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A loss that makes us richer?

How should writers respond to conflict and exile? It was a question at the heart of Cuirt International Festival of Literature 2003. **Patrick Lonergan** reports

'When we killed or captured one of them, we'd search their bodies for papers,' said the US poet Bruce Weigl, who was a soldier in Vietnam. 'Anything we found we confiscated, so that it could be translated and checked for strategically useful information.' It wasn't until a decade after his return to the US that Weigl, by then a celebrated anti-war poet, discovered that the Vietnamese soldiers' papers contained a huge amount of personal writings, including poems. 'If I'd known before I went there that the Vietnamese weren't just brilliant soldiers but brilliant poets, too,' says Weigl, 'well, I think I'd have gone to Canada instead.'

In a month that saw the looting of Baghdad's museums and libraries, Weigl's statement was powerfully resonant. It encapsulated this year's Cuirt International Festival of Literature, which finished in Galway on Sunday. Bringing together an impressive selection of established writers and emerging voices from around the world, the festival's theme this year was exile, with a focus on poetry in translation. It repeatedly invited us to consider one question: what are the responsibilities of the writer, especially during a time of conflict?

Weigl's response, after his return from Vietnam, was to write poems that described the war with a horrifying and unambiguous clarity. Even more radical was his later decision to translate Vietnamese poetry into English, to show US readers that "Vietnam isn't a war but a country". In doing so, he made a point reiterated throughout the festival: writing not only describes conflict but also, by allowing cultures to understand each other, helps to avoid it.

Cuirt's first event, a reading by the poets Douglas Dunn and Carol Ann Duffy, was an ideal opener. Dunn's poetry is often political yet, writing with control and elegance, he shows that political writing must be grounded in the personal. Duffy's work is also political, but her poetry is essentially about transformation, as made clear by her hilarious reading of Mrs Tiresias, the story of the Greek prophet who, having angered the gods, was turned into a woman as punishment, told here by his bemused wife.

Dunn and Duffy showed how writing can discuss and analyse political issues. But they also showed that, by celebrating the personal and imagining the possibility of transformation, writing has the potential to be a political act, too.

Exile, we discovered, can be a matter of language more than anything else - as illustrated particularly well by two young poets who decided against writing in their native tongues in order to excel in the language of a dominant neighbour. The Azeri writer Negar writes beautifully in Russian, and although Bejan Matur's first language is Kurdish, she writes in Turkish a poetry that is muscular and assertive.

Although writers in this country can be ambivalent about Irish, Negar and Matur see their success in other languages as worthy of celebration. As Matur put it, her writing represents a loss, but it's a loss that makes us richer. It was an idea that dominated the festival, being most impressively realised by Bernardo Atxaga, who read to us in both Basque and Spanish.

But the most powerful treatment of exile came during an astonishing reading by the Iranian poet Ziba Karbassi. Forced to flee her country as a political refugee during the 1980s, Karbassi was saved by exile - but that she is banned from returning to her country is a cause of terrible grief to her. Writing poetry was a

direct response. "I decided to build a house for myself that no one could take from me again - a house in language," she said.

Karbassi began her reading with *Sangsar* (Death By Stoning), which describes an execution of a pregnant woman that Karbassi witnessed when she was nine. Presented from the perspective of the murdered woman's mother, the poem is a powerful evocation of grief, shame and rage. As read by Karbassi, it was stunning: she pushes language to a point dangerously close to the incoherency of despair but never loses control of her writing.

Much more playful was *Ziba*, the final poem in her reading. The title (and the poet's name) is the Persian word for beautiful - and Karbassi has given us a beautiful piece of writing, a statement of her strength as a woman that explicitly celebrates her body: its appearance, its ways of moving, the simple fact of its existence.

Karbassi's significance as a poet emerges in the contrast between her opening and concluding poems. She began her reading with rage against her society's brutalisation of the body of a woman but ended it illustrating the possibility of that society's transformation, by celebrating her own body. It's a moving contrast, given weight because it puts Karbassi's life at risk: other countries celebrate their writers, she told us, but she believes the only thing the Iranian authorities want from her is her head.

It would be easy to respond cynically to a group of writers preaching politics before a largely passive audience of the converted. But, as Karbassi's reading showed, many of Cuirt's guests combine writing with genuine political and social engagement.

Some do so obviously - serving in their country's governments, for example (see Daisy Zamora, right). But it was interesting how frequently participants would tell us that some of their poems or stories had originated in often unglamorous work within their communities. The most shocking example was Richard McKane's combination of writing poetry and translations with his work as an interpreter for victims of torture - a combination that he says doesn't inhibit his ability to write poetry but shows him how necessary poetry and translation are. Other participants wrote from an engagement, which, if less harrowing, is equally committed - one of the week's most beautiful readings was Stephen Watts's "What 31 Children Said About Dreams", inspired by his work in a London school.

Similarly, another of the festival's readings, by Mike McCormack and Moris Farhi, took place at Castlerea Prison - and the Cuirt annual publishes the work of participants in the festival alongside the writings of four men from Fairgreen Shelter in Galway, each of whom has experienced homelessness. Cuirt didn't just discuss political engagement; it also showed how it can be achieved.

All of this may sound very solemn, but the atmosphere during the week was easy-going and sociable, as it is every year. Rather like Galway itself, the festival's strength is that it's big enough to give space to many voices but small enough to maintain a communal, friendly atmosphere. Joan McBreen, the first Irish writer to read this year, set a pleasant tone for the week by dedicating a poem to her eight-week-old grandson, Joseph, who was snoozing at the back of the room, missing his first poetry reading. That so many participants followed McBreen's example, bringing their families to the events, was a clear indicator of the organisers' success in making writers and audiences feel welcome.

This atmosphere probably owed something to the involvement of so many excellent Irish writers and artists. Keith Ridgway's reading from *The Parts* was very well received, as was Ed Moloney's lecture on the peace process - and the

screening of *Sing On Forever*, Alan Gilsean's documentary about Tom Murphy, was a highlight for many.

But the highlight for me was provided by the South African novelist Andre Brink. After a marvellous reading from his recent *The Other Side Of Silence* and the post-apartheid *Imaginings Of Sand*, Brink told us he'd been inspired by this visit to the west of Ireland, his first, which had allowed him to see places he'd only ever read about in the works of Ireland's great writers. He made clear that a country gains a great deal simply by the presence of writers - and thanked the audience for an experience that had reinforced his commitment to South Africa. "It's hard in my country," he said, "but I'd rather be there than anywhere else in the world."

He showed that a writer's responsibilities lie not just in the celebration of exile but also, sometimes, in staying at home - an idea not often explored in the history of Irish literature. A vivid illustration of Cuirt's stimulating mix of internationalism and intimacy, Brink's reading achieved one of the festival's simplest aims: the celebration of writing. It showed that Cuirt, which this year celebrated its 18th birthday, is maturing wonderfully.

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