

Good evening. I'm delighted to be here to launch a book of poems on the subject of such an urgent and ancient plight, that of the banished and the dispossessed; people caught up in the cruelties and tyrannies of war and repression. The book is informed by Anton's years spent living in Cyprus, with its own tortured history of invasion. Some of you will be aware that our own first attempt at writing about our history was compiled from songs, poems and oral accounts synthesised and compiled into a manuscript called , in English, *The Book of Invasions*, and in modern Irish, *Leabhar Gabhála na hÉireann*.

My own first experience of displaced people and refugees was in Lisbon in about 1986 /7 and for the next eight years, many dispossessed people became close acquaintances and friends, but I'll mention one in particular, because she was 'stateless', a non person at the stroke of an apartheid pen. This had a deep and lasting effect on me. Her name was Dona Amalia. Officially, this woman belonged nowhere. The designation was both farcical and deeply frightening. If it could happen there, I reasoned, it could happen anywhere.

I wrote a poem about her years later :

*' Do you think I was never born?  
That this hand, this small head,  
This belly that has borne three children  
Is something I am making up to waste time?'*

If you are a dispossessed person, your song, your poems and your stories are your greatest possessions because in your voices, your lives and those of your families and friends come alive and will echo far into the future, and a reader will taste ' the tang of salt in the future' p. 111 to quote from 'A Map of Home' and know that ' in exile/ home is all I see/

(p. 129 The Dark Times), but each will taste that tang, that specific blás, as we say here, in their own language. So it is all the more to Anton's credit that he has organised translation of sections of this book into no fewer than twenty languages, only a few of which I can read. Language, and languages, matter. Perhaps now more than ever.

This book is called 'Depositions'. In geological terms, deposition is the way sediment, soil and rocks are carried by the wind and sea, mostly, and added to a landmass. Our recent arrivals with their different cultures, cuisines and points of view arrive, blown by the wind and carried on the sea, to enrich and enliven and quicken our own culture.

In the legal sense, a deposition is a sworn statement taken to be read in a court of law, and this is poetry of witness.

The biggest section of this book consists of tercets, three line stanzas, that mimic the flickering effect of traumatised memory, as the dispossessed voice, or voices, try to give voice to their suffering by recalling their journey.

The section that begins 'This Story' and ends with The Dark Times is preceded by a quote from Ana Akhmatova, one of the great poets of witness, whose poem Requiem begins: 'The mountains bend before this grief..

Instead of a Foreword to that poem, Akhmatova writes:

*During the terrible years of the Yeshov Terror I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad.' Then one day a woman' with lips blue with cold identified me, came out of the numbness which affected us all, and whispered in my ear-( we all spoke in whispers there) :*

*'Can you describe this?*

*I said 'I can' Then something resembling a smile slipped over what had once been her face./...*

Sometimes, not always but at certain times, the poet feels called to 'describe this' ; to bear witness and give voice to the appalling cruelty and casual destruction of human beings to others, and to the lives of the people they terrorise. This is such a time and such a book.

I was immediately under the spell of Akhmatova from the first time I read 'Requiem' her most famous poem, and that led me to the great Osip Mandestam, Tsvetaeva, and Pasternak and the rest. Theirs was a poetry that sang of what the poets saw during the Russian Terrors when it was very dangerous to do so. There will be poets in all the languages represented in this book doing the same.

'This Story' opens with these three lines:  
this story/ forged on the anvil/ this rasping file...'  
The reader is immediately drawn to the anvil, the file and the sound of the 'rasp' which sets an ominous and dangerous tone. What follows reads almost like a frieze you see wrapped around certain old buildings to tell a story, strikingly visual and fragmented, poem after poem moving with the forward thrust of shocked memory and glimpsed landscapes towards the final stanzas of *The Dark Times : mother tongue/ each sound a contour/ a map of home*

*happy once/ now we sing of the/dark times'*

Stanzas are simultaneously presented in several languages. Even if you read fluently in a second language, it is not the language of the heart, nor of the subconscious in which your dreams and beliefs are formed. I myself happen to write out of that place between languages, one and two generations removed from Irish and yet I only ever encounter a certain flavour or psychic ‘blas’ in Irish.

Before I finish, let me give you a few lines from Michael Hartnett and which chime with the voices in these poems :

*I have heard them knock  
on my dimensions  
like chimes of glass on glass  
or one water drop  
falling a long unlit way  
into a deep well  
but I have never known  
the eternal word for 'enter'.*

This book is another step on the way to finding that ‘eternal word.’ Comghairdeas, Anton ar an leabhar aoibheann seo, obair chroiuil, fíor thabhactach agus ar na dánta nadúrach, geal agus fíor tragoideach.

Read in English and Irish. P 98/99End.

