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THE POETIC TRADITION IN IRISH LITERATURE

Poetry in Ireland dates back to the 6th century and is considered to be one of the oldest forms of vernacular literature in Europe. It was often used to convey the values, history, and identity of the Irish people, making it a cornerstone of Irish culture. The development of Irish poetry was closely connected with the struggle for cultural, historical and political independence of Ireland as throughout its history, Ireland struggled with conquerors, first the Scandinavians, then the British, who left their mark not only on the life of the Irish people, but also on their culture. Consequently, when we speak about Irish poetry, we mostly refer to poems written in two languages: Irish (dating back to around 500 BC) and English, although the linguistic specificity of the Irish poetic tradition is much more complicated: British English, Scottish, Gaelic and Irish proper are intertwined in it. The earliest monuments of the poetic art of Ireland, created in the Irish language, date back to the 6th century, while the English language penetrated the poetry of Irish authors much later – by the 14th century. Both linguistic traditions have always intersected.

Literary scholars tend to divide the entire process of the evolution of Irish poetry into three periods: early, middle and late (modern). The early stage of the development of Irish poetry is discussed in the works of the British researcher J. Boice, Celtic and Gaelic poetry was studied by a great many scholars, such as M. C. O'Brien, J. E. C. Williams, P. K. Ford etc. Scholarly studies of the period from the 19th to early 20th centuries include the works of D. Kiberd, T. Brown, A. Davis, P. Crotty, A. Murphy and many other researchers. The intersection of Irish and global poetry received attention in the research of N. Alsaeed. Irish poetry is also studied intensively from the point of view of linguistics and translation studies (M. Cronin), history and culturology (A. Rees).

These, as well as other researchers note that literacy began to spread in Ireland due to the introduction of Christianity (5th century) which brought with it the Latin alphabet adapted for the Irish language. A significant part in the development of the written language was played by monasteries, which by the 7th century had become large and influential social institutions, centers of learning and enlightenment. In fact, the first poets of Ireland were monks, who created their poems in Irish enriching their versifications with the techniques and vocabulary of Latin poetry. This early poetry was based on local folklore traditions, and its main themes were landscape descriptions and religion. Secular poetry also began to develop, with the authors dedicating their verses to famous historical figures and contemporary ruling commanders and monarchs [1, p. 13]. Numerous early poetic works were marked by a pronounced lyricism and were often focused on heroic themes.

These earliest examples of Irish poetry were not based on rhyme: they were written as blank verses containing alliterations and assonances. "The earliest poetry

we have", writes M. Dillon, "consists mainly of brief utterances of eulogy or satire in which alliteration is the only ornament <…>. Then in the seventh century (perhaps even in the sixth) rhyme appears in Irish verse. The origin of rhyme is still obscure. It first appears in Latin hymns of the fifth century <…>. They soon began to compose in Irish, thus using the vernacular centuries before such a thing was thought of in France or Italy or Germany. And in Irish the use of rhyme was developed with extraordinary effect, so that in a single couplet you may get not merely endrhyme, as in English verse, but two internal rhymes as well" [2, p. 10].

The Irish Middle Ages were marked by the formation of a special stratum of the population – the bards who became a professional group of educated, literate poets. The work of the bards was focused on glorifying the history and traditions of their native land; bardic verse was based on a special technique of versification, Dán Díreach – a syllabary based on consonance and alliteration. However, a bard was not just a poet, but an employee at court; their activities had different directions – they were singers, chroniclers, satirists. From the point of view of the modern understanding of poetic creativity, the works of bards may not reveal similarities with poetry in principle – many poems were, in fact, a description of the genealogy of rulers, journalistic descriptions of their virtues and actions. "Metrical Dindshenchas," or "Lore of Places" is the most famous medieval piece of Irish literature. It is a collection of tales (176 texts) describing the origin of the names of different places in Ireland. Most historians date the compilation of the body of texts of "Lore of Places" to the 11th–12th centuries. "Lore of Places" is perhaps the main surviving written artifact of Irish bardic verse. The most significant monuments of Irish medieval poetry are the poetic fairy-tales about Fionna and Fianna (an Fhiannaíocht), also known as Ossian poetry, and *Manuscript Harley 913* (also named the *Kildare Poems* because of the supposed place of origin – the County of Kildare).

During the Tudor conquest of Ireland (16th c.), Irish poetry began to come into contact with English poetry. During the hostilities, two of the most important English poets of the time served in the Irish colonies. While the work of Sir Walter Raleigh (1552–1618) had little effect on the development of Irish literature, the work of Edmund Spenser (c. 1552–1599) had a serious impact on the further development of the poetry of Ireland. It was typical for E. Spencer to idealize the landscapes of Ireland (they served as the inspiration for his main work, *Faerie Queene*, 1590–1596). At the same time, the author was critical of the rulers of Ireland and rejected everything Irish as a priori barbaric. In general, the invasions of the British had a negative impact on the local poetic and folk art of the Irish [3, p. 103].

The next stage, which was marked by the flowering of Irish poetry, started in the 17th century. This period is characterized by the development of Gaelic poetry. By the beginning of the century, the British had taken the dominant political position in Ireland, which, in turn, led to the decline of the bardic culture. In the middle of the century, the Irish Rebellion of 1641 took place; for this reason, many Irish poets of the period wrote politicized poetry in support of Ireland's Catholics.

Among others, we can mention the work of the clergyman and poet Pádraigín Haicéad who wrote poetry in support of the national uprising. Irish poets of this epoch such as Daibhi Ó Bruadair, Piaras Feiritéar and Aogán Ó Rathaille saw the war as revenge on the Protestant settlers who had come to dominate Ireland. In the 17th century, women poets were first noticed by the poetic community in Ireland. Among them we can name Brighid Chill Dara, Fionnghuala Ní Briain, Kaitilin Dubh.

The 18th century saw the first signs of the revival of the Irish language and culture and was rather fruitful for Irish poetry due to the emergence of literate, technically skilled poets who spoke the Irish language. In early 18th century, new Gaelic poetry took root, inspired by the Irish-speaking community, and its main theme was the plight of the indigenous people of Ireland. During this period, accent meters gained popularity, in contrast to the complex syllable meters that had prevailed before. Aogán Ó Rathaille was an outstanding figure of the Irish verbal art of this era. In the 18th century, Irish poetry was actively translated into English. Dublin became the centre of Irish poetry; there were several literary clubs and associations that united local poets. In some cases, the aristocracy served as patrons of the poets, but, as a rule, more often the poets performed at the so-called *cúirteanna filíochta* – "poetry courts" or local meetings of poets. The most famous members of such associations were Sean Ó Tuama, Aindrias Mac Craith, Seán na Ráithíneach Ó Murchadha. The poetry of those years was aimed at describing the life of an Irishman, revealing the national character, highlighting the specifics of folk professions typical of this era – a homeowner and a tenant, a priest and a teacher, a poet and an artisan [4, p. 65]. Along with the work of literate poets, traditional oral poetic culture flourished as well – love songs, songs about ancient Fianna heroes, labour songs, devotional songs, lamentations, humorous and satirical songs, lullabies and children's songs. The characteristic feature of folk poetry in Irish was reliance on the techniques of assonance and alliteration.

Some Irish poets were turning to the traditions of English poetry, and English culture was no longer perceived by them as a tool of suppression. The connection between Irish and English is evident in songs written in English in the 18th century by such Irish-speaking poets as Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill, Jeremiah Joseph Callanan, Thomas Moore. Among the Irish authors of that period who wrote poetry in English, Jonathan Swift and Oliver Goldsmith are most prominent.

By the 19th century, the Irish language was in a precarious state. Subsequently, the promotion of Standard English in education gradually diminished the importance of the Irish language in poetry. A poet who supported Irish people and sought to revive Irish folk poetry was Samuel Samuel Ferguson whose research paved the way for many achievements of the Celtic Revival.

The era of modernism was marked for Irish poetry by the works of Padraig Pierce (writing in Irish), Joseph Mary Plunkett and Thomas McDonagh. One of the representatives of the poetical culture of this period is the "peasant poet" from the Boyne Valley, Francis Ledwidge. The most significant figures of the second

generation of Irish modernist poets, who started publishing in the 1920s and 1930s, are Brian Coffey, Denis Devlin, Thomas McGreevy, Blánaid Salkeld and Mary Davenport O'Neill [5, p. 54].

The Irish Literary Revival (approximately from 1880 to 1930), also known as the Irish Literary Renaissance or the Celtic Twilight, marked a significant period in the development of literature and specifically poetry in Ireland. It sought to promote Irish culture and literature in response to British colonialism. As R. M. Kain observed, "Ireland's political and artistic resurgences coincided" [6, p. 3]. The three general major characteristics of the Irish Literary Revival are linguistic concerns, religious motifs and political controversies. "Collecting and reporting oral evidence of Irish popular culture and translating folktales and tradition-laden Irish poetry, perhaps partly imitating the original syntax, rhythms and phonetic structure in English, were the most common forms of literary 'revivalism'" [7, p. 236].

A remarkable array of exceptional individuals emerged during this period. George Russell (pseudonym AE) explored spiritual and mystical themes in his poems, nature and Irish folklore, captivating readers with their visionary essence, vivid imagery and rich symbolism. Seamus O'Sullivan offered his unique voice and perspective. Austin Clarke and Padraic Colum also focused on folklore. Some of the poets were leaders and active participants of the 1916 Easter Rising and were executed for this (Patrick Henry Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, Joseph Plunkett).

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) was a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival and devoted himself fervently to the preservation and promotion of Irish cultural history through his writing. He is one of the most significant poets of the 20th century, a Nobel Prize winner, as he exerted a profound influence on literature with his innovative poetic forms and exploration of complex themes that continue to resonate across generations. Yeats showed an interest to poetry at an early age, when he became more profoundly interested in Irish folklore and occultism – the themes that appear in his early works. Yeats's literary career began in the late 19th century, and his first significant work was *The Island of Statues* (1885), a fantasy, followed by *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* (1889). However, since 1900, his poetry became more realistic and politicized. Yeats' mindset was deeply rooted in Irish culture and identity, which he celebrated and explored throughout his work. His poetry often reflects the struggles and aspirations of Ireland, particularly during its tumultuous history, including the Easter Rising of 1916. The folklore, mythology, and history of Yeats's native Ireland are sources of inspiration for his works, which are profoundly infused with an Irish identity. This connection to national identity not only made his work relevant to his contemporaries but also established him as a voice for future generations of Irish writers to such an extent, that some critics even claim that it was "Yeats who created/invented an Irish poetic tradition, Yeats who in his magisterial presence remains an influence that Irish poets must absorb, reject, re-create or ignore as best they can" [8, p. 2].

However, as noted by F. Garratt, "In the 1930's and 1940's <…> [a] new generation of Irish writers was coming into its own, among them Austin Clarke, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain and Patrick Kavanagh, who found the literary scene stale. The problem for these young writers was not what it had been for their elders and betters, the architects of the Revival, who felt the need for an Irish context and tradition. On the contrary, for this new generation the opposite was true: the tradition was all too vivid, so prominent in fact it was epidemic" [9, p. 171]. The majority of these poets wrote about their native land and its history in a less mystical way than Yeats did, with nature still playing the crucial role in much of their work. However, practically all of these authors shared much of Heaney's and Yeats' thematic concerns that are characteristic of the bulk of the solid and prominent Irish poetic tradition. The main historical influence on Irish poetry of the post-WWII period was the Northern crisis – a significant escalation of violence and civil unrest in Northern Ireland that erupted in 1969, marking the beginning of what would later be known as "the Troubles".

A. Clarke and P. Kavanagh were the leading figures in the "second generation" of the Irish Literary Revival. As C. Owens pointed out, A. Clarke was responding to the movement's preoccupations with the heroic legends of ancient Ireland, embellishing the modern style of English verse with bardic traditions, and P. Kavanagh – investing poetry with fresh regional humour and a religious vision imbued with a Catholic sacramental view of nature [10, p. 110–111]. L. MacNeice is often regarded as a philosophical poet, appealing to large audiences. Like the poets of the Revival, he focused "on everyday events and political issues while also exploring ultimate metaphysical questions" [11, p. 143].

In the Republic of Ireland, in the late 1950s, a postmodern generation of poets and writers emerged. Among the most prominent ones we can mention Piers Hutchinson, John Jordan, Thomas Kinsella and John Montague, the majority of whom were located in Dublin during the 1960s and 1970s. A number of new literary magazines were founded in Dublin in the 1960s: *Poetry of Ireland*, *Arena*, *The Lace Curtain*, and *Cyphers*. The poetic works of P. Muldoon mark a departure from the work of his immediate predecessors as he "diverged from the conception of Irish poet as cultural watchdog and keeper of the national conscience" [12, p. 182], which was the staple of the poetic identity of W. B. Yeats.

Further, women's poetry after a relative decline was revived again in the middle of the 20th century. The poetry of Eilean Nie Chuillanain and Eavan Boland shows a profound interest in searching for the sacred, and also in reexamining women's experience. Contemporary Irish poets Rita Ann Higgins and Paula Meehan are not interested in nationalist matters, but rather in social issues such as poverty, violence and injustice.

While the majority of the poets mentioned above created their works in English, bilingualism can still be considered a characteristic feature of contemporary Irish poetry. Among the most notable examples is Michael Hartnett, who was fluent in both Irish and English [13, p. 33]. J. Jensen commented on this phenomenon: "While English has become the dominant language of most

contemporary Irish poets, there are several, including Michael Davitt, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and Michael Harnett, who have decided to express themselves in the Irish language. The rich tradition of Irish poetry seems to be as strong as ever, with its poets still speaking to a nation willing to listen" [14, p. 3].

Seamus Heaney became one of the most celebrated Irish poets writing in the English language and has even been called Ireland's greatest poet since William Butler Yeats. His poetic oeuvre comprises twelve volumes of poetry, which has been translated into more than 27 languages. Heaney was also a distinguished essayist, playwright, translator, professor and literary critic who contributed articles, translations, and interviews to Irish literature and literary criticism. During his lifetime, Heaney received many honours, culminating in the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995 "for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past" [15]. His poetry contributed to the intense flourishing of Irish poetry since the Second World War.

In 1997, in his interview with Henri Cole, Heaney agreed with the interviewer's suggestion that his poetic creativity may be divided into two periods, the collection *Field Work* (1979) serving as the dividing line. Heaney's early style is associated with fidelity to one's roots – to the land itself, whether it be the peat bogs of County Derry or the archaeological sites of ancient Ireland. In fact, the majority of his poems are set within a 10-mile radius of his birthplace. In Heaney's later work, physical surroundings, although also topographically marked, continue to acquire abstract meanings, metaphoric implications and philosophical reflections. At the final stage of Heaney's career, the themes of death and journey to another world would appear more persistently.

The poetic works of both W. B. Yeats and S. Heaney are deeply rooted in Irish culture, nature, folklore, literary traditions, and Ireland's troubled historical past. Both poets also made use of the tension between the local and the universal, expanding the boundaries of poetic space through meditations on human nature, universal laws of human existence, the presence of evil in the world (Yeats) and on the continuity of traditions, family ties, personal and collective identity (Heaney).

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