

Irish-Polish Cultural Interrelations in Practice: Interviews with Chris Binchy, Piotr Czerwiński, Dermot Bolger, and Anna Wolf

Joanna Kosmalska

University of Łódź (<jkosmalska@uni.lodz.pl>)

Joanna Rostek

University of Passau (<rostek@uni-passau.de>)

Abstract:

The following interviews with practitioners of Polish-Irish intercultural relations give voice to two Ireland-based Poles and two Irishmen who, in different ways, have reacted to and represented the new Polish presence in Ireland. Chris Binchy and Piotr Czerwiński have focused on the experiences of Polish labour migrants in Dublin in their respective novels *Open-handed* (2008) and *Przebiegum życia* (2009). Dermot Bolger explored, among other things, the historical parallels between Polish and Irish histories of migration in his play *The Townlands of Brazil* (2006). Anna Wolf is the artistic director and producer of the Dublin-based Polish Theatre Ireland (PTI).

Keywords: Dublin, migrant culture, migrant literature, migration from Poland, Polish-Irish intercultural relations

1. *“You Have to Think Outside of the Box”: Interview with Chris Binchy and Piotr Czerwiński*

Chris Binchy (*1970) and Piotr Czerwiński (*1972) seem to have several things in common: they are writers, they live in Dublin, they can look back on an unusual employment history, and they have published four novels each. In addition, they have devoted one of their novels to the depiction of Polish and other East European labour migrants who struggle in the Irish capital during the Celtic-Tiger years.

Binchy worked as an embassy researcher, painter, hotel manager, and even trained as a sushi chef. His first novel, *The Very Man*, appeared in 2003 and was shortlisted for the Hughes & Hughes / Sunday Independent Irish Novel of the Year Award. *People Like Us* was published in 2004 and was followed by *Open-handed* (2008). Focusing on five characters – two Irish and three from Eastern Europe – *Open-handed* explores “the Celtic Tiger’s underbelly of alcohol, drugs, prostitution, corruption and money laundering” (Schrage-Früh 2011, 356). Binchy’s latest novel is *Five Days Apart* (2010).

Czerwiński is a Polish journalist, columnist, and writer. Having worked for a number of Polish newspapers and magazines, he made his literary debut in 2005 with the novel *Pokalenie* (*Desecration*). His second novel, *Przebiegum życia* (a neologism punning on the Latin word *Curriculum Vitae* which could be translated into English as *Conductum Liffae*), appeared in 2009 and was inspired by Czerwiński’s own migration to Ireland in the mid-2000s. Relating the story of two mediocres successful Polish labour migrants, the book has been noted for being written in ‘Ponglish’ – a colloquial pidgin language which mixes Polish with English and features invented words and expressions. Czerwiński’s third novel, *Międzynaród* (2011; *Internation*), is a parody of a dystopia and again takes up the topic of emigration. It envisages a future where Poland is a global superpower and a promised land for English people, who move to Poland as labour migrants. Czerwiński’s most recent novel is *Pigułka wolności* (2012; *The Freedom Pill*).

JR: What is the first question you would expect in an interview on Polish-Irish cultural interrelations?

PC: Let me ask you back: are there any “Polish-Irish cultural relations”? I honestly suspect that any person, on both sides of this barricade (and it is a barricade sometimes, indeed, in a very metaphorical sense), would be astonished to find that there are any. I would be, at any rate. Although I do know that such contacts have been made, but they are rudimental, in my humble opinion, considering the scale of Polish migration to this part of the world.

JR: So what about intellectual contributions to Irish culture made by Poles – can you discern any?

PC: There have been a few cases, yes. Polish actors playing alongside the Irish. Polish painters, Polish musicians. One Polish writer who came up with a novel written in ‘Ponglish’...

CB: I’m aware of a few Polish journalists and the Polish theatre. I also know there are some Polish writers living here. Regarding your initial question, I would expect to be asked to comment on the impact of Polish migration in Ireland and on how, in general terms, Poles are perceived here.

JR: How then would you describe the Polish impact on contemporary Ireland and the stereotypical perception of a Polish migrant?

CB: I think the presence of mostly young Polish people and families is seen as a good thing, particularly in rural areas. There are probably a few more people at Mass. Polish migrants are probably the most familiar to Irish people, and they seem to have slotted in quickly and painlessly. I'm not sure if that's because the people involved are similar to Irish people, or if they're just good at adapting. As for the stereotypical perception, I'd say it's hardworking, reliable, cheaper than Irish alternatives, good-looking (primarily women), easy to get on with. I'm sure there are more negative attitudes out there, maybe in terms of taking work when young Irish people are emigrating or undercutting Irish workers or going on the dole. I haven't come across much of that, though.

PC: I think Poles have had an influence on Ireland in nearly all domains. They (we?) have shaped quite an important part of Ireland's history, and this won't get wiped out, it will stay with Ireland forever. What is more, they (we?) have built quite a large part of Ireland – in a very literal sense. But the stereotypical perception of Polish migrants is the same as the stereotypical perception of a Polish migrant anywhere. This is why they have Polish jokes in Chicago. One crucial rule applies to the entire history of any (e)migration from anywhere to anywhere – it is the salt of the earth that flows in the biggest waves. This is the saddest part. These people often have no idea that they are 'mobile ambassadors' of their countries and cultures, and that they are partly responsible for creating stereotypes. Sometimes they don't even know what a stereotype is. But this is changing now in Ireland. The salt has melted; it has gone to Norway or Belgium, or the Netherlands, so that we now constitute a much more cultured society here. The locals have finally understood that we really do have all those master's degrees and that we did not buy them online. And that we are not drunks and burglars, all of us. We can speak languages. We don't come from a place where polar bears roam the streets, and where there is no electricity. And so on. Sometimes I have the impression that certain people imagine Poland that way. They go to Warsaw then, usually on a stag night or so, they see the skyscrapers, come back, and never say a word more on the issue.

JR: According to the Irish National Census of 2011, Poles form the largest national minority in Ireland. If they disappeared from the country overnight, what would the Irish miss most?

PC: Polish beer – it's almost two per cent stronger than the Irish! I see the Irish buy our beer all the time, whereas I don't remember the last time I saw a Polish person buying Polish beer. But what do I know, I don't go to the off-licence very often. On a serious note though, I think that Ireland would

lose a lot. The Polish community is really contributing to the Irish economy and many other areas. But whether many people would actually *miss* that or not – that’s another question.

CB: Stereotypically, the Irish would miss good service, reliable workers, reasonable rates in the trades. There would be jokes about the gene pool taking a hit, about future generations being a little uglier. Fewer people at Mass, I guess. Lots of personal relationships would be broken. People would be missed.

JR: Both of you have just mentioned economic contributions made by Polish migrants. The challenges of labour migration moreover form an important theme in Open-handed and Przebiegum zycia. Would you say that economic issues are the determining factor in public debates on migration – from Poland and elsewhere?

CB: Primarily, maybe. But if you look at Ireland over the last twenty years or so, a lot of the old stereotypical markers of Irish identity – Catholic, rural, nationalist, anti-British – have changed very quickly. The church has lost a huge amount of esteem and influence, and our relationship with Britain has improved substantially. Major inward migration began in the late 1990s, and the media started using the term ‘new Irish’ to describe those migrant communities well before, I think, the general population thought of them in those terms. In discussions about what it means to be Irish now – and there will be a lot of them leading up to the General Election in 2016 – migration will be a core aspect.

PC: For me, economic concerns are luckily not the determining issue. The Irish have their own history of migration, which is strong enough to make them stay away from mixing local economic problems with the subject of ethnic and national minorities. That’s what I like about them. After all, blaming foreigners for a crisis would ring too many bells, wouldn’t it? The Irish experience of migration is at the core of their attitude to foreigners, which especially nowadays, in times of economic recessions and seeking scapegoats, is extremely precious.

CB: I would agree that to some degree, the Irish can sympathise more with migrants due to their own history of mass emigration. That sympathy, though, is extended more to certain nationalities than to others. Poles, Latvians, and Lithuanians, Western Europeans and Anglophone white people have few issues, I’d say. Filipinos and Chinese seem to be well-regarded. Others get very little leeway – Nigerians (in Ireland most black people are assumed to be Nigerian) and Roma are regarded with deep suspicion. Non-Irish people claiming social welfare entitlements are often seen as taking advantage. “We worked when we went abroad”, is a phrase that I’ve heard some Irish say in this context, which is not 100% accurate.

JR: Open-handed features newcomers from Poland, but also migrants from other countries. What was your motivation, Chris, to write a novel in which migration to Ireland would play a crucial role?

CB: In retrospect, I think the book came out of the atmosphere in Dublin in the mid-2000s, a feeling that everybody was entitled to be loaded (and that you were a moron if you weren't), and that in their pursuit of that goal, people became blinkered to the impact of their behaviour on the people around them and on themselves. As signs began to appear that things were going wrong, that behaviour became more frenzied, and joyless, and disconnected. I had worked in bars and restaurants and hotels, and had seen the beginning of that environment, and how people in the service industry were invisible to many of the customers they served. By the time I left that business, the vast majority of the people working in it were non-Irish.

I had worked in America at a time when there were thousands of young Irish people everywhere you went. You would hear the accent, and see people you knew or recognised or didn't want to see at all. Sometimes it was comforting, and sometimes it felt oppressive. When I was writing the book, I lived in an area where there were a lot of newly-arrived Polish people, and I thought it must feel vaguely the same for them. Living close to your compatriots had potential benefits, but if you were trying to escape something, to start something new for yourself, it had its downside, too.

*JR: Piotr, you were part of this large group of Poles who came to Dublin in the mid-2000s. I would assume that writing *Przebiegum zycia* was fuelled by your personal experience.*

PC: All it took was to see what was going on. You just had to see it to believe it, because it was pure madness. Even though I am, at least theoretically, 'one of them', I must admit that opening the labour market for the Polish was in some respects quite an incautious decision. Whoever made it, did not realize what kind of Pandora's Box they were opening! On a serious note though, if you had seen it, been there, the first thing that would have come to your mind would be the same thought that struck me: "Maaan, you just *must* write a book about this mess...". That's why I didn't have to do any research for my novel. Being here, with my eyes and ears open, was absolutely enough.

*JR: How did you research for *Open-handed*, Chris?*

CB: My wife had a Polish grandfather, and she has extended family over there. One of her cousins came to live in Ireland around the time I was writing this book. I talked to her about her reasons for leaving, why she came to Ireland, what she thought when she arrived, what she liked about it, what

she didn't. I went to Warsaw twice in 2006 and 2007 and met other family members. I went out with them, went to parties and bars and houses. I asked people how they felt about emigrating, what they thought of the people who had left, if they were considering leaving themselves, etc. I tried to find books that were reflective of the contemporary atmosphere in Poland, or how it felt to be Polish. People kept referring me to Witold Gombrowicz – perhaps because he was an emigrant himself – particularly to his *Ferdydurke* (1937/1938) and the diaries. I read them. I think I know what they meant. My book is different though. I read various blogs and websites written by Polish emigrants living here.

JR: It struck me that although in both Open-handed and Przebiegum zycia, Polish characters are depicted as hardworking and motivated, ultimately, most of them do not succeed in forging a happy existence in Ireland. What are the implications of their 'failure'?

CB: Nobody in the book is having a great time, Irish characters included. The Irish property manager Sylvester is starting from a position of comparative wealth and power and influence, and is still totally out of his depth at the end. His partner and chauffeur Dessie sees that he's being exploited by Sylvester, but can't seem to move on. Marcin, the newly-arrived Polish migrant, is too timid and obedient, and gets himself trapped in a crappy job where drinking is practically a necessity. His buddy Artur, by contrast, is not as academically bright as Marcin, but sharper, more perceptive, pushier, takes less shit. He sees his night porter job in a hotel as a cul-de-sac and immediately moves on. He works hard on building sites, his English improves, he gets on well with the gaffers, and starts moving up the ladder.

When I worked abroad, it was hard to predict who would sink and who would swim. It's a very specific skill – being able to do a job in a foreign country, while quickly seeing how the system works, how colleagues relate to each other, managing jokes and the social end of things. I wanted to reflect that. Seeing how well Artur manages things makes Marcin feel even more of a messer. How people get on in the book is more a matter of individual character than nationality.

PC: I wouldn't say that most of the characters in my novel do not succeed. But the fact is that the plot of the book is situated in Dublin in 2007. Back then, if you were a 40-year-old Polish MA degree holder with fifteen years of professional experience, you were simply crossed out as a human being. None of those 23-year-old 'managers' with pierced tongues and virtually no education comparable to yours would have even thought of hiring you. They needed servants, not experts. It has all changed now, but we had to go a long and thorny way to see these changes.

JR: Chris, your novel features migrants from several countries. Did you have scruples about or difficulties with assuming the voice of a different group and ‘speaking for them’?

CB: The Polish characters in the book were characters first, Polish second. The same idea applied to the Romanians and the Czechs. While I tried to get some sort of insight into what motivated Polish people to emigrate to Ireland, how they felt about life here and life there, and what they thought they would do in the future, primarily I wrote the characters as individuals in specific circumstances with universal challenges, dilemmas, desires. I did try to incorporate some initial responses to Dublin that I’d heard from Polish people who’d come here, refer to some of the perceptions of the place that seemed to be common. But I did not in any way want to talk for the Polish population of Ireland.

In more practical terms, I tried to keep the language of the non-Irish characters neutral when they were thinking or talking to each other, to untether it from any particular type of English. One of the editors who worked on *Open-handed* – who was English herself – pointed out a couple of occasions where she thought the Polish characters began to sound Irish in their interior lives, using phrases or expressions that I didn’t know were not in general use. I thought it was slightly funny that as the book went on, the Polish people began to pick up Irish accents, but I cut it back anyway.

JR: Piotr, let us shed some light on your personal history of migration to Ireland. Can you tell us something about your decision to leave Poland and come to Dublin in the mid-2000s?

PC: Maybe I should start by stating that I am not a migrant – I am an ‘expat’. That is how the English describe themselves when they settle down abroad, to differentiate themselves from cheap labour folk from Eastern Europe, don’t they? Well, in that case, I will not give them the satisfaction of being inferior to them. I am an expat, too!

Regarding my moving to Ireland, I guess that my history is slightly different from that of a vast majority of other Poles who came here. First of all, I didn’t *have* to go, I *wanted* to. I am probably the only Pole who brought his own savings to Ireland. I had just given up a career in journalism; after twelve years in the mass media I was tired and burnt out. Back then, in 2005/2006, the crisis in the mass media job market was just beginning: short term contracts, self-employment, reductions, pay cuts – all that suddenly became popular in what was once an élite group, at least employment-wise. I escaped from that carousel shortly before it started running too fast. I had had no permanent job for about two years, although I had very well-paid casual ones, so I had no existential problems. I had moreover just taken up serious writing – the one with a capital “W”. My debut novel, *Pokalanie* (2005), about the generation of Poles born in the 1970s, had just hit the bookstores and was quite a success. I had suddenly become a public person, albeit tem-

porarily and only on a local scale. I didn't enjoy that, incidentally. On the whole, I wanted fresh air, a new life. Anything new, as far away as possible from the world I had been living in for so many years. Far away from the rat race – and believe me, they call it a rat race for a reason.

English was the only foreign language I could speak relatively well without any sense of shame, so the choice was obvious when they opened the job market in Western Europe for Eastern Europeans. England was a no-go area at that time. The terrorist attacks on the London tube had just occurred. There was double taxation, and the locals' attitude to Poles left a lot to be desired (as it does to this day, to be honest). Ireland seemed different, so I came to Ireland. I put on my best suit, my best coat, and carried an umbrella with a wooden handle. You see, my story is a bit different. I even spent all my Polish savings here...

JR: What was your initial experience of living in Ireland?

PC: Upon arrival, I realised that I was automatically put into a particular category, just because of the colour of my passport. I told people I was Polish and they laughed. I told them I was a writer and they pissed their pants laughing. It was interesting. Happens to me to this day, every now and then. I don't have a Polish accent; some say I sound like "a South African who spent too much time in America". For many Irish, I was a 'Polack', one of those who came here to do everything the Irish didn't feel like doing. I could feel it every day, on every corner. I hadn't taken that into consideration, it was very humiliating. I have to admit that I didn't like that Ireland – it's hard to like someone when you have to kneel before them. But I like the Ireland that we have now. It's poorer, but it's finally Irish, the way I had always imagined it. People are normal again. Now they are the Irish I always wanted to meet and live among. It's good, despite the price Ireland had to pay to wake up from the prosperity craze. But again, for me, that wasn't Ireland back then – that was a bad dream, in a way.

JR: If you were Irish...

PC: ... I would easily get a decent job. I would quickly get promoted. Seriously. No joke here. I don't refer to any particular situation. It's just a general rule and there is no sense denying that. Good for them, at least they respect themselves. I wish Poles had such an attitude in Poland.

JR: What knowledge of Ireland did you have before it opened up its labour market to new EU members in 2004?

PC: Theoretical, to put it straight. Plus, of course, everything that came in the media during the 1980s, about the Troubles etc. But that's a different story. I am a huge fan of Robert Emmet, he reminds me of our Polish 'errant knights'. It is funny sometimes, because I often get to speak to Irish people and

when I tell them about my interest in Robert Emmet's story, they just smile at me bluntly, because they have no clue who Emmet was. Sometimes I make jokes and tell them it was a missing member of U2, who made it in the property business and fled to the States when it collapsed. People love that story.

JR: Your mentioning of Robert Emmet in connection with the Polish struggle for independence in the nineteenth century raises the question of the role of national history for both countries.

PC: Our histories are similar. We both had oppressive neighbours whom we struggled with for centuries. We both had poverty, we had pride, a strong will, the skill to survive and persist...

JR: What about religion?

PC: ... and we had religion.

CB: I would agree that superficially there are certain overlaps in the two countries' histories, having long, troubled relationships with invading neighbours. But Ireland's history has been dominated by Britain for a thousand years – nobody else has really been involved. We're out on the periphery. Poland's situation seems much more complex, having been in all ways at the centre of Europe, a lot starker and more brutal, buffeted on all sides by countries of varying degrees of hostility.

There has been bitterness, intense violence, mistrust and misunderstanding in the relationship between Ireland and Britain, but also a lot of affection, familiarity, shared interest, common understanding and so on. People have hopped back and forth across the Irish Sea for hundreds of years, sometimes regarding the two places as one country, sometimes not. Practically everybody in Ireland has relatives living in Britain, and did even when things were bad. Irish identity was so firmly rooted in opposition to the British 'other' that it's not entirely clear how we see ourselves now that issues between the two countries are mostly resolved.

Regarding the importance of Catholicism, it was a core part of Irish nationalist identity, one of the markers that made us different to the British, at the core of people's lives, whether they wanted it or not. It's hard to convey how central it was to Irish life (especially in rural areas), or how quickly the church went from this absolutely dominant position of influence to one of absolute decline. This was brought about most significantly by a long history of widespread child abuse and cover-ups that began to emerge in the 1990s and has kept emerging. It was hard for people to take moral guidance from an institution whose own appalling behaviour was repeatedly exposed. At the same time, there was a generation of young people who emigrated, but then – maybe for the first time in Irish history – came back as the economy began to do well. For a

lot of them, I think, their religious practice would have faded away while abroad, and they didn't resume it when they came home. Among people I know, friends and family, there are only a couple who would go to Mass on a regular basis.

At the same time, the church is still heavily involved in education (over 90% of primary schools are run by Catholic boards) and would be seen as the default setting for weddings and funerals. People who are not believers themselves will still get their children christened just because it'll keep older family members happy, will facilitate school attendance, etc. Catholicism is ubiquitous in Irish life and there doesn't seem to be any great urgency to change that, despite the fact that very significant numbers of people don't practice it and would profess horror at the Church's behaviour over the last forty years.

JR: Would you say that the Irish and Poles share a common sense of humour?

PC: Naah. Poles have no sense of humour. Just joking!

CB: I don't know enough about Polish humour to be able to comment. I think there's maybe an overlap in terms of dryness, a darkness, something understated and black. The humour in the Polish books I've read reminded me of certain Irish authors – Flann O'Brien, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett. In my limited personal experience, I've found it easy to get on with Polish people, to have enjoyable and lively conversations, and that seems to be common enough. That's always been in English, though. I'm sure there's plenty I'm missing.

JR: Having talked about the similarities between the two countries as regards history, religion, and humour, maybe we can take a brief look at the differences – from a migrant's view. Piotr, what do you appreciate most about your life in Ireland and what do you miss most about Poland?

PC: I enjoy the peace and quiet over here. Even the capital is so rural. Compared to Warsaw, I feel as if I lived in a bubble, sealed and safe. Perfect solitude, a perfect state for a writer.

The Poland I miss is 'my' Poland of the 1990s; it's a feeling of having lost something that I often experience in moments of weakness. I no longer have any ambitions when it comes to my so-called professional career, but I care about my writing, the process of creation, I demand more and more from myself. But sometimes the practical adult wakes up in me, and tells me that I was an idiot to have given up everything I had back there. I have a day job here in Ireland which has nothing to do with my profession as a journalist or writer. I have lost contact with Poland. I have no Poland any more. The one I had is only in my brain. It no longer exists in the real world.

JR: What was your most poignant experience in terms of Irish-Polish (inter-cultural) relations?

PC: I think there has never been a moment which I could describe as poignant in any sense, regarding any field. I wish there has been one, though! In general, I wish I had more in common with the Irish. I don't know any Irish writers, artists, poets, or musicians. I am afraid I will never know them, because I am just a Polack. Here we go again: I am one of those who came here to do everything they didn't feel like doing. In the bloody best suit and coat. And the stupid umbrella...

JR: Does living in a foreign language affect you?

PC: Frankly, it doesn't affect me at all, I find it quite a natural state. I actually think I spoke this language much better before I left Poland. As a journalist, I used English vocabulary that was much more complicated. Now I just repeat standard phrases. Had I not started reading my favourite English-language classics in the original, I would have ended up pretty badly I think. I wonder sometimes why hardly anybody among the so-called native speakers has at least a vague idea of how to use the apostrophe. And if I ever meet a local who knows the difference between 'their', 'there' and 'they're' in writing, I will buy him a crate of beer. I mean it!

JR: What are your personal views of the Polish community in Ireland?

PC: It's a huge population, like a relatively large town. You have all kinds of people in a relatively large town, from priests to hookers. I think this explains it all. In general, I am against nationalities. I always say that there are no nationalities, there are only personalities. Nationalities are an antiquated invention. There are simply good people who happened to have come over here from Poland, or wherever else. There are also bad people, stupid people, and wise ones. And so on.

CB: As mentioned before, I think Poles have managed to fit into Irish society with no great difficulty. They may have had an advantage by being mostly Catholic and white and from a country with a vaguely similar history. From what I see, most Polish people seem to manage the superficial aspects of Irish public interaction – the smiling, informality, jokiness, laid-backness, slagging, etc. – pretty well.

I'm not sure that this necessarily means that Polish people are integrated, though. Ireland has no real history of immigration, in the last 400 years at least, and there's no easy route for people from outside to become quickly and deeply absorbed into the community. A lot of Irish people, I think, have friends they've known forever and then a second division of people they know and like but are not especially close to. It can be hard to get beyond that barrier. As Polish people choose to stay here, become part of the scene, get married, have children, etc., that's more likely to happen. Also, younger Irish people seem more open to me,

more used to dealing with people from different cultures. The barriers may not be as high for them.

JR: This interview with an Irishman and a Pole living in Ireland is conducted by a Pole living in Germany, and will be published in an Italian journal dedicated to Irish literature and culture. Let us thus conclude on a European note: do you think that migration from Poland and other countries to Ireland is affecting Polish and Irish perceptions of Europe?

CB: Over the last ten years I suppose the Irish perception of Europe expanded about 500 miles to the east. A lot of people came here from countries that were very unfamiliar to most of the Irish population, and in time Ryanair started flying to those places, and Irish people went to them. They became familiar. That's about it.

PC: I doubt anyone gives Europe a thought. 'Europe' for many is a term which stands for money donations. For some it brings back good memories, for some it must sound like a curse. It depends. As regards Polish-Irish cultural interrelations in particular, if we could only skip the stereotypes and see one another as individuals with individual values, our life on this island would be much more pleasant. As for culture, I deeply hope that all it takes is to believe that Poles in Ireland may stand for more than just the user-friendly cheap workforce, 'the hardworking folk', and all that. These descriptions are often accurate, but they don't tell you much about us. You have to think outside of the box, my Irish friends. We all have to. Even if this requires battling complexes – be it of superiority or inferiority.

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