



MULTILITERATE IRELAND

Literary Manifestations of a Multilingual History

TINA L. BENNETT-KASTOR

"Drawing on a lifelong engagement with Irish culture, Bennett-Kastor presents a wide-ranging and learned examination of multilingualism in Ireland's poetry, literature, and art, offering fascinating insights to reward the reader."

—TINA HICKEY, University College Dublin

Multiliterate Ireland examines a selection of Irish literature to illuminate a legacy of a multilingual history, demonstrated through works that range from past centuries to the present era. This study examines authors who utilized two or more languages in the same poem, play, or work of fiction, also known as "code-mixing" and "code-switching," of primarily English and Irish Gaelic languages, but with the inclusion of others such as Latin, Greek, and French, and examines linguistically and historically why these multiliterate choices were made.

Included in this analysis are the history of relationships among the languages, the historical use of multiple languages by Irish and proto-Irish writers, the psycholinguistic and cultural effects of colonial suppression of the language, the attempts at restoration of Irish and the desire for a post-Independence literary legacy in the medium of Irish, and a discussion of certain theories and principles of code-mixing that were developed in the case of its oral use and which may in some cases extend to writing. Along with these historical explanations, examples of multiliterate poetry and prose and the writers who produced them, from the late-seventeenth or early-eighteenth centuries up through contemporary works, are explored in greater depth, and serve to illustrate and highlight various uses of code-switching and code-mixing.

Finally, "multiliteracy" as art, or the use of two or more languages as a means of transcendence beyond the ordinary, which is associated with the sublime in general, is explored. This exploration reveals that many Irish writers turned historically and culturally to artists in various other media whose multilingualistic experiences were essential to the development of both their artistic and aesthetic principles.

By examining the literature of these Irish writers through the prism of multiliteracy, *Multiliterate Ireland* attempts to keep at the forefront the authors and their texts, and their decisions to break through the wall of English, or of Irish, to develop an aesthetic that goes beyond a single language, and that creates a language that is at once also many languages.

TINA BENNETT-KASTOR is professor of English and linguistics at Wichita State University



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Multiliterate Ireland

Preface

Several years ago, as part of ongoing linguistic research that included spoken and written discourse, bilingual narrative, and the Irish language, I stumbled across a handful of literary works using two or more languages—that is, using code-switching and code-mixing. My lifelong obsession with language was perhaps nurtured by a family heritage of journalists, speech pathologists, aspiring opera singers, and artists of various other genres, as was perhaps my long and strong attraction to Celtic and especially Gaelic cultures, languages, and literatures. In trying to appreciate more fully the multilingual writings that I continued to unearth as my research went on, I embarked on a pilgrimage into the cultural, anthropological, historical, and linguistic territory of the Irish people and their languages. Exploring such vast terrain is daunting. I came to empathize with the protagonist in William Butler Yeats' "Song of the Wandering Aengus," who was simply trying to cook a trout to eat when it became "a glimmering girl/ With apple blossom in her hair/ Who called me by my name and ran/ And faded through the brightening air."

One of the tasks of Aengus is to maintain until they can be restored the souls of both the land and its inhabitants when these have become lost through war, natural disaster, or even madness. Language is one of the manifestations of that soul, perhaps the one that grows most crucial precisely when people have lost their land and when their identity is on the verge of oblivion. Like Yeats' protagonist, I tried to maintain a grasp on the soul of my subject only to be beguiled by its continuous shape-shifting, and thus I came away with less a sense of brightening than of vanishing air. The souvenirs with which I returned from my exploration were unsatisfying. Though I had finished writing a handful of academic papers, I felt no closure. As Yeats' song concludes, "Though I am old with wandering/ Through hollow lands and hilly

lands/ I will find out where she has gone/ . . . And pluck till time and times are done/ The silver apples of the moon/The golden apples of the sun."

One cannot of course pluck the moon, or the sun, and can no more return to the Land of Youth, the fabled Celtic Tir na n-Óg, where one never grows old and never dies. Yeats' poem is haunting for its invocation of something that another Irish writer, C. S. Lewis, called "joy," but for which such an English word was inadequate: the *Sehnsucht* or yearning, particularly for that which is the fulfillment of our hopes and dreams and yet is beyond our reach; Plato's "divine homesickness"; or Wordsworth's "clouds of glory." The elusive yearning for that which fills one's hunger and the ongoing belief that one may come to know or know it again, whether in this world or the other, is a seductive quality of many of the Irish texts that called to me.

Originally, my intent was constrained. The texts reflect in part the common, grounded, spoken language of the surrounding culture, in which bi- and multilingual people use code-mixing and switching—two or more languages within a single phrase, sentence, encounter, story, or other form of discourse—with regularity. In the case of written language, mixing and switching spring from the same pool of bi- and multilingual people who are the writers and their assumed audience. This practice of "multiliteracy" is by no means a new phenomenon. That multiliterate writing has managed to have a relatively long history is somewhat surprising considering that written language is characteristically conservative, and such conservatism caused much multiliteracy to be hidden for long ages in diaries, letters, and other largely private works. With the civil and social upheavals of the latter part of the twentieth century, however, mainstream monolingual literature began to face challenges from writers who had and wished to express identities other than those associated with the standard literary landscape. Breakthrough writings of a multilingual nature occurred in a number of different cultures. The rich oral and written literary traditions of the Celts in general and the Irish specifically, as well as the particular linguistic history of Ireland, allowed these multiliterate works to flourish and to serve for a case study of such writing throughout the world. Indeed, an examination of geography and history shows that not only has contact and mixing among spoken languages been widespread, but that contact among different types of literacy also began several millennia ago, perhaps in the early years of literacy itself. It is now not only still flourishing, but also increasingly respectable in the world of published and public works.

It was at this point that my modest search for answers became more like the labors of Heracles, or perhaps more aptly of the Irish hero Fionn Mac Cumhaill, for no matter how narrow a question may seem, once the Pandora's Box of human history is opened, all hell is loosed. Language brings its own compounding problems because language is not a self-contained eye that looks out at the world around it so that we may question or comment upon

it; language is itself part of that world and both affects and is affected by it. The world in which the users of human language dwell, and the languages themselves, have histories which shaped them; cultures which both determine the course of that history and are an integral part of it; psychologies and sociologies and anthropologies and theologies of fine distinctions; art; and human biological dimensions which change more slowly but change nonetheless. Thus one cannot really explain what people are doing with their languages—even some small piece of their language use—without invoking all of the other facets of what makes people human.

After ten or twelve years of exploring all the possibly relevant factors I could think might be helpful in understanding multiliterate works, I was in danger of producing a text which was like a joke an Irish acquaintance told me. An Irish story begins something like this: a stranger came into town last summer looking for a standing stone he had heard about, and asked a local farmer for directions. The farmer told him that he needed to continue down the road he was on until he came to a yellow cottage. The yellow cottage was not the one where the stranger was supposed to turn right. The yellow cottage in fact belonged to a family who had lived in the village since Elizabethan days, although the original house had been replaced a couple of times, but there is sadness in that house now because one of their daughters and her husband were recently killed in an accident. So don't turn there, but go on to the next farmhouse. You'll know you are at the farmhouse where you need to turn right because you will probably see a three-legged dog run out into the street. He is three-legged because he does have a penchant for running into the street and trying to have a stand-off with passing motor cars, and one day a car continued along without stopping and the tire clipped the dog's hind leg before the dog could get out of the way. The leg was badly mangled and so had to be amputated. The family—the O'Sullivans is what they are called—could have elected to have the dog put down, but since all six of their other children have emigrated to work elsewhere they only had the dog with them as a sort of surrogate child, and you wouldn't put a child down of course who needed a limb amputated, so the O'Sullivans certainly were not going to do that to their dog. One of their children went to live in Canada, Joe is his name, and he's got a good position in a bank there. The oldest daughter Cat went off and married an Australian, so she is there with family of her own. Then the second son . . .

And so it goes. Every story has a back-story, and every back-story a back-back-story, and that is the trouble one often gets into trying to unravel the reasons and the conditions for the products of the human mind.

Acknowledgments

For help with said unravelling, I must acknowledge gratitude first to colleagues at the former Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann (ITE), or Linguistics Institute of Ireland, who in 2003 scoured a variety of literary texts in a scavenger hunt for those which were multilingual. Thanks are due also to Cynthia Maxwell of the English Department at Wichita State University for demonstrating features of the Word 2013, new to me; to friends and current and former colleagues who maintained an interest in my progress, especially His Honor Michael Roach, Anna Anthimesdes, Professor Margaret Dawe, and Professor Emerita Extraordinaire Jeanine Hathaway; and to an anonymous reviewer who sternly adjured me to make the manuscript less of a long Irish story and to pitch it to a much narrower audience than I had first intended. My editor, Lindsey Porambo, has been enormously encouraging, and assistant editor Marilyn Ehm labored to read the manuscript with keener (and no doubt younger) eyes than mine and was vital in catching errata I had missed. Good friends and former WSU Professors Carl and Ginette Adamson cheered me on, and Ginette graciously provided an image of one of her paintings to utilize for the book cover. The most sustained support came from my husband, Professor Emeritus Frank Sullivan Kastor, who heroically read a much longer and less-integrated version of the work. To him, to our children and their spouses and attachés, and to our grandchildren Tiki Celeste, Riley Lynn, Enoch Sullivan, and Zoey Zainab, I dedicate this book.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“‘You are a foolish fellow’, *air an geósta*” (says the ghost), wrote Eamonn Oig Mhac Anaosa (aka Edmund MacNeese the Young) in his story “*Eachtra Aodh Mhic Goireahctaigh*” (“The Story of Hugh McGarrity”). In doing so, Mhac Anaosa displayed a characteristic common to many Irish writers, namely, “multiliteracy,” the ability to read and write in two or more languages, separately or through code-mixing and switching. Multiliteracy is a term which has occasionally been used to mean much more than what a straightforward parsing of the word might suggest; for example, in some literature, particularly in the area of educational theory and pedagogy, it has been extended considerably beyond the notion of verbal literacy to mean the ability to produce and comprehend diverse modalities of expression, including so-called “mathematical literacy” (i.e., numeracy), musical literacy, literacy in visual arts, or even skilled motor literacies such as those of accomplished athletes or highly skilled carpenters, in short, any forms of representation or “technologies of meaning” subject to cultural interpretation as broadly conceived because “[i]n a profound sense, all meaning-making is multimodal.”¹ Perhaps most importantly, and more relevant to this work, the pedagogical implications for “multiliteracy” in its broadest sense require that literacy is not defined as monolingual, monocultural, and formal—that is, not restricted to the notions of reading and writing in a standard (even in some cases official) language, but inclusive of the variety of languages, meanings, and modalities which characterize the social environment.

Here, the term is used more specifically to refer to reading and writing across languages and dialects, but includes all the various aesthetic and semantic associations the authors may invoke within and across languages, as well as the readers’ interpretive mechanisms whereby these associations are discovered and understood. This is a sense in which the term

multiliteracy appears in some more recent work.² It is also the case that here we are focusing on writers, and consequently on written multilingualism. In doing so we do not wish to suggest that the broad sense of multiliteracy cannot or does not generally include spoken modes of discourse, and indeed the bulk of the research in bi- or multilingual uses of language has utilized spoken language data. However, spoken and written multiliteracy do not always coexist in an individual or a population; some languages have no written form, requiring those who wish to read and write to do so in another language, and some who can speak several languages cannot read and write in all of them while others who can read and write in multiple languages may only consider themselves fluent and competent in speaking a subset of them. Indeed, the linguist Francois Grosjean has written of the problem of defining bilingualism (a term he uses to include multilingualism) from the perspective of researchers as well as that of the bilinguals themselves. He believed that a “fractional” understanding of bilingualism, whereby bilinguals are viewed as persons who are monolingual in more than one language, has hampered linguists’ attempts to determine the effects of one language upon the other; and that many bilinguals themselves often adopt the “two-monolinguals-in-one” perspective and denigrate their own competencies by not appreciating the degree to which their fluency (or literacy) is context-dependent.³ Clearly, a significant understanding of multiliteracy requires such an appreciation and a detailed examination of the context-dependency of multilingualism.

As we explore the literature of certain Irish writers through the prism of multiliteracy, among the questions we examine are those regarding the uses to which that multiliteracy has been put, and whether these functions are separate from or overlapping of multiliterate or multilingual spoken discourse. The practice of code-mixing and code-switching, or in a more general sense what Pieter Muysken has called *language interactions*, is an essential part of the understanding of multiliteracy,⁴ which expresses not only various functions, but also is often identifiable as having certain structural properties. While most of the research regarding these structural properties has also focused on multilingual spoken discourse, some of the most recent contributions have indeed thrown light on the previously somewhat neglected existence of code-switching and code-mixing in writings from ancient times to the present, in works ranging from diaries, letters, and religious texts to fiction, poetry, and other more formal genres.⁵

In addition to questions of function and structure in multiliterate works by Irish authors, a secondary set of questions focuses on what are the metalinguistic, cultural, aesthetic, political, and other, sometimes indirect, dimensions of meaning that writers invoke and therefore are accessible primarily to equally multiliterate readers. Why, for example, is the ghost above using