

Presenting and Translating Michael Hartnett/Mícheál Ó hAirnéide (1941-1999)

Heleno Godoy

“The death of any poet of stature is always to be lamented,” wrote Joe Humphries in *The Irish Times* the day after Michael Hartnett’s death, on early Wednesday, October 13, 1999, in St. Vincent’s Hospital, Dublin. The poet was only 58 years old.

A native of Newcastle West, Co. Limerick, son of a house painter and a housewife, Michael Hartnett was locally educated before spending one year, from 1962 to 1963, at University College Dublin, where he studied philosophy and logic. He lived in London and Madrid, Spain, and again in Dublin, during the 1960s, settling down later in Co. Limerick, between 1974 and 1984; in 1985 he moved to Dublin where he spent almost of the rest of his life. He worked for many years in the Department of Posts and Telegraphs and later as a lecturer in creative writing at Thomond College, Limerick. He co-edited the magazine *Arena* with James Liddy and Liam O’Connor (1963-1965) and worked on a version of the *Tao Te Chin* while a curator of Joyce’s tower at Sandycove. He also co-edited another magazine *Choice* with Desmond Egan, having also worked as a poetry editor of *The Irish Times* for a period.

Among Michael Hartnett’s early works from his late teens, “Sulphur” drew some attention, but it was with the publication of *Anatomy of a Cliché* in 1968 that he became known and respected as a poet. Several books followed in subsequent years, not only of his own poetry, but also translations such as *Tao: A Version of the Chinese Classic of the Sixth Century* (1971), Federico Garcia Lorca’s *Gipsy Ballads: A Version of the “Romancero Gitano”* (1973), poems by the Hungarian Ferenc Juhász: *An Damh-Mhac* (1987), and poems by St. John of the Cross: *Dánta Naomh Eoin na Croise* (1991). He also published selections he translated from Irish poets such as Daibhí Ó Bruadair (1985), Nuala Ní Domhnaill (1986), Pádraigin Haicéad (1993), and Aodgaghán Ó Rathaille (1999).

For Michael Hartnett poetry does not begin with W. B. Yeats (“our bugbear Mr Yeats/ who forced us into exile/ on islands of bad verse,” he wrote in *A Farewell to English*), but in the cultural turbulence of 17th century Ireland. This explains at least two characteristics of his work and literary development. First, the poetic craft acquired with all those Irish poets, which gave him both a mastery of the formal verse and a novelty and freshness in imagery, as well as a great freedom in technical spaciousness. It is as if in having to learn how to deal with Irish old poetic forms in order to translate them (for example, the *dánta grádha*, classical Irish love poems, which were to influence his first book), that Michael Hartnett became conscious of the power that kind of poetry could have, mainly if combined with more developed longer poetic forms (of which “An Lia Nocht/The Naked Surgeon,” about his father’s

death is a good example). The second aspect of Michael Hartnett's poetry is his decisive and "for life" promise to abandon the English language in favour of Irish, as he said in one of the poems translated here, "to court the language of my people." With *A Farewell to English*, published in 1975, he not only forsook English language but offered a challenge to all living Irish poets at the time, deriding Yeats and all others who had written in English in the past and/or had gone on doing so, in a highly provocative and polemical form.

In his presentation "Contemporary Irish Poetry" for *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1992), Declan Kiberd draws attention to the fact that Michael Hartnett's retreat into Gaelic poetry lasted less than a decade, during which he discovered "that it may not be a question of a writer choosing a language, so much as a case of the language choosing to work out its characteristic genius through a writer." Despite his assertion that "[he] belong[ed] to the Gaelic poets and they to [him]," Hartnett later confessed: "I happen to think in two languages. I wake up at night thinking in two languages. It breaks my heart."

The poet returned to writing in English with books such as *Inchicore Haiku* (1985) and *A Necklace of Wrens* (1987). As Michael Hartnett himself recognised, his attempt to write only in Irish, distanced him from his readers. In a kind of prophetic statement, he had written in a poem called "A Visit to Croom 1745" that

I had walked a long time
in the mud to hear
an avalanche of turf fall down,
fourteen miles in straw-roped overcoat
passing for Irish all along the road
now to hear a Gaelic court
talk broken English of an English king.
It was a long way
to come for nothing.

Although, as Declan Kiberd puts it, Michael Hartnett seems to say that his "longed-for Gaelic court of poetry promises much but delivers 'nothing'," and that "he never quite equalled his English output" while writing in Irish, many other critics, poets and readers would gladly say that Hartnett's poetry is one among the best ever published in Ireland in the second half of the XX Century, in English as well as in Irish. Tony Curtis, a fellow poet and friend, declared to *The Irish Times* that Michael Hartnett "was not one to draw big crowds but poets loved him for his craft. He'd more lyrical talent in his little finger than any of the rest of us in our whole bodies." Paying tribute to him, Labour TD, Michael D. Higgins, said that "[w]hat he brought to life and letters was a very particular incisive, wry and deeply human perspective." His publisher, Peter Fallon, also a poet and an anthologist, declaring that "[h]is dying [was] a darkness in the world," also said that "[i]n his honesty and dedication, he was in some ways the personification of poetry." Kiberd himself, recognising him as "an anticlimax poet," because of his being "an anatomist of the cliché," says that "Hartnett can shift a single lyric through a remarkable emotional range. His love of striking images is qualified by a tendency towards abstraction, which often takes the form of moral indignation at the failure of the world to live up to its own imagery." Eoghan Ó hAnluain, in his "Irish Writing 1900-1988," also in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, wrote that Michael Hartnett "brought a new excitement to poetry in Irish and [that] his imaginative resourcefulness in his 'resumed' language is remarkable."

As the poems translated here clearly show, Michael Hartnett's concern with Ireland's rural crafts and country rituals ("The Wounded Otter," "Maiden Street Wake," "Mrs. Halpin and the Lightening") constitute the core of his poetry. His love poems ("1," "2," and "3" of *Anatomy of a Cliché*) extend this concern to family ("To My Grandmother, Bridget Halpin") and country life ("A Small Farm," "Death of an Irishwoman") and, through his refusal of the English language, to highly political attitudes and statements ("5" and "7" of *A Farewell to English*," "Patience of a Tree"). In all of his poetry, the reader can find the "hidden Ireland" Daniel Corkery wrote about in 1924.

Besides the books already mentioned above, Michael Hartnett published other ones: *Poems in English* (1977), *Adharca Broic* (1978), *An Phurgoid* (1983), *Do Nuala: Foighne Crainn* (1984), *Collected Poems in English* 2 vols. (1984-1985), *Poems to Younger Women* (1988). His last major collection was *New and Selected Poems* (1995). He is the co-author, with Caitlín Maude, of a play, *An lasair Choille* (1961). His *Collected Poems* is forthcoming. Critical and background material about the poet include:

Cronin, John: A review of *Haicéad* in *Irish Studies Review* 9: (Winter 1994/95) 49-50.

Denman, Peter: "Haicéad" in *The Irish Literary Supplement* 13: (Fall 1994) 18.

Drexel, John A review of *Michael Hartnett: Collected Poems Volume 2* in *The Irish Literary Supplement* (Spring 1988) 12.

Goodby, John: "New Wave 1: 'A Rising Tide' Irish Poetry in the 60s, iii) Michael Hartnett and the Farewell to English" in Dorgan, Theo (ed.), *Irish Poetry since Kavanagh*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996, pp. 129-131.

Grennan, Eamon: "Wrestling with Michael Hartnett" in *The Southern Review* 31 (Summer 1995) 655-675).

Hunter, Charles: "Michael Hartnett; a poet of Many Masks" in *The Irish Times*, 4/30/1988, Weekend 11.

Ní Chuilleanáin, Eiléan: "In the Forest of English." Review of *A Necklane of Wrens*, *The Irish Literary Supplement* 7: 2 (Fall 1988) 36.

O'Driscoll, Dennis: "An Interview with Michael Hartnett" in *Poetry Ireland Review*, 20: (Aug. 1987) 16-21.

The following should also be seen: *Modern Irish Poetry An Anthology, Between the Lines Poems on the Dart, Anthologie de la Poésie Irlandaise du XX^e*, and Brady, Anne & Brien Cleeve (eds.) *A Biographical Dictionary of Irish Writers* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1985). Also: Robert Hogan's *The Macmillan Dictionary of Irish Literature* (1980), Louis McRedmond's *Modern Irish Lives: Dictionary of 20th Century Irish Biography* (1996), and Robert Welch's *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (1996), as well as many sites on the Web.

The poems translated and published here were taken from Seamus Deane (gen. ed.): *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1992), Peter Fallon & Derek Mahon (eds.): *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), and Michael Hartnett: *Selected & New Poems* (Wake Forest: Wake Forest University Press, 1994). Of these translations, "Morte de uma Irlandesa" was first published in "Poesia Irlandesa Contemporânea," "Opção Cultural" nº 150 (Goiânia: *Jornal Opção*, 8/3-9/1997, p. C-4), "Paciência de uma Árvore," "Velório na Rua Maiden," "Uma Pequena Fazenda," "A Lontra Ferida," and "A Sra. Halpin e o Raio" were first published in the same cultural supplement: "Seis Poemas de Michael Hartnett," "Opção Cultural" nº 266 (Goiânia: *Jornal Opção*, 10/24-30/1999, p. C-4); the others are published here for the first

Cultural” nº 266 (Goiânia: *Jornal Opção*, 10/24-30/1999, p. C-4); the others are published here for the first time. I am grateful to Prof. Patrick John O’Sullivan, my colleague at the Catholic University of Goiás, for his gentle and careful reading of these translations, and some invaluable suggestions.

Patience of a Tree

A knife awaited him in London
in a drawer, in darkness
in a pocket, in darkness.
Fooling,
tricking,
mocking –
he saw the phantom knife.

He burnt the tree of fear
and went across the sea
but a knife awaited in London.
In a hand, in the darkness
in a fight, in the darkness.

The knife was waiting there
and though metal formed the blade
from a tree’s revenge
the hilt was made.

Maiden Street Wake

I watched the hand
until a finger moved
and veins above the index knuckle
pulsed.
That was his last movement.
She had a band
of tan tobacco juice
upon her chin. Her few teeth buckled.
That was all the grief she showed.
In public.

Columned and black with women in shawls,
yellow and pillared with penny candles,
bright-eyed and blue-toed with children
in their summer sandals,
that was the mud house, talkative and lit.
In the bed, the breeding ground and cot,
he wore his best blouse

Paciência de Uma Árvore

Uma faca esperava-o em Londres
numa gaveta, na escuridão
num bolso, na escuridão.
Escarnecendo,
enganando,
iludindo –
ele viu a faca fantasma.

Ele queimou a árvore do medo
e foi, cruzando o mar,
mas uma faca esperava-o em Londres.
Em certa mão, na escuridão
numa luta, na escuridão.

A faca estava esperando lá,
e embora metal formasse-lhe a lâmina,
da vingança de uma árvore
seu cabo fora feito.

Velório na Rua Maiden

Eu olhei a mão
até que um dedo se moveu
e as veias sobre as juntas do indicador
pulsaram.
Aquele foi o último movimento dele.
Ela tinha um fio
escuro de sumo de tabaco
sobre seu queixo. Seus poucos dentes batiam.
Foi todo o sofrimento que ela demonstrou.
Em público.

Encolunada e enegrecida por mulheres de xales,
amarelada e sustentada por velas baratas,
olhobrilhando e pisazulada por crianças
com suas sandalhas de verão,
aquela era a casa de barro, tagarela e iluminada.
Na cama, chão procriador e abrigo,
ele vestia sua melhor camisa

and would have seen
the finest teacups in his life.
But he was white
as an alabaster Christ
and cold to kiss.

We shuffled round and waited.
Our respects were paid.
And then we ate soft biscuits
and drank lemonade.

Small Farm

All the pervasions of the soul
I learnt on a small farm.
How to do the neighbours harm
by magic, how to hate.
I was abandoned to their tragedies,
minor but unhealing:
bitterness over boggy land,
casual stealing of crops,
venomous card tables,
across swearing tables,
a little music on the road,
a little peace in decrepit stables.
Here were rosary beads,
a bleeding face,
the glinting doors
that did encase
their cutler needs,
their plates, their knives,
the cracked calendars
of their lives.

I was abandoned to their tragedies
and began to count the birds,
to deduce secrets in the kitchen cold,
and to avoid among my nameless weeds
the civil war of that household.

The Wounded Otter

A wounded otter
on a bare rock,
a bolt in her side,

e teria visto
as mais finas chávenas de sua vida.
Mas ele estava pálido
como um Cristo de alabastro
e frio para o beijo.

Misturamo-nos e esperamos.
Nossos respeitos prestamos.
Depois, comemos biscoitos amanhados
e bebemos limonada.

Uma Pequena Fazenda

Todas as infiltrações da alma
aprendi numa pequena fazenda.
Como aos vizinhos fazer o mal
por mágica, como odiar.
Fui entregue às suas tragédias,
menores, mas incuráveis:
amargura sobre terra alagada,
roubo casual de colheita,
maliciosos carteados
sobre mesas praguejantes,
uma musiquinha pela estrada,
um pouco de paz em estábulos decrepitos.
Aqui havia contas de rosários,
uma face sangrante,
as portas brilhantes
que de fato enclausuravam
suas necessidades de cuteleiros,
seus pratos, suas facas,
os rachados calendários
de suas vidas.

Fui entregue às suas tragédias
e comecei a contar os pássaros,
a deduzir segredos na cozinha fria,
e a evitar, entre minhas ervas sem nome,
a guerra civil daquela situação doméstica.

A Lontra Ferida

Uma lontra ferida
sob uma rocha nua,
uma seta em sua flanco,

stroking her whiskers,
stroking her webbed feet.

Her ancestors
told her once
that there was a river,
a crystal river,
a waterless bed.

They also said
there were trout there
fat as tree-trunks
and kingfishers
bright as blue spears –
men there without cinders
in their boots,
men without dogs
on leashes.

She did not notice
the world die
nor the sun expire.
She was already
swimming at ease
in the magic crystal river.

Mrs Halpin and the Lightening

When thunder entered like an easter priest
and draped its purple on Mullach a'Radhairc¹

a horse took fright and broke its neck
against a pierstone:
the carshafts gave like small bones
and the tilted wheel spun.
When the blue sheets crackled
with electric starch
Mrs Halpin with a goose's wing
flailed holy water drops
like the steel tips of holy whips
to beat the demons from the room.
But they would not go away.
Their garments shook her rosary
as they danced on the stone floor.
Her fear was not the simple fear of one

alisando seus bigodes,
batendo seus pés palmados.

Seus ancestrais
disseram-lhe uma vez
que havia um rio,
um rio de cristal,
uma cama sem água.

Eles também disseram
que havia trutas lá,
gordas como troncos,
e muitos pássaros
brilhantes como lanças azuis –
homens lá sem cinzas
em suas botas,
homens sem cachorros
em correias.

Ela não notou
que o mundo morre,
nem que o sol expira.
Ela estava já
nadando, à vontade,
no mágico rio de cristal.

A Sra. Halpin e o Raio

Quando o trovão entrou como um padre na páscoa
e drapejou sua púrpura sobre Mullac a'Radhairc¹

um cavalo se assustou e quebrou seu pescoço
contra um pilar de pedra:
os varais da carroça cederam como ossinhos
e a roda encerada rodopiou.
Quando os raios azuis crepitaram
com energia elétrica,
a sra Halpin, com a asa de um ganso,
malhou gotas de água benta
como pontas de aço de chicotes santos
para expulsar os demônios do quarto.
Mas eles não iriam embora.
As vestes deles balançaram seu rosário
enquanto dançavam no chão de pedra.
Seu medo não era o simples medo de alguém

who does not know the source of thunder
these were the ancient Irish gods
she had deserted for the sake of Christ.
They waited in the earth and sky
to punish and destroy
their fickle congregation.
Mrs Halpin knew the reason why.

1 Hills to the south-west of Newcastle West, Co. Limerick.

For My Grandmother, Bridget Halpin

Maybe morning lightens over
the coldest time in all the day,
but not for you. A bird's hover,
seabird, blackbird, or bird of prey,
was rain, or death, or lost cattle.
The day's warning, like red plovers
so etched and small the clouded sky,
was book to you, and true bible.
You died in utter loneliness,
your acres left to the childless.
You never saw the animals
of God, and the flowers under
your feet; and the trees change a leaf;
and the red fur of a fox on
a quiet evening; and the long
birches falling down the hillside

Death of an Irishwoman

Ignorant, in the sense
she ate monotonous food
and thought the world was flat,
and pagan, in the sense
she knew the things that moved
all night were neither dogs nor cats
but *púcas*² and darkfaced men
she nevertheless had a fierce pride.
But sentenced in the end
to eat thin diminishing porridge
in a stone-cold kitchen
she clenched her brittle hands
around a world
she could not understand

que não sabe da origem do trovão:
estes eram os antigos deuses irlandeses
que ela abandonara por causa de Cristo.
Eles esperavam na terra e no céu
para punir e destruir
sua volúvel congregação.
A sra. Halpin sabia bem a razão.

1 Colinas a sudoeste de Newcastle West, Co. de Limerick..

Para Minha Avó, Bridget Halpin

A manhã talvez brilhascenda sobre
a mais fria hora em todo o dia,
mas não para você. Um pássaro planando,
ave marinha, melro, ou ave de rapina,
era chuva ou morte ou gado perdido.
Os avisos do dia, como vermelho maçarico,
tão cauterizado e pequeno o céu nublado,
era livro para você, e verdadeira bíblia.
Você morreu em absoluta solidão,
seus acres deixados para os sem filhos.
Você nunca viu os animais
de Deus e as flores sob seus
pés; as árvores mudarem a folha
e a pele vermelha de uma raposa num
calmo entardecer; e as longas
bétulas desmoronando na ladeira

Morte de uma Irlandesa

Ignorante, no sentido de que
ela comeu comida monótona
e pensou que o mundo era plano,
e pagã, no sentido de que
sabia que as coisas que se moviam
à noite não eram nem cães nem gatos,
mas *duendes* e homens de cara escura;
ela, no entanto, tinha um orgulho feroz.
Mas sentenciada, no fim,
a comer ralo mingau minguido
numa cozinha de extremo frio,
ela fixou suas mãos frágeis
ao redor de um mundo
que não podia compreender.

I loved her from the day she died.
She was a summer dance at the crossroads.
She was a card game where a nose was broken.

She was a song that nobody sings.
She was a house ransacked by soldiers.
She was a language seldom spoken.
She was a child's purse, full of useless things.

Anatomy of a Cliché

1. *mo gbrá ihú*

With me, so you call me man.
Stay: winter is harsh to us,
my self is worth no money.
But with your self spread over
me, eggs under woodcock-wings,
the grass will not be meagre:
where we walk will be white flowers.

So rare will my flesh cry out
I will not call at strange times.
We will couple when you wish:
for your womb estranges death.
Jail me in this gentle land;
let your hands hold me: I am
not man until less than man.

2.

Some white academy of grace
taught her to dance in perfect ways:
neck, as locked lily, is not wan
on this great, undulating bird.

Are they indeed your soul, those hands,
as frantic as lace in a wind,
forever unable to fly
from the beauty of your body?

And if they dance, your five white fawns,
walking lawns of your spoken word,
what may I do but let linger
my eyes on each luminous bone?

Eu a amei desde o dia em que morreu.
Ela foi uma dança de verão nas encruzilhadas.
Ela foi um jogo de cartas em que um nariz foi
quebrado.

Ela foi uma canção que ninguém canta.
Ela foi uma casa saqueada por soldados.
Ela foi uma língua raramente falada.

Anatomia de um Cliché

1. *mo gbrá ihú*

Comigo, desta forma me chamas homem.
Fica: o inverno está severo sobre nós,
meu eu nem vale preço em dinheiro.
Mas com teu eu espalhado sobre
mim, ovos sob asas de galinhola,
a grama não será escassa:
por onde andarmos haverá flores brancas.

Tão raramente minha carne clamará, que
eu não te solicitarei em horas estranhas.
Nós nos acasalaremos quando quiseres:
pois tuas entranhas desconhecem a morte.
Aprisiona-me nesta terra gentil;
deixa tuas mãos me apoiarem: eu não sou
homem até que menos do que homem.

2

Alguma branca academia de beleza
ensinou-a a dançar de modo perfeito:
o pescoço, lacrado lírio, não é lânguido
neste grande pássaro, e ondulante.

São eles realmente tua alma, aquelas mãos,
tão frenéticos como laço de renda ao vento,
para sempre incapazes de sair voando
da beleza de teu corpo?

E se dançam, teus cinco gamos brancos,
andando por gramados de tua palavra falada,
que posso fazer a não ser deixar tardarem
meus olhos por cada luminoso osso?

Your hands... are music and phrases
escape your fingers as they move,
and make the unmappable lands
quiet orchestra of your limbs.

For I have seen your hands in fields
and I called them fluted flowers
such as the lily is, before
it unleashes its starwhite life:

I have seen your fingernail cut
the sky and called it the new moon...

3

Listen,
if I came to you, out of the wind
with only my blown dream clothing me,
would you give me shelter?
For I have nothing –
or nothing the world wants.
I love you: that is all my fortune.

But I know we cannot sail without nets:
I know you cannot be exposed
however soft the wind
or however small the rain.

from A Farewell to English

5

I say farewell to English verse,
to those I found in English nets:
my Lorca holding out his arms
to love the beauty of his bullets,
Pasternak who outlived Stalin
and died because of lesser beasts;
to all the poets I have loved
from Wyatt to Robert Browning;
to Father Hopkins in his crowded grave
and to our bugbear Mr Yeats
who forced us into exile

on islands of bad verse.

Among my living friends
there is no poet I do not love

Tuas mãos... são música e frases
escapam de teus dedos enquanto se movem,
e fazem de terras imapeáveis
a quieta orquestra de teus membros.

Pois eu já vi tuas mãos nos campos
e as chamei de aflautadas flores,
tal como o lírio é, antes que
desatrele sua vida alvaestrelada:

Já vi tuas unhas cortarem
o céu e as chamei de lua nova...

3

Ouve,
se eu viesse até ti, saído do vento
e só com meu exaurido sonho me vestindo,
tu me darias abrigo?
Pois eu nada tenho –
ou nada que o mundo queira.
Eu te amo: esta é toda a minha riqueza.

Mas sei que não podemos navegar sem redes;
sei que tu não podes ser exposta,
por mais que suave o vento
ou por mais que branda a chuva.

de Um Adeus ao Inglês

5

Eu digo adeus ao verso inglês,
àqueles que achei em armadilhas inglesas:
meu Lorca estirando seus braços
para amar a beleza de suas balas,
Pasternak, que sobreviveu a Stalin,
e morreu por causa de bestas menores;
a todos os poetas que eu amei,
desde Wyatt a Robert Browning;
ao Padre Hopkins, em sua visitada tumba,
e ao nosso amedrontante Sr. Yeats,
que nos forçou ao exílio

em ilhas de mau verso.

Entre meus amigos vivos
não há poetas que eu não ame,

although some write
with bitterness in their hearts;
they are one art, our many arts.

Poets with progress
make no peace or pact.
The act of poetry
is a rebel act.

7

This road is not new.
I am not a maker of new things.
I cannot hew
out of the vacuum-cleaner minds
the sense of serving dead kings.

I am nothing new.
I am not a lonely mouth
trying to chew
a niche for culture
in the clergy-cluttered south.

But I will not see
great man go down
who walked in rags
from town to town
finding English a necessary sin,
the perfect language to sell pigs in.

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

embora alguns escrevam
com amargura em seus corações;
eles são uma arte, nossas muitas artes.

Poetas em progresso
não fazem paz ou pacto.
O ato da poesia
é um ato rebelde.

7

Esta rota não é nova.
Não sou um fazedor de coisas novas.
Eu não posso eliminar
das mentes de aspirador de pó
o senso de servir a reis mortos.

Não sou nada novo.
Não sou uma boca solitária
tentando escavar
um nicho para a cultura
no clero-tumultuado sul.

Mas não verei
grandes homens caírem,
os que andam em andrajos,
de cidade a cidade,
achando o inglês um pecado necessário,
a língua perfeita pra se vender porcos.

Eu fiz minha escolha
e parto com pouco lamento.
Eu vim, com parca voz,
para cortejar a língua do meu povo.