

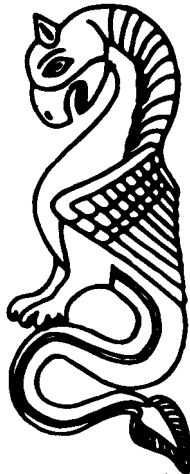
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VERNACULARS: A PERSONAL ESSAY

TOM PAULIN

Darnell McGehey leaves a note in an air-conditioned room in Mr Jefferson's university: *I've taken that book off of your desk.* I look out of the window into this great sunny spicy garden, one of the gardens of the Enlightenment, and try to follow the recognition there is in that "off of". I imagine it as Elizabethan or Jacobean, transplanted to Ulster, then carried to the long grasses of the Shenandoah Valley by the Scotch Irish, now skimming naturally off of the pen of a black secretary with a lost African heritage and a Scotch-Irish surname. I wonder when the "of" became redundant, and how, and why? There are answers, but not knowing them goes with thinking about her surname - there is a McGaheysville in the Shenandoah, I was once friends at school in Belfast with someone called Spence McGaghey. The rest of us used to love the cracking sound in the name (pronounced "McGackey") which was always launched with a triumphantly elastic "yu" sound. American speech, like northern Irish speech, is springy with such sounds - easy to feel at home in its rapping eagerness, its all-off-of-the-top-of-the-head intentness and sense of the now. Hopkins, who read Whitman, would have felt so too, and the famous cadence in "The Windhover" - "in his riding/Of the rolling level underneath him steady air" - celebrates and enacts the sudden extempore nature of passionate vernacular. Spence McGaghey, I remember, had a friend on whose foot a large packing case was once dropped. The lad who dropped it said to the lad who was hopping round the warehouse clutching his extremely sore foot, "Ack, I'm awful sorry - I did it accidentally". The one with the sore foot shouted, "What d'ya mean - y'did it acci-fuckin-bastard-cunt-indentally!". Out of such a yawp - rolling and headlong (coarse and sexist too, of course) - a vernacular poetry can issue.

Such a poetry faces various obstacles, notably the class-barriers in these islands. In the nineteenth century Browning and Hopkins sought to break down the high demesne wall between a standard polite poetic language and demotic speech, dialect, the living spoken language of the people. Perhaps their different backgrounds helped them do this. Browning's nonconformist upbringing prevented him from attending Oxford or Cambridge, while Hopkins slipped out of the ruling class when he converted to catholicism. He moved to the fringes, the provinces, and in the north of England, Wales, Ireland, he listened to the spoken word and sent notes on it to Joseph Wright. His poem, "Inversnaid", is a celebration of Scottish speech and of dialect words, and the language of Hopkins' verse is

a synthesis of various forms of regional speech.

Tennyson, on the other hand, writes in a kitsch, standard, friable, Latinate English and I would like to believe that Browning's line about Andrea del Sarto's paintings, "A common grey-ness silvers everything", was meant for Tennyson's verse. Sometimes, for fun, Tennyson writes cleverly in dialect, but there is an absolute divide between his high polished language (like Virgil ersatzed into English) and his dialect language. The polished language is like arum lilies in a cold, mildly-lit hallway, the dialect like a holiday in the country, a brief return to the Lincolnshire fens, to shaggy "roots", or in the case of "Tomorrow" to a patronizing stage-Irishness.

Clough joyously makes the standard language, the upper middle-class vernacular, sing:

Sweet it may be and decorous, perhaps, for the country
to die; but,
On the whole we conclude the Romans won't do it, and I
shan't. (*Amours de Voyage*)

He plays games, subverts, jokes, thinks about social class and beyond it. Which is why the dull dead worthy verse of his friend, Matthew Arnold, gets more attention. Language is a consumer object in Arnold and Tennyson's verse, but Clough's language parodies consumerism, cliché, second-rate public speech, so that his verse-line becomes eager, witty, intent with a rapidly developing idea, the quick of individual personality, the sudden immersion into (not consumption of) a landscape. Clough anticipates Wilde's ludic and operatic deployment of upper-class speech, and it is significant that in the original draft of *The Importance of Being Earnest* the gardener was given a few words to say in response to a question. Wilde cut them and so his gardener is dumb (unlike the seditious gardener in *Richard II*) and unable to say anything against gardens or country houses. Although Wilde was an anarchist and socialist, it was only after his imprisonment that he could use a popular form and write as if out of the people in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol". It is a powerful and important poem, but this is in despite of its obvious rhythms and stale language.

Social class in England seems often to make people tongue-tied like Wilde's gardener, as if it is impossible for those who retain a regional accent and a dialect to talk easily to those who speak the 'lingo of Metroland, the Home Counties, and who possess a ruling accent. Very often there is either deference or chippiness, and it is rare to find an egalitarian outlook, a complete freedom in personal social terms from class consciousness. It was that freedom which George Orwell perceived and envied in Nye Bevan. D.H. Lawrence hated the Oxford voice and although that voice can often sound tiresomely rococo - all italics and innumerable exclamation marks - it can possess an operatic beauty, a sheer platonic perfection. Harold Nicolson probably possessed such a voice and he worried about Ernest Bevin's way of talking. Bevin called him "my dear 'Arold" and 'Arold first squirmed, then grew to admire Bevin.

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But Bevin's voice had power over Nicolson's, which for the son of a baronet must have been disconcerting. On the other hand Nicolson desperately wanted a knighthood and Bevin might help him to the Palace. Nicolson was a connoisseur of accents and in July, 1947, over lunch at the Beefsteak, he had

an amusing talk about clique accents. There was the intonation of the Devonshire House circle, the nasal drawl of the ultras, the 1890 voice, the Bright People voice, the Bloomsbury voice and now the Bowra voice.
(*Diaries and Letters 1945-62*, p.101)

In the 1980s there is Cockney chic and various regional accents to choose from on the airwaves - many public voices owe a great debt to the Labour Movement and Wilfred Pickles. After his lunch Nicolson attended a Buckingham Palace garden party, but Attlee never gave him a knighthood.

In the Kremlin once, Nicolson observed how an interpreter at a meeting with Stalin was so frightened he was unable to translate what the dictator was saying, and many interpreters became tongue-tied and incapable of carrying out their official duty when in the presence of the Great Leader with his heavy Georgian accent. And this is clearly because language, voices, accents, all fuse with politics and history and belong, as Clausewitz says of war, "to the province of social life". Thus the revolutionary patriot, Noah Webster, writes in his introduction to *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828):

It has been commonly supposed that the Britons were nearly exterminated by the Saxons, and the few that survived, escaped into the West of England, now Wales. It is true that many took refuge in Wales, which their descendants still retain; but it cannot be true that the other parts of England were entirely depopulated. On the other hand, great numbers must have escaped slaughter, and been intermixed with their Saxon conquerors.

Webster is disagreeing with Samuel Johnson who states in his dictionary that most of the ancient Britons must have "perished by the sword". Deep down Webster feels guilty because he is thinking of the American Indians, and this means that we must treat with a certain scepticism this expression of Webster's patriotism:

Thus the practice of hawking and hunting, the institution of heraldry, and the feudal system of England originated terms which formed, and some of which now form, a necessary part of the language of that country; but, in the United States, many of these terms are no part of our present language - and they cannot be, for the things which they express do not exist in this country. They can be known to us only as obsolete or as foreign words.

This is obviously a political statement and one which expresses the American Enlightenment, but there is something hard-nosed and self-righteous about Webster's attitude and I found nothing in Mr Jefferson's gardens that made me want to stay in the New World. As if illustrating an argument of Burke's, most of the Americans I met moved like a skitter of social atoms, all in hectic competition like drops of water on a hotplate.

* * * * *

Tony Harrison appears to be fond of the U.S. and owns a property in Florida. He writes about the largely inarticulate, the Yorkshire working-class, and in "Social Mobility" he confronts his chosen subject and himself:

Ah, the proved advantages of scholarship!
Whereas his dad took cold tea for his snap,
He slaves at nuances, knows at just one sip
Château Lafite from Château Neuf du Pape.

(Selected Poems, Penguin, 1984)

The son of an archbishop once told me that he always started his students off by telling them to read a Shakespeare play, because if you wanted to teach someone to appreciate wine "you must always give them a good wine first". The puritan in me was offended, but I am suspicious of Harrison's lines, partly because the "s" sounds in the third line have a blocking effect (a shade plonky?), and partly because there is a personal boastfulness in Harrison's work which is improper in a socialist.

The best moments in his work are when he recovers and makes current vernacular phrases that were once voiced by people of no property. He concludes a sonnet with a poignant phrase which Tidd, the Cato Street conspirator, used at the beginning of a letter: "Sir, I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting". And he ends another sonnet, "National Trust", with:

The dumb go down in history and disappear
and not one gentleman's been brought to book:

Mes den hep tavas a-gollas y dyr
(Cornish) -

"the tongueless man gets his land took."

The last line sounds authentic because "took" is often substituted for "taken" in various regional vernaculars, and there is a similar authenticity in the "one known extant line" of W. Martin, paperhanger, in "Remains": "*our heads will be happen cold when this is found*". This is an arresting vocal epiphany and it helps bind Harrison to the inarticulate and the ancestral, to an oral culture which seldom makes the printed record. The paperhanger's wry graffito is like a thumb print on an old brick, or like a phrase from a sound-archive.

It is arguable, though, whether Harrison doesn't convert the argument between RP and the vernacular into a dialogue between personal fame and mass obscurity. The second sonnet, "Them & (uz)", begins "So right, yer buggers, then! We'll occupy/your lousy leasehold Poetry", and ends with the imperfectly ironic, RP statement: "My first mention in the TIMES/automatically made Tony Anthony". It is hard to whinge and boast at the same time, perhaps only professional Irishmen and professional Yorkshiremen can manage it. Autobiographical anecdote is one of the vices of this type of personalizing imagination, and another is a form of ancestor worship. There is a Chinese proverb which says "the common people have no ancestors" and Harrison ignores it in the sonnet to his grandfather who "dressed the gentleman beyond his place".

This boastfulness shows also in "Long Distance" where Harrison sets his father's vernacular against the brown bag of sweets which he bought for him "rushing through JFK as a last thought". The jetsetting self-regard is embarrassing here, and the pull of standard syntax, of the great glossy metropolitan world, can be felt in the lines on his parents' photographs:

Though one of them 's in colour and one 's not,
the two are joined, apart from their shared frame,
by what, for photographers, would mar each shot.

The first line is direct authentic speech, then there is a shift into a slightly plummy formality and those faffy "f" sounds which disturb the third line. The effect is archaic and this is true of the inversion in the last line of "Cremation"; "Behind the door she hears the hot coals hiss". The straightforward vernacular - "She hears the hot coals hiss behind the door" - sounds much better (it has three strong stresses bunched naturally in the middle), but it doesn't fit the sonnet's rhyme-scheme and the words are therefore wrenched out of the natural speech-pattern or "sentence-sound" as Frost terms it. The ironic, desperate result of this wrenching can be to demean the working-class experience Harrison writes out of and for:

And it isn't just the gap of sixteen years,
a bigger crop of terrors, hopes and fears,
but a century of history on this earth
between John Keats's death and my own birth -
years like an open crater, gory, grim,
with bloody bubbles leering at the rim.

This is like the drama of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* - the earnest proletarian poet stands with many black and Irish comedians, harmless, charming, quaint, inept.

Another problem for the poet who believes in "the Wurd" (see Lorimer's translation of the New Testament into Scots which has recently been published by Penguin) is how to treat words which are opaque to a majority of his or her audience. Harrison glosses "tusky" as "the Leeds word for rhubarb", and although this helps

the reader it also concedes that the word is not, and never will be, part of the language outside Leeds. If that's the case then critics must go in search of the word's meaning and interpret it for the general reader. My own feeling is that the poet must cast his words upon the water (or "watter") and the readers who're interested will go in search of meanings. If they're not interested, they're not interested. They may be one day, or they may not.

* * * * *

For several years I heard tell of Michael Traynor's glossary, *The English Dialect of Donegal* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 1953). It is a rare book, long out of print. One snowy day in Virginia I got a phone call from Stephen Rea in Ireland asking would I do a version of *Antigone*? I don't know Greek and had to work from Jebb's edition, a thick parched book which had last been borrowed from the University of Virginia library in 1907. I ordered Traynor's glossary and it arrived from Texas a few weeks later. I photocopied it like a piece of *samizdat* and returned it. Reading through it and making notes, I wondered was it possible to make many of these words live? The word "jap" sounded natural because it was familiar from Belfast speech (it means "to spill; to splash, bespatter with mud or liquid"), but the word "lunk" I can't remember ever having heard:

Of a day: close, sultry. It's a terrible lunk
heat the day; (cf. Norw. dial. *lunke*, tepid degree
of heat.) 2. *adv.* Having a sickly feeling. I
was feeling lunk. (App. Don. only.)

I've tried to use the word in a poem, but it's opaque, it can't catch on. "Lunkhead", though, is Belfast for "thicko".

This summer I found and bought a copy of Traynor in Glenties, a small town in Donegal where they have a festival every August in honour of Patrick Magill, the novelist and "navvy poet" who was anti-clerical and socialist. So now I'm the proud owner of a book which will or may or should be one of the stones in a cairn that doesn't yet exist, and may never do so (it was Murray compared dictionaries to cairns in *The Evolution of English Lexicography*). And because of that non-existent, greater dictionary - a dictionary of Irish English - the word "lunk" is homeless, perhaps doubly so because it appears to have dropped out of the vernacular.

When the play opened in Derry the Unionist critics voiced a different objection to the language, arguing that when Creon weeps over his dead son he should not call him "bairn" or "my own wee man". The vernacular isn't "poetic", they insisted, but standard speech is. My own instinct is that the only way to reach a "high" formal style - if that's the style you want - is to plunge into an often abrasive vernacular and see where it takes you. That vernacular is your early experience, the experience of a community and a region, and it is inseparable from the past, maybe also from an idea

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of the future. On the other hand if "dusk" is a dead word in a poem, isn't "dayligone" like a gnarled relic in a folk museum? It doesn't float naturally in the current of these times.

Trying to find a rhythm for each character in *Antigone* I listened for the speech of Belfast, Derry, Mid-Ulster, Donegal, Virginia, and hoped that it might be possible to find a language that wasn't simply cornered by its Ulsterness. But it may be impossible to escape the folksiness of "the tight wee six" without beginning with a style that might be regarded as "Parnassian". Because I've no Irish to draw on, all that subtle exacting vowel music and gutturals I can only glimpse in certain translations (Kinsella and O'Tuama's *The Poetry of the Dispossessed*, Frank O'Connor's translations), or in the work of poets whose Irish English draws on the Irish tradition. Deep down there's a Belfast street song, probably the best-loved of its songs, that I hear:

My Aunt Jane she took me in,
She gave me tea out of her wee tin,
Half a bap, sugar on the top
Three black lumps out of her wee shop,
Half a bap, sugar on the top
Three black lumps out of her wee shop.

My Aunt Jane she's awful smart
She bakes wee rings in an apple tart
And when Hallowe'en comes round
Fornest that tart I'm always found.

My Aunt Jane has a bell on the door
A white stone step and a clean swept floor
Candy apples, hard green pears,
Conversation lozenges.

The song has a lovely quartzly consonantal chanting rhythm:

A white stóne stép and a cléan swépt flóor.

This is what Hopkins meant by instress, an effect he exemplified by these lines from the nursery rhyme:

Díng dóng béll, Pussy's ín the wéll:
Who pút her ín? Little Jóhnnny Thín.

The joy, or kick, of the vernacular lies in the unpredictable bunching of stresses so that a line or phrase is utterly unique, simply and perfectly itself. This means that the speaking voice is forever breaking down the barriers which print creates between prose and verse.

Synge's *Riders to the Sea* draws its inspiration from an oral culture and although it appears to be written in prose, it is in fact a cunningly disguised verse-play. Take this exchange:

Cathleen: Is the sea bad by the white rocks, Nora?

Nora: Middling bad, God help us. There's a great roaring in the west, and it's worse it'll be getting when the tide's turned to the wind.
(She goes over to the table with the bundle.)
Shall I open it now?

This can be scanned as follows:

Cathleen: ^x Is ^x the ^x sea [∕] bad [∕] by ^x the ^x white [∕] rocks, ^x Nora^x?

Nora: [∕] Middling ^x bad, [∕] God [∕] help ^x us.
^x There's ^x a [∕] great ^x roaring [∕] in ^x the ^x west,
^x and ^x it's [∕] worse [∕] it'll ^x be ^x getting
^x when [∕] the ^x tide's [∕] turned ^x to [∕] the ^x wind.
(She goes over to the table with the bundle.)
[∕] Shall ^x I [∕] open ^x it [∕] now?

Cathleen's single iambic line is answered by lines which have either three or four strong beats, and the play's classical austerity partly resides in its being ostensibly written in prose. The prose form would have helped the actors and made them fit their voices more easily and naturally to the words. Synge's sentences are composed of a series of perfect, discrete vocal phrases - phrases which are like those vocal epiphanies which Tony Harrison draws his inspiration from. Such phrases take us beyond words to those tribal or anonymous communal energies and powers which can be sensed in vernacular verse - powers that can be felt whenever small children on long journeys snatch a phrase and repeat it and repeat it until it becomes strange and resonant.

Those enduring atavistic powers are celebrated in Hugh MacDiarmid's "Farmer's Death":

Keuk, ke-uk, ke-uk, ki-kwaik,
The broon hens keckle and bouk,
And syne wi' their yalla beaks
For the reid worms houk.

The muckle white pig at the tail
O' the midden slotters and slorps,
But the auld ferm hoose is lown
And wae as a corpse.

The delight in pure sound here, the ecstatic sense of loud abrasive farmyard noises, transforms what might have been a sad, elegiac poem about a recently dead farmer into a carefully designed cacophony instinct with natural magic and with a reverence for intuited powers. This combination of reverence and ecstatic celebration is one of the chief characteristics of vernacular verse and I believe it is high

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time we had an anthology of such verse. Perhaps a series of vernacular anthologies would help us get Tennyson, Betjeman and RP off of our backs?