

## Doubly-Crossing Syllables: Thomas O'Grady on Poetry, Exile, and Ireland

Anne Compton

Volume 26, numéro 1, spring 2001

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl26\\_1int01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl26_1int01)

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Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Compton, A. (2001). Doubly-Crossing Syllables:: Thomas O'Grady on Poetry, Exile, and Ireland. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 26(1), 145–171.

Résumé de l'article

The interview focuses largely on Thomas O'Grady's first collection of poetry *What Really Matters*. He discusses ideas of home and exile, Prince Edward Island and Island literature, the idea of language and its relation to place, family history, and academics. O'Grady's use of the formalist and the Romantic tradition is considered.

# Doubly-Crossing Syllables: Thomas O'Grady on Poetry, Exile, and Ireland

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY ANNE COMPTON

PRINCE EDWARD ISLANDER Thomas O'Grady, Director of Irish Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, published a remarkable first collection of poetry, *What Really Matters*, in 2000, a book already in its second printing. In his poems, and in this interview, O'Grady is an advocate for poetry's return to formalism. His poetry unites depth of feeling and formal mastery, local lore and great learning, the Irish diaspora and Maritime out-migration. A scholar and a poet, O'Grady has published extensively on Irish writers and on poetics. He is currently writing a book on the Irish writers William Carleton, Patrick Kavanagh, and Benedict Kiely.

On July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2000, we met on the Island, following the Island launch of his book, for a conversation about the Island and Irish writers, exile and poetry. Every summer, Tom, his wife, and daughters travel back to P.E.I. from Milton, their home, just outside of Boston. Our conversation took place in Southport, east of Charlottetown, overlooking the Hillsborough River, a scene of some importance in O'Grady's work. Cormorants stood sentinel on the riverbank.

*AC* *What Really Matters* is a poetry that takes place in Ireland, Boston, and on the Island. Where's home?

*TOG* Home is P.E.I. Absolutely. It's where my heart is; it's where my identity really does reside. In the Boston area where I live, I certainly can't play myself off as an Irishman. Despite my career, my title as Director of Irish Studies, I don't make any pretence to being Irish because I couldn't get away with it. I'm not inclined to, anyway. My natural impulse is to look to where I came from. The Island is definitely home.

AC The Island is your principal subject. Is this a subject in which literary journals have been interested?

TOG The first two poems that I got published were actually Irish-related poems, and both were published in Irish journals, the first one in *Poetry Ireland Review*, in 1990, and the second in an academic journal *Studies: an Irish Quarterly Review*, a year or two later. Writing those poems, I was responding to what was close to what I was working on in Irish Studies. I was provoked into writing in that way. But my commitment to writing began with the Island poems. The first time that I realized that there might be an audience for Island poems was when the *Kansas Quarterly/Arkansas Review* published “Transmigration,” “Auguries,” and “Valediction” (*WRM* 37-38, 39-40, 45-47). It stunned me when they accepted those three poems. That made me aware that poetry could transcend the negative notions of regionalism that some editors and some journals might have. I do think that there are journals that want poetry that is less place-specific and less regional than my Island poems tend to be.

AC You began with transatlantic and American publication. So Canadian publication was the third layer of publication for you?

TOG I had poems accepted by *The Fiddlehead* and *Dalhousie Review* quite early on. I was appreciative of both those editors because there is not a P.E.I. poetic tradition that my poems could be seen to be coming out of, or a school of poetry, or even a cohort of poets.

AC You didn’t belong.

TOG There’s nothing to belong to.

AC Would you say that except for Lucy Maud Montgomery and Milton Acorn, there’s been little, or no, literary rendering of the Island’s cultural past?

TOG I wouldn’t go so far as to say there’s not been any. Frank Ledwell’s *North Shore of Home*, a very moving collection — which I reviewed when it came out, appropriately praising it — validated the Island subject in a lot of ways. At the same time, it wasn’t my Island that Frank was recording because it’s a generation removed and his background is much more rural than mine. When I come to the rural, I come to it as a city boy, immersing myself in the rural partly by standing on the South Shore, where we came each summer. Also, my identification with my mother’s rural family was intrinsic all along, but when I began to write, I became

aware of how important it was for me to know that my family had been rooted on the Island since the 1830s.

*AC* The speaker in *What Really Matters* refers to that family as “sea-crossed souls” (15) and as a family “choosing transportation overseas” (11). Why does that exile, generations in the past, remain so fresh?

*TOG* I would have to make a distinction between the paternal and the maternal lines of my family. One of the dimensions of my father’s side of the family that strikes me with great poignancy — it’s registered in the poem “East Side Story” (72-74) — is that his parents came from Ireland to New York City, and my father came from New York City to P.E.I., and then I went from P.E.I. to Boston. There is a diaspora effect at each generational level. On the maternal side, my ancestors came from Ireland in the 1830s, in pre-famine time. They came willingly, and settled here, and made their homes here. I value the rootedness of the maternal link at the same time that I’m acknowledging the paternal pattern. I’m trying to work through the relationship of those two strains in terms of my own identity.

*AC* That gives us the ancestral record, but it doesn’t explain the fresh feel of exile in *What Really Matters*.

*TOG* My first real awareness of the Island as home was the product of the first time I left the Island, which was when I went to Ireland, in 1977, to do my Master’s Degree at University College, Dublin. I was away for a year and a half. Ireland is very beautiful in all its richness, but upon my return, in the summer of 1979, I was absolutely stunned by how beautiful the Island is and what it did to me. The point at which I became aware that I wouldn’t be living on the Island was around the time that I got tenure at University of Massachusetts-Boston. I was fixed in a job, had a house, a family. Knowing that this was where I was going to grow old is what provoked me to write the poems. There’s a little poem, “Land and Sea,” that’s not in the book. It’s a quasi-translation of a lyric by Theógnis of Méagra, a Greek poet. For a few years, before I actually re-worked that poem, I would come back to Boston [from P.E.I.] in late August and I’d read that poem. His longing for place consoled me, but then I had to make the poem my own. So I reworked, rewrote, it as an Island poem, and then I really had a way of saying this is how I feel about having just left. The poem “Valediction” (45-47) is true to my yearly experience of leaving the Island. Every year, the evening before we leave, there is a great grief that I have to come to terms with.

AC In terms of the Island, then, eyesight is inflected with loss, isn't it?

TOG There is always a looking back over my shoulder. One of the wonderful dimensions of the ferry was that you could stand on the ferry and look at the Island receding.

AC When I first read your poetry two years ago, I said that your poetry was located mid-strait. There's a whole bunch of exiles out there — stranded — because there is no ferry to take them home.

TOG "Lament for My Family, Lost at Sea" (11-12), which is a sestina, is a parable about my family. Seven children. Six of us have left the Island. That poem actually started as a villanelle that didn't work, but I still had to locate myself lost at sea. I mined the villanelle for images that had to do with the tidal pull. Something obviously did take me off the Island, but there is something just as strong pulling me back. I'm neither here nor there in a lot of ways. The mid-strait perspective is, indeed, an interesting conceit for where I am, and where others are too.

AC The speaker in *What Really Matters* fears that his heart will harden (10) or grow "sere in a foreign land" (13), but he also fears that "words [will] turn brittle" (13). Is exile as much a loss of language as a loss of place?

TOG I think so. I think there are elements in my poetry that I am self-conscious about in hindsight rather than in foresight because I didn't set out with an agenda when I started writing poems. I didn't know I was going to be a poet. Five years ago in the summer of 1995, I made the commitment: I said I'm going to see if I can be a poet. One of the tests is the Wordsworthian one — natural language, the language of the people, and its accessibility. When my editor at McGill-Queen's was editing the manuscript she came to "Cattle Crossing at Argyle Shore," and wondered about the phrase "our having gotten caught" (16). She said, "that doesn't sound right," but I thought that's how an Islander would say that. I didn't write it self-consciously. When she alerted me to the fact that it was non-standard in some way, I thought, well how else would you say it? I don't make a conscious attempt to sound like an Islander or to use Island dialect unless they are words that I myself would use.

AC Still, the speaker in your poems does fear that the language will grow "brittle" and the heart will harden.

TOG Those two images reflect the times when I have blocked out my emotions concerning my exile. It's a self-defence mechanism.

AC Memory itself is like a tide, according to "Exile" (10). It washes the encrustations off the exile to reveal a soft-bodied heart. So, the defence mechanism breaks down, doesn't it?

TOG The poem "On Unquity Road," containing the phrase "my words grow brittle" (13), was written out of the same anxiety as "Transmigration" (37) that contains the image of the blue heron, which represents my displaced soul. It concerns my removal from civility, which I associate with the Island — romantically or otherwise. It has a specific connection with what was going on in our neighbourhood [Milton, south of Boston], and in our lives, where there was a sense of entrapment.

AC Would you say that your language, in fact, has not gone "brittle" in exile, because you still speak "Island" don't you?

TOG Seamus Heaney has a wonderful poem, "Making Strange," in which he talks about the need to be both adept and dialect. He can still go back to South Derry and walk in the bogs with the farmers and talk with them. I feel that I can come home, bump into old friends, and there is no distance between us. I feel very at home when I am at home.

AC Jonathan Bate, in *Romantic Ecology*, says that place-naming is a way of finding identity by dwelling in the land, but how does place-naming, of which there is a lot here, function for the exile?

TOG To borrow one of my own phrases, it's "a finger-hold (and no more) / on a solid sandstone shore" (43). One of the licenses for that is the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh, who is one of the subjects of the book that I am writing. He has a marvellous sonnet called "Epic" in which he names the Duffys and the McCabes fighting over a little strip of land. I can remember reading Kavanagh back in 1977, when I was a student in Dublin. One of my regrets is that I didn't write my thesis on Kavanagh, but I couldn't find my way in at that time. My poem "The Field" has the line "*Naming ... is the love act and the pledge*" from Kavanagh's "The Hospital."

AC When you use place-names such as "Belvedere" ("Bloodlines" 7-8), hundreds of miles away from the place that you name, does that constitute a renewal of the "pledge"?

TOG It does, and it validates the poetic place that I am writing about. In *Poetics*, Aristotle talks about the recognition that the audience experiences from the familiar. Acknowledging the familiar is important to me. The first poem to make an impression on me was Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues," where he names Lennox Avenue. In 1984,

I took the bus into New York City and going through Harlem, I saw Lennox Avenue. It was an incredibly emotional moment for me because suddenly this place that he had made so real for me in the poem was so real in this other way. The real place validated the poem, but the poem had also validated the real place. It was an epiphanic moment for me. Some of that has carried through for me in “A Poem Leaves No More Mark” where it was so crucial for me to name “the Point Prim / beacon” (43) right across from our cottage. It is not “a lighthouse”; it is, specifically, “the Point Prim / beacon.”

*AC* In almost every poem you name a place. In “Cormorants,” for example, you name the “Hillsborough Bridge” (9). It’s as if you start from a specific geographical location when you think a poem.

*TOG* In some cases I start from them; in others, I end up at them. “Cormorants” is an interesting example. The first time I saw cormorants was twenty years ago at Pictou Landing. I saw them sitting on posts by the dock. Cormorants weren’t common on the Island when I was growing up; or, they weren’t ubiquitous the way that they are now. In the intervals when I have been away from the Island, more and more cormorants have come to be on the old pilings of the Hillsborough Bridge and out at St. Catherine’s. This became a symbol of change for me: my departure, but an influx of new Islanders. I could name envy not in a vicious, but in a longing, way. They are now enjoying that “wingspread ease” (9) of being Islanders.

*AC* Are the “Cormorants” (9) to PEI what the swans are to Yeats’s Sligo — markers of time; messengers, by way of contrast, of man’s disjunction with place?

*TOG* They have come in and made themselves at home while I have been removed from home. The blue heron is a much more important symbol for me as a kind of embodiment of my own soul, but the cormorants do function in a naturalistic way to mark time.

*AC* Is the exile, especially the one who makes return visits, more watchful than the inhabitant of a place?

*TOG* Recently I came across a wonderful image in the poetry of Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer that comes close to describing how I feel when I return to the Island: “I don’t know where I / turned my head — / with a double field of vision / like a horse.” I think that returning home to the familiar lends one a heightened awareness of place specificity — of what

makes that place distinctive. As a corollary to this, I wonder whether we can ever know a place that is not home.

*AC* There's a family history in this collection — a poem about a maternal grandfather (a railway agent, 19); a great uncle (“an idler,” 25); and a paternal grandfather (a soldier, 27). Except for the mention of the railway agent's wife (“Bloodlines” 7), you remember back through male forbears. Is that right?

*TOG* Well, in the cases you cite, there are specific stories behind the poems that lend the poems their resonance. Also, I suppose that the world of male activity outside the house is more intrinsically compelling for me. That is not, of course, to invalidate the domestic world: it is simply not a world that I've plumbed the depths of . . . at least not yet. In fact, somebody recently observed that my poem “Bloodlines” may take for granted — when it really should question — the contentment and patience that I attribute to “the railroad / agent's wife who set meals on the table / timed to the minute the station clock showed.”

*AC* When you name yourself, what word — Islander, Maritimer, Canadian — most readily comes to mind?

*TOG* If we're travelling some place, usually for convenience's sake, I'll say I'm from Boston, but if I actually start talking to someone, they'll know I'm not from Boston. It immediately comes out that I'm from the Island. The first thing that would come to mind is Islander or Canadian, not Maritimer. I cannot think of anyone that I've met who would use “Maritimer” as a badge they would wear. For me, the Canadian part comes and goes, but growing up on the Island, I didn't have a very extended or extensive sense of Canada. There were seven children, and we didn't travel much off-Island. I didn't have a sense of belonging to the greater part of the country. I do have to say though that I grew up at the time when Canadian identity was being forged and Pierre Trudeau was prime minister. Over the years I've had various kinds of renewals of my Canadian identity. One of them was several years ago reading David Adams Richards's *Hockey Dreams*, which is just a marvellous evocation of my childhood identification with hockey. This spring one of my P.E.I. friends sent me Stuart McLean's *Stories from the Vinyl Cafe*. I told my wife, “read this book and you'll understand where I come from.” What emerges from his stories that is so true to my growing up on the Island is a sense of decency and decorum in people's relationships with one and other, the anxieties that people feel about doing the right thing and not



overstepping boundaries. I have internalized an awful lot of that from growing up on the Island.

*AC* This is the reserve that Alistair MacLeod writes about. It's there in Alden Nowlan also, especially in his poem "The Red Wool Shirt," where the reserve is in the unsaid. The depth of feeling is conveyed by what is not said.

*TOG* Alden Nowlan was the first poet I saw. What I remember most distinctly about his reading [at U.P.E.I.] was what I saw from the position where I was sitting. I could see that the water glass that he was drinking from didn't contain water. It was Beefeater Gin. Down behind the podium, he would pour it into the glass. That was my introduction to the life of the poet.

*AC* In your academic life, you teach Irish Studies. Does your academic life complement, enrich, your poetry writing?

*TOG* I think so. Much of my scholarship in the last eight years, while I've been writing the poems, has been related to place in Irish literature. I'm writing a book on three Irish writers — William Carleton, who is a nineteenth-century short story writer and novelist; Patrick Kavanagh, poet and novelist; and Benedict Kiely, novelist and short story writer, and general man of letters, anecdotist and memoirist. Kiely is still alive; he is 81 years old. All three of the writers are from Southeast Ulster, from County Monaghan and County Tyrone. This happens to be where the great majority of the Island Irish emigrated from in the 1830s. That was part of my attraction to Carleton in the first place. The very first scholarly essay that I wrote was for the *Abegweit Review* on Carleton's short story "The Fair of Emyvale," set in County Tyrone. Emyvale on P.E.I. takes its name from there. I wrote that in 1985 and it took me a number of years to return to Carleton for scholarly or teaching purposes, but when I did, I returned with a vengeance. I said these are the writers that I can identify with because their world is so familiar to me in a lot of ways. The codes and values are similarly tribal to the ones I have from Island culture. There are other dimensions of their writing that I'm interested in. How do they record place? What do they recognize as the factors that define place? Some of it is the topography and the topography as it affects the social structure. They are all writing in drumlin country with the rolling hills that define people's lives because they live in these little narrow valleys, where there are just a few families. That is their view of the world. Estyn Evans, the great Irish geographer, said that there is no sense of

horizon in drumlin country. All you see is your world, and there is no projecting another world out there. I'm very interested in how these writers create place through language, through the interaction of the people, and the social codes that get rooted in a place. Through the material culture of the place and through the popular culture of the place — the music, the stories, and poems, the oral culture. I am interested in the “how” of registering place. But what also intrigues me is “Exile and the Epic Imagination,” which is the sub-title of my book. All three of these writers left Southeast Ulster and moved to Dublin, and wrote about their place from that distance. I am interested in the impulse to return constantly in the imagination. The recurring emphasis, perhaps in about ninety per cent of their writing, is going back even though they are not physically going back to reside there. In the case of Kavanagh and Kiely they go back to visit. I had the great honour a couple of years ago of being in County Tyrone with Benedict Kiely. It was so marvellous to be in his country with him, to be introduced to his friends, the models for his characters in his first novel. Their attraction to place and their writing about it from the position of exile is part of the license, or authority, for me to do it, but it also tells me that it has to be done with care.

*AC* So you are excavating in your scholarship the very thing that is the underlay of this book?

*TOG* Yes, though I would make a distinction. Seamus Heaney has written several wonderful essays on Patrick Kavanagh. In one of the later ones, he takes a phrase from one of Kavanagh's poems where Kavanagh refers to County Monaghan as “the placeless heaven.” Eventually Monaghan became more important to Kavanagh as an imagined place. For me, the Island has not become a “placeless heaven” yet. I still have family here and close friends. I hope that I won't move toward simply the idea of a place. That's why it is so crucial for me to get back every year, to re-root myself.

*AC* What we make of a place, when we write about it, begins to pull away from what it is in actuality. That's an inevitability. The imagined place and the real place are not the same place, are they?

*TOG* What is so important for me when I write is the authenticating of the place. Part of that has to do with the naming of the place, with the details that make their way into the poem. I have an Island “informant,” and I have tested a few poems with him. He would not let me get away with anything. He would not let me distort, corrupt, or romanticize. So when

I send him something, I have already processed the work as if he were my Island editor. If I can pass his litmus test for authenticity, then I know that I've got a poem that speaks some form of the truth.

*AC* The epigraph on the title page of the second section is from the Gospel of St. Thomas: "*If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not have that within you, what you do not have within you [will] kill you.*" Is poetry salvational?

*TOG* It is for me as a writer of poems and as a reader of others' poems. That epigraph functions as a sort of gloss on where my poems come from. I don't write unless I have something to write about, some issue that I need to work through or explore. When I have found the proper words and appropriate form, then I do feel some sort of uplift, some sort of release. The epigraph thus implies that if I were not to find release through the poems, then I would be consumed from within.

*AC* There are a number of religious references in this book — poems entitled "Redemption" (58) and "The Miracle" (59), images of ark and grail, and a creed is voiced: "Belief/ is what saves us in the end." But is this any longer religious belief?

*TOG* Most of the religious images are probably cultural references: I grew up a Catholic. The occasional "religious" dimension to the poems involves the need that I think we all have (whether we know it or not) to believe, or the desire to believe, in *something*: God, music, art, poetry.... Conventional religious belief is difficult to maintain in this materialistic and cynical age. While I have evolved into what some priests refer to as "cafeteria-style Catholicism" — one who picks and chooses from the rules and the beliefs and practices — I am nonetheless a "cultural Catholic," and that makes its way into the poems.

*AC* How do you keep a poetry that is so unashamedly attached to family and place from becoming sentimental?

*TOG* I'm not a sentimental person. I'm not a dreamer. I'm very practical in a lot of ways. One of the things that I'm aware of from these three Irish writers is that there is a way in which you have to achieve distance from your subject in one way or another. The physical distance I have is just right for what I need. I'm not so removed that I can't come back in a day. I don't have to have a "placeless heaven." I can have a real heaven. I do idealize the Island in a lot of ways, I suppose. I'm selective about what I write about. Because it's lyric poetry, it's very much filtered through my own emotional

grid of experience. Authors who write about places that they know intimately use comedy or irony to distance themselves. James Joyce, writing about Dublin and *Dubliners*, says he's going to use his "style of scrupulous meanness" to remove anything that would be sentimental. But then, at the time that he is writing "The Dead," there is this one beautiful letter to his brother Stanislaus where he wonders if he has been exceedingly harsh in his depiction of Dublin. What comes across in "The Dead" is a notion of generosity. We are able to see the two aunts as good people, unlike most of the other characters in the other stories. Every writer who engages with place in a sweeping way throughout his writing has to find some device. I don't know how I would label my device. It isn't comedy or irony. There's a scrupulosity although it's not "scrupulous meanness." It's a selectivity. There may be more that I'm not writing about. Maybe I'm not even aware of what I'm not writing about. The fact is I had a happy childhood. I grew up in a completely innocent way on the Island. I don't have childhood darkness that I need to explore. My relationship with the Island is one that has always been very healthy. That healthiness — when I'm in an unhealthy place — is what I summon.

*AC* Physical distance affords a kind of objectivity, and it can stand in for mental objectivity. There is also, however, a naturalness of language in *What Really Matters*, and it co-exists with strict forms. Perhaps the strict forms play a role in the disciplining of feeling?

*TOG* What you are saying is interesting in light of the distinction that Patrick Kavanagh makes between craft and technique, and that Heaney picks up on in his own writing. Craft for both Kavanagh and Heaney is the ability to know the rules — iambic pentameter and the rhyme scheme of the sonnet, for example — but technique is what the individual infuses the poem with that distinguishes it as *that* poet's sonnet. It's a vision that is distinctive and unique to the poet. Perhaps for me craft and technique merge. Form is part of my vision.

*AC* The analogy for that is the boat and the boater. The craft is useless unless you have technique, unless you handle the oars in your particular way, as Milton Acorn would say.

*TOG* That's very nice. I like that.

*AC* Neither of the section titles of the book, "Transmigration" or "Between Two Worlds," suggests arrival, yet the book testifies to a deep attachment to place. Is there a paradox here?

*TOG* Over the years, as the poems were accumulating, I began thinking in terms of a book. My working title as I wrote poems and inserted them into the manuscript was “Between Two Worlds.” There was a completely different order from the present order in *What Really Matters*. The Island poems were all at the back of the book. I was frontloading it with my sense of not being on the Island. The phrase “Between Two Worlds” appears in the poem “East Side Story” (72-74), which is about my father’s experience with his father and the phonograph they had in their New York City apartment. It’s about the transporting power of music to take someone back and yet not to take them back physically. You are in one world physically, but you are in another metaphysically. So that you end up “between two worlds.” It’s actually a wonderful phrase in Irish: “idir dhá shaolta.” You look the words up in an Irish dictionary and it means not just between two worlds, but between two times, two states of mind. It resonates with multiple meanings. That phrase worked very well for what I wanted to capture on a literal level, but it also resonated for me with my grandfather’s experience, my father’s experience, and with my own. “Between Two Worlds” is exactly what I have felt. In a way, my writing reflects how I’m between three worlds because the Irish world is also very important for me. Talking about the heart growing harder, we were over to Ireland in 1998, for the first time in eleven years. I don’t fly. As my poems reveal, I have a very great fear of death and my own mortality. But I had become so distanced from the evolving Ireland, it was time to go back. My friend Joan met us at the airport and she said, “So, what’s it like to be at home?” “This isn’t home,” I said. “But it is,” she said. It was a license for me to say, “this is home.”

*AC* Why do we have this notion that there can be only one home?

*TOG* I have a loyalty to the Island that I am afraid of diluting. But I’d have to say that a shift has taken place because of the license that Joan gave me to think of Ireland as home, too. One of the moments in Ireland — too beautiful to record in a poem perhaps — occurred when we were driving along the road that my father’s father walked with his family in the 1890s. Being in ancestral land was very touching and transporting for me.

*AC* I had thought the title of the second section, “Between Two Worlds,” came from Matthew Arnold — “between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born,” which is quite glum.

*TOG* The poems in the second part of the book — its title has no

connection to Arnold — tend not to be Island related unless it's incidental. They are not working through my relationship with the Island. There's a more cosmopolitan sense of self. Ireland is there; America is there. The fiddlers of the first part of the book become Stéphane Grappelli and Niccolò Paganini in the second half. David Blackwood's painting appears there. There's a different engagement: the Islander not being dialect but being adept, if I can borrow from Heaney again.

*AC* If I say Thomas O'Grady, he's a formalist and a Romantic, would you have a quarrel with that?

*TOG* Not with the formalist part and not with the Romantic if it refers to the poetic tradition. No one has ever accused me of being a "romantic" in real life. I think the valuing of experience processed through the imagination is vital to my poems. There's a real effort, on my part, trying to locate myself relative to natural process. In "Valediction" (45-47), I see the heron homing to St. Peter's Island, and we are going to Boston the next day, wanting to believe that is the right place for us to be going. There is a desire to see my experience, and the tugs and pulls, as being part of a larger cycle of being.

*AC* You read the natural landscape for portents and auguries. That's a Romantic gesture. There's individualism: the self is sought in various ways. Also, this is a poetry that seems to come from the inspired moment. Central aspects of the Romantic aesthetic — the natural world, individualism, and inspiration — are present in your poetry. At the same time, in terms of craft and technique, you are a formalist even when you are not dealing with fixed forms.

*TOG* One of the touchstones for me formally — and as you know sonnets are my great weakness — is Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret Not," where he explains why people write sonnets. Sometimes we like the rules and constrictions, and like to work against them. Wordsworth is someone who licenses me. The other influence, a very specific influence on the first published poem that I ever wrote, "The Test of the Bow" (75), a sonnet variant, was Keats's poem "On the Sonnet," where he advocates the loosening of the sandal straps. So the first published poem I wrote was influenced by Keats and also by Wordsworth. It would be romanticizing to say that I was destined to write sonnets by way of that first poem.

*AC* This is a poetry that is highly allusive (its many classical and literary references), yet it is extraordinarily tactile. Is that a balance you strive for?

*TOG* There's a sestina in the second half of the book "How a Poem Begins" (81-82), and the first word of it is "Coincidence." Many of my poems come from stories, and it's usually not just one story, but two elements coming together and clicking. This is galvanizing for the emotional life behind the poems. Two agents come together and something comes out of that. A specific example of what you describe is "The Craft of Poetry" (33), which has the story of Jason and the Argonauts trying to return with the golden fleece through the Symplegades — a wonderful story — and the other agent was a woodworker's vice that was on my grandfather's workbench in Cardigan. I had to find a way to bring the transcendent story of Jason and the Argonauts back down to my known experience, and not just have it as a metaphor for the vulnerability of the poet that I constantly feel. I had to make it the real vulnerability of getting my fingers pinched over and over again as a child at my grandfather's. Writing the poem I was remembering something that I didn't even know that I was remembering.

*AC* Both of the levels in that poem — the classical and the actual — become ways of talking about poetry itself.

*TOG* Constant risk inhabits the making of poetry, or any art for that matter. And art without risk is no art at all. Those aren't just good stories. They are a way of illuminating real experience, bringing them into my realm.

*AC* But even when you are being allusive, you domesticate the allusion through tactile imagery. You bring these allusions, these stories, not only into your realm, but into the physical realm.

*TOG* Another poem that does that is "Metamorphoses" (54-55), which starts off with Pegasus, and you have the Centaur and Ixion, the sire of the Centaur. Its origins include the one and only time I ever saw my father ride a bicycle. I saw how that transformed him. It includes, as well, the first time my daughters saw me on a bicycle. My pleasure in all of those poems — such as "A Prayer for My Daughters," which alludes to Yeats's famous poem — not just the ones that have classical references, is the ambitious, but I hope appropriately modest, attempt to have a dialogue with the poetic tradition.

*AC* Do you think that a poem speaks to past poems, past literature?

*TOG* In my poetic, they certainly do. I'm very aware of T.S.Eliot's talking about this, and W. Jackson Bate's speaking of the fact that there are always the precursors. I don't suffer from an anxiety of influence. I can

acknowledge that the Irish poets have had a determining influence on my becoming a poet. My attraction to form is through the Irish tradition, but because I don't write as an Irish poet, I don't have an anxiety of influence. It's much more the pleasure of confluence, entering into the same stream that they are part of. I can explain it through some of my fiddler and violinist poems, especially the Paganini poem. Paganini actually is for me a kind of Yeatsian anti-self. He is a projection of who I am not. The fiddler or the violinist standing up with his music is the poet standing up with his words. Paganini and Grappelli are such wonderful musicians. I like to sidle up next to them.

*AC* This is the opposite of the vulnerable poet that you talk about. This is the confident guy on stage with his fiddle.

*TOG* I'm betwixt and between on this, too, because there is also the cavalier dimension. That's very much a pose for me, the anti-self, projecting a figure the opposite of who I am and trying to fulfill it. In one of the personal essays that I'm working on, I'm trying to sort out for myself the performative dimension in the readings and the launches. But the writing of the poems is also performative. I've been able to trace the longing to be an artist back to a very particular moment in my life. I wanted to be a musician. I wanted to be the lead guitarist in a rock band. I wanted to go to Berklee College and study music, and that goes back to when I was ten or twelve years old and my parents bought me a ticket to a Hank Snow and Wilf Carter concert at the Confederation Centre. Seeing them, something in me said, "that's what I want to do." I never imagined myself doing it as a poet though.

*AC* The originating moment for your creativity, then, was "hurtin' truckin' songs"! From that you followed, however, not the musical side, but verbal composition.

*TOG* Creativity comes from inside and is given expression, but as soon as it is on the page it is performative, and then on the stage it is performative in a different sense.

*AC* At a reading you literally, as well as metaphorically, stand behind your words.

*TOG* And last night at the launch, with friends and family present, there was heightened vulnerability. Nobody, including my parents, had ever heard me read a poem before.

*AC* There's the risk of seeming "to act big."



*TOG* In my essay on Milton Acorn, I wrote about that — borrowing from David Weale’s chapter on “Big Feelin’” in *Them Times*. I’m afflicted with that fear; that’s the story of my life. Everything that I do in my life, I do quietly.

*AC* Don’t you think the fear of bringing on the accusation of “big feeling” has been very damaging for Island artists, for Island writers, for any ambitious Islander?

*TOG* I’ve been trying to be (unscientifically) analytical about this. I think that on some level the “big feeling” creates the counterpart to the fear of failure, which is the fear of success. Is there a way on the Island to handle accomplishment or success gracefully when everybody is going to be squinting at you? In the States, there is an incredible sense of ego, of entitlement, that goes with political office, whereas here, the politicians are the guys you meet walking down the street and they are immediately accountable to their constituents. If they become egotistical here, they are voted out. As I put it in the Acorn essay, there is on the Island a “governor” that keeps your engine from running at full tilt.

*AC* Do you think of yourself as an intellectual poet?

*TOG* No. I’m very aware when I read a poet like Mark Strand, for example, that his poems start with ideas. The poetry of someone like Wallace Stevens has a different origin from mine. My poetry starts with an emotional impulse. When I finished *What Really Matters*, I was burnt out, but now I’ve started writing again and I’m trying to do something different, formally and thematically. Exile is not going to figure as much. I’m looking for, and finding, different formal strategies, which I think help complicate my emotional engagement with whatever my subject is. I’m finding it difficult to write sonnets. The four poems in the sequence “Land of Youth,” which I’ve now finished, are all set on our shore, and it’s a much different relationship with the shore. It involves the experience of coming home last summer — and we hadn’t been home in ’98. The cottage had fallen into disrepair; there was a lot more seaweed and sinking sand on the shore. The cliffs had crumbled. There was a sense of erosion. I was startled, shocked, and dismayed with the ravages of time. What is projected in the poems [of *WRM*] is this timeless, serene place. The name on our cottage is Tír na nÓg, the Irish for “land of youth.” In a way, all of that damage was a measurement of the passing of time, the ravages of time, and created an awareness of mortality. It’s not now “a prayer makes time stand still,” as it is in “A Poem Leaves No More Mark”

(43). The form that I've used for the four poems is four rhymed quatrains. I take the comfort of housing it in that form. It goes beyond the sonnet, which has a tendency to give you a gratifying sense of closure. Those extra two lines keep the poem going beyond the compactness of the sonnet. There's a poem by Rossetti where he says, "A sonnet is a moment's monument." In a sonnet, you've got that, but the form of these poems acknowledges that change can't be contained in the sonnet form.

*AC* The sonnet says there can be summary, and the world is tidy. I notice in *What Really Matters* that you have a tendency to write sonnets in pairs ("Bloodlines" [7-8]; "Cattle Crossing..." [16-17]). The dialectical relationship, formerly between octave and sestet, exists here between the sonnets in the pair. In these twenty-eight line sonnets are you seeking the formalism of the sonnet yet the stretch of the pair?

*TOG* That's an interesting way to look at it, but it's not the way I look at it. One of the appeals of the sonnet for me is what Paul Fussell, in his book *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, calls the principle of imbalance. The need to resolve in a smaller space what you have established in a larger space is very appealing to me. In my sonnets, and even in my free verse writing that is arranged in couplets or tercets, I'm interested in the relationship between formal structure and rhetorical structure. The rhetorical structure is affirmed by the end rhymes, but, more importantly, the rhetorical structure *is* the structure. In those double sonnets, each sonnet works on that level. There are pairs because I'm indulging my narrative impulse. My first P.E.I. writing was a short story. I have a storytelling impulse and that contributes to those sonnets.

*AC* The 28-line run is required for something other than the formalism of the sonnet. Even as you pay regard to the formal requirements of the sonnet, you are trying to elbow your way out of the form.

*TOG* From what I've been writing in the last six months, I have a feeling that I'm going to write a lot more sequences. I am aware of the strength and power of the stand-alone lyric, but also its limitations in acknowledging the complexity of human experience. In the sequence I've just finished, "Land of Youth," each poem stands alone, but when they come together, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Sequences allow me to extend beyond the nicely turned vase that the sonnet is.

*AC* A yearning for the epic and the narrative is present in this book in the related lyrics. Perhaps lyric sequences are the present-day epic.

*TOG* In *What Really Matters*, there are probably a half-dozen, maybe even eight or ten, poems that make reference to my grandfather, my mother's father. It's a kind of "connect-the-dots" history of that line of our family. That's how I would describe the epic ambitions of my poetry, very modest ambitions, but the cumulative effect of a body of lyric poems is somewhat narrative. The trajectory of the poems tells the story not just of a poetic career, but also of a life.

*AC* In this case, a cultural past is expressed as well. In *What Really Matters*, the familial history *is* the Island cultural past. Although we have Milton Acorn's mythic history of the Island in *The Island Means Minago*, nobody has started telling, in literary terms, the cultural past through familial stories. However, in spite of your narrative tendency, you use the word "song" for poetry (26). There are not a lot of people today who refer to poetry as "song." Does your use of this word declare a position?"

*TOG* This past winter, when I was teaching creative writing, I was accumulating various materials, and one of the descriptions of poetry that I came upon was Emerson's. He says that in a poem every line should be a poem. That was wonderfully affirmative for me because that is not only what I aim for, but what I feel instinctively when I write. There's a musicality in my poetry. Not coming from an artistic culture or a culture where beauty was something that mattered, I had this fear of writing something beautiful — not only thematically beautiful, but beautiful in itself, having a texture to it. But I got over that. I said, "That's what I want to do — create something beautiful for myself." In the beginning, I had no audience. I was writing poems because I wanted to create beauty.

*AC* When you use the word "song" for poetry, you are referring, then, to the beauty that you want to create in poetry. "Song" says something about beauty that the more pedestrian word "poem" doesn't. Your use of the word places you in time. You go around modernist poetics. Your poetry seems little touched by modernist poetics. Why is that?

*TOG* I guess that would be true. I can't imagine my poems ever being set to music, perhaps because of the musicality within them. Perhaps it's my frustrated musician coming through that wants to be melodic. I played a dozen instruments and can still do so if called upon. As I acknowledge in an essay just published, "Weights and Measures," Seamus Heaney licensed me to create beautiful poems. He has a remarkable musical capacity. In his essay "Feeling into Words," he talks about the way language as it is spoken in South Derry — the consonantal qual-

ity of it, in particular — became the sound system that he was working with when he started to write poems. When I started to write, what came naturally to me was a play that was at times verbal, at times sonic, that I didn't want to suppress. I wanted to acknowledge that this was the medium that I was working with. When I'm writing, I'm not worrying about whether this poem is going to work. I'm taking pleasure in where the poem is going and how it is going there.

*AC* We have been locating you in place, but my question about modernist poetics was an attempt to locate you in time.

*TOG* I haven't read — to the extent of being engaged with — much twentieth-century American poetry.

*AC* You take your bearing from a nineteenth-century tradition?

*TOG* Or, from the Irish poetic tradition, which tends still to be traditional and formalist. It draws from the nineteenth-century English tradition that it emerged from and from the older Irish tradition, which is very rigorous in form and has a special sensitivity to language and a resonance with, what Heaney calls, “the verbal philandering of the Irish language.” I see myself as taking that same kind of pleasure in the use of language. I can't say that I came from an oral culture, but I came from a very literate culture, growing up in a house surrounded by books.

*AC* So you have gravitated toward a literary tradition that is yours “genetically” and which is itself orally based. Many of your poems are about poetry-making and the role of the poet. The identification of the poet as “idler” (“A Fiddler's Share” 25-26) is reminiscent of William Morris's phrase “the idle singer of an empty day” in *The Earthly Paradise*. Does the term “idler-poet” (25) convey the social perception, perhaps judgement, of the poet?

*TOG* I can translate that back to my growing up experience when Milton Acorn was the only visible Island poet. Poets John Smith and Frank Ledwell, of that same period, were partially academics. As an example of the social public poet, there was an element of caricature in Acorn. As far as I can glean from the Lemm biography and from Gudgeon's, it seems that was partly a function of Acorn's personality. He was a little bit different, and he played that up and became a kind of persona. That for me was not a useful model for the poet. The poet like anyone else has to be a functioning part of some other structure. “A

Fiddler's Share" does acknowledge the social perception of the poet, but what has stunned me and uplifted me about the reception of *What Really Matters*, especially where I live in Milton, is the celebration of me as poet, and that is connected to the other dimensions of my life there.

*AC* Acorn referred to himself as a "bard," as do you. Do you think of your work as at all similar to his?

*TOG* When I read Acorn, I am constantly distracted by the politics — by the stridency of his expression of his politics. When I read certain poems in isolation, however, I find his lyric spirit altogether engaging. I admire his poem "The Island," and I recently took pleasurable notice of "The Stormbirds" for the first time. But I am also distracted at times by Acorn's inattentiveness to craft: I think that he has written many poems that are just a word or a phrase or an image short of being objects of true beauty. There are other poems in which remarkable phrases or images get lost in an otherwise undistilled poetic concoction. It's the difference, once again, between "craft" and "technique," though perhaps he wanted that rough-around-the-edges effect to his poetry. I suspect that Milton would register mirror-image complaints against my poems: not enough politics, too much polish.

*AC* Like Acorn, you use clusters of hyphenated words that function as adjectives — "Brine-blackened sticks" (9); "wind-plagued place" (11); "salt-tattered sail" (12); "cattle-stalking flock" (17); "Sunday-collared countrymen" (72). Within these adjective clusters there are nouns. Why do you think you share with Acorn this linguistic habit?

*TOG* I would certainly say that it is coincidental rather than influential. For me, what is going on in those phrases that you have named is the sonic texture. It is the assonance in "stalking flock" that matters and the consonance in "cattle-stalking." I use a lot of internal rhyme and consonantal play so that my poems, my most formal poems, my sonnets, are defined not only by their form, but also by their texture. To the extent that I can analyse it, I'd have to say that my biggest influence in these clusters of sounds is my closeted career as a blues guitarist in my younger days. I played obsessively from tenth grade through college with a blues pianist. The inflexions of blues guitar — the repetition of notes, the bending of notes, the difference between the down stroke and the up stroke with the pick, all of that has made its way into the sounds in my poetry. I've just begun a six-poem sequence that is going to be about six jazz guitarists. It's my acknowledgement of the importance of guitar players

not only as stand-ins for violinists, but also for the importance of the guitar in my system of hearing and of making sounds.

*AC* Your answer is very interesting, but not what I expected. I wondered if there was some common ground having to do with Island speech that might explain why two Island poets of different generations had this common linguistic tendency. You say this is a sonic feature, related to your background in jazz; nonetheless, in these adjective clusters, there are nouns which give the phrasing its tactility. Adjective-clusters that contain nouns harden the adjectives.

*TOG* I should acknowledge another dimension to this: Hopkins and sprung rhythm. My poems are heavily iambic. Robert Frost says that there are two metres that we can use — loose iambic and strict iambic. In using those clusters, I am able to strain against the strict iambic. Paul Fussell talks about the three degrees of “metrical competence,” which are the absolute absence of it, where you are all over the place; strict adherence with no variation; and the third is the one where the metre is expressive. Adjective clusters make the line expressive. The adjectives are part of the texture of the line, but they are also part of the recuperation of the experience. That feature has a complex quality. I have never actually consciously written anything Hopkinsesque, sprung rhythm, but in the poem “Fox Tongs” (32), I was very aware of the strong stresses that were getting into the poem. That’s a poem about forging something. Sprung rhythm provides a way to make the iambic expressive, and natural as well, so that you are not just aiming for that end rhyme. You’ve got other things going on that prevent the end rhyme from defining what the sonnet is.

*AC* You get the flexibility and plasticity in the iambic line that you want through strategies that make the line more expressive, but you also say, “rhyme keeps my grip / on what really matters” (53). Is there a place for recklessness in your poetry?

*TOG* It goes against my ear.

*AC* Let me give you another line from your work. You speak of Mandelstam’s “high faith in unfettered words” (67).

*TOG* A poem like “Valediction” (45-47), which is a free verse poem with irregular line lengths, is a very dangerous poem for me because it could end up being sentimental. It also uses that lethal “O” twice. That’s a poem that is a little bit “unfettered.” I am able, however, to contain it through its structure. It’s got two parts, and within each

part, there are sections. There is a relationship between the formal free verse strophe and the rhetorical content. When I was citing Mandelstam, I was acknowledging what that poem departs from, but also I am recognizing Mandelstam's own life and career as a prisoner in the Gulag. When I say that "rhyme keeps my grip / on what really matters," rhyme is a stand-in for poetry in general. At the same time, the evidence suggests that rhyme itself is crucial to what I do. If you do the math on the free-verse poem "What Really Matters" (51-53), you see that it is masked heroic couplets all the way through to the end. This structural principle is as much as anything a textural principle. It gives the poem its music. These undercurrents of sound measure out wonderfully for me personally.

*AC* You have the satisfaction of the poem's mathematical equilibrium. The reader, although unaware of that, experiences something pleasurable in the sound of it.

*TOG* There's a degree of satisfaction in the making of it that I take pleasure in. Its structure of slanting lines creates a mimetic effect for the slope that the cyclist is going down. There is a lot of play that is visual. I don't do a lot of that. As the title poem in the book, it also carries a lot of thematic weight. I write by necessity because I have to write about "what really matters." This phrase became the title for the book when I became aware that none of my poems were written as exercises.

*AC* This goes back to what we were saying about inspiration: a poem must come to you, must address you. You write nothing as an exercise or as a toss-off. It seems to me that you have a very high notion of what poetry is. Finding the poem in the empty field, the "stone-strewn field" (31), is compared to laying a hand upon Excalibur. In another poem, poetry is aligned with the sea-engaging Argonauts (33). This is a very high notion about poetry, isn't it?

*TOG* Stompin' Tom Connors is poetry; Gene MacLellan [Island singer/songwriter] is poetry. They're working with words. They're making words do something. That for me defines poetry. My own poetry is what it is by virtue of who I am and my own particular take on the world. I try to read widely. I try to have a very catholic sense of poetic possibilities. I had my eyes opened a few years ago when I did a hitch as poetry editor for *College English* and read thousands of poems and accepted poems that I never would have imagined writing myself. I became aware of the range of valid poetic expression. I tried to accommodate that range

within the few pages that I had each issue. I tried to get in variety and different poetic strategies.

*AC* It is clear from *What Really Matters* that the craft of the wily peasant is present, but there is also the high as well. Poetry is compared to a “gilt-hilted sword” (31) and, contrarily, to fox tongs (32). Do these two analogies represent the poles of poetry for you: heroic and aristocratic, on the one hand, and the wily peasant’s craft, on the other?

*TOG* As high as poetry may be, it should not be foreign to the “low audience” or to the audience accustomed to low culture.

*AC* The audience accustomed to “low culture” also has an appetite for the high as well. This is very consistent with the fact that yours does not seem to be a modernist poetic. It draws out of the nineteenth-century and much earlier too because of the genealogy of the tradition with which you are associated. The so-called “low culture” wants not just the tale, the ballad, of their own culture, but they also like to hear about what the prince does. In “Whoso Pulleth Out This Sword” (31), the poem is found in the “stone-strewn field,” and the question is, who is able to pull the sword of the poem out of that field. There’s a notion there of what poetry is and it is not without appeal to the so-called “low culture.”

*TOG* Many people would know that story of the sword in the stone and would be able to respond to it. If that poem were seen as a stand-alone lyric, it could be seen as an egotistical, vain expression as if I were the Arthur who is going to come and do that, but the poem stops short of saying that I’m going to do that. Actually when I was writing that poem, I was thinking of the absence of poetic culture on the Island. I end my Milton Acorn essay, “Advice from Milton Acorn,” with a glance at Yeats’s “Under Ben Bulbin,” where Irish poets learn their trade by singing whatever is well made. This poem is saying to Island poets — but also to myself — there’s something in the air, but we have to grasp it. We all have to be Arthurs in a sense. We have to be bold enough and innocent enough to do that.

*AC* But can we all be Arthurs? In the story, only one person can pull the sword from the stone. It resists everyone else. I’m not suggesting there is only one poet — God forbid that there is only one poet — but surely there is not an endless number of poets?

*TOG* But maybe everybody needs to try it within their own narrative. Not everybody, but anyone who has the impulse, as I did myself, five years ago, when I said to myself, “I want to see if I can become a poet.”



The writing I had done up until that point did not allow me to say it, but I can say it now. I wanted to know if this desire to create something that was beautiful, and beautiful in a performative way, would work. Would people read the poems and be enriched by them? I had to see if I could pull out that sword.

*AC* Is poetry elitist?

*TOG* I think that it is perceived by many as elitist. It doesn't need to be. I don't think that it should be. I'm not sure that poetry slams have done anything to make poetry any more accessible. Sometimes poetry slams can take the art out of poetry; it becomes mere showmanship, rather than acknowledging that this is a craft that has a long and dignified tradition, that we can all partake of. The tradition itself is very complex and diverse. I don't know how poetry is ever going to become the place of first resort that people go to for entertainment or uplift. With all the cultural shifts we've gone through lately, there's been a loss of poetry's potential to be truly populist. There shouldn't be a lowest common denominator that poetry is aiming for. In terms of the modernist poetic tradition, I can read poems that I envy because of the complexity of what goes on in a poem. *The Waste Land*, for example, is rich, dense, and allusive in ways that I like to be myself, and yet it carries so much more weight than any of my poems will ever carry. I can be envious of that, yet, at the same time, capable of saying that's not what I am capable of doing. That doesn't invalidate it for me either. Poetry can do that as well as do what Stompin' Tom's songs do, or Acorn's poems, with their social conscience, do.

*AC* There is a delight here in sound linkages. In the Grappelli poem, the jazz artist's improvisations become "rapelling" (60). Is it sound linkages, rather than narrative or theme, that carries a poem forward in terms of its development?

*TOG* Yes. One word leads to another. I don't know if I've ever had a sense of exactly what I was going to do in a poem. Poems are very much acts of discovery for me. I can predict the area that I'm going to land in, but not the spot that I'm going to land in. It's really a matter of following the impulse established in the first line of a poem. For me, the first line of a poem is really crucial. The last line of the Grappelli poem is from an interview that Grappelli did with the *New Yorker* in the 1970s. I actually read it back then, in the U.P.E.I. library, and although I didn't retain that line, I retained something else that is so crucial for my poetry. The interviewer asks Grappelli about improvising on the violin, and

Grappelli cites the advice given him by a French cabaret singer: you must start well and end well. Nobody is listening in between. Starting well and ending well are important for me. I have a pronounced attraction to the closure of poems. That dates back to my first reading of Patrick Kavanagh in 1977. I didn't have a word then for what happens in a Kavanagh sonnet, but there is always this sense of closure. The other part of it for me is you must start well. You must have something that establishes in the first line of the poem where the poem is coming from and where it is going to.

AC For you it is very important where you start, but do you get on "the sound train" to carry you to where you are going?

TOG The first version of "A Fiddler's Share" (25-26) that I wrote started out with the line "the horse that plowed back sod now plods backroads," but when I continued to revisit the poem, there was just something not right about that as a beginning line. The present version gives me much more rhythmic flexibility at the outset than the strong stresses of the line as it was.

AC "[D]oubly crossing // syllables" (80) seems to me a crucial concept in *What Really Matters*. Would you say something about that concept?

TOG That phrase works in "As in Wild Earth a Grecian Vase" (78-80) on the literal level with the word "*streetish*." Seamus Heaney actually used that word recently in a poem that was published in a journal, but my poem was published first. The phrase actually went from Ireland to P.E.I. and then my mother wrote it in a letter to me when I was in Ireland. But "doubly crossing // syllables" can also describe a linguistic and a poetic heritage. There's a poem that I didn't include in the book that is a translation, or version of, a poet named Dáibhí Ó Bruadair, which is my mother's name, anglicized as "Brother." Working with dictionaries, with other translations, I have done a few translations of Ó Bruadair. I've tested them against Irish poets and they have worked. In the first of those, which *The Fiddlehead* published, the phrase was "*cairt chluana*," and the translation as it existed at the beginning of the twentieth century was "beguiling verses," but when I translated it, I used "verses tickling her fancy." That was "doubly-crossing syllables" for me. Whenever I'm at a dry spell, I'll try to do a little bit of translation, and work with the Irish language. When I detach myself from my own use of words and look at someone else's, trying to recover them, it opens up a "wordhoard," to cite Heaney's *Beowulf*. "[D]oubly-crossing // syllables" acknowledges for me the linguis-

tic subtlety that, on some level, I grew up with. If you look at Terry Pratt's *Dictionary of Island English*, you'll find "streeelish" there.

AC But in Pratt's dictionary "streeelish" means "sluttish," a sluttish woman.

TOG "Straoille" means a "hag" or a "slattern." That was the original meaning, but my mother was using it to mean "unkempt." That's how it was handed down in my family.

AC Words come from Ireland, land on the Island, pick up something Island, and go back to Ireland. "[D]oubly-crossing // syllables" — that's the poetry that you write.

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