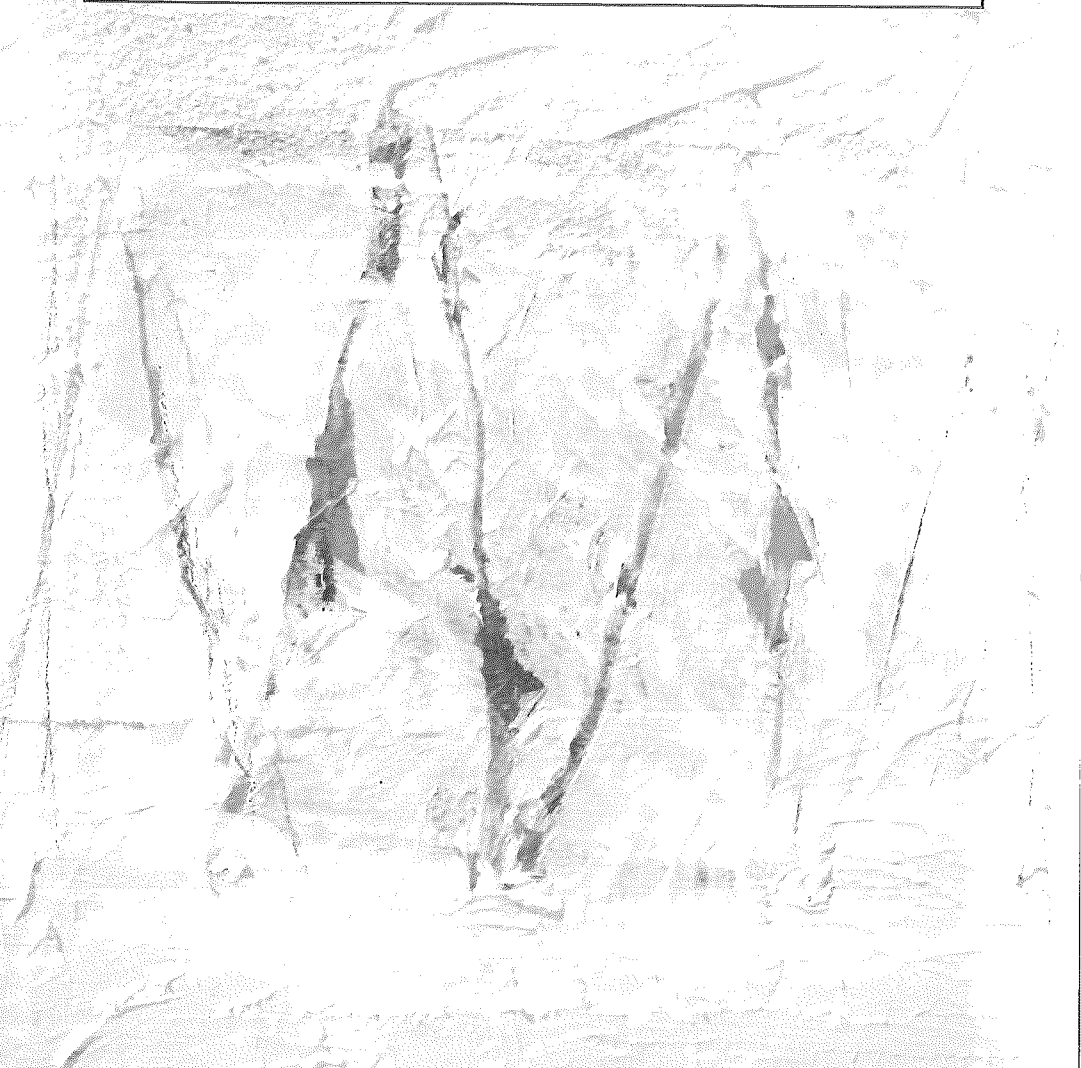


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PERCORSI DI POESIA IRLANDESE

a cura di

**Francesco Marroni Mariaconcetta Costantini
Renzo D'Agnillo**



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Percorsi di poesia irlandese

Da W.B. Yeats a Desmond Egan

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PREFAZIONE

Il presente volume raccoglie gli atti del convegno "La poesia irlandese: da W.B. Yeats a Desmond Egan" svoltosi nei giorni 4-5 giugno 1996 presso la Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere di Pescara. A parte gli interventi e le comunicazioni, il momento più vivace delle due giornate è stato senza dubbio il dibattito al quale hanno partecipato attivamente non solo gli studiosi convenuti, ma anche i dottorandi e gli studenti dell'ateneo dannunziano. Un resoconto della discussione avvenuta dentro e fuori la sede del convegno avrebbe certamente arricchito la pubblicazione, ma per motivi di spazio i curatori hanno dovuto ben presto rinunciare a questa possibilità. Non fanno parte del volume nemmeno gli interventi di due importanti relatori, Anthony L. Johnson e Robert Welch, che, per motivi diversi, hanno rinunciato alla pubblicazione dei loro papers. Comunque, va subito precisato che gli atti sono organizzati nello stesso ordine in cui si erano svolte le tre mezzeggiate di studio, e che le cifre tematiche sotto cui sono stati raccolti gli interventi configurano lo spirito del convegno, che ha concentrato l'attenzione soprattutto su Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh, Seamus Heaney, Thomas Kinsella e Desmond Egan, omettendo programmaticamente tanti altri poeti irlandesi contemporanei, come ad esempio Desmond O'Grady o John W. Sexton.

Qui occorre aggiungere che la presenza del poeta Desmond Egan ha reso il discorso intorno alla tradizione poetica irlandese, per molti versi, ancora più stimolante e vivo. Il poeta ha letto le sue poesie e cantato alcune ballate irlandesi, ha partecipato al dibattito con entusiasmo, senza mai dimenticare di dare suggerimenti e rivelare i 'contesti' da cui erano scaturite alcune sue poesie. Dall'incontro tra il poeta irlandese, Francesco Marroni, Giuseppe Serpillo e Nicoletta Di Gregorio, Presidente delle Edi-

zioni Tracce, è nata anche l'idea di un'ampia scelta di testi eganziani da proporre al lettore italiano. Forse più degli stessi atti, il libro — pubblicato da Tracce con il titolo "Poesie scelte" nel gennaio 1998 e curato da Marroni e Serpillo —, dà conto della ricchezza di stimoli e vivacità editoriale che hanno caratterizzato le giornate irlandesi.

Da ultimo, i curatori desiderano esprimere un grato pensiero a tutti coloro che hanno contribuito al successo scientifico dei lavori e ringraziare quanti hanno reso possibile il convegno e la successiva pubblicazione degli atti: il Dipartimento di Scienze Linguistiche e Letterarie, le Edizioni Tracce e la Libreria Campus Editrice, la Provincia di Pescara e la Banca Popolare dell'Adriatico.

I curatori

Renzo D'Agnillo

W. B. Yeats and Desmond Egan: Two Refuge-poems

One of the big dilemmas of twentieth century Irish poetry has been the almost overbearing presence of W. B. Yeats. For Desmond Egan, however, the shadow of the great bard no longer looms so intimidatingly over the modern Irish poet. Granted his presence is still felt as an important one, but at the same time it is one that Egan can hold at a distance¹. Indeed, Hugh Kenner observes that "he [Egan] is the first Irish poet to have broken free from the need to sound 'Irish'; to manufacture some way of sounding 'Irish'"². This attitude is, of course, the very opposite of Yeats who conceived his poetry, at least initially, as an attempt to 'reinstat[e]' a national cultural identity.

To illustrate the essential differences between the two poets I intend to consider two poems with apparently analogous themes and intentions; the first is Yeats's *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*³ and the second Egan's *Needing the Sea*⁴. At the heart of the two poems lies a tension recurrent in the works of both poets between a preoccupation for the private and the personal on the one hand, and a concern for the social and the political on the other. Both of them share a similar urge to escape from the oppressiveness of the every day world of reality, and both have water as a central element in this escape. Through these convergencies of theme and setting the comparative textual analysis that follows will ultimately reveal essential differences in the way each goes about resolving the tensions generated by such an urge as well as exposing contrasting attitudes in poetic approach and world-view.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree is undoubtedly one of the most popular and certainly the most anthologised of Yeats's poems. From a

biographical point of view, Innesfree, a small island near County Sligo in the west of Ireland where Yeats used to spend his holidays in early childhood, represented a sort of dream world, a world to which he longed to escape whenever he felt oppressed by reality. At the same time, from a textual point of view, Yeats creates a fictional situation in the poem in which authorial intention is shifted onto a dramatic speaker, a persona:

THE LAKE ISLE OF INNESFREE

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

5 And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping
slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket
sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
and evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
10 I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavement grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

In the opening line, the speaker immediately expresses, in uncompromisingly bold tones, the urgency to flee from his present surroundings, as seen in the assertive verbs *arise* and *go*, (*arise* being both semantically as well as phonologically linked with its subject, *I*, through assonance [ai]), the emphatic auxiliary *will* and the adverb *now*. Alongside the assertive nature of the poetic voice is the large number of nouns employed (28 in all) set against a comparatively low frequency of adjectives (9), which

emphasises a concern in stating and in defining a way of life. The repetition of the verb *go* also, drives the first line onward both figuratively and literally towards the precise destination of Innesfree. That the speaker chooses a real geographical location adds credence to his intentions — and perhaps at the same time a justification to any implicit criticism of the uselessness of day dreaming. However, there is no implicit evocation of another voice (unlike, as we shall see, in Egan's poem). The speaker then goes on to state precisely what he will do there and how he will live:

“And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee
And live alone in the bee-loud glade” (ll. 2-4).

In these lines there is a confident statement of definite constructive action, a creative act represented in the verb *build*. Fleeing from reality, which implies inaction, paradoxically leads to the possibility of alternative activity. On a literal level, the vision summoned up is representative of Yeats's ideal community; an organic, agrarian community based on the respect of a feudal hierarchy, “living close to and growing out of the land”⁵ and uncontaminated by industrialism and capitalism, an ideological fantasy, and one that reveals Yeats's much criticised aristocratic nostalgia. On a metaphorical level, the speaker is creating not only his ideological world but alongside it his poetical world which he will shape in hostile antithesis to the real one; the cabin being his poetic identity or oeuvre and the natural materials he uses to build it representing the voice that brings his poetry into being.

In the second verse, synaesthetic elements such as alliteration and assonance, as well as a predominance of nasal sounds /m/, /n/, /ŋ/ and the liquid /l/ together with the counterplay between the voiced /s/ and the unvoiced /z/, aurally create in an exquisitely rhetorical patterning the enticing nature of this personal paradise:

"And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping
slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings" (ll. 5-8).

The peace sought by the speaker is metamorphosed from an abstract into a physical entity by its being equated with water through the gerund *dropping*. Again, on a figurative plane, the speaker is seducing himself not only into the dimension of an idealistic realm, but also into the realm of his own craft.

The metaphorical and metaphysical dimensions of the temporal and spatial elements of the poem become clear in the final verse. Until now the speaker has posited a contrast between a 'here' that has been hitherto suppressed and a *there* evoked 4 times to the extent of becoming almost an icon in substitution of Innesfree itself. In the third line of the second verse *there* is given initial position and likewise receives a heavy stress as part of a spondee (the poem is heavily coated with trochees and spondees, and these of course add to its assertive, declamatory tone). This is also the case for the other three in which "there" is followed by a comma, thus in a position of end-focus to a clause and summing up the gradual progression from *build there* [...] *have there* [...] *peace there*, a progression from CREATION to POSSESSION to FULFILMENT:

"And a small cabin build *there*, [...]
Nine bean-rows will I have *there*, [...]
And I shall have some peace *there*, [...]
There midnight's all a glimmer, [...]"
(My italics)

Against this here/there binary opposition, the speaker refers to a *now* which on first sight appears literally a present moment. This is further accentuated by the repetition of the conjunction *and* (9

times), which creates a sense of immediacy and excitement. But the emerging doubts as to the speaker's intention of actually going to Innesfree *now* can be gauged from the last verse with its repetition of the initial phrase of the poem followed by the frequency adverb *always*. It is "always" that he hears *lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore* (l. 10) — and it may be noted how this echoes the peace *dropping slow* of the second verse — so that the same evocation has occurred in the depths of his *heart's core* (l. 12) before. So *now* is not just a present moment, but an eternal moment, an eternal 'now', because it is always the same feeling, always the same desire and each time, the speaker dives into his *heart's core* into the world of his poetic creation which he boldly asserts against the real world. Thus, from a spatial point of view the poem moves from the UPWARD movement characterised by its opening in *arise and go* to the DOWNWARD movement of the speaker's plunge into his heart's core⁶.

Paradoxically, however, the elements of the speaker's poetic creation have their origin in the real world. For example, the nine bean-rows may be substituted for rows of houses, *the bee-loud glade* may be substituted for the noise of the city streets. (Yeats himself claimed that the poem was inspired by a tinkle of water he heard coming from a fountain in a shop window). The city itself is described metonymically in the penultimate line: *the roadway* is a neutral reference, whilst *the pavements grey* characterise a real world, void of energy and life. The final position of *grey* serving both as a rhyme word with *day* but also to emphasise its negative quality. Elsewhere Yeats uses the term *grey truth* to denote a gloomy materialism and utilitarianism that frowns on all things of the spirit as mere dreams⁷. It also contrasts with the only other colour mentioned in the poem, that of purple, which on the other hand represents Innesfree, with its overtones of passion and energy. Against the grey knowledge of science Yeats opposes an alternative kind of knowledge in 'reverie'. So on the one hand, although this dream world actually exists (*it is Innesfree*),

the realisation of an ideal existence there can only be textual — only through its artistic creation can it acquire the force of an antagonistic provocation to a real world the speaker/poet is completely unsatisfied with.

Egan's refuge-poem, *Needing the Sea*, is centred around the same theme of temporary escape from a harsh reality through the element of water, but, as will be seen, displays significant differences in tone and approach as well as in the final resolution:

NEEDING THE SEA

in September maybe most: that time
when the earth begins to take over again
something in me gets bogged down and
cries out for the grace of water

- 5 there's no need friend to remind me
about the countless whose lives are far from such luxury
about starvation and misery the latest holocaust
of those who never got a dog's chance oh
as I write I can hear the scream of
10 someone being carefully tortured while others
with their only life blindfolded face into
the high cement wall of one military or another
even the thought like that of Poland becomes
a kind of dying: what the hitcher from North felt
15 as he watched the blaze of his cottage

we all know about the houses of hopes blown up blown out
we all bump into the local alcos the druggie
youngsters their adult faces mugged by less than poverty
just off the O'Connell Street of our new towns

20 is the world which so many miss
realised for them you'd wonder through others
do we carry it for this mongol child that
bucketful of abortions in the sluice room?

I need the sea

25 my being as if on strike soundlessly cries out
to come on it high above the road I
want to stand on that rock which tells no lies and
feel the grassgreen otherness making the mind reel
see the wide slow gathering of a watershadow rising up
[into

30 the wash the rush the clatter spreading down a beach
hear the strangely comforting clicking of pebbles
I need
to be consoled by the rush of my own smallness
to swim my soul awhile in the pure space let it go adrift
35 where one wave can hide the shore

at times I need this deep

forgive me

To begin with a general stylistic consideration, Egan deplores the rhetorical strategies employed by Yeats. His verse is characterised by what has been called a "fluid technique"⁸ with a complete disregard for rhymes, iambic beats and punctuation, and *Needing the Sea* is certainly no exception. In the whole poem there are only two punctuation marks, each time a colon. It is particularly when elements become scarce in a poem that we must consider the effect of their eventual occurrence. Although the lack of punctuation and the high frequency of enjambed lines in Egan's poetry is, as Arkins points out, an attempt to reflect a chaotic world⁹, at the same time the linguistic elements are generally semantically clear, and the frequent enjambments,

together with the lack of punctuation, create a certain ambivalence between a fluidity of discourse and a denial of the graphological dimension of syntax. Thus, a tension is set up between the logical coherence of the discourse elements and their syntactic merging and juxtapositioning. In this particular poem the metrical strategy may be seen as imitating the transitoriness of the movements of the waves of the sea which, in turn, reflect the transitoriness of existence.

The first line of the poem, which is in *medias res* as if the speaker is answering a question the reader himself has to infer, is significantly interrupted by a colon. This serves to immediately reinforce the location of the poet's need in a precise temporal dimension, one that contrasts with the essentially symbolic temporal dimension of Yeats's poem. From the beginning the kind of tensions which generate the poem are made explicit. At the moment in which the Earth *begins to take over again* (l. 2), the poet feels a sense of heaviness. These two counter movements, *take over again* and *bogged down* induce a feeling of melancholy in the poet which overwhelms him to the extent that he himself becomes a passive agent, for it is something *in him* which *gets bogged down and/cries out for the grace of water*. The poet is reduced to a state of utter dejection, with the chiasmatic link of the consonant clusters /b/, /g/ and /d/ (in *begins* and *gets bogged down*) effectively conveying this stasis on a phonological level (a different tone altogether to Yeats's *I will arise and go*). Water is characterised by the noun *grace* which has religious connotations and immediately equates the function of water with that of cleansing and purification (holy water). Thus, water is a spiritual element as well as being a physically evoked one.

Unlike Yeats, Egan evokes the silent voice of an implicit speaker in the appellation *friend* (l. 5). The tone of self-justification addressed to this *friend* elicits a contrast between a need to escape on the one hand, and an acute awareness of the suffering in the world and hence of the selfishness of this desire for escape on the

other. Needless to say, such an internal conflict is firmly repressed in Yeats's poem.

The depressing features that follow characterise a harsh and bitter existence; starvation, holocaust, poverty, political harassment and dictatorship and the struggle for freedom, all man made evils that have forever plagued the world and that likewise invade and plague the text. In this way, Egan anticipates or answers the objection made to him by the implicit voice, or anti-voice (*there's no need to tell me friend*) the list being at the same time, however, a product of the poet's own guilty conscience, with the emotional tone rising in the fourth line of the second stanza with the exclamation *oh* (l. 8), effectively placed at the end of the line, as part of an enjambment, to bring the actual suffering of humanity within the temporal dimension of the poem's composition. *As I write* underlines the obsession of such thoughts even during a creative activity which expresses the need to escape from such things. The extraordinarily appropriate lexical choice of *carefully*, to denote the manner in which the person is being tortured, exposes not only the clinical cynicism of torture with its calculated aims, but is also disconcertingly and ambiguously connected with the idea of composing a poem, which likewise has to be written out 'carefully'. The reference to poetic composition, implicit in Yeats's symbolism, is therefore explicitly evoked here in terms of this creation-destruction polarity.

For the poet, to think of a country like Poland becomes *a kind of dying* (l. 14), and indeed death and resurrection are two themes embedded in the poem. The figurative death of the poet has been seen already in his state of passivity and dejection at the beginning. It is no accident that these, the only two phrases interrupted by a punctuation mark, can be seen as semantically linked by the theme of death (*In September maybe most [...] a kind of dying*). This metaphorical death, from which the poet longs to be released by the spiritual purity of water is precisely something *we all know*, and the harsh realities are things *we all bump into* (ll. 15-16). The

introduction of the first person plural opens up the poem's dimension from a personal to a universal significance, introducing a tone of human sympathy (reinforced by the appellation *friend*) which is alien to Yeats's poem.

Furthermore, Egan does not flinch at realistic elements that Yeats deliberately excludes. Against Yeats's concern in symbolically setting up a textual world that can defy the reality around him, Egan literally names the evils from which he wants to temporarily escape, whilst at the same time keeping his two worlds very much apart; local alcos, druggie youngsters and abortions are one thing, drifting one's soul out into the sea quite another.

Egan is acutely aware of the ambivalent potential of things, so that in the element of water there is on the one hand the purifying element of the sea, and on the other the destructive element seen in the abortions in *the sluice room* (l. 3), *sluice* having an almost grotesquely onomatopoeic function. This double equation WATER = DESTRUCTION/LIFE is linked with that of CREATION/DESTRUCTION already alluded to.

However, the therapeutic effects of water are what the poem finally celebrates, and whereas in Yeats's poem there is a detached, aesthetic response to Innesfree, characterised in the paradigms of sight and sound, in Egan the response is both intensely sensual and spiritual, indeed, more complete because it includes physical sensation and contact, spiritual elevation and abandon. Certain phonological and metrical devices which may seem more typical of Yeats, can be just as, if not even more, effective when put into the hands of a poet like Egan, who reveals an extraordinary sensitivity in knowing just when to use these devices to the utmost effect.

Through the sense of sight comes also a change in perspective. From the movement DOWN characterised by the first part of the poem the speaker now sees himself as emerging *high above the road* (l. 26) and being offered an ariel view in which — there is *the wide*

slow gathering of a watershadow rising rising up [...]. So a sense of elation is represented visually from both a subjective and objective point of view, a perception that is also beautifully caught in the physical contact described in the lines *I/want to stand on that rock which tells no lies and/feel the grassgreen otherness making the mind reel* (ll. 26-27). A physical intoxication that borders on the spiritual, in its intensity of self-abandon. This is followed by the two most expressive lines, phonologically speaking, in the whole poem: *wash [...] rush [...] clatter [...] the strangely comforting clicking of pebbels*, in which the repetition of the onomatopoeic K-ing linked with the rhythmic cadence of the double trochees and dactyls are most effective in conveying the sounds of the sea and of footsteps on the shore. At the same time there is a paradox in the phrase *strangely comforting*, it is as if the speaker is in a territory he is still readjusting himself to. This is followed by one of the most poignant lines in the poem in which the poet realises that the ultimate consolation he will find in the sea will be self-consolation: *I need to be consoled by the rush of my own smallness* (ll. 32-33). Thus is revealed a dramatic juxtaposition of the limitations of the body against the background of *pure space*, and one in which subjective and objective reality are connected by the word *rush*, which is previously used with reference to the sea. The line which follows is also phonologically very effective: *To swim my soul awhile in the pure space* (l. 34) the consonant /s/ evoking the sound of the sea and the semi-vowel /w/ the sound of the wind bearing the soul away. The sense of consolation is made all the more poignant, precisely because it is essentially a self-consolation, and the nakedness of the noun *smallness* adds further to the poignancy.

The ultimate condition reached in the poem is one of oblivion, as seen in the wave hiding the shore. Interestingly, *hide* is reverted from subject to object: it is not the poet who is hiding but the shore itself that is being hidden. The poet seems to indicate the ultimate impossibility of his own escape by reverting the idea onto the land being hidden by *one wave* (l. 35). Of course, there is also an

implicit image here of a pre-natal state, to be taken into account. In this sense the poet's merging into the sea is a merging back into a pre-life state, of suspension beyond time, beyond guilt and innocence, whereas Yeats's poem envisages a pre-lapsarian state that is at once innocently child-like and boldly antagonistic.

Both Yeats's and Egan's poems end with a reference to depth, though again in different ways. Yeats refers at the end of his poem to *the deep heart's core* and Egan's penultimate line declares *I need this deep*. Yeats's *deep heart's core* is the real setting of his poem: it is there, we finally learn, that everything takes place. Egan, however, points to a juxtaposition of subjective/objective reality in the lexical item *deep* which, as a deviant adverb, refers to the speaker, but at the same time as a noun, refers to the sea. But in spite of this ambiguity the two worlds are kept separate and the final two lines suggest, on a graphological level, a plunge that has been taken and that is acted out textually (thus the final line which pleads forgiveness as a result).

The binary opposition between text and world present in both poems sets up the notion of a real world characterised by negativity against an alternative world of momentary escape. In Yeats this real world is evoked metonymically, while in Egan it is evoked explicitly in the appalling socio-political scenario. Egan confronts each aspect of harsh reality and, as a consequence, leaves an essentially unresolved dilemma. In Yeats's poem, the speaker boldly asserts his own utopian vision against a real world he constantly refutes (*for always night and day I hear [...]*), and it is precisely in the magical (illusory) dimension of his art that he finds solace and strength. This explains why the idea of refuge is so present in Yeats's poems, conceived as they are in antithesis to a political reality he refutes. Paradox is a weapon for Yeats. For Egan it is indicative of a painful reality. Egan's escape is therefore ultimately a temporary, physical one, because as the realistic dimension of the poem never makes us forget, he is a real man living in a real world and it is to that world, with all its pain and contradictions, that he is to inevitably return.

NOTES

- 1 Egan himself has expressed his antipathy for Yeats's acute artistic self-consciousness, which he sees as a denial of reality, very plainly in his poem "Non Symbolist": "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 [...]". Desmond Egan, *Collected Poems*, University of Maine at Orono, The National Poetry Foundation, 1983, p. 216.
- 2 Desmond Egan, *Selected Poems*, Selected and with an introduction by Hugh Kenner, Nebraska, Creighton University Press, 1992, Introduction, p. 12.
- 3 W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright, London, Everyman, 1990, p. 60. Line numbers will be given in the text.
- 4 Desmond Egan, *Selected Poems*, ed. Hugh Kenner, Newbridge, The Goldsmith Press, 1992, p. 105. Line numbers will be given in the text.
- 5 Stan Smith, *W. B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction*, London, MacMillan, 1990, p. 8.
- 6 Anthony L. Johnson, *The Verbal Art of W. B. Yeats*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 1994, p. 96, notices that the poem's apparent insistence on a "horizontal" or journeying quest "is resolved by the discovery, in the last line, of the essence of Innesfree already localised within the self, in a 'below' or 'inner' position".
- 7 See *The Song of the Happy Shepherd*, *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, op. cit., p. 33.
- 8 Brian Arkins, *Desmond Egan. A Critical Study*, Arkansas, Milestone Press, 1992, p. 9.
- 9 *Ibidem.*