CHAPTER I

'The Synthetic Irish Thing'

In his 1959 essay, 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', part autobiographical fragment and part jeremiad on a moribund Dublin poetry scene, Patrick Kavanagh recalled that his early work was praised because 'all agreed that I had my roots in the soil, was one of the people and that I was an authentic voice.... There's always been a great market in England for the synthetic Irish thing.'[1] Kavanagh's rhetorical slide, from authentic to synthetic, will be familiar to recent readers of Irish literature and history from a variety of critical and political positions, readers who have found that authenticity itself is a synthetic construct and that the hybrid, the bogus and the counterfeit lurk at the roots of modern Irish culture. Such accusations attended the matter of Irish writing from at least the controversy surrounding the publication of the Scot James Macpherson's Ossianic fragments, fabricated as they were from Irish mythological texts, and the *Irish Melodies* of Thomas Moore, in which newly written English lyrics were joined to Irish airs. Among the results of these inventions was a conflicting version of Irish Romanticism, cast either as what Matthew Arnold called the 'Titanism of the Celt, his passionate, turbulent reaction against the despotism of fact', or for William Hazlitt, the conversion of 'the wild harp of Erin into a musical snuff-box'.[2] Resistant to such stereotyping, the young William Butler Yeats praised an entirely different tradition which was rooted in the example of his immediate predecessors, the cultural nationalists Thomas Davis and James Clarence Mangan, and the Protestant patriot Samuel Ferguson, a small canon of critics and poets which would form the inspiration for his cultural revival: 'The grass is always green for them, and the sea merely blue, and their very spontaneity has made them unequal. But a wonderful freshness and sweetness they have, like the smell of newly-ploughed earth. They are always honest companions; no one of them wrote out of mere vanity or mere ambition, but ever from a full heart.'[3] As someone who knew what it meant to follow a plough through less-than-fertile Irish land, Kavanagh might be right to

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pour scorn on the spurious organicism of the synthetic Irish thing, particularly given that 'Davis, Mangan, Ferguson' all lived in the city. But over the course of the nineteenth century, as these powerful ideas of rootedness and antiquity met the demands of print culture and performance, it was Irish poetry that established itself as one answer to what Declan Kiberd has called, borrowing a phrase coined by Timothy Brennan to account for the emergence of the contemporary postcolonial novel, 'The National Longing for Form'.[4]

There were a number of ways that the synthetic recovery of Irish culture from the end of the eighteenth century was achieved, from the 'false sublime'[5] of English prose versions of ancient Irish poetry to the translation and repackaging of the remnants of the courtly bards or peasant poets and balladeers of a 'Hidden Ireland' for the English-language reading classes. In both cases, the matter of the Irish (or the 'Celtic') was edged into a home which might appear to belong to an alien, English. 'By the forms of its language a nation expresses its very self,' Arnold said in his 1865–66 Oxford lectures on Celtic literature, in terms we might mistake for those of a Young Ireland polemicist, counselling the preservation of Irish. His language came from a place he called England, and when he asked himself what that place was, he found himself tempted by one possible answer, which might not have looked like Victorian England at all: 'A vast obscure Cymric basis with a vast visible Teutonic superstructure'.[6] Finding that the Cymric basis persisted in language and culture in Wales (the *Eistedfodd* was revived in 1860), and that the last speaker of Cornish was still a living memory, such thoughts enabled Arnold to say that Celticism was at the root of a broadly conceived British culture which is distinct from, and indeed superior to, its European relatives.

More than language, Arnold says it is 'literature' which is the key to a people, and family resemblances within the language of that literature establish for him a poetry written in the synthetic language of a modern United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Poking around the roots for origins, Arnold reiterated something discovered by many who had compiled and translated the documents rescued from British and Irish antiquity, literary forms which for all the classical and Christian traditions of their superstructure had in the obscurities of their etymology something older, possibly pre-Christian, certainly pre- and anti-Reformation, and were somehow working in different, unaccommodated ways at the foundations of the British state. Like Kavanagh's rootedness and authenticity, to adapt one version of an ancient Britishness stripped of its superstructure, the Celtic looks like 'the thing itself: unaccommodated man'.

That may be no more than 'a poor, bare, forked animal,'[7] but it provided a powerful version of authenticity in a state of nature as a riposte to the modernising industrial society of the philistines.

The story of Irish poetry written in the English language throughout the nineteenth century is that of the unaccommodated searching for the thing itself. The method is a subplot, of sorts, of the deliberate stripping of English poetic form to its roots and the grafting of different literary and linguistic forms, prosody, syntax and style onto it. Those metaphors of 'root' and 'graft' are inherently problematic ways of describing things which are cultural and not organic – culture as if it were organic – and much fun was had in post-Romantic Irish literary criticism about the use and abuse of such terms, of which much will be said later. Suffice to say here that recovering poetry and music and language from the past resulted in coming up with something new in poetry written in English. The dominant method was through translation of various sorts, even when, as with Macpherson, there was no discernible 'original'. Notoriously in Arnold, geographical, anthropological, linguistic and what we would nowadays call racial terms swap places promiscuously in his conception of the origins of Celtic literature. This is not the place either to reiterate the charges or to defend Arnold, but we could make a slight historical leap back to this problematic terminology to adapt and then to reverse Arnold's terms for the geography, anthropology and politics of England for the emergence of a distinctively Irish culture in an anglophone nineteenth century.

For the purposes of Irish literary history, an obvious replacement of Arnold's 'vast obscure Cymric basis with a vast visible Teutonic superstructure' is simply to shift it west, finding an obscure Gaelic basis with a visible English superstructure. This might then be to describe something in Ireland comparable to Arnold's modern British state. It might also describe something unified, with one history in language and culture layering over and thus replacing the other. Thus in one Victorian formulation, we end up with Alfred Tennyson's King Arthur in 1842, surrendering the Celtic epoch to its replacement, however vague that might be: 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new.'[8] But Gaelic Ireland was never so resigned to its fate, and Ireland remained, as many observers pointed out through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not one place or people but two or more: Irish, English and Anglo-Irish sometimes existing in a place that Daniel Corkery called 'Irish Ireland', a 'peasant' place, distinct from a place called English Ireland.[9]

If there is a view of the Gaelic which might be thought to be the opposite of Arnold's view of the Celtic, it is that of Corkery, published in 1924 at the end of the Civil War which had followed the establishment of the

Irish Free State. He reconstructed a divided culture sunk in degradation after Britain's 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. Working from a phrase of Samuel Madden picked up from Corkery's bête noire, the unionist Victorian historian W.E.H. Lecky, he saw that from a description of a divided English/Irish, Protestant/Catholic eighteenth-century Ireland as 'a paralytic body where one half of it is dead or just dragged about by the other', he could offer one of a number of definitions of his theme: 'The Hidden Ireland, then, the land that lies before us, is the dead half of that stricken body; it is the terrain of the common enemy, ruled by deputies of deputies of deputies, and sunk so deep in filth and beggary that its people have been thrust, as torpid and degraded pariahs should, beyond the household of the law.'[10]

We cannot separate Corkery's 'Hidden Ireland' from the crucial function it played in the early years of a Free State keen to pursue the *Kulturkampf* of de-Anglicisation (and its relative failure, which is another story). But two more versions of Arnold, albeit crossed with Corkery, might look something like this. Over the course of the Irish contact with its English neighbour, an English and Protestant superstructure was imposed on the Gaelic and Catholic basis of the culture. This Gaelic basis suffered an attempted eradication after the defeats of the Jacobite cause and the Union of England and Wales with Scotland in 1707, a process accelerated by the Penal laws of the early eighteenth century. Add the subsequent suppression of Jacobite rebellions in Scotland in 1715 and at Culloden in 1746, and the decline might have been thought to be terminal. Nevertheless, towards the end of the eighteenth century, a confident English-speaking culture, benefiting from the learning promoted by a settled ascendancy class, met again the old Gaelic basis, which was in its turn becoming newly visible, assuming a superstructure in which the seeming ruins of the Irish language and Irish music were shored up by English translation. This was manifest in one way by poetry and song, in the contact of English poetry with Irish lyric and melody. But it also coincided with a new politics, of rights and revolution, inspired by events in America and France. It is difficult to underestimate the confluence of art and culture with this new politics, no matter how uncomprehending of each other their adherents might originally have been. An emblematic moment occurred in the middle of the Belfast Harpers Festival, on 13 July 1792, when two Protestant figures, Edward Bunting and Wolfe Tone, could be seen in the same hall, one a diligent nineteen-year-old student writing down the nearly lost music of a fairly ramshackle collection of elderly, mostly blind Irish harpers, and the other using the occasion to

organize United Irishmen and Volunteers for the next day's celebrations of
the third anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, all the while complaining
of the musical accompaniment which exacerbated his hangover: 'the harp-
ers again, strum, strum and be hanged!'[11]

One possible site of the origin of what the nineteenth century would
later call nationalism was thus also a site of recovery, making a historical
connection with something thought lost, and beginning the process of its
restoration – albeit printed in the English language or in notation for the
pianoforte. Melody and style were translated, adapted, written down and
relearned to be joined with a new subject matter. In Arnoldian terms, the
superstructure assumed the basis; in Corkery's terms, the sunken began to
recolonise the terrain. The renewed antiquarian interest in the recovery and
translation of ancient Irish texts, court and folk poetry, melody and song,
as well as the persistence of Irish-language poetry and English-language
ballads, meant that the resultant synthetic form of Irish poetry in English
came into the light as something new but still based in a project primar-
ily concerned to rescue and complement the cultural remains of those
who had remained unaccommodated with the Ireland of Ascendancy and
Union. These remains were composed and performed by a people whom
Corkery memorably called

> the residuary legatees of a civilisation that was more than a thousand years
> old.... With that civilisation they were still in living contact, acquainted
> with its history; and such of its forms as had not quite become impossible
> in their way of life, they still piously practised, gradually changing the old
> moulds into new shapes, and whether new or old, filling them with a con-
> tent that was all of the passing day and their own fields. What of art they
> did create in their cabins is poor and meagre if compared with what their
> fathers created in the dun and grianans of queens; yet the hem matches the
> garment and the clasp the book.[12]

The poetry beginning to be written in Ireland could also gain from such a
late-Romantic formulation of tradition as the persistence of the traces of the
old in the new writing for a new audience in speakers of another language.

Corkery's case is exemplary for an Irish literary criticism sensitively
attuned to the nuances of Irish historiography. His work has been much
revised since Louis Cullen used it as the basis for a revisionary movement
in Irish history.[13] The critique of Arnold has for some time been a starting
point for the counter-revisionist turn of Irish postcolonial and nationalist
criticism.[14] But one thing that neither Arnold nor Corkery can be accused
of is the static mourning of the merely nostalgic. Bearing in mind the sin-
cerity of Corkery's complaint against the destruction of the literary and

linguistic culture of his forebears, and its seeming opposite, the no less sincere modernising educational mission of Arnold's Oxford lectures, both critics offered versions of culture in process, in adaptation, reorienting the 'Celtic' or the 'Irish' to the new. They described a becoming of sorts, even when they were content with the evanescent and the parochial – 'the passing day and their own fields' – which would eventually emerge for a poet like Patrick Kavanagh as end enough for poetry.

This book is interested in retelling a part of that story again, by looking again at the ends and the beginnings of Irish poetry. Nineteenth-century Irish poetry in English was for most of its life trapped inside an arranged marriage – most would say a forced marriage. For all that Great Britain and Ireland constitutionally tied the knot in the Union of 1801, as we can see from the place-changing of Arnold's and Corkery's terms in the preceding sketch of literary and linguistic history, that knot can look fairly difficult to unravel in longer stretches of the relationship between English and Irish poetry. 'History encloses him so straitly that even his fiery moments do not set him free from it', James Joyce said of James Clarence Mangan, 'the type of his race', Irish poet.[15] Figures for the unravelling came very slowly and frequently with an apocalyptic import, as in the two spools disarrayed for the last judgement in English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins's Dublin poem of the *dies irae* of the end of Empire and time, 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves'. Irish versions were even less certain: the closest William Butler Yeats's end-of-the-century poem 'The Valley of the Black Pig' comes to a liberating apocalypse is at its threshold, 'Master of the still stars and of the flaming door'.[16] Even Joyce, a writer who chose escape, ended his only significant poetic sequence, *Chamber Music*, abandoned on a shoreline, blasphemously quoting the crucified (and un-resurrected) Christ, 'My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?'[17]

The becoming of the moment of liberation was wary of both birth and rebirth, and it is important that the hindsight cast back from subsequent Irish history, of cultural revival, insurrection and (partial) political and cultural independence, not be allowed to over-influence readings of poets acutely aware of their subject status, caught between origins and originality. At the very least, to tell the story of nineteenth-century Irish poetry, we cannot avoid matching it with another, more frequently told one, following recent historians and critics from a number of ideological positions in revising it a little to allow in the broader British poetic story. Taking a lead from the work of the historian of Britain J.G.A Pocock, three-kingdoms or four-nations models of British history have been crucial for historians of Enlightenment and Romantic literature. Witness Robert Crawford's

account of a 'devolved' English literature located back into its institutional inception in Scottish universities and Edinburgh printing houses, or John Kerrigan's appropriation of Shakespeare's 'Scottish Play' at the beginning of a seventeenth-century archipelagic English.[18] There has been a long-held revisionary view of the Irish locations of the composition of Spenser's British epic for Elizabeth, *The Faerie Queene*. By the end of the eighteenth century, a Bardic nationalism, to use Katie Trumpener's phrase, might be seen as widespread across a devolved English literary scene, so much so that Maureen McLane, attempting to establish a 'transhistorical, transmedial' reflection on poetry after historicism, locates a paradigm in Anglo-Scottish balladeering 'the persistence and transmutation of a poetic and musical phenomenon as it encounters new media and new historical situations'.[19]

But the four-nations paradigm has slipped from the literary history of the newly expanded United Kingdom after 1801. The slippage has been from the study of nineteenth-century Ireland, centred as it is around the catastrophes of the Great Famine and emigration and governed as it has been by the hindsight of eventual rebellion and independence. It has also suffered from the oft-noted repression of the Famine in the Anglo-centric and imperial preoccupations of studies of Victorian culture.[20] For nineteenth-century Irish poetry, however, the archipelagic examples were strong, whatever their dubious authenticity: *Ossian*, Bishop Percy's *Reliques of English Poetry*, the medieval forgeries of Thomas Chatterton, the great commercial success of the renovated songs provided by Robert Burns in his collaboration with a number of Scottish publishers and European composers, Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, and ultimately William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, a particular form of Romanticism for which a new poetry was founded in the old forms of country and orality. For all that literary history usually posits that Yeats, writing a century after Wordsworth, is at the beginning of a revival of original Irish poetry written in the English language, in MacLane's terms, the 'persistence and transmutation' of English and Scottish ballad-collecting and 'the new media and new historical situations' of the reprinting and translation of the Irish ballad and lyric were to result in much original Irish poetry in English in the nineteenth century.

The poetry which followed the example of Romanticism we might broadly call 'Victorian' – no matter how problematic that term might be in relation to Ireland. The strongest detractor of the poetry of nineteenth-century Ireland has been Thomas Kinsella, for whom the loss of Irish resulted in his own singularly divided Irish modernity, inheritor

as he saw himself of a 'Dual Tradition'. Developing arguments made in an influential lecture first given in New York in 1966, Kinsella blames the 'poetry of general dullness, a great supply of bad verse' written by Irish adherents who were following British Victorian forms, the example of which was 'minor and bad verse, from a succession of poets content with established modes and forms and making small changes, in a changeless tone, inside narrow bounds'.[21] A generation of scholars has learnt to read again Victorian poetry since its great belittling by the modernists among whom Kinsella was a late developer. But bar the markedly dissimilar approaches offered by Robert Welch or David Lloyd, fewer have tried to read again Victorian Irish verse.[22] That involves reading against the grain, in many ways celebrating, if that were possible, its baggage as synthetic, forged, stolen or mere translation. Then again, what of 'Tam O'Shanter', 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' or 'The Lady of Shalott'? These are synthetic British products which were partly recovered mythic or oral tradition, but mostly invention. If the American folklorist Richard Dorson refers to these British poems as 'fakelore', his definition of it might yet be turned to positive account: 'a synthetic product claiming to be authentic oral tradition but actually tailored for mass edification'.[23] In Ireland, the needs were of a 'mass audience' further split by the change of language: in Kinsella's terms, 'the change of vernacular from Irish to English was leaving a majority audience divided from its past.'[24]

The Irish poetic turn to bring its own traditions – in mythology, epic, court poetry, Jacobite lyric, folk melody or ballad – into print at first sought simple academic pleasure from its earliest practitioners, perhaps coinciding with the desired immersion of Ireland in the greater United Kingdom and its world-spanning empire. Aping Percy, Charlotte Brooke could call her 1789 collection of translations *Reliques of Irish Poetry*, but that publication – the first serious attempt to find English poetic form for Irish-language aristocratic as well as peasant poetry – was to founder because of two ultimately related circumstances. The first might be suggested by the date of the year of its publication and the events in France which were to draw Britain into an alliance with the forces of reaction against the revolutionary spirit unleashed across Europe. The second was Brooke's own version of the Great British family:

> The British muse is not yet informed that she has an elder sister in this isle; let us then introduce them to each other! together let them walk abroad from their bowers, sweet ambassadresses of cordial union between two countries that seem formed by nature to be joined by every bond of interest, and of amity. Let them entreat of Britain to cultivate a nearer acquaintance

with her neighbouring isle. Let them conciliate for us her esteem, and her affection will follow of course. Let them tell her, that the portion of her blood which flows in our veins is rather ennobled than disgraced by the mingling tides that descended from our heroic ancestors.[25]

This passage is familiar to many historians of Irish Romantic culture, promoting the 'cordial union' of culture between Britain and Ireland in order to follow the ultimately successful union of England and Wales with Scotland earlier in the century. It might be discrete not to look too closely at the metaphors Brooke employs: one feature of the critical discussions in this book will be to question the poetic unions attempted in practice and in theory by a succession of Irish poets and critics. But another will be to look at the metaphors that are used, and the inevitable vocabulary of hybridity, grafting, marriage and issue. Brooke's intention is genial, but her metaphors of sisterhood, shared blood and mingling tides suggest a marriage which might be rather too close in terms of shared family characteristics.

Brooke's method to effect this union was translation, and if the semi-incestuous metaphor implicit in her account is not entirely under control, neither was the translation. A translation which cannot register difference in the translator's language cannot suggest something new. But at times she could admit a more than family distance, a yawning gulf unbridgeable by translation.

> A chinn duibh dhílis, dhílis, dhílis,
> Cuir do ceann dílis tharam anall;
> A bhéilín meala, a bhfuil boladh na tíme air,
> Is duine gan chroí nach dtabharfadh duit grá.
>
> [Lay your head, my own (my own, my own)
> Your head, my own, lay it here upon me.
> Honeymouth that smells of thyme
> He would have no heart who denied you love.][26]

This is the ending of an anonymously composed Irish folk song, usually referred to by its Irish title, 'Ceann Dubh Dílis' ('My Own Dark Head' or 'Dear Dark Head'), as it appears in Kinsella and Sean Ó Tuama's classic 1981 collection, *An Duanaire 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, along with Kinsella's modern translation. Printing the stanza in 1789 in a Gaelic font, Brooke's gloss simply went thus: 'I need not give any comment upon these lines; the English reader would not understand it, and the Irish reader would not want it, for it is impossible to peruse them without being sensible of their beauty.'[27]

Seventy-six years later, Samuel Ferguson was to publish his attempt at just this feat, of translating the untranslatable:

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Cean Dubh Deelish

Put your head, darling, darling, darling,
  Your darling black head my heart above;
Oh, mouth of honey, with the thyme for fragrance,
  Who, with heart in breast, could deny you love?
Oh, many and many a young girl for me is pining,
  Letting her locks of gold to the cold wind free,
For me, the foremost of our gay young fellows;
  But I'd leave a hundred, pure love, for thee!
Then put your head, darling, darling, darling,
  Your darling black head my heart above;
Oh, mouth of honey, with the thyme for fragrance,
  Who, with heart in breast, could deny you love?[28]

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This poem appeared as one of Ferguson's *Lays of the Western Gael* in 1865, in a volume which finally gathered together his 1830s translations of Irish court and peasant poetry with more recent work on translated and original versions of Irish myth and epic. The volume served two functions. The first was primarily patriotic, to continue to redress the great correction of the Ossianic from the mystical, the sentimental and the defeated into what Peter Denman calls 'Ferguson's hard-edged vision of the simplicities of a heroic Ireland'.[29] More pertinent to this poem, and the poetry discussed in this book, the *Lays* also removed Ferguson's versions of Irish-language song and lyric from their original polemical context, as an appendix to another corrective or revisionary act. This was the young Ferguson's sharply critical review of the tastelessly anglicised versions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Irish poetry collected in James Hardiman's 1831 *Irish Minstrelsy*, accompanied as they were by a sectarian and O'Connellite critical apparatus.

A much later translation, Ferguson's 'Cean Dubh Deelish' functions thus as something which has been placed at a deliberate distance from its 'source'. It was published in the 'Versions from the Irish' part of the *Lays* without an original for comparison. In Hardiman's collection, texts in an Irish typeface faced the English versions, and Kinsella and Ó Tuama were later scrupulously to follow this procedure in *An Duanaire*. In one sense, giving version or adaptation and not literal translation, Ferguson appears to be asking us to read an English poem on its own terms, and what a strange thing that is. Brooke must have been wary of the challenge of translating the first line alone, where 'dílis' can mean in English alternately 'my own',