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The 'nothing-could-be-simpler line': Form in Contemporary Irish Poetry

Brearton, F. (2012). The 'nothing-could-be-simpler line': Form in Contemporary Irish Poetry. In F. Brearton, & A. Gillis (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* (pp. 629-647). Oxford University Press.

Published in:

The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry

Document Version:

Early version, also known as pre-print

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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CHAPTER 38

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‘THE NOTHING-COULD-
BE-SIMPLER LINE’: FORM
IN CONTEMPORARY
IRISH POETRY

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FRAN BREARTON

I

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In ‘The Irish Efflorescence’ Justin Quinn argues in relation to a new generation of poets from Ireland (David Wheatley, Conor O’Callaghan, Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey, and Caitríona O’Reilly among them) that while:

Northern Irish poetry, in both the first and second waves, is preoccupied with the binary opposition of Ireland and England...[t]he youngest Irish poets...are not bounded in the same way by this opposition. The extent of their lack of engagement with this theme is evident when one notices that they do not even go to the trouble to subvert it.... Several of these poets write about experiences abroad, but even this eludes the usual pattern of exile and return which structured so much expatriate Irish poetry in the past. And while none of them is from Dublin, they are not concerned either with the myths of rural culture that animated Patrick Kavanagh’s poetry, or, through its subversion, Anthony Cronin’s. The extent of this thematic shift should not be underestimated: although the term is a little modish, it seems accurate to say that they are the first genuinely post-national generation.

However, as he goes on to note, ‘[i]n formal aspects they are more conservative’, some learning ‘their handling of half-rhyme and stanza from Derek Mahon, some their prosody from Michael Longley’. Most, he says, ‘avoid Muldoon at all costs’, since his ‘tone is so infectious and spreads so rapidly’; and ‘[a]s for imitating Heaney, they leave that to Americans’. Thomas Kinsella, he concludes, ‘has had virtually no impact on them, and

they perpetuate the division between conservative mainstream and experimental margins that was present in Irish poetry for most of the twentieth century.¹ Quinn is not advocating that perpetuation as a willed act necessarily; rather the comment acknowledges a debate that has been at the heart of Irish poetry criticism for decades. Indeed, as Matthew Campbell notes in his essay for this book, it may even be traced back to the nineteenth century: ‘Between Mangan and Ferguson’, he writes, ‘a fissure of a sort opens up in Irish poetry, one that may be seen to this day’, between ‘an innovative strain in Irish poetry open to international influences’ and a ‘liberal conservative development of a self-consciously Hiberno-English poetic diction or prosody.’²

My focus here is on three poets from the Republic of Ireland—David Wheatley, Caitríona O’Reilly, and Justin Quinn himself. Identified by Quinn as part of a new ‘post-national generation’, they have also been loosely (if not always accurately) associated with formal conservatism, even with a new formalism; they worked collaboratively in the 1990s and early 2000s; they have significantly contributed to critical debate about modern poetry in ways that might throw into question some of the labels attached to them and to Irish poetry more generally; and they complicate the ‘division’ or ‘fissure’ sometimes traced in Irish literary history. Quinn published his first poetry collection, *The O’òàà’ Bird*, in 1995, Wheatley’s debut, *Thirst*, appeared in 1997, and O’Reilly’s *The Nowhere Birds* in 2001. Wheatley and Quinn co-founded *Metre*, a journal of poetry and criticism, in 1996, O’Reilly later joining them on the editorial board; for all three, the journal *Thumbscrew*, founded by Tim Kendall in 1994, and which ran for twenty-one issues, shutting up shop in 2002, provided a lively and often controversial outlet for their poems and poetry reviews; Wheatley and O’Reilly worked collaboratively in a long partnership that resulted in a joint publication, *Three-Legged Dog*, in 2002; and Quinn and Wheatley have had a long (literary) friendship, comparable in its way to the early friendship between Mahon and Longley, one that has involved, over the years, the exchange of poems for comment and critique. All three studied at Trinity College Dublin in the early 1990s. Both Quinn and O’Reilly attended (as did Sinéad Morrissey and Claire Kilroy) the writers’ workshops run by Michael Longley, then Writer Fellow at Trinity, from January to April 1993, with Wheatley also closely associated with the group.³

In a tribute volume published on the occasion of Michael Longley’s seventieth birthday, Caitríona O’Reilly acknowledges both the importance of the Trinity workshops to her own formal development, and the ‘higher-than-usual number of participants’ in the group who ‘persisted with writing and have since published books.’ The latter she attributes to Longley’s ability to inspire younger poets; the former she describes as the discovery, for the first time, ‘that a poem has a ticking heart and lungs, that there is an emotional and rhetorical logic to the way it unfolds in time and space.’ The workshops

¹ Justin Quinn, ‘The Irish Efflorescence’, *Poetry Review* 91:3 (Autumn 2001), 46.

² See ch. 1, p. XXX.

³ Those who wished to be considered for attendance at the two-hour workshops were required to submit portfolios in advance. Wheatley, as far as Longley recalls, did not do so, hence was not part of the group, although he did meet with Longley to discuss his work during the same period. Michael Longley, interview with the author, July 2011.

presented them with formal challenges in the different modes of the lyric. 'I became,' O'Reilly writes, 'obsessed with locating the break in the line, with finding artful symmetry and instinctive balance'.⁴ Given the preoccupation with set forms in all three writers (of which more anon), Longley's significance to their development might initially seem counter-intuitive. His preference is not for writing in set forms (the sonnet is the exception) and his oeuvre is free of the villanelles and sestinas essayed by peers such as Mahon, Heaney, and Muldoon. Yet Longley's concentrated lyric style (in contrast to the looser, conversational, and overtly political style and idiom of Durcan and Kennelly, who loomed large on the Dublin scene in the 1980s and 1990s), the quest for 'balance' in the earlier work, where almost every poem is rhymed, and his complex syntactical structures, bear fruit in O'Reilly most evidently, but in Quinn and Wheatley too.

The fascination with form, a fascination worn on the sleeve (as it is in Longley's and Mahon's early work) in the poetry published by O'Reilly, Quinn, and Wheatley in the 1990s and early 2000s, might have begun in, or been nurtured by, the writing workshop. Selina Guinness notes too, in *The New Irish Poets*, that the presence of sestinas and villanelles in Irish poetry of the 1990s is partly to do with 'academe' (MAs in Creative Writing; doctoral study of English literature).⁵ But these three poets have done more than produce one or two academic exercises either in the laborious acquisition of technique or in the service of a neo-formalist aesthetic: the interest is evidently more extensive. Along with other formal varieties, O'Reilly has notched up a sestina ('Thin'), more unusually, a pantoum ('Persona'), a poem in terza rima, 'The Mermaid', and some sonnets; Quinn, prose poems, sonnets, several sonnet sequences, villanelles ('A Strand of Hair' and 'Days of 1913'), a poem in terza rima without the rima ('Vesalius and the Soul'); Wheatley, extraordinarily, three sestinas ('Bray Head', 'Landscape with Satellite Dish', and 'Chronicle'), two villanelles ('Poem' and 'Recklessness'), prose poems, sonnets and sonnet sequences, an extended terza rima poem ('Traffic'), a sequence in terza rima ('Misery Hill'), and some haiku ('Whalebone Haiku').

In a recent essay for *Poetry Ireland Review*, surveying the journal's poetry publishing in the first decade of the twenty-first century, Maria Johnston noted that the 'enduring poetry workshop favourite, the sestina', in its various *PIR* appearances, 'ultimately puts one in mind of the final question in Ian Duhig's list of questions that turn bowels to sorbet: "Would you like to see my earwax candles?/Would you like to hear my new sestina?"'.⁶ Yet if the sestina can be a sometimes unfortunate rite of passage, a poem that, as Paul Fussell observes, 'would seem to be one that gives more structural pleasure to the contriver than to the apprehender',⁷ there are exceptions that prove the rule. One such is Leontia Flynn's '26' in her first collection *These Days* (2004); another is O'Reilly's 'Thin' from *The Nowhere Birds*, a poem which in marrying form to subject turns its

⁴ Caitríona O'Reilly, 'When in Doubt, Intimidate the Opposition', in *Love Poet, Carpenter: Michael Longley at Seventy*, ed. Robin Robertson (London: Enitharmon Press, 2009), 106–7.

⁵ Selina Guinness, 'Introduction', *The New Irish Poets* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2004), 30.

⁶ Maria Johnston, 'Reading Irish Poetry in the New Century: *Poetry Ireland Review* 2000–2009', *Poetry Ireland Review* 100 (March 2010), 37.

⁷ Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form*, rev. ed. [1965] (New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., 1979), 145.

self-conscious artificiality into its virtue. Equating the form of the poem, the ‘room’ of the stanza, with the physical body of the speaker, and with a trapped psyche, O’Reilly turns the discipline of the set form into a comment on the progress of the disease—anorexia:

It is chill and dark in my small room.
A wind blows through gaps in the roof,
piercing even the eiderdown. My skin
goose-pimples in front of the cloudy glass
though there was scalding tea for dinner
with an apple. I’m cold to the bone.

What begins, in both cases, as a willed exercise in control, ultimately ends by controlling its author: power gradually shifts from the anorexic to anorexia itself; the poet’s imaginative licence is increasingly subject to the implacable demands of the sestina. Where form obtrudes (as in ‘I’m such a bone-/head!’) the discomfort, the bits of the poem that stick out, one might say, are themselves an equivalent of the bones that begin to protrude through the speaker’s skin: ‘My hip-bones/stick in the foam mattress. . . . My ribs rise like the roof/of a house that’s fashioned from glass’. The process of the poem is one of destructive self-discipline, and simultaneous creation of a fragile edifice, a body (like the brittle body of the poem) only just holding itself intact: ‘*how shatterproof is my skin?*’ While the poem records its female speaker’s literal shrinking, a negation of self, it also insists on making space for itself, in paradoxically gruesome fashion, against the pressures of a male-dominated environment: the speaker’s starved and therefore ‘more habitable’ skin is a ‘ceiling that shatters like glass/over those diners off gristle and bone’.⁸ Fitting oneself into the sestina is not exactly the equivalent of slipping into something more comfortable—although that may be precisely the poem’s point.

O’Reilly’s observance of the demands of a sestina is, as we would expect given her subject, fairly exact, and exacting. Its only slight variations are ‘bone/bones’, ‘room/room’s’, and, once only, ‘skin/skim’, ‘glass/class’; of its end words, ‘dinner’ is the unaltered (unconsumed) constant until the envoi, where it mutates into ‘diners’, at which point ‘roof’, also a constant through six stanzas, becomes the more politically charged, and shattered, glass ‘ceiling’. By contrast, Wheatley’s ‘Landscape with Satellite Dish’ falls rather into Fussell’s category above, the pleasure seeming to lie more in the making than the reading, and the rationale for the form (Bart Simpson meets the sestina, ‘Doh!’) less in evidence.⁹ More conventional, and also from his first collection, is ‘Bray Head’, which paints a landscape of mountain, gorse, and sea, and captures, through the repetitions, a certain tranquillity. But it is the sestina in his second collection, ‘Chronicle’, that more convincingly earns its form, and it does so, in contrast to O’Reilly’s approach, by opening up to a degree of flexibility—first through its hexameter line, giving the poet, in effect, an additional forty-two feet to play with, and lengthening the gap between the appearance of the end-words; second, by a degree of end-word variation in which the linguistic play is not merely born out of necessity, but is part of the poem’s effect:

⁸ Caitriona O’Reilly, *The Nowhere Birds* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2001), 20–1.

⁹ David Wheatley, *Thirst* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1997), 38–9.

'Wicklow' mutates, variously, into 'clue', 'claw', and 'loy'; 'van' into 'vain', 'oven', 'even', and 'heaven'; 'roads' into 'roods' and 'raids'; and, in a poem which carries a wry consciousness of Heaney and Muldoon, 'father', constant through the first five stanzas, becomes 'fodder' in the sixth. That the father is poetic fodder here (as he has been so productively for Heaney and Muldoon) serves as an acknowledgement that this is both a family 'Chronicle' and a literary one, with echoes of Wheatley's literary forefathers, of Heaney's sestina 'Two Lorries', for instance, or of 'Digging':

My grandfather is chugging along the back roads
between Kilcoole and Newtown in his van,
the first wood-panelled Morris Minor in Wicklow ...
...
The old man never did get to farm like his father,
Preferring to trundle his taxi along the back roads.

The poem's convoluted syntax brings the chronicle full circle, memory doubling back on itself ('All this coming back to me in the mountains/early one morning'), so that it plays effectively to the form's capacity for linearity and circularity at the same time:

... driving on down to Hacketstown with my father
we find grandfather's grandfather under an even
gravestone gone to his Church of Ireland heaven,
and his grandfather too, my father maintains,
all turned, long since to graveyard fodder
just over the country line from their own dear Wicklow,
the dirt tracks, twisting lanes and third-class roads
they would have hauled themselves round while they endured,
before my father and I ever followed the roads
or my mountainy cousins first picked up a loy,
or my grandfather's van ever hit that garage door.¹⁰

In Muldoonian fashion, the poem has its tail in its mouth (compare '7 Middagh Street'), and, with the 'loy' of the envoi irresistibly reminiscent of Christy Mahon's *Playboy of the Western World* 'patricide', a parodic spirit of reverent irreverence towards literary tradition, lineage, and the (vanishing) point of origin.

Wheatley's *Misery Hill* (2000) is dominated by set forms, from the opening 'Sonnets to James Clarence Mangan', through two villanelles and a sestina, to the closing 'Misery Hill', a sequence of thirty-three poems in terza rima.¹¹ Likewise, Quinn's second collection, *Privacy* (1999), a book preoccupied with (poetic) architecture, is also one in which he tries his hand at a couple of villanelles, a form notoriously difficult to sustain effectively in English. As John Lennard observes, 'Perhaps more than any other form specifying line repetition, villanelles live or die by what John Hollander calls "one simple

¹⁰ David Wheatley, *Misery Hill* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2000), 39–40.

¹¹ 'Misery Hill' is the title given both to a shorter lyric in *Misery Hill*, 10–11, and also to the long sequence which closes the book, 60–92.

phenomenon: repeating something often may make it *more trivial*—because more expected and therefore carrying less information, as an engineer might put it—or, because of shifting or developing context in each stanza preceding, *more important*.¹² Unsurprisingly, no more than three twentieth-century villanelles in English have made their way convincingly into the Western canon—Dylan Thomas’s ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’, William Empson’s ‘Missing Dates’, and Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘One Art’. Heaney’s ‘Villanelle for an Anniversary’, a poem written in 1986 to celebrate Harvard’s 350th year, was his first villanelle and, he has said, one that ‘should be his last’, the form chosen in part for practical reasons.¹³ Mahon’s own forays into the territory in the early 1980s, indicative of his affinity with French poetry, ‘The Andean Flute’, ‘The Dawn Chorus’, and ‘Antarctica’, never quite lift themselves above the extreme artifice of the form, although the most memorable of them, ‘The Andean Flute’, has a quality of lyrical enchantment in tension with a controlled ‘frenzy’, and a musicality that serves its ‘ancient theme’: ‘He dances to that music in the wood./Who said the banished gods were gone for good?’¹⁴ Muldoon, unable to resist the kind of challenges posed by Empson, pulls off a double villanelle in *Horse Latitudes*, a technical triumph.¹⁵

The villanelle by Wheatley in *Misery Hill*, simply entitled ‘Poem’, finds memorable repeating lines, as in ‘The roof has fallen but the house still stands’, with the potential to carry different metaphorical resonance, although the poem itself does not, through the repetitions, gather an incremental significance. The form necessitates that it ends where it began; but as with many villanelles, necessity is not always made into virtue, and the reflection of ‘Poem’ on its own form—‘the house still stands’—tends towards the static.¹⁶ The same is true of Quinn’s ‘Days of 1913’, from *Privacy*, although here that time-warped quality serves the poem’s purpose more evidently, in its depiction of Central European small-town certainties in the days before the First World War swept them aside:

The sun goes down on courthouse and mainstreet.
The grocer has his borsch and says as often,
‘This soup the emperor himself could eat.’¹⁷

¹² See John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook*, 2nd ed. [1996] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 52, and John Hollander, *Rhyme’s Reason*, 3rd ed. [1981] (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 38.

¹³ See the *Harvard Gazette*, 3 October 2011: <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2008/10/heaney-catches-the-heart-off-guard/>. The poem was delivered in Harvard’s Tercentenary Theatre in 1986 and its form was apparently ‘an attempt to answer the question ‘How do people listen to a poem over a loudspeaker?’

¹⁴ Derek Mahon, *The Hunt by Night*, 2nd ed. [1982] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13.

¹⁵ See Paul Muldoon, ‘Soccer Moms’, *Horse Latitudes* (London: Faber, 2006), 28–9. Empson’s challenge lies in his own poetic achievement, but also in his criticism, as in for instance his throwing down the gauntlet on the double sestina in Sidney’s *Arcadia*: ‘limited as this form may be, the capacity to accept a limitation so unflinchingly, the capacity even to conceive so large a form as a unit of sustained feeling, is one that has been lost since that age’. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* [1930] (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956), 38.

¹⁶ Wheatley, *Misery Hill*, 46.

¹⁷ Justin Quinn, *Privacy* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 45.

The repetitions become, in the course of the poem, a manifestation of post-war nostalgia for pre-war values, with the setting sun a broader reflection on loss of empire: 'Their words repeat/with longing in their children's children's children,/The sun gone down on courthouse and mainstreet.' Both poets, too, have written villanelles as love poems. Wheatley's 'Recklessness', whose form in one sense belies its title, with its opening line, 'Join me again, love, in the old mistake', is a nod to the 'old mistake' of love, and/or the failures of love, as well as to the unfulfilled 'ache' that is the love poem itself, 'the permanence we aim at and we miss'.¹⁸ Quinn's 'A Strand of Hair' is perhaps the only one of these poems that marries its form perfectly to subject. An epithalamion, obliquely reminiscent of a seventeenth-century metaphysical love poem (as mediated, too, by Longley's own early 'Epithalamion', a poem similarly indebted to the metaphysicals), 'A Strand of Hair' plays on its form as both freedom and restraint. Through its circling and repetition it holds a delicate balance between choices made and choices never to be made:

And though I never asked you for your hand,
We will be married, and
As this, hardly to be felt, twines around my finger,
So light will be our wedding-band.

...

And you won't ask me to leave my rain-cursed land
Forever for your city with its saner weather.
I'll never ask you too. Give me your hand.
So light will be our wedding-band.¹⁹

It may be attributable in part to particular influences (the later 'freer' Plath one of them, MacNeice another) that O'Reilly evidences far less a compulsion to work in set forms, to 'order' her imagination to this degree. Quinn notes O'Reilly's capacity to give 'an impression of incredible compactness and discipline' whilst still often 'writing in freer modes'.²⁰ And yet, as in 'Thin', the strict form tests the capacity for freedom within boundaries, proving an effective vehicle for the explorations of self, and for the play of interior and exterior, fixity and fluidity, that characterize her work. A rare outing in English for the pantoum occurs in her second book, *The Sea Cabinet*, in 'Persona'. If it is less assured than Muldoon's venturing into the territory in 'The Mountain is Holding Out',²¹ the form is nevertheless suited to her occasionally surreal imaginings and projections of a sometimes trapped and disturbing psyche because of its structurally disorienting effects. As John Hollander observes, in the pantoum, 'a touch of the riddle is preserved in that the first half of each quatrain is about something wholly different from the second half'.²² The strangeness of 'Persona', the forced nature of its artificiality, its laboured forward movement (four steps forward, two steps back), is both its form and its theme:

¹⁸ Wheatley, *Misery Hill*, 54.

¹⁹ Quinn, *Privacy*, 12.

²⁰ Justin Quinn, 'The Irish Efflorescence', 49.

²¹ See Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*, 87–8.

²² Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason*, 44.

The mud-brown river is clotted with debris.
 What can I do with these dark adhesions,
 These unmoored pieces of the night?
 They breathe their black into my day –
 What can I do with these dark adhesions?
 If dreams are rooms in which my self accretes,
 They also breathe their black into my day.
 As a manikin, I set myself to work
 In dreams or rooms in which my self accretes.
 See me there with the pained carved face.

This ‘pained carved’ poem is cryptic; its repetitions and knotty accretions are difficult, like the manikin’s ‘wooden limbs’, to make ‘work’. Nevertheless, it does go some way towards creating an atmosphere of difficulty too, a form of inward struggle at odds with an outward projection.

II

Beyond the use of set forms, notable is the fascination in Quinn with rhyming couplets, or with triplets in Wheatley—in, for instance, ‘Gable End’, from *Mocker*, where the mindset explored in the poem is bound up with its dead-end (gable end) end-rhymes:

... I too return to prod at the past,
 content if I can be the unnoticed guest
 and drop dead letters to myself in the post,
 delivered and thrown away at the gable end
 as I must have been, to end up lost and found
 sharing my postcode with the rain and wind.
 I paint myself into the tightest corner
 and, though I could not be a slower learner,
 mouth the slogans on each flag and banner
 that I might join the gable end people
 at last, surrendering to their appeal
 and saying a prayer beneath their dreary steeple...²³

The parodic elements are unmissable here too—of Mahon in ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’, or ‘Day Trip to Donegal’—as is a shared subversive Beckettian sensibility in which, as Mahon puts it, ‘[h]aving hit rock bottom as you do with him, you know there’s nowhere to go but up’.²⁴ (Like Mahon, Wheatley, it seems, in his twenty-first-century Hull ‘exile’, is

²³ Wheatley, *Mocker* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2006), 36.

²⁴ Derek Mahon, ‘Each Poem for Me Is a New Beginning’, interview by Willie Kelly, *Cork Review*, 2/3 (June 1981), 11.

not actually going 'to die their creature and be thankful'.²⁵ With only a handful of exceptions, most of the poems in Quinn's *The O'òàà' Bird* and *Privacy* are rhymed. In *Privacy* in particular, rhyme can be expressive of the poet's being landlocked, tower-blocked, and contained, literally it seems, in squares and oblongs; yet the serendipity enjoined on the poet by rhyme can also allow for free play: as 'Bathroom' has it, 'A fight between the gridded immovables/And something that will always hate right angles...'²⁶ Sometimes the patterns force considerable ingenuity, as in 'Weekend Away', with its seven stanzas rhyming abcdefg with each other. Or in 'Non-Enclave', the obvious visual trick (the poem is right-aligned on the page, capitalizing the final rather than first character of the line) disguises its abba rhymes which, appearing as they do at the start of the line, are not discernible by the ear: 'this is extra, is what's kept outside thE /door (rhymes clicking shut like locks) when it's rounD/four below and snowstorms swirl in lovelesS/-ness, in chaos...'²⁷ Quinn's interest in rhyme is not, of course, in the creation of a Muldoon-style rhyming grid—his practice in the 1990s shows more affinity with the early Longley, whose poems in his first collection are almost all rhymed, or with early Mahon through to *The Hunt by Night* (1982). But, the disclaimers about Muldoon's influence aside, there is nevertheless, in both Quinn's and Wheatley's work, a lurking fascination with such grand designs, and with the potential to shape their writing in intricate patterns not always immediately visible. Quinn, like Muldoon, is a fairly compulsive sonneteer (sonnets comprise about a third of Muldoon's *oeuvre* to date), with, for instance, a sequence of Onegin stanzas in *Fuselage*,²⁸ twenty sonnets, 'Prague Elegies', in *Waves and Trees* (2006), or twelve sonnets, of various kinds, making up 'The Months', in his most recent collection *Close Quarters* (2011). Wheatley comes closer to Muldoonian ambitions, perhaps, in the final 'Misery Hill' sequence, which sustains its terza rima through thirty-three poems, and which takes us on a Gallogly-esque narrative journey ('Nemo reappeared, bearing a toothbrush//and soap. "How could you," he began, "even/imagine I'd leave you?" One of the new arrivals/yanked his jacket and asked, was this a safe haven//or what...'²⁹

In an interview, Quinn acknowledges that what he misses most, living as he does in Prague, is the sea.³⁰ On the one hand his imagination is, of necessity, drawn into an urban landscape, 'these ringing blocks/Laid down upon the whiteness of the page';³¹ on

²⁵ See Derek Mahon, 'The Last of the Fire Kings', *The Snow Party* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 10.

²⁶ Quinn, *Privacy*, 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁸ The poems are untitled. See *Fuselage*, 42–8. The 'Onegin stanza' is fourteen lines in iambic tetrameter, rhymed ababccddeffegg.

²⁹ Wheatley, *Misery Hill*, 62. See Muldoon, 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants' in *Quoof* (London: Faber, 1983), 40ff.

³⁰ See 'Justin Quinn: An Irish Poet in Prague' at www.radio.cz/en/section/books/justin-quinn-an-irish-poet-in-prague

³¹ 'Apartment', *Privacy*, 15. Living in a tower block in Prague (and in a landlocked country) is, he says, rather like living in a huge machine, a far cry from the leafy suburbs of Dublin where he grew up. See n.30 above.

the other, he returns often to shaped, heterometric poems reminiscent of Mahon's technique in the title poem of *The Hunt by Night*, or of Longley's 'The Hebrides' from *No Continuing City*, poems whose ebb and flow across the page is central to their effect, and latently indicative, it seems, of a seaboard imagination. These experiments in what is close to pure syllabic verse (as Hollander notes, 'an importation into English from other languages')³² are part of a larger concern in Quinn to work with visual as well as aural effect, characteristic also of Mahon (if one recalls for instance the shape poem 'The Window' in Mahon's *The Snow Party* [1975]),³³ and for both indicative of non-anglophone influences. In 'Clearing', as in other poems which adopt this kind of form (such as 'Childishness' or 'A Shrike'), Quinn's style is an attempt to capture movement, flux, and the natural world, the rhythmical momentum pushing towards clarity and freedom in stanzas whose underlying template is ten, four, eight, six, ten, and four syllables:

As though we were the first to walk the earth
 And see this place,
 The twilight's flare on grass and wort,
 First to see the slant
 Of sunrays downward, every glance and pause
 Echoed with portent...³⁴

Quinn closes his first collection, *The O'òàà' Bird*, with a sequence of twenty poems, 'Days of the New Republic', each comprising four five-line stanzas, with an ababa rhyme scheme. The sequence tests out stanzaic shapes for a new order. If the five-line stanza offers more room for manoeuvre, the potential for an asymmetrical open-endedness, the rhyme pattern inscribed on each poem by Quinn simultaneously seeks to connect the beginnings and endings that are his thematic concern. In 'Last Poem' he writes: 'You'd like to end with it, that's right?/The nothing-could-be-simpler line', although the poem ends with 'promise/Of new futures limbering up, as I/Full-stopped, step off into whiteness'.³⁵ The 'nothing-could-be-simpler line' eludes the poet, both as the 'line' to take, and, literally, in the poem itself, where it is spoken, but blacked out on the page and unreadable; yet it is also, in a sense, the in-between space where he finds himself (as in 'A Strand of Hair'). 'Days of the New Republic' is an attempt to structure thought in the uncertainties of the new Czech Republic, post-Velvet Revolution, a sequence carrying (as in 'Ur-Aisling') a consciousness of the Irish Republic's own founding mythologies, setting Quinn's adopted home of Prague alongside the home he left in Dublin. The 'line' of these poems, indeed of Quinn's *oeuvre* as a whole, is a line he identifies in the final poem of the sequence 'Geography', as the 'nothing-

³² Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason*, 23.

³³ Mahon reprinted this, his only shape poem, in *Poems 1962–1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) but not thereafter. *The Snow Party* also contains two prose poems, 'A Hermit' and 'The Apotheosis of Tins', not subsequently reprinted. Cf. Quinn's prose poems in *Privacy*.

³⁴ Justin Quinn, *The O'òàà' Bird* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), 37.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

could-be-simpler/Line where skies depend on seas'; it is also the borderline between two countries, and between the two (or three) languages in which, variously, he writes, lives, and works.

The five-line stanza, as Lennard notes, is less common than the tercet, quatrain, or sestet.³⁶ It appears seldom in Heaney's early work, for instance, only twice in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), in two lesser-known poems, 'The Folk Singers' and 'Poor Women in a City Church', once in *Wintering Out* (1973), in 'Bye-Child', and once in *North* (1975), in 'Belderg'; Heaney's imagination, not untypically, is drawn on the whole into tercets and quatrains.³⁷ Yet by contrast, the five-line stanza is the form of a number of Mahon's and Longley's early 'signature' poems—Mahon's 'In Belfast' (retitled 'Spring in Belfast'), 'Preface to a Love Poem' (with an ababa rhyme scheme), 'Van Gogh among the Miners', or 'The Forger', all from *Night-Crossing* (1968); Longley's 'Epithalamion' and 'A Personal Statement' (both rhymed ababb), or 'Leaving Inishmore', and 'In a Convent Cemetery' (both ababa), from *No Continuing City* (1969) as well as, amongst others, the later 'Irish Poetry', 'The West', 'Landscape', 'Second Sight', or 'Home Ground'—notably in other words, poems preoccupied with 'home'. Philip Larkin's 'Home is So Sad' (ababa), 'Arrivals, Departures', 'Wants', or 'I Remember, I Remember' with its bleak conclusion "Nothing, like something, happens anywhere",³⁸ offer a precedent here too, not just for Mahon and Longley in the 1960s and 1970s, but later for Wheatley's 'Misery Hill', a retrospect on Dublin from the vantage (or disadvantage) point of Hull:

Here's a single high-heeled shoe
posed upright, still wearable,
and a poster for a concert last year.
...
The wind lifts again, a post-office van
passes silently by with letters
for anywhere but this grim street
with its rubble and wire-topped walls,
featureless and empty besides.³⁹

The avoidance of rhyme, and asymmetry here, along with the Larkinesque details knowingly imported across the Irish sea (a reminder that the poet sometimes narrowly associated with England and provincialism can happen anywhere too), are apposite to the rather mundane and 'featureless' landscape of 'Misery Hill'. In contrast, as Paul Fussell notes, '[t]he most attractive kinds of five-line organisation seem to involve the envelope

³⁶ John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook*, 45. Five-line stanzas, Lennard notes, 'have no agreed name'. Paul Fussell also argues, this time in relation to three-line stanzas, that 'the general rarity of successful English three-line stanzas, suggests that stanzas of even- rather than odd-numbered lines are those that appeal most naturally to the Anglo-Saxon sensibility. We may inquire how well any three-line stanza, regardless of the talent of its practitioner, can ever succeed in English.' *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form*, 132.

³⁷ They are also generally unrhymed, although there are exceptions: 'Poor Women in a City Church', a poem with its echoes of MacNeice and Larkin, is rhymed aabab.

³⁸ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 2003), 69.

³⁹ David Wheatley, *Misery Hill* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2000), 11.

principle, the principle of enclosure and return . . . where the closure of the final sense is coincident with the sound closure echoing its initial rhymes'.⁴⁰ That may be one reason why the form suits those poems which tiptoe around a problematical concept of 'home', as well as those in search of an emotional homecoming. Mahon's 'Preface to a Love Poem', with its delicate circling of its subject, works through structure and rhyme in precisely that way too, as does Longley's 'In a Convent Cemetery': 'Although they've been gone for ages/On their morning walk . . . Convening out of sight and sound/To turn slowly their missal pages,//They find us here, of all places. . .'.⁴¹ Others resist enclosure and return, reaching instead for a more syntactically complex and uneven structure, suggestively open-ended—as in Longley's later unrhymed five-line poems, of which he writes several in the 1990s.⁴²

In Longley's *Gorse Fires*, the volume which heralds that new 1990s style, with its opening up into the longer, fluid (generally unrhymed) lines of his later work, the poet is, as he describes himself, 'an orphan now', 'making do with what has been left me'.⁴³ The liberating uncertainty and loss which are in part the impetus for Longley's recovery of poetry in the 1990s after a period of writer's block⁴⁴ are also influential in terms of O'Reilly's quest for self-expression. In the free-verse poem which opens her first collection, 'Perdita', she writes: 'I cannot feel found./I filled your absence in me/with all the wrong things, father,/fardels, odd bits, gewgaws. . .'.⁴⁵ 'Perdita' may be read as posing the problem of the 'woman poet' in relation to tradition, the 'father' here a symbolic, and literary figure, who, in the context of *A Winter's Tale*, refuses to, or simply cannot, recognize his daughter and abandons her. 'Perdita' contains the stuff of nightmares—'trees like lobster claws/and howling. Being chased'; the body of the poem is 'the thin skin over a scream'. Throughout *The Nowhere Birds*, O'Reilly's preoccupation with carving and sculpting an exterior always carries an awareness of the fluidity, or, in 'Perdita', the 'mesh of dark' beneath. It is a concern that carries obvious political resonance in a poem such as 'Ninety Eighty-Four', an indictment of the culture and society which brought about the death of schoolgirl Ann Lovett in the 1980s.⁴⁶ In a mischievous opening, 'Saint Laurence O'Toole meant business,/with his . . . stiff mitre', while 'Mary wore lipstick and no shoes'. As the poem progresses, the iconography, the familiar, unchang-

⁴⁰ Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form*, 139

⁴¹ Michael Longley, *Collected Poems*, 34.

⁴² The five-line stanza is habitual to Longley throughout his career; the five-line poem, however, appears only in the early 1990s, often as a single sentence in loose hexameter, and seeming, thus far, unique to *The Ghost Orchid* (1995), where the title poem itself is one of six five-line poems, and *The Weather in Japan* (2000), which has a further five instances of the form.

⁴³ See Michael Longley, 'Icon' and 'Sea Shanty', *Gorse Fires* [1991] (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 1, 36.

⁴⁴ See Fran Brearton, ch. 5, *Reading Michael Longley* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2006) for further discussion of this point.

⁴⁵ O'Reilly, *The Nowhere Birds*, 11.

⁴⁶ Ann Lovett, a schoolgirl of fifteen, died, along with her baby boy, from haemorrhage and exposure after giving birth beside a grotto in County Longford in 1984. No one knew she was carrying the child. The event caused a public outcry and debate in Ireland.

ing statues of childhood, and the rigid codes represented by them, begin to destabilize in the face of human tragedy: 'whole crowds of Marys/wept bloody tears in the groves,// making signs with fragmented hands'.⁴⁷ Elsewhere, as in the five-line poems 'Atlantic' and 'Watermark', which owe a debt to Longley's 'The Ghost Orchid', where the petals are 'bruised into darkness', and to the fluid gender politics of his later work, the hard/soft, surface/depth counterpointing of the poems turns, impossibly, absence into presence, the single sentence holding in its form the transient moment that has already gone. In 'Watermark':

Among the signs that lovers' bodies give
I loved the slow uncurling of your palms
like beech-leaves making shadows over water:
how my skin was awash for days on end
with the impress of hands on a river.⁴⁸

In the opening poem to *Privacy*, Quinn, the poet not quite in exile but permanently in transit, asks 'Where/Oh where will I unpack?'⁴⁹ The question is answered in and by the poems that follow, as he unpacks on the page, balancing his experience of Ireland with a life lived in Central Europe, and with significant international as well as Irish influences permeating his work.⁵⁰ For O'Reilly, resident in Dublin, there is a consciousness that the 'contemporary Ireland' she knows 'is almost laughably at odds with the largely fictional but weirdly persistent national construct posited by "strong" (in the Bloomian sense) writers such as Yeats, Joyce and Heaney. It is, to quote Sean O'Brien, an Ireland "where nobody lives"'.⁵¹ If, faced as she is with different problems in terms of self, society, and tradition, she 'cannot feel found' at the opening of *The Nowhere Birds*, she is at home, in the end, in the body of her forms, both 'open' and 'closed'; yet those forms in O'Reilly, like the body, are fragile and deliberately 'uneasy', pushed almost to breaking point, conscious of 'the dark space under the stairs', 'worried' by what is in the 'corner', what one senses but cannot see just off the edge of the canvas.⁵² In the final poem of her first book, 'Augury', the implied take-off into a new-found imaginative freedom and confidence might also be the birds (poems) taking off from the page into the 'nowhere' of the title, a process of composition aware of its imminent disappearance: 'For days they practise flying, then they fly'.⁵³

⁴⁷ O'Reilly, *The Nowhere Birds*, 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁹ Quinn, *Privacy*, 9.

⁵⁰ See 'Justin Quinn: An Irish Poet in Prague' for discussion of the influence of Petr Borkovec, a contemporary whom he translates frequently, and other European writers on his own work.

⁵¹ Caitriona O'Reilly, rev. of *Selected Poems* by Bernard O'Donoghue, *The Guardian*, 19 April 2008.

⁵² See Caitriona O'Reilly, 'Burning Pig', 'Anxiety', and 'Thunder over the Humber', *The Nowhere Birds*, 50, 51, 52.

⁵³ O'Reilly, *The Nowhere Birds*, 63.

III

In *Serious Poetry*, Peter McDonald points out that:

Form itself is a word long under suspicion in academic circles. However, poets themselves are unlikely to worry about the consequences, in the politics of the academy, of any supposed ‘formalism’. A respect for poems, and a respect for poems’ workings, negotiations with language and each other, and economies of meaning, image, and expression, is the common currency of poetic influence; without these things, talk of ‘intertextuality’ remains mere academic chatter. It may be significant that this creative fascination with form is so often combined with a sceptical attitude to the received shapes of authority in the literary, cultural, and political spheres, at least among the best and most enduring poets. Because of this acceptance of form’s authority, real poets know (as they have always known) that poetry cannot work to extra-poetic agendas...⁵⁴

If a younger generation of poets from the Republic have, as suggested thus far, found more compelling influences—certainly in terms of form—in the work of poets from the North whose perceived ‘formalism’ has itself proved controversial, this is not to underplay the importance, in other contexts, of poets such as Paul Durcan or Eavan Boland to a contemporary Dublin scene. As Quinn observes, ‘Boland... has cleared a space for Irish women poets to emerge’, even though ‘her style has not been taken up by her juniors.’⁵⁵ Similarly, he describes Durcan as ‘an agent of social change in Ireland’, who in the 1980s and 1990s ‘stood as a messenger—an angel more properly—bringing news that things could be otherwise’. Yet he concludes that Durcan’s poetry ‘seems unlikely to find a permanent place in the canon. It is as though its energies were completely expended on its occasions and has none left to move us two decades later.’⁵⁶ It is, however, to argue that their ‘creative fascination with form’—a fascination through which Quinn, Wheatley, and O’Reilly reflect on, and redirect thinking about such tried and tested themes as place, exile, language, and the politics of gender—owes a greater debt to those poets for whom the pressure to write to, and therefore the compulsion to resist, extra-poetic agendas has informed, often in politically subversive ways, their own observance of form’s ‘authority’.⁵⁷

That Quinn and Wheatley, or, in a different way, O’Reilly, are so evidently drawn to, and fascinated by, particular kinds of formal challenge, might also seem at the very least to affirm their place on one side of that division between ‘conservative mainstream and

⁵⁴ Peter McDonald, *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 15.

⁵⁵ Quinn, ‘The Irish Efflorescence’, 46.

⁵⁶ Justin Quinn, ‘Containing Multitudes’, rev. of Paul Durcan, *Life is a Dream: 40 Years Reading Poems*, *Poetry Ireland Review* 100 (March 2010), 134–5.

⁵⁷ For further discussion see Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) and McDonald, ‘Yeats, Form, and Northern Irish Poetry’, in *Serious Poetry*, 138–66.

experimental margins'. In her introduction to *The New Irish Poets*, Selina Guinness argues that enterprises such as *Thumbscrew* and *Metre* 'served as the promoters and often the defenders of a "new formalism"'. Changes to Irish life, she suggests, have animated this 'new formalism'; it has also been 'accelerated by academe ... [by] an awareness among younger poets of the need to learn the trade as Yeats commanded'.⁵⁸ Yet the picture that emerges, in both the poetry and criticism, qualifies the lines of battle sometimes crudely drawn between formalism and experimentalism, traditionalism and modernism, as it also complicates poetry's relation to 'social change'. If anything, the formal preoccupations of these poets suggest not so much a 'formalist' ethos, whether that term carries a positive or negative charge, as a desire, with varying degrees of success, to stretch the limits of formal possibility in response to a rapidly changing social and political environment. This they strive to do in a manner which may be seen as antipathetic to certain new formalist or neo-modernist articulations as they have manifested themselves in Irish critical debate. It is, in other words, an obsession not simply with 'form', but with formal and stylistic diversity.

In so far as both *Metre* and *Thumbscrew* had something in common, this may be seen as the desire to step outside commonly accepted (often London-centric) literary judgments; to pay attention to small presses, to lesser known as well as major poetic figures; and, more particularly in the case of *Metre*, to acknowledge poetic dialogue beyond the borders of these islands, to enable preoccupations 'to be freely shared across borders'.⁵⁹ *Thumbscrew* had from the outset a refreshing scepticism, a propensity to question accepted judgements, and an ability to ruffle feathers. In the last issue of the magazine, Tim Kendall, its founder, notes that he relied at the outset on:

a wave of upcoming critics and poet-critics, all in their twenties, who shared not so much a program or manifesto as a distaste for the insider dealings of the poetry scene. From Ireland came John Redmond, David Wheatley, Justin Quinn; from England, Ian Sansom; from the States, Stephen Burt; from South Africa, Elizabeth Lowry. I could rely on any of them to state what they thought and to state it intelligently and entertainingly; between them, they very soon began to influence for the better the culture of poetry reviewing in this country.⁶⁰

'The great advantage of an independent little magazine,' he concludes, 'is that it need not pander to anyone'. Here are some turns of the screw: Ian Sansom ('Armitage's poetry is a compendium of all that is pseudo, mal-dicted and calloused in the underworld of the English language. And that's his good stuff'); Simon Brittan ('the most irritating [and potentially misleading] aspect of Duffy is her insistence on writing prose as though it were poetry'); Caitriona O'Reilly ('everything Paulin writes labours under the dead hand

⁵⁸ Guinness, ed., *The New Irish Poets*, 14, 30.

⁵⁹ Quinn, 'Of Grids, Flux, and the Patternless Expanse', rev. of Armitage and Crawford, eds, *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945*, in *Contemporary Poetry Review*: www.cprw.com/Quinn/grids.htm

⁶⁰ Tim Kendall, 'Editorial', *Thumbscrew* 20–21 (2002), 2–3. Although, as he goes on to say, 'Plus ça change: the London scene is still cosy, self-savouring and mediocre...'

of Lit. Crit.’); Justin Quinn (‘the abandonment of regular rhyme and meter probably had more to do with Kinsella’s own failure to master them than with the times being out of joint, or some such Modernist escape hatch’).⁶¹ If *Metre* has ruffled fewer feathers, it has also served to promote a more cosmopolitan view of Irish poetry. Both magazines evidence a willingness to criticize the most mainstream of ‘conservative mainstream’ poets.

Guinness’s ‘new formalism’ tag, applied either to these journals or to the Irish poets writing and publishing in this generation, is thus misleading, since the term has a particular currency, notably in the US, where ‘new formalism’ is a kind of rearguard action being fought against a neo-modernist poetics and LANGUAGE poetry. William Baer’s introduction to the first issue of *The Formalist*, the US magazine which ran from 1990 to 2004, set out his agenda as follows: ‘*The Formalist* is dedicated to metrical poetry, which the editors feel is the mainstream of English-language verse. We hope to create a forum for formal poetry and to encourage a renewal of interest in traditional poetic craftsmanship.’ It was, for X. J. Kennedy, ‘a shining refuge for poets who play the Grand Old Game of rhyme and meter’.⁶² It is hard to imagine such overt promotion of poets’ interest in rhyme and metre would be felt as necessary in the Irish tradition (even if critics have felt impelled to defend the politics of traditional forms), or that in Ireland an anthology might be published entitled *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women*, an American anthology which, according to the *Yale Review* ‘challenge[s] the notion that women today write, or ought to write, primarily in free verse . . .’. ‘Form’ here equates with ‘traditional form’ (otherwise one might ask which poems by women, indeed by anyone, are *not* ‘in form’); and the book is embattled in a way we might in Britain or Ireland (where a formal feeling never went away) more usually associate with neo-modernist aesthetics. Its poems, the editor suggests, ‘contradict the popular assumption that formal poetics correspond to reactionary politics and elitist aesthetics’.⁶³ If that criticism has itself, however erroneously, been levelled at Heaney, Longley, and Mahon, their work has not been, in consequence, sidelined in the academy, or pushed to the margins of the publishing world. Indeed, those critics who advocate more extensive attention to neo-modernist writing in Ireland, claim a comparable neglect or misunderstanding in Ireland of experimental forms as they try to make a case for an Irish modernist poetic.⁶⁴ And websites devoted to British avant-garde or neo-modernist

⁶¹ See *Thumbscrew* 1, 3, 7, 17.

⁶² See <http://theformalist.evansville.edu/formalist.htm>

⁶³ Annie Finch, ed. *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women* (Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1994), 1. The anthology is, of course, specifically concerned with the gender politics of traditional form, recognizing it as a uniquely ‘troubled legacy’ for women poets, although the links to ‘new formalism’ more generally are evident in the introduction.

⁶⁴ John Goodby, for instance, argues that ‘the world of Irish neo-modernist poetry . . . has intermittently shadowed mainstream poetry since the 1950s’, and that their ‘relationship’ between the two is ‘characterised . . . by ignorance and outright dismissal’. *Irish Poetry since 1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 301. ‘Relationship’ here presumably means the attitude he attributes to the ‘mainstream’; although one could argue the issue both ways, given his own dismissal of what he calls ‘the limitations of the “I” of the Northern Irish lyric’.

poetry tend to be rather embattled too, on a mission to counter an 'anti-modernist and anti-innovative bias within the dominant British literary culture', and dismissive, in the process, of more traditional poets such as Larkin and Hughes (or at least dismissive of those who admire them).⁶⁵ In more restrained fashion, the recently established *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* recognizes that 'the equivalent North American work is well-represented in academic work, but researchers on British and Irish poetry have no dedicated refereed journal'.⁶⁶

Quinn as a critic is alert to, and frustrated by, the polarization of poetry criticism (particularly American poetry criticism) into distinct camps, or movements, which can, he argues, push 'the best readers of literature into unhelpful rearguard actions'. He makes a case instead for 'a criticism which attends to the societal context of poetry without reneging on responsibilities to poetry as a discourse distinct from politics and ideology, one with its own special rhetorical funds and resources', and he attributes to a 'younger generation of critics' the felt need to 'renew our sense of the particularly literary aspects of poems, while also attending to political contexts and the ways in which poetry matters to lives'.⁶⁷ When it comes to the battle-lines drawn between 'stylistic differences', the preference for a diversity of style which crosses such boundaries is expressed with a certain frustration:

Will they ever ask you to write a sonnet at S.U.N.Y., Buffalo? Will something a little disjunctive ever creep into The Formalist? The vigilance with which these borders are patrolled makes for a tedious purism, whose end result is the impoverishment of poetry and not its empowerment.⁶⁸

Since his own interest in traditional forms is bound up with an interest in experimentation too, particularly with typography and layout, Quinn's criticism of a British and Irish culture of publishing and reviewing poetry is of its own tendency to patrol the borders too, rather than testing 'the boundaries of form', or allowing them to be tested: 'the stylistic experiments of poets like John Ashbery and A. R. Ammons have received general acclaim in the U.S., whereas anyone in Britain who so much as fiddles with the syntax or displaces a capital instantly designates their collection to the out-tray of the established publisher'.⁶⁹ 'The bottom line,' he writes, 'is that there isn't really a plurality of poetic cultures in Britain and Ireland at the present time. . . . What is different is the demographics of the poets' backgrounds: you don't have to go to Oxford (although it has to be admitted

⁶⁵ See 'An Introduction to British Innovative Poetry,' at www.modernpoetry.org.uk/nrsh.html

⁶⁶ www.gylphi.co.uk/poetry/index.php

⁶⁷ Justin Quinn, *Gathered Beneath the Storm: Wallace Stevens, Nature and Community* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2002), 1–2.

⁶⁸ Quinn, 'Of Grids, Flux, and the Patternless Expanse', www.cprw.com/Quinn/grids.htm

⁶⁹ Ibid. One senses that for Quinn, multiculturalism, internationalism, plurality, heterogeneity, are no more than buzzwords in poetry criticism if the arguments for their existence are not proven by a necessary thematic and stylistic diversity. See also his argument in 'The Multicultural Meld' in *Contemporary Poetry Review* where, considering Native American poetry, he argues that 'the gaze of multiculturalism (wielded by the poets as much as the critics) is homogenizing and . . . identities are erased by the title "Native American"'.

that it still helps), and you don't have to be white and male (positive disabilities these days) if you want to make it. But such diversity has not resulted in any great diversity in poetic style.⁷⁰

Quinn is not here advocating instead an 'innovative' or 'neo-modernist' aesthetic. His own poetry tells a different story; and in any event, stylistic diversity may be no more or less characteristic of the 'experimental margin' than it is of the 'conservative mainstream'. (His interest in Jorie Graham, a poet 'singular in the American context as she is, it seems, capable of learning from most camps', may be revealing in terms of Quinn's own ambitions.⁷¹ Graham's poetry, he says gives the impression of 'a strikingly original intelligence that has taken the lyric form apart and put it back together again according to new blueprints'.⁷² Wheatley, a Beckett scholar, and a poet whose modernist affiliations are the most apparent of the three (to the extent that he is listed as author of one of '21 Worthwhile Contemporary British Innovative Poetry Blogs'),⁷³ reveals a slightly different frustration, this time with critical readings of that more 'experimental margin'. Reviewing a collection of essays on Brian Coffey, he writes:

As someone with an abiding love of experimental modernist writing, I find it dispiriting that the desire to have a modernist generation of poets of our own in Ireland, where the faintest pretence of one existed, leads us to see in Coffey the major experimental poet he patently was not. Beside the real thing – beside Montale, Vallejo, Char, Seferis – Coffey is bloodless and secondary.⁷⁴

The 'real thing', in Wheatley's phrase, is not 'home grown'; nor does it need to be. The 'desire' for 'our own' heritage is itself subjected to scrutiny in the ironic and parodic ('conservative') modes of Wheatley's poetry; and in the 2006 collection, *Mocker*, his forays into a more obviously modernist style and his experiments with rhythm, syntax, layout, and fragmentation owe more to the writers he names above, to Beckett and James Joyce, or to his English contemporaries and precursors Peter Riley or Peter Didsbury, than to Coffey or Devlin. In 'Fintan and the Hawk of Achill', the medieval source text becomes the vehicle for an experimental play on the politics of translation and textual fragmentation:

*put in the shape of a salmon each spring
by the Ba nn the Suir the Liffey the Shannon
to suffer stuck fast in the ice of Assaroe of the seals
came the hawk
that plucked out my eye*⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Quinn, 'Of Grids, Flux, and the Patternless Expanse'.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Justin Quinn, 'Pundits of the Weather', *PN Review* 113 (January–February 1997).

⁷³ 21 Worthwhile Contemporary British Innovative Poetry Blogs, www.modernpoetry.org.uk/lists.html Wheatley's blog is at <http://georgiasam.blogspot.com/>

⁷⁴ David Wheatley, 'Cloisters, Courtyards, Laneways', rev. of *Other Edens: The Life and Work of Brian Coffey*, Benjamin Keatinge and Aengus Woods, *Poetry Ireland Review* 100 (March 2010), 139.

⁷⁵ David Wheatley, *Mocker* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2006), 57.

If this collection in particular makes him something of a fly in the formalist ointment, that he retains his fascination with traditional forms also makes him a rogue element in the 'Innovative' scene.⁷⁶

From pantoum to postmodern rupture, it seems rather as if anything goes. Quinn, Wheatley, and O'Reilly are, in Wheatley's phrase, 'formalist or experimental as the mood takes them'.⁷⁷ If anything goes, not everything works. Yet it is fair to say that they 'offer in their variousness compelling examples of the range and scope of Irish poetry as it enters the twenty-first century'.⁷⁸ Anyone placing them too securely on one or other side of the formalist/experimental, mainstream/marginal border is likely to find they have smuggled themselves across it at various points. The stylistic and formal variety in evidence across all three poets (and others of their generation) is indicative of a desire to eschew a simple 'line', in more ways than one, and it suggests a conscious move away from some of the debates—or divisions—that have pervaded Irish poetry criticism in the twentieth century.

⁷⁶ For further discussion of *Mocker*, notably of 'Bankside-Wincolmllee by Instamatic', a 'homage to Peter Didsbury', see Maria Johnston, 'Dark Horse Among the Hippos', *Dublin Review of Books*, at www.drb.ie/more_details/08-09-25/Dark_Horse_Among_The_Hippos.aspx

⁷⁷ David Wheatley, 'Irish Poetry into the Twenty-First Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 250–1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 251.