

There is no such thing as the future

by Pádraig Ó Tuama

Britain and
Ireland Lives
Entwined



Poet and theologian **Pádraig Ó Tuama's** work centres around themes of language, power, conflict and religion. Working fluently on the page and in public, Pádraig is a compelling poet and skilled speaker, teacher and group worker. Introducing Pádraig's TEDx talk on Story, BBC journalist William Crawley said: 'He's probably the best public speaker I know.'

Ó Tuama's published work incorporates poetry (*Readings from the Book of Exile* [nonglisted for the Polari Prize 2013] and *Sorry For Your Troubles*), prose (*In the Shelter*) and theology (*Daily Prayer*, 'The Place Between'). His poems and prose have been featured in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Academy of American Poets*, *Post Road*, *Cream City Review*, *Holden Village Voice*, *Proximity Magazine*, *On Being*, *Gutter*, *America* and *Seminary Ridge Review*.

From 2014 to 2019 he was the leader of the Corrymeela Community, Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation community. He has been featured multiple times on the renowned American radio programme *On Being with Krista Tippett* and, from early 2020, he will present a new poetry programme – *Poetry Unbound* – as part of the On Being Project.

There is no such thing as the future

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All summer long, I have been thinking about the future, and how it hasn't happened yet.

But I couldn't get that damnable line from Eugene O'Neill out of my mind:

There is no present or future — only the past, happening over and over again — now.

I remember it as the epigraph from the beginning of Leon Uris' novel *Trinity*, only I swear that the version I read wrote:

For Ireland, there is no present or future – only the past, happening over and over again – now.

That's not what it says but it's how I've told it for years. Some memories, it seems, are accidentally true.

Anyway, I've been in the future all summer long, even though I don't believe in it. I don't believe in it because it hasn't happened yet. And – I wish this weren't true, but I fear it might be – much of the future will remain predictable if we continue doing as we do. Only if something surprising happens will something surprising happen – on the first day there was a surprise; then everything exploded.

I tried writing poems about Brexit. I turned to forms that use repeating lines to create a sonic and visual representation of how, now, in 2019, nearing the centenary of when Ireland was partitioned, we are facing into questions of the reiteration of the border. I made vocabulary lists: Brexit & Backstop & Trade Deals, oh my.

(Backstop, I understand, comes from baseball, and is something like the function of a wicket-keeper in cricket. Ireland has a cricket team now. *Surprisingly good*, an Indian friend said to me recently.)

Anyway, British–Irish relations – or, to be more accurate, Anglo-Irish relations, because it’s mostly with England that our beef is – have been under strain. The debates of the past few years have focused on the achievement of trade deals, backstops, customs arrangements, as if those will be the things to address whatever is going on. They’ll help, that’s true, but they’re just a start. Partition happened 100 years ago in Ireland and families are still split about who to vote for: the parties that accepted the compromise of partition, or the parties that opposed it – separation is measured in decades not days.

When I tried to write poems about what’s happening, I riffed on tumbling forms – villanelles and pantoums – inventing new patterns for repeating lines increasing in intense repetitions.

British–Irish relations, July–October 2019

All summer long
I’ve wondered what to say
not because I don’t know what to say
but because I don’t want to say it.

I don’t want to say it because
all summer long I’ve wondered
whether saying it is
what I want to say.

Saying something during uncertain times
is an uncertain art
because uncertain times make
saying anything an uncertain art.

And the trouble with history is that
history’s troubled by the past. And
the past is history, or at least, in some parts,
in other parts its troubled presence

is an ever living present. And this
troubles us when we try to tell our
history to the present. That’s the trouble
with history; it’s not past. Not always.

And if you ask me where the border is
the border is all round me. I drove through it
yesterday, or rather, it through me. It weaves
its way across the laneway near my house;

near my house it weaves its way
around me, this blade of grass is Irish, this is British
this is through me, I drove through it.
A blade of sharpened history.

But I was unsatisfied with that poem. What's the point of poems that tell us what we know? Clever little forms that do nothing do nothing for me. I don't know if art has a purpose, but I wanted a poem about British–Irish relations to do more than that.

One of the terrible things about British–Irish relations is that we have no shared story of the past, and this makes it terribly difficult to describe the present. In an uneasy peace, there exist parallel, but distinct, narratives about who the aggressor was in the question of how British presence on the island of Ireland over the past 700 years can be narrated – as if blame can only be apportioned in one direction.

God you love talking about the past, a person in London said to me recently, when I mentioned the upcoming centenary of partition. Only that week, my insurance company had sent me the green card that I'll need to keep in my car should a bad version of Brexit occur. The green card – it's more of a green form to be honest, but who's asking? – will ensure that my insurance works if I'm in an accident south of the border.

I told the person in London that the past wasn't the past for us when we have to navigate across borders that are being reignited with attention. The person didn't know what to say. I found myself in an awkward position. I felt the need to change the subject, more so to ease their tension than mine.

What do we say when we don't know what to say because there's something new every day in the unfolding relationship between our governments? I tried poems like the one above, but while I enjoyed the formplay, I was inherently dissatisfied with smart repetitions of things that give no hope. So, I turned to the past, to the often forgotten past. It astonishes me how few people in Britain know about the famine in Ireland. Or, if they know about it, they call it the Potato Famine.

My granddad's grandad survived the famine. He had gone to a soup kitchen in Irish-speaking West Cork, in the arms of his mother – his brother in the arms of his father – and got separated from them. He was taken in by a Protestant family and the rest of his family all died, it's presumed. Mother, father, brother. Cousins, aunties, grandparents too. He never saw them again. He was six. The story of the famine reaches into Irish consciousness like a rot, because we know that there was food enough to feed us throughout it. Famine isn't ever just famine; it's also policy. There were abominable things said about the convenience of a potato blight in reducing the population.

And – in heroism and horror – people like the Clergyman John Mitchel in Derry came to the fore. He was heroically accurate when he said that it wasn't God who created the famine. He was diabolically inaccurate when – years after having been incarcerated in Van Diemen's Land – he moved to the southern part of the United States and insisted on the morality of enslavement. To look to the past, we may imagine that the story of victimhood will leave the victims with a pure sense of identity while tainting the taunters with guilt and blame. British and Irish pasts are not so convenient.

The Potato Famine

*The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight,
but the English created the Famine.*

John Mitchel

My father likes his spuds piled high upon his plate.
My mother likes her peace and her diet magazines.
My great-great grandad was the only one who made it.

At the heart of every famine is the scheming of a state
to bring a people to their knees for the state's convenience.
My father likes his spuds piled high upon his plate.

On the phone an English woman says the Irish are fixated
with our stories of the past in a way that's quite obscene, but
my great-great grandad was the only one who made it.

My auntie moved to England and learnt how to translate
between the way a people are and the way their history's been.
My father likes his spuds piled high upon his plate.

There are proteins in our grass from forgotten famine graves,
some families fed on rotten grass and – my mother tells me –
my grandad's grandad was the only one who made it.

His family had all starved so he missed his Confirmation.
Decades later, a priest arranged it. Didn't make a scene.
My father likes his spuds piled high upon his plate and
my great-great grandad was the only one who made it.

Phytophthora Infestans

The Institution of Negro Slavery is a sound, just, wholesome Institution; and therefore that the question of re-opening the African Slave Trade is a question of expediency alone.

John Mitchel

We love to blame the British for our past
but our past is blighted by a story we won't own.
God knows, it wasn't that our suffering was mild at home,
but when we travelled, we shackled up with empire
and smited other places while crying about our home.
Not with a rot of other people's making; but with a rot our own.
And not because of how an empire shackled us
but because of something rotten in us.

Certainly, a rot of other people's making – not our own –
starved us from our villages and homes.
But because of something rotten in us,
and not a blight that was exploited, we went and
starved other peoples from their villages and homes.
Our suffering was far from mild at home. But far from home,
we uncovered something white inside us.
We cannot blame the British for the stories we won't own.

What gives hope? It's hard to say. We can hope in the future, but I always want some evidence of the present to build on. And anyway, it hasn't happened yet. The future I mean, not the past.

Sometimes a story can give hope: stories go beyond data and speak to the human condition. So, as I've been thinking about British-Irish relations, I decided to take an old idea, I wondered about stories about pilgrims.

British interests have impacted Ireland for the past 700 years, so it's worthwhile reckoning that we're stuck with each other, and anything that is going to be good for us will need to be good for all. Enemies is no longer a fruitful term, even when the term has echoes of truths from the past. So, I decided to pick pilgrims as a metaphor for a story about unequal pilgrim partners who are tied up in story, pain, death, the past and the future. The inequality was important. No analysis of the past can lead anyone to think that Ireland was ever as equal a threat to Britain as Britain was to Ireland. However, even unequal pilgrim partners can cause mutually exchanged horror.

We know this. It continues.

So unequal pilgrims are on paths of pilgrimage with each other. Pilgrimage towards where?

That's one of the things that the summer of 2019 has confused. But what we know is what has saved lives: the spirit of concord that allows for peaceful, democratic solutions whereby the question of the population of the jurisdictions of Ireland is debated and discussed with information, care, creativity, tension and precision. All of this looks like argument, and when done by peaceful means, that looks like creativity and democracy.

In this Pilgrim poem, the Pilgrims are unlikely companions. They fight, they are knotted together with holy and unholy knots, they are in tension with each other, and they are pursued by the Dead. They meet the ghost of a Princess who directs them towards story, they take risks of disclosure with each other, and they fall apart when they take those risks. Even still, they still take risks, and occasionally make gestures of kindness to each other. The Dead are not the glorious Dead. These Dead have things to say.

Pilgrimages are known for reaching fulfilment from the moment they begin. 'The destination is all around' is the sometimes frustrating advice given to people on hundred-mile walks to a specific pilgrimage destination. Or someone might speak of the journey as the thing that means much more than the final arrival. This can sound soppy, but in general, I'm inclined to agree with Annie Dillard when she says *How you live a day is, after all, how you live a life*. If we are to take the wisdom from these maxims as a lens through which to view British–Irish relations, it's difficult to find a day in the last three years that gives hope that the future will be anything other than a frustrating unfolding of predictable patterns.

Worrisome as this is, it is not the final word. Because days happen all the time, and – with courage, gesture, consideration, leadership, acknowledgment of pain, and recognition of power – we can make new days, days the like of which we might wish to repeat every so often, or perhaps more often than only every so often.

In a time when we spend a lot of time speaking about the future, it is worthwhile focusing on the present, because whatever the future is, it'll be practised in the present.

The quality of any future will only be a magnification of the qualities exhibited in the present.

Pilgrims, let us pick up stories.

Pilgrims – fighting, unlikely, unwinding Pilgrims – let us Pilgrim.

The Future

*There is no present or future – only the past,
happening over and over again – now.*

A Moon for the Misbegotten, *Eugene O'Neill*

*We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have
followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.*

The Book of Common Prayer (1789)

A Cast of Characters.

- Two Living Pilgrims, frequently fighting in the Present.
- The Dead, frequently watching, from the Past,
the Fighting Pilgrims in the Present.
- A Princess, also dead. She has other business.
She also has a horse.
- The Buried; whose Names Nobody Remembers.
- A Watcher, who Watches.

(i)

Before a broken throne
two Pilgrims stood
and put their hands
around each other's
throats.

One bigger than the other.

Each wished the other
dead
or worse.

Watching them: the Dead.

*Watch them love
to threaten life*
the Dead all said.

Each Pilgrim prayed
they'd
win
to whatever God was
listening.

(ii)

One Pilgrim
noticed they
were noticed
turned around and said:
We're not alone.

Thank God, the other said.

The Dead said
Wait.

The Dead said
Watch.

The Dead said
*You'll both
need each other.*

*And it might mean
the death of all
you've come to know.
Watch, we'll show you.*

(iii)

The Pilgrims pilgrimed
passing many graves
along their way.

*Are these the
lonely resting places
of the Dead?* one Pilgrim asked

The Dead
said
nothing.

Some forgotten things
are lost
but might be found.

Some forgotten things
are just
forgotten.

(iv)

The Pilgrims fought.

And fought about
the things
they fought about.

A blade was bought;
and brought;
and then a cut was made;
and a hand fell
to the dirt.

(There's always something
sacrificed to earth
for the sake of someone's
fantasy of winning.)

Pick it up and take it with you,
the Dead ones said,
make it make you
make.

(v)

The Pilgrims fought
about the question
of who'd been hurt
the most.

Fighting about old hurts
made old hurts hurt
much more.

And then one fell.

And the other hated helping,
but still tried to help.
And the helped one hated
being helped.

And they dreamt of
separating.

Their lives had been entwined,
like families,
for centuries by now.

Not by promises,
or priests.
but by griefs sustained.

(vi)

The Pilgrims' fighting paused from
time to time.

When one found
a way to make a
kindness
to the other,
the other made a
kindness back.

But then they took it back.

But then they offered it again.

And things went on like this for
longer than you'd think
a connection should survive.

(vii)

And sometimes along the way
a story cracked. And then again.
And then again, again.

What's your name today?
one Pilgrim asked the other.
The other didn't answer.

It wasn't that they didn't wish to share.
It's that they
didn't know.

Stories are a name, but stories only
grow with
stories told.

(viii)

Along the way
a Princess came,
a dead one, riding on a horsey
ghost.

She said:
*The Future's made of storied stuff
provided you keep storying
each
other.*

(ix)

The bigger Pilgrim turned to face the other:
I know you've hated me most of your days.

*So make your meaning plain.
Speak out from that pain you're holding.
Spare no
thought
for how you'll break our Future.*

The other Pilgrim said:

*I know that my dead
mother
and her mother's mother
and that woman's mother's mother's mother
went to death
repeating the same
question:*

*Don't they have some
other fields to
sow other than
these fields of ours
they've stolen?*

(x)

Then the bigger Pilgrim cried.
Lay down and cried.
Lay down and curled up on the ground and cried.

Lay down,
believed the story that was stated
defined them wholly hated;

and knew that it was
true, but it was not
the only truth.

Stood up and shouted:
*We were hurting too.
While you were grieving for your country
we were foreigners in fields whose language
hated us with centuries of hatred.*

And then one Pilgrim produced placards
filled with poison for the other.
And a Pilgrim blamed a Pilgrim for the other Pilgrim's hatred.

And then everything grew loud.
And the sounds of violence
electrified their ears.

Of course they thought about partition,
but some
hates run deeper than a border.
Hope too. And sometimes
truth.

(xi)

The Dead returned with force.
Howling, they lamented
everything they lost.
Like some kind of storm
they crossed the space
between the living and the dead.

They brought songs, and stories.

*We are not your glory.
We were empty sacrifices
required by emptier devices and desires
of power hungry people.
We were vassals
broken by a castle-dwelling class
whose names and stories
we forget now.*

(xii)

The Dead saw death
arriving on the faces
of the pilgrims.

The Dead toned down,
they said:

*Make stories while you live.
Where we stand now
you do not stand.
But where you stand, you can
risk a bit for living.*

(xiii)

One of the Pilgrims
went right up to the other
and pulled out salve
and tried to soothe
some sores.

And then the other, sitting, sitting, sitting
letting what the other touched
sting
with the stinging
of the living living living.

And for a moment they were looking
looking
looking at the

ways of
living.

(xiv)

And when the Pilgrims — fighting Pilgrims —
saw all that
they saw
they thought about the future
and how it hadn't happened
yet.

And how they didn't know a way
to make it grow.
And how the centuries all groaned
for victory and for
blame.

They turned to face
their destiny —
each other.
They turned to
face fragility —
each other.

They turned to
face their hatreds —
each other.

They turned to face
each other face
each
other.