

SMALL VOICES IN A BIG WORLD: Guth na mionteangacha in éigse na hEorpa by Alan Titley

'Never apologise, never explain.' I am not sure who first coined this aphorism – it is attributed to Benjamin Disraeli and even to John Wayne, but in this case I am going to try to explain, but definitely not to apologise. The reason for the lack of this apology is quite simple. It always seems that the arts are in crisis; in our schools and colleges there is more and more demand for relevance, for whatever it is we might do, that it contribute to economic growth, that it be relevant to those people in their banking ivory towers, to those lords and ladies of industry who are sheltered from the real world.

There is always a call, an outcry, a clamouring insistence, that we who are involved in the arts, and even worse than that, in the arts in minority languages and cultures, that we justify ourselves. The court of law, the tribunal of justification is always sitting. But I do not recognise the court; and I will not be called before the tribunal. As that really bad song sung by schoolboys and girls in a bus on their way to a match, or back, and lacking any other song before the days of 'The Fields of Athenry' used to sing, 'We're here, because we're here, because we're here!' Or to turn Stevie Smith's poem on its head: 'We are waving, not drowning.'

Putting to one side for the moment, the question of so-called minority cultures and languages let us just banish with gay abandon at the very beginning the notion of the irrelevance of the arts.

To do this I could call up a heavy-weight of witnesses. I could call up Shelley's short summary that 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.' While I never quite understood what he meant by this, when I think I thought I did I was inclined to disagree. Tolstoy argued that art would end war and bring peace to society. Somebody else said: 'Art is the essence of our existence, the pure centre of our consciousness, the goal of our souls.'

Actually I just made that one up, but you get the gist.

Before you cease reading because of a barrage of boring quotes, let me bring it back to basics. When a child is born nobody (I hope) actually says, 'I am really delighted to have this child because he or she will help to add to the gross domestic product of the economy, and will be a really useful addition in our campaign for economic growth.' I have met many weird and wonderful people in my time, but I have never yet encountered somebody who saw their children in this light. It seems that we don't always see our children as widgets in an economic wonderland.

Neither do we see ourselves. If I happen to visit Killarney, and when I look at the beauty of the place, and it is still beautiful despite much rain and the efforts of jarveys' horses here and there, I do not say when I observe the lakes and Muckross Abbey and Torc Waterfall, I do not say, 'Oh wow, amn't I the happy man to be contributing to the Development of the Kerry Tourist Industry.' I actually might like what I see because it is beautiful. I may even like it because it gives me that weird and forbidden aesthetic joy, which is simply another word for being alive.

Leaving Kerry behind and returning to the kid in the cradle, I do not seek out signs that she or he may be a productive worker in our broken financial centres, I simply wonder at this human person. And because I wonder I want to teach him or her about the world. And to teach her or him about the world I do not read pages from the *Financial Times*, or play footsie in the cradle, or murmur the sweet nothings of Nasdaq – although I do agree it might help to put it to sleep. I tell stories. I sing songs. I recite ditties and poetry and rhymes. Then as it grows older, I tell more stories, and sing more songs and recite more ditties and poetry and rhymes.

Why, in the name of the Stock Exchange and the Financial Services Centre and The International Monetary Fund would I do this at this most crucial point of the child's development?

Why would I murmur meaningless mutterings if the real world was somewhere else waiting to devour us?

The reason we tell stories to our children, and sing nursery rhymes, and babble pitter patter, but most of all why we tell stories, is because this is how we understand the world. Children understand stories before they can talk; children know about worlds they have never experienced through stories. They learn the wonder of language by the babble of poetry and learn about the rhythm of life by what they hear recited to them in those hours before you put them to sleep. It is universal. There is no known culture where parents do not tell stories and recite poetry to their children. Actually there is, but they are extinct.

This is entirely the unapologetic bit. Never apologise for the arts, because they are the most human thing about us. There would be no humanity without the arts. If you do not think so, just for a moment imagine a world without the arts.

If you lack imagination, take a look at today's or any day's newspaper. Look, for example, at *The Irish Times* (which I randomly choose simply because I write for it). I reckon on my pocket calculator that there are roughly 1,222 and a half hours of TV available every day in the average household. People with other packages will have more. Of these, using my fingers and toes, about 856 hours and twenty five minutes are drama, that is to say, are story. These figures are entirely plucked from the same region of the body as those figures which bankers produce, but no matter. The truth is always greater. Is this, or is this not, the single biggest industry in the world, if that is all that you are interested in?

Is í tionscal na siamsaíochta an tionscal is mó ar domhan, seachas b'fhéidir tionscal na hineistíochta, agus caitheann siad san ineistíocht a dhéanamh i rud éigin. Samhlaímse nach mbeadh tuiscint dá laghad againn ar rud ar bith mura mbeadh dúil mhallaithe ag daoine sa tuiscint féin. Agus tá ábhair seachas a chéile a thugann éachtaint duit ar an dtuiscint sin. Is chun tuisceana atáimid anseo ar chlár dhomhan an iontais.

Is é is measa faoin dtuiscint seo, áfach, ná go mbraitheann go minic ar na sásanna tuisceana atá ar fáil. Ceithre chéad bliain ó shin chreid daoine ar fud na hEorpa go raibh cailleacha feasa nó mná draíochta ann. Cuireadh na céadta míle chun báis. Is chun ár gcreidiúna nár cuireadh oiread is bean feasa amháin chun báis mar chailleach in Éirinn na nGael, agus bhí cúis leis sin. Ach bhain na sásanna tuisceana le pé duine nó daoine nó drong a bhí i gcumhacht. B'í an chumhacht shaolta go minic a shocraigh cad a chreid na gnáthdhaoine.

Ach pé rud is a chreid na gnáthdhaoine, mhair scéalta agus filíocht agus amhráin. Agus is é is míorúiltí faoi sin ná de réir mar a chúlraigh na hardréimeanna úsáide, is é sin, an teanga mar theangain rialtais agus ardoideachais, is ea is daingne a fhréamhaigh sí i measc na ngnáthdhaoine mar theanga ealáine. Mar theangain éigse. Mar theangain anama.

B'fhéidir nach raibh an dara rogha acu. Is féidir féachaint ar an gcúlú seo mar thubaist pholaitiúil – agus ba thubaist pholaitiúil í gan bhréig – agus mar thubaist shóisialta, agus b'ea sin go nótálta gan amhras anonn – ach ba oscailt féithe cruthaithí a bhí ann, nó le cruinneas, ba nochtadh cruthaitheach a bhí ann dóibh siúd a raibh a nguth múchta acu ag stáit mhóra impiriúla na hEorpa de réir is mar a tháinig siad chun cinn.

Féach leat ar chultúir mhóra na hEorpa! Táid ar fad cosmapalanaithe go héag le céad bliain anuas; is é sin, d'fhocal gearra, táid AnglaMheiriceánaithe. Agus cé ná fuilim ag caitheamh anuas ar sciara fada fairsinge den chultúr san, is breá liom Bob Dylan agus Bruce Springsteen agus Morrissey agus eile, is amhlaidh gur mhúch siad go rómhinic na maítheasaí siar síos uathu, dá n-ainneoin.

Ar leith amháin is féidir féachaint ar chultúr na mionphobal mar iarsma. Fágála. An rud nár tháinig ann dó. Ina choinne sin, is féidir féachaint air mar aiséirí, mar earra a d'éirigh aníos. Mar luach a bhí riamh ann ach gur balbhaíodh a ghuth.

Ireland may well be the classic case of a minority culture, a despised culture, a silenced culture jumping up and shouting that it is not dead. Because Irish culture, in that popular sense, was never a minority culture in the country. Outsiders reading this will understand why I emphasise the situation of Ireland, as it is obviously the one I know most about; but much of our experience will be familiar to others as well. Undeniably, Irish culture in the popular music, story, language sense was never a minority thing until the second half of the nineteenth century. It was just what people did. People sang their lives, and storied them, as they still do.

One of the more extraordinary things about that culture in Ireland now, is its vitality. On the one hand there are the Irish-speaking communities, which we now call the *Gaeltacht*, although as a word it historically meant simply Irish speakers. I cannot give facts and figures, but a cursory walk through libraries, and catalogues, and bookstores, and the collections of friends – not to mention the radio and TV and just keeping my ears open – leads me to the very clear conclusion that there is more cultural activity in any Irish speaking community, even now, townland by townland, field by field, hall by hall, band by band, quatrain by quatrain, cd by cd than in any comparable English-speaking community of a similar size.

I challenge anyone to contradict this. I will give only one small example, but it could be multiplied. A recent book by a scholar, who unfortunately died young, Ciarán Ó Concheanainn, described and accounted for the songs in one small area of Connemara, the barony of Maigh Cuilinn. The book is nearly 700 pages long and gives the titles and first lines of the songs of the area. It doesn't give as much as one verse, not a stanza, nor quatrain, nor does it give a summary of what they are about. It is simply a list: 700 pages of names of songs!

Minority cultures are only minority cultures because, in the words of a great ballad by Canon Sheehan, they were 'worsted in the game.' We are back to that explaining business again. Why haven't you gone away? Why haven't you just shut up shop, accepted the inevitable, forgotten all about it, dump the past, live in the real world, die the death, kick the bucket, stop annoying us, get with it, cop on, just feck off...

It may surprise people that the opposition to the cosmopolitan juggernaut is not either political or social. Just simply human. I was born here in Cuas an Bhodaigh or in Eolagarraidh or in Gipuzkoa or in Inari, it is from here I came, it is for this I sing, and do you know what? This is fine by me. You were born in Paris or Rome or Dublin or Berlin or Warsaw or Prague or Helsinki, and that is fine by you. I know I have to learn your language, and I know that you do not have to learn mine. I am Sami or Kashubian or Roma or Frisian or Vlach, but, hey, do you know what? I am just as human as you. My words sing and laugh and cry and holler and dig deep and echo above, just as yours do.

Iompraíonn mo chuidse cainte mo dhóchas agus m'oilíúint agus mo chroí agus m'anam, mar cad eile a dhéanfaidh sí? Is é mo scéal féin é. Ceann de na deacraí a bhíonn ag mionlaigh, agus ag teangacha neamhfhorleathana, ná nach mian le daoine a aithint gurb ann dóibh. Is cigilt ar a gcoinsias féin iad, nó meabhrú mistéireach nach bhfuil an saol chomh réimdhíreach neamhchas agus is dóigh leo. Tá's ag pobal na Gaeilge go maith an drochmheas a bhí go forleathan ar an leabhar *Peig* nuair a bhí sé, rófhada b'fhéidir, ar chúrsa na hardteistiméireachta. Tá's agam chomh maith nach tús róghealgháireach é 'Is seanbhean anois mé, cos amháin san uaigh agus cos eile ar a bruach', go háirithe toisc go n-éiríonn níos gruama ina dhiaidh sin. Mar a mhaigh duine amháin, 'caithfidh gurb í Peig an t-aon bhean amháin a mhair trí chéad bliain, agus nár bhain taitneamh as oiread is lá amháin díobh...'

Ach ina choinne sin thall, tá aithne agam ar dhaoine a theagaisc an leabhar i bhfoirm aistriúcháin in ollscoileanna sna Stáit Aontaithe agus a mhionnaigh is a mhóidigh gur bhain na mic léinn ardtaitneamh as. Bhain siad ardtaitneamh as toisc gur scéal gnáthdhuine, eachtra mná nach raibh saibhir, a bhí ann. Leabhar é a ghoill go mór ar ghlúnta abhus, áfach, ar chúis éigin a bhain, dar

liom, le náire, agus chaithfí a rá, le cúngaigeantacht. Is cuimhin liom bean Ghaeltachta a dúirt, 'Bhueil, féach, b'éigean dúinne Jane Austen a léamh, agus bhí an saol sin i bhfad níos deoranta dúinne.'

Níl mise ag gearán. Tuigeann mionlaigh agus dreamanna ar an imeall nach foláir dóibh iad féin a mhíniú is a chiallú ó am go chéile don saol eile lasmuigh díobh. Is nós le filí na Gaeilge anois - nós i bhfad níos coitianta ná mar a bhíodh - cnuasaigh dá gcuid filíochta a chur amach agus aistriúcháin Bhéarla ina dteannta. Ní drochnós ar fad é, ach tá a chontúirtí féin ag baint leis. Is maith agus is mithid an phoiblíocht agus an leathantas, ach is róbhaol, leis, go háirithe má tá an file féin ar fheabhas gurb é an leagan aistrithe a ghabhfaidh lastuas den bhunleagan agus a phlúchfaidh é i súilibh an tsaoil mhóir. Is dóigh liom gur tharla a leithéid sin, a bheag nó a mhór, don mhórfhile Albanach Somhairle MacGill-Eain sa tslí gurb iad na claochlaithe go Béarla is mó caint agus tasc agus cáil níos minicí ná a chéile.

Tá scríbhneoir Afracach ann, Ngugi Wa Th'iongo a thosnaigh ag scríobh i mBéarla fadó riamh. Tamall ina dhiaidh sin, tar éis dó aitheantas láidir a bhaint amach, d'iompaigh sé ar a theanga dhúchais, an Kikuyu. Duine ar bith a léann a ndeir sé mar gheall ar an gcor seo, aithneoidh sé láithreach díospóireachtaí na hÉireann agus cás gach mionteangan eile. Ar ócáid phoiblíochta sa bhliain 2006, foilsíodh leagan Béarla dá úrscéal *Wizard of the Crow*. Chuir iriseoir, mar a dhéanann iriseoirí, chuir ceist air cad ina thaobh nár scríobh sé an scéal ar dtús i mBéarla agus ansin é a aistriú go Kikuyu. Ghlac sé an leabhar Béarla ina láimh agus dúirt go sollamanta, 'Dá bhfoilseofaí an leabhar seo i dtosach,' ar seisean, agus ansin thóg sé suas an leabhar Kikuyu, agus dúirt, 'bheadh an leabhar seo balbh.'

Ina choinne sin, ní bheadh an scríbhneoir Bascaise Bernardo Atxaga léite agam mura mbeadh go bhfuil fáil air sa Bhéarla agus sa Spáinnis. Ní bheadh trácht cloiste agam thar na milliúin filí gan áireamh as teangacha éagsúla a d'aistrigh Gabriel Rosenstock go Gaeilge. Ná an t-úrscéal *Gwen Tomos* le Daniel Owen a d'aistrigh An tAthair Gearóid Ó Nualláin go Gaeilge ón mBreatnais. Tá gá le haistriúcháin ní hea amháin chun go gcloisfí ár nguth ar stáitse an tsaoil, ach chun go leathnófaí ár dtuiscint ar dhaoine atá cosúil linn féin ar fud na cruinne.

Pushing, not the envelope, as I haven't seen a brown one for some time (and I haven't the least clue what this new piece of jargon means), but pushing the notion of the arts further out or into what we are discussing is the question of Europe itself. I have absolutely no idea whatsoever how we can intelligently discuss Europe without having some clue as to what it is. A simple answer is that it is a geographical place although its borders have been quite fluid from time to time. There isn't any real reason why you should give some allegiance to a map drawn up by dubious cartographers with dicey steering devices over a thousand years ago rather than anything else.

But there is a sense in which Europe is more than just a series of lines drawn on a map. If that was it, then just a bit of Turkey would be allowed in, and much of Eastern Russia, and Iceland, which despite its guts on the financial stage would not be a problem. The thing is that we sense, inchoately, vaguely, shadowishly, ghostly, that there is a European culture that has something to do with the past, with philosophy, with shared values, with common stuff, with floating ideas, with the circulation of notions about life and death, even with religion despite our wars. This list seems to be a kind of description of culture itself. Not even deep down, but floating along the surface there is an understanding that the idea of Europe is a historical, philosophical, literary notion. Europe makes no sense whatsoever if it is only the ECB and the machinations of regional financial markets. If Europe is merely a chunk of land, a collection of convenient statistics, then it is of no more than the insignificance attributed to it by the Scottish poet, George Campbell Hay, 'Och, An Eoraip. Rubha na hÁise/ Bálcán an tSaoghail' - 'Poor Europe! The prick of Asia/ The Balkans of the World'. Somehow, we think it is more than this.

What do we talk about when we talk about Europe? We talk about culture. It has something to do with the Greek miracle, with the remnants of the barbaric Roman empire, with the wonders of the Renaissance, with the philosophical disputes about freedom of speech, about the radical equality of individuals, with the growth of science as intellectual investigation, with the invention of the novel to talk about ordinary people – Europe only makes sense not as an economic convenience but as something which springs from a shared history. The question sometimes asked, ‘Where does Europe end?’ can only begin to be tackled by dealing with these questions. George Steiner once said that the eastern borders of Europe were to be found in the coffee shops of St Petersburg; although this might be news to the people of Rostov or even Moscow; and in Russia itself there is always a debate between its European and Asian tuggings, or even indeed if Russia is an entirely separate place, which I believe it is: a vibrant and lively unorthodox limbo which will always do things differently. There would be no dispute about Turkey entering the European Community if it was perceived not to have a culture somewhat removed, and perhaps even rivalling, the main planks of European understanding. When we talk about Europe, we talk about culture.

And what do we talk about when we talk about minority groupings, or marginalised communities in this Europe? We talk about culture also.

It is because of some aspects of culture that minority groups and languages still thrive and have their being in this increasingly monocultural joint. Some of it may be sentimental, some more may be nostalgic, even a whoring after a never-existing past. But most of our regional and minority cultures thrive and survive because it gives them meaning. As regional and minority cultures become sucked into, and parcel and even part of the bigger concerns around, they hang onto their own. It may be that a song as powerful as the Connemara song ‘Curracháí na Trá Báine’ will fade in the collective memory some time, but for generations yet it will express the horror and desolation of the drowning of three brothers; and beyond that, the universal experience of people who have to live off the threatening and cruel sea.

The point I am making is that where previous ways of life have been subsumed into international capitalism, what the local is left with is the local itself. And in what we still call minority communities, this localism assumes an importance which it would never attain amongst the totally assimilated, the smashed, the muted, the dumbed, the talkative attitudinizing of the knowing-all. Amongst our minority communities, culture is the thing.

We learn the big languages of the world because we want to do business, or become tourists, or just to know what these millions out there are doing. We don’t learn minority languages for these reasons. As most speakers of Irish, or Welsh, or Gaelic, or Breton are bilingual to some extent, in terms of sheer necessity, you will always get along in the big brother language nearby. You are unlikely to die of thirst in Dún Chaoin or Gaoth Dobhair because you don’t speak Irish – in fact you are not likely to die of thirst at all. But you sure as hell will not understand the community, be able to get beneath its skin, participate as an insider, feel the width and the breadth and the depth of those places until you know the language and live and breathe its present and its past.

Tá cearta i gceist chomh maith, gan amhras. Cuid den oidhreacht is luachmhaire a d’fhág an Eoraip againn, mar a bhí á áiteamh agam, ná meas ar chearta daonna. Is iontach mar atá an meas seo tar éis fáis inár measc, go fiú le scór bliain anuas. Tá éileamh anois ar chothromaíocht do chách, agus aithnítear gan bhréig an duine homóghnéasach, an duine sa chathaoir rotha, an bodhar, an dall, an dalta le fadhbanna foghlamtha, an cláiríneach, an duine éisleannach, é seo ar fad mar is ceart. Ar an gcuma chéanna, braithim go bhfuil sé i bhfad níos fusa gnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge le géaga áirithe stáit anois, murab ionann agus rud a tharla do chara liom nuair a ghlaoigh sé ar an Roinn Oideachais na blianta ó shin, b’in an Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna, nó an Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta nó pé ainm atá air i mbliana. Nuair a labhair sé as Gaeilge, chuala sé siosarnach agus monabhar, agus

na focail ‘Quick, quick, get Kitty from Conamara, there’s a guy speaking Irish on the phone.’ Agus go deimhin, is deacair nósanna na mblianta a chasadh siar agus a chur de dhroim seoil.

Is cuimhin liom a bheith i láthair ag cruinniú poiblí sna Hearadh in Albain, áit ar cainteoirí Gàidhlig breis agus 90% den phobal. Cruinniú a bhí ann a bhain le cairéal a bhí le tóch san áit agus é i gceist go leagfaí cúpla cnoc chun clocha a bhaint amach. Is i mBéarla a reáchtáilleadh an cruinniú ar fad, in ainneoin gur sa Ghàidhlig a bhíonn an tseirbhís phoiblí eaglasta gach Domhnach.

Cuid den chultúr é seo chomh maith go bhfágfaí gnéithe áirithe den saol faoi theanga amháin agus gnéithe eile fós faoin teanga eile. Chuala féin scéal ó chara liom i gConamara mar gheall ar bhean a tháinig isteach chun a pinsean a bhailiú in Oifig an Phoist áitiúil. Bhí cleachtadh aici ar an ngnó a dhéanamh as Béarla, nós na linne in áiteanna. Ach an lá áirithe seo bhí Máistir nua poist tagaithe chun na háite agus bheannaigh sé dhi i nGaeilge agus chrom ar an ngnó a dhéanamh. Ach Béarla a labhair an bhean. Gaeilge a labhair an fear. Béarla a labhair an bhean. Gaeilge a labhair an fear. Tar éis tamaill d’fhiafraigh sí de i ndrochBhéarla, ‘Young man why do you speak Irish to me, when I speak the English to you?’ Dúirt sé go béasach gurb é polasaí an stáit an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn agus gur bhain sé le béasa an Ghaeilge a labhairt i gceantar Gaeltachta. D’fhreagair sí go pras: ‘I’ll tell you now, young man, let us do the business first, and then we can speak the Irish all day!’

Is dóigh liom gur samhlaoid í sin ar chor an tsaoil, agus cé go ngoilleann orainn go minic ní bheadh aon dochar ann go ndéanfaimis iarracht chuthaigh ar an nGaeilge a cheangal go príomha le cultúr na tíre arís. Táimid dár n-imeallú arís sa dioscúrsa poiblí ar shlí nár tharla chomh soiléir sin ó lár an 19ú haois i leith.

It should be said, of course, that minority or lesser-used languages are only minority or lesser used because of historical circumstances, and I am referring primarily to languages that are not spoken as a national language in other adjacent countries. ‘Cuibhl an fhortain orainn a’ caochladh’/ ‘Wheel of fortune turned against us’ as the great Scottish poet Alastair Mac Mhaighistir Alastair put it. There is a kind of perverse pleasure in saying that our lesser-used languages were often the tongues of great nations and much more widely spread than today, and the reason they did not expand and sweep across the planet is because we didn’t get involved in the business of conquest and linguistic as others did. Spanish was not spoken by anybody native to South America, where it is now widespread, until Hernán Cortés and three hundred of his men met with the supreme ruler of Mexico in November 1519. We do not have to recount what then happened. There wasn’t a syllable of English in Australia until Captain Cook with his band of brothers encountered what are often called aboriginals speaking Guugu Yimidhirr in July 1770. Neither do we have to recount what happened to English and to Guugu Yimidhirr subsequently in Australia.

Of course, military conquest is not the only reason for the spread of languages; there are questions of economics, of the prospect of riches, education, religion, and others – and there is always an element of deep mystery as to why some languages prosper and others fade away. It is this mystery which gives us our opportunity. One of the lesser-known reasons for minority cultures to survive is prestige, or an even better word, ‘charisma’. It is not certain why some cultures attain this, and others don’t. But ‘charisma’ is not a word that we easily associate with business, and certainly not with banking, at least not anymore. Nor do we associate it with bureaucracy or the incessant marching feet of soldiers doing their worst. If ‘charisma’ resides anywhere, it resides in the arts. In a recent survey in *The Irish Times* (yet again) people were asked what their favourite, or most desirable job would be. The answers were revealing. I don’t think anybody said they wanted to work in a factory, or an office, or even to make pots of money by gambling on the stock exchange. The answers were varied, but they included being a writer, a photographer, a dancer, a singer, a tattoo artist...all those things which touch the soul and the heart.

And if the soul and the heart – and once again I make no apology for using these words – beat collectively loudest in communities, they do so in communities for which the arts themselves are often their life blood. Glancing through the *Euromosaic* study of minority languages which also shows the strengths and weaknesses of various communities, it is remarkable that their weaknesses are generally in business – because business is often international and speaks the language of money – and their strengths are often in the arts, especially in music and in literature. I know of people from the ends of the earth who have learned Scottish Gaelic because of Runrig, and Irish because of Clannad. While this is not going to be replicated on any large scale, it does tell us that one of the characteristics of charisma is simply ‘enjoyment’. There is also ‘wisdom’ and ‘enlightenment’, and these are as likely found in small packages as in the large warehouses of excess.

We do not easily know why some language communities flourish and others do not. Very often our languages are seen to belong to the past, whereas I have been emphasising their life in the present, and in the future, and how the arts enliven and vivify and percolate and enhance and hearten what we are about. There was a time when the Celtic languages, according to one version, were widely spoken throughout Europe leading a Roman writer, Sidonius Apollinaris, to bewail ‘the rough scales of Gaulish speech’. Welsh, in a slightly older dress, covered all of England and Wales, and even part of Scotland. But then, Aramaic, the language of Jesus, stretched right across the Middle East (or Western Asia, if you prefer not to be Eurocentric) before his time and afterwards, but is now confined to a few villages in Syria, if they still exist this week. If I mention Sogdian, you might well ask, what is that? It was the dominant language from the 8th to the 16th centuries along the silk road which went from the Mediterranean sea all the way to China.

As against that, English was once the rough-hewn tongue of a tiny rough-hewn band of rough-hewn marauding pillagers on the rough-hewn coast of Kent, and here we are discoursing in it for readers wherever it is read. There is strong demographical evidence that the number of native speakers of English has peaked and may be in decline; and while it will certainly continue to have immense influence as a *lingua franca* for a considerable time to come, if we take anything from the history of the world we do know that at some time in the future, that position will be taken by, who knows, Mandarin, or Hindi, or Urdu, or Arabic. The future we don’t know; the present we do.

The great thing about the arts is that they are anarchic. They are unpredictable. They cannot be easily domesticated. And in society, the artistic cat is always out of the managerial bag, and it cannot be put back in. The arts in these our lesser-used languages are always those turbulent kids that you don’t quite know what they are up to, but you love them all the same. But when they grow up they are still incalitrant, still messy, still awkward, but you can be absolutely sure that they are alive.

There was a kind of despairing but also hopeful Irish quatrain in the eighteenth century when we were being ruled from Dublin Castle by a foreign government. It was, of course, referring to the English, but we are all friends now and don’t have to hide anymore:

Do threascair an saol is shéid an ghaoth gan smál
Alastrann, Caesar is an méid díobh a bhí ina bpáirt
Tá an Teamhair ina fear, is féach an Traoi mar atá
Is na Sasanaigh féin, dob fhéidir go bhfaigheadh said bás.

It was translated as:

Life has conquered, the wind has blown away
Alexander, Caesar and all their power and sway;
Tara and Troy have made no longer stay

Maybe the English too will have their day.

I think we should rewrite it to suit ourselves:

Do threascair an saol is shéid an ghaoth gan smál
Alastrann, Caesar is an méid díobh a bhí ina bpáirt
Tá an Teamhair ina féar is féach an Traoi mar atá
Is ár dteangacha féin is cinnte go ndéanfaidh siad fás:

Life has conquered and has blasted and blown
Alex and Caesar's pride away, as has been shown;
The past is gone, the future we do not know
Except that these our tongues will thrive and grow.