Introduction

In the margin of a manuscript page of Priscian's Latin grammar, likely made in Ireland and brought to the Abbey of Saint Gall in the mid-ninth century, appear several verses in Irish.[1] Stretching across the top of the page is a nocturnal quatrain describing harsh wind beating against the sea and quietly rejoicing that the weather will keep away invaders, at least for the night:

> Is acher in gáith in-nocht,
> fu-fúasna fairggae findfolt:
> ní ágor réimm mora minn
> dond láechraid lainn úa Lothlind.

James Carney has translated the poem this way:

> Bitter and wild is the wind to-night
> tossing the tresses of the sea to white.
> On such a night as this I feel at ease:
> fierce Northmen only course the quiet seas.[2]

This poem, a quatrain made of seven-syllable lines – rhymed *aabb* – in which the first and third lines end in monosyllabic words and the second and fourth in disyllabic words, is in a fairly typical Irish syllabic meter called *deibide*, and it has been a favorite among twentieth-century Irish translators.[3] The first line gradually centers itself, its specificity increasing with every phrase: "it is bitter" (*is acher*), "the wind" (*in gáith*), "tonight" (*in-nocht*). This slow spiral, spiked with consonants, gives way to the silky "f"s of the second line, as the sea's (*fairggae*) rain-whipped (*fu-fúasna*, a verb form meaning "to shake or agitate") whitecaps are personified into white hair (*findfolt*). The line's consonance belies the roughness of the storm.

Ní ágor réimm mora minn more literally translates as "I do not fear the coursing of the clear sea," where *ágor* is the first-person singular form of the verb *ad-ágathar* (to fear) and *réimm* is the verbal noun of the verb

réidid (to course or run). As Carney's version indicates, the gist of the final lines is that the "I" of the poem is not afraid because the "keen warriors from Lothlind" (*láechraid lainn úa Lothlind*) only attack in good weather, and so will not attack on this stormy night. However, the final phrase of the third line embeds a powerful ambiguity into the text. *Mora minn*, a genitive singular that literally means "a clear sea," is also an early name for the Irish Sea (*Muir Menn* in the nominative), and this dual phrase is forced to function as a hinge between the final two lines, even though it sets up an interpretive puzzle that the poem does not solve.[4] The split between the phrase's literal and figurative meaning obscures the poem's sense and intensifies the anxiety of the scenario. Even though the speaker feels safe on this night, when the Irish Sea is stormy, the poem can't help but to think ahead to when the sea will be clear and the attackers will again come to shore, and this worry lodges within the phrase. The phrase *mora minn* refers figuratively to the Irish Sea, which on the night of the poem is stormy, but literally denotes a "clear sea," which is precisely the time when invaders would strike. From a safer position under a stormy, wind-bitter night, a clear sea (actually absent, but semantically, and perhaps imaginatively, present) incites both panic and calm. Naming the Irish Sea to describe its present storms inevitably means naming the opposite of current conditions – "a clear sea" – which troubles the poet's statement of relief. A gap opens between the poem's lexis and its act: The poet feels safe on this night only because the Irish Sea, the "clear sea," has belied its name.

Is acher comprises a series of such gaps. Vikings from "Lothlind" may not attack on this night, but they will surely be back, and the poem registers this fear. "Lothlind," perhaps signifying Lochlainn, may refer to Scandinavia, but in the Irish oral tradition, Lochlainn can also indicate the otherworld, and so a further fissure opens between this world and the Gaelic otherworld, an uncomfortable pagan undertow considering the poem's monastic provenance.[5] There are additional gaps opened by the text's overlapping geographies: A poem in Irish by (presumably) an Irish monk describing a specifically Irish moment – the Viking invasions of Ireland in the ninth through eleventh centuries often targeted monasteries – is found in the marginal space of a manuscript found in a Swiss abbey that transcribes a well-known Latin grammar first disseminated in Constantinople in the sixth century. The scribe who wrote the poem is a gap figure in Irish literature: a wandering Irish monk who made his way to a monastery on the continent during the Viking incursions. His position is exilic and (at least imaginatively) anchoritic. The stark quatrain

traces a gap in his scribal duties: Inscribed within it is the time he spent not copying Priscian's grammar.

A thematic liminality, underwritten by the complicated positionality of the monastic poet, is redoubled by the text's marginal placement on the page of the Latin copy of Priscian, and then again by the third line's compaction and its ambivalent unfolding. The speaker scrambles the poem's logic by introducing two sets of weather conditions – an actual storm and a figurative clear sea – that slyly reverse within the poem's concisions. The quatrain offers an intimate perspective on the terror of the Viking raids in Ireland, but its material existence depends on its absence from the scene. These facets counter one another as the poem cleaves to and away from itself. Its content, the probable conditions of its composition, its placement upon the manuscript page in which it survives, its lexical ambivalence – each converges and breaks upon the others. The text as we have it enmeshes these fractures, of which some are an effect of its composition, some of the material conditions of its inscription and survival, and some of the figuration of the author within the text and within the historical contexts that have accreted around it. The poem does not fully repair these fractures, nor is it entirely undone by them. It is unified metrically but frays internally as its declarative and representational work are tugged out of alignment by a series of forces within and without the quatrain. These forces are strong enough to warp the poem's discursive motion, but not strong enough to negate it as a form. The resulting poem, then, is never quite itself, but instead is a contradiction and shadowing of itself.

In this book, I describe a multifarious formal transfiguration that is the central feature of the work of a generation of Irish poets who began publishing in the mid-1970s. During a complex historical moment, these writers have rethought the possibilities of lyric form by fissuring the act of lyric from its utterance so that such renovated shapes might provide subjectivity effects commensurate with, or at least answerable to, tensely shifting conditions. Their work, like most modern Irish poetry, depends on lyric as its formative mode, but dramatically undoes or upsets lyric's procedures and stakes. Rather than assuming, exploding, or eschewing lyric, Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, Ciaran Carson, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill turn lyric against itself from within, producing poems that install secondary incongruous lyric structures that bolster and antagonize the primary form. I call such poems "counterlyrics" to emphasize this double commitment: the preservation and the perpetual undermining of lyric as genre and practice.

The countermotions that typify Irish poetry in the final third of the twentieth century are grounded in specific historical realities, whether Ireland's halting entrance into global capitalism, its status as both a former colony (the Republic of Ireland) and as a continuing British colony (Northern Ireland), the intense antagonism over the assumptions entrenched in the previous formulation, the thirty years of violence and sociopolitical turbulence in the North, or the aftereffects of the long process of Anglicization throughout the island. More specifically, the counterlyrics that begin to surface in the 1970s emerge from a hectic transitional moment in Irish literary history and are shaped by a diffuse and persistent argument undertaken in the 1960s and early 1970s that ranges selectively over the long history of poetry in Ireland in order to reformulate the position of poems and the role of poets within contemporary Irish culture. This initial refashioning, which I detail in Chapter 1, takes place discursively and polemically in essays and thematically within poems, and results in an Irish poet – both as cultural position and textual figuration – that is internally fissured and that speaks from a tactically self-undermining space. These counterpositions serve to project critical imaginative and discursive spaces from which to write as actually adversarial social and cultural positions wane. The next wave of poets turns these complex, contradictory stances into a set of tactics and, subsequently, a series of effects, producing lyric forms that decline to correlate with themselves. Such texts aggregate structures and strategies that oppose or undo one another without canceling each other out, remaining at odds and yet amalgamated within an unfolding poem. This harnessing of incommensurability works to split a poem's utterance from its act, or to counter what it says with what that saying ends up doing. In the chapters that follow, I delineate the polemics that characterize the debates in the 1960s and early 1970s, then show how the four poets mentioned absorb the debates and refract them into a formal problem with variable and provisional solutions, and, finally – and inevitably briefly – detail a further turn that takes place in the later 1990s and into the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Neither an aesthetic resolution, nor a structural dissipation, nor even a dialectical negation, a counterlyric runs crookedly adjacent to itself, as inversion, retroflection, or discrepancy – a text that projects the afterimage of a double structure, a form that launches another warped form. The act of countering depends upon a mutually constitutive antagonism, one that requires both opposition and reciprocity within an interdependent structure. A counterlyric is not against or outside the lyric. Rather, it sets into motion within lyric practice a process of contradiction or incompatibility,

what I describe as countering. Of course, any single general definition of *lyric* itself is bound to be unsatisfactory and is most useful as an initial provocation, but lyric can be provisionally defined as the interplay of three principles: compaction, pronomination, and tension. Whatever else lyric is, it is a mode of concentration, of making dense. This is often achieved via sound, morphology, figuration, layout, ellipsis, or by the simple fact of brevity; but one clear way to characterize lyric is as a compacted text. This isn't to say that lyric is nonnarrative or nondiscursive, only that its narrations and discourses are generatively curtailed by some simultaneous principle of compaction.

Secondly, lyric is based upon a manipulation of deictics, and on the decontextualization of these contextual words. When the narrator of or a character in a novel says "now" or "this," these refer to some aspect of the world created in the novel. Likewise, if a character in a play says "there" or "you," what or who is being referenced is almost always clear. In lyric, deixis is often decontextualized, and so strange, often uncanny, sedimentations appear.[6] To take only one example (but the crucial one): If an "I" appears in a novel or short story, it is generally either the narrative voice or a character in dialogue or internal monologue (in which case it becomes another kind of narrative voice), and is either part of the diegesis or of the extra-diegetical scrim. At times a reader might elide the narratorial "I" with the authorial "I," but rarely with the readerly "I." In a lyric, however, the "I" incessantly morphs, from the speaker of the poem, to the author, to the reader, to the text itself. A reader of a poem doesn't suspend his or her disbelief in quite so strong a way as when reading a novel or watching a play, and so the created world of the poem inevitably leaches into and draws from the actual world of the situated reader, without, however, collapsing the two. Reference is fissile, and so part of lyric's overall project involves what Paul de Man calls "pronominal agitation."[7] Such agitation frequently assures the ambiguity of a lyric's contents and consequences. Because the "I" and "you" toggle between author, speaker, and reader, the poem's context remains both difficult to specify and easy to assimilate: The lyric scenario is abstract but still projects an autonomous coherence, even if that autonomy only coheres at different, and disparate, levels.

The third principle, tension, has to do with the fact that poems are composed both of lines (whether metered or unmetered) and sentences, which are constantly playing off one another in what Giorgio Agamben calls the "opposition between metrical segmentation and semantic segmentation."[8] Poems, then, work syntactically as well as performatively, and their significance derives from their being made of conceptual, grammatical strings as

well as rhythmic and sonic ones. By centering these three principles, I do not mean to suggest that a given lyric might not have any number of other principles of composition, or that these three principles will always feature equally. Such a schematic definition of lyric is meant simply to provide a working notion of a fraught and ceaselessly debatable term.[9] Each of these principles assures the double status of lyric as simultaneously a verbal object and an act in words, and they most often go toward ensuring the coherence of this duality. This triad of features generally helps to knit together the poem as utterance, by which I mean the space from which it mobilizes its saying and the poem as act, which takes into account the formal shape that results. In the counterlyrics that I describe, though, these same features effect a splitting of the poem as utterance and the poem as act. This split anatomizes the double status of lyric in order to locate a space of agency that does not depend on the conflation of the poem's artifactual character with its status as a processual act.

Although the most obvious analogue for counterlyrics is musical counterpoint, pushing this correlation far past metaphorical affinities isn't ultimately useful. Basing an account of counterlyrics on musical counterpoint would require almost every aspect of the definition to be either severely generalized or damagingly mutated. Counterpoint is quite specific to musical composition, and its terms do not readily translate to literature. Most importantly, and obviously, the poems I discuss (and, more sweepingly, nearly all poems) do not contain multiple voices or lines occurring simultaneously. Counterpoint begins when distinct melodic lines are combined, and depends upon a double principle of independence and interdependence. It is necessary that the distinct lines of a contrapuntal composition can be detached from one another and played or sung separately and – at least in pre-twentieth-century music – that their combination results in a harmonic texture based on a progression of consonances and dissonances that ultimately resolve together. Whether one is describing species counterpoint, fugal counterpoint, or looser posttonal versions of free counterpoint, a contrapuntal piece is based initially on disunification, on two different voices ceasing to sound in unison. It is difficult to rechannel this into a description of poems, which, no matter the metaphorical ways in which we use the term, are not harmonic. We may say that one passage or pattern in a text "harmonizes" with another, but when we say this, we are not actually talking about musical harmony, which necessitates – if nothing else – multiple voices or channels sounding at the same time. In modern poetry, there is only one channel: A poem can be a melody (a linear series of sounds) and it may have a rhythm, but it will

not have several melodies or rhythms going at once. We may "hear" an iambic pentameter pattern occurring "underneath" a Hopkins poem, but this pattern is a readerly insertion based upon expectations and experience. There is not another poem in strict iambic pentameter happening alongside one of Hopkins's more far-reaching metrical experiments that helps a reader apprehend the metrical syncopations that occur. The kinds of fissures that characterize counterlyrics do not feature a separation into multiple strands, but are internal to the single strand of words that constitutes the poem.

In describing a set of contemporary Irish poems as counterlyrics, I am much more invested in what "countering" offers as analytical shorthand than in what musical analogues might provide. In addition to furnishing a specific way to talk about intratextual discrepancies, the conception of a counterlyric insets a species of temporality, of ongoingness, into our critical sense of poetry. We generally do not experience poems as we experience pieces of music (which enforce their own construction of temporality on our experience of them). Like listening to music, however, reading is a temporal activity that does not produce a poem all at once. But it also depends upon the catalytic actions of a reader to a greater degree than a piece of music depends on the activity of a listener (in this sense, a reader is somewhat akin to a musician realizing a score, but, again, this analogue becomes less fruitful the further it is pushed). Poems regulate and manipulate the pace at which we read them – by their stanzaic layout, their dominant metrical patterns, their sonic clustering, their distribution of figural densities and narrative freight, or their shifting of perspective or scene – and readers just as surely can countermanipulate a text's various tempos, by focusing on minor, ambiguous, or subdominant features of the text, or by actively reading against a text's grain. My sense of poetic form throughout depends on Lyn Hejinian's remark that form is "an activity": While our interpretive maneuvers are often based on treating a poem as one sort of thing (an elegy, a sonnet, a dramatic monologue), the active experience of reading is much more haphazard and inconsistent and usually involves a set of activities and counteractivities that produce as many incommensurable moments as resolutions.[10] The counterlyrics in this book tend to be recursive, feeding themselves back into themselves as they unfold and continually upending and reformulating their stakes. If one way to describe lyric's mutability is Osip Mandelstam's description of Dante's transformative poetics – an airplane "which in full flight constructs and launches another machine" – then a counterlyric can be illustrated by imagining that the second airplane then feeds itself back into the first.[11] This admittedly preposterous rerouting

of Mandelstam's image gets at the oblique ongoingness of a poem's unfolding (the continuing flight path) as well as the disruptions that compose it (a plane making and launching another plane from within itself while in flight is nothing if not constitutively turbulent).

A counterlyric uses one aspect of lyric practice to thoroughly disrupt another while simultaneously keeping it in play. This processual derailment occurs internally, and appears across a range of registers: a poem's sonic and figural patterns, its compositional shapes and strategies, its material modes of reception, its handling of lyric's open deictic lattice (the pronominal shadow play based on the tilted and abyssal connection of an "I" and "you"), and its complex negotiations of the figure of the author with the outlines of the lyric "I." The term *counterlyric* is specifically useful to describe the contemporary poetry on which I focus not only because of the continuing centrality of lyric within Irish literature and the commitment that Muldoon, McGuckian, Carson, and Ní Dhomhnaill demonstrate to lyric form, but also because it conveys that the experiments they conduct from within lyric are experiments on lyric. By fissuring lyric from the inside and then suturing those fissures together while resisting the tendency to entirely repair them, these poets undertake a critical project to revitalize lyric poetry, putting under scrutiny the ideologically suspect aspects of lyric – its continuing reliance on presence, its bids for immediacy, its arrogation to itself of powers of revelation (however self-consciously belated) – while finding what is viable in the remains.

Each poet's work converges on different areas of lyric's formal and discursive matrix, and so these counterlyrics appear quite distinct from chapter to chapter. Muldoon's triangulate three practices: a strategy of constant, multileveled association (whether sonic, thematic, or etymological); a dependence on precisely mutating and highly elaborate shapes or procedures; and a reliance on narrative, which often resembles a mode of proximate autobiography. This triangulation can, in Muldoon's best poetry, enact a new kind of lyric subject on the page, one that instances itself, paradoxically, by undermining its own interiority and one which indexes the counterlyrical possibilities that this book articulates. McGuckian sets a startling refurbishment of poetic authority within a recursive lyric frame structured by deictic volatility, an obscure manner of image production, and a penchant for unfinished or disabled syntax. When, in her work of the 1990s, McGuckian employed these complicated frames to think through various moments in Irish history, the resulting poems constituted an aggregated experiment about how lyric poetry can (and can't) figure historical connection.

In Carson's Belfast-centered poetry, competing regimes of visuality work against one another, scrambling lyric's economy of sight, vision, and perspective. As seer and as seen, Carson's fractured lyric subject, as it makes its way through Belfast's hazardous paths, continually disarticulates the durable visual positions that have underwritten poetry by subjecting itself to the city's surveillant gaze. Finally, while Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry in Irish is seemingly the most traditional in its dependence on a stable lyric voice and on the resources of Irish folklore, its dominant method of distribution generates a set of double texts in which one side of the *face-en-face* book counters, replicates, and occupies the other. Accounting for her work as it appears in popular dual-language editions requires a double reading in which both sides of the page impinge upon the other, continually upsetting the relationship between the primary and the secondary text.

Beginning a book entirely about late twentieth-century Irish poetry with a reading of an early Irish poem is admittedly anachronistic. I am, needless to say, not offering a critical narrative that accounts for the entire history of Irish poetry. However, I do mean this ahistorical gambit to perform a point: The counterpositionings I describe in the next chapter and the counterlyrics I examine in the four following chapters draw from the longer history of poetry and poets in Ireland. The kinds of positional instability and formal contradiction that mark contemporary Irish poetry are often catalyzed by self-conscious turns to past Irish poetry and to the positing of a tradition that, though itself constructed as fractured and discontinuous, is still a viable resource. Irish poets in the second half of the twentieth century have repeatedly turned to Irish history, and I examine one such turn in my chapter on McGuckian. Some poets have fashioned their own styles by way of literary-historical analogue, sometimes as the consequence of a translation project, such as Thomas Kinsella's generation of a poetics out of his engagement with *Lebor Gabála Érenn* and *Táin Bó Cúailnge* or Seamus Heaney's adoption of the Sweeney persona in his adaptation of *Buile Suibhne*. Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry is profoundly inflected by the Irish oral tradition and its conception of poets as keepers of lore and local history. Likewise, Carson's poetic style is indebted to the figure of the *seanchaí* and to the body of the Irish traditional music. Muldoon, in *To Ireland, I*, his 1998 Clarendon Lectures at Oxford, uses the proto-poet Amhairghain (Amergin) to structure his idiosyncratic tour of Irish literature. At work is a diffuse but insistent effort to use the complex historical figure of the Irish poet to delineate the conditions of Irish

poetry in the later twentieth century, some instances of which I detail in subsequent chapters.

These efforts are dependent on and complicated by the various and disparate roles poets and poems have fulfilled throughout Irish history. In pre-Christian and early Christian Ireland, the poet was a hinge figure, functioning as a mediator between discrete family and clan groups and bringing together various strands of Irish society. The early Irish poets were historians, judges, political operatives, and diviners and were extremely powerful in society even as their place in that society was unsettled.[12] They were respected because of their knowledge and because of the high degree of training that they had to undergo; the technical difficulty of their poems determined their status and the fees they could command; they were necessary to the workings of power because their poems of praise and their judgments influenced the construction and maintenance of the social structure; but they were feared because their praise poems could easily turn to curses or satires if they were unhappy with their compensation or the hospitality shown to them, and these satires and curses could damage a ruler's dynasty just as praise poems could strengthen it.[13] Debates continue about the exact provenance of each of the poet figures in early Ireland, and as to the relationship between these figures (the *fili*, the bard, the monk, the druid), but it is clear that they had power within the *túath* (tribe), as well as privileges of mobility among different *túatha*.[14] The role of poets in early Irish society was variegated, but the importance attributed to their role was bound up in their liminal place within the social fabric. These in-between positions, whether actualities of the social structure or imaginative projections, contributed to poets' cultural clout as well as assured that the poems produced by those in such positions would remain caught up in and by their own indeterminate place. If we temper Muldoon's knowingly provocative description of Irish poets' ability to negotiate the "world-scrim" between this world and the otherworld by redescribing such a "world-scrim" as cultural and social rather than supernatural, then we begin to get a sense of the disjunctions that emerge between the cultural utterance and the imaginative act.[15]

Muldoon initiates his description of this "world-scrim" with a turn to Amergin, who fashions a poem upon reaching Ireland with the Milesians, and who, for Muldoon, "is crucial to any understanding of the role of the Irish writer as it has evolved over the centuries."[16] Included in *Lebor Gabála Érenn* (*The Book of the Taking of Ireland*), Amergin's brief charm catalogue is a statement of cultural imposition and an instance of the poetic traversing that Muldoon endorses.[17] As Amergin sets foot upon land, he recites