important contemporary poets in support of this view, among them: Harry Clifton, Paul Durcan, Peter Sirr, David Wheatley, Vona Groarke and Conor O’Callaghan. Of course, Ireland never literally disappears from the work of these writers, far from it. But the globalization *of* poetry has led them, arguably, to view Ireland through the prism of their international experiences and frames of reference in a less introverted and less nationalistic way than their predecessors.

In his 2009 essay “Solitary Caverns: On Globalization and Poetry”, American poet C.K. Williams reminds us that, ever since the Renaissance, change and evolution in poetry (and the other arts) has come about through the cross-fertilization of various national traditions. Indeed, it seems that all major cultural formations – the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernism – are pan-European and international in character. Nevertheless, what Williams calls “a globalization of art” (2009, 553) may carry the same cultural dangers often associated with globalization, those of homogenization and conformity across national boundaries. One of the controversies and questions concerning globalization is whether such a process leads to greater cultural homogenization or whether, on the contrary, globalization may undermine national traditions but simultaneously strengthen local and regional identities in a process of so-called ‘glocalization’. Certainly, the benefits and consequences of global economic processes for poetry and art are not yet fully understood and may yield some counter-intuitive surprises.

Just as artists and writers have always ignored national boundaries in their search for new styles and ideas, so the business and mercantile *élites* of

the world have always sought opportunities abroad. The early-modern period, in some ways, marks the beginnings of the colonial and pioneer trading networks which find their modern manifestation in the international money markets where vast sums can be transferred around the world at the touch of a button. Therefore, globalization as a process has been with us at least since the Renaissance; however, as a constellation of ideas and set of discourses, it emerges in the 1990s as a powerful explanatory tool for describing the new and complex networks of international trade and finance which the Irish economy tapped into during the Celtic Tiger. Perhaps the greatest difference between the modern global economy and those of preceding periods is that the level of interdependence of finance and trade is now so great that, in terms of economic policy, no country can be self-sufficient or avoid the international factors which drive or impede economic growth.

Irish poets have been quick to co-opt the idea of globalization and its vocabularies as a way of exploring perennial themes of identity, personal relationships, lifestyles and the workplace in the twenty-first century. The fact that Ireland has benefitted from globalization, but also suffered major economic reversals, because of this small island's exposure to the swings and roundabouts of the world economy, lends globalization a certain topicality within Irish culture. Equally, the evolution of Irish society away from essentialist definitions of Irishness towards a more pluralistic viewpoint – one which includes the Irish diaspora, immigrants to Ireland, non-Catholic Irish, various ethnic minorities, Northern Protestants – should serve as an indicator of the potential benefits of a discourse which helps account for a less insular Ireland. This essay, then, will look, first of all, at some of the satirical responses to the fall-out from the economic collapse since 2008; it will also explore how poets such as Dennis O'Driscoll have made the work and social patterns of the Celtic Tiger years one of the major aspects of their poetry. The essay will then explore some of the more insidious aspects of globalization – for example: call centres, internet spam, junk TV – under the heading of 'Depersonalized Spaces' and see how Irish poets have responded to the more impersonal features of the global technological revolution.

2. Fool's Gold: Satire and Critique of the Celtic Tiger

Within discourses of globalization, the term *précarité* – or in English, precarity – is often used to describe the social and economic experience of globalized, free-market capitalism in which the deregulated market threatens to undermine some of the hard-won social protections which are embodied in social-democratic models of society (Bremen 2013). Clearly, Irish experience since 2008 has been nothing if not precarious, with the near meltdown of the financial system and subsequent property collapse and recession. However, it could be argued that even during the years of economic growth,

precariousness is what exactly describes Irish social and economic experience. Although globalization is primarily an economic experience affecting the domains of work and consumption, it also arguably invades the inner corners of our private selves with a very modern sense of precariousness and transience which sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has referred to as the “liquid” (rather than “solid”) experience of modernity under late capitalism. Even if new opportunities and new lifestyles have opened up in Ireland since 1990, the type of mobility, speed and dynamism which was a feature of the Tiger years, contains its own unique sense of vertigo so that the sudden reversal of the wheel of fortune may be seen as an extension, rather than inversion, of the vertiginous economic spiral of the Irish and global economy.

For Bauman, in his persuasive critique of globalization and modern consumerism, the nature of modern societies is entirely dictated by the needs of the market:

The seminal departure that sets the *consumerist* syndrome most sharply apart from its *productivist* predecessor [...] seems to be the *reversal of values attached respectively to duration and transience*. The consumerist syndrome consists above all in an emphatic denial of the virtue of procrastination and of the propriety and desirability of the delay of satisfaction [...] the consumerist syndrome has degraded duration and elevated transience. It has put the value of novelty above that of lastingness. It has sharply shortened the timespan separating not just the wanting from the getting (as many observers, inspired or misled by credit agencies, have suggested), but also the birth of the wanting from its demise, [...] it has put appropriation, quickly followed by waste disposal, in the place of possessions and enjoyment that last [...] *The ‘consumerist syndrome’ is all about speed, excess and waste.* (2005, 83-84, italics in original)

The Celtic Tiger was a period of Irish history entirely in the grip of this consumerist syndrome. The beneficiaries of the boom took advantage of their new found purchasing power in order to acquire all the accoutrements of the modern consumer: fashionable clothes, holidays abroad, second homes, expensive cars, fine dining and, of course, more and more property. Indeed, one of the features of the boom was the decision by many young first-time buyers to get on the property ladder in case they would miss out entirely on the apparent property bonanza. Such “denial of the virtue of procrastination” and inability to delay the satisfaction of a major purchase has resulted in financial disaster for many Irish couples and individuals. In a society of “speed, excess and waste”, individuals are interpellated, as Bauman (following Louis Althusser) suggests, as consumers so that earning and spending became the sole preoccupations of vast swathes of the populace. Irish society became a classic case of the consumerist syndrome which was expressed in the need to own and to consume and the generation of false needs in order to perpetuate and prop up economic order of things.

Perhaps the most perspicacious poet-critic of this state of affairs, in the 1990s and early 2000s, was the late Dennis O’Driscoll who used his poetic

gifts to critique the work-a-day world around him. His ironic and mordant criticism of Irish lifestyles in the Celtic and post-Celtic Tiger period makes him the most perceptive and effective poetic opponent of Ireland's hyper-consumerism and subsequent crash-landing in the past decade. In his poem "The Celtic Tiger", from his 1999 collection *Weather Permitting*, O'Driscoll neatly captures the heightened tempo and shallowness of the boom years:

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

[...]

Outside new antique pubs, young consultants
well-toned women, gel-slick men –
drain long-necked bottles of imported beer.

[...]

The old live on, wait out their stay
of execution in small granny flats,
thrifty thin-lipped men, grim pious wives . . . (2004, 145)

In a globalized and highly dynamic economy of rapid technological change, the old (defined as over-fifties) and the poorly educated are necessarily excluded. O'Driscoll's evocation of retiree couples in the globalized city foregrounds the fact that there are stark contrasts in lifestyle between the winners and losers in a consumer society. One of the more deplorable features of "liquid modernity" is the devil-take-the-hindmost attitude to social cohesion. In a newly acquisitive Ireland, to quote Bauman again:

The need here is to run with all one's strength just to stay in the same place and away from the rubbish bin where the hindmost are doomed to land [...] Life in the liquid modern world is a sinister version of the musical chairs game, played for real. The true stake in the race is (temporary) rescue from being excluded into the ranks of the destroyed and avoiding being consigned to waste. (2005, 3)

Traditional Catholic Ireland may have been economically stagnant, but at least the exclusionary game of musical chairs was not a feature of national economic life to the same extent as the boom years.

In subsequent collections, O'Driscoll has extended his critique of the consumer economy via his focus on two themes – death and work – which he uses to offset the hedonism and acquisitiveness of Celtic Tiger Ireland. In a review of the 2002 volume *Exemplary Damages*, Adam Kirsch writes:

If death is the major theme of O'Driscoll's poetry, his favourite subject is work. He makes work – the routines and impedimenta of office life – a synecdoche for the standardised, globalised, pampered and otiose life led by the middle classes in the West, Ireland as much as Britain or America [...] his semi-sonnet sequence 'The Bottom Line' makes Dublin seem like a version of Detroit. (2003, 35)

The global equivalent of individual mortality is the unsustainability of economic life as currently lived in the West which, simply put, will exhaust the globe's resources at current rates of consumption. O'Driscoll spells this out for us in the poem "Exemplary Damages":

How will there ever be goods enough, white goods,
dry goods, grave goods, munitions, comestibles,
to do justice to all the peoples of the world?

Enough parma ham, however thinly curled,
to serve with cottage cheese and chives
in the cavernous canteens of high-rise buildings?

Enough rubs and creams, suppositories and smears,
mesh tops and halter necks, opaques and sheers?
How will there be enough flax steeped for smart

linen suits, enough sheep shorn for lambswool coats,
enough goats for cashmere stoles to wear on opening nights,
enough cotton yarn to spin into couture tops, flak jackets?

And can we go on satisfying orders for baseball caps, chicken nuggets,
body toning pads, camomile salve for chapped lips? And what quantity
of dolphin-friendly skipjack tuna meets a sushi bar's demands? (2004, 193-194)

Here O'Driscoll employs the language of the modern consumer, with suggestions of the liquid lifestyle of the upwardly mobile professional of the Celtic Tiger years whose dietary and sartorial tastes are deftly suggested. Implicit in this poem is O'Driscoll's sense of the superficial and blindly acquisitive nature of these apparent needs, especially since the goods mentioned are luxuries, not necessities. An older, more traditional Irish poem would regard such lifestyle choices as exotically foreign, not native. However, in a globalized city such as Dublin in the 1990s, these are the new, consumer-driven norms.

O'Driscoll pursues these concerns – of mortality, in the context of a finite and fragile world ecosystem – in his final published collection *Dear Life* (2012). Here again, he lambasts the money-changers and the speculators, but he also adopts, in places, a tone of solemn appreciation of life's blessings together with a sense of responsibility and concern for the future. So, the poem "Not the Dead" looks forward in a deprecatory and darkly funny way,

all the while evoking Bauman's sense of the disposability of both goods and people in liquid modernity:

It is not the dead who haunt us.
 [...]

 It is the not-yet-born
 we are up against.
 They will be the first to forget us.
 [...]

 Consign us to the past.
 [...]

 Outlast us. (2012, 57)

Another Dublin-based poet who shares some of O'Driscoll's ironic insights into the essential emptiness of Ireland's economic transformation is Iggy McGovern. As the title of McGovern's first collection – *The King of Suburbia* (2005) – implies, he is happy to foreground the ordinariness of his suburban environment by casting himself ironically as the monarch of Dundrum, king of the wheelie-bin and the bottle-bank and the suburban garden. In his more recent volume *Safe House* (2010), we find the following series of juxtapositions in “The Irish Poem Is” which tellingly unravels the conflict between traditional (indigenous) and modern (globalized) Irish identities:

a Táin Bó, a Spring Show, a video
 a trodden dream, a parish team, a tax -break scheme
 a prison cell, an Angelus bell, a clientele
 a brinded cow, a marriage vow, a domestic row
 a tattered coat, a puck goat, a telly remote
 a game of tig, a slip jig, a U2 gig
 a restored tower, a Holy Hour, a pressure shower
 a ticking clock, a summer frock, a shock-jock
 a hazel wand, a dipping pond, a page 3 blonde
 a canal bank, a returned Yank, a septic tank
 a green flag, a Child Of Prague, a Prada bag
 a whispering sea, a Rose of Tralee, a transfer fee
 a disused shed, a settle bed, a Club Med
 [...]. (2010, 61)

This bewildering series of images and associations speaks for itself. While the majority of traditional images of Ireland are rural, it is the urban and materialistic counter-images which we recognise as best describing current social realities. By opposing clichés of traditional Ireland with modern equivalents, McGovern shows how the Celtic Tiger has bequeathed us its own set of associations which invade the fabric of our consciousness and become starkly recognisable when fed back to us in juxtaposition to more traditional cultural imagery.

The perspective of Galway-based poet Rita Ann Higgins on the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger conveys some of the anger and denunciation expressed by the public at large especially in their unceremonious rejection of Fianna Fáil in the 2011 general election. She has long been known as a poet from the margins who has championed minority causes and voices in her work. In her most recent collection titled *Ireland is Changing Mother* (2011) there are several arresting poems pointing out the political stupidity and corruption which has led to Ireland's economic collapse. Her poem titled "The Darkness" is a riposte to anyone who believed that Ireland's economic miracle was sustainable or that Bertie Ahern's version of socialism was credible:

it was dishcloth dreams
 it was back on the dole queues
 it was Fás schemes
 it was refuse charges
 it was Fás expenses
 it was soap operas
 it was pope operas
 it was Spiddal in the middle
 it was rain rain rain
 [...]
 it was tribunals
 it was lost receipts
 it was a limo, here a limo there
 it was SSIA's (Rita Ann Higgins 2011, 19)

As with Iggy McGovern's poem "The Irish Poem Is", there is a rhetorical clarity here which hits its targets in a direct and vigorous way. All of the wrongdoing and corruption of the Celtic Tiger years is laid out in this three page poem: from "Biffo's budget" (reference to former Fianna Fáil Finance Minister and Taoiseach Brian Cowan whose mismanagement of the nation's finances arguably worsened the subsequent economic recession) to Michael Fingleton (former chairman of Anglo-Irish Bank, subsequently nationalized after massive losses), to the Health Service Executive (HSE), "foreign-owned banks" (Higgins 2011, 20), to NAMA (National Asset Management Agency) and An Bord Snip Nua (a government-commissioned report on possible budget savings published in 2009). Despite the global backdrop, these reference points are decidedly Irish; Ireland found its own distinctive way to go bankrupt and Higgins revels in some of the local points of reference well-known to Irish readers.

Nonetheless, Higgins (born in Galway in 1955) has had a productive poetic career which spans a period beginning well before the years of economic plenitude in the 1990s and early 2000s. From her first volume *Goddess on the Mervue Bus* (1986), she has drawn particular attention to the situation of

working mothers and to poverty and social exclusion in her native Galway. As a bilingual writer currently living in Spiddal in the Galway Gaeltacht, Higgins has also written about her relationship to the Irish language and its ever-dwindling community of native speakers. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, to find a poem (in the 2005 volume of new and selected poems, *Throw in the Vowels*) which deals with an older and more traditional form of globalized Irishness: the church missions to Africa, South America and Asia, part of the Irish Catholic Church's historical contribution to worldwide Christianity. Even up to 1980, the Catholic priesthood would have been a not unusual career choice in the highly circumscribed choices presented to Irish school-leavers. Even though this is now a vanished Ireland, Higgins reminds us of its grim legacy as has been revealed in several investigations during the 1990s and 2000s into sexual misconduct among the Catholic clergy:

They say Ambrose had a smashing global outlook,
 [...]
 When he could hardly walk
 he was collecting for the black babies.

So it came as no great shock to us
 when one pancake Tuesday word rose up the queue
 that Ambrose got a black baby of his own
 and he married her.
 She was twelve and three quarters. (2005, 190)

Higgins' work reflects the tensions within a wider Irish society between conservative, traditional forces and modernizing tendencies. A poem published in 2005 about a church missionary appears to hark back to a bygone era, but the link the clerical child abuse makes it entirely contemporary. Likewise, a poem published in the 2010 volume *Hurting God* titled "When the Big Boys Pulled Out" reminds us that the economic challenges of globalization are not necessarily new in Ireland. The modernization of the Irish economy really began in earnest with the publication in 1958 of the *First Programme for Economic Expansion* authored by economist and civil servant T.K. Whitaker at the behest of then Taoiseach Seán Lemass who was determined to reverse de Valera's economic isolationism. This strategy to attract foreign investment was partially successful with a modest economic recovery during the 1960s. However, Higgins evokes a Galway of the 1980s when some of the newly established industries "pulled out" thus exposing the vulnerability of the Irish economy to outflows of capital investment: "Our fag breaks / became our summer holidays / when the Big Boys pulled out" (2010, 48).

Another Galway-based poet with a distrust of the "Big Boys" is Kevin Higgins, author of four volumes which mingle reflections on his own brand

of left-wing politics with several state of the nation poems alongside satires of political mismanagement and corruption. Born in England, Higgins' family returned to Ireland in 1974 when he was seven to live in Galway and Higgins experienced the worst of 1980s recessionary Ireland as well as the upheavals of Thatcher's England. His take on the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath is predictably acerbic. The sanitized, politically-correct Ireland of recent times is described in the 2010 volume *Frightening New Furniture* as "this minimalist spaceship / where people just sip their decaffeinated water / and listen to David Gray" (2010, 21). The poem "That Was My Country" from the same volume, displays an ironic nostalgia for a less (or possibly more) wholesome Ireland: "When there was planning permission / for anything and morning / was breakfast baps and gravel / going back that road by the truckload" (2010, 24). Higgins' poetry present the poet's persona as a self-deprecating, aging radical whose memories of political counter-culture from the early 1980s cannot help but cast in a negative light the new, insipid but superficially improved Ireland of more recent years.

3. *Depersonalized Spaces*

In the realms of clinical psychology and psychiatry, the term "depersonalization"² is sometimes used to refer to a psychic state which entails a self-division and inner alienation. The subject or patient feels disconnected from his/her inner self while at the same time feeling estranged from outer reality; it is therefore a kind of double alienation which threatens the stability and integrity of the self. The term "postmodern schizophrenia"³ is sometimes advanced, in the context of Frederic Jameson's theories of post-modernity, as a way of describing the modern subject's disconnectedness from social and historical realities and Jean Baudrillard's theorization of "the simulacrum" has attempted to describe a postmodern mediatized non-reality which has lost its grounding in a localizable, actual social or geographical space (Baudrillard 1988).

Clearly, in the age of the internet and modern communications technologies, all of us are challenged by a lack of groundedness which can lead to distortions in our own sense of self-identity. Even a relatively simple transaction of watching the daily news on TV can be disorientating in its bewildering conflation of various events across the globe which may have little or no direct relevance to our daily lives. We are all spectators, but we don't control always what we see and how it is presented to us. More controversially, we are also victims of surveillance by agencies around the world; every e-mail we send can be read by intelligence agencies. Our financial, professional and personal histories leave traces across the world wide web so that our sense of personal autonomy and integrity is increasingly besieged. Interestingly, schizophrenia is an illness which may entail paranoia and delusions of volition; a patient may not feel his/her actions and movements belong to him/her and may feel controlled involuntarily by external agencies. Such is our daily experience as

Jameson and others have suggested and it is a psycho-social dilemma which some contemporary Irish poets have engaged with.

In the blurb on the back cover of Cork-based poet Billy Ramsell's 2007 volume *Complicated Pleasures*, we find the following comments: "[Ramsell's poems] attempt to stake out a 'personal space' in a violent world of systems, machines and twenty-four hour surveillance where privacy, language and even memory itself are under permanent threat". Ramsell's collection amply shows that the personal is the political even while he tries to resist the encroachments of globalized cyber-systems into his personal space. However, the poems register as a kind of silent alarm or nameless dread that "those digital minds [...] with their fibre optics" ("You and the Sea", 2007, 55) can penetrate the poet's most private thoughts and wishes. There is a dose of postmodern paranoia in the poem titled "Silent Alarm":

Feel that? One of those inexplicable shivers,
the flesh stretching at the base of your neck,
rippling in a wave-pattern?
You're being credit-checked
by a mainframe in Brussels.
Your girlfriend's sister's Googling you
in a Liverpool cybercafé. (2007, 58)

The sense of being manipulated by unseen and unnamed forces is part of Ramsell's sense of postmodern depersonalization even within private spaces and even in the most intimate moments of his personal life. In the poem "Still Life with Frozen Pizza", Ramsell presents the speaker as passive and semi-catatonic victim of the global networks which encroach upon him:

I unwrapped the plastic and slid the icy disc
onto the oven shelf. 15 minutes later, as the TV rippled
into wakefulness, the tray made a presentable still life:
[...]
I navigated Countdown, sitcoms, pantomime wrestling,
rolling news. Somewhere bombs were falling:
the crosshairs at the centre of the grainy video.
A building dissolved in dust, its crater spoiling
the streetscape's geometric perfection. (2007, 52)

Ramsell here seems to be manifesting a globalized world-weariness which leaves him indifferent even to the bombs falling, close at home or far away. An ironized allusion to Seamus Heaney's poem "Digging" ("the remote / that liked to sit in my hand, snug as a gun", 2007, 52) makes us painfully aware of just how far we are from any traditional sense of rootedness or belonging. More than merely weekday fatigue, the poem presents an invasive globalized non-reality which induces panic and passivity in equal measure from the poet.

The kind of depersonalized loneliness evoked by Ramsell is keenly felt in another cyberspace poem by Peter Sirr from his collection *Bring Everything* (2000). Sirr worked for a number of years as Director of the Irish Writers' Centre. At one stage, in this role, his was in daily receipt of e-mail messages destined for the Irish Wildbird Conservancy which resulted in his poem "The Beautiful Engines":

for the king eider seen off Brow Head, the scarlet rosefinch on Rockabill,
Baird's sandpiper seen last evening in Ballycotton

flocking in daily error to my computer,
fluttering their names as I log on,
[...]

it would have been terrible to miss:
an engine released at last from its name
to flicker like lightning in the brain,
the valves of the planet looming through glass . . . (2004, 77)

In an interview with David Wheatley, Sirr comments that: "I'm interested in computer technology so I read a lot of technical stuff about operating systems and so forth" (2005, 70). His poems have an impersonal feel which undermines any sense of a lyrical-I behind the verses. In the above poem, cyber space, bird migration and the travels of diverse bird-enthusiasts, whose lives Sirr accidentally learns about, are presented as a relatively benign version of our cyber-histories circumnavigating the planet, though the final stanza is full of mechanical menace.

Aingeal Clare remarks in her introductory article on Peter Sirr, published in *Metre* magazine in 2005, that Sirr's poetry: "hints at a desire to unpick conventional notions of poetic persona" and that Sirr is working from a position of "non-identity" resonant with "the Portuguese modernist Fernando Pessoa" whom Sirr has cited as one of his major influences (Clare 2005, 77). The poem "Gospels" is full of machines which seem to supplant the lyric subject. The poet is "sucked out of sight [...] / erasure's emperor" (Sirr 2004, 73). Sirr's poetry only occasionally, and then obliquely, addresses the socio-economic crisis of contemporary Ireland in such poems as "James Joyce Homeloans" and "Office Hours" both from the 2004 collection *Nonetheless*. However, in a wider sense, his poems articulate a nomadic subjectivity which appears to reflect the globalized networks of communication which dominate our world.

4. Conclusion

Writing in his editorial in the summer of 1986 to Issue 16 of *Poetry Ireland Review*, Terence Brown complained that:

I get very few poems that address political or social issues directly [...] Reading the bulk of the submissions it is sometimes possible to forget that we are living through a period of profound social and political crisis, so intent are the poets on the exploration of the private world which is assumed to possess unquestionable validity. (1986)

It is clear, however, that Ireland's current economic plight has stimulated a fair amount of social engagement on the part of this sample of established and emerging poets. To speak coherently about contemporary Ireland, global discourses and networks must be considered. In an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 1987, Samuel Beckett referred to "consternation behind the form" of his own work. Even though the context and occasion is different, one might reasonably suggest that the precarity of globalized modernity, as manifested in Ireland's economic boom and bust, has prompted some well-sculpted consternation on the part of contemporary poets. The consternation is a formal artistic response to a "new world disorder" (Bauman 1998, 59) which has engulfed Ireland and threatened her sovereignty and survival.

Notes

¹ For example, Fintan O'Toole comments: "In essence, the real boom lasted from 1995 until 2001. What made it real were two forces [...]: sharp rises in output per worker (productivity) and manufacturing exports. Productivity growth slowed between 2000 and 2006 to its lowest level since 1980. [...] By 2008, Irish productivity levels were below the OECD average" (O'Toole 2009, 20).

² This term originated in the field of existential psychiatry and was popularized in Scottish anti-psychiatrist R.D. Laing's study *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960).

³ For extensive discussion of the cultural history of this term see Chapter 6 'Postmodern schizophrenia' of Angela Woods' study of the uses of the term 'schizophrenia' in cultural and critical discourses titled *The Sublime Object of Psychiatry: Schizophrenia in Clinical and Cultural Theory* (2011).

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