

Travelling With Desmond Hogan: Writing Beyond Ireland

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Abstract: *The uneven and at times tentative development of Desmond Hogan's fiction, based in Ireland for over some twenty years, was transformed in 1995 by his novel 'A Farewell to Prague' when Hogan discovered that while he could still assemble fragments from Irish life and history, now he had at his command a new means of incorporating insights from his restless travelling in many countries and a way of moulding diverse experiences into personal encounters with inner landscapes, the imagined worlds of others and visions in art. The most exhilarating effect of such travel writing is the perspective where one's own indigenous culture may appear insignificant by itself, yet when viewed in certain ways may become a linking and a bonding with the peoples of other cultures. Hogan's 'miracle' occurs when the human tragedies of history do not divide but actually help to unite individuals from whatever culture when they are moved to join in the crosscurrents of mutual understanding and guarded hope.*

Desmond Hogan (1950-???) felt the urge to travel from a very early age. He wrote in 1988: 'In the old Jewish Cemetery I'd thought of them and in the suburbs of Prague, under high-rise flats, a gypsy family on a bench waiting for a bus, I'd thought of the gypsies, the tinkers who'd enriched our town when I was a child. They'd created a pattern for the lives of many of my contemporaries, a pattern of moving on, always moving on, nomads.' (*Edge*, 66) But the metaphor of a nomad, while perhaps still retaining an appeal for the older Hogan, provides an inadequate explanation of Hogan's compulsive wanderlust. Hogan published his first novel in 1976 *The Ikon Maker* wherein Diarmaid O'Hallrahan, at the age of four or five, is described as walking on fields 'where Jacobean soldiers once fled before the Williamites after the Battle of Aughrim'. (*Ikon Maker*, 19) In a journalistic piece written about a visit back in 1990 to his home town of Ballinasloe in County Galway for the annual horse fair, Hogan evoked his strong sense of local history, rather like George Moore had responded many years before to the local history

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of Lough Carra in County Mayo: 'On a hired bicycle I made a tour of medieval monastic ruins that form an exhilarating demi-necklace around Ballinasloe [...] stone patterns of arched medieval windows against the sky.' A sobering thought was that Ballinasloe once had the largest mental hospital in Europe: 'The first building went up in 1833 and extensions and additions haven't stopped since.' (*Edge*, 142-8) In *The Ikon Maker* Diarmaid experiences feelings of rebellion against his mother who thinks travel is to go nowhere, and harbours secret sexual longings for boys. Trauma climaxes in the suicide of Diarmaid's childhood friend, Derek O'Mahoney. Ireland is imagined as having mangled, twisted and embittered Diarmaid by the way in which Diarmaid's school boy Derek committed suicide as a result of the small town's bullying and of Diarmaid's own refusal to respond sexually to Derek's love. Another influential aspect of Diarmaid's childhood experience is his early addiction to the art of collage. At first 'he made shapes, puts bits of cardboard together, eggshells, fluff – mattress fluff, ducks' feathers. He constructed these icons' (*Ikon Maker*, 20). Later he made a collage of Derek O'Mahoney's guts; 'His collages were becoming bloodier, all red; one day he smeared lipstick over eggshells.' Much later he constructed an ikon for a drug addict: 'That night Diarmaid put bits and pieces together, feathers for the boy's eyebrows, paper skin, a button in each eye' (*Ikon Maker*, 43-6). In *The Ikon Maker*, Hogan prologues in lyrical mode the four major themes of his fiction: the bloodshed of history, the urge to travel, the compulsion of homosexual desire and an undying passion for assembling life's fragments into collages of memorable beauty.

Hogan's second novel *The Leaves on Grey*, published in 1980, is a surprising diversion into the genre of the French Catholic novel. This short novel is mainly concerned with a group of friends from the Irish Catholic middle class who were undergraduates in University College Dublin in the mid-1950s. The narrator, Sean McMahon, becomes a married solicitor with three children who works in Dublin and London. Sean experiences the problems of marital infidelities and the massive psychological impact of terrorist explosions in Dublin in 1974 which shatters his complacent belief that Ireland had become quietly cosmopolitan during the 1950s and 1960s in spite of the plethora of gombeen politicians and numerous quack artists. Sean shares with his creator Hogan a collage style of narrative, but Sean's collages which consist of listings of places, clothing, drinks, food, songs, films, poets too often suggest the shorthand doodlings of a Dublin newspaper gossip columnist. *The Leaves on Grey* comes fully to imaginative life only as Sean's curiosity grows about two old Dublin friends, Sarah and Liam, who were once lovers. Sarah's father was an eminent surgeon who was well known for his sympathy for the martyrs of the 1916 Rising and for his dedicated work among the Dublin poor. His death causes Sarah to revert to orthodox Catholicism in the form of entering the Medical Missionaries of Mary: 'She would go north to Drogheda, dress in a habit white as skulls, kneel before crimson Christs like the poor of Dublin did, eventually journey abroad to Africa, redressing the ignorance of the Western world which abandoned huge areas of the universe to starvation' (*Leaves*, 68). Years later in London,

Sean meets up again with Sarah who, having left her religious order many years ago, is the headmistress of a progressive all-girls comprehensive school. Liam, after a period in California during the 1960s, also reverted to orthodox Catholicism. Sean finally meets up with Liam on an island off the coast of Northern Ireland, peopled by celibate poets and academics in monks' gowns all dedicated to the cause of peace. Looking back at his Catholic middle class upbringing, in a conversation with Sean on the holy island, Liam denounces his own class for its lack of pity for the world from its privileged rampart during the 1950s, and explains the creative communal possibilities of the new form of medieval monasticism which celebrates the inner plentifulness of leaves on gray: 'I'll tend to lives. Grow flowers. Shape again. With my hands. A sculpture. A recognition, a divining of that area where one registers peace, from which peace flows'. (*Leaves*, 116-8) Sean's final impression of his old friend's face is 'a stillness of stone, one of those faces on ancient stone in Ireland', but his parting reflection is ironical when he concludes that he must return to the things of life, doubtless drawing some consolation from his wife's explanation of the Sarah and Liam as mere 'meteorites'. In *The Leaves on Grey*, Hogan tried to depict the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie, somewhat along the lines of Francois Mauriac who had been a scourge of the French Catholic bourgeois family in South West France when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1952. The role of quasi-radical Catholic writer excluded too much from the Hogan itinerary. The uncharacteristic feature of *The Leaves on Grey* is that Hogan's narrative here is mostly landlocked in period and place. In his account of the holy island of poets and academics in monks' robes as an image of a challenging poetic idealism in the modern world, Hogan seems to be suggesting that the holy island way of life was a state of exile from the Ireland of the 1970s, perplexed by the threats of material prosperity and terrorist violence which could put the thinking elite in touch with a more idealistic way of life. Hogan's sense of travelling at this stage of his journeying retreated too quickly into safe territory.

A Curious Street was Hogan third novel, first published in 1984 and marked a virtuoso development of the practice of collage-making which had been first signalled in *The Ikon Maker*. The main storyteller is Sergeant Jeremy Hitches, a British soldier of English and Irish parentage, on active service in war-torn Belfast. Jeremy mostly remembers with affection making good friends in Ireland but also of being faced, as a boy with an English father, with those long and bloody accounts of Ireland's grievances over many centuries against the English. He suggests that somehow he was returning to the English working class roots when he joined the British army, whereupon he was branded by his Irish mother as a Cromwellian. But early on in his upbringing Jeremy heard from his mother another story of Ireland – that of Alan Mulvanney, history schoolteacher, with whom Mrs. Hitches had an unconsummated love affair. His mother spoke to Jeremy often about Alan's unpublished historical novel entitled *A Cavalier Against Time* which had been born out Alan's individualistic response to things like the Irish historical exhibition which he had experienced as a boy of ten in the classroom –

an exhibition of the wrongs done to Ireland which was dominated by the picture of Oliver Plunkett who had been hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn in 1681. Alan's story in *A Cavalier Against Time* concerned a pair of star-crossed lovers, Lorcan O'Mahony and Eleanor O'Keefe, who preach peace on horseback throughout the Ireland of the seventeenth century until they endure the siege of Galway and survive only to become separated. Sergeant Jeremy becomes so involved with the lovers' life-story and the historical fiction world of Alan that he admits to rewriting parts of *A Cavalier Against Time* and to imagining much of Alan's interior exile from Irish society by way of acknowledgement of that part of him which had been conceived in that unconsummated affair between his mother and Alan. Jeremy, empowered by his creator Hogan, creates intensely romantic collages of people, places and events by means of inventive non-linear cross-cutting between the past and present in Irish history. Alan's romantic lovers, Lorcan and Eleanor, roam the countryside in sympathy with gnostic forms of Celtic Christianity and with the dreams of the utopian Diggers and Levellers. Eventually each lover is driven into an exile of wandering in Europe where Eleanor ends up as a Flemish burgher's wife and Lorcan settles for life happily married to a Moorish girl in Andalusia. Alan's own personal life-story unfolds in fits and starts: loneliness, furtive fantasies about Red Hugh O'Donnell, confusion about a sexual identity, loving remembrance of the young red-haired farm labourer who committed suicide, unsettling experiences in Rome, feelings of alienation from a country whose history becomes a kind of ultimate wound, inner exile in the local mental hospital which is escape for those who cannot live in the present. Jeremy imagines all his friends acting out some part in Alan's story of Ireland, concluding that 'a chaos which will go on and on, which nothing will stop, neither journeys, nor movement, nor changes of role, nothing except the gesture of love' (*Curious Street*, 40). The greatest paradox in Jeremy's life is that while he plays his own minor part in the prolongation of the Cromwellian agony in modern Northern Ireland, his imagination has been sufficiently matured by the telling and the retelling of Alan's stories to the point where he can confidently acclaim Alan as 'the unwreathed laureate of Ireland'.

The most remarkable tour de force in *A Curious Street* occurs at the climax in the imagined apotheosis of the unwreathed laureate. Alan as a child of ten takes his poem about the dissolved snowman whose pebble eyes and top he treasures on a walk to the Shannon river, close to the ruins of the house which had been burned down during the recent Irish civil and which had once been owned by two harmless elderly Protestant ladies whose presences are invoked: 'their heads close together, fearful of what the night will bring [...] fearful of what this land will bring and is commonly known for – the untoward assassin, whether of the emotions or the body, the intruder in the night, the gun in the bushes, the rupturing insult that will destroy for life – but sure of this, the discordant rhapsodies of the heart'. Near that same spot some fifty years later, Alan would be found shot dead, a presumed case of suicide. The novel ends on an apocalyptic note with Jeremy invoking Alan as he would a saint: 'He was a talisman on nights in a

mental hospital corridor, nights of orange lights, of the Sacred Heart's picture and the assassin's bullet. He accompanied me through the desert, over the sea, through these pages. He kept me going when there seemed to be nothing else' (*Curious Street*, 192-4). Rarely have such compelling tragic depths been plumbed in a novel about a nobody as the transfigured victim of history. Hogan's uncompromising collages may not appeal to those who prefer a tidily academic historical answer to the perennial question of the nightmare of Irish History.

The dimension of homosexual desire played a subtle role in the exposition of Alan's human condition; but in Hogan's fourth novel *A New Shirt*, first published in 1986, his theme of homosexuality emerged as the dominant theme. The story concerns the anonymous narrator, the only child of a Spanish aristocrat and Irish industrialist, beginning to research, just after the Second World in New York, the life and work of the famous drowned poet Nessian Muir as a consequence of having read the little flutterings of Nessian's poems during his undergraduate days at University College Dublin. The narrator arrives just in time to meet the dying mother of Nessian whose maiden name was Bonnie O'Dowd, a second generation American who traced her Irish stock back to the Kinucanes, the one time owners of a Big House who had to flee to the New World during the Penal Days. The young Nessian was brought up by his grandmother on great stories about the triumphs of the Liberator Daniel O'Connell. But what made the greatest impression on the growing Nessian was down-hanging, male American genitalia in the changing rooms after baseball games on Sunday afternoon. Nessian became famous for exposing his marble white buttocks for everyman. While publishing slim volumes of fashionable poetry, he determined to enjoy a life of untrammelled sexual indulgence among the rich set in New York. Surprisingly the narrator shows no interest in Nessian's poetry but much interest in Nessian's homosexual sexual promiscuity which he romanticises into a form of self-reflection; 'The people you pick up, usually not penises, but loneliness, stories. Most of them not queer. But lonely. Searching. Open. Vulnerable. Those treading the earth with vulnerability' (*Shirt*, 94). All that one is allowed to learn about Nessian's artistic activities are the facts, or fictions, that he worked as a scriptwriter for a millionaire Hollywood director and appeared as a star in a blue movie. Stimulated by thoughts of Nessian's erotic life style, the narrator, now an antiquarian bookseller and married man, explores the makeshift caverns of modern Irish homosexuality in the clubs, saunas and gyms operating in the Dublin of the 1970s and 1980s, invariably frequented by those, like the narrator, with a middle class veneer of cars, wives, children and synthetic smiles (*Shirt*, 114-6)

A vividly imagined Nessian hovers like a guardian angel over the relationship which develops between the narrator and Phineas Ward, the IRA revolutionary and male prostitute, just one of the numerous latter day Irish patriots who trade on a policy of guns for sex which the narrator, while availing of the service, brands as the great Irish perversion of 'sex for sale and guns for the chalk Virgin with plastic lilies at her feet in Belfast'. Phineas Ward, himself haunted by the memory of the drowning in the Liffey

of a fellow rent-boy by the name of Bord Baine, has a jaundiced look which inspires the narrator to cast him as an ikon; 'a fleshed, mustard skin colour that was suitable for someone who espoused the cause of Ireland, connecting him with the shades in those suffering medieval Christs' (*Shirt*, 15) The collage of Irish landscape closely associated with Phineas consists of children playing on rubble, wall mosaics of national heroes and giant Easter lilies, posters for Sinn Fein, patriotic graffiti, and refuse heaps of syringes, durexes and offerings from the Virgin cased in glass. The relationship between the bourgeois pervert and the resourceful rent boy ends when Phineas is blown up with his own bomb near the Cavan-Fermanagh border in 1984. In an attempt to grapple with his own confused emotions following the horrific death of Phineas, the narrator projects attitudes onto Nessian: 'Deranged things were happening inside Nessian. He was scribbling himself to death. These ghosts, the demons of Ireland, of other places, were after him, the void of his ancestry. They didn't wish he'd draw things into a path of lucidity, of meaning. It would be an embarrassment to history, to them. These ghosts, these demons wanted to remain as amorphous, screaming commotion in the ancestral memory. They did not want to give way to clarity' (*Shirt*, 114). Clarity is just what this narrator lacks in these memoirs of bad faith. Towards the end a kind of bizarre clarity leaps out when Fintan, Nessian's grandson born in 1967, appears in the Ireland of 1984 to hitchhike round Ireland in search of ancestry. In Belfast, Fintan has 'nightmares, men with explosions of blood on them, blood the way crimson appears on Hawaiian shirts'. In Dublin, Fintan discovers in the National Library the verses in the Martyrology of Donegal which explains his grandfather's ancient Irish name: 'Nessian, the holy deacon, loves/Angelic pure devotion;/Never came outside his teeth/What was untrue or guileful.' Hogan's novel ends not on the expected note of irony but on a celebration of Fintan's enthusiasm at the discovery of a name as we are presented with the resonance of the blond American boy making a telephone call in a kiosk just inside a Dublin pub, a month after Easter in 1985: 'a resonance of an Easter which you'd hoped for in this shabby and slithering city but which had never come, never that is, until now' (*Shirt*, 213-5).

A New Shirt must seem somewhat underwhelming to the admirers of *A Curious Street*. Nessian Muir's Irish ancestral history is never explored thoroughly by the narrator. This fundamental failure is acknowledged knowingly in the account of Nessian's ghostly encounter with his grandfather Paid O'Dowd during his flying visit to Dublin after he has had an even more fleeting, unfinished encounter with a County Kildare farmer's boy in the lavatory of a Dublin pub; 'A grandfather of Nessian had broken from order once, broken from inheritance, and so had sundered the connection in his descendants between the roots of their being and themselves' (*Shirt*, 181). The fact that Nessian's poetry remains totally undocumented, unlike Alan Mulvaney's historical novel, reduces him to the narrator's aphrodisiac image of an American homosexual celebrity. Why did Hogan decline the challenge to bring the promiscuous Nessian alive as a poet, perhaps somebody like Walt Whitman or Hart Crane, two American poets whom he greatly

admires? The novel works best as a collage of male homosexual stories which buoy up the narrator in the Dublin homosexual caverns but fails to encompass the theme of Irish ancestry which the narrator doggedly but unsuccessfully attempts to incorporate into the narrative. The novelist's obsession with the homosexual theme frequently leads him as a traveller only into *cul-de-sacs* of feverish erotic fantasies.

Hogan's fifth novel *A Farewell to Prague* appeared some nine years after *A New Shirt*. The novel is an ambitious one in that Hogan at last adopts a literary form which enables him to integrate his major themes into a new and exciting synthesis. The only sad fact is that many of his critics have felt bewildered and put off by the spirals and interlacing of language, by the pointillistic verve of the narrative and even by the absence of chapter numbers and headings. The language is at times as elliptical as anything in Joyce's *Ulysses*. In any study of *A Farewell to Prague*, the problem is to know what to leave out and what to put in from the seemingly endless exhibition of Hogan's collages in this uncompromising novel.

In his occasional travel pieces collected in *The Edge of the City*, Hogan notes down the interesting but random observations of a journalist: the world's edges are primarily chronicled in a diaries of restlessness during the years 1976 to 1991: Santa Cruz (1976), Cairo (1977), Israel (1984), Norway (1987), Galicia (1987), North Yemen (1988), Russia (1989), Lisbon (1989) Prague (1989) Leningrad (1989; 1991), Mississippi (1989), New Orleans (1990), South Africa (1990), Berlin (1990) and Guetemala (1991). Hogan's narration in *A Farewell to Prague* concentrates for the most part on the European experiences of a character called Des. Des is not a journalist, or anthropologist, or business man or politician or aid worker or even tourist circling the globe; rather, he comes across as a wandering inquisitive writer who is intensely vulnerable to the personal and communal histories existing beyond, yet often reminding him of, his Irish experiences. Clearly there is an interchange and an absence of boundaries between the preoccupations of this fifth novel with the rest of Hogan's fiction, including his forty or so published short stories. In Hogan's numerous short stories, the plots are often tenuous, characters undifferentiated and entire family histories compressed, yet there is a relentless procession of metaphors, the most remarkable of which are refashioned in his novels.

The long Hogan project at last emerges finally as a brilliantly fashioned kaleidoscope of myriad impressions and reflections. Memories of Ireland persist in welling up. There is the vignette of Des' mother on the occasion when she brought him as a small boy from Galway to Dublin to see the Jack Cruise pantomime: Des remembers how he saw her naked before she put on a pink nightdress and slept in the bed with her arms about him. Then again Des remembers the occasion when his mother beat him, when he was thirteen, in a wild frightened way for standing in a makeshift theatre in the back shed in a turban with a turkey feather in it and with a tan acquired from mixing some of her cosmetics (*Prague*, 55). There is the recurring memory of the Korean war veteran (with blond hair like Tab Hunter) in the Ireland of the 1950s: 'on a frayed armchair at the guesthouse down the road, he told us about the green trains of Seoul and

about the many lepers [...] he caused my first wet dreams'. Later, in the company of a Croation woman, Des remembers the War veteran: 'He was my first and enduring lesson in courage, courage to face memort, hypocisy [...] a talisman, his strength being passed on like a candle in dreams' (*Prague*, 168-70). The Irish past is best suggested in the collage description of Eleanor. Eleanor's father was a lecturer in the Dublin College of Art. She was sent to a convent school on an island in Mayo where a nun, Sister Camisias, captivated her young imagination by telling the story of the Children of Lir. Sex as an adolescent in Paris gave her the first sense of exile from Ireland. She began the habit of sending friends Rembrandt postcards acquired in Mulvanys on Wellington Quay. It was among the dead and mutilated bodies on Talbot Street, May 1974 that she resolved to leave a country which continued to breed such unyielding versions of political nationalism, because behind much of the poetry was the savagery which attacked everything not vetted by the tribe. Dublin for Eleanor became for ever associated with the memory of a dead blond male prostitute being pulled out of the Liffey. Des lives for a period with Eleanor in Rathmines: 'Making love to Eleanor I saw a battle, a World war Two Battle in the snow. It is the early forties in Russia [...] There was a young German soldier, slightly bumpkin face, his hair straw blond, just looking at the battle, not fighting' (*Prague*, 71). Through her failing marriages, Eleanor and Des continue to keep in touch in spite of the emotional torture they inflict on each other; 'I remember the crucifix I saw with Eleanor in Italy and knew that this was to be our lives' (*Prague*, 171). At one stage, Des experiences a total breakdown from which he can recover only by calling up the child in him, 'the broken part in me' (*Prague*, 56). The travels of Des go on multiplying partly to fill the crater left by the physical absence of Eleanor. These travels render national boundaries less and less meaningful; while people met and events experienced across the globe come to be increasingly seen as interconnected and interchangeable.

The other abiding presence in Des' life is Marek, the child of a failed marriage between a German actress and a Palestinian doctor. Des first meets Marek in a school in the West of Ireland from which the rebellious Marek eventually escapes. One of the highlights of Marek's drifting life across the cafes of Europe is a conversation with the brilliant Russian film maker Andre Tarkovsky in a café in Berlin. Marek becomes HIV positive on heroin in Verona. Des and Marek fall more deeply in love as Marek's death approaches. Des becomes godfather at his baptism on Easter day. While Des waits in a small room, he draws consolation from an ikon of Our Lady of Vladimir, with its squirrel-like child being held by the black hands of the mother (*Prague*, 118-22). After his death in 1991, Des dreams of Marek with his mother by the turquoise sea in Sicily, with Marek in a black summer shirt with white skulls (*Prague*, 167)

Two great European painters help to shape the maturing aesthetic perception of collage maker Des into the fabrication of some resplendent ikons. The first is Rembrandt, the favourite painter of Eleanor. Rembrandt's masterly chiaroscuro gives an intensely luminous quality to the partly lighted human figures set against the dark background,

suggesting a perspective in which to view his own collages. Des begins to see Rembrandts everywhere in London: ‘He brings tenderness to old people, mostly black, queuing to take part in an old people’s talent competition [...] to two young Irish lovers, holding hands, looking at Padre Pio in a window [...] to a Killarney brick-layer in a hospital, about to have a hernia operation’ (*Prague*, 157). The second painter who leads Des towards a visual sense of mystical beauty is Georges de La Tour whose picture of St. Sebastian depicting the saint’s motionless body with a single arrow and silent figures including St. Irene, Des sees in a gallery in Berlin and notes the fact that La Tour’s pictures were neglected for centuries. La Tour’s use of the baroque devices of close up, strong tone contrasts, the qualities of stillness and silence achieved by geometrical patterning, the switching of perception from naturalistic setting to dreamscape all help to create the luminous quality which Des so admires. The spirit of La Tour is invoked by Des when he proclaims the miracles of cities: ‘every embrace with every stranger became an act of expiation, and every act of kindness became an act of atonement, and the city’s orphans became the only possible mirror, a candle always reflected in that mirror if the liasion [...] if the exchange of hurt was a true one, like the candles in Georges de La Tour paintings’ (*Prague*, 150). Des pays tribute to La Tour’s pictures of the Magdalen imagined by flame and mirror in the darkness of a room by ending *A Farewell to Prague* with a magnificent iconic image of the ebony-haired woman with the tattoo of a ladybird on the cup of her hand: ‘She has been spat on. She has been abused like the women in my town were abused long ago. Her bags packed beside her, she is ready to move to another abode, another country even. But like a Georges de La Tour Madeleine at the flame she stares out now at the city whose rags and orphan walls have adhered to her’ (*Prague*, 245). Even as he acclaims the art of La Tour in characterisation by candlelight, Des reaffirms his own fervent belief in the practice of the art of collage: ‘Keep fighting for love. Even when they’ve all but destroyed language in you, pick up the pieces and make collages, continue making collages – some meaning will come out of it’ (*Prague*, 166). The strength of collage is inclusiveness; but the risk of collage is triviality as in Sean’s fleeting impressions of Dublin bourgeois life in *The Leaves on Grey*, or incoherence as in the arid stretches of *A New Shirt*. In *A Farewell to Prague* the aesthetic touchstone is the creation in literature of those painterly qualities usually to be found in the chiaroscuro of Rembrandt or in the candlelit image of La Tour. The risk, then, becomes a wordy pretentiousness; but, *pace* the uncomprehending critics of the Hogan style, the risk was worth taking in view of the imaginative mapping so tellingly set forth in *A Farewell to Prague*.

As the novel’s title suggests, the city of Prague has a special place in Des’ affections. While he celebrates Wenceslas Square – with lovers on benches, marigolds on sale and the young and old mingling – it is the old Jewish Cemetery which provides a perfect mirror for his journey East: ‘When I first went to Prague and used to sit in the old Jewish Cemetery, I’d think of how the old Jewish town reflected my life, sometimes the double-tailed Bohemian lion flying proudly here, sometimes with the inhabitants

having to wear the yellow star' (*Prague*, 185). Before he travelled to Eastern Europe 'to see the face of God', Des in North Connemara had a dream of a prison cell with two small windows with five hooks on a cross beam: 'I did not know at the time this was Plotzensee Prison in Berlin' (*Prague*, 91). The poem by Harro Schulze Boysen found under the floor of his cell after his hanging at Plotzensee in December 1942 haunts the dreams of Des. It is an important moment of truth for the Irish writer as he ponders not such the history of Ireland's grief, but on the universal meaning of the world's suffering. (*Prague*, 123).

Hogan's fictional collage in *A Farewell to Prague* is a late twentieth century development of the genre of eighteenth century Romantic fiction wherein the traveller is the questing, homeless self whose true citizenship is not of one country but of many countries, and whose actual travels become mental travels as the writer moulds experiences into modes of encounters with inner landscapes and imagined worlds. (1) The most exhilarating effect of such travelling is the realisation that one's indigenous culture is a small but crucial link with the peoples of other cultures. In *The Ikon Maker*, Diarmaid grew aware of the painful gap between his own inner ideal and his mother's ideals for her cherished son. In *A Curious Life*, Alan Mulvanney was finally imprisoned and destroyed by his sense of Irish history, yet Alan's tragedy inspired an understanding of the possibilities of life in a British soldier who adopts him as his father. (2) Unlike Alan, and unlike Liam on his holy Irish island in *The Leaves on Grey*, Des finally transcends in *A Farewell to Prague* the limitations of the commonly propagated tradition of Irish mainstream national navel-gazing. Des jumps to respond to the memories of peoples from different races and beliefs – often to the point of friendship, and occasionally to an intense awareness of the paradoxical human complexities of sexual desire and love. The raddled reign of the mottled queen Nessian in *The New Shirt* is metamorphosed into the tragic fate of the heroin and Aids victim Marek in *A Farewell to Prague*. Hogan's miracle in the cities which he visits in his travels occurs at the point when the human tragedies of history do not divide but actually unite individuals from any culture in crosscurrents of mutual understanding and guarded hope. The uneven and somewhat tentative development of Hogan's fiction, over some twenty years, finally led to the emergence of an imaginative structure in which the selected fragments from Irish history may be contemplated alongside a further selection gathered from the histories of cultures far and wide throughout the world.

Yet neglect of Hogan's cumulative achievement is general, especially in Ireland. (3)

This woeful state of neglect confirms Hogan as the great outsider novelist in modern Irish literature. Yet Hogan's ikons – made from autobiographical quest, cultural exploration and historical scope – form a unique voice on the Irish cultural margins. One is reminded of the cold shoulderings of *The Crock of Gold* and *The Demi-Gods* of James Stephens; and of *The Interpreters* and *The Avatars* of George Russell (AE), which have been too often consigned to the cultural margins of the Irish literary consciousness,

most probably due to an obstinate lack of sympathy for their theosophical idealism. (4) Ireland's national fear of travelling, as distinct from touristic jet-setting, suggests that the country's cultural horizons remain over restricted in range. If the dynamic urges to travel outwardly and inwardly were more commonly practised by the Irish beyond Ireland, then Hogan's idealism would probably be more readily understood, and his fiction would be more widely appreciated.

Notes

- 1 See Percy G. Adams. *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* (Kentucky: University Press, 1984) for the historical background to the beginnings of the genre which Hogan adapted in a strikingly original way, in *A Farewell to Prague*.
- 2 See Robert Tracy's review of *A Curious Street* in *Eire-Ireland*, Spring 1986 for one of the very few sustained analysis and interpretation of Hogan's Fiction.
- 3 See *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, v. 1 (A-L) Robert Hogan (Ed.). London: Aldwych Press, 1996, for the nadir of the trivialisation of Hogan's achievement by the Irish critical establishment: 'Hogan's late novels have really very little to offer but their appalling prose style [...]. Hogan in his late novels is unintentionally silly and almost unreadable', 558.
- 4 See James Stephens. *The Crock of Gold*. London: Macmillan, 1912; James Stephens. *The Demi-Gods*. London: Macmillan, 1914; George Russell. *The Interpreters*. London: Macmillan, 1922; *The Avatars*. London: Macmillan, 1933.

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