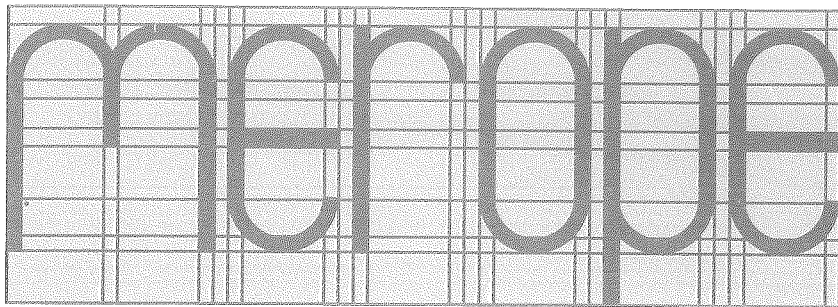


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LETTERATURA

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LINGUISTICA

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Edizioni  
*Tracce*

*Sommario*

LETTERATURA

Renata Mecchia, <i>Ermeneutica ed Epistemologia in Jung</i>	Pag.	5
Gilberta Golinelli, <i>Shakespeare e la ridefinizione del teatro tedesco nella Germania del XVIII secolo: Gersteberg e Herder</i>	"	19
Anna Enrichetta Soccio, <i>Strategie per un romance: The House of the Seven Gables di Nathaniel Hawthorne</i>	"	51
Cristina Ossato, <i>Sartor Resartus ovvero l'approssimazione del nome alla cosa</i>	"	63
Paola Partenza, <i>Goblin Market: Christina Rossetti e le metafore del destino</i>	"	83
Renzo D'Agnillo, <i>Desmond Egan: A Poet with no Illusions</i>	"	105

LINGUISTICA

Adua Paciocco, <i>The Input/Interaction Hypothesis and Practical Implications for Foreign Language Instruction</i>	"	113
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Renzo D'Agnillo

*Desmond Egan: A Poet with no Illusions*<sup>1</sup>

In 1983, eleven years after his poetic debut, Desmond Egan became the first European writer to receive the prestigious National Poetry Foundation of America Award. Three years later he made the bold decision to abandon his profession as a school teacher of English and classical literature and to dedicate himself completely to his writing. Egan has published thirteen volumes of poetry to date: "Midland" (1972), "Leaves" (1974), "Seige" (1977), "Woodcutter" (1978), "Athlone?" (1980), "Seeing Double" (1983), "Snapdragon" (1983), "Poems for Peace" (1986), "A Song for my Father" (1989), "Peninsula" (1992), "In the Holocaust of Autumn" (1994), "Poems for Eimear" (1994) and "Famine" (1997) as well as three collections; "Collected Poems" (1983), "Selected Poems" (ed. Hugh Kenner) (1992) and "Elegies 1972-1996" (1996). Egan, whose works have been translated into French, German, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Czech and Japanese has also revealed himself to be a fine translator and his versions of Euripedes's "Medeas" (1991), and Sophocles's "Philoctetes" (1997) have met with very positive critical response.

Born in Athlone, central Ireland, in 1936, Egan attended Maynooth College where he received a classical education before

<sup>1</sup> The above text is part of a talk given at the Translators and Interpreters Department of the Faculty of Languages, "G. d'Annunzio" University, Vasto on 5 December 1998 during the presentation of the Italian edition of Desmond Egan's selected poetry, *Poesie scelte*, translated and edited by Francesco Marroni and Giuseppe Serpillo.

completing his studies at Dublin University in 1965 with an M. A. thesis on the twentieth century Irish novel. His firm grounding in classical literature and his eclectic reading in European Literature and non (among his influences are Pound, Berryman, Achmatova, Mandel'stam, Majakosvski, Leopardi) is reflected in the powerful blend of intellectual rigour and compassion that runs through his poetry.

Egan's wide range can already be seen in his first volume "Midlands". The title itself refers simultaneously to his home place in central Ireland, and to the countries of the Mediterranean, particularly Greece. The volume bears testimony to his subtle command of language and stylistic variety; from the tight structure and dense sound patterning of "Nettles" to the almost impressionistic style of "Midland" and "Near Herons Town March 19th", and the loose conversational lines of "To an Old Man". His technical originality is also already evident here. Although he has a strong sense of the value of tradition, Egan, like most modern poets, shuns the regularities of classical metres and rhyme whilst at the same time revealing an acute musical ear and a subtle sensitivity to rhythm:

a path of bubbles wobbling  
from his ebbing head  
towards the whisper of shore<sup>2</sup>.

This random example, from "Swimming", shows alliteration, consonance and onomatopoeia combining with metre to evoke the rhythm of the action that is being described as well as the sound. The initial iambs are interrupted by a series of irregular beats to suggest the irregular bobbing movements of someone in water. Thus, rather than externally imposing metre, Egan uses it

<sup>2</sup> Desmond Egan, *Poesie scelte*, a cura di Francesco Marroni e Giuseppe Serpillo, Pescara, Tracce, 1998, p. 34.

to evoke his own internal rhythms or the rhythms that are naturally generated by the meaning and tone of each individual poem. Another striking and original technical device which is first evident in "Seeing Double", is his practice of placing a parallel text, as a counterpoint lyric, next to the 'main' poem to suggest an alternative but contemporaneous version. Although Hugh Kenner says: "There is no way to utter"<sup>3</sup> the two at the same time, public readings have demonstrated, with the help of two voices, both the polyphonic and dramatic effects of this device. At the same time it exposes the insufficiency of the linear nature of writing and reading as well as the limitations of the Irish poet's traditional role as reciter and performer. Egan's poems are also almost completely void of punctuation (with the significant exceptions of question marks, dashes and suspension points) and, as Hugh Kenner says: "Like The Great Phrase, punctuation in Ireland marks an obligation towards a celebrated spoken rhythm [...]. Egan's verse frees him and all his readers from obligations to Irish cadence". This does not mean, of course, that Egan is indifferent to things Irish. Far from it. It is merely that he has "broken free of the need to sound Irish"<sup>4</sup>. This is a particularly important point to underline since Egan writes naturally about Irish themes, without having to force them out of himself or onto his reader.

A recurrent feature in Egan's poetry is landscape. "Midlands", for example, already shows his "unorthodox and evocative use of pastoral"<sup>5</sup> to establish the quiet intense mood of the Irish landscape with its characteristic blend of vitality and melancholy:

<sup>3</sup> Introduction in *Desmond Egan, Selected Poems*, Nebraska, Creighton University Press, 1992, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin T. McEneaney, "The Affirmation of interiority: Love" in *The Poet and his Work — Desmond Egan*, edited by Hugh Kenner, Orono, Northern Lights, 1990, p. 96.

a house steamed down the horizon afternoon  
the bog sea calm  
flat as drainwater the swells of browns rising  
to where quiet mountains of cloud sheered ranging away<sup>6</sup>.

This sense of the spirit of place is a recurrent element in Egan's work and one particularly evident in "Peninsula", a volume in which poetry and photography beautifully interact. Here there is also an evocation of the spirit of the history of place in "Dun An Oir", a sequence of poems about the massacre of 600 people in Port Smerwick in 1580 in which violence and death and the surrounding landscape become inextricably interlinked:

evening swings like a body  
the mist is cold as steel  
death stinks from the bay (p. 175).

In contrast with the intimate and lyrical quality of much of Egan's verse there is the tone of political and moral condemnation, evident from his very first collection (notably in "The Northern Ireland Question"). This aspect becomes more prominent with "Seige", a poem divided into seven parts and concerning the kidnapping of a Dutch industrialist at the hands of two members of the IRA in 1976. Political/historical themes have become increasingly more evident in his latest works. Besides "Peninsula", "Holocaust" draws parallels between the Irish and the Jews as two peoples that have been continually persecuted throughout history, and "Famine" explores the historical and social consequences of the potato famine of 1845-7 (one of the greatest tragedies of Irish history) and can also be read as a blast against the British Empire and its political institutions... though not, of

<sup>6</sup> *Desmond Egan: Selected Poems*, cit., p. 21. Page numbers will be given in the text whenever further quotations refer to this edition.

course, its people. Like most Irishmen, Egan is very careful to make a distinction between the British race and its institutions and authorities.

Egan has an extraordinarily instinctive understanding of people and a number of his compositions dealing with individuals famous and non have been collected under the title "Elegies". Such poems as "Late but! One for Ezra", "Eugene Waters is Dead", "For Benjamin Moloise" (a poem that the South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu keeps on his bedroom wall) and "Echoe's bones", his tribute to his friend Samuel Beckett as well as the naked and moving sequence "A Song for My Father", reveal a unique sensitivity that goes beyond sentimental idealisations and reaches to the heart of things in the attempt to capture the true essence of people, beyond the outward manifestations of their personalities. Ideed, Giuseppe Serpillo notes the "classical Greekness of a blend of detachment and passion"<sup>7</sup> that characterises Egan's poetic voice and that gives to his verse a stark intensity that exposes both the fragility and dignity of suffering humanity, giving that wholeness of vision so typical of his poetry.

Egan's sensitivity is also extended to inanimate objects. A wonderful example of this is his poem "Goodbye Old Fiat" in which, with an affectionate and comical irony, he reminds us just how sentimental our attachment to things can easily become:

I left enough of myself in you even a stranger  
will find money probably under the seat and  
an ashtray of cigarillo relics I never wanted to empty (p. 107).

In his book on Egan, Brian Arkins notes that, with the possible exception of Yeats, "The manifold achievements of Anglo-Irish poetry in this century can hardly be said to include a substantial

<sup>7</sup> Desmond Egan, *Poesie scelte*, cit., p. 17.

body of love poetry"<sup>8</sup>. In Egan, however, love is a recurrent theme and the fact that Arkins himself dedicates a whole chapter on the subject in his poetry is confirmation of the fact. There are the poems dealing with loss and separation, such as "Requiem" and "If", those evoking a sense of nostalgia such as "Sunday Evening" and "Under London" and the 12 beautiful love poems in "Snapdragon" that deal with the complexity of love and in which the sense of loss is to a certain extent mitigated by happiness.

Perhaps the biggest dilemma for Irish poets this century has been that of the almost cumbersome presence of W. B. Yeats. For Egan the problem is non-existent in that, although he recognises Yeats's greatness, he does not need to feel a complex about it. In fact, his poem "Non-symbolist" contains what is in effect a dismissal of him!

Yeats Mallarmé and co you're out the window  
for me at least  
what we need is wholeness not the splintered  
world of broken glasses  
we want the real thing the sacred  
mood as rich  
as an apple or a cup of tea and therefore  
full of strangeness like a face<sup>9</sup>.

For Egan, the ultimate difference lies in the poet's response to the real world which he accuses Yeats and Mallarmé of not representing in its totality — indeed, of even partly refuting. Egan does not shun reality. As Francesco Marroni points out, paraphrasing one of his poems, "Egan writes poems of no illusions"<sup>10</sup>. But this does not mean that he merely stops at a

<sup>8</sup> Brian Arkins, *Desmond Egan — A critical Study*, Little Rock, Milestone Press, 1992, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> *Desmond Egan — Poesie scelte*, cit., p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.



surface representation of reality. Quite the opposite. For the idea of illusion suggests a refusal to accept or partake in the pains and sufferings of real life, to accept them for what they are. Egan's language is concrete in the sense that it draws its power from "the real thing", the wholeness of life itself and expresses a wealth of vision that never ceases to surprise.