Dinner at the Café Marliave

John Boyle O'Reilly and the Dual Tradition

Emerging from the busy underground of the Park Street T stop at the corner of Tremont and Winter, where the green fan of the Boston Common flares out between Downtown Crossing and Beacon Hill toward Boylston Street, Chinatown, and the Back Bay, you can join those stepping from a motorized trolley or one of the neon pink amphibious Duck Tours and, like Dorothy toeing the origin of the yellow brick road, take your first steps on the Freedom Trail. The alternating red-brick and scarlet-painted line angles continuously through downtown Boston’s warren of streets—paved, prerevolutionary cow paths that laid out the pattern for what is arguably America’s first and most history-obsessed city. You might choose to head straight up the esplanade toward the capitol’s golden dome and spend time at St. Gauden’s famous bronze bas relief of Robert Gould Shaw on horseback leading his “bell-checked Negro Infantry” into Civil War battle and civic immortality, into Robert Lowell’s great poem “For the Union Dead” and the “glory” of several academy awards. Or you might head north toward the Park Street Church and the Old Granary Burial Ground on your way to the Old Statehouse and the Old North Church with a stop along the way at one of the chowder bars at Fanuiel Hall and Quincy Market. If you go that way, as you come to the Burial Ground filled with tombstones from before the Revolution—like rows of chipped brown teeth—leave the trail and cross the street toward the glittering show-sign of the Bean-town Pub, and keep walking down the narrow street that looks almost
like an alley—Bosworth Street—behind the Parker House Hotel, famous for its rolls, where Malcolm X once worked as a bellhop. Keep walking still under the half-lowered fire escapes of old print shops toward the tall metal grill at the dead end, and stop there, just before the stone stairs at the stone building on the right, where hangs a black sign with gold, cursive, nineteenth-century lettering that reads “Café Marliave.”

Navigating though Boston by foot and certainly by car can be like making your way through a Maurice Escher print—first you’re in the basement, then you’re on the roof, and there’s no telling how you got there—but arriving at the Marliave, and going inside, is fortuitous. If the café doesn’t throw you wholly back to the nineteenth century, it at least conjures the kind of bygone restaurant one might remember from the mid-twentieth, itself a holdover from ragtime days—tin ceiling, high straight-backed wooden booths packed back-to-back and closely together. If you ask for the “Brief History” with the menu as you’re led to your booth by one of the wait staff, you can read about how Henry Marliave, who, after emigrating from Paris, founded his first small restaurant in 1868, which burned in the great Boston fire of 1872; how he moved to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for his health but returned in 1882 to open the present establishment; and how after his death in 1895 the café continued under his wife’s management until 1904, then under his nephew’s, and finally under the management of just two succeeding owners who have dedicated themselves to the “traditions of the Marliave.” One of those traditions that does not appear even in the brief, photocopied history and will not be proffered this evening by our waiter entails the booth in back—easily the most cramped of all the booths in the dining room—presided over by the portrait of a large, dignified-looking man with intense eyes, a broad, drooping moustache, and a neat cravat, who might be a politician or a civic leader, certainly a famous man in his day. And he was: “John Boyle O’Reilly” the frame reads, but the portrait does not hang there to commemorate the civic contributions of this mostly forgotten figure, for we have arrived, as the gold-plated plaque tacked to the wall just below the portrait tells us, at The Poet’s Corner.

In his day, John Boyle O’Reilly was a man of considerable national and international renown, one in a long line of Irish rebels and exiles banished from his home by the British colonial authorities whose ex-
ploits, writing, and public accomplishments made him one of the key-note figures during the last half of the nineteenth century. Born in 1844, the same year as Gerard Manley Hopkins, in the village of Dowth, County Meath, near the Boyne River, in the looming shadow of the Great Famine, O’Reilly would seem destined as a poet to draw his creative resources from a singular place deeply resonant with Irish history back to Neolithic times—the passage graves at Newgrange; Patrick’s arrival at the Boyne’s mouth; the rise of Celtic monasticism; the final, hope-crushing defeat of Ireland at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690; and all the fraught history that followed. Instead, as A. G. Evans’s biography Fanatic Heart describes, O’Reilly’s life reads like the perfect epic vehicle for a film starring Russell Crowe.

It began in the parish fields of Dowth, where he wrote his first poems. After his apprenticeship as a journalist for the Drogheda Arms, his emigration to England to advance his opportunities like so many young Irish of his time, his enlistment in the Tenth Hussars of the English army, and his clandestine swearing of the Fenian oath while still a soldier to join the Irish Republican Brotherhood, he was court-marshaled as traitor to the crown and confined behind the Dickensian walls of Dartmoor Prison in the Devon moorlands before being banished to Fremantle in Western Australia. He then attempted suicide, had a doomed love affair with the warder’s daughter, and made a spectacular escape through the bush and the sand dunes at Australind. From there he paddled out into the Indian Ocean in a makeshift dory to meet the whaling boat Gazelle, which would convey him to Java, through the Southern Seas, around the Cape of Good Hope—with some periodic delays for expeditions, including one in which he barely survived after a harpooned whale splintered his whaleboat with one of its flukes—and onward, still in disguise from the colonial authorities, to Liverpool. There he boarded the S.S. Bombay to Philadelphia, arriving to huge acclaim as a heroic figure and a life in America as the preeminent Irish American literary figure of his time, editor of the Boston Pilot, embodiment of the gradual acceptance of the Catholic Irish into the status quo of Protestant America, as well as a vocal and tireless advocate for African American rights when Jim Crow minstrelsy prevailed and shaped the attitudes of what he saw as his own historically distressed people. He died at the ripe age of forty-six in 1890, one year after Hopkins’s
death and two years before Whitman’s, possibly by a last suicide attempt, though more likely by accidental overdose of sleeping pills for his chronic insomnia.¹

As one looks up at the picture above the table in the Poet’s Corner of the Marliave, it seems impossible to plumb the complex life and history behind the inevitable mask of portraiture. One would have to know the story behind the portrait and recognize that other elaborate stone monuments commemorate the man inside the frame not far away at Boston’s Fenway and in Holyhood Cemetery in Roxbury, and farther away also in Dowth Churchyard in Ireland and among the dunes of Australind in Western Australia—a man whose image is enshrined on three continents but whose writing is all but entirely neglected by literary historians and anthologists.

Reading most of O’Reilly’s poetry, one is not surprised to see at first why such an art of the purely occasional and public-minded, and bound to the technical conventions of the day, might quickly fall out of favor at the brink of the twentieth century while Hopkins’s poetry—so individually tuned and formally idiosyncratic—obtained greater and greater currency and influence despite the relative obscurity of the poet. One could, perhaps, picture O’Reilly as a kind of Irish American version of Whitman writing the epic “Song” of the great European migration to America, or at least the Irish version of it—that diasporic “open road” across the Atlantic with its still more brutal parallel in the Middle Passage, a wake parting the waves behind a coffin ship, an American wake. That missing epic of America he never wrote, perhaps in part because of his public position, and perhaps for more complex reasons of the poet being unable to carry the full imaginative weight of the historical circumstance of which he was so centrally a part.

Of O’Reilly’s literary meetings at the Marliave, Evans writes, “There is little doubt O’Reilly was proud of his position as editor and he enjoyed the companionship of the Boston literary set. He dined in their company on formal occasions and lunched with them less formally at the Marliave Restaurant on the corner of Bosworth Street, a short distance from the Pilot offices. The tables were divided by wooden partitions and set around the walls so that small groups of like-minded friends could meet without distraction from neighbors.”² One can imagine O’Reilly, perhaps during the same week of similar close literary gath-
erings at the Papyrus Club (later the St. Botolph Club), animatedly discussing poetry with his fellow Irish American poets James Jeffrey Roche and Louise Imogen Guiney within the intimate surroundings of the Marliave. On any given day, Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Greenleaf Whittier, William Dean Howells, and Ralph Waldo Emerson might have been gathering at other literary salons and clubs, and surely O’Reilly would have been welcome among the Brahmin literary set by the time he had established himself sufficiently to host Oscar Wilde on his visit to Boston in 1882. As A. G. Evans observes, O’Reilly had indeed “constructed a bridge” between “Yankee Boston” and the Boston Irish, in part one might say by emulating the kind of popular and declamatory poetry written by Longfellow, whose death in 1882 deeply affected him.³ His long patriotic ode, “America,” has the ring of a uniquely American brand of optimism but is all the more startlingly prescient for its vision of Europe’s future that seems to predict the formation of the European Union, which occurred a little more than a century after his death:

O, this thy work, Republic! This thy health,
To prove man’s birthright to a commonwealth;
To teach the peoples to be strong and wise,
Till armies, nations, nobles, royalties,
Are laid to rest with all their fears and hates;
Till Europe’s thirteen monarchies are States,
Without a barrier and without a throne,
Of one grand Federation like our own!⁴

It is O’Reilly’s backward look to Europe from his New World vantage in the rousing rhetoric of these lines that most suggests the kind of deeply seated historical, cultural, and retrospective pressures that were ultimately subversive of his prospects as a poet of singular voice and accomplishment, despite all the visionary heraldry. For all the rhapsodic sentiment of poems like “America,” “At Fredericksburg,” and “Crispus Attucks,” steeped as they are in the turbulent milieu of American history, John Boyle O’Reilly is not just another would-be American bard left in the dust on Whitman’s open road in the predawn of modernism.
He is perhaps the last, misbegotten heir of an older Irish bardic tradition, the file, so thoroughly displaced into his life and literary ambitions as to be little more than a trace asserting itself across the spectrum of his varied civic and literary passions.

Reflecting on the quality of nineteenth-century English poetry in Ireland, Thomas Kinsella comes to the judgment that such verse is “of general dullness, a great supply of bad verse” but for individual poems by James Clarence Mangan, Samuel Ferguson, William Allingham, Thomas Davis, and Thomas Moore. Of course, the same might be said for verse generally in any time and place, but certainly none of these figures matches the achievements of the great English Romantic and post-Romantic poets. For Kinsella, of these, Mangan’s poetry commands the highest stature, if only for those few “exceptional poems” of which “The Nameless One,” “Siberia,” and “Dark Rosaleen” are the quintessential examples. What characterizes Mangan’s work is its psychic intensity, its willingness to turn inward while at the same time situating itself in the social and cultural context of an Ireland divorced from the shaping literary traditions of a lost language. Mangan’s best poetry manifests the collective psyche, individually pitched, of an imploded bardic tradition centuries removed from sustaining social conditions. As such, his work is a pivot point between an eclipsed ancient tradition and the advent of a modern world characterized, as Edward Said remarked, by exile. As Said further reflects, exile “is predicated on the existence of, love for, and real bond with one’s native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss. . . . No one today is purely one thing.”

Perhaps it is an internal hybridity not yet fully assimilated into the poet’s identity that drove James Clarence Mangan ever deeper into idiosyncrasy and madness within the limits of his long-colonized native place. Perhaps also it is the irreconcilable loss, his permanent exile from his native place, that drove John Boyle O’Reilly to embrace a hybrid identity in nineteenth-century America well in advance of its currency in the latter half of the twentieth century and today. At the same time, O’Reilly’s understanding of himself as a poet and civic leader harkens back to what Declan Kiberd calls “the strong sense of social vocation.
and the public tone” of the Irish bardic ideal without testing it against the kind of individual, personal urgency that has shaped the most permanent poetry of the past two hundred years.

As his personal history of imprisonment, exile, and emigration testifies, John Boyle O’Reilly’s life was nothing if not tumultuous. He embodied the emigrant experience—the experience of exile from Ireland in its harrowing extreme—but his poetry remains opaque to that ordeal except in the most general public way. Here is the opening of “The Exile of the Gael”:

“What have ye brought to our Nation-building, sons of the Gael? What is your burden or guerdon from old Innisfail?”

“No treason we bring from Erin—nor bring we shame or guilt! The sword we hold may be broken, but we have not dropped the hilt! The wreath we bear to Columbia is twisted of thorns, not bays, And the songs we sing are saddened by thoughts of the desolate days. But the hearts we bring for Freedom are washed in the surge of tears, And we claim our right by a People’s fight outliving a thousand years!”

The poem begins with a question posed by what could easily be the voice of Columbia herself, torch in hand above New York harbor, if not an atypically liberal-minded Know Nothing willing to at least entertain Irish emigration and enfranchisement in the American democracy. In addition to making a passionate rhetorical argument for the Irish joining the ranks of America and its national, imperial future, O’Reilly’s eponymous speaker harkens back to “the desolate days” of cultural and linguistic loss under a thousand years of colonial rule, as well as “the surge of tears” of displacement, exile, and emigration. Needless to say, as unique and yet emblematic as O’Reilly’s experience must have been in the wrenching details of his life, the stock images that populate “The Exile of the Gael” carry none of the gravitas of his hard-won experience. His unique diasporic narrative of loss and crossing is submerged
beneath a bardic directive that eschews the individual for what Stephanie Rains calls “the macro-narrative” of emigration.10 O’Reilly leaves his own “micro-narrative”—the narrative that is irreducibly closer to the bone of experience—undocumented in the poetry. It is an act of self-exclusion that largely recurs in Irish American poetry well into the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, in “The Exile of the Gael” O’Reilly intends to sing the collective experience of his tribe in true bardic fashion, though in Kinsella’s words “the native aristocracy” that formed “the basis” for the file’s “social—virtually administrative function in society” has long since vanished.11 What he would sing instead of the lore of place names (dinnseanchas), or the praises and satires supportive of a lost order, are the odes that would redress a still further dispossession from the native place experienced by millions who left their homes often under social, cultural, economic, and political duress. In this light, it is not outlandish to see O’Reilly in the line of latter-day bards, dispossessed, nostalgic for the vanished order, singing brutally out of their hopelessness. For O’Reilly his place in that line might have been at most only a half-conscious thought. Beyond this subliminal link, his work differs from the likes of Dáibhí Ó Bruadair and Aogán Ó Rathaille in its optimism—showing American influence—though it is an optimism achieved without admission into the poetry of the raw edge of experience, a circumstance that left his work at once belated and immature, for all its ambition and largesse of feeling.

As one early commentator wrote, O’Reilly “might have been the Dickens or even the Tolstoy of Ireland’s mass migrations and national agitations” had he been able to achieve a “systematic and realistic depiction of either.”12 Or perhaps in his poetry, instead of his fiction, he might have been able to represent those same harsh realities in work that heralded twentieth-century poetics, instead of harkening back to an outmoded bardic calling through received models of declamatory verse. Because he was not able to make that transition, his poetry stands preeminently alongside the popular nineteenth-century Irish American poems that memorialize the exile’s loss of the native place or invoke in purely political terms Ireland’s long travail under British colonial rule.13

Interestingly, in The Dual Tradition, Thomas Kinsella identifies similar flaws in the preponderance of Irish poetry written in the English lan-
guage during roughly the same period. The inadequacies of Irish poetry at the time, he observes, “have something to do with the loss of a working Irish literary tradition” while simultaneously having even more to do with “the related colonial impulse to present the home literature to a ‘senior’ outside audience for its amusement and instruction.” In turn, the weakness of Irish American poetry during roughly the same historical moment may have something to do with the exile’s need to remain connected to his Irish homeland while simultaneously proving his mettle in his new country. In both instances, Irish and Irish American poets had to inflect their work largely away from inner experience—from what Yeats would later call “passionate, normal speech”—and either toward an audience whose communal support for the poet’s artistic growth had been abrogated by historical circumstance through the loss of the Irish language or, in the case of Irish America, toward an audience that was as yet nascent in the emigrant’s painful but gradual enfranchisement within the American cultural order. In either case the historical and cultural forces at work were very nearly crushing; certainly they were inimical to the making of great poetry.

For Kinsella the root of the problem for Irish poetry in the nineteenth century lies in the loss of the Irish language as a “possible sustaining force.” What could be more devastating to a poet’s inner creative resources than the loss of his or her native language and the cultural community it perforce implies? In Ireland, “the virtual absence of good writers in both languages during the whole nineteenth century, when the people were painfully shedding one language and slowly acquiring another,” likewise symbolizes for Declan Kiberd the fundamental division of Irish literature from which it is still seeking to recover. Kinsella states it succinctly: “Irish literature is a dual entity,” and it is so because one language had to be “abandoned for another” through a centuries-long process of dispossession “reducing energies of every kind, undermining individual confidence, lessening quality of thought.” In his essay “The Divided Mind,” Kinsella’s seminal reflections on his separation from a thousand-year-old tradition of Irish-language poetry are deeply moving:

The inheritance is certainly mine but only at two enormous removes—across a century’s silence and through an exchange of worlds. The
greatness of the loss is measured not only by the substance of Irish literature itself, but also by the intensity with which we know it is shared; it has an air of continuity and shared history which is precisely what is missing from Irish literature, in English or Irish; in the nineteenth century and today. I recognize that I stand on one side of a great rift, and can feel the discontinuity in myself. It is a matter of people and places as well as writing—of coming from a broken and uprooted family, of being drawn to those who share my origins and finding that we cannot share our lives.19

Both Declan Kiberd and Richard Kearney regard Kinsella’s “double vision” as shaping his insightful assessment of the trauma underlying Irish literary intelligence.20 The great rift Kinsella laments likewise haunts O’Reilly’s poetry; he is another of its stillborn literary heirs, only further removed by forced emigration from his native ground. What is so striking in Kinsella’s lament, however, is that this Irish poet’s classic statement on “the divided mind” of the Irish writer might just as well have been written by any Irish American poet conscious enough to recognize that the legacy of emigration and exile constitutes not only a divided mind but a mind doubly divided by being uprooted from those people and places and writing from which he or she is dispossessed by distance and not only by time. If we add to the traumatic loss of the Irish language the further traumatic loss of native place experienced by millions of Irish in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and acknowledge as we should that emigration is as much a part of the Irish experience as the Irish American experience, and in turn situate the burgeoning of Irish American poetry in the twentieth century after O’Reilly in the context of both losses, then what we have before us is not simply “a dual tradition” but a tradition further displaced through the historical, cultural, and psychic trauma of emigration and exile. It is as if Irish American poetry has raised the dual tradition Kinsella articulated so astutely to yet another power.

Dialectics of Home and Abroad

What does this mean for how we understand the continuities and discontinuities of Irish poetry? For one thing, it suggests that to speak
merely of a dual tradition is not adequate, unless one is willing either to elide or to minimize the impact of mass emigration on Irish identity. To do so would constitute the most thoroughgoing denial of historical fact. This is very nearly what Patrick Ward claims in *Exile, Emigration, and Irish Writing*, in which he notes that even in this time of intellectual sensitivity to matters of cultural diaspora, Irish journals “reveal a noticeable neglect of exile and emigration in spite of the fact that it has been and remains a central fact of Irish experience for writers as well as the population as a whole.” Yet even in Ward’s urgent assessment his objection remains focused on what might be called “insular Ireland”—the writers he speaks of are “Irish” construed narrowly, as is the population to which he refers. It is one thing to consider the self-elected emigration of Joyce and Beckett as insufficiently examined through the lens of exile; it is another to bring attention to the work of those who left under more grave duress than artistic choice, or who are, as members of the succeeding generations, the heirs of that legacy of exile and emigration.

This leads, naturally, to a second admission of substantial importance relative to how we understand the traditions of Irish poetry: it means Irish American poetry has not yet been sufficiently acknowledged or explored either for its continuities with the poetry of the homeland or for its own continuities and discontinuities or for its potent affinities with other diaspora literatures. The result is a greater rift, a larger gulf, than Thomas Kinsella’s dual tradition wholly acknowledges. It also means the “quarantine” between Irish and Anglo Irish that Declan Kiberd saw as dividing “Irish schoolrooms” in the late seventies has hardly begun to be admitted even to exist between Irish and Irish American poetry, except in those cases where the “Irishness” of the poet is not in question. In those cases the more centrifugal complexities of identity hardly matter where the centripetal identifier “Irish” trumps the hybrid-making realities of history.

This is not to say, of course, that emigrant and expatriate writers, and poets in particular, do not populate the Irish literary landscape. From the early twentieth century onward, poets like Padraic Colum and Brian Coffey register limited but important responses to the experience of migration out of Ireland, if only for a time. Here is Colum’s “A Rann of Exile”:  

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Nor right, nor left, nor any road I see a comrade face
Nor word to lift the heart in me I hear in any place;
They leave me, who pass by me, to my loneliness and care,
Without a house to draw my step nor a fire that I might share!

Ochone, before our people knew the scatt’ring of the dearth,
Before they saw potatoes rot and melt black in the earth,
I might have stood in Connacht, on top of Cruchmaelinn,
And all around me I would see the hundreds of my kin.23

Padraic Colum’s lyric assumes a moving eponymous voice born of the Irish post-famine diaspora, and one suspects that his many years of living and traveling outside of Ireland in America and as far a field as Hawaii fostered his imaginative access to the experience of forced emigration. At the same time, to adopt Andrew Gurr’s useful distinction, Colum might best be identified as an “expatriate” Irish poet rather than an exile, since he could and did return to Ireland.24 The like is true for Brian Coffey, who wrote his long poem, “Missouri Sequence,” during his time teaching philosophy in St. Louis from 1947 to 1952. Here are lines from “Nightfall, Midwinter, Missouri”:

We live far away from where
my mother grows very old.
Five miles away, at Byrnesville,
the cemetery is filled with Irish graves,
the priest an old man born near Cork,
his bloss like the day he left the land.

People drifted in here from the river,
Irish, German, Bohemians,
more than one hundred years ago,
come to make homes.

Many Irish souls have gone back to God from Byrnesville,
many are Irish here today
where cedars stand like milestones
on worn Ozark hills

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and houses white on bluegrass lawns
house people honest, practical and kind.

All shows a long love
yet I am charmed
by the hills behind Dublin,
those white stone cottages,
grass green as no other grass is green,
my mother’s people, their ways.²⁵

What is so striking in these lines is how the poet’s affirmation of continuity with the diasporic Irish who populated Byrnesville—even the name inscribing a founding Irish identity—suddenly elides to the recognition of difference. The hills behind Dublin are not the Ozark hills, and the stone cottages of Ireland are not those of this Midwestern town despite its Irish cemetery. For Coffey, what finally makes the Irish of Byrnesville not Irish in the fullest sense is the simple fact that they no longer live in Ireland where “grass is green as no other grass is green” and as such where “the ways” of his mother’s people manifest an unbreached continuity. In their unguarded honesty Coffey’s lines perform a paradigmatic slippage—the remarkable erasure of Irish identity from Irish America based on the absence of Irish Americans from the native place. They likewise exemplify perfectly Patrick Ward’s judgment that “the dialectics of ‘home’ and ‘abroad,’ consciously or unconsciously, pervaded the cultural and artistic consciousness of those who stayed, and those who left.”²⁶ Yet if “the fact of emigration and expatriation covertly permeated all aspects of national life, for all Irish people, one way or another,”²⁷ then how is it possible the very reality that so defined consciousness and culture in Ireland for hundreds of years is the same reality that asserts itself as a marker of difference rather than identity, and as such between Irish and Irish American poetry?

One centrally important contemporary Irish poet for whom the “dialectic of home and abroad” becomes the vital substance of the work, explored consciously and embodied in poems imbued with an unflagging awareness of both Irish and American history and culture, is Eamonn Wall. Born in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, Wall emigrated to America with the other so-called New Irish during the 1980s, before the
Celtic Tiger changed Ireland from one of the weakest economies in Europe to the economic player it became before the recession and the debt crisis of 2010. Throughout his five books of poems Wall dives persistently and deeply into the gulf of discontinuity and displacement articulated in Coffey’s “Missouri Sequence.” “The Wexford Container Tragedy” in Refuge at DeSoto Bend can be read as an answering sequence to Coffey’s in which the experience of migration is the identifying thread uniting diasporic peoples from different cultures. The sequence begins in the New York Holocaust Museum and ranges broadly from the poet’s native place of Wexford to Ellis Island to St. Louis, Missouri, where he presently lives, in an effort to reconcile the tragic discovery of eight dead African stowaways in the Wexford Business Park on December 8, 2001. Their death in the ship container, as Wall implies, makes the boat on which they traveled the twenty-first-century version of a coffin ship. Yet as the poem “From St. Louis, Missouri” suggests, the heart-rending tragedy belies a deeper continuity among emigrant peoples:

These words are whispered from St. Louis where last night children in green gathered at the Sheldon Concert Hall to play music, dance jigs, sing in the ancient languages of monks, navigators, saints, sinners, builders, homesteaders, nuns, bakers, bankers, all peoples of a scattered cast called Irish: Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Jew, piled merrily to applaud dancers on a stage. Adults and pumped-up relatives had fought the dismal early December night—city workers in warm canteens drinking hot chocolate, playing five card stud—streets and highways uncleared, cars and semis in the ditch, a rolled mini van upside down, wedged between the guard rail and storm drain on I-44 between the Hampton & Kingshighway exits. Of German, French, Swiss, Nigerian, and Irish ancestry, these performers in hard shoes gathered in our bright French city to dance a steady narrative of removal and survival.28
In contrast to Coffey’s “Nightfall, Midwinter, Missouri,” Wall’s “From St. Louis, Missouri” describes a contrary arc of consciousness in which the Irish are identified as a “scattered cast” that includes Irish America. For all its empathy toward its American setting, Coffey’s poem reasserts the idea of the Irish as an insular people. To be really Irish is to be native in one’s native place. In Wall’s poem, on the contrary, to be Irish is to be scattered, a wandering tribe. Paradoxically, the status of the Irish as a diasporic people is what most defines them and, in turn, binds them to other diasporic peoples in Wall’s “steady narrative of removal and survival.”

Thus Wall shifts the concept of identity away from nativist constructions and toward a more complex web of relations both cultural and historical—a common experience of passage rather than a common ground. Within that web, to be Irish cannot be separated from being Irish American—or Jewish, Swiss, or African, for that matter. Implicitly, Eamonn Wall’s poem redresses what James Byrne has observed to be the Irish American struggle “to locate itself along the lines of other, more successful, ethnic minorities, by striving to imbue itself with a sense of ethnic authenticity.”29 Wall’s poem does so not by assuming an equivalency in the magnitude of racial and ethnic discrimination, but by furthering the insight that the experience of diaspora inherently composes a nexus of stories that need not at this historical moment compete for recognition and validation at another’s expense. Within the related narratives of diaspora we become more ourselves in every sense by becoming more “other” than what we might initially deem ourselves to be.

Wall’s poetry is potently significant, for to understand “emigration, immigration, and migration”30 requires us to recognize how these related experiences ultimately converge in a kind of subtending narrative of loss and endurance that unites people from different cultures and histories. It is a more capacious understanding of diaspora that brings together all the “othered” others. Nevertheless, when he reflects on his own experience as an expatriate Irish poet in his groundbreaking study From the Sin-é Café to the Black Hills, Wall affirms the double nature of his life as an Irish immigrant in America:

If I wish to define myself in the future, I would have to begin
With two huge words: Irish and American. But over the years
I have revered both terms while at the same time seeking to understand them better. But the two can never be separated. I have double vision; I am doubled in every way.31

Whether or not he intends to do so, Wall’s affirmation of his own doublessness underscores the need to enlarge Kinsella’s “dual tradition.” It requires the dual tradition to acknowledge that the rift the older poet rightly identifies deepens still further in the experience of “removal and survival” outside the homeland of Ireland. Not surprisingly, Wall implicitly sees the connection when he reflects: “Being an Irish exile is a heavy business because it is so tied up with mythology, pain and history. When I left Ireland I thought I was getting away from history; little did I know I was walking right into the middle of an historical web from which there would be no escape.”32 The sentiment is underscored powerfully in his poem “Leaving Boise” from his most recent book, A Tour of Your Country:

Last night, you drank
at the Ha’ Penny Bridge in Boise to come-all-ye roars
of local balladeers
as Irish miners heard ringing in saloons rollicking songs
of home, thinking as we must,
all of us across time, of many destinies we had managed
to escape. Not one of us
willing to put America behind us so intent were
we to learn what we did not know. . . .33

Even as “Leaving Boise” wittily and cunningly portrays the bar life of this Montana town as a kind of wry simulacrum of Dublin—a Ha’ Penny Bridge pub instead of a Ha’ Penny Bridge—the poem simultaneously extends a metaphorical bridge to “all of us across time.” Thus Wall’s poem modulates quietly from physical place to metaphysical condition. America is one destiny of many possible destinies, though its very presence in the moment as the destiny actually encountered and lived calls for the poet’s assent, his intention to embrace the vast “unknowing” of America. Through this assessment, hard-won, both the
poet’s fate and the importance of Irish American experience for Ireland and Irish history gains purchase in the landscape of Irish and Irish American literature.

Of course, Eamonn Wall is not the first Irish poet to venture into that historical web. O’Reilly found himself in it, as did Padraic Colum and Brian Coffey to far lesser extents, as well as many others in their day. Wall’s contemporary Greg Delanty, also a New Irish poet, has likewise produced a sustained body of work through five books of poems, as well as a recent Collected. He and Wall have been established as the two Irish poets of their generation who have given themselves the task of bringing the emigrant experience to the fore in Irish poetry, an experience that was until recently all but entirely ignored. Like Wall’s poetry, Delanty’s work reflects the double vision of the expatriate Irish writer living in America. Though they live much of the year in the United States and hold posts at American institutions of higher education, both have strong ties to Ireland and spend significant time there for personal and professional reasons. They exemplify the transnational lifestyle of many contemporary Irish living in the United States, who return often to their native place. At the same time, both poets have American families as well as American jobs. The experience of being “doubled” pervades the poems of each, yet their work reveals important differences in the way each evokes the emigrant relationship to his adopted country.

To read through Eamonn Wall’s growing body of work is in large part to follow the poet’s venture ever deeper into the continent, into the West in the historical as well as the metaphorical sense. As a poet who found academic work in Nebraska and Missouri, Wall made a literal journey that was the rehearsal for his poetry’s imaginative venture. Even the lineation of his poetry shows the open-form influences of American poets like James Schuyler and Frank O’Hara.

In contrast, Delanty’s poems reveal the emigrant’s awareness of a fascinating and significant difference from his new home. His early poem “America” begins with the declaration “I’m buffaled / by this landscape / without voice / or memory.” The shock expressed in these lines at once demonstrates the poet’s consciousness of his own “otherness” in the midst of the American landscape and rehearses the myth of America as a land without a past. The poet might as well be a Pilgrim arriving at Plymouth Rock or any European explorer from the Age of
Exploration who projected on the American landscape the status of a historical and metaphysical blank slate. At the same time the verb “buffaloed” is an American idiom, not an Irish one, so from the beginning the poem inscribes the poet’s veiled equivocation—he has already been taken in linguistically by the landscape and its history. By the poem’s third word the landscape has already altered the identity of the poet—I am buffaloed; I am become that which I am not, and that is surely not Irish. As such, the landscape is hardly without voice but is voiced by the poet, hardly without memory since the poem’s trope reiterates the history of “discovery” by which Europeans assumed the New World as at once an otherworld to be feared and, perhaps more significantly, an opportunity—again the empty slate on which they might imprint a new version of the long-standing nexus of Western tradition.

Delanty is clearly aware of these tensions and countercurrents, for in the lines that follow he floats an analogy that potentially fuses American and Irish histories in what is nothing less than an archetypal pattern of oppression, victimization, and survival, or at least a palimpsest of such:

Perhaps it pow-wows
with surviving Abenaki
the way Iveragh or Beara
parleys with us.

In this poem’s analogical conceit the Irish are like the Abenaki, the American landscape like the wild West of the west of Ireland. What saves the analogy from being strident to the point of confusion, a forced equation, is, again, the poet’s equivocation—“perhaps.” As before, the verbs carry the metaphor. “Pow-wow” and “parley” define parallel actions of verbal exchange between the landscapes and their inhabitants. “Pow-wow,” like “buffaloed,” brings Native American culture into the poem, while “parley” inscribes an entire history of Irish conquest into one word, since the verb “parley” arrives in Middle English through the Middle French parlee, which in turn originates in the late Latin parabolare, which is related to “parable” and “parabola.” This brief excursion into the etymology is worth the effort, since Delanty’s poem is hyperconscious of its own parabolic parallels between identities, landscapes, and
cultures, while at the same time questioning the very parallels it asserts, the final one reiterating a pre-Columbian journey to the New World from Irish legend:

Yet I can’t help but feel
I’m one of Brendan’s crew,
oblivious to the nature
of the fishy shore
they settled
before the whale
beneath their feet
surged to life.

The poem’s final parallel is to assert a parable of the emigrant’s inevitable slippage of identity, at once firm in the archetypal pattern of legendary passage and fundamentally unsettled since the archetype itself is founded on the undermining of firm ground, both native and adopted, through the parabolic journey away from home that will inevitably alter one’s consciousness of home, wherever it is. As Delanty observes in “We Will Not Play the Harp Backward Now, No,” “many of us learned the trick / of turning ourselves into ourselves, / free in the fe fiada anonymity of America.” Here, playing on the Irish legend of Earl Gerald, who turned himself into a stag, the poet affirms his emigrant identity as bound neither to the native place with its “all-seeing” small towns, nor to the ideal of American assimilation, but rather to the idea of the emigrant as artist whose freedom is enabled by America’s fe fiada, its cloak of invisibility, an art made possible by America’s sheer immensity relative to Ireland.

Marianne Moore alludes to the same legend in “Spenser’s Ireland,” and Delanty’s poem in turn alludes to Moore’s formally as well. Delanty’s poem, however, supplies an additional intertextual nuance by transplanting Earl Gerald’s transformation into an American context. Moreover, in Delanty’s poem the use of Irish to describe an American phenomenon underscores the poet’s equivocation about even his artistic identity—as artist he would be neither one thing nor the other, and perhaps both Irish and American at the same time, and/or as needed by
the particular poem, or even at a particular moment in a particular poem. Such poems are about the shifting, essentially hybrid nature of the emigrant’s sense of identity, as well as the cultural gaps and allegiances the emigrant must negotiate, and the poet negotiates through language. As such, a poem like Delanty’s “Tagging the Stealer” uses baseball to track the shift from scoffing ignorance at the American pastime to seeing the game as an art that, like poetry, has its own complex “sign language” through which the game is made possible.

Such poems in turn track the emigrant experience somewhat differently than does Eamonn Wall’s work. His poetry feels rather more at ease in the emigrant encounter with the “otherness” of America, with that defining openness, whereas Delanty’s poetry equivocates and thereby charts an emigrant’s resistance to redefinition and assimilation in the image of the immigrant’s new world. Nevertheless, both poets render apparent what Richard Kearney calls in Navigations a transnational paradigm that underlies the history of Irish culture, and they suggest the extension of that paradigm to the Irish American context and to Irish American poetry specifically.

_A Traveling Tradition_

Eamonn Wall and Greg Delanty are the most prominent poets of their generation who explore the Irish experience of emigration to America, though they have their progenitors as well in a few key figures who, like the prototypical John Boyle O’Reilly, stayed and made lives in America. The work of the late James Liddy, born in Wexford in 1934, stands as a bridge between Patrick Kavanagh’s Dublin and Ginsberg’s Haight-Ashbury—and gives a winking nod to John Ashbery along the way. Born in Dublin in 1941, Eamon Grennan established his career entirely in America and through American presses, garnering a substantial number of American awards. Born in 1951 in County Armagh, Paul Muldoon moved to the United States in 1987 and has since become an American citizen; he won a Pulitzer Prize for his book _Moy Sand and Gravel_ in 2004.

Like O’Reilly, each of these poets is an Irish poet by virtue of his birth on the island; still, American models, culture, and history have in-
fluenced their work pervasively. Could one consider them Irish American poets, as John Boyle O’Reilly is? (While he may be seen only as a minor poet, his work certainly has resonance for the expressly Irish experience of emigration and exile.) Again, as Eamonn Wall reminds us, after Dermot Bolger, many Irish writers now are not exiles at all but “commuters.” This is true to some extent for each of these poets, since each has easy access to frequent flyer miles as well as friends and family back in the home country, along with families, jobs, and publishers in the United States. But to see such writers as only identifiably Irish—that is, Irish by birth and therefore inextricably bound to the native place—is once again to cover with a kind of _fe fiada_ cloak of invisibility the undeniable fact that emigration, as the novelist Joseph O’Connor observed, “is as Irish as Cathleen Ni Houlihan’s harp.” Beyond O’Connor’s rueful barb, to miss the American impact on these writers and its place in the history of Ireland and America—or to treat it as merely ancillary—is to avoid confronting the complex and perhaps challenging fact that the divided tree of Kinsella’s dual tradition has another transnational limb.

That there are few poems expressly treating emigration and exile in so defining a literary and cultural resource as _The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing_ is significant. A quick track of such poems in the first volume notes Haicead’s seventeenth-century “The Emigrant’s Love for Ireland” and James Orr’s eighteenth-century “Song, Composed on the Banks of Newfoundland.” One has to wait until the third volume to find Brian Coffey’s “Missouri Sequence.” The third volume also includes work by John Montague and Eamon Grennan, both poets with strong ties to the United States, though none of Montague’s poems from _The Dead Kingdom_—his work that most directly treats the experience of exile—is represented. We do, however, find his classic poem of emigrant longing, “All Legendary Obstacles.” Still, it is a telling omission that none of Montague’s poems engaging his family’s emigration to America or his father’s decision to stay in his adopted country find admission to this definitive collection. Thank goodness Eavan Boland’s “The Emigrant Irish” appears with its stern reproach—“What they survived we could not even live”—though the poem’s admonition might just as well be turned against a definition of tradition that appears to prune much of the poetry of emigration from the canon.
There are no poems by John Boyle O’Reilly in the anthology (examples of his more purple poetry appear in others), though a poem like “At Fredericksburg” commemorating the Irish soldiers who died in the American Civil War is certainly worthy of inclusion. Also missing is Padraig O’Heigeartaigh’s “My Sorrow, Donncha,” an exile’s lament for his lost daughter written in Irish, though it does appear in Kinsella’s *Oxford Anthology of Irish Verse*. Nor are there any poems by Lola Ridge, a prominent but neglected literary and political figure during the 1920s and 1930s, poetry editor of the *Dial*, and contemporary of William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Hart Crane, whose work gained substantial notice during her lifetime. Nor do we find Louis MacNeice’s “Last Before America,” again one of the few Irish poems that speak to the experience of exile and emigration.

Future anthologies of Irish writing might seek to include more poems that explore this central theme of Irish history. Among them should be Michael Coady’s poem “The Letter,” which together with his essay “The Use of Memory” form a classic exploration of how the experience of emigration takes a personal toll on the lives of Irish families for generations. Coady himself forcefully addresses the fundamental problem in “The Sea-Divided Silence,” in which he identifies at the heart of the Irish literary tradition a denial of the magnitude of the diaspora for Irish literature. What we have, in his estimate, is “a tragic history of the unsaid, an evasive and disabling mode of response based upon the twin stereotypes which conspire to conceal rather than reveal—on the one hand the streets-paved-with-gold-vista of America from Ireland and on the other the sentimentalised idealisation of the homeland among exiles, each curiously reinforcing the other, though in seeming contradiction.” The result, he judges, is a “lacuna in the national discourse” and in the literature. The point here, without sounding shrilly critical, is to identify a significant blind spot in the Irish literary tradition, one that appears to manifest pervasively in the world of cultural memory the words of Boland’s lament for the emigrant Irish—“Like oil lamps we put them out the back, // of our houses, of our minds.”

The growing significance of this historical and cultural lacuna becomes even more apparent when one considers Irish American poetry from the standpoint of those poets who are not Irish-born but who by

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ancestry deserve to have their work considered within a more encompassing formulation of tradition. From such a widened perspective, however, would Irish American poets merely be appropriating an Irishness lost to them by history? Then again, is the tradition of Irish poetry complete without some measure of recognition given those works and poets who embody Ireland’s history of emigration? Or does assimilation over just one generation into the American cultural milieu preclude such considerations? Eamonn Wall broaches the subject implicitly when he writes: “Irish culture has become so widely disseminated and influential in the United States, and travel has become so easy, that Americans bypass Irish America and come straight to Ireland. Similarly, many of the young Irish who go to America nowadays go straight to the Lower East Side of Manhattan and steer clear of an Irish American world they consider having ground to a halt, wallowing in a time warp.”

Wall’s intention here is to argue for definitions of Irish and American to be “enlarged, inclusive, and allow both for fluidity and for a changed world,” particularly regarding the “migrant” Irish poets who move between both shores.40 One might ask, What of first-, second-, and third-generation Irish American poets? Are they also to be considered part of an Irish American world that has ground to a halt? Such a judgment would be inconsistent with the remarkable burgeoning of Irish American poetry over the course of the last century or so since John Boyle O’Reilly’s death.

Moreover, the idea that assimilation into America should preclude the Irish American poet from being considered within an expanded understanding of Irish literary tradition is inconsistent with Irish history. Kinsella himself speaks of “the way of assimilation” as essential to the development of “the dual tradition” of Irish and Anglo Irish literature and culture. Likewise, to envision being born on the island as the litmus test for Irishness is likewise inconsistent with Irish history. Is John Montague not an Irish poet because he was born in Brooklyn? Is Eva Bourke not an Irish poet because she was born in Germany, though she lives and teaches in Galway and publishes with Dedalus Press in Ireland? Assimilation is part of Ireland’s history, as is the history of migration—emigrant, exile, or contemporary “commuter.” Irish assimilation to America was born of the forces of the Irish diaspora and is a part of the story of the Irish people. To further neglect that story would be to
persist in what Declan Kiberd has called “a revivalist culture,” a culture trapped by the need to define itself against a colonizer, though surely revivalism must be misplaced when it is levied against one’s own historically and culturally extended community abroad. Given Ireland’s inevitable and increasing confrontation with multiculturalism through the European Union, as well as the growing recognition of its own multicultural past, vestiges of revivalism should give way to broader views on the conception and formation of tradition. This means taking fuller account of the poetic legacy of the emigrant Irish in America and thereby bringing Irish American poets out of the poet’s corner for a long-awaited place at the larger banquet.

Such a revised understanding of tradition would embrace Richard Kearney’s insight that “tradition is not just a homogenous totality; it is a multi-layered manuscript with each layer recording some new crisis, rupture or spasm that has altered the course of history.” To shift metaphors, however, Irish tradition has also been a culture en route, given the exigencies of history, and that conception at times pulls strongly against the more deeply ingrained conception of being rooted to place—despite the long experience of peregrination that informs Irish culture and literature. Irish tradition is a traveling tradition, to adapt Paul Gilroy’s use of the concept of traveling cultures from his book The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. Surely Irish American poetry is a part of that tradition and provides a unique vantage on the crisis or rupture of diaspora as well as on the idea of a tradition that remains fruitfully en route despite the spasms of history. To deny as much would be an impoverishment both of that tradition and of our understanding of tradition.

Here, again, Richard Kearney is illuminating on the subject, particularly in his objection to what he sees as the nature of T. S. Eliot’s view of tradition as a static totality of monuments. In contrast, as I underscore in “Irish American Poetry and the Question of Tradition,” Eliot’s conception of tradition is not as static or as reified as it has been portrayed, and it may in fact be useful to the idea of a traveling tradition. For Richard Kearney, an authentic understanding of tradition remains “wary of the Eliotic view of tradition as a pantheon of eternal monuments that ‘form an ideal order among themselves,’ an order that is ‘complete before any new work arrives.’” Instead, he sees tradition as “a seedbed of multiple readings that subvert any pretension to univocal

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self-identity or self-completion.”44 While certainly a compelling and needed corrective, the problem with such a view is that it undermines the aesthetic directive at the root of Eliot’s understanding of tradition. Without the aesthetic directive we are reduced to an idea of tradition beholden entirely to what Yeats called in his “General Introduction to My Work” the poetry of the point of view. As such, supremely achieved works of art with their technical sufficiency and innate surplus of meaning—their capacity to translate beyond their own times and cultures and hence their ability to enlarge our collective and ideally communal understanding of our selves and our world—become reduced to solely political and cultural surrogates. Part of the problem rests in Eliot’s tendency—a common one—to conflate the formation of tradition, which is the process of “handing over” (tradere), with the formation of a canon, the process by which works of art are determined to “measure up” (kanon, from the Greek kana or “cane”). Eliot affirms that no artist has “complete meaning alone” but can be valued only when set “for contrast and comparison, among the dead.”45 This speaks to the complexities of canon formation quite honestly and indubitably from the artist’s perspective as one who would not only make art but seek to make great art.

Tradition, however, is more encompassing than canon. Where canon asserts the aesthetic sense as the predominating category of judgment, tradition requires a broader field of inclusion; it requires receptivity to the new, even in the most bounded circumstances. That is why, though Eliot asserts “the existing order is complete before the new work arrives,” he also avers that “for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.” Eliot’s “eternal order” is not “eternal” at all, if by “eternal” we mean unchanging; rather, tradition requires “a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal.” What makes a writer traditional for Eliot is a historical sense that holds both together. Imbedded in this notion of the traditional is the canonical, although, as Eliot continues in his explanation, we discern the thread of the canonical giving way to the wider, evolving weave of tradition:

To proceed to a more intelligible exposition of the relation of the poet to the past . . . The poet must be very conscious of the main current,
which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route.\

Taken in relief of its own relational and developmental processes, Eliot’s conception of tradition is far from a cold pantheon of eternal monuments. It is an organic body composed of artistic minds, both living and dead, that not only can change but does change. Certainly Eliot’s own proclivities toward “the mind of Europe” and “the main current” manifest themselves here, but the direction of Eliot’s thought is distinctly forward, or perhaps we should say recursive—a gathering up of the past in the consciousness of the present as tradition grows, a living embodiment, at once fundamentally and radically en route.

Eliot’s idea of tradition may yet survive both the tidal wave of politicized criticism and his own narrow views, provided such an understanding of tradition can become recognized as resilient beyond its canonical intent and Western inflections in order to become even more encompassing and en route—a “traveling tradition.” Such a tradition not only rides the “main current” of a single history but recognizes that it evolves through confluences of lives, cultures, and artistic expressions. This concept also affirms that, rather than being simply a palimpsest of multiple, segregated narratives or traces from the ruptures of history, tradition tends optimally toward an interfusion of expressions, all of which have the potential to enrich our self-understanding and some of which may be sufficiently distinguished as to enlarge our artistic as well as our critical resources. Tradition is a monumental configuration of history in the multifarious life of art; moreover, it is always a reconfiguration of that history in the present through the evolving amplitude of the past, with the aim, however fraught and imperfect, of providing a more humanly available future. Given a twenty-first-century global nexus shaped so pervasively by social, cultural, and economic interfusion, all would do well to keep mindful of how traditions evolve by acknowledging and assimilating what once might have been inadmissible. The like is true for Ireland, America, and Irish America.