Fundamental and moot literary issues always come to our minds when one approaches the topic “a book of essays”. Despite all the tradition of extraordinary essayists – from Montaigne to Adorno, from Bacon to Borges and Camus, from Baudelaire to Cotzee, from Shelley to Yourcenar, from Emerson to Epstein, from Shaw to Sontag – the status of the essay form is still perpetually questioned and, alas, essays, or “creative non-fiction”, are often taken as a minor literary expression. The hierarchy of literary genres – poetry, drama, and fiction – and the position of the essay among these genres will always be an endless debate; for the moment being, this debate would evade the focus of this review: to comment on the special qualities of the recently released *Words of the Grey Wind – Family and Epiphany in Ulster* by the Irish writer Chris Arthur (Belfast, 1955), a book of essays.

Printed in Belfast by Blackstaff Press, with the assistance of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, this anthology somehow (re)introduces an Irish writer to the Irish reading public. The first four essay books written by Arthur were published in the USA, thus being the author not so much known in his own country. The fact that Arthur has been living outside Ireland, first in Scotland and, next, in Wales (he has been teaching at Lampeter since 1989), may have also contributed to this “invisibility” in Ireland. But, if one considers that – and here let’s think of reknown writers as James Joyce and Gertrude Stein – the exile is one of the most effective ways an artist may have to exert a critical view on his/her own culture, his/her own production. Arthur’s case is not unusual, and would not justify a lack of interest for his work in Ireland. Hopefully the release of this new book may lead critics and readers to the discovery of Arthur’s exceptional talent as essayist.

With an insightful Foreword by John Wilson Foster, *Words of the Grey Wind* is a collection of thirteen essays chronologically disposed according to the dates of their publication: “Kingfishers”, “Ferrule”, “Meditation on the Pelvis of an Unknown animal”, and “Linen” belong to the book *Irish Nocturnes* (United States: The Davies Group, 1999); “A Tinchel Round my Father”, “Table Manners” and “Train Sounds” are from *Irish Willow* (United States: The Davies Group, 2002); “Witness”, “Miracles” and “Swan Song” are from *Irish Haiku* (United States: The Davies Group, 2005); the other three essays of the anthology, “Mistletoe”, “Room, Empty” and “Waxwings” are new. Differently from the collections of essays that Arthur has published before, which had drawings illustrating the texts, this one brings some photographs of his family members adding a nostalgic flavour to the volume.
Chris Arthur is a consummate philosopher and an erudite who draws freely from religion, philosophy, biology, physics, astronomy, chemistry and history, and his literature profits very much from his solid background. His mastering regarding the literary complexities of the essay form surfaces in his intelligent and perceptive use of sources that are, at the same time, varied and deep; Arthur knows how to balance depth and fluidity in the text, and this makes \textit{the} quality in essays. In his \textit{Words}, he explores many inspiring themes, such as family and blood-obligation, heritage and the sense of belonging, tradition and memory, the precariousness and mystery of existence, Christianity and religiousness; it is worth noting that in the whole book a tone imparted by the Buddhist thought seems to prevail and it reverberates in motifs such as the interdependence of all beings, that evocation of the sense of wonder at the universe, and the reverence for nature. Reinforcing the idea presented in the subtitle, right in the epigraph for the book one reads that intuition and epiphanies, as “assaults of the Ineffable”, are central to the collection and happen to guide us into the apprehension of the “true nature” of things around us.

A heedful consideration and then a reconciling of binaries mark Arthur’s essays: the text departs from the immediate to reach the immense and universal, encompassing the commonplace and the miraculous, the physical and the spiritual, the accidental and the destined. In Arthur’s book everything is interconnected and ruled by a profound awareness of change and of the impermanence of life. The themes and the stages of argument in the essays create a metaphysical net, and appear as the combination of the voices in a fugue. The first essay in the collection, “Kingfishers”, for instance, starts with the observation of the bird which appears in the title:

To anyone with an eye for birds, kingfishers are memorable. Not only because the brightness of their colours sets them apart from all other native species (the green woodpecker is their only serious rival), but also because, at least in an Irish setting, sightings are uncommon. Indeed even those with no ornithological leanings may find the kingfisher an exception to their normal indifference towards birds. (5)

Next, the essay moves to a visit to an Asylum in Armagh, and then to the specific recount of Auntie Carrie’s life at the Asylum; it also discusses, in the sequence, the question of causation and unpredictability, a bomb explosion in Lisburn (a town close to Belfast) and even other topics. Like a coda, brilliantly amalgamating all the apparently disparate subject matters, the text surprises us with the return to kingfishers and, almost by its end, the essay presents the “impossible question”:

... is our life punctuated by a flash of kingfisher colour as something transcendent impinges on us, or are we imprisoned in the world we see, earthbound and clumsy,
shackled immovably to the chains of our finitude? Is there, behind the stink of fish in a dark hole in the earth, some hope of bright colour beyond it? (23)

In “Meditation on the pelvis of an unknown animal” the reader’s trajectory is wide and varied for he/she is taken from the initial discussion about owl pellets to ruminations on fossils and bones, following Georgia O’Keefe’s pelvis paintings, the story of Sirima, a wealthy prostitute in India at the time of the Buddha, and then to reflections on karma and rebirth. All that leads to exquisite statements:

It’s rare now for most of us to encounter the epiphany of bones. Cities shield from the sight of their citizens nearly all of the elemental organic processes – birth, illness, death, decay. Despite television’s endless fare of disaster and violence, our finitude has been so hushed up, so cosmeticised, that it can sometimes almost be forgotten. Which – beyond its immediate aesthetic appeal – is why I keep the pelvis of a large unknown animal in my living space, an un-ignoreable memento mori, and why I hang Georgia O’Keefe’s paintings on my walls. They help remind me of that sometimes savage sense of the numinous which pervades so much of life’s substance and, as such, provide useful touchstones against which to assess religious ideas. Bones are an excellent acid test for the adequacy of any worldview. They provide an earthing ballast which prevents thought from soaring off into those far reaches of the intellectual stratosphere beloved by theologians, where the oxygen of intelligibility becomes perilously thin. (41-42)

Taking memories, unique incidents or particular objects to start his essays, Arthur proceeds in his poetic desquamating process; throughout the book this process, often transmuting the mundane into the sacred, is also reinforced by the use of a keen analytical thought and of a very poetical language, thus transforming seemingly common things – from a ferrule to a cup of tea – into experiences charged with symbolism and philosophical contents. In “Miracles”, one of the best essays of the collection, the observance of an otolith gives rise to a precious remark on the act of writing:

It the act of holding it and writing this, I feel as if I’m trying to act as some kind of lightning conductor, providing a conduit so that the charge of meaning carried mutely in the otolith (let’s continue to call it that for now) can find safe passage and be earthed through words. The trail of sentences, written first in black ink (before their electronic marshalling into print), is like a slow unpacking of its cargo, an attempt to bleed out significance and sense from the tiny incisions that are all we can puncture in the tough armour of the baffling phenomena around us. It is, I know, just a scratching at the surface, a peeling off of only the thinnest, most obvious layer, a thin trickle from a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir. With something as densely concentrated as this, I could write for all my life, trail out skeins of words, and still not discharge more than a fraction of the otoloth’s dark, compact voltage. It is this laden plenitude, the potency of meaning so
tightly compressed within it, which gives this object so much of its allure.
(163)

With his unique acuteness, and as a child who saw the onset of the Troubles, in “Witness” Arthur approaches the cruelty and impact of the “religious warfare” and also the extinction of morality; in the essay “Swan Song”, with a very frank tone, he ponders on his stillborn son and about grief and human loss; in “Room, Empty” he analyses our sense of presence and, principally, our understanding of “voidness”; this text stirs our attentiveness not to confuse metaphysical and mundane senses of emptiness or, as the essay reads:

I would argue that the metaphysical is so tightly embedded in what we take to be the mundane, that the philosophical is so close-threaded all through the everyday, that it is impossible to separate them. Unless we address the intimacy of such interconnection, we risk marooning our reflections in realms of artificial abstraction that are irrelevant to the hard realities our lives must negotiate.
(210)

*Words of the Grey Wind* spots the importance of paying attention to the minutiae, the careful observation of all things and events – shapes, forms, faces, birds, ideas, pictures. In this book, Arthur puts into practice the Buddhist principle of the dense interconnection of all beings: if the essays depart from minimal details and often display Irish scenes, the reader is led to investigations of a transcendental magnitude through which the locality proves to be universal. Exploring contrasting thoughts and experiences, and finally reading them as unities in the circular frame, the essays convey the idea of the intermingling of everything. The publication of Arthur’s new collection of essays in Ireland is to be very much praised – through a superb poetical use of the English language, very important messages are being delivered in this book. Now many more readers will be closer to the discovery of one of Ireland’s best essayists of our present times.