Speaking in Tongues
An Interview With Belfast Poet
Gearóid Mac Lochlainn
By Thomas Rain Crowe

In May 2002, I received an e-mail message from Irish poet and translator Gabriel Rosenstock informing me of the publication, in Ireland, of a new bilingual collection of poems by a young Irish-language poet named Gearóid Mac Lochlainn. Gabriel’s e-letter praised Mac Lochlainn’s new book, Stream of Tongues, saying: “Mac Lochlainn dances with coyotes, with pipes in the heather. Stream of Tongues is a waltz, a side-step, a tango, a Highland fling. … Such lovely lunacy is as rare as good watercress these days. For 15 measly euro, you can enjoy the book and the CD. The CD, you say? Yes, it’s a riot, a rattlebag, and if it doesn’t attract a cult following, I’m giving up on cults. I, for one, believe that this stream of tongues, this crazy confluence, deserves a wide readership, at home and abroad.”

Feeding off Gabriel’s enthusiasm, I quickly e-mailed Cló Iar-Chonnachta, the publisher of Stream of Tongues, to request a review copy, to see for myself what all the excitement was about. I dove into the book’s “Irish Sea” of text with anticipation, as well as with a healthy dose of skepticism. But I was not disappointed in what I encountered. True to Gabriel’s ecstatic endorsement, the page poems, as well as the CD’s oral equivalents (like the Highland pipes), took my breath away. What I found “amongst the watercress” was a mature poetry dealing with the difficulties of a minority Gaelic-language culture facing the pervading English monoculture and exploring the problems encountered in its search for an effective artistic voice that honors both English and Irish speakers. I found a powerful, emotive poetry with the edge (although softer) of a voice that honors both English and Irish speakers. I dove into the book’s “Irish Sea” of text with anticipation. No better introduction comes to mind than Gabriel Rosenstock’s words in his initial e-mail to me: “Come on brothers and sisters, let’s all go down now and immerse ourselves in a stream of tongues!”

Totally drawn in by Gearóid Mac Lochlainn’s strong, lyrical, poet-activist voice, and his informed irreverence and seeming fearlessness, it wasn’t long before the two of us were carrying on a Belfast-to-North Carolina conversation over the Internet, the essence of which is offered here.

The Bloomsbury Review: Since this conversation will reach mainly readers in the U.S., and will introduce you to most for the first time, can you begin by your talking a little bit about yourself—the history of your family and of your connection with Belfast and Northern Ireland?

Gearóid Mac Lochlainn: “Northern Ireland” is a difficult terminology for myself and many others like me. It carries lots of colonial baggage and an ideological subtext. I don’t use it. Let’s use “north of Ireland” and move from there.

My blood relatives on my mother’s side of the family are Curleys from Belfast—from the “Loney,” which is one of the oldest parts of the Falls Road. My mother’s great-grandfather was John Skelly, one of the United Irish men involved in the 1798 Rising, so the story goes.

On my father’s side of the family, the story is different: His great-grandda was Irish Gypsy or “Traveling People,” who came from Curleys from Belfast—from the “Loney,” which is one of the oldest parts of the Falls Road. My mother’s great-grandfather was John Skelly, one of the United Irish men involved in the 1798 Rising, so the story goes.

In my early years, I went to Slate Street School off the Falls Road before moving to Twinbrook “industrial” estate, famous for two things—the De Lorean scandal and Bobby Sands. Politics was everywhere when I was growing up. The feud between the official IRA and the Provisional IRA that occurred in the early 1970s deeply disrupted the whole lower Falls Road community and split families and friends. Then there were riots, pogroms, strikes, bombs, assassinations, discriminations, the Civil Rights movement, hunger strikes, the British Army on the streets, and 100 other things. … That was Belfast growing

Stream of Tongues is available in the U.S. through Dufour Editions.
Contact with Gearóid Mac Lochlainn or his publisher, Cló Iar-Chonnachta, in Ireland, can be made via e-mail at: cic@iol.ie.

Author of Babylon Gaelgeoir (1997) and Na Scéalaithe (1999), Mac Lochlainn has won several prizes and received a special award from president of Ireland Mary McAleese in recognition of his work with the Irish language. For the past couple of years he has worked with Radio Ulster to produce Irish-language programs; worked to set up Irish-language pro-grams in urban and underfunded schools; appeared at arts and literary festivals to read from his work and perform with his Irish-language band Bréag; and traveled throughout Europe, Canada, and the U.S. (particularly the Pine Ridge Reservation of the Lakota in North Dakota). He currently resides in his native Belfast, in Northern Ireland, with his wife and two young children. In September 2002, he was awarded the Hartnett Award honoring the Irish-language poet Michael Hartnett; and in February 2003, he received the Butler Award from the Irish American Cultural Institute of New Jersey.
up. A city saturated in politics, revolution, ideas, censorship, state repression. But amidst all this, there was always poetry and music. My grandmother, for instance, on my father’s side, played harmonica and sang until she died, in her 80s, awhile back. Everyone on my father’s side of the family is still a singer and a crooner, though I don’t see much of them nowadays. So maybe the most important aspect of my background is that I was always exposed to songs and singers and music.

**TBR:** Let’s ease into the subject of your writing by beginning with some of your essential influences. To whom or what do you attribute your love of language?

**GM:** My musical and literary influences are very broad and far-ranging, but more than all else, I’m influenced, I suppose, by sean nós, or what is sometimes called “old-style” Gaelic-language song that contains some of this country’s most beautiful poetry. The sean nós tradition is transmitted and passed down orally. This Irish tradition still defies to be text-bound and still lives only in performance or person-to-person sharing. I was blessed by a singing circle that happened nightly in Cumann Chluain Ard, an Irish-speaking club in a Belfast backstreet that is off the beaten track. I heard and learned many songs there, where there were often Gaeltacht people who would sing, teach, and share their songs and stories with the Belfast Gaelgeoir and create a cross-fertilization between urban and rural Irish communities and language users. I was fortunate enough to have many good teachers from whom I’ve learned the sean nós songs.

Sean nós are social messages as well as a bridge between realities. For the early Irish peoples, like all indigenous peoples, words had magic and great power. When the Bardic form of Gaelic society was destroyed and went underground, the poetry changed to laments, songs of loss, great love songs, and vision (“Aisling”) poetry that still held the hope of liberation of the Gael. These songs are still sung in many parts of Ireland, mostly in the Gaeltacht areas (the first Irish “reservations”), but also in Belfast and other urban areas, where they continue to survive. However, it is a very transient and fleeting art form these days and in danger of being lost. The same song can have multiple variations and versions. Most of the songs are shape-shifters that are sung differently in different parts of the country. Conamara has the big airs and the long tonal phrasing, while Donegal has the rolling, rhythmic, chopped phrasing that is linked to the fiddle playing and the landscape. I, personally, use variations of these rhythms in my poetry but also fuse in other cross-cultural referencing from reggae, Dub, hip-hop, Wacipi, Beat poetry, French existentialist writing, cubism, surrealism, and Rastafarian philosophy.

**TBR:** And what about purely literary influences?

**GM:** Off the top of my head, I love Ó Riordain, Ó Tuairisc, Ó Searcaigh, Joe Heaney, and Michael Hartnett and Pearse Hutchinson. Others would include Caitlin Maude, Noel Lenaghan, Ciaran Carson, Linton Kwsie Johnson, Albert Fry, Bob Dylan, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Bob Marley, and Bobby Sands. But there are three quotes that essentially permeate all my writing, beginning with Joyce. James Joyce’s character of Stephen Daedalus talking about English as an acquired speech: “My soul fretted in the shadow of his language. The words Christ, Ale, Master were different on his lips than they were on mine.” These were and are very important words for me.

Secondly, the line from Michael Hartnett’s poem “Farewell to English” was an essential influence. “Poets with progress make no peace or pact/The act of poetry is a rebel act.” This single line, alone, moved me to begin writing in Irish only. Hartnett believed that writing in Irish at all is subversive and a political statement. Hartnett, for me, is the most important Irish writer since Joyce and more so since he wrote in Irish and English. He is tragically underestimated at times, like Flann Ó Brien and Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, who also moved between Irish and English.

And thirdly, there was Wordsworth’s statement that poetry is “emotion recollected in tranquillity.” This idea has informed my idea of translation and, specifically, how I translate my work out of Irish into other languages. I get deeper into all this in the author’s notes at the back of *Stream of Tongues.*

**TBR:** I’m interested in your references to the cultural implications of the sean nós songs. Can you talk more about this—especially where the Gaeltacht and the Irish language are concerned?

**GM:** In Irish, these sean nós songs are referred to as *filiocht na ndaoine,* which is translated in English as “the people’s poetry or song.” They date from a period when the traditional Bardic order began to disintegrate under English colonization. With the advent of English colonization, the poet lost his traditional privileged role in Irish society, which was a spiritual and socio-political voice that mediated between the people and the Chief (*Taoiseach*). The poet’s influence was able to put regulations on the power of the chiefs and how they used their power, making sure that they were praised if they did their job well and castigated if they didn’t. So poetry had an innately political and functional role in society here in Ireland during earlier times. As I was growing up, I became somewhat dismayed that many poets were very hushed about politics and didn’t properly fulfill that role, or that they tiptoed around politics or political issues.

The exceptions to this prevalent attitude are Michael Hartnett and Pearse Hutchinson—both of whom I admire. The fact that I’ve just been awarded the Hartnett Award for the year 2002 is something that I am very proud of. But both of these poets are from the south. Northern poets have a sly reticence or coded referencing system relating to the north. “Don’t rock the boat or bite the hand that feeds you, don’t mention the war, etc.” are still prevalent attitudes that have led to self-censorship in poetry here. In my mind, these are false separations that are part of the colonial silencing and psychological repression that are the history of the “Preoccupied” Six Counties. In this sense, our poetry, here in the north, has been emasculated, diluted, and appropriated. Of course, most poets will deny this and say they do tackle the issues other than those strictly for a European American academic audience. My own poetry differs in that I was raised and still live in a community that is under siege and has suffered a lot. I don’t know any other Irish poets that do live in communities here in Belfast or who come from...
the same class background as I. Ciaran Carson may be the one possible exception. But although I admire his work, I feel that he could have gone further in this respect in tackling political issues. I admire poets like Padraic Fiacc for taking those kinds of risks with his career, though sadly, Fiacc remains, like Hartnett, largely ignored in this part of the world.

In the end, I’m interested in healing the separation between poetry and music and also politics and poetry. For centuries poetry was sung in Ireland and also accompanied by music, as it still is to some extent. The growing split I see is a result of the continued influence of the colonial mentality in this country, which has brought on fragmentation and atomization. I can’t even say “postcolonial,” as there is still a British military presence in the north and one of their barracks is at my front door here in North Belfast.

TBR: And the Irish language? Where does this fit into what you are telling us about yourself and Irish history and culture?

GM: I began learning Irish at the age of 11 and still count myself proudly as a learner—a perpetual one. There was a three-year break in later years when I was off traveling, when I lost touch with the Irish-language community. However, while I wasn’t speaking much Irish during these years, I was made more aware and concerned, by being absent, about the issues pertaining to language and culture at home. Ironically, I would say that this separation heightened my sense of personal and cultural identity.

I learned most of my Irish in Belfast from the older people—including Ciaran Carson’s father, Liam Mac Carraín, the storyteller. From Liam Mac Carraín and lots of great sean nós singers that were very traditional, unlike some of the more crossover stuff that is around today and made for the export market, such as Clannad, Altan, and the likes.

I love the human voice. It is a beautiful form of communica-
tion. In Irish there is an older form of communication called oídeas béil or Béil oideachais, which translates as “oral educa-
tion.” This type of teaching includes songs, myths, storytelling, and poetry—dúinseachais (the stories of place, place-names, community history, etc.). I like to think of my work as oídeas béil—the oral transmission of ideas. Words are meant to be carried on the air, to be externalized, vocalized, sung, intoned for the ear of the listener. Text-bound poetry puts limits on understand-
ing. We would never think of buying music in manuscript form to bring home to read and then assume we have heard the music. So why should we think that a reading of the text would allow us to assume a knowledge of the musical intentions in the words? Only when the words are vocalized can we interiorize and understand the true intent and often hidden ironies, sub-
tleties, tonal weaving and layering, and sound patterns that the voice can carry.

As you can no doubt tell, music (or the musicality of lan-
guage) is more of an influence on me than modern poetry itself. I’ve had many a poem softly recited into my ear at the bar or in a session, as if it were too precious to be said in any other way. I tried to get that feel on the CD that accompanies the Stream of Tongues book—with the pub sounds floating in and out. The role of oral communication of words and mes-
ages/knowledge is on the wane all over Ireland, if not the world. The voice, itself, has been disempowered.

In the end, I love poets who use music to create accessibility and a holistic, multimedia approach to giving voice to words. I’m surrounded by many musicians here and in the south, so discussion on the larger context of Irish music with regards to language is constantly going on as musicians share ideas, expe-
riences, and knowledge that seep into the poetry. I personally use a macaronic style in performance, and this mixes the two languages I write in a somewhat holistic way. Poetry, song, and performance are aspects of prayer to my mind. It is the only way I can do it.

TBR: And how does politics affect language and music in 21st-century Ireland?

GM: The only Irish-language radio station broadcasting from the cultural center on the Falls Road is still a pirate sta-
tion which has been refused a license from the broadcasting authorities in England. The public broadcaster here also puts out a minimum of three hours of Irish-language TV (enough to barely fulfill its responsibility under the European Charter of Minor-ity Languages)—compare this to Scotland, where there are less speakers of Gaelic and they have 300 hours of programming and a bilingual station of their own. An anti-Irish bias seems to pervade broadcasting in the north. I sincerely hope this will change under the Good Friday Agreement and the new structures agreed upon to create “peace” here, but to date there is no evidence of this in real terms. Poetry allows me to voice issues that are not dealt with by media or arts establishments. These and other facts represent absurdities and ironies that have their roots in anti-Irish ideology. These things all leak into the poetry: the nature of the realities around me, the silencing of the culture and lan-
guage, the brutality of the colonial statelet and their refusal to assume responsibility for crimes against the Irish people and culture. The Irish and English languages I use, then, are a product of these issues and an attempt to overcome the silencing and psychological fetters of colonialism and its resultant traumas. I like accessible poetry that speaks clearly and doesn’t hide behind “open interpretations” and deliber-
ately constructed duplicity of voice and layers of referencing.

Here in Belfast there is a dominant culture that silences true voices that speak out for justice and equality. This, too, I pray, will change, though once again that process of change is proving painfully slow for a lot of citizens. As for the poet’s role—poets are marginalized to being the “barroom bard,” the “stage Irish,” the pub drunk. My work is a reaction against that silencing and the denigration of the spoken word in Irish and English. The poet, to my way of thinking, is a medium, a translator, who is countering the forces of the so-called media, which has really assumed and appropriated the old role of the bard as a go-between between the ruler and the ruled. The poet’s role is, or should be, a political one where language and the magic of words are used to keep balance, harmony, and cohesion amongst the people and their place. That’s how
it was traditionally, and that is how I view my own work as an Irish poet.

Unfortunately (as is the case here in Belfast) the media has often been a tool of the state and in collusion and cahoots with the government, and when that government is still steeped in colonial structures and mentality, then the media becomes an oppressor too. Nowadays, poetry in Ireland is becoming obsolete or, more succinctly, the pastime of a privileged few. Politicians and speech writers have appropriated the poet’s role in modern “democracies” and use language to talk the masses into, and themselves out of, any given situation. So I see my role as a transmitter—speaking truths that are masked by the media. In that sense, I am an alternative to media-speak.

TBR: How, specifically, do you set out to achieve such lofty goals? Are there particular approaches that you employ in your work to bring about your ideals?

GM: In Irish, Cántaireacht, Pointe Béil, Oístaíteacht Béil all translate as “incantation,” “sitting,” “mouth music.” They are heard in Scotland and Ireland and are often described as complex rhythmic “nonsense” songs that mimic fiddle music or pipe music. The voice and feet become a rhythmic pulse and can be mesmerizing. I try to work this into the poems: the incantation and rhythmic mantra tripping over itself, trying to find its feet. It is a way of breaking the silencing, and liberating the voice and its sensuality. Text poetry, really, is a kind of fascism against the voice, body, eyes, movement, flow, the sensuality and presence of sound and soundings. I love to speak/sing the poems, and it can be a daunting and costly experience, but I’m getting a handle on it. Working out emotions that would otherwise stifle me—anger and rage, for example. These emotions become part of the song, the poem, and are sublimated into artistic messaging. Many people here in the north are deeply enraged at the circumstances in which they are forced to live, but they’re not allowed to express this rage. We are expected to bite the bit, hold our tongue, play the game.

TBR: I want to talk more about the silencing and the reticence and its effect, and to know more about its past and present history in Northern Ireland, and how that history has affected the language there, and what we in the U.S. would think of as First Amendment rights.

GM: One of the main reasons the Irish language was so “successfully” repressed was that older people (parents, mothers, fathers) believed (justifiably) that if you didn’t speak English you wouldn’t survive in the new social dispensations and structures that were introduced by London centuries ago. In other words, Irish was a hindrance if you expected employment, a wage, survival. And what, truly, lies behind all of this suppression of the language? Racism. Despite what the media projects to the rest of the world as “the problem in Northern Ireland” being the war between the Catholics and Protestants, “a sectarian conflict,” it’s really the racial issue between the British identity and the Irish identity that is at the root of the tension. The religious issue is just a symptom of the racial issue and the colonial history and present.

As is, was, and continues to be true in the “colonization” of America and the American Indians, the outlawing of the Irish language was the main tool in the overall silencing of the culture in general. Later, this kind of approach was extended to include the silencing of voices of dissent. The government and moral structures that existed and which caused Bloody Sunday and the Civil Rights movement of the seventies still exist today in many forms and covert ways, and if you live in The Short Strand or North Belfast, absolutely nothing has changed in decades. And the “new structures” and dispensations don’t seem to apply to Irish citizens.

TBR: How does this scenario play out in your own daily life there in Belfast? Would you be willing to talk about this even though it may be dangerous for you?

GM: The Marching Season has just entered full swing here again, and for the month of July the city is in clampdown and an unofficial curfew affects many nationalist areas where people are forcibly locked in their own streets. Even during this time of year I travel all over Belfast by bicycle and refuse to take “safe” routes that avoid “trouble spots.” I learned from an early age that if you are walking or cycling through a loyalist area (which 90 percent of Nationalist people would never do unless they had to, for some reason), it’s best to assume a different identity. In Seamus Heaney’s poem “Whatever You Say,” he writes of names as clues to identity that can give you away. I remember reading this poem with hope as a teenager, the hope that a poet was going to expose the corruption of the statelet here. I think Heaney shied away from that and sadly heeded his own words too well. He has found a niche in the Anglo Irish tradition, which feeds off the Irish language through many celebrated translations into English that don’t even include the original Irish text when published. This disturbs me, as it is part of the process of erasing the language from our literary heritage. Heaney, like Yeats, is a one-way translator and very much a safe poet, an aesthete, who does not question political structures and the politics of language in any deep way. His translations, like Yeats’, fall into the trap of cultural appropriation—satisfying the curiosity of a non-Irish-speaking audience, fulfilling the Anglo Irish poet role that Yeats molded with his false ideas of “Celtic Twilight.” He is a great English-language writer, but I have problems with him being held up as the standard of “Irish” writing while his output is purely monoglot English or translations into English that feed off the Irish-language tradition and thereby disempower the original language through deft translation into the tongue of the “dominant culture.” These are worrying issues for the bilingual writer and the Irish-language writer.

Getting back to the politics in my own writing, if we look at the suicide statistics and demographics for heart disease for Belfast compared with the rest of the country, they look a lot like the statistics of Native American reservations in comparison to the U.S. national average—even worse when you consider areas like West Belfast, which had the highest suicide rate per capita in all of Europe a few years back. On top of this, there are many other problems in our area—such as depression, theft, underage drinking, joy-riding, alcoholism, domes-tic vio-
lence—all added to the sectarian/racist violence and attacks, etc.

To compound matters, the state refuses to deal with these issues. And if by some sort of miracle someone were to “make good” as a writer, musician, or artist, they are expected to move out of the area—feeling lucky to have escaped. To my way of thinking, this is wrong. I believe that it is the artist’s duty to stay and face the music. To confront the corrupt system as a voice within the community—using stories and issues as the material from which he or she draws. To do otherwise is to become nothing more than a cultural and political ostrich or an aesthete.

TBR: Given the situation that exists in Belfast and Northern Ireland, how do you see yourself as a poet in the midst of all this, and how does that play out?

GM: The word file in Irish translates as “seer,” “one with vision,” “one who sees what is hidden.” I believe that this is the role of the poet. By seeing, allowing others to also be able to see; to unveil and expose things; to create cultural epiphanies. What I want people to see through my work are some of the distorted images and untruths that the government-run media here are spoon-feeding my people and the rest of the world. Many people are fascinated with things Irish or Celtic, but they rarely come into contact with real communities and people on the ground. Many people here are hurt, broken, and suffering from ongoing traumatic stress disorder and heavy repression. With the Marching Season back again there are helicopters flying overhead all day and night. It’s more like a war zone in the streets this time of year than a neighborhood. Each member of my community is a victim of years of this kind of thing. No apology has been made and no responsibility has been assumed by the oppressors who created this situation in our country.

The fact that the Irish language exists at all is subversive. To choose to write as one’s vocation is a hard choice to make. To write or perform “political poetry” can literally be dangerous. There are many parts of this city where I cannot walk or go for a pint simply because I am Irish. I would like to raise these issues in public and create dialogue and interaction amongst people and the government. This is part of my role as poet, as I see it. I’m tired of watching my friends slide into self-destructive drinking and self-loathing. It has taken me years to build up my own self-esteem and self-respect, so that now I can take the stage with confidence. I’ve had to overcome years of negative conditioning. Now I feel blessed to have people take an interest in what I do. That puts me in a position of privilege but, at the same time, a position of responsibility. I take this all very seriously. The fruits of my labors to clean up my act are evident in Stream of Tongues.

If anything, as public artists we have a moral duty to challenge the forces that would silence us and threaten our very existence and the use of our language of choice. If the system stinks, then it’s up to us to expose it. We have a duty as poets to speak for others that won’t be heard.

INTERVIEWER: Thomas Rain Crowe is editor of the anthology of Celtic language poets Writing The Wind: A Celtic Resurgence (The New Celtic Poetry) and author of a collection of poems (The Laugharne Poems) written at the Dylan Thomas Boat House in Laugharne, and published in Wales (Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 1997). He is the translator of Drunk on the Wine of the Beloved: 100 Poems of Hafiz (Shambhala, 2001), and lives and writes in the mountains of western North Carolina in the enclave of Tuckaseegee.
Speaking in tongues was a gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit, but it, or any other gift, can be misused. Speaking in tongues was no mark of spirituality, because the Corinthian. Thus Paul sees in this Isaiah prophecy the gift of tongues as a sign to Israel. The words “these people” in Isaiah 28:11, in its context, can refer only to Israel. The abuse of tongues-speaking in Corinth did not arise from the belief in speaking in tongues, but rather in the neglect of the Scriptures which teach its proper use. Prayer Language, Speaking in Tongues, how satan stops Christians from receiving the gift of Tongues. DivineRevelations Spiritlessons. 19:13. Holy Spirit Baptism and Speaking in Tongues: My Testimony: Q&A. ieva f. 19:52. Speaking/Praying in Tongues. Speaking in tongues differs depending on who you talk to. To Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, it is a spiritual language that needs to be translated and that the Holy Spirit can understand. Wikipedia gave a good example of the most common thought on "tongues" in mainstream Christianity: "In the New Testament, the book of Acts recounts how "tongues of fire"