

Ireland and Catalonia: Fearful Symmetries

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I wish I had taken notes at the time, or kept a diary, or even collected some of the posters which appeared on the city walls. I wish I had taken photographs of the first graffiti. But I remember some things so vividly and easily and clearly. I remember the Corpus Christi of 1976, I remember that I came casually across the scene being enacted in front of the Cathedral in the early afternoon, maybe one of the last images of the old regime to appear in the city: the church and the military in full regalia, hand in glove, soldiers on horses, salutes with guns, the raising of the host in the open air, bells, the clergy in full colourful dress. I remember it maybe because it was the only image of the ugly old stability I ever saw in Barcelona. Every other image was an image of change.

I know that I arrived there on 24 September 1975. I had been out of Ireland once before and that was just for a few days in London. Franco died on 20 November 1975. In the months before and after his death, the whole world changed for me and for many others. If I had known this was happening I could have written it down at the time; but maybe what I thought was important then was not important, was stuff that made no difference. The public things are easier to write and note down than the private, and they were different, but the memory of them all has the same shiny excitement about it, everything seems part of the same unconsidered whirl.

It is easy to talk about the Saturday night in a taxi alone going somewhere, I have no idea where. And the news coming on the radio that the communist party had been legalized. Later, I would read about it, and I would meet one or two people who had been in Paris that night, in the airport waiting to come back after all the years, but those moments in the taxi, the driver whistling in wonder and surprise and both of us understanding the significance of this. I remember that night. I have no doubt it happened and I have no doubt what it meant.

And other things too. One night they put Catalan names for the streets opposite the Spanish ones. Later, they removed the Spanish names, but I do not know when. The King came to the city and spoke in Catalan, and for the 1976-1977 season the printed programmes for the weekly concerts at El Palau de la Música appeared only in Catalan.

And I remember the eleventh of September 1976, Catalonia's national day, and everybody waiting to see what would happen, and that morning early the news breaking that yes, yes, they were going to allow a demonstration, but not in the city rather in the suburb of Sant Boi and I have a sharp memory of the words "Tots a Sant Boi" but I do not know whether they were in a newspaper or where they appeared first. In any case, I went to Sant Boi. I saw all the flags and all the slogans and all the happiness for

Catalonia. It reminded me of what it must have been like in Ireland sixty years earlier when people could talk openly about loving Ireland, or doing things for Ireland or dying for Ireland.

No one then wanted to die for Catalonia. Their dying had all been done. But, nonetheless, I understood their fierce love of their country. I loved it too: the sound of the language, the history, the songs. More than anything, I loved how beautiful they were. The women were beautiful, but it was the men I was interested in. I loved the soft clarity of their skin, their dark eyes, I loved when they shouted slogans and raised their arms, I loved their fierce addiction to the new possibilities of freedom.

I went on their marches. I followed each day's events in the newspapers like they did. I wished I had been born here, brought up in this culture, so that I could confidently, vehemently join some splinter nationalist group or become a communist. But for those first few months it didn't really matter what you were. Everyone marched together. I couldn't take my eyes off the blokes on the marches.

In September 1976 I began to learn Catalan. I went to classes and I had a private teacher. The private teacher asked me the first day if there was anything special I needed to know. I nodded. Yes, there was, but it wasn't a point of grammar and it was slightly embarrassing. The teacher was curious. I told him that I already knew how to say yes and no and how much and thank you and where and when. But I needed something that was a cross between an imperative and a subjunctive. I needed to be able to say it in an urgent whisper so that it would be obeyed and attended to.

I needed, I said, to know how to say: "Don't come yet". In those months after the death of Franco that was the Catalan phrase I needed most. I worked for some time with the teacher's help at getting it right. I have never looked back.

The problem I had then was that I was susceptible to everything: the sexual and the political possibilities and enticements. I learned very quickly, in a matter of weeks, about my own sexuality and what fun could be had with it and how this fun could be found. And very quickly too I learned to feel the same emotions as the Catalans felt about their country. I was gay and thus I was ready for a sexual awakening. I was Irish and thus I was only too ready to witness and understand and feel the emotions surrounding the sudden lifting of the heavy hand of Spain on a vulnerable nation with an ancient history. I loved the language, as people at the turn of the last century must have loved Irish. I loved certain figures in Catalan history such as Lluís Companys and Francesc Macià. I loved Catalonia's European and humanist heritage. But beyond all that there was an emotion I can't explain which is the emotion which fuels romantic nationalism. It was at that time the pervading emotion. I felt it, and I thought everyone around me did too, but that turned out not to be the case.

I taught English as a foreign language and most of the English and the Americans I worked with were left cold by the upsurge of Catalan emotion. They could not understand why Catalans wanted to be separate; they could not see any need for legislation about the use of the Catalan language. They were in Spain and they wished Catalans would realize that too. There was no point in arguing with them, I realized. You either felt the emotion that filled the air or you did not. And it was pointed out to me that when I wasn't being vehement about Catalonia, I was being vehement about my loathing for the IRA and all who sailed in her. I hated Irish nationalism. How could that be?

It was hard to explain and I remember that any time I tried I failed. What happened in those years in Catalonia gave me a sense of what it might have been like in the early years of the twentieth century when people joined the Gaelic League and went to the Aran Islands. I watched politics working in those years—the use of the ballot box, the making of deals and pacts and compromises—in a way that seemed impossible in Ireland. The Ireland I left in 1975 was grim and seemed unreformable. For me and many like me, the aura around the word Ireland has lost its glow; the aura around the word Catalonia in 1976 was incandescent. Yet you could feel it better, the excitement around Catalan nationalism then, if you knew Ireland, even if the Irish nationalism you knew seemed clapped-out and part of history as Catalan nationalism will be in the future, maybe has already become.

There were strange uncanny echoes, which seemed less uncanny and more like essential ingredients of the nationalist dream the more I studied them. Every small nation's sense of itself begins with a notion of a glorious past, and this glorious past is usually bogus but expertly invented and suitably remote. For Ireland's age of saints and scholars and illuminated manuscripts, read Catalonia's Romanesque churches and Romanesque wall-paintings. Every small nation needs a sense of a great intact culture disturbed by a large and predatory colonizer. Catalonia and Ireland had, respectively, Spain and England.

And then there was song. Listening to someone singing "La Dama d'Aragó" or "Rossinyol" in Catalonia was like listening to someone singing "Donal Og" or "Casadh an tSugain" in Ireland. There was a reedy beauty about the airs, and a loneliness and sadness in the tone, and a sense of the languages—Catalan and Irish—as sounding all the more poignant for being defenceless and under threat. Listening to those songs filled you with a notion of a longing and loss that was communal as much as personal, and that longing and that loss, no matter what your politics, could not help reminding you of a time before longing and loss, or a time in the future when these feeling would not be so sharp. In other words, these songs were political, as such songs in England or Castile could not easily be.

And then there was the landscape. At the end of the nineteenth century Catalans rediscovered their landscape and began, much as certain

Irish people did, to fetishize it or some parts of it. The movement in Catalonia called 'Excursionisme', where groups of people walked the countryside, had enormous political significance, establishing a love of country, its colours and peaks and contours. In Ireland, too, the west, which had held on to older traditions and the old language, became a place of pilgrimage for nationalists. The Aran Islands, the Blasket Islands and the coast of the Dingle Peninsula and Connemara became sacred places, just as the Canigó or Montseny or Montserrat were sacred for Catalans.

The connection between Ireland and Catalonia in those years can be most convincingly argued by placing Joyce's story "The Dead" in Barcelona rather than Dublin. Greta comes from a small village at the foothills of the Pyrenees; the aunts have moved from Carrer Sant Pere més Baix to the Carrer Ample. In both Dublin and Barcelona, capital cities without seats of power or parliaments, singing and opera became a substitute for certain forms of feeling and action. Manners in these places among those who are neither rich nor poor are almost provincial. The scene with Molly Ivors can be replicated exactly: the Catalan Gabriel writes for a Spanish-language newspaper; he goes north to France on his holidays while she wants him to visit the Catalan landscape and use his 'own' language Catalan. And his wife is moved by a song which is filled with sadness and longing and it reminds her of the place she comes from, far away from the metropolis. The story could not be set so easily in Paris or London.

Catalonia and Ireland had other things in common. They both had a peculiar atmosphere in the years around the end of the nineteenth century in which the political and the cultural seemed to curl around each other. Catalan interests were deeply affected by the loss of Cuba in 1898 (many Catalan fortunes had been made on the island), so that it is possible to see that event as having a similar status as the fall of Parnell in Ireland. Yeats compared Ireland in the years after Parnell's fall to "soft wax"; nobody knew who would take power or what forces would win out. In Ireland between the fall of Parnell and the rise of de Valera, between, say, 1890 and 1927, the following forces were at work: the Northern Unionists, the nationalists, the Catholic church, the rabble, the trade unions, William Martin Murphy, Lady Gregory and Yeats, the GAA, the Gaelic League. In Catalonia between 1898 and the civil war, the following forces were also at work: the anarchists, the bourgeois nationalists, the popular nationalists, the Catholic church, the communists, Alejandro Lerroux, the army, Gaudí, the 'Excursionistes', the Barça football club. It was clear that there was going to be radical change in both societies as the old power blocks of England and Castile seemed to weaken and prepare to cede power. The struggle to fill the vacuum in those years in both societies had a similar shape and intensity.

For Yeats, Ireland of soft wax would be a place where politics would take a back seat and culture would dominate. In both Ireland and Catalonia in these years of ferment and fierce uncertainty, there was a strange aura

around writing and painting and architecture, as though artists too were vying for influence and power, as though a work of art could have an immense public importance, could take the place, for once and for all, of politics. Yeats and Gaudí had much in common, an interest in mysticism, an interest in combining modern techniques with ancient material, in creating a 'national spirit' in architecture and poetry. Both were politically conservative and both were nationalists. Both found solace and inspiration in their country's landscape. Joyce and Picasso (who came to Catalonia when he was fourteen and lived in Barcelona until his early twenties) had also much in common; they were skeptical about nationalism and Catholicism and they fled to Paris as soon as they could and never came back. Joyce's attitude to Yeats has much in common with Picasso's attitude to Gaudí: neither had much time for the older artists' pieties and solemnities. Both loved cities and made great monuments to sensuous women. Beckett and Miró came next, both fleeing provincial cities for Paris, both looking up to Joyce and Picasso, both finding a personal iconography which was both minimal and comic, both remaining solitary and enigmatic figures who went into old age believing more and more in lessness.

Ireland and Catalonia, Dublin and Barcelona, thus became the inspiration for crucial moments in the development of the modern movement in poetry, fiction, painting and architecture. Some of the work by the six artists listed above was clearly made to be part of the public argument: Yeats's public poems, Gaudí's expiatory temple, Picasso's Blue Period paintings, Joyce's celebration of the city above the nation, Miró's dark paintings after the civil war and even Beckett's sour and decaying Irish voices. But even when their work was at its most private and pure, when Yeats wrote about love, for example, or when Miró painted the sun and the moon, there was a sense of the work offering a beautiful and uncompromising stillness in a time of ugliness and terrible compromise and rabid instability. There was a sense of utterance itself, the showing of a painting, the publishing of a poem, as representing somehow the highest aspirations of a community in search of some hidden and ideal version of itself.

This is not to argue that all art is political, or that all the work by these artists was rendered political by the time they worked in. It is merely to reiterate that there was a peculiar aura around work created during these thirty years or forty years during which there was an unprecedented possibility of change in two provincial cities. (Picasso and Miró thought Barcelona provincial, even if Gaudí did not agree.) So that the work done then by a number of geniuses from these two cities radically changed our view of what paintings and poems and novels and buildings and plays could do.

We live in their shadows. I walked those streets in the Barrio Chino or around the port where the Picassos lived and where Picasso had his

studios. I walked around Plaça Reial where the Mirós had a shop and up along Carrer Ferran to where they lived in a strange side-street called Passatge del Crèdit. I walked to Plaça Sant Felip Neri; Gaudí came to Mass here every day. Just as when I came to Dublin first I could sit in the National Library where Joyce and Yeats had sat, wander in Clare Street where Beckett once lived, into Trinity College where he studied and lectured, walk in Merrion Square where Yeats lived and up towards Eccles Street and the Municipal Gallery.

These artists, more than any politicians or public figures, remain the primary ghosts of our two cities. They made their cities in their own likeness and in some strange, mysterious but emphatic way, the cities entered into their spirits and gave their utterance an edge, a peculiar aura.

What seemed like ferment in 1976 in Barcelona calmed down within months. Everybody moved towards the centre, towards agreement in Catalonia and in Spain. In Ireland, too, more slowly, first in the Republic and then in the North, the politics of agreement became dominant, the rhetoric of compromise became the order of the day. Slowly, too, the art created in both places—the paintings of Miquel Barceló, for example, or the novels of John McGahern, the architecture of the 1992 Olympic Games, for example, or the poems of Seamus Heaney—became calmer, quieter, more formally conservative, easier on the ear and the eye. The heroic period in Irish writing and Catalan art was over, just as the heroic period in Irish history had long gone and the strange heroic interlude in Catalan history had passed as well.