A black and white photograph of a rugged coastline. In the foreground, there are large, jagged, rocky cliffs with various textures and shades of grey. The middle ground shows a wide expanse of ocean with gentle waves. The background is filled with a dramatic sky filled with heavy, dark clouds, creating a moody and atmospheric scene.

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READING IRELAND

THE LITTLE MAGAZINE

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Reading Ireland is published bi-annually and is available to subscribers at a cost of \$40 for four issues. The aim of the magazine is to provide in-depth analysis of Irish Literature, past and present, along with opening a window onto the best of contemporary Irish poetry, prose, drama and culture.

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readingireland.net

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1

Cover image courtesy of Fergus Mullen. Clogherhead, County Louth.

The lapetus suture is a large geological fault that marks the collision zone where the north of Ireland and Scotland collided with southern Ireland, England and Wales. Up until then, the vast lapetus ocean had existed between them over a period of about 200 million years. It gradually closed until collision was complete by about 400 million years ago. For more information visit www.geolsoc.org.uk

Introduction



Adrienne Leavy, Eugene McCabe and Margot McCabe. October 2018.
Photograph copyright Bobbie Hanvey.

Welcome to the 2018 winter issue of *Reading Ireland*, which focuses on writers from the Province of Ulster. The island of Ireland has historically been divided into four Provinces – Ulster, Munster, Connaught and Leinster. The geographic Province of Ulster includes the six counties of Northern Ireland along with three counties in Southern Ireland, Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan, and it is the literature of these nine counties that we celebrate in this issue.

We open with a tribute to the late Dr. Maurice Hayes, a remarkable public figure and author who passed away on December 23, 2017, in his hometown of Downpatrick in County Down. A statement released by the Development and Alumni Relations Office of Queen's University summed up Dr. Hayes's legacy thus: "Few public figures in the last 100 years have made such a wide-ranging contribution to local government, health, politics (in both Northern Ireland and the Republic), sport, culture and Queen's University governance, as alumnus and honorary graduate, Dr. Maurice Hayes."

2

Our coverage of Dr. Hayes's remarkable life includes a discussion with his widow Joan Hayes, and a series of intimate portraits by his friend and renowned photographer, Bobbie Hanvey.

Since the publication of his first collection, *A Store of Candles* (1977), Frank Ormsby has been a central figure in Northern Irish poetry, crafting a lyrical body of work which grows richer and more diverse with every collection he publishes. Over the course of his career Ormsby has invested much of his imaginative life in his native Fermanagh, and his creative affinity to Patrick Kavanagh is as strong as that of Seamus Heaney's, though both poets draw on Kavanagh's example in different ways. With his most recent collection, *The Darkness of Snow*, Ormsby extends his formidable range and consolidates his reputation as one of Ireland's finest lyric poets. We are delighted to also include an in-depth interview with the poet and to publish four poems from his next collection, *The Rain Barrel*, which will be published in October 2019.

In his introduction to Michael Longley's work in *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry*, Wes Davis writes that over the course of his long career Longley had "built a reputation for himself as the master craftsman of Ulster poetry," noting that the poet had "injected a strong dose of classicism into Irish poetry, while at the same time rooting his own work firmly in the landscape of the island's rural west."¹ Fran Brearton has written extensively on Longley's poetry and here she provides an in-depth review and analysis of the poet's most recent collection, *Angel Hill*. Along with Brearton's essay we are delighted to include Longley's artful sonnet, "Ceasefire." First published in 1994, and drawing on Homer's epic, *The Iliad*, the poem has been read by many critics as a sophisticated commentary on the important Republican and Loyalist ceasefires which occurred in Northern Ireland during 1994.

Paul Muldoon is the youngest member of a group of Northern poets including Heaney, Longley and Derek Mahon which gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s. Poet Mary O’ Malley revisits two of Muldoon’s early collections, *Meeting the British* (1987), and *Madoc: A Mystery* (1990), and discusses Muldoon’s layered use of conceit, allusion and wit in these volumes. O’Malley celebrates Muldoon’s ability to craft a poetics that is both clever and irreverent while simultaneously grounding it in deeply serious historical, personal and philosophical concerns.

Several years ago Derek Mahon announced he had stopped writing poems, choosing instead to concentrate on prose. Thereafter, he published two prose volumes, *Red Sails* (2014) and *Olympia and the Internet* (2017), which Mahon scholar Hugh Haughton characterizes as “poems by other means.” The complicated sensibility of Mahon is in full evidence in his return to poetry this year with a new collection, *Against the Clock* (2018). In his detailed review of the volume Haughton concludes that these poems “confirm Mahon as an indispensable ecological voice and a survivor poet who, like Auden, continues to respond to the challenges of cultural change, political crisis, and global threat in the present.”

The youngest winner of the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award, winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize for her fifth collection, *Parallax* (2003), and the Forward Prize for Poetry for her sixth collection, *On Balance* (2017), Sinéad Morrissey has established herself as one of the foremost poets of her generation. Notwithstanding the critical praise her work attracts, there is still relatively little scholarly analysis available on her poetry. *Reading Ireland* is delighted to include in this issue Brian Caraher’s detailed study of Morrissey’s corpus, one that should be a touchstone for future scholars of the poet’s work. A former colleague of Morrissey’s at Queen’s University Belfast, Caraher traces the critical reception of her poetry along with the significant moments and turns in Morrissey’s developing poetic trajectory, from her first volume, *There was Fire in Vancouver* (1996), to the most recent collection, *On Balance* (2017).

Belfast-born Medbh McGuckian is another unique voice in Irish poetry, producing a distinctive body of work that has drawn sustained critical praise and provoked comparisons to the work of Emily Dickinson, John Ashberry and Rainer Maria Rilke among others. Her complex representations of alternative forms of feminine sexuality often serve as oblique commentary on the political discourse of Northern Ireland. Erin Mitchell examines the ways in which McGuckian’s poetic speakers use language and imagery to express states of solitude, which can be simultaneously longed for and unwanted, often transforming into loneliness and grief. As Mitchell argues, in many of the poet’s elegies the boundaries between the self and the “Other” further exacerbates the sense of isolation which is a defining characteristic of much of McGuckian’s work, adding a deliberate sense of indeterminacy to her poetry.

Ailbhe McDaid’s essay on Derry born poet Colette Bryce considers how Bryce aesthetically explores issues of memory and migration which in turn evoke questions of personal, national and social identity. Although Bryce has lived outside Northern Ireland for most of her adult life, McDaid argues that there is “little doubt about the significance of Bryce’s relationship with her native city of Derry.” Her essay discusses “Bryce’s tensions of appearing and disappearing in her poetry of Derry” and how this creative stressor influences her work.

Orla Fay reviews *The Radio*, the fourth and most recent collection of another Derry-born poet, Leontia Flynn. Describing her as a “pioneer poet,” Fay illustrates how with this new collection Flynn brings “an awareness of the age we live in” as she incorporates “phrases which have never been used in poetry” but are now part of our modern lexicon. A fellow poet, Fay is attuned to the “little nuances in language that delight Flynn” and her review gives this collection the attention it deserves.

Critically acclaimed playwright, novelist and short story writer Eugene McCabe is probably the least prolific writer of the authors featured in this issue of *Reading Ireland*. To the charge that McCabe has not written enough over the course of his long career, the rebuttal would be that everything he has written is tremendous. His one novel, the powerful *Death & Nightingales*, has been described by John Banville as “one of the masterpieces of late 20th century Irish writing.” It was recently adapted for the screen and broadcast in November 2018 as a three-part mini-series by the BBC and RTE. Let’s hope PBS picks it up for an American audience. McCabe’s superb short stories rival those of Joyce’s *Dubliners* in their ability to lodge in one’s consciousness and not leave. *Tales from the Poorhouse*, his series of four monologues set in the period of the Great Famine, transcend the boundaries of fiction in their harrowing account of this devastating Irish tragedy. We are very privileged to include an interview with this gifted author in *Reading Ireland*.

The American writer Tara Ison was a student of the late Brian Moore when he was a professor of creative writing at UCLA. Ison recalls the impact that Moore’s masterpiece, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, had on her when she first read it as a student: “As a reader I cannot remember when reading has felt so immediate and vital, so intimate.” Here, Ison analyzes *Judith Hearne*, which she describes as “a master class in craft,” and which she now regularly teaches to her own creative writing students. In tandem with Ison’s essay *Reading Ireland* is proud to share an until recently unpublished interview with Moore, which was conducted by Tony Kilgallin at Moore’s house on Easter Sunday 1973. The story of this long-buried interview is one worthy of the plot of one of Moore’s novels, and we are grateful to Kilgallin, Moore’s nephew Brian Moore and Martin Doyle, the literary editor of the *Irish Times*, for making this wonderful interview available to *Reading Ireland* for publication in its Ulster issue.²

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Over the course of his forty-year career, the critically acclaimed Belfast born author Bernard MacLaverty has published five novels and five original short-story collections. With his careful, nuanced prose, MacLaverty is regarded as a master storyteller in the vein of John McGahern and William Trevor. Richard Rankin Russell, who has written in detail about MacLaverty’s fiction, reviews MacLaverty’s most recent novel, *Midwinter Break* (2017). Describing the novel as “an exquisite portrayal of an older couple’s relationship *in extremis* over the course of their midwinter’s break in Amsterdam,” Russell identifies an affinity between MacLaverty and Joyce, especially in regard to Joyce’s most famous story, “The Dead.” Russell also reads a debt to Samuel Beckett in MacLaverty’s work, arguing that the former’s “minimalist affirmations have colored MacLaverty’s fiction before.” This in-depth review concludes with Russell’s affirmation of his earlier assessment of MacLaverty’s short fiction and novels wherein he writes, “The conflict between imprisonment and love remains his favorite dialectic.”

The late Benedict Kiely is another writer who does not get enough contemporary critical attention. Kiely, who spent much of his life in Dublin, was born in Omagh, County Tyrone. His corpus includes both novels and short stories, and he worked for many years as a broadcaster and journalist. We are delighted to include a tribute to Kiely by his friend, the American poet Gibbons Ruark, who first met Kiely when he was a visiting professor of creative writing at the University of Delaware where Ruark was teaching.

Yvonne Watterson reviews two books about music in Northern Ireland that were published in 2018: Stuart Bailie’s *Trouble Songs* and *In Another World: Van Morrison & Belfast* by the poet Gerald Dawe. Watterson was invited to speak at the Irish literary festival in Los Gatos,

California, last fall where she interviewed fellow conference participants Bailie and Dawe. Her conversations with both authors informs her reviews which expertly evoke the music scene of Belfast at a particular moment in time. Two poems by Dawe complete this section.

Acclaimed Irish photographer Bobbie Hanvey and his son, singer-songwriter and poet Steafán Hanvey, recently launched *Reconstructions: The Troubles in Photographs and Words*, a book-length collaboration containing many of Hanvey's most iconic photographs with accompanying lyric prose poems and commentary by Steafán. A testament to the strength and resilience of ordinary people living through violent times, *Reconstructions* acts as a timely reminder of just how futile and unnecessary sectarian conflict really is. In *Reconstructions*, one artist talks to and reinforces the work of the other is a truly unique aesthetic creation.

Last October Anna Burns' *Milkman* won the 2018 Mann Booker Prize, which makes her the first winner from Northern Ireland in the prize's history. Burns grew up in the Ardoyne area of Belfast, and her remarkable novel, which is set in the sectarian atmosphere of the 1970s, is a profound story of political and sexual oppression. For Burns, language can be a poisoned chalice, and in her novel she deliberately refrains from directly naming her protagonist or any of the other characters. As one critic has remarked, this "formal strangeness proceeds naturally from the strangeness of the story it tells and the place in which it is set."³ Belfast journalist and writer Malachi O' Doherty interviewed Burns shortly after the Man Booker decision was announced and we are delighted to include in *Reading Ireland* his thoughtful record of their conversation. We also have a spotlight on another Ardoyne writer, playwright Paul McVeigh, whose award-winning debut novel, *The Good Son*, expertly explores the effects of violence and oppression on the life of a community from the perspective of a young boy.

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Byddi Lee reviews the English language version of *Laoch na Laochra: Scéal Chúchulainn*, Réamonn Ó Ciaráin's modern Ulster Irish language version of the stories from the Ulster Cycle of the mythological hero, Cúchulainn. In *Cúchulainn: Ulster's Greatest Hero*, the same artistic collaboration between Ó Ciaráin and the artist Dara Vallely that was so impressive in the original Irish language edition is on display, with Vallely's paintings revealing a new vitality and depth to these stories. As a native of Armagh, one aspect of the book that stands out for Lee is Ó Ciaráin's fidelity to the topography of the stories recounted. She writes, "I picture these characters existing here, in this place I call home. It reinforces my sense of living in a historically important place." Another aspect of the book she finds noteworthy is the prominence of powerful and influential women to whom Ó Ciaráin gives equal weight, especially his treatment of the characters of Eimhear, Queen Méabh, Aoife, and her nemesis Scáthach, who trained Cúchulainn in his battle skills in Scotland.

Patrick Kavanagh is arguably Monaghan's most famous son, and while his work did not receive the recognition it deserved during his lifetime, it has influenced a subsequent generation of poets including Heaney, Longley and Ormsby. The Patrick Kavanagh Rural & Literary Resource Center, located in the village of Inniskeen, County Monaghan, is an essential stop for scholars of Kavanagh's work. To make an appointment to visit the center or for general queries please email the center at infoatpkc@eircom.net. Continuing our focus on Kavanagh, we include a detailed introduction to the poet's work and the different stages of his career by Úna Agnew, one of the leading authorities on Kavanagh.

Evidence that Kavanagh continues to inspire a younger generation of poets can be seen in the work of the Irish language poet, Caitríona Ní Chléirchín, another Monaghan-born poet who is involved in a project of translating some of Kavanagh's work into Irish. We are delighted to include in this issue her translation "I gCuimhne ar mo Mháthair," a Gaelic

language version of Kavanagh's beloved poem, "In Memory of my Mother." We also include a new poem by Ní Chléirchín, "Banríon an Uaignis/ The Queen of Loneliness," which is based on a folklore story from the Rannafast area in the Donegal Gaeltacht, with an English translation by fellow poet Peter Fallon.

Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney has been the subject of a terrific essay by Yvonne Watterson, "Bringing it all back home with Seamus Heaney," in a previous issue of *Reading Ireland*. Watterson's moving tribute to Heaney, which I would encourage subscribers to read, was subsequently reprinted in the *Irish Times* and can be accessed at <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/bringing-it-all-back-home-with-seamus-heaney-1.2536956> Featured in this issue is a spotlight on the Seamus Heaney Homeplace. For lovers of Heaney's work the HomePlace is an essential visit, and an excellent resource for students and scholars of Heaney's work. We would also encourage readers to visit the recently opened "Listen Now Again" exhibit, located for the next three years in the Bank of Ireland on College Green, Dublin. Curated by Professor Geraldine Higgins of Emory University, this exhibit consists of approximately 100 items plus audio readings by the poet, along with video footage charting Heaney's revisions of some of his best-loved poems.

Unfortunately, due to space considerations, we are unable to cover every notable writer from the Province of Ulster in this issue of *Reading Ireland*. However, we would encourage readers to seek out the work of Ulster writers such as poets Louis MacNeice, John Hewitt, Padraic Fiacc, Francis Harvey, John Montague, Seamus Deane, Ciaran Carson, Tom Paulin and Cathal Ó Searcaigh, as well as playwrights Stewart Parker, Tom McIntyre and Moya Cannon. These writers will be covered in future issues of *Reading Ireland*. The late Brian Friel, arguably the most successful dramatist to emerge from the Province of Ulster, is likewise not covered in this issue. The reason for this omission is that Friel's work was the subject of a lengthy critical essay in a previous drama issue of *Reading Ireland* and he will be featured again in our second drama issue forthcoming next year.

Finally, another resource for readers interested in the topic of this issue is Patricia Craig's major study, *The Ulster Anthology* Belfast: Blackstaff Press, (2006), which charts the history, politics and culture of the historic nine counties of Ulster. Containing over one thousand extracts, and spanning more than three centuries, this anthology assembles an abundance of commentary, description, argument and reminiscence, encompassing the voices of writers, historians, commentators, musicians, and Ulster people from all walks of life to present a rich and subtle picture of the life of the province.

Thank you for your support of *Reading Ireland*
Adrienne Leavy

Endnotes

1 An *Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry*, Wes Davis, editor. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. P.357.

2 Our thanks to Martin Doyle literary editor of the *Irish Times*, and to Tony Kilgallin, for making this interview available to *Reading Ireland*.

3 Mark O' Connell *Slate*.

In Memoriam: Dr. Maurice Hayes 1927-2017: A Man for All Counties



Maurice Hayes and Joan Hayes
Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives,
John J. Burns Library, Boston College

Dr. Maurice Hayes was born in County Down in Northern Ireland on July 8, 1927, and for most of his adult life he served the people of Northern Ireland in one official capacity or another. He was a noted scholar, educator, public servant, sports administrator and a passionate proponent of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Dr. Hayes's ability to unite people of different faiths, political persuasions and cultures was a defining characteristic, reflected in the variety of positions he held at various points in his distinguished career. His wide experience of public life included such influential posts as GAA Down Board Secretary; Town Clerk of Downpatrick (a position in which he succeeded his father); Chairman of the Community Relations Com-

mission; Assistant Secretary for the Northern Ireland Power-Sharing Executive; Permanent Secretary in the Department of Health and Social Services and Independent Senator in Seanad Éireann for two terms (he was first nominated by the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern in 1997 and re-nominated in 2002). He also served, at the Taoiseach's request, as Chairman of the National Forum on Europe in the Republic of Ireland. The approach he devised to educate the population on the arguments over European issues was so successful that other European countries adopted similar methods. Additionally, Dr. Hayes was Chairman of the influential Ireland Fund in the Republic of Ireland and a Governor of the Linenhall Library in Belfast.

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Because of his innate ability to communicate and work with any individual or group, regardless of political or religious affiliation, Dr. Hayes was often called on to moderate between differing factions in the Northern Irish political structure. He was a major contributor to the Patten Commission dealing with reforms to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the Northern Irish police force that was later renamed the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). One of the most noteworthy of his achievements was that he was the first Catholic to be appointed Ombudsman for Northern Ireland. The symbolic significance of this appointment was tremendous, and Dr. Hayes's inspired leadership in the role was of critical importance given the highly charged political climate of the times.

An ardent supporter of the Gaelic Athletic Association and Gaelic football, Dr. Hayes was instrumental in the victories of County Down in winning the All-Ireland football finals in 1960 and 1961, the first time the Champions Cup had travelled north.

In addition to his political and administrative interests, Dr. Hayes turned his attention to literature later in life, authoring three volumes of autobiography: *Sweet Killough Let Go Your Anchor* (1994), *Minority Verdict: Experiences of a Catholic Civil Servant* (1995), and *Black Puddings with Slim: A Downpatrick Boyhood* (1996). Not surprisingly for someone who earned a Ph.D. in English from Queens University, Dr. Hayes proved himself an adept writer. Published when he was sixty-seven years old, and by his own admission his favorite of the three volumes, Seamus Heaney praised *Sweet Killough Let Go Your Anchor* as a "remarkable literary début." Lyrical descriptions of an early childhood in the small, self-contained fishing

village of Killough on the County Down coast are complemented by an almost documentary sense of realism about what village life was like during the first half of the twentieth century. The seasonal rhythms and routines of the community are recorded in panoramic detail, whether it be rituals organized around the Catholic calendar, the farming or fishing community, school activities, or the summer tourist trade. A small detail such as a description of the bread deliveries in the village typifies Dr. Hayes's ability to confer significance on even the minor details of daily life in the village:

The bread vans started from Downpatrick very early in the morning and covered twenty or thirty miles in a day in a great circuit of the countryside which took in Killough and Ardglass. Some often recharged their trays with bread sent out by train in whicker hampers to await them at the station. They were more than mere bread servers. They were an essential part of the communications and distribution network around the countryside. They carried the newspapers, to be slung off in bundles at shops along the way, they carried messages for people from shops in Downpatrick, they would carry out small commissions for their customers and they conveyed the news of deaths and disasters and the general gossip.¹



Maurice Hayes

Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives,
John J. Burns Library, Boston College

In his second book Dr. Hayes focused on his adult life, specifically, his experience of government and his relentless diplomacy, negotiation and mediation during many of the darkest days of the troubles. What emerges from this self-deprecating account is that in his public endeavors Dr. Hayes strove to include all political and religious fractions in the conversation, often with mixed results. The development of warring sectarian fractions in the North is also astutely analyzed. Writing for the *Irish Times*, Fergus Pyle praised *Minority Verdict* thus: "Many good books have come out of the troubles in the North, but this is one of the most elegant, well-informed and trenchant."

8

In *Black Puddings with Slim*, Dr. Hayes revisits his boyhood in Downpatrick, the town his family moved to when he was ten years old. The warmth of family life, coupled with the bustle of the then prosperous town and the lure and freedom of the surrounding countryside, are remembered with a combination of nostalgic fondness and penetrating detail. This is no simplistic account of small-town life through the eyes of a child, however, as world events continually permeate the fabric of Dr. Hayes's childhood. The civil war in Spain was talked about, not only in newspapers, "but at school and in church," with the Spanish situation recalling memories of the Irish civil war for some of the young boy's older relatives. Referencing a phrase from Patrick Kavanagh's poem "Epic," Dr. Hayes recalls that "the Munich bother registered with us because Mammy's recollection of the Great War frightened her." Two years to the day that the family moved to Downpatrick Hitler invaded Poland. The progress of the war is remembered as a series of "geography lessons," with "the great event" being "the Blitz on Belfast."

Acclaimed Northern Ireland photographer, Bobbie Hanvey, a life-long friend of Dr. Hayes, succinctly sums up his friend's legacy thus:

As Chairman of the Ireland Fund, he put millions of pounds into numerous community projects in Nationalist and Unionist areas where the poor benefited. He was also a Senator in the Republic's government. He managed the Down GAA team which won the All Ireland in 1960. He mixed with kings and queens, and people such as Bishop Desmond Tutu, yet he spent more time speaking to the poor of Downpatrick when he took a stroll down the town. He knew the history of Downpatrick like no other.²

The personal papers of Dr. Hayes are held at National University of Ireland, Galway, in the James Hardiman Library. They cover his whole career and include speeches, correspondence, reports, files, records, pamphlets and papers from membership of various working parties, commissions, conventions and other organizations. The archive will be opened for use at a public event at the University, scheduled for 12 March 2019, and a catalogue will be published at <http://library.nuigalway.ie/>.

In addition to his children, sons and daughters-in-law and grandchildren, Dr. Hayes is survived by his wife Joan Hayes, who graciously agreed to talk to me about her late husband and his legacy.

Endnotes

1. Maurice Hayes, Sweet Killough Let Go Your Anchor p.157.
2. Bobby Hanvey quote taken from Hanvey's forthcoming book, *Photography in a Small Irish Town*.

Questions for Joan Hayes

Maurice Hayes, Taken in
Downpatrick on April 17th 2017
*Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie
Hanvey Photographic Archives,
John J. Burns Library, Boston College*



A.L. How did you and Maurice meet?

J.H. We met at a treasure hunt, both looking for clues over a hedge in Loughinisland. Maurice thought he found the best treasure ever. As did I.

A.L. Did you have any idea at the time what the trajectory of his career would be?

J.H. I had no idea at the time. All I knew was that he had brought the Down team to glory, the first all Ireland win ever by a Northern team which was greeted with joy by everyone in Ireland.

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A.L. Your husband held a variety of positions throughout his long career. Was there one that was a particular favorite of his?

J.H. I don't know that he had any favourites. He loved and was proud of everything he did. Probably the most long-standing and famous was his contribution to the success of the Down team in the 1960s. Rumour has it he invented the tracksuits – but we never saw any royalties from that! He also loved being a Senator in the Seanad Eireann, having been appointed by the then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. They recently did a lovely tribute to him there which all the family attended. And everyone, from the guards at the door to the people in the restaurant to the senators themselves, spoke of him with great fondness and admiration.

A.L. Conversely, was there a post that he was happy to step away from?

J.H. The only post he ever stepped away from – and he wasn't happy to do it – was from being Chairman of the Community Relations Commission. He left it in protest after Bloody Sunday.

A.L. What did Maurice consider to be the greatest accomplishment of his political career?

J.H. That's a hard question to answer. He was never one to boast about his achievements. I'm so proud of everything he turned his hand to – he always did his best. If I had to choose one, I'd probably say the Patten Commission on Policing.

A.L. Given the length of his time in public office, I'm sure there were times when he was frustrated in achieving his objectives. Could you speak to this issue?

J.H. Maurice was never one to complain. The only time he might have been frustrated was when internment was introduced, against his advice.



Maurice Hayes

Downpatrick, April 17th 2017

Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives,
John J. Burns Library, Boston College

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A.L. Given the delicate nature of his work as the first Catholic Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, did you or your family ever feel in any physical danger?

J.H. No, we didn't but we took precautions like nearly everyone else in Northern Ireland who was in public service. We both kept a very normal life for the children and they were never aware that there might even be any issues.

A.L. Maurice published his three-volume autobiography fairly late in life. What prompted him to write these books?

J.H. My nagging! He had such a gift for words – they just flooded out of him – but he always felt that no one would want to read what he had to say. We all wanted him to write a best-seller thriller but he wouldn't do it. Bobbie Hanvey was also a great influence on his writing – and especially in the last year, the two of us would have a go at Maurice all the time about writing another book.

A.L. Did he have a trilogy in mind when he began writing *Sweet Killough, Let Go Your Anchor*, or was it the success of this book and the positive critical reaction that encouraged him to continue writing his memoirs?

J.H. I don't think he had anything in mind after the first book – he just had more that he wanted to write about so he wrote it.

A.L. I understand that Maurice was a deeply committed Catholic and also a fierce proponent of the Irish language. Aside from yourself, were there other influences or individuals who influenced his life?

J.H. He loved the Irish language – and was one of the best speakers around – but he hated seeing it being used as a political football. His mother and father were great influences on his life – as is shown in his books. Padraig O'Keefe was also a great influence, as was Bryan McMahon. At the height of the Troubles, John Hume. He enjoyed working alongside great civil servants like George Quigley and Ken Bloomfield. He also had a great admiration for Chris Patten – they worked together in the DHSS and subsequently, on the Patten Commission. On the more literary front, he loved and was very influenced by poetry and drama. He particularly enjoyed the works of – and his friendship with - Brian Friel, Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley.

A.L. At the time of his death last December, were there particular projects that Maurice was still involved with?

J.H. Apart from doing the Times crossword every day, not really. He enjoyed his grandchildren coming to stay. He was very weak for the last few months although he only spent a short time in hospital where he was really well looked after by the staff in the local Downe Hospital.

A.L. What do you think Maurice's lasting legacy will be?

J.H. It could be a million things. Probably the main one would be the respect for the differences of others. And to treat everyone with dignity and in the same way.

Thank you, Joan.

December 2018

Frank Ormsby: Local Poet in a Global World

by Adrienne Leavy

Born in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, in 1947, Frank Ormsby has for the past forty years been quietly honing his craft with deceptively economical and restrained lyric poems which range in subject matter from the personal to the political, from grief and loss to celebrations of new life, and more recently, to broader philosophical concerns and aesthetic representations of illness. His quietly unassuming work, which often exhibits the Joycean realism of *Dubliners*, is all the more effective for it, eschewing as it does empty aesthetic flourishes and the temptations of didacticism.

For much of his career Ormsby served as Headmaster of the Department of English at the prestigious boy's grammar school, the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, until his retirement in 2010. A gifted anthologist who has done much to carve out a distinct place for Northern Irish poetry in the Irish poetic canon, he has edited, among other works, *Poets from Northern Ireland* (1977, revised in 1990), and *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (1992). He also co-edited with Michael Longley *John Hewitt: Selected Poems* (2007), and from 1969-1989 he edited the influential literary journal, *The Honest Ulsterman*, which provided an important forum for new writing and discussion in a time of turmoil.

With his first collection, *A Store of Candles* (Oxford University Press, 1977, reprinted by Gallery Press, 1986), Ormsby focused his gaze on the landscape and people of his native Fermanagh. The importance of the local is signaled by the opening poem, "The Practical Farms," which celebrates "a world / Where little is wasted." The atmosphere of mistrust and anxiety that permeated the countryside of the border counties for so long is obliquely alluded to in the short poem "Old Man on a Country Bus." The old man of the poem "will not commit his parcel to a rack," for fear that "he has caught the wrong bus." Having successfully completed his journey and arrived home safely, he is pictured as "a pleased survivor, slippred by the wall, / Watching horizons over the half-door." Dr. Eve Patten writes that these early poems "pursue the poet's subtle interest in the various 'elsewheres' underwriting the known territory of home." Several poems support this analysis, such as "Mrs. G. Watters," about a previous occupant of the poet's home who still receives letters at the address. In "The Edge of War," a poem foreshadowing the concerns of Ormsby's second collection, the poet writes about the conflict in Europe impinging on life in Fermanagh with the building of an airfield and "the edge of war in a provincial town." In "Islands," the upheaval of moving home is evoked by remembering a different upheaval on the world stage, the 1974 coup against Mikhail Khristodolou Makarios, the first president of Cyprus.

In contrast, *A Northern Spring* (The Gallery Press, 1986) openly addresses the lives of others, specifically the American soldiers stationed in Fermanagh during 1944 waiting to ship out to Normandy. In a sequence of thirty-six poems Ormsby imagines the lives and the posthumous afterlives of these soldiers. In poem no. 8, the sectarianism of the American south is highlighted when the remains of a soldier who stepped on a land mine are shipped back to Georgia for burial and honor:

If dead men laughed, I would have laughed the day
the committee for white heroes honoured me,
and honoured too the mangled testicles
of Leroy Earl Johnson. ("I Stepped On A Small Landmine," 11)

Justly described as "an intensely moving but unsentimental collection," Ormsby captures the lives of soldiers and civilians caught up in a conflict not of their making. Survivors fare no better than the dead as is evident in poem no. 17, "Grenade-Fishing In The Orne," where the speaker states: "They flew me back to Utah with shock in my eyes, / that rimmed and frozen look the marines call / the two-thousand-yard stare." Writing about an historically distant conflict on mainland Europe is also an aesthetically subtle way in which Ormsby could comment on the contemporary conflict in Northern Ireland. As these poems make clear, the victims of the carnage of World War 11 share the same fate as the victims of the northern Troubles in their "unfinished lives."

With the publication of *The Ghost Train* (The Gallery Press, 1995), Ormsby continues his exploration of the boundaries between the personal and the historical. The literal ghost in many of these poems is once again Ormsby's father, "speechless since his stroke," with the young Ormsby pictured as carrying "the dead weight / of that baffled mobility." A number of tender love poems counter the aura of sadness in *The Ghost Train*, such as "The Photograph," with the poet's wife pictured in a field of "huge, blind, flamboyant" sunflowers in the Dardanelles, and the four-part poem, "A Paris honeymoon." The responsibilities of fatherhood are a preoccupation as the poet reflects on the joys and anxieties of expectant parenthood against the background of violence and uncertain ceasefires in Northern Ireland: "In your sixth week the talk is all of peace, / the killing goes on. The city you will call home / aspires to be the capital of bereavement." In "The Easter Ceasefire" political uncertainty is a metaphor for the uncertainty of a safe outcome to pregnancy, after a miscarriage scare and bed-rest ordered. Eschewing sentimentality Ormsby effortlessly comingles these critical events: "In the fraught silence between / might-be and might-have-been, / we edged towards Saturday and hoped-for all-clear."

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Fireflies (Carcanet Press, 2009) travels further afield from the poet's native terrain of Northern Ireland with part one of the collection reflecting his visits to the United States, specifically the town of Valhalla and the city of White Plains in New York State, and later in the volume the snowy plains of Minnesota. The title, *Fireflies*, is a subtle nod to the American poet, Ogden Nash, known for his humorous verses, including a short poem about fireflies and their fiery anatomical feature: "I can think of nothing eerier / Than flying around with an unidentified glow on a / person's posterior."¹ Ormsby's title poem is more philosophical, asking "What should we make of fireflies, their quick flare / of promise and disappointment, their throwaway style?" The sheer geographic scale of the United States is encapsulated in a poem about craft beers, "At the Lazy Boy Saloon and Ale Bar," where "whole seasons have arrived / in brown bottles from Oregon and Vermont, / Wisconsin and Colorado." In the elegiac "Washington's Headquarters," Ormsby directs his poetic gaze on one of Westchester's oldest historical landmarks, the colonial home of Elijah and Ann Miller during the Revolutionary War. The poet is simultaneously conscious of the present, "the spread and rise / of a suburban city," and of the past, wondering "what dirt-track, what stony lane / dissolves in the foundations?" (the Miller house served briefly as the command post for George Washington at the time of the 1776 Battle of White Plains). Before turning his back on the "charged silence" of the house to return to the present, Ormsby imagines the Millers returning his tourist gaze:

When their eyes meet yours,
briefly, they have the look of prisoners
in their own dream house, allowed to glimpse, just once,
the trespass of the future. (*Fireflies* 24)

A series of firefly Haikus close out the first section of the volume, before Ormsby redirects his gaze to the Fermanagh of his childhood and to the modern city of Belfast, trying to rebuild in the aftermath of the Troubles. At one point he writes:

In statueless streets
the cranes are hoisting
the city off its knees.
Immigrant workers,
man the scaffolding,
their lives and ours
re-angled, re-aligned. (*Fireflies* 46)

A poem dedicated to his friend and fellow poet Michael Longley describes the pair in Flannigan's Bar in Belfast, with Ormsby listening to Longley mimic the cry of the whooper swan. Given the decades of sectarian violence they both witnessed, the pathos of what this impersonation triggers has added resonance:

Though earthbound, landlocked, I never lacked till now
the gift of a coastal childhood, or missed a life
edged with Atlantic: sea-self, sky-self, land-self
among the dunes in late autumn, balance restored
by the rich plaint, the vibrant ochone of the whooper swan. (*Fireflies* 58)

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Selections from these four volumes were collected in *Goat's Milk: New & Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books, 2015), a comprehensive retrospective of Ormsby's work which also includes many new poems, including several tender poems about his deceased father, one of his more persistent muses. In his introduction to this volume, Longley quotes Ormsby describing the lyric poem, noting that his description is "Ormsby's *ars poetica* in a nutshell." For Ormsby, the lyric is "an insight distilled or crystallised, the essence of a mood or emotion caught with memorable concision, the verbal equivalent – linguistic, aphoristic, epigrammatic – of the brushstroke which evokes the fuller picture, the splash and its ripples."²

Ormsby's most recent collection, *The Darkness of Snow* (Wake Forest University Press, 2017), is divided into five discrete sections and is the poet's most expansive and experimental work to date. In addition to elegiac poems about his parents there are poems of boyhood memories and of fellow poets, including the late Seamus Heaney, and of the reemergence of Belfast, Phoenix-like, in the aftermath of the Troubles. However, Ormsby also extends his range considerably in this collection, covering subjects not treated in his earlier work.

Section three includes a series of twenty-six ekphrastic poems based on the art of Irish painters working in Normandy, Brittany and Belgium at the end of the nineteenth century. Here the lyric line is longer, but no less precise. One could argue that Ormsby's career had been building up to this suite of poems. In many of his earlier poems, the poet observes an ordinary scene which he captures and frames like a photograph in his memory, aesthetically exploring its meaning. "Landscape with Figures," from *A Store of Candles*, is a representative example. The poem opens with an image that could have equally been a scene in a painting:

“....a farmhouse among trees / Seen from a bus window, a girl / With a suitcase climbing a long hill / And a woman waiting.”

In contrast to the beautiful tranquility of the ekphrastic poems, the final two sections of *The Darkness of Snow* strike a deliberately dissonant note. There are a series of fourteen poems addressing the poet’s diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease. Gallows humor and anger are evident along with matter-of-fact descriptions of some of the side-effects of his medications, specifically the hallucinations which plague him. In one poem, Ormsby speculates as to how the disease may affect him in the future:

That lively man
in the wheelchair
could be me,
ten years from now,
abroad in the Waterworks park,
a tremor in both arms,
and giving the nod
to trees, lake, dog-walkers and waterfowl. (*The Darkness of Snow* 116)

Reluctant to be regarded now as the “Parkinson’s poet,” these poems are nevertheless an extraordinarily clear-eyed exposition of this progressive disease. It is a testament to their power that the nursing program in Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh has incorporated the suite into their teaching curriculum.

The final sequence in this collection, “The Willow Forest,” consists of fourteen narrative poems from the perspective of the interpreter in a War Tribunal. An unnamed tyrant (called “The Accused”) is on trial for the mass murder of the inhabitants of an unidentified village in Europe. The difficulty of bearing witness in the face of such atrocity comes with a recognition of the vagaries of the truth, as the judges of the War Tribunal “stoutly pursue / the evidence there is to be had from the witnesses’ memories.” As the interpreter cynically notes, ‘whatever emerges will be labelled Truth.’ The ambiguous international setting for these poems does not disguise their subtext, that is, the horrors of sectarian violence that plagued Northern Ireland for decades.

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The importance of Patrick Kavanagh to Heaney’s work has been well documented both by critics and the poet himself; however, in several respects Ormsby is also an heir to Patrick Kavanagh’s poetic legacy. In his essay “The Placeless: Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh,” Heaney writes that all of Kavanagh’s early Monaghan poetry “gives the place credit for existing, assists at its real topographical presence, dwells upon it and accepts it as the definitive locus of the given world.”³ While Ormsby’s aesthetic world is often more urban and international in scope, I would argue that his Fermanagh poems, which appear in every collection, embody the same “horizons of consciousness” that Heaney found in Kavanagh’s early Monaghan poems. Although Kavanagh employs a looser, more freewheeling lyrical style, his focus on the local as worthy of poetic celebration is matched by Ormsby’s dedication to Fermanagh. Kavanagh’s love for the “stony grey fields of Monaghan” find a kindred spirit in Ormsby’s Fermanagh fields which, the poet tells us, are “earthed, each one, / in our practical affections.”

Kavanagh’s privileging of local parish life as a legitimate subject for poetry was ground-breaking given that he came of age as a poet under the shadow of W.B. Yeats and the legacy of the Celtic Revival. For him, serious poetry was parochial, not provincial, a distinction

he articulated in *Kavanagh's Weekly*, a short-lived newspaper he founded in 1952 with his brother Peter. Citing Joyce and George Moore as "two great Irish parishioners," Kavanagh explained his philosophy thus:

Parochialism and provincialism are direct opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis – toward which his eyes are turned – has to say on the subject. This runs through all activities. The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic value of his parish. All great civilisations are based on parochialism – Greek, Israeliite, English.⁴

Much of Ormsby's poetry insists, like the grandmother figure in "Travelling," on "local colour to the last stroke." His is a poetry made of "Antrim clay," where there is always a "a wind off the Lagan," and on winter nights in the Fermanagh countryside "simply to step outside / is to be gifted /instant access / to the constellations."

Yet while the poet repeatedly celebrates the local and "the air-wide, skin-tight, multiple meanings of here," his poetry refuses to be constrained by these geographic boundaries, opening itself instead to the broader global community. Both facets operate simultaneously and independently in his poetry. In the concerns he brings to his work, his poetry makes the domestic international and the global local. Ultimately, his poems "add small stones to the cairns of love and sorrow" that is the human condition worldwide.

In "Catching Fireflies" Ormsby describes himself as "an anxious optimist," and this anxious optimism can be summed up in the final line from his first collection, which in retrospect can be viewed as a kind of clarion call to poetic arms. In the short poem "Under the Stairs," among all the brick-a-brac one may find in a "dark alcove under the stairs," the poet makes sure to include "a store of candles for when the light fades." Speaking at the presentation of the Lawrence M. O'Shaughnessy Award for Poetry in 2002, Jim Rogers, the editor of *New Hibernia Review*, underscores the symbolic significance of this line to Ormsby's aesthetic:

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We honor Frank Ormsby's generosity of spirit; the craft of his poetry; his deep humanity; his resolute claiming of the moral authority of imagination and of memory – gifts that in his poetry, have sought to exorcise the darkest chapters of the century just past; gifts that have given his readers, across dark times, their own store of candles.

Editor's note: All poetry cited in this essay is copyright Frank Ormsby. *Reading Ireland* is grateful to Frank Ormsby for his generous permission to reprint his work.

Endnotes

1 Ogdon Nash, "The Firefly."

2 Michael Longley, quoting Frank Ormsby in The Hip Flask, "Introduction" Goat's Milk p.13.

3 Seamus Heaney, "The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh," in Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001 London: Faber and Faber, 2002.

4 Kavanagh's Weekly, May 24, 1952.

Interview: Adrienne Leavy in conversation with Frank Ormsby



Frank Ormsby

Photograph courtesy of *The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College*

A.L. How did you first get involved in writing poetry?

F.O.: When I was ten or eleven, a teacher set us writing poems for a competition at Enniskillen Show. I won a second prize with a poem about a dog or a dogfight. The challenge of constructing quatrains and finding rhymes and solving the problem of getting the syllable count right in each line must have triggered something in me. Pattern and music. I went on to write imitations of the patriotic verse in a magazine called "Ireland's Own" and by the time I had entered St Michael's College, Enniskillen, I was already filling small note-books with verse. Very little of this early stuff has survived.

A.L. How important was Seamus Heaney to you in your development as a poet?

F.O.: When I came to Queen's as an undergraduate in 1966, the year of "Death of a Naturalist" and Heaney's first year as a lecturer in the English Department., I came across his poems (and those of Michael Longley, Derek Mahon and James Simmons) in Harry Chambers' magazine "Phoenix". When Simmons published my first poem in "The Honest Ulsterman" (February 1969), he described it accurately as "*pastiche of Heaney*". After it appeared, Heaney took me aside and invited me to join the Writers' group which at that time met in the English department. On the same day, Heaney introduced me to Michael Foley on the steps of the Students' Union. Simmons had asked Foley to take over the editing of "The Honest Ulsterman". Foley was willing to do so provided he had someone to help. I was that helper. I am recording this by way of illustrating Heaney's dynamic presence at this time and his significance to me in all sorts of things.

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In addition, of course, his poetry opened up the subject matter of rural Ireland, reinforcing and extending the work of Kavanagh and Montague. He was a towering figure in Irish poetry for decades. The number of critical studies of his work and the appearance of his books on university syllabuses all over the world attest to his popularity and influence.

A.L. Aside from Heaney, I would imagine that John Hewitt is also an important influence on your work. You edited *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt*, a book which Wes Davis praises as "*the standard edition of that fundamental poet of cultural alienation in the North.*" Can you speak a little about what Hewitt's work means to you?

F.O.: I was not an admirer of Hewitt from the start. When he privately published a pamphlet of poems called "An Ulster reckoning" in 1971, he quoted, in the Foreword, John Montague's description of his as "*the first (and the last) deliberately Ulster Protestant Poet. That designation carries a heavy obligation these days*". Hewitt sent a review copy to "The Honest Ulsterman" with a note to the effect that he expected the usual dismissive mention. My review in "The Honest Ulsterman" No 29, July/August 1971 comments "*Unfortunately it is not difficult to give second rate poetry a spurious importance by playing this sort of game - let's call it the Dilemma of the Ulster Protestant Poet or Look! I've got a spilt identity*". *Hewitt has played this game for a long time*" there were two pages of this. It was brutal then and it is brutal now. Hewitt wrote to me from Coventry, where he was curator of the Herbert Art Gallery. The letter was dignified and angry and he

struck a satirical note advising me to develop a more effective “hatchet-man” style by imitating models such as William Hazlitt. Detecting an element of hurt in the letter, I wrote an apology to Hewitt, which was accepted. Shortly after this, he retired from the Herbert Gallery and returned to Belfast. Michael Longley introduced me to him at the Festival Club on 9th February 1972 after I had taken part in a reading with Michael Foley, Paul Muldoon and William Peskett at the Students’ Union. Back in Belfast, Hewitt became a father figure to several generations of poets and won honours galore. He quarried new collections from his notebooks, revising poems from as far back as the Forties. After our initial skirmish, we settled down and developed a friendship. I found him gruff and kindly, always ready to give judicious praise.

It is difficult to say (I think) whether Hewitt influenced my poems – unless it be in the use of traditional forms, a fondness for short poems and, occasionally, a four-square quality. Hewitt certainly detected a poetic affinity. My diaries for the 1970s tell me that when the Arts Council commissioned a set of poster poems, Hewitt was particularly enthusiastic about my collaboration with the artist John Middleton “*I like your poem very much and have it hung in the porch where I can see it daily*”. During a visit I made to his house in Stockman’s Lane in October 1973, he told me that my poetry appealed to him more than that of any Ulster poet “*currently writing*”. Hewitt was not given to over-statement. I admired his nature poems and lyric poems generally. When Michael Longley and I edited Hewitt’s Selected Poems (2001), I think both of us were surprised by the re-discovery of a considerable lyric poet.

A.L. How do you decide on a poem’s form? At what point in composing do you decide on shape?

F.O. Poems often suggest themselves, as it were, in an opening line in the poet’s head and the line often has a particular rhythm which is then likely to become the rhythm of the poem. So, by the end of the first verse, I am likely to have a sense of whether the poem will be in free verse, blank verse, couplets, quatrains, or whatever. If the poem itself suggests form and shape, it is usually “better” than a poem in which the poet imposes a form.

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A.L. A connection to place is very important in your poetry, and your rural upbringing in Fermanagh features in much of your work, beginning with your first collection, *A Store of Candles* (1977). This preoccupation with the local seems more prevalent in the work of Northern Irish poets than in the work of Southern poets (with the exception of Patrick Kavanagh). I’m thinking specifically about poets such as Louis MacNeice, John Montague and Seamus Heaney. Would you agree with this assessment or am I making too broad an assumption?

F.O. The local is a starting point for the Southern poet as much as it for the Northerner. I notice this when I read newspaper and magazine contributions by young Southerners and register the local fidelities. The Troubles, however, have given Northern poets a sharper sense of place. This is likely to persist as the bodies of the Disappeared continue to be raised from bogland and other landscapes. The landscape is not, as Hewitt remarks, “*to be read as pastoral again*”.

A.L. Your second volume, *A Northern Spring* (1986), includes a section of thirty-six poems about the American GIs who were stationed in Fermanagh ahead of the Normandy landings in 1944. Your close friend Michael Longley also writes often on war, though in his case his poems center on his father’s experience in World War 1. What prompted you to aesthetically explore this chapter in Northern Ireland’s history, and to what extent did the backdrop of the “Troubles” influence the creation of these poems?

F.O.: We lived on the periphery of the Necarne Castle or Castle Irvine estate, near the village of Irvinestown, County Fermanagh. During World War II there had been an American Hospital camp in the woods and when I was a boy there were still a couple of air-raid shelters (see “*The Air Raid Shelter*” in a “*A Store of Candles*”) I was born in 1947 and had no direct memories of the American presence, but the GIs related particularly well to the Nationalist community and there were numerous stories about them.

“*A Northern Spring*” is an attempt to imagine their lives and experiences. I have given them voices in the style of Edgar Lee Masters’ “Spoon River Anthology”. The sequence is about the fate of the universal soldier who has his future taken from him. The Troubles are to the fore in some of these poems, a significant undercurrent in others. The use of dramatic monologue is intended to strengthen our sense of the soldiers as individuals at a time when soldiers and policemen in the North of Ireland were being de-humanised as “legitimate targets”.

I saw “*Apples, Normandy, 1944*” as a poem about the pressure of expectation on artists to produce “relevant” work about the Troubles and the obligation of the artists to maintain their independence and follow the dictates of their art. “*Soldier Bathing*” moves from Lough Melvin in Co Fermanagh to Lucifer’s War in heaven and the “*Let there be light*” moment. The title is borrowed from a well-known WWII poem by F T Prince. The images that run through “*Maimed Civilians, Isigny*” would be very familiar to anyone who had heard about or seen photographs of various atrocities in the North and the stunning capacity for recovery shown by the casualties.

A.L. In your poem “The Heart” from your third collection, *The Ghost Train* (1995), you describe Belfast as a city that “aspires to be the capital of bereavement.” Your recent poetry celebrates the city’s rejuvenation. How difficult was it to write poetry about the Troubles?

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F.O.: It was easy enough, indeed all too easy to write about the Troubles. It was more difficult to allow the material to find its “*imaginative depth*” (as Michael Longley put it) and write the poems with a weight appropriate to the seriousness of the subject. My anthology “*A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Troubles*” did not appear until 1992, almost thirty-five years after the Troubles began, by which time poets had absorbed the subject – not entirely, of course, but sufficiently to approach the topic thoughtfully and with authority.

A.L. Your father’s stroke and early death cast a long shadow over your poetry. In *Goat’s Milk: New and Selected Poems* (2015), the poems about his death are particularly moving. Do you find the experience of writing about your father to be cathartic?

F. O.: Cathartic yes. He presides over the poems and even answering this question brings a familiar image of him. White hair, cap, walking stick. He is almost always seated and silent but somehow manages to remain an authority figure. We will take a short walk, during which he will keep one hand on my shoulder. My mother will give him an insulin injection and I will feed him porridge with a spoon.

A. L. You were also an English teacher and later head of the English Department at one of Belfast’s leading schools, The Royal Belfast Academical Institution. I believe you taught there from 1971 until your retirement in 2010. Can you speak a little about your career as an educator?

F.O.: Royal Belfast Academical Institution (also known as R.B.A.I... and Inst.) is a Boy's Grammar school located in the centre of Belfast. It is essentially a Protestant school but prides itself on being open to pupils of all denominations. It makes a point of not enquiring into the religious background of staff or pupils. My professional life as a teacher was spent there. I was an Assistant Teacher of English from 1971 to 1976 and Head Master of the English Department from 1976 to 2010. The school was founded to be the local university, which explains the 'Head Master'. I inherited Humanities, as it were, and was also Head of History and Geography, though in name only.

The school might be described as a boys' scientific and mathematical academy but it did have a literary tradition. Sir Samuel Ferguson was a pupil there, as was William Drennan, the United Irishman. The Edwardian novelist Forrest Reid was another pupil, more recently the poets Michael Longley and Derek Mahon. The poets Robert Johnstone and William Peskett were educated at Inst. John Hewitt was a pupil there for one year, circa 1919. I realise that this answer has become a survey but I want to mention three other interesting figures – the painter Paul Henry, Dr. William Neilson, Head Master of the Classical School, who taught Irish and, in 1808, published an Irish Grammar, and the poet Charles Reavy, poet, translator and founder of the Olympia Press.

I loved teaching literature every working day but probably had more impact simply as a poet on the staff. A poet who managed a school hockey team! I'm speculating that this normalised poets and poetry in some way.

There were opportunities to introduce classes to contemporary Irish Writers – Flann O'Brien was a great hit. I taught the poetry of Yeats, MacNeice, Kavanagh, Heaney, Longley, Mahon, Muldoon and Carson and, occasionally, my own poems. By the way, Adrienne, do you know what the Tollund Man's full name is? Pete Brown. And that the opening line of Heaney's 'Mid-Term Break' is 'I sat all morning in the college sick-bag' and that 'ambition was Macbeth's athlete's foot'?

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A.L. Your current collection, *The Darkness of Snow*, contains fourteen poems about your experience with Parkinson's. I'm wondering if you are familiar with Susan Sontag's book, *Illness as Metaphor*, in which she argues that the clearest way of thinking about disease is without recourse to metaphor. Many writers disagree with her thesis, arguing that metaphor and other types of symbolic language help afflicted people form meaning out of their experiences. What are your thoughts on this?

F.O. I haven't read Susan Sontag's book yet, so I don't feel in a position to comment on it. I have had a sense of metaphor in action. When I walk into a room, there is a second in the course of which I see coats, cushions, clocks, etc. as people but they resume, almost immediately, their own shapes. I can only assume that what happens is caused by medication.

A.L. You have become much more prolific in your writing since being diagnosed with Parkinson's. Would you attribute this new burst of creativity to the fact that you are now retired and have more time to devote to writing or are there other factors also at play?

F.O. Retirement has played a significant part. It used to take me nine years to get a book together, now it takes two. I think medication plays some part in this. Just as it can make your mind wander, it can also encourage feats of concentration that can be useful when you are trying to finish a recalcitrant poem. Furthermore, I am a man in a hurry. I have Diabetes

Type 2 and Parkinson's and have had the experience of being taken suddenly into hospital and I know that the diseases are potentially fatal. From that point on, I am in a hurry. I feel free but psychologically I must have a sense, however deeply buried poetry is in there, that my time is limited and that I must get the poems on to paper whatever. All this is speculation and even perhaps a little ridiculous.

A.L. You were the editor of *The Honest Ulsterman* from 1969 to 1989. How did the poet and editor in you work together in shaping the magazine? Also, were you surprised how influential the magazine became?

F.O.: There was no tension between the poet and the editor! I think I had a kind of throw-away editing style and was lucky to be able to call on an enviable group of contributors. I would visit The Eglantine Inn on the way home from RBAI. Paul Muldoon would be there after a day at the BBC, Ciaran and Deirdre Carson and John Morrow would arrive from the Arts Council and others might appear – painters, teachers, musicians, individuals such as Ted Hickey, Keeper of Art at the Ulster Museum and Conor Macauley, my colleague at RBAI. The poets often brought new stuff and I often left with a few pages filled in the next issue of the magazine. There was a personal element in all this that kept the potential drudgery of editing at bay. I dealt with the printers and booksellers and my first wife Molly helped with parceling and mailings.

Add the names of terrific poetry critics such as Edna Longley and Michael Allen and the provocative, splenetic, opinionated columnist, Jude the Obscure. Add the contribution of the Non-Irish poets such as Gavin Ewart and Carol Rumens. Editing the "*The Honest Ulsterman*" was, for me, one of the excitements of the literary life in Belfast from, roughly, 1968 to 1988. Was I surprised at how influential the magazine became? It is difficult for me to answer this because I had very little sense of the nature of the influence. The magazine helped to keep poetry and therefore the peace –time values of poetry alive for almost the entire duration of the Troubles. It published the earliest writing of a formidable group of writers, such as Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, Michael Foley, John Morrow, Bernard MacLaverty, Tom Paulin, Peter McDonald, Medbh McGuckian. The pamphlet press, Ulsterman Publications, published the work of Heaney, Longley, Mahon and Simmons, as well as Muldoon, Carson and company, establishing a poetic continuity. Yes, I suppose these activities and achievements constitute influence and that I shouldn't be surprised at this. I was surprised at the magazine's capacity to recover its freshness after periods in the doldrums but this statement may be as much about me as it is about the magazine!

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A.L. During a previous conversation you told me that after *The Darkness of Snow* was published Dr. Kath MacDonald, a senior lecturer in the Nursing division at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, contacted you to ask permission to use your Parkinson's poems as teaching aids in the nursing program. It's rare for poetry to achieve such a practical impact outside the artistic sphere. Are you aware how the poems have been received by the nursing students?

F. O. After I gave a reading in the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh, Dr. Kath MacDonald, a senior lecturer in the Nursing Division at Queen Margaret University asked for permission to use the Parkinson's poems as teaching aids in the nursing program. This approach was marvelously unexpected and led to a couple of workshops with the pupils studying neurological diseases and the staff who taught them. The emphasis was on the need to develop empathy skills, so literature fitted in. The students studied a number of appropriate poems and wrote haiku poems embodying forms of empathy. I wrote an article for the

Journal of Nursing Research and have been receiving offers ever since from nursing organisations – to chair panel discussions, to deliver key-note speeches, to lead research programmes. All the offers are addressed to ‘Doctor’ Ormsby! To speak, seriously, it seems to be the case that the arts have a role to fulfil in the treatment of diseases like Parkinson’s. My poems are still being used in Queen Margaret University and artistic activities such as poetry, dance, music are being taken seriously as forms of treatment, not just of ‘Parkinson’s disease’.

A.L. Section iii of *The Darkness of Snow* is a series of twenty-six ekphrastic poems (poems based on paintings). The paintings are all by Irish impressionist artists based in Normandy, Brittany and Belgium at the end of the nineteenth century, including John Lavery, Walter Osborne and Nathaniel Hone. An example from this series is “The Widow” by Frank O’ Meara (1853-1888). So our readers can get a sense of what an ekphrastic poem is like we have included an image of the painting on which the poem is based below.

Frank O’Meara: The Widow



The widow walks by the river, in black and alone, the wind undoing her veil.
She is hanging on nobody's arm, seems to stand free
of family and friends. Now she is here,
will she test herself against the first loneliness?
Or adjust to the bereavement space
in which she is the chief mourner?
Intense memory has closed her eyes.
She wants a river in her grief and bare trees
and little low islands, a geography of loss, a local scene
where distances conflict and horizons give back nothing.
She is marked, if she allows it, a widow for life.
Monsieur O’ Mara, a painter with a taste
For the *lacrimae rerum*, an aficionado of Autumn and Winter,
Has asked her to pose. He has taken her arm
courteously and complicated her sadness.
He will complicate it again with the finished portrait.

22

The American poet Mary Jo Bang has described her approach to writing ekphrastic poems thus: “I am taking an existing work of art and rewriting over it. I’m imposing a new narrative on it, one that is partially suggested by the artwork itself and partially by something that comes from within. Sometimes that thing is an autobiographical moment, sometimes it’s a larger concern, social or political or intellectual.” Can you comment on your approach to writing this kind of poem?

F.O. The approach to the subject here is typical of the approach in most of the other poems. I identify closely with the central character and enjoyed writing these poems because they often took their own direction as I wrote. The widow is a vulnerable loner who has a choice to make about her future. She will either retreat into her widowhood or resist it. The painter will play a part in this. It is implied, I think, that the painter is drawn to her, not only as a subject for a painting, but also as a woman, which will complicate the decision she must make. “*He has taken her arm*” sets up a deliberate contrast with “*she is hanging/on nobody’s arm*” earlier in the poem. For me, one of the unexpected elements in the poem was the landscape fantasy, me imagining her imagining, a kind of backcloth to her grief. The questions in the poem create the illusion that the observer is speculating and is not omni-

scient. I imagine – I hope – that if this poem were subjected to group discussion, it would yield more. O’Mara’s paintings contain a somber element which appeals to me without being overwhelming. One autumn - lover speaks to another, as it were.

A.L. This poem includes a Latin phrase, *lacrimae rerum*, meaning “tears of things,” from Book 1 of the *Aeneid* by the Roman poet Virgil. The phrase fits nicely in the poem and I am wondering if Virgil’s work in general has influenced your poetry?

F.O. If Virgil is an influence on my poems, the influence is so oblique that I cannot detect it. My Masters course at Queen’s University, Belfast had a component called ‘*Classical Literature in Translation*’, my first extended introduction to the poetry of Homer, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Juvenal, Catullus and other poets. What a course that was! Given the subterranean workings of influence, I don’t rule out Virgil!

A.L. You have another collection forthcoming entitled *The Rain Barrel*. Can you talk about this volume?

F.O. The rain barrel of the title is emblematic of life on the farm. It is earthy and dignified, a solid custodian, a focal presence. Like the books which precede it, “*The Rain Barrel*” highlights the beauty of the rural background, a beauty that contains also the graves of the Disappeared, buried secretly on the mountain and in bogs. The sense of place is, as always, strong. Rural and Urban Northern Ireland both figure prominently. I try to acknowledge and identify with the pain and frustration of the families still waiting for the restoration of bodies. The Rain Barrel is very much in the vein of *Goat’s Milk* (2015) and *The Darkness of Snow* (2017) and continues to explore the themes prominent in those collections.

23

A.L. One of the poems in *The Rain Barrel* is titled “After Fernando Pessoa.” Pessoa was an early twentieth-century Portuguese poet, literary critic and philosopher. What inspired you to write this poem?

F.O. I’ve been intending to read Pessoa’s work for a long time and recently finished his ‘*Selected Poems*’, translated by Richard Zenith (Grove Press). Immediately I set out to write an affectionate parody in two parts. The first part was clearly parody (‘in a void where there is nothing/nothing becomes everything. That is why my best moments are the everything in the middle of nothing’), but the second part sounded uncannily like a serious poem. I recognised this, as did Michael Longley and Neil Astley without any prompting from me. So the poem came in from the cold and I have placed it at the end of *The Rain Barrel*.

A.L. Can you tell me about your collaboration with musician Anthony Toner? How did *The Kiss of Light* tour come about?

F.O. It is odd to hear yourself say that one of your books has made an ‘*impact*’, but that was Anthony’s response to my second book *A Northern Spring* (1996) and he would occasionally slip poems from my books into his concerts. When *Goat’s Milk* appeared in 2017, David Torrants of No Alibis Bookstore in Belfast organized a surprise for Anthony. We were introduced to each other at the interval in one of Anthony’s concerts in the bookstore and had an immediate rapport, personally and through his songs. Our collaboration grew out of that and what I think of as our first culmination is a CD called ‘**The Kiss of Light**’. The title is taken from my Paris honeymoon poem ‘*L’Orangerie*’ I recite nine of my poems on the CD and Anthony plays music prompted by the poems. We have performed the piece several times, included at the Irish Cultural Institute in Paris. Initially, I had misgivings, fearing

that the audience had come to hear the music and endure the poetry. This has not been the case. Our joint performances so far have been warmly, sometimes uproariously received. We don't try to impose connections but we do draw attention to some common themes. I think the venture has given us creative reassurance. Our mood at the end of the sessions have been one of elation. I like Anthony's accessible, humane songs and the informality on stage which makes each performance a gig rather than a reading.

A.L. How do you see your poetry evolving in the near future? What are you currently working on and what do you hope to work on in the future?

F.O. I have very little sense of my poems evolving. If they do, it must be secretly, in the dead of the night. I'm increasingly a devotee of the short poem and will probably have a '*Small World*' haiku section in all future collections. It is some time since I edited an anthology and I have several ideas – one of which is to produce a second edition of *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles*.

A.L. What is your opinion on the state of Irish poetry today? Are there movements in contemporary poetry that you find notably encouraging or discouraging?

F.O. The state of Irish Poetry is not a subject to which I devote much thought, but I welcome the blossoming of women's poetry in the North and I am still excited by the achievements and continuing creativity of the apprentice poets and friends (and their predecessors) who found poetry in Belfast in the 1960's.

A.L. What do you want readers to find in your work?

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F.O. I want them to find the kind of poems I myself enjoy, accessible poems about recognizably everyday subjects treated humorously or with a sort of serious frivolity. The poems would be written in language readily understood but used inventively, with the odd, unexpected flourish. I like the idea of poems that both move readers and make them think, poems without pomposity or pretentiousness.

Thank you, Frank.

Four poems by Frank Ormsby

After Fernando Pessoa

Everything in the universe is beyond belief
but I reach out daily in the act of believing.
O my fugitive unbelief,
let my reaching out
be always
to what is beyond belief.

25

Aristotle Reaches Fermanagh

Somewhere in the fields around here
there was a hedge-school run by Master Doak,
its curriculum classical,
its pupils shouldering the school fees
in potatoes and turf.

During my father's lifetime there were still old men
who talked of their schooling:
'Master Kane broke us in on philosophy
with the book of the Harry Shuttle.'

The Urban Fox

He carries the hunch of trespass
into suburban gardens,
directs a ten-second stare
that somehow makes the trespass ours.

He has the look of a raider
who has come to topple our wheelies
and nose through the garbage.

Sooner or later he will encounter the dogs.

He will not settle among us. He is dressed
for autumn in the woods and headed that way.

The Second-Hand Book

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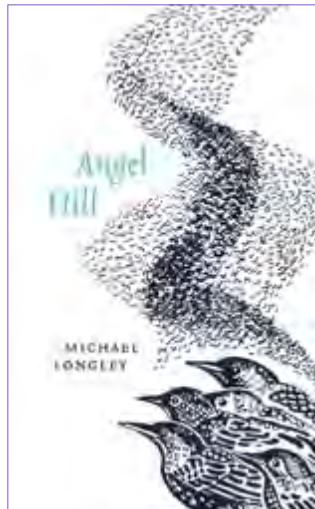
Forgive me, whoever you are,
who pasted the dry leaf
into the inside back cover
and filled the spaces
around it with fragile endearments.

Forgive me! How tentatively
I have come to own
part of your unhappiness.

All poems copyright Frank Ormsby.

Editors Note: *Reading Ireland* would like to thank Frank Ormsby for permission to publish the poems “After Fernando Pessoa,” “Aristotle Reaches Fermanagh,” “The Urban Fox,” and “The Second-Hand Book” which are taken from his forthcoming collection, *The Rain Barrel*. His seventh collection, *The Rain Barrel* will be published on October 24, 2019 by Bloodaxe Books in Ireland and England and by Wake Forest University Press in the United States. To order, visit www.bloodaxebooks.com or www.wfupress.com

Essay: Fran Brearton on Michael Longley's *Angel Hill*



Angel Hill
Michael Longley
ISBN:978-1-930630-81-9

Angel Hill, or in Gallic *Cnoc nan Aingeal*, is a burial ground in the Scottish highlands, a ‘soul landscape’ that earns its place as the title of this, Longley’s eleventh collection. A final resting place among the clouds, Angel Hill is close by the home of his daughter, the painter Sarah Longley, who with ‘easel and brushes’, ‘big sheets and charcoal for drawing’ is ‘looking after the headstones’; and in Longley’s ‘Snowdrops’ the hill is peopled by ghosts who are themselves visiting the dead: ‘Murdo, Alistair, / Duncan, home from the trenches, / Back in Balmacara and Kyle, / Cameronians, Gordon Highlanders / Clambering on hands and knees / Up the steep path to this graveyard’.

Like Yeats before him, Longley is the elegist and self-elegist *par excellence* of his generation. *The Stairwell* (2014) commemorated his late twin brother, Peter. In *Angel Hill*, Seamus Heaney is another kind of lost brother for Longley, the poet with whom he gave a reading tour of Northern Ireland in 1968 – a tour which Heaney described as the ‘beginnings of pluralism’, despite the Troubles which followed – and with whom he read in Lisdoonvarna two weeks before Heaney’s death. The friendship, with its ‘pilgrimages around the North’ in Heaney’s ‘muddy Volkswagen’, is commemorated in ‘Room to Rhyme’, a powerful and intimate elegy in which the poet grieves for his subject, and remembers his subject’s own grief: ‘When Oisin Ferran was burned to death, you / Stood helpless in the morgue and wept and wept’. Or in ‘Storm’ the ‘mighty beech’ in the poet’s garden, a long-standing symbol in Longley’s work, has ‘lost an arm’; it is ‘Wind-wounded, lopsided now’. Where once they ‘Gazed up through cathedral / Branches at constellations’, now he and Heaney are ‘Together...counting tree-rings’.

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And counting is a motif of *Angel Hill*, with its consciousness of lives slipping away and just beginning, its unsettling movement forwards and backwards through time. Longley might justly count himself as Yeats’s inheritor here too – the Yeats who counted his ‘nine-and-fifty swans’, who ‘number[ed]’ the dead in ‘Easter 1916’, or counted ‘those feathered balls of soot / The moor-hen guides upon the stream’ during Ireland’s Civil War. Longley counts, variously, his own passing years (in the superb ‘Age’), as well as ‘whooper swans and waders’, ‘barnacle geese’, ‘oystercatchers and sanderlings’, starlings and whimbrels. In the brief and haunting elegy for Patrick Rooney, a child killed in the early days of the Troubles, the children chanting ‘*In and out go / Dusty bluebells*’ echo down the decades. With a keen naturalist’s eye (‘For fear of leaving particulars out’) and finely-honed instinct for preservation, Longley, like the ornithologist in the poem of that title, is also, in this collection, ‘counting and re-counting / The generations, listening / For their messages on the wind’, ‘Tracking in his imagination / Their return’.

The young soldiers of the Great War, those he returns on leave to Angel Hill, resting ‘against rusty railings / Like out-of-breath pallbearers’, are a generation who have been better served by Longley than by any other living poet. In these centenary years, he has proven himself the outstanding laureate of the Great War, in which his own father fought, partly because the war has been part of his imaginative hinterland from the very beginning, but also because he has ‘remembered’ across the archipelago, elegising soldiers and soldier-poets from the Gordon Highlanders, the London Scottish, the Ulster Division, the Inniskilling Fusiliers.

For the Irish writer, memory of the war is never uncomplicated; Longley, as much attuned to the problem of remembrance as to the urgent need to remember, is also painfully aware of both how much and how little poetry itself can do in wartime: in ‘The Sonnets’, a soldier’s ‘leatherbound book’ of Shakespeare’s sonnets ‘stopped a bullet just short of his heart’. The poetry is ‘life-saving’, but it is also ‘shredded’.

In 1963, recently graduated in classics from Trinity College Dublin, Longley wrote in praise of ‘the kind of translation which is the final criticism, the appreciation of one poet by another carried to its logical conclusion – free translation at its best, the only *real* translation’. The 1960s also saw the beginning of a lifetime’s appreciation in Longley’s work of Homer: the *Iliad* has always been a touchstone for his writing on war; and when Odysseus appears in a collection now, it feels like the return of an old friend. Longley’s free translations, in which his handling of loose pentameter and hexameter lines is second to none, compress Homeric passages into moments of lyric intensity. In *Angel Hill*, Odysseus reappears ‘Telling the truth and telling lies’ to Penelope, and ‘In the middle of his rigmarole’ (from Book XIX of the *Odyssey*) comes ‘The Brooch’: ‘A golden dog grasping a dappled fawn / In his forepaws, fascinated by it / As he throttles its struggle to get free’. The ten-line poem contains the brooch, as the brooch contains the fawn, the whole exemplifying the ‘intricate craftsmanship’ that is a hallmark of this book.

Often, Longley’s Homeric preoccupations centre on the linked themes of recognition (or *anagnorisis*) and homecoming. He savours individual place-names, as he also delights in assonance and internal rhyme: ‘After Achnashellach comes Achnasheen, / Sheep grazing among molehills, seaweedy / Breakwaters...’. His is a poetics of perpetual return and recognition – seeing again and afresh – which is never grounded in one place only. He captures instead what one might term sacramental moments, in which last things are first things, and where a surface impermanence plays over permanent depth: ‘starlings’ are ‘Heavenly riffraff’; a bookshop is a ‘lost cathedral’; the ‘Connemara ponies’ are also mythical creatures named by Odysseus; a ‘nosegay and/ Egg cup’ are offered ‘like a chalice’.

Longley’s first collection, *No Continuing City* (1969) was (deliberately) elusive in its title: taken as it is from St Paul (‘For here we have no continuing city but we seek one to come’) it implies a quest for what might never be attainable here and now. It’s fitting that almost half a century later, when for the first time a Longley collection earns a place-name title, that name, *Angel Hill*, is at once of this world, and otherworldly. Unafraid to capture the intimacies and specifics of this life, Longley is also one of the very few poets able to take us, time and again, to a place as ‘Wild and melodious’ as the birdsong he celebrates.



Bio: Fran Brearton

Fran Brearton is professor of modern poetry at Queen’s University Belfast, and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. Her books include *Reading Michael Longley* (2006) and, co-edited with Alan Gillis, *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* (2012).

Poem: “Ceasefire” by Michael Longley

Ceasefire

I

Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

II

Taking Hector’s corpse into his own hands Achilles
Made sure it was washed and, for the old king’s sake,
Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.

III

When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
To stare at each other’s beauty as lovers might,
Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

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IV

“I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles’ hand, the killer of my son.”



Michael Longley

Photograph courtesy of *The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives*,
John J. Burns Library, Boston College

“Ceasefire” copyright Michael Longley.

Reading Ireland would like to thank Michael Longley for his generous permission in allowing us to publish his poem “Ceasefire.”

Essay: “The Light Fantastic of Paul Muldoon”

by Mary O' Malley

I think Paul Muldoon is funny. He is more likely to hold a stiletto than a spade. His lines trip and pirouette, as Milton puts it in L'allegro, ‘Come, and trip it as ye go / On the light fantastick toe.’

His poems have a sense of exuberance and spontaneous fun.

‘Boys and girls together, me and Mamie O’Rourke / Tripped the light fantastic / On the sidewalks of New York.’



Paul Muldoon

Photograph courtesy of *The Bobbie*

Hanvey Photographic Archives,

John J. Burns Library, Boston College

I like the shorter lyric and some of the longer suites of poems, the orchestral pieces as well as the waltzes. I’m going to look at one of each, which I first read when they, and I were fresh and have gone back to now for another look.

‘Quinquereme of Nineveh...’ begins the poem “7, Middagh Street” in Paul Muldoon’s startling and brilliant fifth collection, *Meeting the British*. So begins too John Masefield’s famous poem “Cargoes.” When I first read that poem, I loved its daring, its cheeky appropriation of Masefield, Yeats, whatever lines were to hand for the job in hand. Above all, I liked the lines about Yeats’ ‘Did that play of mine/ send out certain men (*certain men?*)/ the English shot...?’/ the answer is ‘Certainly not.’ My sentiments exactly and it’s always nice to see the mighty taken down a peg. Or two.

30

And who can resist the image of Auden, no action man at the best of times, thrown from a donkey in the Spanish Civil War, or Yeats in his tower paying out ‘one gilt-edged scroll from his pencil/ as though he were part-Rapunzel,’ all the better that these lines are put into Auden’s mouth, while ‘Two girls in silk kimonos’ is given to Carson McCullers, and ‘Both beautiful, one a gazebo’ is Louis MacNeice’s first line in his section of this long poem.

It helps to know, as I didn’t when I first read the poem, that 7, Middagh Street was a house in Brooklyn Heights where Louis MacNeice, W. H. Auden, Gypsy Rose Lee, Salvador Dali, Carson McCullers and Benjamin Britten, among others, occupied at various times. I have since become interested in that strange and generous experiment for reasons unconnected with the poem, yet I can’t help feeling that if such a house hadn’t existed, Paul Muldoon might have invented it, so perfectly does it suit his literary shapeshifting, and in particular, his gift for ventriloquism, most successful in the sections entitled ‘Wystan’ and ‘Louis’, and in the bitchy and self-serving ‘Salvador’ :

‘...I left Barcelona by the back door
with a portfolio of work’

‘...The Anarchist taxi driver carried two flags,
Spanish and Catalan.’

I still remember the shock of the final two lines of the title poem, “Meeting the British,” but also the repetition of the word ‘lavender’, so gentle, and calm, then the Colonel, with his foppish shake of a handkerchief saying ‘*C'est la lavande,/ une fleur mauve comme le ciel,*’ before handing over the infected blankets and ‘six fishhooks.’ There is still something chilling reading this poem now, knowing what we know of chemical warfare, and of the fate of the Ottawa Indians, and of the Pontiac Rebellion. At least it begs the question ‘What do we know? Why don’t we know more?’

This is more than the sleight of hand turning upside down of the usual story. This is the quick/slow drip and word flow of a poet at his brilliant best.

“The Lass of Aughrim” a sonnet, or at any rate a fourteen line poem, drops a tender depth charge into the Amazon river, deft and beautiful, without demonizing the priest whose tibia is being used to lure fish to a young man’s line.

I read *Madoc* because I was introducing Paul Muldoon at ‘Cúirt,’ the poetry festival which I ran, along with Charlie MacBride and Trish Fitzpatrick, for about nine years. Maire Mhac an tSaoi gave a show-stopping reading on the same evening. *Madoc* had just come out and Muldoon would be reading from it. I didn’t want to be caught napping.

I was interested in what Andre Breton had done, in the play and experimentation of Fernando Pessoa and the school of poets who used heteronyms, and in Borges story “Pierre Menard, author of Don Quixote,” written in 1939, a year before the editor George Davis found the dilapidated house on Middagh Street, after he’d seen it in a dream. I was bound to like *Madoc* based as it was on the conceit that the Welsh prince who sailed to America in the twelfth century, so I wasn’t unprepared. I still found it perplexing, in part because I didn’t know several of the figures who featured, from Butler to Pyrrho, and I had only a glancing knowledge of many others. I thought it possible the poet had made some of them up, which in a sense he had. I had always liked the ludic aspect of Muldoon’s wordplay, how he could make a world spin on the turn of a phrase, as he does in “The Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife,” where the poet says he might as well be a guest at the marriage of Strongbow and Aoife

‘...as watch you, Mary,

try to get to grips
with a spider-crab’s
crossbow and cuirass.’

Such lines were rare in *Madoc*. I thought it ‘good in parts’ and was taken by its experimental daring, the shimmer of words used in new or different ways. The showoffery of ventriloquising all those philosophers, the name-checking, and the strangely arbitrary way in which they were shoehorned into the overall thesis all was a world of Muldoon’s choosing, as well as a world of his making. I thought he was having us on and I fully expected to meet ‘The Virginian.’

The book didn’t so much succeed for me as poetry as it did as an idea. And I was intrigued then at the ingenuity of taking Coleridge’s and Shelley’s idea of setting up, along with another 18th century poet-philosopher, Robert Southey, a Utopian community on the banks of the Susquehanna river and treating it as history - the freedom conferred by the past conditional.

The trouble is, Madoc demands that the reader work in ways that seem inappropriate to the occasion: one pictures work details of Ph.D. students already setting to, tracking down the references, preparing glosses, grinding keys...’ wrote John Banville in *The New York Review*, and I can’t disagree. Nor can I disagree with Lucy Mac Diarmuid’s opinion that “*Mr. Muldoon’s Madoc is sui generis, his own exuberant genre.*

Was Muldoon ‘off there in the distance, dancing by himself’ as Banville put it? Well, yes, mostly, especially in the second, book-length part, but then why not? Muldoon dancing is always a worthwhile sight, and we can be sure he is high-stepping on his way to somewhere else. I have never been convinced that all the shavings and dust should be swept off the floor after the occasional perfectly formed figure is passed for approval and show, so *Madoc* still stands for me, as an interesting experiment.

What strikes me now about those two quite different books of poetry is their confidence, the poet’s placing of himself, staking his claim on his own high ground, and choosing as his companions, some very rarified company to entertain with high class high jinks, tomfoolery and not a little etymological jiggery-pokery. If he shows us Coleridge eating cloudbERRIES, and tantalised by carrigeen, well, there was literary opium to be had, even on the banks of the Susquehanna river.

There is a map attributed to Ptolemy, but more reminiscent of Flann O’ Brien. It has a river, the Susquehanna, with two towns on its left bank. One is called Athens; the other is called Ulster. Somewhere above Pennsylvania, and above that, New York.

On re-reading *Madoc* recently, I see both it and *Meeting the British* as a kind of repositioning, How else could a young man from Ulster make his own way, a young man who would, it was clear from the start, go far and travel on his own terms. A rare bird, we are told in the oft repeated anecdote where Seamus Heaney says the sixteen-year old has nothing to learn from him. In some retellings, Heaney says that maybe he, Heaney, could learn from the young *rara avis* that is Paul Muldoon. They were mad for the Latin up North in those days. Whatever the detail, the young poet would strike out on his own.

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He would, to paraphrase Robert Pinsky paraphrasing a Zulu man, not worship the ancestors but he would consult them, and if his references to the Irish canon were more send-up than homage, a trove to be pilfered when a trinket was required, he did it so lightly that the sting floated like a butterfly.

These two books see Paul Muldoon choosing his ground the way all writers re-make their world in order to make their way by their own lights, but especially so in a country where the word ‘cartography’ is a loaded gun, as Brian Friel so deftly showed us in *Translations*, where sappers dug into the place names of the Táin route and came up with words that might as well have been brands of soap.

In a few deft poems, Muldoon set up his tent in America, where he would meet the British – and whoever else he wanted to invite in – on his own terms. From there, his quicksilver circus act was poised to tour, ready to rock and roll.



Photograph copyright Bobbie Hanvey.

Bio: Mary O' Malley

Mary O' Malley was born in Connemara in Ireland, and educated at University College Galway. She lived in Lisbon for eight years where she taught at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa. She served on the council of Poetry Ireland and was on the committee of the Cúirt International Poetry Festival for eight years, authoring its educational programme. She taught on the MA programmes for Writing and Education in the Arts at NUI Galway for ten years, and held the Chair of Irish Studies at Villanova University in 2013. She has also held Residencies in Paris, Tarragona, New York, NUI Galway, as well as in Derry, Belfast and Mayo. She has been active in environmental education for over twenty years with a specific interest in the Sea and Bogland.

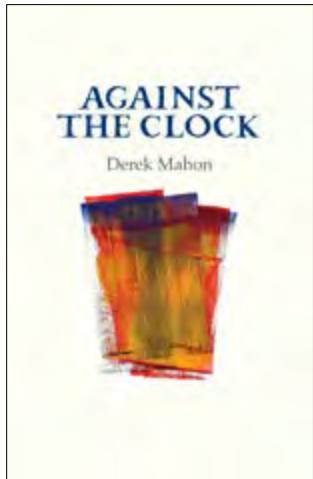
She has published seven books of poetry, including *Valpariso*, Carcanet Press (2012), arising out of her Residency on the Irish national marine research ship. *Playing The Octopus*, Carcanet Press (2016), is her most recent collection. Her work has been translated into several languages. *Donde Las Piedras Flotan*, a selection of her poems translated into Spanish, was published in summer 2018 by Olifante Press. She is currently working on a memoir of childhood, as well as essays on place. Her new collection, *Gaudent Angeli*, is due from Carcanet Press in the Autumn of 2019.

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She is a member of Aosdána and has won a number of awards in Ireland and the U.S. for her poetry, including the Humboldt Award in 2013. She writes for RTE Radio and broadcasts her work regularly. She was the 2016 Frank McCourt / Arts council Writer-in-Residence at the University of Limerick. She lectures and travels to read her work in the U.S. and Europe. She was joint winner of the Eigse Michael Hartnett Award 2018 and was presented with an award in recognition of excellence in poetry in Soria, Spain in August 2018. She currently teaches poetry on the MA in Writing at NUI Galway and has been appointed 2019 Writer Fellow at Trinity College Dublin.

Essay: “Poetry and Survival: Derek Mahon, *Against the Clock*”

by Hugh Haughton



Against the Clock

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In the title poem of his brilliant new collection *Against the Clock*, Derek Mahon tells himself, ‘You thought you’d done, ‘the uneven output/ finished at last, but that wasn’t the end.’ Always end-haunted, Mahon a few years ago said he had stopped writing poems and was turning his hand instead to prose. The result was a collection of agile essays included in *Red Sails* (2014) and a more recent collection with the elegantly anachronistic title *Olympia and the Internet* (2017). Under headings such as ‘Pots and Pans’, ‘Montaigne Redivivus’, ‘Red Sails in the Sunset’, ‘Space Time: East Cork’ in *Red Sails* and ‘Going to the Pictures’, ‘Rubbish Theory’, and ‘Clouds’ in the second collection, Mahon’s late essays read like poems by other means - chatty autobiographical commentaries on time, place, things and cultural memory, written with the allusiveness, reflective wit, omnivorous curiosity and stylistic grace familiar from the four decades’ worth of poetry assembled in *New Collected Poems* (2011).

Mahon the poet is back in harness, now ‘Writing against the clock, the flying calendar,/not to a regular but to a final deadline.’ With that deadly pun lurking in the ‘final deadline’ in mind, Mahon tells himself that ‘You’re here for one purpose and one only’ (playing on Robert Graves’s claim in ‘Juan and the Winter Solstice’ that ‘There is one story and one only’). That purpose is poetry. The poem goes on to invoke ‘the poets of old age/ who scribbled on at the unfinished work/ with undiminished courage’ and to call up the ghosts of earlier poets who wrote late into life, including Sophocles (‘who wrote *Colonus* in his ninetieth year’), Ovid, Hugo, Yeats and Anna Akhmatova, some of the many poets hovering in the wings of this new collection. In ‘Olympia and the Internet’, Mahon writes that ‘Poetry, that strange persistent art made up – ideally – of soul, song and formal necessity, survives and even thrives in the digital age; thrives, perhaps, because of digitization. It’s a form of resistance, or should be...’ In an early poem entitled ‘After the Titanic’, Mahon adopted the voice of a survivor himself, and now in his later work with ‘undiminished courage’ of his own, he writes a poetry of survival in many senses. Acutely aware of threats to the survival of the planet and the survival of poetry (among other arts), he is also conscious of the fact of his own survival.

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In the final poem of *New Collected Poems* (2011), Mahon referred to Edward Said on ‘late style’, and *Against the Clock* is a self-delighting expression of his own well-weathered late style and its ‘soul, song and formal necessity.’ Showing an inobtrusive mastery of a huge range of intricate short stanza-forms, the poems offer late variations on many of his abiding pre-occupations, including his mordant sense of cultural obsolescence, his animated sense of the life of things (there is even a poem called ‘Thing Theory’), his ongoing critique of capitalist modernity (there’s another poem called ‘Trump Time’), his long protest against our culture of waste and his increasingly ecologically-minded affirmation of ‘life on earth’ (the title of an earlier recent collection). Bridges, windows, sheds, beaches, birds, dawns, lost domains, northern light, new bungalows, old photographs (with ‘a past/ already fading as the shutters fall’): many of the poet’s signature motifs are resurrected in a new light and new key.

Mahon’s late style confirms what Said calls ‘the accepted notion’ that age ‘confers a spirit of reconciliation and serenity on late works, often expressed in terms of a miraculous transfiguration of reality.’ We get in abundance in Mahon’s new poems as well as something more like Adorono’s fiercer and more un-reconciled view of the style of late Beethoven, where ‘as

if, confronted with the dignity of human death, the theory of art were to divest itself of its rights and abdicate in favour of reality.' Luckily, however warm the embrace of reality in the new poems – with their celebration of the life of birds, animals, the seasons, woods, rivers, the sun, moon, tides and sea-shore around Kinsale where now lives - Mahon never gives up on the human need for art ('we live by grace of the created word', he says in a hymn to the sun), or the obligation to bear witness through form. Writing against the clock inevitably suggests Mahon's own time (like all of ours) is running out in his mid-seventies but it also reflects his obdurate need to write against the grain of the time.

Mahon's come-back was first signalled last year with *Rising Late*, a beautiful Gallery Press pamphlet of 16 poems with coloured illustrations by Donald Teskey which was a dazzling trailer for *Against the Clock*. In its title poem, the poet writes that 'Salvation lies in love of the simple thing/ such as our complex poets used to sing,' and declares, with the kind of expansive lyric consciousness we associate with Keats, Wallace Stevens or late Yeats: 'I would become, in the time left to me,/ the servant of an enhanced reality.' Though intensely conscious of the 'new age of unbeauty, rage and fear', and saddened by the death of fellow poets (including Heaney) with their 'quotient of soul, song and singularity', the poet insists on celebrating simple things like 'birdsong, harbour lights,/ the longer days and the short summer-nights.' *Against the Clock* gathers all the lyrics from the pamphlet into its late harbour with some revisions ('enhanced reality' becoming 'restored reality' in the line I've just quoted, for example), giving us nearly 50 new poems. These include some of Mahon's very best, including 'Ninth Wave', set on Mahon's archetypal site of the sea-shore. In it the poet recasts Robert Graves's White Goddess as the legendary ninth wave and asks:

Haunted by death, lost love, a nightmare past,
indictments of ourselves, what should we do
with these inheritances but write them through
and sing the praises of our only nurse
in gratitudes of prose and verse?

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Resurrecting the archaic plural noun 'gratitudes,' Mahon confronts his own dark biographical 'inheritances' of 'death, lost love and nightmare past' while affirming the imperative to 'write them through.' In confronting such inheritances, the poem generates a hymn of praise to his Gaia-like planetary nurse and muse, envisaged here as surfing in on the ninth wave. Wallace Stevens claimed that 'Death is the mother of beauty', and the poems in *Against the Clock* combine a new awareness of mortality with an enhanced ecological sense of the beauty and bounty of the world (what Mahon calls 'that first-day-of-creation point of view/ old Hugo in his Guernsey exile knew'). The poems are also however, keenly alive to the threats we pose to it, as in a poem about hurricane Ophelia, where in Yeatsian 'excited reverie', the poet finds himself 'in a true cyclone spun by fatal industries'.

In his earlier career, Mahon was very much the poet as traveller, a kind of Irish Childe Harold, writing mobile topographical poems about England ('The London of 'A Kensington Notebook', the Sussex of 'Brighton Beach'), Paris ('Resistance Days'), Rome ('Roman Script'), Venice ('High Water'), India ('Homage to Goa'), an imagined Japan ('The Snow Party'), USA ('New York Time' and 'Key West'), as well of course as from his native Northern Ireland ('Glengormley' and 'North Wind') and the Celtic Tiger Dublin of 'Decadence,' among a hundred other places his poems take in on their world tour. His 1972 poem 'Lives' is paradigmatic in this respect, being both a modern 'thing' poem and a 'trans-national' one, cutting with vertiginous grace between Ireland, Africa, North America, Ithaca and Tibet, and ending up with the ironic figure of an 'anthropologist' talking about 'ontology'. In his

recent essay on ‘Readings’ about poets as performers, Mahon says ‘I tired of readings, and of travel.’ Though no longer a traveller, the Mahon of *Against the Clock* is no less globally aware and no less intellectually mobile. Following George Moore’s dictum that ‘A mature artist takes the material closest to hand’, he sets almost all the new poems in his ‘retreat’ to the ‘Space Time’ of Co Cork where he now lives. In one poem – here I have to declare an interest, since it is called ‘To Hugh Haughton Retiring’ - he says ‘I’ve been retiring and retired out here/ from the ‘real world’ for many a quiet year.’ With characteristic self-mockery, he goes on to ask, ‘Who do I think I am? Tu Fu? Montaigne?’ before answering: ‘such precedents do help/ sustain/ a tactical retreat from the venal roar.’ Under-written, as always, by literary precedents from elsewhere, Mahon’s tactical retreat to Kinsale generates poems with a local focus but also a global reach. ‘Howe Strand’ begins with wind shaking ‘a telephone wire in fields of grain’ and ‘the back door of the Strand Café,’ but ends by reflecting on how ‘Chaos, an order without obvious order, throws/ such revelations at the shivering sand’ as the poet imagines a creator (or ‘spirit’), ‘still loudly evident as the daylight grows.’ Ontology and cosmology, such poems intimate, begin at home.



Derek Mahon in his study in Kinsale, County Cork.

Photograph Copyright John Minihan

Mahon has written numerous memorable poems about painters, and another poem is dedicated to the painter Charles Tyrrell and set in the ex-industrial, peninsular landscape of Allihies in West Cork, where Tyrrell lives. In it, Mahon remembers the time ‘we consumed landscape/ in the days before ecology came round,’ with that verb ‘consumed’ high-lighting the connection between aesthetic taste and environmental damage. Under its Seferis-inspired title ‘Mythistorema,’ the poem is a complex recapitulation of many earlier Mahon poems of place. The ‘disused engine houses’ and its underworld visions recall ‘A Disused Shed in Co Wexford’ while the ‘full moon shining on ruined Kor’ reminds us of the London poem ‘During the War,’ where the poet was to be found ‘reading Bowen again in Mysterious Kor.’ Likewise the poem’s ‘copper-mine museum’, ‘ghost of myth’ and departed miners who ‘took off for Montana and Colorado’ call up memories of the emigrés in ‘A Garage in Co Cork,’ while the ‘stricken voice’ of the ‘struck lyre’ recalls ‘Ovid in Tomis’ and ‘North Wind: Portrush.’ As Orpheus emerges from the exhausted mine after failing in his ‘heroic bid’ to save Eurydice, Mahon sees the classic poetic survivor Orpheus as ‘condemned thenceforth/ to sing on in the clear light of the world.’

Most of the new poems sing of and in that clear light. In ‘Montaigne’, the speaker says, ‘I can do nothing without gaiety/ still there despite the death of Boétie’, obliquely referring to the death of his friend Seamus Heaney, but also recalling the late Yeats who praised ‘gaiety transfiguring all that dread’ in ‘Lapis Lazuli.’ In ‘Olympia’, his ode to his old-fashioned type-writer (‘clickety-click/(each imprint an antique...’), Mahon speaks of the mythologically named writing machine and himself as ‘two crotchety relics of a previous age/ jazzing it up again as/ in the great days.’ Mahon’s Montaigne says, ‘I make nature my study as I grow old/ unknowing to the last, in the known world’, and in his jazzy late style Mahon relishes both the well-tempered clavier of the traditional rhymed stanza (‘a rhyme in your head’) and the familiar rhythms of the natural world’ (‘the deep rhythms’ and ‘constant beat of the life cycle’). Making nature his study, Mahon has poems to the ‘prodigious rays’ of the

sun ('A Bright Patch'), the 'ambiguous authority' of the moon ('A Full Moon in May'), the 'crucible' of the stars ('Stardust'), rain ('Rain Shadows'), and to the 'wood-wide web' of trees ('A Clearing') and 'unruly woods' ('The Rain Forest'). There is also a poem to 'Botany', and many poems to birds, including the childhood vignette recorded in 'A Dove in the House' and a gently satirical ode to the earth-bound 'comedians' among the birds celebrated in 'Woodpigeons at the Grove,' who are described as 'worldly, self-confined to safety zones' but 'still dreaming of our once infinite horizons.'

If Mahon makes nature his study, his nature is never divorced from culture. In 'Trump Time' Mahon speaks of 'where a spring rises, in the little wood/ of birch and sycamore beside the house' and of the 'undying source/ whispering there.' 'Such things survive', he says, 'beloved of poet and artist/ only where their despoilers haven't noticed.' Again, this is Mahon the poet of survival. In 'Data', he finds himself 'noticing again the singular things/ I noticed as a boy: the hidden springs,/ the sound of silence, nap of tablecloths,/ sea taste of iodine,' ending the sentence with a representation of the 'scrambling interface/ of ebbing tide and incoming tide race.' That 'interface' reminds us Mahon always writes with the 'situational' sense he attributed to Swift and is anchored in the present, even though he ends the poem by reflecting that we don't need a computer 'to contemplate/ that morphic resonance where swifts migrate/ in close formation from a river mouth.' Here the full-mouthing rhymes and flowing cadences show the 'morphic resonance' of Mahon's late embodiments of Coleridge's 'shaping-spirit of Imagination.' In 'Ebb Tide', pondering the 'riddles in the sand' in one of his signature shore poems – he has always been a littoralist of the imagination - Mahon confronts 'a place of origins,/ a fertile space for the evolving forms.' Once again a meditation on zoological life is interwoven with a sense of his own poetically 'evolving forms' (reminding us of his astonishing command of protean stanza forms in *Against the Clock*). 37

Mahon's allusion in the title-poem to 'gratitudes of prose and verse' points to the overlap between the poems and the new essays in *Olympia and the Internet*. This is evident in the parallel life of the title-essay about technologies of writing and the poem 'Olympia,' Mahon's love-song to his type-writer, which is cast in trim sestets in syncopated rhyming couplets:

We commune, she
and I, in silent privacy,
ribbon and paper glimmering. I wait,
she waits, for a first word to communicate
itself with a hesitant beat
to the white sheet.

Having captured the hesitant inception of the poem, poet and type-writer 'find a rhythm' and get caught up in 'the dance of keys, the trance/ of composition,' as the 'sumptuous black register records/ the notes of the concerto.' There's nothing Olympian about the poem or the wide-ranging discursive essay on the writing habits of writers, but the lyric brings us closer to the materiality of the machine and the musical 'trance' of poetic creation. The essay informs the poem and vice versa. There are other parallels between essays and lyrics. The essay on 'Horizons' is subliminally twinned with a poem with the same title, which alludes to the same dictum of Einstein, where 'You hear a different music of the spheres according to where we sit in the auditorium', and where the phrase 'where you stand on the shore' becomes 'You hear a different music of the spheres/ depending on where you stand on these quiet shores.' The essay touches deftly on a flighty set of instances, including Paul Bowles, Roget's Thesaurus, Shakespeare, Ernst Lubitsch's 'flighty' movie *Monte Carlo*, Proust in Balbec ('Proust was on to horizons early'), realist landscape paintings by Claude and Ruisdael, the story of Niamh and Oisín, Hy-Brasil, St Brendan's navigation, Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us* and it ends with a discussion

of his partner Sarah Iremonger's paintings about what she calls 'the horizons of paintings.' In fact Iremonger, the dedicatee of Mahon's collection, has painted a number of works entitled 'Horizons'. The airily rhymed sestets of the poem treat horizons less allusively than the essay, revealing, phrase by unfolding phrase, the truth of the fact that 'beyond the rising and declining sun/ are more horizons.' Following close on the heels of the essay, the poem imagines a straight line that 'opens up the sea/ to ancient shipwreck, drowned forest, lost continents and nuclear waste', and invents a witty variant on his earlier 'Heraclitus upon Rivers' when affirming 'nobody clears the same horizon twice.' Neither poem nor essay quite clears the same horizon either. Likewise, the autobiographical essay 'Here at the Grove' is a companion-piece to the poem 'Woodpigeons at the Grove,' celebrating homely and home-oriented pigeons rather than those celebrated in St John Perse's ode to 'Braques's birds wide oceanic reach' (a poem Mahon once translated). In the same essay Mahon speaks of 'that sense of unique location, of special ambience, writers and artists find hard to resist,' a sense deep-rooted in the volume as a whole, which, like the essay, dwells in and on the Grove in Kinsale where he lives, representing it as a 'field of energy, and an inspiration.'

'What can I but enumerate old themes?', Yeats asked in his late 'The Circus Animals' Desertion.' If many of Mahon's poems in his wonderful new collection enumerate his old themes, they do so in ways that are eloquent, moving, and resourceful (in every sense) and with that sense of a 'unique location.' As a result, they too become 'fields of energy.' One of the finest of them, 'Ivy' is cast in witty Ben Jonson-style tetrameter couplets, and opens with the assertion that ivy 'embraces fields of energy', drawing again on the phrase quoted in the essay by the 'environmental writer' Roderic Knowles. The poem celebrates the sheer persistence of ivy as a 'perennial victor' with a 'proud ancestral line' and which has 'known the love of poets', imagining it as 'the final flower/ of life' that will survive 'the great cities where we died.' Such poems confirm Mahon as an indispensable ecological voice and a survivor poet who, like Auden, continues to respond to the challenges of cultural change, political crisis, and global threat in the present, simultaneously offering a savage critique of contemporary culture and showing the survival of the 'affirming flame' Auden advocated.



Bio: Hugh Haughton

Hugh Haughton was born in Cork and is Professor of Modern Literature, University of York. He is the author of *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (2007) and numerous essays on modern poetry. He is the editor of *Second World War Poems* (2004), Freud's *The Uncanny* (2003), and the first two volumes (with Valerie Eliot) of *The Letters of T.S. Eliot* (2011).

Profile: “Balancing Fire, Dreams and the Signatures of All Things: Sinéad Morrissey’s Poetry and Poetics”

by Brian Caraher



Sinéad Morrissey

*Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives,
John J. Burns Library, Boston College*

Almost two hundred poems collected and craftfully arranged in six published collections, 1996 to 2017; two major poetry awards – The T S Eliot Prize for *Parallax* (2013) and The Forward Prize for *On Balance* (2017) – over the last five years; the nomination as Belfast’s inaugural Poet Laureate; and Professorships in Creative Writing -- first at Queen’s University Belfast and then at Newcastle University, England -- have placed Sinéad Morrissey at the forefront of contemporary British and Irish poetry. Though perhaps understandably Morrissey doesn’t get a mention in the otherwise extraordinarily capacious and well-edited *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women’s Poetry* (2011), she receives only the most cursory

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gloss in the final paragraph of David Wheatley’s concluding chapter to *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, entitled “Irish Poetry into the Twentieth-First Century” (265). In contrast, Wes Davis’ *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry* – a sumptuously edited, wide-ranging collection of post-Wildean, post-Yeatsian and post-Joycean poetry by Irish poets born in the 1880s through the 1970s -- provides a sound selection of sixteen of Morrissey’s poems and places them at the conclusion of 935 pages of offerings in a carefully chosen spectrum of forty-three men and ten women writers. Wes Davis’ knowing nod securely positions Sinead Morrissey’s work within the ranks of modern and contemporary Irish poetry, and he most definitely promotes her early achievements for a voracious international audience eager for excellent Irish writing.

Davis also signals the contentious issue of poetic influence regarding Morrissey’s early, emphatic yet fascinatingly varied appearance on the poetic scene. ‘At fourteen,’ Davis notes (922), ‘Morrissey told an interviewer, she “fell under the dangerous spell of Sylvia Plath, like so many teenage girls with literary aspirations”.’ Plath’s influence is distinctly there in early work, especially the first volume of poems published by Carcanet in 1996, *There Was Fire in Vancouver*. Moreover, in October 1990, Morrissey with her Plath-inflected poems had become the youngest winner (aged 18) of the prestigious annual Irish writers’ competition, The Patrick Kavanagh Award for Poetry. However, there is an impressive range of growing influences across the full body of Morrissey’s poetry, especially ‘Les Murray, the Australian poet she points to as the strongest influence on her own work’ as it has grown and matured (Davis 922). In conversation with the Yorkshire poet Ian Duig in late 2017, Morrissey responded to a point concerning writers needing and creating their own influential ‘precursors’. Morrissey asserts:

‘I would entirely agree that we create our own precursors – we need that conversation so desperately. The idea of influence is too passive. Les Murray was important to me in my middle 20s – I turned him into my teacher on form, because I knew understanding form better was going to bring me out of a creative impasse caused by overreliance on inspiration. I read Amy Clampitt later for her self-generating, knotty, but deeply generous linguistic response to the world. I love Mayakovsky too,

for his spiky exuberance, his bold rupturing of the line in the wake of the Russian Revolution, for showing me the kinds of things which disrupted white space can allow into a poem.' (Duig 27)

This superb, considered reply exhibits an international range of reading, influences and creative conversations for Morrissey and her poetic development. There are American, Australian, Russian and various Anglophone Irish and Welsh 'influences' recognised and 'precursors' acknowledged. Fifteen years earlier, during an interview for a School of English newsletter, soon after taking up her full-time post as Queen's University Belfast Writer-in-Residence, she struck a markedly similar yet more detailed note on influences:

'Over the course of my life so far, Plath, McNeice, R. S. Thomas and Les Murray have been my biggest influences. Or I don't know if influence is even the right word. With Plath it is – I read her as a teenager and adopted her voice, and spent my twenties trying to get rid of her. The others are just poets I've read a lot and admired and felt inspired by; I don't think you can hear their voices through mine.¹ Murray has been the latest one. He's just so capable – he has such sweeping control of language and makes it do such unusual things – speak in the consciousness of a sunflower, or a herd of cattle about to be slaughtered, or a shoal of fish. His versatility is frequently breathtaking. And he can be very tender. I like him when he's being tender about landscape in particular.' (King 1)

Indeed, the now-80-year-old Australian poet Murray provides the now-46-year-old Morrissey (30 years old at the time of the interview just cited) with a formative influence and model of poetic practice, certainly over her last four published volumes. Plath is admitted as an early influence and internalized 'voice,' one which Morrissey has striven since *Between Here and There* (2002) to expunge in the interests of expanding, diversifying and maturing her range of voices, sympathies and engagements. However, from very early on, Morrissey has been poetically 'transatlantic' and markedly international in her choice of influences, precursors, teachers and voices. She's certainly not content to remain insular, conservative and 'traditional' in her poetics.²

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Morrissey's marked antipathy to Philip Larkin, for instance, helps to flesh out this choice of poetics in no uncertain terms. The poem "To Look Out Once from High Windows" in her first volume from 1996 glosses a number of poems from *High Windows* (1974) and *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), especially the title poems of these quintessentially Larkin collections. Morrissey caustically criticizes Larkin's choice of poetic stance and its misogynistic and counter-domestic undercurrents:

To Look Out Once from High Windows

Cost you your railway lines, washing lines, sex on billboards
Seven feet high, pissing in gardens, smoking in bedsits, dust.
Cost you the choice you never made so you could be lost
In the closest way to being found: the quicksand of a wife, in-laws,
The decrease that children bring, or an attic full of yourself only
Only yourself and only as you tell it – wanking and lonely. (*There Was Fire* 47)

To gaze out once from the ‘High Windows’ and ‘all-round prison wall’ that Larkin’s insular solitude has given him would unsettle the resolutely ‘lonely,’ sterile and puerile existence of a ‘wanker’ and precipitate the poet toward ‘life’ and loving compromise.

To look out once from High Windows was to fly
Over the walls you saw in life, in life’s renunciation
And beyond, and to accept that endlessness might mean resolution.
All words broke there. You stopped your various desolations colliding
By just looking up. You built your runway out of decimated love
And saw in flight how nothing could be left to lose or prove. (*There Was Fire* 47)

Larkin’s onanistic insularity fails resolutely as life-choice and as poetic stance for Morrissey; and her accusatory, bitterly ironic voice here indicates such self-imprisoning solitude is nothing more, nothing less than self-indulgent ‘flight’ from life and love. In *The State of the Prisons* (2005) Morrissey returns to indict Larkin once again. “Reading the Greats” foregrounds ‘Larkin on Empire’ as one of those ‘avoidable mistakes’ into which some poets stumble, especially in those otherwise-overlooked and dismal strands of their ‘omnivorous Completes’ (35). Such ‘failures’ of ‘the Greats’ exposes

a seascape suddenly drained and stinking
of flies & fishheads & bladderwrack.
And the tide impossibly distant. And no way back. (*The State* 35)

Yet the most incisive indictment of Larkin and his poetics is found in the title poem of Morrissey’s latest collection, *On Balance* (2017). “On Balance” deploys as epigraph seven lines from “Born Yesterday,” a poem from Larkin’s collection *The Less Deceived* (1955), and plays off the condescending characterization of female ambitions embodied in the poet-speaker’s wishes for a newborn girl’s future:

*May you be ordinary;
Have, like other women,
An average of talents:
Not ugly, not good-looking,
Nothing uncustomary
To pull you off your balance [. . .]
In fact, may you be dull* (*On Balance* 11)

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Morrissey responds vigorously to Larkin’s misogynistic construction of the ‘balance’ in prospect for a fully grown woman: ‘Even fully grown,/ she’d be a ‘girl’ to you’ (11). There is no sympathy for appalling Larkinesque humor at the expense of women, newborn or mature:

You were the mean fairy
at the christening,
feigning honesty.
No doubt her father slapped
you on the back,
admired your dazzling
final turn from lack
to grudging benediction. (*On Balance* 11)

Morrissey pastiches Larkin's clipped, faux-benedictory, poetic lines and occasional end-rhymes ('talents' and 'balance' & 'back' and 'lack'). However, as she tackles Larkin's labelling 'dull' as the choice of blessing for a woman's future, Morrissey's reponse strikes a dismissive incandescence in her final six lines:

I wouldn't let you near
my brilliant daughter –
so far, in fact, from *dull*,
that *radiant, incandescent*
are as shadows on the landscape
after staring at the sun. (*On Balance* 11)

Morrissey finds firey rhetoric -- indeed verbal signatures of fire and vision: radiance and incandescence -- as shadowy markers for her own daughter's brilliance in a sun-struck 'landscape.' No Larkinesque feminine dullness and constriction of ambitions here. Fire, vision and the ability to read the signatures of visible things appears in prospect for her 'girl.' Yet in "On Balance" Morrissey slyly indicates they also mark out the ambition and project of the mature woman writer in the here and now of poetry. Morrissey's antipathy to Larkin's persona is clearly and more generally an antipathy to the 'manly,' phallocentric and misogynistic poetics of Larkin and much mainstream English and Anglo-Irish poetry in its clapped-out 'Georgian,' 'Hardyesque' and neo-Georgian style – namely, formalist, attitudinally and tonally conservative, anti-rhetorical, colloquial, violent, casually realistic, agnostic, pessimistic, elegiac, dirge-like, resentful and masculinist.³ It's no surprise, then, that Morrissey casts her eyes, her ears, her ambition and her search for influences, 'teachers' and 'precursors' more broadly than the received masculinist tradition of *High Windows* and its insular acolytes.

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And it is with the stunning first collection, *There Was Fire in Vancouver*, published when the poet was 24, that I choose to commence my tracing of Morrissey's productive conversations with her 'precursors' and her own search for a brilliantly mature 'balance' in poetry and poetics. The forty-two poems of this early collection begin with eleven lyrics largely focused on Belfast and Northern Ireland from the perspective of a teenager channeling her experience through a Plath-like voice:

Friday. Eight o'clock. Pissing rain.
Belfast a shallow bowl of light,
The Black Hill a power failure
Touching the sky.
I've seen it all. But the places in your head
Stay shut to me, and I'm grasping at why. (*There Was Fire* 9)

The terse, succinct capturing of factual detail and emotionally deep imagery in sharp juxtaposition -- as well as the 'I' and 'you' of female and male *contretemps* -- augurs the influence of Sylvia Plath.⁴ The latter is there in strongest profile in "Double Vision," "Eleven" and "Thoughts in a Black Taxi" (*There Was Fire* 9, 13, 19-20); Morrissey employs her early Plath-like voice to capture adroitly physical and emotional carnage and contradictions of Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s. Significantly Morrissey does not remain here or enamored in this singular choice of voice.

The second movement or cluster of poems reveal her shifting ground and perspective, including toward the magnificent title poem of this early collection. Five poems register death-like experiences or journeys through death to 'light,' 'love' and 'fire' (*There Was Fire*

21-5). All five poems are set elsewhere, a ‘there’ largely outside of Northern Ireland yet perhaps positing the North as ‘the precipice’ counterpointing these other places (24). With its echo of Hamlet’s ‘the undiscovered country’ of death in its penultimate line, “In the Valley of Lazarus” charts the near-death experiences of ten skiers and numerous bikers and drivers who ‘crashed like stars into darkness’ yet who ‘came back./ All countries discovered, There was no shocking them’ (21). Other deaths chart lives ‘empty of light’ or lives ‘strain[ing] to reach God,’ ‘love’ or ‘light’ in their final moments (22-3). “There Was Fire in Vancouver” brings this cluster to an incandescent crescendo with its vision of a promised land, one that counterpoints Vancouver to Belfast and the Northern Lights of western Canada to the incendiary flames of Northern Ireland in conflict. It’s worth quoting from this marvellous early poem generously:

There was fire in Vancouver,
And we leaned out into the night to watch it
Set light to the East End.
It had taken stand on Commercial Avenue.

We marvelled at the darkness of the city,
All neon dulled by the superior flame,
And wondered would it bestow its dance
On the Ginseng Teahouse in Chinatown, on Jericho Pier. (*There Was Fire* 25)

It’s crucial to note the phrasing: ‘There was fire’ and not ‘there was a fire.’ Vancouver is lit up by visionary light, an *aurora borealis* of a different order, that has ‘Set light to the East End.’ This ethereal dawn issues from the ethnically and culturally mixed ‘end’ of Vancouver, where for nearly a century Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Greek, Italian, Portuguese and eastern European immigrants to western Canada have settled and worked cooperatively together. The speaker wonders whether this multicultural ‘fire,’ this ‘superior flame,’ ‘would bestow its dance’ on areas in the older, western neighborhoods of Vancouver marked off by Chinatown and Jericho Pier, areas of earlier Chinese and English settlement dating back to the nineteenth century. The poem concludes with the stanza:

There were no sirens, hoses, buckets even,
Scattering streets and ‘Fire!’ ‘Fire!’
We seemed the only ones conscious of the bright crusade
And we watched with Moses standing in our heads. (25)

The first brace of lines here underscores the visionary nature of ‘fire’ yet also perhaps counterpoints ‘Fire in Vancouver’ as distinctly unlike the incendiary fires ‘Scattering streets’ of cities such as Belfast (or Beirut or Sarajevo) wracked by civil unrest and socio-ethnic and religious rivalries. The collective, plural speaker-visionary of the poem – ‘we’ – is permitted a privileged sight, one assimilated to the prototypical vision of the weary prophet-leader in the wilderness of exile and civil deracination: Moses standing on Mount Pisgah. In the thirty-fourth and final chapter of *Deuteronomy* Moses goes to the top of Mount Pisgah, east of Jericho, facing the land of Canaan (ancient Palestine), and is shown the ‘promised land’ given by God to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their Hebrew descendants in *Genesis*, chapters 12, 26 and 28. Morrissey strongly evokes this cultural and religious prototype of visionary election. It would seem to signal that multicultural, multi-ethnic, civically cooperative Vancouver may well be the enlightened promised land to the west of Belfast and those cities of Europe once wracked by civic disorder and atavistic efforts at ‘ethnic cleansing’ in the 1990s.

A third cluster of seven poems ensues, largely about relationships and friendships gone awry: ‘there’s no stopping the undoing/ Of all that keeps us us and not we,’ as the poem “Clothes” has it (*There Was Fire* 28). The Plath-influenced voice, Plath-inflected lines and Plath-like scenarios feel strongly recognizable in this cluster, especially the poems “You,” “Clothes,” “The Mirror on the Ceiling” and “A Visitor” with its Plath-like construction: ‘Everything screamed her in her own absence. I felt ousted’ (*There Was Fire* 32). A fourth cluster of six poems turn upon personal and familial recollections and scenarios Morrissey will continue to mine in each of her published volumes. The longest poem in *There Was Fire in Vancouver* – “Mercury” (33-8) – commences this cluster through a fascinating six-part exploration of ‘Where your feet belonged’ (37) on the part of a young figure who shifts voice mercurially from third to second to first to second and then back to first person as the sequence develops. ‘Mercury’ seems a displacement for ‘Morrissey,’ and this shape-shifting voice metamorphoses perspective on the poet’s younger years and changes focal images of her self-understanding – from ‘Chinese vase being painted in/ By time’ through a gull caught in ‘The music of my loneliness’ to ‘tulips . . . nodding their heads in the garden’ (33, 35, 38). Mercury (a version of the Greek god Hermes) is the legendary bringer of morning light and divine messages, including divinatory dreams. Morrissey seems to be trying out an archetypal, indeed mythical, voice for herself as she attempts to chart a developmental shift from a private ‘shape’ for herself ‘beautiful and brittle as bone’ (33) to a decidedly more public construction of herself as exhibiting ‘that knack of knowing how to thrust colour skywards,/ Flaunting the unlikely, shocking through bloom’ (38). From brittle Chinese vase to exiled, lonely seagull to knowing garden of resurgent, blooming, colourful tulips comprise a deep-imaginistic itinerary marked out in the lyrical sequence, “Mercury”; it’s a sequence that may well sublimate and reconfigure the imagery and the drift of one of Sylvia Plath’s most stunning, resonant and beautiful poems, “Tulips.” Regardless, it’s a strong, brilliant announcement that Morrissey as ‘Mercury’ has come to read ‘A skyline of signatures’ and leave behind ‘a walled up room,/ Somewhere you can’t get back to’ (34): ‘It was then you knew there’d be dreams for years’ (37). Those dreams seem rooted in family and familial relationships, as the rest of the ensuing cluster substantiates.

Indeed, the next handful of poems show Morrissey locating herself among familial, especially female relations – a mother, an aunt, a grandmother, a great aunt -- and their various ambitions and desires (*There Was Fire* 39-45). “Hazel Goodwin Morrissey Brown” evokes an aunt who flies from years of protest in Northern Ireland, who ‘saw fire in the windows,’ and who has ‘settled [her] feathers after the flight/ In a fairytale rainforest. Discovered the freedom of the last resort’ (39). In “Awaiting Burial” great aunt Sarah is asked, ‘speak to me, you’ve been through/ The journey, was there light on the other side’ (41). A grandmother, ‘one who broke rank,’ and a mother who ‘never forgot her gypsy blood/ And broke rank all her life’ are invoked as progenitive role models of iconoclastic mothers of ‘moon-eyed children/ Who played together in the land of glass’ in the seven-section poem, “My Grandmother through Glass” (42-5). Close, remembered female relatives embody ambitions, desires and treasured models of action for the poet-speaker/ Morrissey, the ‘I’ of these poems. Then, “To Look Out Once from High Windows” is sharply juxtaposed to this set of poems so strongly evocative of the powers of the feminine and the mutual support of familial relationships. Larkin’s perceived antipathy to ‘the quicksand of a wife, in-laws,/ The decrease that children bring, or an attic full of youself only’ (47), thus, has an extraordinarily resonant context in the project and stance of Morrissey’s own life-story and developing poetics.

The final twelve poems of *There Was Fire in Vancouver* cluster into two sets that seem to build an arc of lyric reflections on light, love and visionary invocations of the angelic and the divine. ‘God’ is invoked recurrently, or better yet reconfigured persistently as a presence, in these con-

cluding lyrics. The handful of poems from “After the Hurricane” to “My New Angels” (48-52) find evidence of God’s power and presence in the natural and the human forces of this world, especially ‘light’ as ‘their element’ (51). Perhaps it’s no accident that the attitude and tenor of Gerard Manley Hopkins can be heard in this set of incandescent, self-transcending lyrics:

I don’t know why God gave the world,
But I am in it. Looking up, I want to photograph
The blown blossom and the receding colours of the day –
To affirm my sky as beautifully as a blackbird. (*There Was Fire* 50)

So says the single quatrain that comprises the lyric “Twenty-One,” and it’s perhaps this handful of poems which answer so significantly to Morrissey’s citation of the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas as an influence. Here we see and hear her being ‘absolutely faithful to [her] own poetic concerns, regardless of a predominantly atheistic environment and changing literary fashions.’ However, the concluding seven poems of the collection raise the poetic bar and stoke the firey vision even higher. “Her Love” to “Restoration” (53-60) reveal the struggles such affirmation of divine power and presence undergo. In the strident lyric “If Words,” Morrissey contrasts words as ‘all the small-minded/ Weapons of fear’ to her aspiring dream of words as our better angels, expressive of our better selves:

I dream of the mouth as a nest
Giving flight to

Lilies, windows,
Gold letters and chimes,
Witch-hazel, a lighthouse,
An oak beam, a warm sea
And a bright white body
In the act
Of forgetting itself –
Shuddering with love. (*There Was Fire* 55)

45

The creative power and acts of the writer provide a matrix for de-weaponizing ‘the small-minded’ and for self-forgetting, self-transcendence, enlightenment and love. The next poem, “The Juggler,” deftly strives for a related recognition. Wes Davis foregrounds this poem in his selection of Morrissey’s work for *The Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry* and prefaces it with these words:

“The Juggler,” for example, is a kind of sideshow *ars poetica* in which the performer’s anachronistic skill is tantamount to poetry. The supple craft the juggler troubles himself to master serves no practical purpose and it requires a lifetime’s practice to hone its techniques to a point of effortless performance – the ‘game,’ as Morrissey puts it, ‘whittled/ / To art.’ His achievement is in the momentary control his art demonstrates over a world that – by physical gravity and metaphysical chance – seems otherwise conditioned toward the failure of human endeavors. (Davis 921)

Yes, agreed, yet Davis sleights the weight and the burden of Morrissey’s final three lines:

With all the improbables cajoled
Into truth, we are not as far out
From faith as we were. (*There Was Fire* 56)

The well-trained juggler and the well-practiced poet bring us toward ‘faith’ in the ‘game,’ the ‘art’ and the task of bringing ‘the improbables’ of our world toward collective belief in the merit of our skills and our acts of ordering and enlightening our lives. “The Juggler” is a lyrical *ars poetica* that seeks to overcome our default state as ‘Natural begrudgers’ and to lead us toward self-forgetting, self-transcendence, enlightenment and love, the same burden as the previous poem, “If Words” (*There Was Fire* 56). Moreover, the collection closes with the two-part poem “Restoration” in which the desolation of a strand on Achill Island, Mayo in 1985 with ‘the sea . . . wide and emptied of love’⁵ is overwhelmingly counterpointed by the restoration of light, faith and love experienced on Juist Island, East Frisia, Germany in 1991:

The sea is revealing itself
By its own light light revealing
Essences of light:
Meeresleuchten, lights of the sea

One touch and the water explodes
In phosphorescence
No one knows if it lives
It is as though God has said

*Let there be light in this world
Of nothing let it come from
Nothing let it speak nothing
Let it go everywhere* (*There Was Fire* 59-60)

46

Phosphorescent ‘lights of the sea’ – perhaps produced by shoals of invertebrates or tidal flows of algae or plankton – are felt and read as visible signatures of the restorative power and presence of the divine. Yes, Morrissey phrases it ‘as though,’ *as if* God reveals such power and presence in the manifestation of visible things, when a northern sea is no longer ‘wide and emptied of love’ but suffused with creative and restorative ‘light’ (59). However, Morrissey is willing and bold, brave and courageous enough, to invoke and reconfigure the words and images of the first chapter of *Genesis* where -- for the Jewish and Christian traditions of faith -- light and love enter a world breathed from nothingness. *There Was Fire in Vancouver* seeks nothing less than to recover light, fire, faith and ‘superior flame’ for the troubled darknesses of our cities and islands (25).

Between Here and There, Morrissey’s second volume of poetry, continues her juxtaposition of the ‘here’ of Belfast and Northern Ireland to a ‘there,’ an elsewhere, with Japan as the significant, designated, other place. Indeed, the collection is graphically divided into two parts with ‘JAPAN’ as the singular title of the second. The presence of Asian deities is noted, and the Christian deity rather notably slips into the background of *Between Here and There*. Other sources and complexities of light, fire and vision seem under exploration in this collection, with perhaps a turn to lyrical agnosticism, given the breadth of encounters and experiences explored.

Part I of *Between Here and There*, comprising twenty-four poems, commences with two pieces charting the poet’s place, here and now in 2002, in ‘our splintered city’ of Belfast and looking outward toward tourists to ‘infect us with your radical ideas’ and to ‘bring us new symbols’ (14). The touch of Les Murray seems to mark a number of pieces as the collection branches out from its local, self-reflective, contemplative start. The slightly comedic touch, formal play and social critique of texts like “Publisher’s Notes” (17), “In Need of a Funeral”

(22), “Rock Pool” (25), “Darwin Man” (26) and “The Inheriting Meek” (27) all argue the influence of Morrissey’s new ‘teacher,’ Les Murray. The Plath-like voice and imagery of “Nettles” (18) and “Street Theatre” (19) also indicate the survival of Morrissey’s earlier influence in the way that ‘a frozen unnecessary duel’ between increasingly estranged partners is poignantly dramatized (*Between* 19). “Sea Stones” seems Plath-like too in its construction of a painful argument between a couple in which ‘the sting of your ring finger’ catches and marks the mouth and facial skin of the speaker who cannot ‘stop the cup of my hurt/ flowing over and over until I saw there was no end of it/ and only an end to me. How promiscuous pain can be’ (20). Secrets and ‘truth’ ‘got dropped between us like a fallen match’; yet the speaker, ‘suddenly wanting to be struck again, to keep the fire of your anger lit,’ bites her lip in anticipation (20). This emotionally intense, graphically violent poem perhaps shocks read solely on its own, yet “Sea Stones” positioned on a left-handed, *verso* page is paired with “& Forgive Us Our Trespasses” on the facing right-handed, *recto* page. The placement and the partnering of the two poems appear strikingly deliberate, not just because of the use of an ampersand, but because the second poem responds to, explores, analyzes and prays for the circumstances of its pair. “& Forgive Us Our Trespasses” is a Shakespearean sonnet which also subsumes the rhetoric and progression of a prayer, not unlike Carol Ann Duffy’s famous signature sonnet “Prayer” from *Mean Time* (1993).⁶ Morrissey’s poem posits that among ‘Our Trespasses . . . the first is love,’ ‘especially the loves we shouldn’t foster’ but that ‘burrow faster and linger longer/ than sanctioned kinds can’ (*Between* 21).

Loves that thrive on absence, on lack
of return, or worse on harm [as in “Sea Stones”], are unkillable, Father.
They do not die in us. And you know how we’ve tried.
Loves nursed, inexplicably, on thoughts of sex,
a return to touched places, a backwards glance, a sigh –
they come back like the tide. They are with us at the terminus
when cancer catches us. They have never been away.
Forgive us the people we love – their dragnet influence. (*Between* 21)

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The prayer sublimated in the confessional rhetoric of this plea for forgiveness is The Lord’s Prayer or “Our Father,” though distinctive phrases surface in the title and lines 4, 10 and 14 of the full poem. The poem comprises one of the few instances the Christian God is invoked in *Between Here and There*, yet ‘Father’ seems invoked ritually to hear and comprehend the self-analysis of self-destructive circumstances which mark the trespasses, the sins against love, that plague us from youth until death. God is not so much a power or a presence here as an interlocutor for confessional analysis. The closing couplet of “& Forgive Us Our Trespasses” underscores this construction:

Accept from us the inappropriate
by which our dreams and daily scenes stay separate. (*Between* 21)

The plea for forgiveness of sins metamorphoses into an offering of our understanding of ‘the inappropriate’ – our trespasses – to our creative auditor, our parental confessor and our forgiving analyst, our ‘Father.’ We know and are plagued by self-division ‘by which our dreams and daily scenes stay separate.’ Our self-analysis, however, comprehends the toll taken by the contradictory play of nightmarish ‘dreams’ and the ‘daily bread’ of our ‘sanctioned’ lives -- or conversely, the aspirant ‘dreams’ of our better selves that pale before the ‘daily scenes’ of our trespassing loves.

The last segment of poems in Part I of *Between Here and There* (28-39) tends to be dominated by lyrics evocative of Morrissey's husband Joseph Pound (of Tucson, Arizona) – to whom the collection is dedicated – as well as the poet's experiences of the American southwest and the advent of a miscarriage. Morrissey experiments with the triadic measure of William Carlos Williams in "Post Mortem" (30), as well as tries out various line lengths and stanzaic forms in many of these poems. Perhaps the most arresting are the brace of lyrics, set side-by-side, concerning the experience of miscarriage – "Stitches" and "Our Flower Garden" (*Between* 28-9). "Stitches" comprises rhyming couplets arranged in three quatrains: 'A name came in the third month. A face followed./ A hair type, a footprint, but the stitches showed' (28). The 'Imagination's cloth' of Morrissey's poem would embody the stitching together of a new life, yet 'Later the screen said darkness – no spine, no heart./ And the stitches came apart' (28). Paired with the heartbreakingly blunt eloquence of this lyric, Morrissey counterposes a Shakespearean sonnet, "Our Flower Garden," in which an incomprehensible 'bitterness' destroys the 'promising buds' of a garden of flowers and leaves the gardeners to 'cox and cry at their withered heads' (29). The displacement of miscarriage onto the conceit of suddenly failed and felled flowers perhaps risks maudlin melodrama, but the emotional burden of the poem is borne through heroically to the resonant closing couplet: 'Across the hedge the neighbours' poppies soar./ We smile and wave. Behind their backs we roar' (29).

Part II of *Between Here and There* (41-58) comprises fourteen poems, all but the last one set in Japan. As an extended sequence, these are brilliant lyrics recording and shaping a sense of life and of learning and teaching elsewhere. "Before and After" synopsizes beforehand warnings and afterward pleasures of teaching English at a Japanese agricultural high school near Ogaki City (44), and there is a cycle of five brief lyrics regarding seasonal festivals and their rituals (*Between* 48-52). The title poem of *Between Here and There* seems one of the finest in this second part. In separate seven-line stanzas "Between Here and There" captures four moves or turns of thought regarding the 'here' of lives and behaviors in Japan and the path to some sense of a heavenly 'there' or 'paradise' (46). The first stanza puzzles over aprons 'tied to the necks of stone babies in temples' and how they aid the 'journey away from us to the heaven for children'; the second regards 'a graveyard for miscarriages' and 'all of the energy for life that fell out of them too soon'; the third contemplates the spectacle of 'Japan's greatest Buddha' and how 'His crossing [from life to death] was a falling into light' (46). The final stanza pivots upon a Japanese teacher and colleague who leaves his modernity politely behind when he pauses to respect the rituals of heartfelt, soulful prayer:

When Nagasawa visits the house of the dead
he leaves at the door his camera and tripod
his champion karaoke voice his miracle foot massage
his classroom dynamics his rockhard atheism
and slips onto the tatami of the prayer room
as the man who can chant any you-name-it soul
Between here and Ogaki to paradise. (*Between* 46)

This final stanza is not the sort one would find in Philip Larkin's otherwise admirable, yet very wry poem "Church Going" in *The Less Deceived*. However, Morrissey finds clever, emotionally moving ways to trace the ways we seek to turn from our 'here' toward the 'there' of 'paradise' whose enlightenment we may still desire and covet.

Two poems in the final section of *Between Here and There* reveal Morrissey playfully thinking through signs from Japanese calligraphy, the ideograms or pictographs that compose Japanese writing, Kanji, 'a sky of walking pictures' (53). "To Encourage the Study of Kanji" (53)

and “To Imagine an Alphabet” (54-5) are inventive, enthusiastic and deeply engaging lyrical encounters with Japanese calligraphy, as well as attempts to read signatures of ‘all visible things,’ as a much later poem has it (*On Balance* 65). “To Imagine an Alphabet” speculates that Kanji offers ‘stories in skeletons,’ though with ‘a mind . . . inside the lines’ – ‘a landscape of noisy ideas that cross and flare in fireworks of strokes’ (54). ‘Problem is Tree in a Box’ is a stunning recognition and creative unpacking of one Japanese ideogram (54): the elsewhere, the ‘there,’ of writing bursts alive in the varied landscapes of Morrissey’s Anglophone ‘here.’

The collection closes with “Pearl” (57-8), a poem that points backward into the past of Morrissey’s familial relations, as well as projects forward toward the future concerns of Morrissey’s next volume, *The State of the Prisons* (2005). It’s a tripartite, rather prosy reflection on her links to her mother (and father) as well as a shared dream:

There are treasures in the sea. You told me of the pearl you smuggled
from the underwater dynasty of kings and queens. I want to see it,
finger it, believe it, be amazed. (*Between* 58)

Not the ‘Meeresleuchten, lights of the sea’ that amaze at the conclusion of the previous volume (*There Was Fire* 59), but a shared dream between mother and daughter who resist the ‘landscapes of familiar failure’ and ‘faces [that] haunt the mirror’ (*Between* 57). *The State of the Prisons* – a volume largely written while Morrissey held a three-year post as Writer-in-Residence at the newly-opened Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry in the old School of English at Queen’s University Belfast – explores the fault-lines, fractures and troubled matrices of families both historical and familiar as the poet prepares herself to be a mother.

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The State of the Prisons moves in one magisterial arc through its twenty-eight poems, from the opening piece “Flight,” about an 17th Century figure Anne Bridlestone, to Morrissey’s lengthy narrative poem, “The State of the Prisons” (51-8), concerning the 18th Century prison-reformer John Howard. “Flight” (9-10) is utterly remarkable and sets the keynote of the collection – namely, the constraints created within and for families through the contradictory demands of states and conflicted subjects. Anne Bridlestone suffers under the rule of Oliver Cromwell and her own husband -- ‘1651:/ The Year of Our Lord that my husband bridled me/ And I have learned to hold my tongue in company’ (9). She remains loyal to ‘our blessed Martyr’ [Charles I] and ‘His son the rightful king [in] hiding’ (9). Morrissey evokes the mindset and rhetoric of the ‘bridled’ Anne brilliantly, including her sense of illicit imprisonment by both state and husband:

There is too much law
To live by, and I have torn my face
In two by swallowing silence.
My husband leads me through the marketplace
As the village women gape. (*The State* 10)

“The Second Lesson of the Anatomists” discloses the strange corridors and prisons secreted away inside the skins of ourselves:

See how the inside belies our skin,
say the anatomists,
after showing us how freakishly we split;

*the outside, smooth and assiduous
unto itself, while the inside
baffles and seethes . . . (The State 11)*

The anatomists puzzle over this contradictory nature of ourselves, yet their ‘second lesson’ provides the poet with her own lesson in selfhood, otherness and self-discovery:

For we have hallways to discover in one another like nerves.
And childhoods, and love affairs, and drownings, and faithfulness
by which language has occurred. (*The State* 11)

Taking the form of a villanelle, “Genetics” explores the fleshly fashion in which divorced parents still meet and merge in the hands of their daughter:

My father’s in my fingers, but my mother’s in my palms.
I lift them up and look at them with pleasure –
I know my parents made me by my hands.

They may have been repelled to separate lands,
to separate hemispheres, may sleep with other lovers,
but in me they touch where fingers link to palms. (*The State* 13)

The lyric is playful and clever in its cunningly worked conceit, metrics and rhymes; and Morrissey seems prepared to read out a ‘second lesson’ in genetics, as it were, as she turns to marriage and procreation in her own time:

So take me with you, take up the skin’s demands
for mirroring in bodies of the future.
I’ll bequeath my fingers, if you bequeath your palms.
We know our parents make us by our hands. (*The State* 13)

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Indeed, ‘the skin’s demands’ would mandate the making of one body from the bodies of two beings. The body so made may then know his or her parents from the ‘mirroring’ and merging that made it one. Perhaps the ‘second lesson’ of “Genetics” is that such fleshly consubstantiation leads to the self-discovery that ‘we’ are never one, but always embody the imprint of our making and ‘mirroring in bodies.’

“On Omitting the Word ‘Just’ from my Vocabulary,” moreover, declares the state of pregnancy -- ‘(How you cannot say ‘just’ and ‘pregnancy’.)’ -- in playful and contemplative measures. The speaker notes ‘a fissure in store for me here’ as she takes the measure of a strange room in which she is sequestered; ‘Yet I step purposefully./ I swell uncontrollably’ (33). However, there is an overwhelming recognition of the transformative condition of pregnancy; the marked paradoxes of two mirroring one and of one becoming two are rife and raucous. Indeed, a noisy, persistent bell ‘is marking the hours until I break into two/ and lose/gain everything’ (33). Pregnancy seems a long-desired state in which one (woman) imprisons herself with another of two’s making until the desired/ undesirable prison-break occurs after nine-months’ term.

Prisons appear everywhere in this highly inventive and intensely perceptive volume. The poem “Juist” provides a densely textured, confessional narrative of a summer (‘Nineteen. My first job. Time.: 1991) on the North Sea German island, a narrative that fluctuates between

the mendacious and the miraculous (*The State* 20-21). The latter state is encapsulated in the recollection of ‘waves, peeling/ apart from themselves, hurl[ing] phosphorescent plankton into visual ecstasy . . .’ (21). Here is found a context and a material gloss on the visionary imagery that drives the second section of the poem “Restoration” at the conclusion of *There Was Fire in Vancouver*. Here it is registered as ‘miraculous,’ along with ‘Night skies on Juist . . . My aurora borealis’ (21); yet here it is no longer restorative and visionary so much as desired and diversionary. The commercial, exploitative nature of summer work on the island, including the exploitation and robbery of the poet-speaker by a fellow worker, seems paramount and enclosing. Fifty Newfoundland pilot whales appear trapped in Belfast Lough in the poem “Pilots” (*The State* 14-15). The poem reflects the crises of climate change and ocean pollution; yet in terms of form, rhetoric and visionary conclusion it’s strongly reminiscent of Edwin Muir’s stunning post-nuclear-apocalyptic poem “The Horses” (1956): ‘What had they come for?; . . . but we took them/ as a gift’ (*The State* 15). The whales are imprisoned in the lough, perhaps destitute and dying, but they also seem ‘New islands in the water between Eden and Holywood’ (15). One of the more visionary lines and conclusions in *The State of the Prisons*, for sure, yet it feels more optimistic and hopeful than the vexed plight of the pilot whales would seem to allow. More humorously the long poem “China” (22-30) records the writer on a British Council funded jaunt (‘jolly’) on a Writers’ Train across the PRC in 2003. In nine sections Morrissey charts dreams, memories, closely regulated encounters and jokes about ‘a country which does not exist and which must be shown’ (22). Her train carriage is ‘a capsule’ – a sort of voluntary prison provided by the states of Britain and China – for her to travel and catch regulated and photographed glimpses of an immensely variegated landscape, while ‘our shadow-/ travellers’ – the Chinese – are sequestered elsewhere on the train ‘and we’d been marooned/ in the midst of them’ (28-9). A short lyric in rhymed couplets called “Advice,” paired with “Reading the Greats,” is spoken from the perspective of a poet who cultivates divisions and animosities:

You think it ugly: drawing lines with a knife
Down the backs of those writers we exist to dislike. But it’s life.

One is disadvantaged by illustrious company
Left somehow undivided. Divide it with animosity. (*The State* 34)

Perhaps there is no obvious influence or target in evidence here, but Morrissey gives voice to an extant poetic type who constructs and regulates mental and cultural prisons in fraught ‘culture wars’ and ‘poetry wars’. Northern Ireland, Ireland and Britain have suffered from those who seek to police poetry ideologically, to ‘Gerrymander it’ (34).

Two poems obliquely address the calamity and the confusion of the 11th of September 2001 attack in the US – “In Praise of Salt” and “The Wound Man” (*The State* 36-7) – and ten poems (38-50) tackle a range of issues and subjects in observed or in personally remembered domestic life in Britain, Ireland, China and New Zealand. There is a great deal of experiment in line-length, form and voice across these texts; and Morrissey’s eye and ear seem always alert to catch those familial ‘nets’ that ‘turn the daylight white and empty’ (“Clocks,” *The State* 38). However, it is the concluding, title poem of the collection upon which I’ll focus here.

“The State of the Prisons” bears the sub-title “A History of John Howard, Prison Reformer, 1726-1790” (51). In many respects, this long poem is a dramatic monologue in six acts, or six moments of poignant memoir, in which the highly influential 18th Century social reformer John Howard narrates crucial, transformative moments of his life-story, including

his disastrous relationship with his only son. In rhyming pentameter stanzas of six lines each, reminiscent of Tennyson's *Maud: A Monodrama* (1855), Morrissey drills down into the psyche and motivations of Howard. Aged 29 Howard loses his first wife to untimely disease and resolves, like Tennyson's mourner after Maud, to cast his life thoughtlessly into foreign adventures. However,

We were captured as prisoners of war, whipped,
And forced on our knees to swear a blood-felt testament
To dungeon existence. (*The State* 54)

Later freed, Howard 'Washed. Grew well. In time became Sheriff of Bedford' and periodically attended county-wide trials in Cardington where ill-treated prisoners sent him 'reeling back to a stone hole/ And darkness interminable' of his experience as a prisoner of war (54). In response to such persistent ill-treatment of English prisoners, Howard 'barked six questions at the Crown officials':

Why are they not clean? Why so thin?
Why ill? Why are felons and debtors, women and men,
Chained and tried together? Why, when chosen for release,
Do debtors stay listed on the turnkey's roll call?
What fees remain to pay? Justice sat asleep

In a rolled wig, I metamorphosed into an enthusiast.
And so it was my journey started to every prison in Europe,
Shuttling between nations like an evangelist. Or a Cook
Of the Unfortunate (as Burke put it). I, too, was on a voyage of discovery.
I, too, would make maps. A continent of misery, uncharted, vast,
Opened before my eyes. I vowed to regulate the colony. (54)

52

Howard's friend Edmund Burke placed him on an equal footing with the sea-adventurer and discover, Thomas Cook; and Morrissey cleverly exploits and develops this conceit. She explores his most probing insights – 'I have ridden the Devil's coach road, I have discovered/ It leads, in every city in Europe, to the mansions of governors' (53) – as well as plumb the depths of his personal failings – 'I was not designed for intimacy' (55). The latter domestic crisis focuses largely on his failure to understand, raise and educate his only son, following the early death of his second wife. Morrissey counterpoints this domestic agony to Howard's 'manifest success' of his masterwork *The State of the Prisons* which had 'engendered an Act of Parliament' mandating the reform of prisons, 'Yet all along,/ Sickness was festering in my only son like sedition in a nation' (57). Howard's will established that enlightened institution, the Howard League for Penal Reform, yet regarding his troubled son Morrissey ventriloquizes: 'So much that I have left undone. And so much harm' (58). The enlightened social reformer of prisons harbors the familial tragedy of his own intimate failings as a father: 'My conscience sears me, as with David I say:/ O my son Absalom, my son, my son' (57). Brilliant, perceptive, well-sustained dramatic poetry, I think, both in terms of social and historical issues and deeply personal problems.

A Poetry Book Society Choice and winner of *The Irish Times Poetry Now Award, Through the Square Window* (2009) follows *The State of the Prisons* with an extraordinary display of poetic pyrotechnics throughout its thirty-two poems. The volume is dedicated to Morrissey's first-born, her son Augustine, and his conception, gestation, birth and infancy seem alluded to or featured in nearly a dozen of the pieces. The volume also pivots upon storms, dreams, hal-

lucinations and shadows throughout, with its title and central organizing conceit dependent upon allusions to Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). The opening poem "Storm" invokes Carroll by name and links his photography of young girls to a thoroughly Gothic setting 'with the inside/ holding flickeringly, and the/ outside clamouring in' (9). A dream-like, rather hallucinatory scene commences this fourth collection, with the sense of outside forces questioning the powers and stamina of 'the inside,' the dreaming subject. The fourth poem "Matter" (13-5) begins a sustained series of reflections and lyrical queries about conception, gestation and childbirth. A long, prosy, epistolary piece runs through ancient and medieval constructions of parthenogenesis, of matter giving rise to new forms through self-regeneration, until the speaker herself intervenes and declares:

And though I know, thanks in part to Pasteur –
to his gauze impediments and penchant
for boiling – how you came to enter,
how you came to roll and hiccup and kick
against the windowless dark, feet to my heart
and skull to the pelvic cradle, I still think
of our lovemaking as a kind of door
to wherever you were, waiting in matter . . . (*Through* 14)

"Matter" makes procreation strange, renders it alchemical and pre-modern, as well as a private parthenogenesis, a 'lovemaking' with an unseen being 'spooled into a form I have not yet been shown' (15). Other poems mark the unsettling storm of sensations and emotions set off by pregnancy:

like longing for weeks to be sick
to prove the baby's taken,
then failing to find a tonic
for another being's foothold in your person. (*Through* 17)

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The brilliant poem "Apocrypha" cross-pollinates a memory of the poet-speaker as a ten-year-old (and with a prepubescent misconception of the mechanics of procreation) with an historical anecdote regarding the 'improbable,' virginal conception of the 17th Century Mary Ann Sexton whose 'womb/ was pierced by a bullet/ still wet from the testicle/ of a Roundhead Lieutenant/ / at the Battle of Marston Moor' (23). The poems "Love, the Nightwatch . . ." and "Missing Winter" (28-9) are paired side-by-side and record the agony, crisis and storms of childbirth – 'in a thunder of blood, in a flood-plain of intimate stains' (28). The first of these two poems takes the form of what I call elsewhere an 'exploded sonnet' (Caraher, *Cambridge Companion* 185-6, 194). Morrissey ingeniously adapts the received form to accommodate the actors and the implements of the scene, including the climactic couplet with its storm of colors, fluids and emotions. "Augustine Sleeping Before He Can Talk" is a packed, prosy, observant, Les-Murray-like, thirty-six-line evocation of her child's first few months adapting to sights and sounds – 'a slow, alert surfacing towards the morning, the clock's face,/ the seagulls and the sea's address, all clamouring to be experienced' (31). Motherhood has arrived, and this poem yields an amazing testament to its wonders.

The fifteenth and sixteenth poems at the core of this fourth collection reveal some of the cleverest and most probing allusions to *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. The title poem "Through the Square Window," the major prize-winner in the UK National Poetry Competition for

2007, deftly alludes to Lewis Carroll's Alice-sequel in its title as well as the dual, mirror-like manner in which windows function in both the dream-like and realistic landscapes of the poem's action.

In my dream the dead have arrived
to wash the windows of my house.
There are no blinds to shut them out with.⁷

The clouds above the Lough are stacked
like the clouds are stacked above Delft.
They have the glutt'd look of clouds over water. (*Through* 32)

The dreamer fears the 'huge' 'heads of the dead' – the clouds or the window-cleaners – have come to take away her infant son, but 'as suddenly as they came, they go' leaving only 'massed canopies' of clouds to gaze in the window from the other side and an oppressive 'density in the room' (32). The dreamer-speaker wakes 'flat on my back with a cork/ in my mouth, bottle-stoppered, in fact, like a herbalist's cure for dropsy' (32). Like Alice awaking from her adventures through the looking-glass world that parrots and parodies the threats and fears of her half-child-like/ half-adult-riven world, Morrissey's dreamer awakes from a dreamworld that questions the power and the stamina of the adult to protect her offspring from 'the sluicing and battering and paring back of glass' which dream-like metamorphoses into threatening 'heads of the dead.' Dropsy – an archaic, old-fashioned term for edema (swelling) – is an abnormal accumulation of fluids under the skin and might involve a medical cause or physical agency for such a threatening dream. However, such a move toward psychosomatic realism undermines the Lewis Carroll-like play between childish and adult worlds at stake in this adeptly handled dreamscape. The other poem, "The Invitation," comprises a three-page exploration of an hallucinatory dreamworld – 'A hole, a portal' – which opens under the feet of the dreamer and invites her to seize 'light's sure paradoxes' and 'Jump' (*Through* 33) – an invitation strongly reminiscent of the opening chapter of *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* as well as *Alice in Wonderland*. Each of the three segments of "The Invitation" comprises a bulky, prosy, long-lined, twenty-line stanza of rhymed couplets (33-5). The opening section dwells on February evening light and twilight as it becomes 'daylight's posthumous flare' and 'a hairline crack' opens beneath the poet's armchair (33).

A hole, a portal, is opening at your feet as the mantelpiece collapses
and a linen closet hurtles down the stairs. Your living-room has an axis
you never knew existed and its sudden revolution sees you witless, stumped.
Take light's sure paradoxes with you. Jump. (*Through* 33)

Like Alice the poet is invited and impelled to jump through a looking-glass 'portal' into 'the rabbit-hole' of the next page, the next section and an inverted dreamworld where 'darkness turned autonomous, in love with its own wild deft capacity/ to take light's definition of each working day and render it senseless' (34). In this dream-space of inverted habits and practices, the poet-dreamer encounters 'a five o'clock sky, mindful of nothing/ but its own rejoicing, is teaching itself to sing' (34). Light and twilight now follow darkness and turn 'autonomous' and rejoice in their own pure song. In the final section the 'I' who speaks to the dreamer ('you') all along, inviting her to jump through the portal, reveals itself as a 'tricksterish deity' with 'the reek of untamed mischief' once encountered at a Shinto shrine in Japan and the *Menacing Cupid* – 'my body succulent, my arrow sure' -- once visited at the Reichsmuseum

in Amsterdam (35).⁸ The third segment of the poem intimates the power and presence motivating the dreamworld and its teasing suspensions of the normal play of day and night, light and darkness and twilight:

I am the Maria at midnight, the wind at sea,
the accident waiting to happen, I am what cannot be appeased
by wine, rice cakes, prayer, entreaty, I am what cannot be undone. (*Through* 35)

Such vision seems a long way from “Restoration,” the final poem of *There Was Fire in Vancouver*. It’s a glimpse of the storms, contradictions and paradoxes beneath our feet, roiling on the other side of the looking-glass or square window that would frame and lend logic to our world. Chance, impulse, desire, wayward dreams empower and guide us as much as anything else. Our ‘tricksterish deity’ then invites the poet-dreamer ‘back up through the lift shaft to your waiting space/ beneath the window. The floor is smooth again. The crockery at peace’ (35). However, in the promise of such restoration to an old normality, ‘something strange will stay. Remember Alice?/ . . . Once broken through, a permeable membrane gives at the slightest touch’ (35). The barrier, the flimsy border between normality and our empowering dreamworld, between Alice and Alice through a square-window, ‘gives at the slightest touch’ of an invitation to trespass ‘light’s definition of each working day.’ Dreams and darkness counter-balance fire and light.

Through the Square Window closes with a series of nine poems providing darker visions or projections of darkness and strange impulses in childhood and tales of children. The first of these pieces, “The Innocents,” retells a scene from a film-version of Henry James’ notorious tale *The Turn of the Screw*, focussing on Mrs Grose’s startling claim: ‘I’ve seen rooms used in broad daylight! as though they were dark woods –’ (*Through* 45). The children, Miles and Flora washed and prepared for bed, nevertheless are drawn into a Gothic, dark and threatening otherworld: ‘Their window is a window onto death’ and ‘A beetle/ crawls out of the mouth of a Cupid’ (45). Indeed, the poem comes to agree with the governess’s darker and ‘evil’ version of the actions and motivations of the two innocents:

The Governess is right.
Little Flora giggles and plots.

All over the house, like the singeing
of the edges of the world

in autumn or the fraying
of chintz and lace, the roses

are undressing. Master Miles
lies considering his goodnight kiss. (*Through* 45)

Perhaps ‘a permeable membrane’ – already ruptured – ‘gives at the slightest touch,’ as the final line of “The Invitation” has it. Regardless, darker visions enter through the windows of the ensuing poems. “Fairground Music” dramatizes the end of a day around Whitsuntide when a fairground occupies a field adjoining Tom and Doris’ house; and, while Doris ‘was baking scones,’ her five-month-pregnant friend Esther has ‘been riding all afternoon: the dipper, the dodgems, the giant wheel’ (47). Esther calls to use Doris’ outhouse, ‘was out there an age,’ and then says her good-byes. Doris discovers later the bloody, highly-detailed spectacle of a miscarriage. Utterly shocked she returns to her kitchen, ‘waiting for Tom to

come in' (48). The sombre details record a stunning loss yet also hint at Esther's efforts 'all afternoon' to induce the loss that utterly guts Doris. "Telegraph" is set in Arkansas and Colorado and narrates the brutality meted out by a parent to a child who then abuses his own child in the next generation (49-50). An abusing 'mother was so meticulous in punishment. So many faults/ accrued to him, like interest, turning a fair-haired, freckled child/ into a cross'(49). The abused child himself turns into an abusing father 'in a middle-sized town, so like the house/ back home in Arkansas, his spirit failed him' (50). The tale is dismal, dispiriting and all-too-believable; yet Morrissey underscores its dire sadness by using and repeating the words 'window' and 'windows' throughout. The abused child and abusing father once saw opportunities for escape and change (ie, 'Mooning by the window'), but closes down such openings for his own daughter (ie, 'kept back from the tiny window'). Abuse repeats abuse, examined abjectly through the looking-glass of domestic childhood tyrannies.

The final poem of the collection, "Shadows in Siberia," spins the tale that shadows in this artic wasteland are 'cast not by sunlight but by frozen breath' and that a young boy – 'fantastically dressed/ against the artic frost like an heirloom glass/ / in bubble wrap' – 'disappeared into the portico/ / of himself' (57). The boy, in other words, has passed into his own choice of 'portal' or rabbit-hole, his own choice of window or looking-glass. Morrissey surmises:

Not even Alice,
with her knack for finding weaknesses

in the shellac
of this world, left so deft a calling card. (*Through* 57)

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Is the Siberian boy another trickster or menacing cupid? Does his disappearing act reveal a faultline, a paradox, a 'permeable membrane' in our world through which our dreams and desires might precipitate us? A 'calling card' is left, and perhaps we must call upon *Parallax*, Morrissey's fifth volume of poems to pursue these questions.

Winner of *The Irish Times Poetry Now Award* (second time) and The T S Eliot Prize for Poetry in 2013, *Parallax* features early on a poem called "Shadows" which reflects back upon issues and imagery from *Through the Square Window*. The estranging play of 'February sunlight' and a sexually-charged reference to *Menacing Cupid* -- both concerns featured in "The Invitation" -- and the odd behavior of shadows -- at stake in "Shadows in Siberia" -- recall and refocus questions regarding the permeability of dreamworlds and the world we are taught we live, breathe and travel within. The speaker of "Shadows" observes her shadow and others cavorting in unsettling ways for six quatrains until she exclaims:

Lady other, Lady mine, if I stood here all morning
I'd watch you retracting back like drowning soap.
Shadows of candles on church walls at Evensong
manifest not as flame, but smoke. (*Parallax* 13)

Fire – 'flame' – is in abeyance and shadow-worlds, other-worlds of paradoxical possibilities, come to the fore in strange turns. The 'other' Lady of oneself is now and also 'Lady mine.' Oneself is not just floating soap but 'like drowning soap' passing through the permeable membrane of one's own bathwater. 'Shadows of candles' – perhaps significantly in a religious or spiritual context – reveal themselves as what can't be seen in the fire of self-consumption but in and as its ephemeral trace – 'smoke,' a parallactic manifestation of 'flame': that is, if there's smoke, there may be fire.

The thirty-three poems of *Parallax* often play at parallactic manifestations in cunning and inventive ways. The epigraph to the collection produces a ponderous, inadvertently dense and verbose definition of ‘parallax’ from *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Readers of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* know cunning, simpler and more playful uses of the term, especially in the “Ithaca” or ‘homecoming’ episode – namely, ‘the parallax or parallactic drift of so-called fixed stars, in reality evermoving wanderers’ (*Ulysses* 17: 1052-3). Morrissey resorts to rather Joycean terms for ‘parallactic drift’ in “Lighthouse.” She records her wakeful son, ‘wired and watchful,’ calibrating the night sky while she notices a second watchful and wired nightwatchman on the other side of Belfast Lough:

a lighthouse starts its own nightlong address
in fractured signalling, it blinks and bats
the swingball of its beam, then stands to catch,
then hurls it out again beyond its parallax. (*Parallax* 51)

Almost child-like the lighthouse plays a game of swingball with its warning beam, not unlike the poet’s son might do, yet ‘its own nightlong address’ is a serious game of calibration of life-saving distances and angles for sailors, sons, watchers and poets. Indeed, the poet calculates the secret measurements undertaken by her son and adds the parallactic angle of herself to them:

He counts each creamy loop inside his head,
each well-black interval, and thinks it just for him –
this gesture from a world that can’t be entered:
the two of them partly curtained, partly seen,
upheld in a sort of boy-talk conversation
no one else can hear. That private place, it answers,
with birds and slatted windows – I’ve been there. (*Parallax* 51)

57

This final stanza of “Lighthouse” places two ‘evermoving wanderers’ – poet and child, mother and son – into a ‘parallactic drift’ which the lighthouse beam and its source serves as focus and object. Such parallax serves to calibrate and reveal ‘That private place’ the poet knows on her own and shares in her own life with her son. The situation parallels and echoes the ‘boy-talk conversation’ of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* when ersatz father and exiled son plumb and chart the ‘parallactic drift’ of their own ambitions and desires. “Lighthouse” in many respects is the touchstone poem of *Parallax*, the first and only collection by Morrissey which lacks a designated title poem.

This fifth collection largely examines the parallax of men’s and women’s perspectives on the same phenomenon or similar situation. For instance, the opening poem “1801” takes various phrases and passages from Dorothy Wordsworth’s *The Grasmere Journal 1800-1803* – as a handful of writers and editors have attempted for several decades⁹ – and recasts them as fifteen (mostly) pentameter lines of rhymed poetry. It’s a clever way of foregrounding the incipient poetry of Dorothy Wordsworth’s splendid prose and keen observational skills, yet it also recovers the latent ‘parallax’ of their lives and shared years together. While William works hard at revising *The Pedlar*,¹⁰ Dorothy cooks and ventures out to meet ‘a man who had once been a Captain begging for alms’ (11). The brother writes while the sister encounters similar fallen fellowmen. And while ‘William as pale as a basin, exhausted with altering . . . ‘ rests, Dorothy prepares a remedy for him – ‘boiled up pears with cloves’ and points to the playful reflection of ‘moonlight on Grasmere’ (11). The latter observational remedy provides

both sister and brother with a recuperative image, reflective in its parallactic drift, of both of their shared, supportive roles: ‘the new moon holding the old moon in its arms’ (*Parallax* 11).

Parallax is dedicated to Morrissey’s daughter Sophia, though she only seems to factor in three of its poems: “Home Birth” (18), “Daughter” (33-7) and “Peacocks and Butterflies” (63-5). The ‘parallactic drift’ discussed already, however, surfaces in all three pieces. The sonnet “Home Birth” dwells upon an older brother’s reaction to the birth at home of his sister – ‘You turned your head to take her in: this black-haired,/ tiny, yellow person who’d happened while you slept’ (18). Moreover, “Daughter” captures the otherwise self-possessed sister double-checking on the other-inflected perspective she prefers each morning:

Though she’ll also ask
is it morning?
just to check
she hasn’t missed
the best and purest
portion of her day, the bit
with her brother and breakfast
in it, by being away. (*Parallax* 33)

In the breezy, informal, notational style of the American poet Robert Pinsky, the poet notes her daughter’s desire to begin her day with her brother at the same breakfast table. And in thirteen, rather experimental, six-line, innovatively rhymed stanzas, “Peacocks and Butterflies” draws out differences between ‘yowling’ peacocks, especially one ‘boy who wants/ to be king [and] raises his aquamarine/ fan’ and ‘our daughter/ who has gone and brought/ waving hands and shrieking to his court/ so thoughtlessly’ (63-4).

58

However, parallax strongly marks two of the most extraordinary poems in the volume – namely, “A Matter of Life and Death” and “The High Window,” both of which make use of film as parallactic perspective on the work and effects of poetry. “A Matter of Life and Death” (41-3) juxtaposes domestic scenes of early stages of childbirth with the poet-mother in labor watching David Niven in a severely wounded RAF fighter-plane conversing with ‘a terrified American radio girl’ while he attempts to limp back over the North Sea: ‘*Conservative by nature, Labour by conviction,*’ Niven professes and Morrissey playfully parodies (41). *A Matter of Life and Death*, of course, is the famous Powell & Pressburger film from 1946 (released in the US as *Stairway to Heaven*) in which two divergent fates are allowed cinematically to David Niven’s character – namely, 1) a lucky landing on a British beach and a fortunate meeting and romance with the enlisted American woman who talks him home and 2) the commotion his absence in heaven occasions and the mobilization of heaven’s troops to retrieve him and get him on the stairway to heaven. Morrissey’s poem moves adeptly back and forth from developing labor pains and the RAF pilot’s struggles and fates. The lynch-pin which draws these two juxtaposed scenarios together parallactically, however, is the sudden shift halfway through the poem to a recollection of the poet’s grandmother, her agonizing labor and her loss of her ‘happiness’ during WW2 (42):

And I think of my granny and her *forty-six hours*

of agony, shifting my mother from one world to the next, and how that birth cut short her happiness at the Raleigh bicycle factory in Nottingham where her youth was spent in secret war work, typing up invoices.

Morrissey employs William Carlos Williams' triadic measure, as she has in a handful of poems in *Parallax* and in previous volumes, yet here it seems to be after the fashion of Marianne Moore's adaptation of the measure to longer, prosy, narrative lines which use enjambement, rather than metric stress or rhyme, for emphasis. Morrissey's poem concludes with a brilliant, perceptive displacement of her labors and her grandmother's life into the narrative and dual resolution of Powell & Pressburger's innovative film:

. . . and I imagine my granny, who died three weeks ago
on a hospital ward in Chesterfield, *making room* as she herself predicted,
not dumb and stricken and hollowed out with cancer

but young, glamorous, childless, free, in her 1940s' shoes and sticky lipstick,
clicking about the office of new arrivals as though she owns it,
flicking open the leather-bound ledger and asking him to sign. (43)

The 'him' of the concluding line I take to be David Niven's character in *A Matter of Life and Death*: he is welcomed to the restorative heaven of Morrissey's poem by the poet's fondly remembered 'granny,' both wisely old and glamorously young, just as his character is to the heavenly office of Powell & Pressburger's cinematic *tour-de-force*. Thus, "A Matter of Life and Death" through its use of parallel expressive media, imbedded narrative scenarios and juxtaposition of living and dead personae generates an insightful, emotional and moving sense of celestial parallax. "The High Window" also performs a spin on cinematic plots and perspectives, yet in a far more comic fashion. The speaker of the poem addresses 'Honey' and proceeds to spin a cinematic scenario along lines requested by the addressee: 'You've requested a Raymond Chandler spin-off,/ a spoof in style, but from the blond's perspective' (61). Indeed, that's what readers get for the next thirty-eight lines of the poem. The female voice produces a 'Chandler spin-off,' set in southern California, pastiching the rhetoric of Marlowe, and producing a brilliant 'spoof in style,' though hints of another perspective on the fictive narrative suggest a domestic seduction rite in progress:

But, hell, tonight I've drawn the blinds, clicked on
the tasselled lamp, unplugged the telephone,
set out two highballs, and before the children cry
upstairs, pulled you down beside me by your tie. (*Parallax* 61)

'Honey,' the spouse, queries the blond's motivation just once but allows the narrative and the whiskey to work their effects, and just at a climactic moment in the rising action of the Chandleresque plot, the speaker breaks off and demands: 'Now kiss me' (62). "The High Window" yields a clever, witty, sexy seduction scenario on parallel levels. Morrissey's forty lines of rhymed pentameter couplets, punctuated with a tri-syllabic imperative, delivers a brilliantly comic and sexy sense of parallax – namely, two spouses find a space for themselves through a fantasy of 'a thousand lighted windows/ on the hill' and cinematically-spiced, out-of-character lovemaking, while their young children sleep tentatively 'upstairs' (61-2).

Morrissey's sixth and most recent volume, *On Balance* (2017), collects twenty-three poems of absolutely stunning range and achievement. It was a Poetry Book Society Choice (second time) as well as the 2017 Forward Prize Winner of Best Collection. I discussed the title poem at the outset of this essay in exploring aspects of Morrissey's influences and poetics. However, the concern for finding, restoring or re-righting 'balance' in men's and women's relations, creativity and mutual understanding carries through the volume. This concern is hinted at in the dedicatory epigraph from Mayakovsky's "Brooklyn Bridge" (1925) in which

'the era succeeding/ the steam age' might or will be different (*On Balance* 7). And re-righting balance is an undercurrent in the opening poem "The Millihelen," in which Morrissey invents her own word as 'a fanciful unit of measurement meaning the amount of physical beauty required to launch a single ship' (*On Balance* 69). Since Helen's face could launch by legend a thousand Greek ships toward Troy, then a thousandth of that beauty – a mere '*millihelen*' -- is required to launch the Titanic from dry-dock into Belfast Lough in 1911. In thirty-four lines of blank verse, organized as a single increasingly breathless, head-long rush of a sentence, Morrissey launches the vessel from its traces of 'black-and-white photographs' toward its 'slither and speed' down the slipway (9). The final line of the poem gathers 'a riot of squeals and sparks' back into upright balance: 'in fact everything regains its equilibrium' (9). However, the modicum of beauty required to launch this massive relic of the steam age is 'a rendered whale,' 'the only Millihelen her beauty/ slathered all over the slipway' (9). Factual, sombre, ecocritical and sad, in turns, this little yet pivotal detail registers something significant about 'the steam age' as an era of engineering men, ambitious empire and consumptive financial desires. Morrissey seeks to explore other modes and models of 'balance.'

Familial memories and relations among family members would appear to be one mode, given a run of six poems in the first half of the volume, from "Platinum Anniversary" through "Collier" (15-29). These poems, moreover, deftly underscore the criticism meted out to Philip Larkin and his personal and poetic choices in "On Balance." "Platinum Anniversary" celebrates a tenth wedding anniversary of the poet-speaker and 'bright you singing on the stair-/ way there's only you' in a cleverly woven sequence of fourteen haiku-like stanzas arranged in two equal columns on the page: 'The two of us wound/ into borrowed kimonos/ on the temple steps' (15). The sculptural precision of the piece -- finely balanced in terms of line, stanza, page-presentation and sentiment -- is the sort of public, poetic performance of supportive domesticity one would never expect or receive from the lonely, near-Laureate Larkin. "Nativity" depicts parents attending a school Christmas play and learning an important lesson about 'these people whom we've forged, whose frankincense/ we breathed when they were born' (17):

our sons and daughters amongst them, so cleanly
have they been lifted from their context, so
splendidly have they been managing without us. (*On Balance* 16)

Such school performances yield those sudden moments when our children's ambitions are not just born but weaned; they become not just 'us' but also themselves. "Tribute" invokes the power and effects of Beatles songs, even upon a hard-working tribute band, but its conclusion turns to play upon familial implications of "Let Me Hold Your Hand": 'I need to tell my son when I see him about the lights / of another ferry across from ours on the journey over/ like we were two boats holding hands' (23). Moreover, "Collier," a six-part evocation of the writer's maternal grandfather puts a seal on this segment of family-focused pieces. A Nottinghamshire coal-miner's life and home between the two world wars is poignantly evoked, including his unlikely meeting and romancing of the poet's 'granny' (24-6). Morrissey speculates her mother's mother 'was privy to this':

a walking shadow, the size and shape of a man,

stole across the room towards the kitchen, not touching anything.
The kettle's whistle. Splashing. Singing. Then the shut door
opened abruptly and out stepped a white vest and a clean face

and the moon's penumbra vanished into brightness. (*On Balance* 26)

The miraculous transformation of a black-faced collier, moving discreetly and musically across a domestic space, and then metamorphosing himself into the bright face of a full moon, produces an arresting moment of connection half-way through “Collier.” That connection persists through calamity, dire straights and strained silences. It even persists across familial generations, if I read the elliptical final section of the poem right. The grandfatherly collier, ‘checking for balance,’ despatches the writer towards extensive train and plane journeys, while himself stands ‘like a man who has tasted the rind of the moon, without ever leaving home’ (29). Family sets a balanced seal on connections, ambitions and the future.

Two poems about the strength, beauty, ambition and inventiveness of women follow and appear to embody another mode of seeking balance for Morrissey. “My Seventeenth-Century Girlhood” evokes the life of an English girl caught between her father’s strictures regarding Scripture and the *Book of Martyrs* and her mother’s preparing her ‘for bedsheets & fires & batch loaves & babies’ napkins’ (30). At ‘fourteen years old & already bleeding,’ she’s married to ‘Mr Thomas Davers, who soon came calling’ (30). In marriage ‘[t]he days had no more avenues/ to read or wander in. Soon enough/ another baby girl unclenched her fist,’ while a son is stillborn (30-31). However, the final line of the poem hints at unusual dreams and ambitions for the speaker:

To *Sepulchre, Commandment*
(all mine are thine & thine are mine)
I added new words of my own:

Countess Cakes at Christmastime. Dragonfly. Machine. (*On Balance* 31)

61

The ‘new words of my own’ are not as innovative or radical as ‘millihelen’ but are suggestive of dreams beyond the limitations of her father’s and mother’s severely circumscribed world. Her words suggest pleasure, ambition, perhaps flight, and as such lead directly into the core of “The Mayfly,” the next poem concerning the ambition and inaugural flight of Lillian Bland, Ireland’s and the world’s first female aviatrix. As Morrissey notes, ‘Lilian Bland, who lived in Carnmoney, County Antrim, became the first woman in the world to design, build and fly her own aeroplane’ (*On Balance* 69). Across four pages of delightfully constructed triadic measures, Morrissey tells the story set in 1910 of Bland’s self-guided, inventive, ultimately successful dream: ‘what . . . lift’

allowed you to stand up straight in mechanic’s overalls
(*skirts are out of the question*) and plot
your escape route into the sky? (*On Balance* 32)

The lightness of the biplane’s design is pivotal; yet Bland’s clever design, engineering and installation of a ‘*beautifully balanced*’ two-stroke engine proves crucial:

a horizontally opposed two-cylinder
engine with the help of a whiskey
bottle and an ear trumpet . . . (*On Balance* 34)

The whiskey bottle and ear trumpet appear improvised devices for lightweight fuel-injection machinery. Nevertheless, despite ‘the single most inflammable/ exchange you’d ever risk,’ Lilian Bland’s biplane – The Mayfly -- takes flight leaving

your footprint missing on earth for the span
of a furlong, as if a giant had lifted its boot
and then set it down. (*On Balance* 34-5)

Morrissey’s beautifully balanced poem captures the balanced skill and daring of Bland.

The second half of *On Balance* witnesses Morrissey in full poetic stride, taking giant footsteps across familial and historical terrain. Indeed, the ten poems from “My Life According to You” through “The Rope” (36-64) oscillate back and forth between evocations of family life in admirable domestic balance and experimental pieces charting moments of historical imbalance or disequilibrium. The latter pieces include “Articulation” in which the hustling voice of a museum tour guide attempts to evoke the sights, sounds and smells of what the skeletal remains of Napoleon’s warhorse Marengo – ‘portal, time machine, skeleton key’ -- might well have encountered (39-40). “Das Ding an Sich” offers a full page of disjunctive nouns and phrases in which ‘the thing in itself’ of farmlife contrasts with Grossdeutscher Rundfunk’s last radio broadcast in eastern Prussia in January 1945. Enduring farmlife is recorded as an array of ‘nouns/ unmoored from speech’ in the style of Mayakovsky and contemporary L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets, yet it underscores pathetically the disjunctive presence of ‘dead sons like icons’ among a German farmhouse’s sombre, ongoing domesticity (41). The deep, underlying philosophical or epistemological quandary that according to the Prussian thinker Immanuel Kant we can’t know the thing in itself (*das Ding an sich*) from our cognitions or perceptions of things could well be at play; but in “Das Ding an Sich” Morrissey seems more interested in portraying visually, perceptually and emotionally the absolute disequilibrium between the brutality and ephemerality of history’s bullies and the domestic settings, parents and grandparents who endure deception and brutality. Moreover, in the comic, syntactically loose, cinematically spliced style of John Ashbery, Morrissey dramatizes a startling presentation of the American comic-book hero Batman as “A Very Dyspraxic Child” (61-2). ‘Batman – bewildered, back-footed, bilious,/ shaking that metal-wedge chin of his and drooping/ in the puddle of his own dejection’ is knocked back and flails about trying to combat ‘a timewarp villain, who sports a monocle/ and a Hitler Youth haircut’ (61). Batman must get ‘over the wobbly bridge of his inner/ playground’ and get ‘free of the ill-set, bifurcated shackles/ that pin him to himself’ (61). Batman battles his own inner imbalances. He battles self-inflicted disabilities while pretending to do battle on a stage still marked by the signatures and signposts of old, already-fought, long-disastrous, politically ‘dyspraxic’ world wars.¹¹

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As already indicated, Morrissey rights or counter-balances such varied socio-historical disequilibrium by juxtaposing another set of poems to those just discussed. Five other poems about the interplay and balance within her own family’s life are intercut or dovetailed with the pieces just discussed. “My Life According to You” is a delightful three-page piece in which the poet ventriloquizes the voice of her daughter telling the tale of her mother’s life from childhood through the arrival of the second child who ‘came on a path of lightning/ to finish off the family’ (38). The piece is packed with the curious perspectives of a child on events and situations, including her parents’ courtship:

and when I met a man in a bright
white classroom the darkest parts
of our eyes turned into swirls then question
marks then hearts so we got married (*On Balance* 37)

The final stanza of the poem turns to the mother's promise to her daughter in the latter's vernacular and from the latter's perspective:

When you grow up

I'm going to be *so* busy taking you
to the house shop waiting by the play-
ground gates to bring your children
swimming I won't be any different
I'll keep your room exactly as it is
for you to visit bric-a-brac collection
on the shelf the bed your father built
the letters of your name in neon
appearing on the ceiling

when it's time (*On Balance* 38)

The rituals and cyclic patterns of daughters, mothers, family life, generation to generation, perhaps could not find a more fitting and funny testimonial. Moreover, "The Singing Gates" (42-5) links the immediate present of a family walk on Divis Mountain overlooking Belfast to recollections of the poet's father and paternal grandfather walking the same paths before, telling tales to their children or working through troubling politics. The present-time focus for the poet-speaker is her own young son, his Batman antics, his tales of 'the death rites of Ancient Egypt' (43), his questions and then hers about the five five-staved gates that catch and give voice to the mountain winds:

Why this particular calibre of sound

unravelling only here? Are they in harmony? Are they a choir?
Are they, in fact, the singing ticket to the afterlife

and how might we post ourselves into it, limb by limb?
What scarab? What amulet? What feather? What scale? What spell?

(*On Balance* 45)

The five gates, resembling in turn musical measures (bars and staves) and postal slots, produce thoughts and questions of 'the afterlife' where fathers and grandfathers might be and for which mothers and sons might wonder which 'death rites' – Egyptian, musical or whatever – may eventually or hopefully transport them there. Furthermore, "Meteor Shower" records the family gathering on a Ballycastle terrace to witness 'dust on fire at the edge/ of Earth's flaying atmosphere, scoring its signature' and sharing a child's unfettered joy at the brilliant spectacle (50). And "The Wheel of Death" records the family attending Duffy's Circus ('Ireland's Oldest Circus'), only to dwell upon Tom Duffy, Jr. assuming the ultimate task of riding 'The Wheel of Death (the *Grand / Finale*) yet his 'uncanny/ balancing abilities get tendered, recklessly, out to us/ as a final sacrifice' (57, 59). Families for Morrissey appear

the chosen arena in which the biggest questions of our human lives – birth, attachments, love, death, afterlife, rites and rituals of passage, the purpose and point of storytelling, and so on – get articulated, assume risk, seek answers, shape questions. Indeed, the eight quatrains of “The Rope” witness the poet joyously noting that her two children ‘have discovered yourselves friends’ after years of company and play and that ‘I can almost see it thicken between you,/ your sibling-tetheredness, an umbilicus,/ fattened on mornings like this as on a mother’s blood’ (63). Her children are forging a life-long familial attachment that supplants the sort of life-enhancing nourishment the poet-speaker as mother once provided both children *in utero*. This thickening ‘sibling-tetheredness,’ this umbilical attachment yoking brother and sister together, composes ‘the rope’ the poem celebrates:

the rope is flexing,
tugging you close and you come, obedient

children that you are, back to this moment,
staggering to a halt and then straightening,
grown little again inside your oversize coats and shoes
and with sea glass still to arrange, but without me watching. (63-4)

The final phrase of the poem intimates this fostering attachment will continue into the future of not just this one subtly transformative summer’s day but perhaps into the future lives of well-nurtured siblings who no longer have a parent to watch over them but one to remember in tales, poems and memories.

A final mode of righting or balancing encountered in Morrissey’s *On Balance* seems best articulated by its final poem, yet there are signals all along, perhaps best registered in retrospect. The opening poem “The Millihelen” brilliantly captures the energy, noise, rush and risk of the launch of The Titanic from dry-dock; yet noticing the visible signature of ‘a rendered whale’ on the slipway is pivotal both to the spectacle of the launch and the point of Morrissey’s poem. “Whitlessness,” the longest poem in the collection (51-6), moreover, sets six different speakers and perspectives in a sequence attempting to unravel rocks, stones, valleys, white-furred animals, marine invertebrates and traces of Paleo-Eskimo villages on an exploration trip to Greenland, the oldest part of the rocky surface of our planet. The poem is a *tour-de-force* of voice and character. However, one of the two artists in the company – The Photographer – phrases not only his own ambition but that of the entire company of explorers, including the poet who ventriloquizes them all:

The world speaks to me through signs.
Tiny signs. Missable signs. The stones
in the river are speaking to me. (*On Balance* 52)

The final poem of the collection constitutes a sort of *ars poetica* of this quest, this deeply poetic ambition, to hear the signs and to read the signatures of all visible things. “From *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*” is a poem in twenty compact tercets that takes its cue and its title from ‘an early engineering masterpiece written by Ismail al-Jazari in eastern Anatolia,’ now modern Turkey, in 1206 (*On Balance* 70). Morrissey celebrates Al-Jazari’s talents and skills: ‘Inventor of such leaps/ in engineering/ / as the camshaft, crankshaft,/ throttling valve,/ the calibration of orifices/ / and the balancing/ of static wheels – theophanies that awed all Anatolia’ (65). Such medieval engineering achievements preface ‘our modernday/ buoyancy’ but are also ‘theophanies’ – human works and achievements which nonetheless render ‘all visible things/ the über-florid signature of God’ (65). Reading

the signatures of ‘all visible things’ gives us buoyancy and balance in our world. Yet also for Morrissey reading such masterful signatures would allow us aweful ‘theophanies’ – not unlike the vision of celestial fire in “There Was Fire in Vancouver” – in which the poet and her readers (or the artist-engineer Al-Jazari and his re-readers) -- can sense a divine presence visiting the richly inscribed and beautifully balanced pages of our dreams, our brilliantly designed mechanical and poetical devices:

the dream world oddly
tilted at your feet

for ages, for a year,
until it almost vanishes,
leaving the ghosted

impress of its ardour
still folded
in the bedclothes. (*On Balance* 67)

The final poem of *On Balance* itself balances dreamily with “Restoration,” the final poem of *There Was Fire in Vancouver*. However, now ‘theophanies’ issue forth to light and to enlighten the world from the beautifully balanced work of the engineer and the poet, both dreamers allowed the touch and the ‘ardour’ of a creative power and presence who enfolds them in ‘the bedclothes’ of ‘the dream world’ – perhaps in the guise of a ‘trickster deity,’ a ‘Menacing Cupid,’ shoals of ‘Meeresleuchten, lights of the sea,’ a forgiving ‘Father,’ or ‘*tawhid*’ or ‘the oneness of God’ (*On Balance* 66, 70). In an era of fractured polarities and resurgent socio-political disequilibrium, such visions of inclusive power, presence and balance seem not only welcome but absolutely precious.

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Sinéad Morrissey is an Irish and a British poet of major achievement. Her mixed, hybrid, intertwined family heritage -- British on her maternal side and Irish on her paternal -- exemplifies this background; yet her poetry to date recuperates, performs, luxuriates and delights in this hybrid heritage. Her honors to date also appear even on both sides of the Irish Sea. Her choice of and loyalty to Manchester’s justly esteemed Carcanet Press as the publisher for all six of her collections show an honorable sense of balance between her Irish and British stakeholders and readerships. Carcanet, moreover, is known for cutting-edge work in poetry and poetics, drawn not just locally but internationally. Morrissey’s poetry is deeply local, hybrid, transatlantic and international in all the best senses of these four words. Her influences, her ‘precursors’ and her restless, deeply informed experiments with form, line, stanza, voice and perspective demonstrate an impressive, even global range. In my view, she’s the finest poet of her still-young generation.

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Endnotes

- 1 The Welsh poet R. S. Thomas is an intriguing point of reference. Morrissey once noted that Thomas ‘inspires me because he is absolutely faithful to his own poetic concerns, regardless of a predominantly atheistic environment and changing literary fashions. He teaches that half the battle is knowing what not to listen to’ (Smyth 1). In other words, Thomas is another teacher of ‘poetic concerns’ – not unlike Murray – and ‘teaches’ that it is imperative to stay faithful to your beliefs and commitments regardless of current poetic fashions. While Gerald Smyth notes that ‘her work owes no clear debt to him [ie, R. S. Thomas,’ Smyth as reader and reviewer maintains ‘Morrissey’s playfulness is not Ashberryesque, an erroneous comparison made by her publisher in one book blurb’ (Smyth 1, 3). In many respects the reviewer’s adamant stance here exhibits the contentious issue of influence: Thomas trumps Ashbery for Smyth because he prefers one over the other, whereas Morrissey appears to learn from both ‘precursors’ in different, indeed diverse ways – one attitudinal and the other textural and tonal.
- 2 This point intersects with a larger project of mine that found articulation a few years ago in *Ireland and Transatlantic Poetics*. In the introduction to that volume, I claimed that ‘the motive toward [‘transatlantic poetics’] lies in the need and in the demand for cross-national, international, and postnationalist comprehension of cultural relations and critical practices across modern Anglophone British, Irish and North American literary developments, literary filiations, and literary history’ (Caraher 13-14). Indeed, ‘Ireland is an island, geographically a rather small one at that, yet its finest writers have insistently articulated its modern culture within the transatlantic neighborhood stretching from continental Europe across the British and Irish archipelago to the western reaches of North America’ (Caraher 14). Sinéad Morrissey is distinctly and definitively in the company of the ‘finest writers’ practising such ‘transatlantic poetics’.
- 3 The classic study by Myron Simon, *The Georgian Poetic* (1975), examines the sentimentalized or faux-Romantic, Housmanesque and Hardyesque roots of the ‘Georgian Movement,’ its anthologies and the adaptation of its poetics to the treatment of issues arising from the Great War. Also all five anthologies of *Georgian Poetry* (1912 to 1922), edited by Edward Marsh and published by Harold Munro at the Poetry Bookshop, London were populated exclusively by male poets. Excellent, chapter-length analyses by David Perkins and George Walter greatly extend Simon’s work to include astute reflections on the social and historical matrix of the Georgian Movement (markedly anti-Victorian and post-Edwardian) and the claim that Wilfred Owen, Edward Thomas and Robert Frost should be included as the better Georgians, though never included in the five famous anthologies. Blake Morrison’s *The Movement* (1980) examines the rise of male-dominated circles at Cambridge and Oxford in the 1940s and 1950s, their anthologies and the neo-Georgian, Hardyesque poetics percolating through their antipathy to the modernism of Eliot, Pound and Yeats and the rhetorical exuberance and bardic personality of Dylan Thomas. Perkins notes the link between Georgian poetry of the 1910s and the ‘version of it revived in the fifties’ (204), notably in the poetry of Robert Conquest, Philip Larkin and the early Thom Gunn.
- 4 See my early discussion of these aspects and features of Plath’s poetry in “The Problematic of Body and Language in Sylvia Plath’s ‘Tulips’,” an article that prompted a ‘festival’ of replies and discussion, including responses by M. D. Uroff, Robin Reed Davis and Marjorie Perloff.
- 5 Perhaps there is an echo of Tristan’s famous line from Wagner’s opera, *Tristan und Isolde*: ‘Oed’ und leer das Meer’ (wide and empty the sea). Of course, line 42 of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* consolidated the currency of these words and desolate, love-lost image for modern Anglophone poetry. It’s worth noting that Morrissey achieved a First Class Honours Degree in English and German at Trinity College Dublin.
- 6 For an extended study of Duffy’s “Prayer” and its implications for modern British and Irish women’s poetry, see my chapter in Dowson’s *Cambridge Companion*, especially pp. 192-3.

- 7 Morrissey typically possesses a flawless sense of rhythm and measure in her poetic lines, but I will quibble with the use of the unnecessary extra word and syllable – ‘with’ in this line. The first five lines of the poem otherwise have a perfectly-weighted eight syllables and four beats or stresses each as they move toward the ‘glutted’ and over-balanced sixth line which tags ‘over water’ (four more syllables and two extra stresses) onto its initial and syntactically independent first eight syllables and four beats. Maybe a later, revised version of the poem might adjust this slight, niggling anomaly.
- 8 Morrissey mentions *Menacing Cupid* again in the third poem, “Shadows,” of *Parallax*. It’s worth glossing it here because it adds some depth and focus to the sculptural image: ‘the see-through/ / boy with his quiver of arrows/ could claim me as his own’ (13).
- 9 See, for instance, Collette Clark’s intriguing edition of interspliced work by Dorothy and William Wordsworth, *Home at Grasmere*.
- 10 *The Pedlar* was William Wordsworth’s working title for a long poem he worked on from 1787 to 1802; it was eventually published as *The Ruined Cottage*, the First Book of his ambitious masterwork *The Excursion* in 1814.
- 11 This reading contrasts markedly with Kate Kellaway’s misconstruction of “A Very Dyspraxic Child” as a poem about ‘a boy’s brave loyalty to Batman’ and his purported heroics. Kellaway’s review of *On Balance* seems inattentive in a few other matters as well.

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Essay: “Between Solitude and Company: The ‘I’ and Its Levinasian Relationships with Otherness In Medbh McGuckian’s Poetry”

by Erin Mitchell

Some of Medbh McGuckian’s poetry features speakers who are willingly separated from others. In the early poems, often a lover, temporarily or for good, banishes or loses a lover. Some speakers, however, are solitary, or made solitary from others, even when they reach out to others in their speaking. At times, however, speaking can diminish solitude, connect speakers to others, and allow speakers to continue the work of the other. In other words, some of McGuckian’s poetry enacts Levinasian “ethical relationships” between the speaker and the other. McGuckian’s poetry, as Elin Holmsten reminds us in “Signs of Encounters in Medbh McGuckian’s Poetry,” sometimes echoes Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy (Holmsten, p. 96), which responds to WWII by meditating upon the possibility that the openness to the other of speaking ethically elicits a reciprocated welcoming. Levinas, and sometimes, McGuckian, postulate that if the “I” participates peaceably in a “Face-to-Face” encounter between the “I” and an “Other,” the “I” can carry on and extend the ethical projects of the “Other” without enslaving, melancholically “encrypting,” or fighting to the death with that “Other.” Thus, the “I” can obligate the “Other” to do the same. Given a close reading of some of McGuckian’s poems, I will examine solitudes that feel like relief, and solitudes that feel like loneliness. In some poems, the speaker feels lonely and disconnected and melancholic, longing for company, and, sometimes, in the Levinasian encounter with the other, even the dead are mourned. We see such reciprocity between the “I” and the other as sometimes barred and frustrated, and sometimes fruitfully enacted throughout McGuckian’s *oeuvre*.

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Some of Medbh McGuckian’s poetry features an “I” poet who wishes for solitude, as in “Dovecote,” taken from McGuckian’s *Venus and the Rain* (1994) and included in the first volume of her *Selected Poems 1978-1994* (1997). McGuckian’s speaker wishes that the rain and sea and soil will make “me an island once again” (*SP*, p. 37). In a poem that appears in *My Love Has Fared Inland* (2010), entitled “Desh: The Homeland,” the speaker cherishes her/his (lost) solitude; the speaker reminds him/herself that “the quietly hidden insula/may be the most important of all” (*MLFI*, p. 76). Some of McGuckian’s early poems are about lovers who long for a respite from being coupled. “The Aphrodisiac,” published in *The Flower Master and Other Poems* (1993) is the story of a woman who has announced that she:

had stopped sleeping with him, that
her lover was her friend. It was his heart
she wanted, the bright key to his study,
not the menacings of love. So he is
banished to his estates, to live
like a man in a glasshouse. (*SP*, p. 25)

The woman who sends her lover away from her garden and from her body, bans sexual contact with the lover. She bossily institutes a willed cutting-off of company. While the narrator of “From the Dressing Room” which first appeared in *Venus and the Rain*, does not throw her male partner out so precipitously, she sometimes wants, as Virginia Woolf famously recommended, a room of her own. The speaker says, in a sprightly and self-mocking way:

...Oh, there
are moments when you think you can
give notice in a jolly, wifely tone,
tossing off a very last and sunsetty
letter of farewell, with strict injunctions
to be careful to procure his own lodgings. (SP, p.

The speaker of the poem is delighted to be temporarily sequestered in her “poet’s attic,” her “good little room [which] is lockable” (SP, p. 32), and she hopes to become, like an ideal monk in a round tower, a solitary and sexless being bent over her work.

Rejoined couples, however, might remain closed two-person circles, as McGuckian implies in the title *My Love Has Fared Inland*, and in some claustrophobic poems in which one of the partners is dead, and is psychologically encrypted in the mind of the alive partner. The first two lines of “Watching the Owls with You” communicates this theme, stating that “Only two people are allowed in the room/a room designed to imprison” (MLFI, p. 40). Sometimes, one of the members of a couple cannot escape the presence and influence of a dead other. In a poem from the volume aptly called “Sealed Composition,” the speaker uses an epigraph from Goethe: “One learns only from those one loves” and takes the “only” in that epigraph seriously, but the alive girl and the dead man go “up and down another’s stairway” (MLFI, p. 9) in what seems a hopeless Sisyphean task. In “The War Degree,” included in *Captain Lavender* (1995), the “I” is speaking to a seemingly dead, but melancholically encrypted, other, saying “that I must re-fall in love with the shadow of your soul, drumming at the back of my skull” (CL, p. 74). These couples, in which the alive member psychologically encrypts and is haunted by the dead member, cannot continue the work of the other, but are doomed to return again and again to the self in what Levinas calls “Odysseus’ journey” which “assimilate[s] the other” (Holmsten, p. 96). Neither the return to the same of the self or melancholic encryption of the other reaches out to otherness as otherness.

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Some of McGuckian’s poems are about speakers/writers who are stranded in unwished-for solitude, and who are calling out for company. Some speakers in McGuckian’s poetry report feeling that “being islanded” might eventually mean that one is lonely. McGuckian’s speakers feel most distraught over speaking that doesn’t successfully reach out to otherness, and thus fails to become a project continued in the world. McGuckian’s speakers worry that writing poetry sometimes seems to be a sterile, solipsistic, activity. Solitude keeps the poet and her words disconnected and unproductive, as in the poem “What Does ‘Early’ Mean?”, included in *On Ballycastle Beach* (1988). Here, “I” finds that “Every sentence is the same/old workshop sentence, ending/rightly or wrongly in the ruins/of an evening spent in puzzling/over the meaning of six o’clock or seven” (OBB, p.11). Such musings are too trivial to be passed on (although McGuckian slyly writes them down). Further, more isolating, doubts about public speaking’s ability to become a conduit to otherness and the future appear in a poem called “The Questioning of Soldier L,” included in *Balaris Moor* (2017).

The speaker, in her capacity as public poet, thinks that:

You are asking a woman of a great
many words
to recall half a dozen...

Me and my rhetoric should be some
where, inside my head my own
voice without any connection to my mouth...” (BM, p. 36).

Poetry is displaced by mere rhetoric, as the poet, who doesn't want to speak or write such worn-out words, fulfills her public "duty" to answer journalists' and readers' questions in a trite, but expected, fashion.

As the speaker gets increasingly famous, she is obliged to speak in words approved by the public-relations language. The speaker's concern about the dead-endedness of using rhetoric extends to the bureaucratic and diplomatic language the speaker is obligated to use. In a poem called "Note for Blind Therapists," included in *Blaris Moor*, the speaker, in an aside addressed to her serious readers, laments the consequences of her being a public figure, which drains words of their capacity as communicators. Trying to speak using the words of others becomes "nothing from which, no power/no desire, with the obligation/to find semantic succor, and no/audience—that's part of one's death" (*BM*, p. 39). Using public rhetoric might silence and murder her as a poet; "empty" language might hasten an excommunication from the company of those who do will not love her public persona. Like the speaker of "She Which Is Not, He Which Is," the poet beset by public duties might anxiously feel that "My eyes will not be the eyes of a poet/Whose voice is beyond death" (*MC*, p. 93), and that the poet's project will disappear after public and real death. The poet remains lost and alone in the nearly illegible language of the public relations persona, like the State employee who can speak only bureaucratese. While such "ventriloquizing" language might soothe or benumb the listener, the speaker remains stranded in a lonely and unfecund space, like Echo's.

Solitude becomes loneliness and grief for some of McGuckian's voices. In a volume entitled *The High Caul Cap* (2013), the poems repeat an attempted, and failed, rapport with a dying, silent, incontinent, and nearly blind mother who has prematurely stopped communicating with her family. The title of the book, according to the Wake Forest University Press volume's back cover, refers to "both the name of a traditional Irish air and a symbol for the link remaining after birth between the mother and the child. The caul was superstitiously regarded as a good omen and so kept at the hearth as a preservative against drowning." However, in a poem entitled "Master of the Female Half-Lengths," the mother (rather than the child) suffers a "prolonged...endurance of drowning" (*HCC*, p. 49), and, in the title poem, McGuckian writes that "/The October rains set an all-time record/...when the heavens duly open.../his cold rain,.../overtakes us each afternoon" (*HCC*, p. 45). Both poems show that the mother is drowning in her own dying, and that the mother-daughter bond has been lost in the deluge, even as the daughter tries to somehow save it. According to "The Spirit of the Mother," a narrator reports that "she is drowsing, dying,/in her ill-timed sleep,/a primitive crust, heaving and folding, encapsulated/in her own spatial pale" (*HCC*, p. 42). The mother's retreat to uncommunicative solitude leaves the daughter prematurely bereft. In a poem called "The Meanings of Margaret's Hands," the daughter attempts, and fails, to make contact with her mother. The daughter calls out "You-are you?" and reports that: "She seems eaten away by the air that surrounds her.../She is twisted down into herself/the weight of her torso supported like a wheelbarrow." (*HCC*, p. 38).

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The unresponsive mother addressed in *The High Caul Cap* leaves her daughter no projects to continue, and no last words. *In My Love Has Fared Inland*, a poem called "The Book Moth," describes the speaker as "fair of mourning at a graveside/repeating once more that nothing/ remains to be said, to re-cut/the inscription on my mother's tombstone" (*MLFI*, p. 26). The speaker has no new words to carve; she will simply re-inscribe the words that are already there, given that her mother did not say whatever words she wanted to be remembered by, so the inscription might not tell the passer-by much information about her. In *Shelmanier* (1998), a book of poems "about" the 1798 Rising, a poem called "Standing Army" features an "unlettered headstone," but, unlike during her mother's funeral, "A bugle re-echoes in

four caves,/each in a different key, and more/unmelancholy there...the hornblende Irish cry" (S. p. 52). The musical tribute to an unknown soldier become less sad than her mother's gravestone, as the unmarked grave's inhabitant joins not only the peaceful, meadowed, and be-rivered landscape, but the community of his comrades-in-arms.

Not all the casualties of wars, however, get such a send-off. McGuckian, born in 1950, in Belfast, lived in battle-zones of the Troubles as a child and maturing adult. She reminds us of her unusual surroundings in a poem called "Slips," in *The Flower Master and Other Poems*, and also in the first volume of her *Selected Poems 1978-1994*, where she writes that "My childhood is preserved by a nation's history" (SP, p. 17). Her poetry voices the violence, fear, despair, cruelty, bombings, and terrors of the Troubles, and it rejects the complacent forgetfulness of peacetime. McGuckian's horribly isolating experiences during wartime are probably most poignantly remembered in a poem called "Drawing Ballerinas," which is also the title of a section, included in the Wake Forest University Press volume of *The Soldiers of Year II* (2002). The poem was "written to commemorate Ann Frances Owens, schoolfellow and neighbor, who lost her life in the Abercorn Café" (SYII, p. 95) in which McGuckian imagines a dead ballerina lying gracefully, but twisted, on the ground. The body:

...flattens to the surface on which it lies,
a series of fluid, looping rhythms, let loose
by one last feeling. As if it had obligingly
arranged its legs, or joined those imprisoning arms. (SYII, pp. 94-5).

Like many others, this girl is a civilian casualty of the Troubles. The dead girl's body, exploded into pieces, remains where it fell; passersby and the police can see her in all of her grace and indignity until her relatives can come and get her.

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Even after the Peace Accords are signed, McGuckian's speakers feel silenced, or at least unheard, in the neo-liberal environment of touristy, Celtic Tiger Belfast. In a poem called "Life of a Literary Convict," the speaker refuses to surrender her/his arms. The speaker insists that "All my minds are weapons" and that the speaker distrusts the complacency she/he finds around him/her, since: "I have experienced a wilderness" of war: the speaker recalls that:

Everything that ended in gunshots
and news of massacres
and third-class funerals that smelled
of nothing, pressed out of my reader's eye
the last tears of childhood. (SYII, p. 18)

The speaker worries that, and is angry about, a return to everyday life that has "neutralized the lava/...at an enormous cost" (SYII, p. 18), and that the melancholic denizens of Belfast do not wish to think about or remedy the wounds of war.

The poem features a speaker who is still at war, and is a rebuke to those who are trying to "forget," repress, or ignore the bloodshed and terror of the Troubles. Such people include those profiting from peace in a city that no longer features security checks on every major street, constant loudspeaker announcements about unattended baggage, watch-posts manned by British soldiers, and helicopters' circling overhead. After peace was declared, Belfast has become a place of commodified and profitable commemoration. As Guinn Batten writes in her "Afterword" to *Soldiers of Year II*, "Life as a Literary Convict" shows that "the enforced peace seems only an inversion of those [enforced during] the war" and that "just as violent is the everyday denial of violence, its amnesiac obliterations compared to an assassin-

tion or execution" (Batten, p. 129). The speaker of the poem is aghast at the forced forgetting of the peace in a melancholic way; she wants to remember and mourn the war and its dead, such as the bomb-victim ballerina sprawled so gracefully on the ground. In McGuckian's "Life of a Literary Convict," the speaker is angry and depressed given that bourgeois complacency and deadened commemoration have too soon replaced the ongoing project of creating a real republic, she/he must fight on alone rather than in company.

McGuckian's speaker explores the idea that mere commemoration, in photographs, museums, and on gravestones, silences, stills and "kills" them again. In his analysis of the poems in McGuckian's *Had I a Thousand Lives* (2003), Conor Carville contends that the poem called "Ring "Worn Outside a Glove" "explicitly links an absolutist investment in the image with a misplaced fidelity to the past...[and] criticiz[es] a commemorative complacency...such procedures...fail to do justice to the complexity of the past" (Carville, p. 120). *Had I a Thousand Lives* is a volume of poetry "about" Thomas Russell, and Robert Emmet who were both United Irishmen and were executed in 1803 (Carville, p. 119). Emmet famously made a pre-execution speech, in which he said:

I have but one request to make at my departure from this world, it is-THE CHARITY OF ITS SILENCE-let no man write my epitaph, for as no man knows my motives dare not vindicate them, let them and me now repose in obscurity and peace, and my tomb remain uninscribed, and my memory in oblivion, until other times and other men, can do justice to my character. (qtd. Carville, p. 120).

As McGuckian puts it, "The Flower of Tullahogue," such a refusal to be commemorated and gradually forgotten is Emmett's "warding off an epitaph" according to a line in McGuckian's "Ring Worn Outside a Ring" (qtd. Carville, p. 22). Emmet bans the social and psychological investment in commemoration as a substitute for continuing his work until the time "my country takes her place among the nations of the Earth, *then and not till then*, let my epitaph be written" (qtd. Carville, p. 120). In other words, Emmet's advocacy of a Levinasian idea: that encounters with the Other elicit a promise to continue and extend the Other's ethical projects. Levinas writes:

The future for which the work is undertaken must be posited from the start as indifferent to my death. A work...is being-for-beyond-my death...To renounce being the contemporary of the triumph of one's work is to have this triumph in a time *without me*, to aim at a time beyond the horizon of my time... [which] is a passage to the time of the other...to be for what-is-after-me. ("The Trace of the Other," p. 349, italics original).

That "enormous cost" of trying to commemorate dead others in photographs and memorials, is a state of melancholy, as Helen Blakeman's "Medbh McGuckian and the Poetics of Mourning" defines it. The speaker of "Life as a Literary Convict" believes that her neighbors "refuse to let go" of the dead by encrypting, and being haunted by, dead others who can't yet be "let go" into mourning. Mourning entails the "letting go" of the dead other from the crypt of the psyche, and carrying on the work of the dead.

Such fierce solitude or isolating melancholy is ultimately untenable, however. Some speakers in McGuckian's poetry report feeling that "being islanded" might eventually mean that one realizes, as does the speaker of "Dovecoat," that "you cannot reproduce in your own shade" (*SP*, p. 37), and they reach out to the other. In a poem called "The Sky Marshall," the speaker expects that a "walk must/End with a meeting" (*OBB*, p. 54). The woman who has sent her

lover to his estates in “The Aphrodisiac” invites the lover back when “all her books seem... frumpish,” and she “take[s] to rouge again” (*SP*, p. 25) in order to (successfully) seduce him back into her “garden.” The narrator of the title poem of *Marconi’s Cottage* (1996) realizes that the building and the “books of love” are “all I have gathered/to me of otherness” (*MC*, p. 103). The speaker of “The Aisling Hat” seeks the journey outward to otherness that remains other, and that speaking is a reaching out to the other, insisting we “remember that to speak/ is to be forever on the road,/listening for the foreigner’s footstep” (*CL*, p. 47). Levinas calls such an open-ended encounter an “Abrahamic journey,” which is “an ethical journey towards otherness” (Holmsten, p. 96) that does not absorb that otherness. The speaker of “In the Rainshadow” seeks “a whole city of looks;/And one that gives my head a chance/To listen back and speak to the other...at the deepest moral not where people/Can still press together/What they both remember/Till it joins” (*MC*, p. 96). Such reaching out to otherness repopulates and allows the speaker to rejoin the world; love is indeed faring outward in these poems.

Relations with others refresh the will to use language that reaches out to the other, but also requires a scattering of the self (Holmsten, p. 93), which sometimes accompanies the maternal. In a poem called “the After-Thinker,” in which the speaker declares “I lack any relation with you now/But the deepest” as she seems to speak with a seemingly dear, but dead, person whom she wants somehow to resurrect, from “my secluded ego” (*MC*, P. 91), as a mother would give birth. In a poem called “On Her Second Birthday,” she dedicates to her daughter, and in which the speaker muses:

It seems as though
to explain the shape of the world
we must fall apart,
throw ourselves upon the world,
slip away from ourselves (*MC*, p. 107)

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and makes explicit the ‘falling apart,’ however temporarily, of the Levinasian reaching out to the other who remains other.

Sometimes, the encounter with the other in McGuckian’s poetry becomes a continuance of the work of the other. Levinas hopes that the worthy ethical projects of the dead “I” are carried into the future, writing:

The future for which the work is undertaken must be posited from the start as indifferent to my death. A work...is being-for-beyond-my death...To renounce being the contemporary of the triumph of one’s work is to have this triumph in a time *without me*, to aim at a time beyond the horizon of my time... [which] is a passage to the time of the other...to be for what-is-after-me. (“The Trace of the Other,” p. 349, italics original).

Given the human foreknowledge of one’s death, Levinas hopes that those who are still alive and yet to be born will carry on the projects of the dead, extend work into the “time without me.”

On Ballycastle Beach is dedicated to, along with her son named after him, McGuckian’s father, Hugh Albert McCaughan. In *Marconi’s Cottage*, a woman speaker of a poem called “Red Armchair,” the speaker both dreads and mourns “properly” (without resorting to encrypting the dead in the self) the death and metamorphosis of her father. McGuckian’s

speaker says that “If my father dies in the wasted arms of summer,/The sudden warm flow of his melted life/Will make new constellations...family photographs/Sparkle to distract death’s attention back to love” ((MC, p. 102). The father generously leaves his family constellations and photos, which are signs of his love, and of the speaker’s readiness to let him go into what “Vibratory Description” calls “the more with which we are connected” (MC, p. 95). The speaker also shows that he/she is willing to take on the work of the father in his/her description of the inheritance the father leaves to her in a poem called “The Partner’s Desk.” She remembers his saying “The finest summer I can ever remember/Produced you” (MC, p. 70), and she seems inclined to bring into “life.. another soul” as, “Today is the true midsummer day” like the one on which she was conceived. The speaker tells us that “when I teach the continents/To my favorite daughter, my father is there/Though I do not see him” (MC, pp 70-1); she feels her father’s presence as she continues not only the ancestral line but also the work of instructing one’s children about the otherness that exists in the world. The mourning daughter reminds herself of a time when the father is both connected, and about to “give away” her, his daughter, who is to be married. The speaker says:

I remember a second,
Gentler dream, of my wedding year,
Where we took a walk across loose stones,
And he took my hands (MC, p. 71).

From the father, the speaker inherits not only memories, but also objects. The speaker says:

...He will leave me
The school clock, the partner’s desk, (MC, p.71).

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The father thus passes down implements that make writing easier, and most importantly, a partner’s desk, which implies that two people can use the desk at once, that a partnership has taken place between the father and the daughter to whom he has passed it, and that writing is a collaborative act rather than an isolated one. The desk encourages her to reach out to otherness even while she plans a poem, to be in the company of her father, and of the audience (including her dead but “properly” mourned father). She sends out a poem included in *Captain Lavender* called “Elegy for an Irish Speaker”:

Most foreign and cherished reader,
I cannot live without your
trans-sense language,
the living furrow of your spoken words
that plough up time. (CL, p. 43).

“An Elegy for an Irish Speaker” is addressed to an other who cannot be assimilated by the speaker, an other who, even if dead, remains other even as he or she lends an audience, company, a “trans-sense language” and “speaking flesh” to the ongoing and shared work of the poet no longer isolated, but in company.

Medbh McGuckian’s poetry features speakers who long for solitude, and speakers upon whom isolation is “forced.” Some speakers psychologically encrypt the other, and see others as mere ghosts of the self. In other words, these solitary speakers treat the death of another as a journey that Helmsten, paraphrasing Levinas, calls “a mere detour which the self takes only to define itself and thereby secure its identity” (Helmsten, p. 96), taking a journey that

resembles Odysseus' travels. In some of the poetry, however, some speakers can and do call back the other to their sides. McGuckian's speakers discover that reaching out to others using language allows audiences and the dead to help them on a Levinasian "Abrahamic Journey" which Helmsten paraphrases as a "movement towards the unknown with no possibility of return" and as "an ethical journey towards otherness" (Helmsten, p. 96). By thus entering the company of the Other who remains other, McGuckian becomes empowered to continue the work of the other, as Levinas suggests we do. McGuckian's speakers find themselves in regenerative community with others, sometimes. They strive to be in company, but they achieve such community only when they open themselves to the other and his/her projects.

**Bio: Erin C. Mitchell**

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Essay: “Reconfigurations in Colette Bryce’s Poetry”

by Ailbhe McDaid

Colette Bryce’s early collections suggest an urge to withdraw from and transcend the bodily, cultural and political constructs of her native city of Derry. Her latest volume *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe* overturns this impulse to return to Northern Ireland and to childhood, albeit through the tentative strands of memory. This essay explores Bryce’s tensions of appearing and disappearing in her poetry of Derry, and proposes that anxieties of identity and an emergent ethic of responsibility conduct a creative tension in her work.¹ In 2011, Bryce commented on her anxieties of identity:

I see myself as a poet of “the UK and Ireland” but very much as an Irish poet within that. It’s strange. I’ve been away now for longer than I lived in Derry, yet when my work wasn’t represented in a recent anthology of my Northern Irish peers I was surprised at how hurt I felt. It was as though I was being edited out of the story.²

In addition to the complex frames of belonging inherent in a Northern Irish identity, Bryce has resided outside of Derry—in Scotland, in Spain and, long-term in England—for almost all of her adult life. If, in 2011, an anthology-maker might have seen fit to exclude Bryce on the basis of physical, imaginative or thematic non-residence of Northern Ireland, her most recent collection, *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, leaves little doubt about the significance of Bryce’s relationship with her native city of Derry. From her first collection, *The Heel of Bernadette* (2000), however, Bryce has engaged with her home city, albeit in a poetic mode that embeds, rather than exposes, the context of the Troubles. This essay traces the ways Bryce’s poetry is preoccupied with varieties of escaping and inhabiting the city, and then turns to examine how the past is confronted and controlled in her latest collection.

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Given her upbringing in a city riven by division, it is unsurprising that Bryce’s poetry is preoccupied with the politics and prejudices of space. Bryce was born in Derry in 1970, and her childhood in a society inscribed with actual and ideological boundaries lays the contours for a nuanced poetic engagement with the various ways structures of power are transferred within these symbolic demarcations of inclusion and exclusion. In her impetus to map her personal identity within those pre-defined spaces, Colette Bryce engages poetic strategies of escape, erasure, and invisibility in poems such as “The Full Indian Rope Trick,” “Form,” and “Car Wash.” These poems carefully balance normative political, cultural, and sexual expectations against the societal backdrop from which Bryce longs to escape and yet is charged to represent.

The interplay of public and private spheres underpins Bryce’s key poetic motif of borders and boundaries to probe questions of enclosure and exclusion. These questions are located in spatial and political allusions, and they reach into cultural and sexual aspects less overtly delineated but similarly entrenched. Across her collections, Colette Bryce constructs the city of her childhood along the lines of separation that defined the streets, both physically and metaphorically, during the Troubles. An early poem entitled “Line,” (*The Heel of Bernadette*, 11), deals explicitly with the scored flesh of Derry’s city center, “the criss-crossed heart of the city” marked by the so-called “peace lines” constructed at the interface of Republican

and Loyalist neighborhoods. Likewise, the city's ancient walls demarcate social boundaries in "Stones" (*The Full Indian Rope Trick*, 3), a version of Spender's "My Parents Kept Me from Children who were Rough" that reinvents the original poem in terms of the social class prejudices of her youth.³ Bryce's "Stones" opens with "We kept ourselves from children who were rich," placing herself as one of Spender's children "who threw words like stones." Watching the privileged children "strapped in the backs of foreign cars / whose quick electric windows rose / effortlessly," Bryce and her peers observe from the physical divisions that carve up the city:

From walls we saw them come and go.
War-daubed faces, feathers in our hair, wild,
we never smiled.

As well as being marked by material and social divides, Bryce's Derry is constructed with imagery of a "twisted, stricken" cityscape warped by violence, as in "Last Night's Fires" (*The Full Indian Rope Trick*, 13):

The street lamp by the gutted bus
soft-ticks, watches us from the stuck
joint of its neck. There's windscreen
shattered on the ground like jewels,
diamonds, amethysts, on the school
walk.

The street-lamp watching "from the stuck joint of its neck" is like a trapped animal or a deer in the jaws of a lion, helpless and resigned. Searching for beauty in the devastation, the smashed windscreen is transformed into something precious, the poignancy of which is amplified when the setting is clarified as "the school walk."

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"Last Night's Fires" forms a triptych of poems with "Device" and "1981" in *The Full Indian Rope Trick* (2005) that address, without attributing, cause and effect in the cycles of suffering during the Troubles. "1981" (*The Full Indian Rope Trick*, 11) alludes to the public/private events of the hunger strikes and traces the corrosive effect on the public psyche of the display of "[a] makeshift notice in the square / ... with numbers, each day higher." While the poem shies away from explicit identification with the hunger strikers and the Nationalist community, "1981" nevertheless demands questions of power and expression, culminating in the icy observation of the final lines:

heads are bowed, as mute as theirs,
that will find a voice in the darker hours,
say it with stones, say it with fire.

The question of articulation and how a section of the community can express itself when it is reduced to the mute humiliation of a "makeshift notice" leads into "Device," (*The Full Indian Rope Trick*, 12) which challenges those standards of communication. The matter-of-factness in the way Bryce presents the construction of the "device" is characteristic of Bryce's Troubles poetry prior to *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, tending toward detached allusive language punctuated by graphic detail. *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe* maintains the explicit detail but occupies a personal space within the telling, opting for domestic settings rather than public squares and anonymous bombings.

“Device” elucidates Bryce’s early technique, with its titular euphemism lending a delicacy that balances the bluntness of the ensuing lines. The opening statement—“Some express themselves like this”—is a neutralized acknowledgment of how certain segments of society choose to communicate, and it follows directly from the closing lines of “1981,” of how to “say it with fire.” The dull litany that follows is similarly drained of color:

circuit kit; 4 double-A batteries, 1 9-volt,
1 SPDT mini-relay, 1 M-80
rocket engine, a solar ignitor,
a pair of contacts, 1 connector [...]

While the Irish literary tradition is familiar with poets and playwrights incanting a litany of placenames to invoke their native locations, Bryce’s subversive recitation twists the *dinnseanchas* tradition to a darker purpose. The paraphernalia of a car bomb is reeled off with the ease and familiarity of a prayer, but these utterances, while bland on their own, compile a sinister mass. The precision of the recitation reflects the process of assembling the device: “wired, / coiled and crafted together, care / taken over positives and negatives.” A suggestion of responsibility and consequence is brought up by the reference to “positives and negatives” but these remain, finally, issues of electrical rather than moral imperative.

The representation of the device as a gift over which its creator has toiled implies the extent to which this society is monstrously misshapen. In this place, the act of destruction becomes a gesture of creativity in which devastation bequeaths immortality. The gentleness of the closing stanza enshrines the disjunction between the depicted act and its inevitable effect.

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Dawn or before, the artist’s hour,
it is placed, delicately as a gift,
under a car in a street that will flare
to a gallery in the memory,
cordoned off and spotlit for eternity.

There is no hint of violence here; only the word “flare” suggests an explosion, while the reference to “under a car in a street” is subtly constructed as the installation of an artwork. The destruction it will cause is alluded to only in its impact on the collective memory where it will be “spotlit for eternity.” That destruction is made explicit in “Last Night’s Fires,” which completes Bryce’s triptych of violence and suffering.

This boundary between destruction and creation is also courted in the poem “Form” (*The Heel of Bernadette*, 17-18) which similarly considers an unconventional act of creativity. Ostensibly about hunger artistry, the poem flows with undercurrents of gender, politics, and art that surface during the narrative. The imprint of growing up during politically fraught times is perceptible here in the unspoken allusion to the Long Kesh hunger strikes, already addressed in “1981.” In “Form,” those events remain as a presence outside of the poem but cast their shadow across the work: a method of addressing a trauma without ever mentioning it. Bryce inhabits the persona of a hunger artist and conveys the act of self-starvation as a creative act, as valuable (or pointless) as any other artistic gesture. The purpose is pure—“because it is something to do / and I do it well.” The undertaking is religious, like a “vocation,” and an enabling experience—“the hunger isn’t a sacrifice / but a tool.”

The sense of liberation through self-denial parallels with the creative/destructive binary that troubles much of Bryce's work, and also speaks to the need "to find a voice in the darker hours." Whether through "stones" and "fire," a "device" or "hunger," the search for a mode of expression is a theme Bryce explores with empathy but also with detachment. It is difficult to place the poet herself in these poems, and harder still to perceive her position around these Troubles poems, which might indeed be a deliberate strategy.

I'm writing this as my only witness
has been the glass on the wall.
Someone must know what I've done
and there's no one to tell.

The urge to share is curiously depersonalized by this disassociation from the reader who becomes incidental to the performative act. The use of the first-person in "Form" contrives a certain intimacy that is contradicted in this stanza by the speaker's justification for the poem's existence. In constructing an isolated, incarcerated space, Bryce approximates a prison of sorts, and her reference to the wall suggests an image of a prisoner scratching out his/her final words. The prison wall also calls up the so-called dirty protests that preceded the hunger strikes, reinforcing the unstated external framework of "Form." Within the poem, form itself is the binding goal of the hunger artist's act as she revels in the steady revelation of smooth lines and contours on the body.

Or would lie, supine, stomach shrinking,
contracting, perfecting its concave line.

Each day gave a little more: depth to the shallows
of the temples, definition to the cheek,
contrast to the clavicle, the ankle bone, the rib,
the raised X-ray perception of my feet.

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Hard consonant sounds, deliberate assonance, and strong internal rhymes ("supine"/"line"; "shrinking"/"contracting"/"perfecting"; "temples"/"clavicles"/ "ankle"; "raised"/"ray") reiterate the poem's thematic emphasis on the body shedding flesh. This careful poetic reconstruction builds another dimension to the poem's title, "Form," which is also an analysis of the private/public act of creativity and exposure. In private, the artwork is molded and made to "conform to my critical eye," but once out on the street, the speaker (and by extension the artwork) is exposed to "a latent contamination of eyes / from windows and cars."

In her delineation of threatening and safe spaces, Bryce recognizes the codes of behavior dictated through inherited structures. By reinventing spatial configuration within her poetry, space itself is turned into a tool to acknowledge and question those very boundaries. Migration is a version of disappearance that challenges the societal expectations laid out in public space, while memory works as a form of reappearance in the way it revisits and reconstructs the past and the self. Bryce's poetry enacts a sharp tension between an imagistic desire to disappear and narratological and thematic urges to reappear in poems set in childhood and in Northern Ireland. "Form" is a poem about artistry and politics but it is also a poem of self-erasure; likewise "Car Wash" and "The Full Indian Rope Trick" conspire toward vanished and concealed selves. Contrastingly, "The Search" and "The Analyst's Couch" from *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe* reach for restitutions that remain, like damaged memory, marginally beyond grasp, and the potential of the poem as a mode of retrieval is complicated by the instabilities and conflicts of memory.

The individual in the title poem of *The Full Indian Rope Trick* reaches for liberation into the infinite space of “thin air” enabled by the sleight of hand of the magic trick. The trick itself is seen a *fakir*, or Hindu ascetic, toss a coiled rope into the sky where it remains, levitating, while his assistant (a young boy) ascends it. Some accounts have the boy disappear into the sky and reappear on the ground; others claim the *fakir* climbs after the boy, slashing at the sky with a knife until the boy’s bloodied limbs fall to the ground. Bryce’s poem is purposefully located in the delineated space of Guildhall Square, a setting that foregrounds the desire to transcend the constructed parameters of societal behavior. The location also lends a political angle to the poem, particularly given the historically-charged setting of Guildhall Square which was, of course, the destination for the Civil Rights march on Bloody Sunday 1972. Within the poem, the paraphernalia of the rope and the square hint at public hangings; contrastingly, the protagonist’s feat in “The Full Indian Rope Trick” (*The Full Indian Rope Trick*, 17-18) is entirely voluntary and self-motivated. The speaker makes careful avowals of independence from the outset—“[t]here was no secret / murmured down through a long line / of elect”—and any hint of assistance (“no dark fakir, no flutter / of notes from a pipe”) is dismissed. The communal space of the square is emphasized by the detail: “walls” to delineate (and enclose) the area, “bells” to call attention, and “passers-by” to observe. Even the time of day suggests a “high noon”—style confrontation. The scene set by Bryce conjures an arena, primed for public performance:

Guildhall Square, noon,
in front of everyone.
There were walls, bells, passers-by;
then a rope, thrown, caught by the sky
and me, young, up and away,
goodbye.

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The gentle lilt to the rhyming of “by,” “sky,” “away,” and “goodbye” allows the act to take place with ease within the poem, and that rhyme continues into the next stanza: “Goodbye, goodbye. / Thin air. First try. / A crowd hushed, squinting eyes.” The speaker’s marginality is encoded in her performance that is, essentially, an attempt to refute the dominant parameters of social behavior.

In Bryce’s version of her “one-off trick,” there is, however, no possibility of return, no miraculous reappearance. The act of disappearing is irreversible, a “one-off trick / unique, unequalled since.” There is “no proof, no footage of it” nor, implicitly, of the woman herself—erasure is the realization of the trick’s ambition. Having disappeared, the difficulties of reappearance are immediately made clear in the final lines of the poem. Striving if not to undo the performance, then to at least reassert the self, the speaker reaches from her place above the rope to try to reconnect with the public she left below. She asks, “what would I tell them / given the chance?”, constructing the permanence of the trick’s consequence through the absence implied by the phrase “given the chance.” Even the self-evidence of the poem does not suffice as a statement of existence as the speaker is still at pains to state her presence.

It was painful; it took years.
I’m my own witness,
guardian of the fact
that I’m still here.

The poem speaks to the transition from childhood to adulthood, from co- to independence, to coming out or distinguishing oneself from the mass, and to emigration as a means of escape.

The process of dissolving and realizing the self is “painful” but is a necessary act of self-determination that allows the speaker to declare in that final sentence “I’m still here.” Bryce invests in the poem as the only “proof” that the trick happened, and in this way, the poem is also an analogy of artistic purpose and value—to capture events for which there remains “no proof, no footage” and to speak for those who have vanished or been erased from the public narrative formed within the walls of a city square. “Hide-and-Seek” from *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe* (2014) picks up the theme of disappearance as it appears to caution against “hiding” too well, particularly in migration: “Watch out, / if you’re too clever you might not ever / be found. England, say. Or adult life” (*The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, 8). Along with her expressed anxieties about her anthological presence, the personal dimension of hiding in migration is exposed in the way Bryce’s poetry finds its way back to Northern Ireland in her most recent collection.

Disappearing through migration means having to continually reappear on return; furthermore, it requires renegotiation of the terms of public space. “Car Wash” (*Self-Portrait in the Dark*, 6-7) centers conflicted structures of identity in the innocuous setting of the forecourt of a petrol station. Like Elizabeth Bishop’s “Filling Station” and Martina Evans’s *Petrol*, the garage is a shared space of social regulation, itself a microcosm of society that conceals hidden private lives. Ed Madden suggests that in “queer narratives [...], home must be negotiated as a site of estrangement and nostalgia, complex (dis)affiliations and (dis)identifications, especially since ‘home’ (domestic space or place of origin) is linked to heterosexuality.”⁴ “Car Wash” opens with an assertion of the dominant heterosexual structures of the immediate and social context: “This business of driving / reminds us of our fathers” the poem declares, evoking particular familial and patriarchal structures, and the speaker and her partner, in returning to Northern Ireland, find themselves “two / women in our thirties, / [in] this strange pass, / a car wash in Belfast.” The “strange pass” of the petrol station becomes a kind of portal through which Bryce realizes an alternate space in which her reappearance and her sexuality are accommodated.

The sub-space of the car in the carwash exists both within and beyond the visible public sphere where all acts are scrutinized and, once the machine begins, the car itself becomes a private, enclosed space, a heterotopia, which cannot be observed or invaded.

[...] and find ourselves
delighted by a wholly
unexpected privacy
of soap suds pouring, no,
cascading in velvety waves.

The heterotopic space, realized here within the car going through the carwash is, according to Foucault’s construction, a “counter-site.”⁵ Highly localized, it is a space of marginality and alterity that is simultaneously improvised and actual. The counter-site occupies a physical presence as well as a space of imaginative disruption; it is “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”⁶ Society’s norms are reinforced by the association of “driving” with “fathers” but in this heterotopia, that expectation is challenged and overturned through the female drivers. Requirements are observed (they “have minded

/ the instructions to wind up / our windows and sit / tight") but in obeying the rules, the heterotopia is fully realized in "a wholly unexpected privacy."

The erotic tincture of the "soap suds pouring, no, / cascading in velvety waves" brings the poem to its inevitable climax, a private act snatched in a normally public space. The crucial sentence begins as a plea to the reader but soon turns its question into a statement. The initial appeal to a shared sense of human connection is retracted as the narrator remembers her own outsiderness, even within this temporarily safe zone. Bryce's deft phrasing carries the weight of the image's allusions lightly:

what can we do
but engage in a kiss
in a world where to do so
can still stop the traffic.

The construction and collision of gendered sites in "Car Wash" is another manipulation of space by Bryce. The domain of the car and the act of driving is recalled as masculine—"this business of driving / reminds us of our fathers"—and the aural, visual and olfactory detail of the "low purr of fifth gear, / the sharp fumes, the biscuity / interior" reinforces the embedded, almost subconscious association of the car with a male figure of power. The repossession by these "two women in our thirties" of patriarchal control through the occupation of the car is, thus, an act of rebellion against that gendered discourse. Within the space created by "spinning blue brushes / of implausible dimensions," a creation myth of violence that belies the calm affection of the kiss, the heteronormative expectations of society are dissolved. Emerging from the car wash, those expectations are restored as the machine dictates how the car is presented and when it can progress.

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we are polished and finished
and (following instructions)
start the ignition (which
reminds us of our fathers)
and get into gear
and we're off
at the green light.

In "Car Wash," enclosure within the heterotopic space is a liberating experience that enables the motorists but it is a temporary, concealed space that is dissolved upon re-exposure to society, insinuated by the reminder "of our fathers." Bryce's sexuality problematizes her identity formation in the strictly heteronormative society of her youth, as depicted in "The Full Indian Rope Trick," and indeed, of the present. "A Clan Gathering" (*The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, 29-31) insists on its contemporaneity in its subtitle "Dublin, 2009" and analogizes familial and societal attitudes towards the speaker's lifestyle:

I don't mention my lover
how we have to invent
for ourselves a blank, unscripted
future; her guaranteed absence
from the diagram, the great
genetic military campaign,
and no one asks,
sensing a difference.

The poet's relationship is excluded from "the family chart," an "excitable flow of births, / deaths, accidents, marriages," by virtue of its homosexuality. The doubly othered conditions of her relationship—as a migrant and as a lesbian—maintain her exclusion from the conventional family structures inscribed through the family tree. In "*Cé Leis Tú? Queering Irish Migrant Literature*," Tina O'Toole considers the ways LGBT diasporic identities trouble established migrant narratives, arguing that "queer kinship and migrant affinities unsettle the fixities of family and place in Irish culture."⁷ In seeking alternate spaces in her poetry, Bryce pursues and, through migration, finds a mode of realizing and representing the self.

This dialogue of personal representation is carried out alongside analogies of political responsibilities. The sectarianism and violence of her youth are mostly adverted to through detached imagistic and formal references in her early work; her fourth collection, contrastingly, is an explicit engagement with personal and community experiences of the Troubles, as well as addressing public events including the murder of Jean McConville. *The Whole & Rain-domed Universe* demonstrates a sense of ethical responsibility toward the past that Bryce's poetry carries in personal lyrics. Bryce makes the past reappear by remembering personal and familial events in poems with provocative titles, including the colloquial "Don't speak to the Brits, just pretend they don't exist," "The Republicans," and the ekphrastic "Positions Prior to the Arrival of the Military." The motif of disappearance and reappearance, established in *The Full Indian Rope Trick*, is sustained in *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe* and directly presented in the confronting poem "The Search" (*The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, 19-20). Subtitled "*i.m. Jean McConville*," "The Search" extends Bryce's key trope of presence/absence to address the historical truth of "the disappeared" during the Troubles. The eponymous "search" pictures a crowd of children scouring the sand for the lost wedding ring of a family member, and it is only in the dedication that the poem's underlying subject is articulated. The language of erasure and irretrievability as well as the familiar imagery of failed digs definitively locates "The Search" in its historical context as Bryce's poem allusively speaks of the hidden past:

Close to the dunes,
we sifted, dug. One
patch of sand soon merged
with another. Not a land
mark, not a post or rock,
the script of the beach
erased by the weather.
Our shadows loomed
on the lit strand,
conducting their own
investigation.

The recovery of McConville's body on Shelling Hill Beach in 2003 finds its way into the poem in the quiet dignity of the final stanza's opening lines: "Thirty years. / The coolness of that sand; / just coarse enough / to hold itself together / in the wind." In trying to recover the past, memory is as fragile and as insistent as the "cloudy gems / of greenish glass" turned up by the children, and the poem itself is a tentative gesture toward salvaging the fragments.

Despite Bryce's concern about being excluded from the story of Northern Irish poetry, *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe* leaves no doubt about her personal and poetic lineage. Her assertive reappearance as a Northern Irish poet is an effort to exorcise the erasures of migration and she expressly rewrites herself into Northern Irish poetry by constructing

a dialogue with Louis MacNeice. Similar to how fellow Northern Irish poet Sinéad Morrissey's "In Belfast" converses with MacNeice's "Valediction," Bryce's "Derry" (*The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, 2-5) reworks MacNeice's Carrickfergus" into a coming-of-age poem during the Troubles.⁸

I was born between the Creggan and the Bogside
to the sounds of crowds and smashing glass
by the river Foyle with its suicides and riptides.
I thought that city was nothing less

than the whole and rain-domed universe.
A teacher's daughter, I was one of nine
faces afloat in the looking-glass
fixed in the hall, but which was mine?

Like her earlier evocation of Spender's "My Parents Kept Me from Children who were Rough," Bryce's "Derry" conjures a childhood marked by the "ancient walls with their huge graffiti, / arms that encircled the city" in an unrelenting embrace. While MacNeice's poem also recollects military presence, the calm distance of the "dummies hanging from gibbets for bayonet practice" ("Carrickfergus", *Collected Poems*, 55) is transformed into the reality of "another explosion, / windows buckling in their frames" ("Derry", *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, 5) in Bryce's unstinting representation of the Troubles in "Derry."

The poems' return to childhood and, by implication, to its traumatic events, carry an emotional intensity in the way they square up to the past. The visceral brutality of the Troubles is seen through a child's eyes, as depicted in "The Analyst's Couch" (*The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, 15). The Troubles are made to reappear, although the speaker's admittedly borrowed memories complicate the veracity of her narrative: "I was not there when the soldier was shot, so I didn't see him / carried up the street," the opening sentence announces, yet the poem continues with detailed recollection of his suffering.

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Blood, seeping into the cushions, dark brown stuff
like HP sauce, soaking thoroughly into the foam, the worn
upholstery of the enemy.

The fabric of memory, like the material of the couch, is stained by events absorbed through cultural and collective experiences as well as through individual observation. The interjection—"Am I making this up? Its animalness"—doubts the memory but the repetition of bestial imagery that characterizes Bryce's depiction of victims of the Troubles asserts its validity, if not necessarily its truth, through its association.

In returning her poetry to Derry, Bryce configures memory as flawed and subjective; similar to the map in "North to the South," it is "like a kite, a barely controllable thing / to be wrestled" (*The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, 17). This negotiation for control over difficult subject matter is enacted through distancing techniques, such as the way Bryce relinquishes jurisdiction of perspective in "Helicopters," leaving the reader to decide, or as in "The Analyst's Couch" which doubly removes the narrative through memory, hearsay, and repetition. In "Re-entering the Egg" (*The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, 6-7), memory takes on spatial configurations in a grotesque version of a Fabergé egg that, once opened, reveals overwhelming detail.

A tiny family fills the rooms.
[...]
In one, first floor, a spangled girl
enters in her diary: *I am headed for a fall.*
In one, girl-twins, conjoined
at the skull, freak themselves
to a pitch of shrieks.

Bryce acknowledges Anne Sexton's influence on this poem in the appended notes, which recognize the intertextuality of many of her poems. The opening lines rephrase the initial sentences of Sexton's "The House," taking Sexton's third line—"Like some gigantic German toy, / the house has been rebuilt / upon its kelly-green lawn"—and recasting it in a more recognizable location.⁹ Bryce's version reinvents the detail but retains the image: "Like some magnificent Swiss clock, the house has been rebuilt / in the same position, in that Georgian street." This notion of reconstruction locates the poem in Derry during the Troubles but it also signals the artificial memory-space to which "Re-entering the Egg" alludes.

Reflecting on how her "recent poems seem to want to examine that place, and time, more closely," Bryce recognizes the house as a site of symbolic consciousness and of childhood.¹⁰ "Re-entering the Egg" pauses to scrutinize this family home that is bizarre, and yet entirely domestic; the ordinary paraphernalia of an Irish Catholic home is made *unheimlich*:

and turfs collapse in the grate
beneath the glowing coal
in the ruptured chest
of the Sacred Heart.

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The poem's final lines recoil from the intensities of memory, and demand that "the egg" of the past be set aside: "Close it up. That's enough for now."

Approaching the past through frames that contain and can be set aside, Bryce engages precautionary modes—such as the Fabergé egg or the snow globe of "The theatrical death of my maternal grandmother as revealed in a 1960s glitter globe" of *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*—and distancing devices, including the hunger artistry of "Form" and the sleight of hand in the eponymous poem of *The Full Indian Rope Trick*. She places memory in carefully configured spaces over which the poet and narrator maintains strict control; like Adrienne Rich's use of formalism as a pair of "asbestos gloves," Bryce's strategies of detachment similarly enable her to "handle materials [she] couldn't pick up barehanded."¹¹ The bank of memories encased in her grandmother's glitter globe draw Bryce's poetry back to childhood and the Troubles, but there is a furtive, cautious quality found in the constructed distance of her formal approach. "I give it a shake and look again," the narrator announces in "The theatrical death of my maternal grandmother [...]", a snatched glimpse of the many agitations of memory and space that make up Bryce's poetry of Derry.

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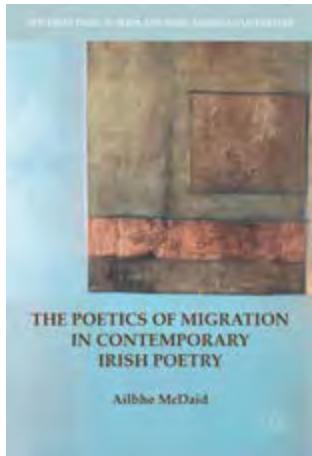
Endnotes

1. Colette Bryce, *The Heel of Bernadette* (London: Picador, 2000); *The Full Indian Rope Trick* (London: Picador, 2005); *Self-Portrait in the Dark* (London: Picador, 2008); *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe* (London: Picador, 2014).
2. Rosita Boland, "What Daffodils Were to Wordsworth, Drains and Backstreet Pubs Are to Me," *The Irish Times*, March 12, 2011. The anthology to which Bryce refers is presumably Chris Agee's 2008 anthology *The New North: Contemporary Poetry from Northern Ireland* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest UP, 2008; London: Salt Publishing, 2011), which includes four women poets born after 1955: Jean Bleakney, Moyra Donaldson, Leontia Flynn, and Sinéad Morrissey. For more on the fate of women poets in Northern Irish anthologies, see Alex Pryce, "Ambiguous Silences? Women in Anthologies of Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry," *Peer English* 9, *Time and Space In Contemporary Women's Writing* (2014): 57-73.
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8. Sinéad Morrissey, *Between Here and There* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2002); Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007; Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest UP, 2013).
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11. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English* 34, no. 1 (1972): 22. I am grateful to Bríona Nic Dhiarmada for this observation.



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Dr Ailbhe McDaid is a graduate of University College Cork (BA, English and Irish), Trinity College Dublin (MPhil, Literature) and University of Otago, New Zealand (PhD). Her book *The Poetics of Migration in Contemporary Irish Poetry* is published by Palgrave Macmillan. Ailbhe has published articles and book chapters on poetry, migration, memory studies and the literature of conflict. In 2017, Ailbhe was awarded the Busteed Postdoctoral Research Fellowship by the Institute of Irish Studies, University of Liverpool for her project 'Women and War: conflict, bereavement and Irish cultural memory'. She is currently Government of Ireland Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of English at University College Cork, on her new project entitled "Domestic Disruptions: Women, Conflict and Literature, 1914-1923."



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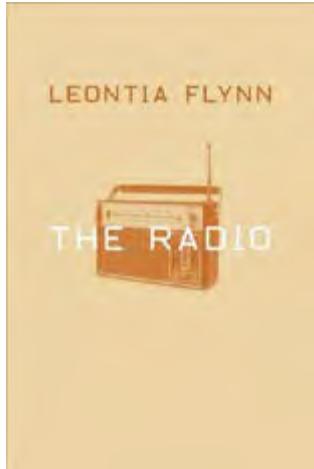
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Review: “Beauty for Ashes.” Orla Fay reviews Leontia Flynn’s *The Radio*



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The Radio by the poet Leontia Flynn is divided into three sections, 1) *The Child, the Family...2) ...and the Outside World* and 3) *Poems Conceived as Dialogues between Two Antagonistic Voices*. Sections 1 and 2 owe their titles to the classic book on child development by D.W. Winnicott. The final section contains 3 conversations between opposing voices; the first on gender politics is between a mother of an infant and an “impatient” man, the second on climate change is a dialogue between a man defending the abuse of nature and nature itself, and the third takes place between a weary mother and the Internet. Flynn, from County Down has published 3 collections prior *The Radio*. Her debut collection *These Days* (2004) won the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. Her second book *Drive* (2008) won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature and her third, *Profit and Loss* (2011) was shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize. *The Radio* won The Irish Times Poetry Now Award and was also shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize.

From the title of the collection and the opening quote from Edward Thomas “...there is a music of words which is beyond speech; it is an enduring echo of we know now what in the past and in the abyss...” I expected that this will be a book about listening and about the past and throughout Flynn is always trying to touch her past, this abyss, this echo. In *The Radio* she tries to come to terms with the process of aging. The first part of the book is something of a love letter to her mother, but it also traces themes such as her father’s death and concern for the frailty of the mind. Flynn confronts her mortality in *In the Beginning*, a sonnet that imagines the intellectuals, Darwin and Coleridge suffering from afflictions that make Flynn think less of her own pains but creates a tension between the body and the mind; “the spectre of our human flesh/trembling on the tensed webs of our minds.” Flynn’s childlike delight in listening to stories is captured in the unexpected and delightful “we were like, ‘woah’” in the fourth line.

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Alzheimer’s Villanelle explores the slow wasting away of a person’s mind, which causes Flynn to wish her father had “had a heart attack instead.” She imagines him to be “a train delayed... delayed...delayed/that pulls up without passenger or driver.” She is left wondering about her father’s soul and when it was he had really left his body. The uncertainty is troubling. *Poem in Praise of Hysterical Men and Women* delves again into the mind and the flesh echoing sentiments from *In the Beginning* and *Alzheimer’s Villanelle*. The “axons and dendrites” of the human mind that worried *Alzheimer’s Villanelle* appear in this poem where the poet is concerned about mortality: “And out of the meat and fireworks of the mind/the fuse set there that races to its end.” *The Brunties: An Elegy* calls for a reboot of the Bronte sisters. Flynn is tired of their doom and gloom and wishes that they were saved “of some retro malaise”. She imagines Emily Bronte had agreed to call a doctor.

In *Bobby Fischer: Very Displaced Elegy* Flynn is left still trying to understand the complexity of the human mind, “to understand the games, these moves, that fix the fitful mind.” Bobby Fischer had been a chess mastermind whom many tried to understand. This was one of my favourite poems because I had to look the whole background to it up. In *Gerard Manley Hopkins* the poet forms the opinion that Hopkins had been bi-polar and remembers how her father was not too pleased if she and her sister insinuated that Hopkins was gay. Flynn

cleverly takes Hopkins words and weaves them into her own sonnet that explores grief or depression. Hopkins is another who has been prey to the mind, “the mind, sick, preys upon the stricken mind.” I was delighted by this poem as I recalled with fondness studying Hopkins in *Soundings* for my Leaving Certificate. It is little nuances in language that delight with Flynn, the “bi[nsey] po[plar[s]]” of *Gerard Manley Hopkins* and the “woah” of *In the Beginning*.

Yellow Lullaby explores the poet’s role as mother to a new-born daughter. She imagines herself as the colour yellow in various forms, an omnipresent sun in the tiny child’s life. It is a poem of praise for mothers who are “The voice-that-wasn’t-silence that replied, /there in the night—so she was not alone.” So, in this role there is a battle between light and darkness and it is a spiritual role, akin to the role a creator might keep “with the unborn and the dead” that Flynn completes the poem with. *The Radio* revisits the poet’s mother’s life when the poet was a child. Flynn tries to see the world through her mother’s eyes as she listens to the troubled world of Northern Ireland through radio reports. We learn that Flynn’s mother had been from Belfast and she had married her father, a farmer and had five children. Her mother is on the “Wheel of Motherhood” which centres about her children and their safety in a violent world. *Listening to my Mother Listening to the Radio* is a concrete poem/visual poem. Listening to her mother listening to the radio means “The World” to Flynn, it is everything to her, in a square world, in the world of a child orbiting their godlike parent. *The Radio* places the mother listening to a song from the radio. Quickly Flynn is drawn into the impermanence of life, referencing Shelley’s *Ozymandias* while she conjures her father’s footsteps disappearing, him not remembering. Flynn channels her mother reflecting on life, on grown children, on a magnificent Taj Mahal, which could be her life. She wonders what a life is, but something to be built and knocked down, something to haul from “the earth’s guts in one day, /she thinks, O Lord—then fuck it into the sea.” And I love how Flynn ends this section with such a line, with such irreverence and humour for life. She knows not to take herself too seriously.

August 30th, 2013 is a reaction to learning of the death of Seamus Heaney. It is an exploration of his life, Flynn’s life and something of a commentary on the Digital Age:

“And while our networked culture makes lament
perhaps we’re mourning too a passing age:
the Derry homesteads, flax-dams, bagged cement
and benedictio –and the *pen*, the *page*,
enshrined in those broadcasts, long-wave, analogue,”

In considering Heaney she is a little troubled that

“we zigzag digitally, thrilled, frenetic
but slowly forgetting how we might go *slow*.”

Heaney’s quote “The way we are living, timorous or bold will have been our life” appears in the poem and Flynn admonishes: “Now shut up. Write/for joy. Be deliberate and Unafraid.”

The next part of the book sees Flynn remembering old friends, lovers and acquaintances. *Field of Yellow Flowers with Airplane and Standing Figure: Poem for Gavin Turning 40* is a lament for lost youth and love, and again the radio:

“Sometimes I almost hear it still
under the white fuzz (constant, virtual,

diffuse) of daily *meh* – like the radio signal left on some old transmitter, blindly sending and re-sending; the faint persistent hum of the first Real Thing.”

Poem for Ruth in the Heatwave Summer of 1995 celebrates youth, its freedom and disregard. *Out*, similarly is a poem reminiscing about the past, about being young and going out in Belfast:

“The opposite of simply sitting about
in your head, like an egg in eggshell. That was ‘Out’.

In *Black Mould and Mildew: Obsessive-Compulsive Poem for Lawrence* I love the lines:

“and I wish you well. We were half out of our minds
and young and smart. We should have been better friends.”

Flights expresses regret for the past, for a close relationship. It is succeeded by *Poem about All the Space I told my Husband I Needed* which is a blank page, making one wonder if the poet means that she needed all that space or if she needed none at all. And maybe it’s a poem she cannot write. What this poem does do though, is make for a delightful and unexpected interlude in the text. In *Taking Blood* the poet while giving blood is again reminded of “the limits of myself” and confronted by her mortality tries to think of the glass being half-full.

The Fish in the Berlin Aquarium contains beautiful description of the fish:

“as though to tap into their element
which is clear and pale, blue and perpetual
like some outrageous Scandinavian dusk
framed and airbrushed. The fish are hyper-real,
high-definition almost, in this space”

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which shows awareness for the age we live in, taking phrases that have never yet been used in poetry which makes Flynn something of a pioneer poet. The poem ends with the wondering whether the fish are so calm and peaceful or if behind the glass they are “mutely harrowed in their comfort zone”?

Wives in Mid-Twentieth Century American Fiction shows a very human side to Flynn and I really related to these lines:

“What does it mean to hear ‘now change your life’
and falter, or not be able to obey”

Flynn is somewhat frustrated with the lifestyle of the poet, and as a writer myself I can understand the conflict between the time one needs to give to poetry and the time one might prefer to spend with others or on other things:

*“Poetry is bullshit egotism:
the trite romance of waking up alone,
gradually, in a room where sun
falls on a chair, a bed, four walls – a prism
of – spare me please! – ‘essential solitude’”*

She is in no way clear about her life, “I am clear as mud”, she writes.

Give it up, Moron after Catullus 8 showcases Flynn’s wicked sense of humour and is another of my favourites from the collection. She translates the translated from Latin

“Wretched Catullus, stop being a fool,
and what you see has perished, consider perished.”

into

“Give it up, moron: forget it all, let it go.
Chalk up among your losses what’s lost now for good.”

Flynn writes an enjoyable piece of satire dedicated to the food processing company Moy Park in *Ode to Moy Park*, ending the poem with a reference to Tina Turner’s song *Simply the Best* which made me laugh. *Malone Hoard* is a further reference to the digital age, where the present, “heavy and useless, ceremonially in the thick dust of itself” is laid, where lives become “bright relics”.

The Mast is a commentary on life in presumably, Belfast, from the vantage point of a hill that platforms a radio mast. For better or worse Flynn is alive, “I’ve lived so far down in its machine and painful source” and this *is* her life and her home,

And where–past
all this industry, and the lives
held in its eminent perspectives–
somewhere, also, is home.”

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In the final section, *Poems Conceived as Dialogues between Two Antagonistic Voices*, the speaker in *Woman, in Receipt* says “I moved from a world of air to one of earth. /Ash in my mouth.” If anything, Flynn has convinced me that the work of the poet is to hone poetical gems from growing pains, to make beauty from suffering, to give beauty for ashes if you like, in a reference to The Old Testament. Perhaps she would appreciate such a throwback to an ancient age, before we moved from tablet to page to screen, since she finishes the collection a little hunted, writing that “the world and its images are so relentless,” in “the Age of Interruption” of the Internet, in *Third Dialogue*. *The Radio* proves that Flynn is a true original, unafraid to tackle the harder issues, delightful, unexpected, clever, with a deep and impressive knowledge of culture and literature. It is little wonder her poetry has been so lauded, and I am grateful to have read her work.



Bio: Orla Fay

Orla Fay is the editor of *Boyne Berries*. Recently her poetry has appeared in *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Cyphers*, *The Ogham Stone*, *Quarryman*, *Red Lines*, *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, *Hennessy New Irish Writing* in the *Irish Times* and is forthcoming in *Poetry Ireland Review*. In 2017 she was shortlisted for The Red Lines Book Festival Poetry competition and the Dermot Healey International Poetry Award. In 2018 she was shortlisted for the Over the Edge New Writer of the Year Competition. She has just completed the MA in Digital Arts and Humanities at University College Cork, for which she created <http://digitalagepoetry.com/> She blogs at <http://orlafay.blogspot.com/> For more information on *Boyne Berries* visit <http://boyneberries.blogspot.com/>

Eugene McCabe: Border Chronicler, Universal Storyteller

by Adrienne Leavy

Introduction

Eugene McCabe was born in Glasgow in 1930 to Irish parents who originally came from the border counties of Fermanagh and Monaghan. His childhood summers were spent in Ireland in County Monaghan, and the family returned permanently to Monaghan after the outbreak of the second world war. He was educated at Castleknock College in Dublin and later attended University College Cork, where he studied English and History. Upon graduating McCabe returned home and farmed with his family near Clones on the Monaghan/Fermanagh border, where he still lives. In 1966 he abandoned full-time farming to devote himself to writing. His many awards include the Legum Doctorate from the University of Prince Island in Canada in 1990, the Butler Literary Award for Prose from the Irish Cultural Institute in 2002, and the AWB Vincent Literary Award from the American Ireland Fund in 2006. McCabe is married to Margot Bowen and they have four children. He is a member of Aosdána.



Eugene McCabe

Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives,
John J. Burns Library, Boston College

McCabe's writing spans several genres. A master storyteller and dramatist who is frequently compared to Chekov, he has written a novel, numerous short stories, several plays, a novella and a children's book. Reading McCabe's vital body of work, it is clear that Colm Tóibín's assertion that "Eugene McCabe only produces masterpieces" is no glib praise. In sparse poetic language McCabe unflinchingly dissects the corrosive legacies of colonialism and sectarianism on the entangled communities living in the border counties of Fermanagh, Monaghan and Cavan. His work is further distinguished by a pronounced absence of didacticism as he explores the nuances of human behavior and the roots of ingrained hatred. In "A Tribute to Eugene McCabe" published by the Center for Cross Border Studies, Andy Pollak sums up the genius of McCabe's work thus:

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McCabe – perhaps uniquely among Irish Catholic writers – is equally able to write about the terror and contempt of Protestant border farmers and UDR men as he is to portray the anger and vengefulness of their Catholic neighbors and historic adversaries. And he is able to see into the wounded humanity of both communities and evoke sympathy with the most unlikely people, people driven demented by religion and politics and death and drink and bigotry.

In an interview with *The Northern Standard* in 1977, McCabe explained why he felt is necessary to continually return to this theme in his work:

In recent times, since the outbreak of the troubles in the North, I am very conscious that I am a writer living on the border. There is no way a writer can turn his back on what is happening around him. All other themes seem trivial to what is happening around us.

For those readers unfamiliar with McCabe's writing the following is an overview of some of his most critically acclaimed work which will help contextualize the interview discussion that follows:

One of McCabe's first plays, *King of the Castle*, premiered at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1965. The play centers on the character of "Scober" MacAdam, an elderly, impotent farmer who is married to a much younger woman. Scober was born in poverty, and his early life of depravation has shaped his character. Avaricious and cunning, he has made his fortune and purchased a former "Big House" in County Letrim. His neighbors and employees envy his wealth, and when rumors of his impotency threaten his pride, Scober hires a drifting journeyman, Matt Lynch, to impregnate his wife. The play was controversial at the time due to its unflinching examination of the recent Irish past and because of its stark exploration of sex as a bargaining currency; however, it went on to win the Irish Life Award at the Festival. In many respects, the harsh, uncomfortable world that Scober and his wife exist in is reminiscent of the rural Ireland Patrick Kavanagh excoriates in his anti-pastoral long poem, *The Great Hunger*.

In the early seventies, McCabe wrote a trilogy of short stories, "Cancer," "Heritage" and "Siege," which he subsequently adapted for broadcast by RTÉ in 1973 under the title *Victims*. The first story, "Cancer," won the Writers Award in Prague and took second prize in the Prix Italia. Collectively, the trilogy were gathered and published in one volume in 1993 under the title *Christ in the Fields*. In these stories McCabe examines the divided loyalties and heightened emotions of individuals who live in the Irish Border counties. In sparse, bleak prose, replete with local dialects, the Protestant-Catholic impasse is starkly portrayed by characters whose independent agency is tragically compromised by virtue of their historical inheritance. Eoin Flannery reads these stories as ones which "expose the limits of monolithic ideological thought as it manifests in irredeemable sectarian hatred." In "Cancer," the Republican point of view is explored. Jody McMahon is wasting away from the physical disease while all around him, the cancer of violence and sectarianism is destroying the community in which he and his brother live. Following this is "Heritage," where the conflict in Northern Ireland is seen through Protestant eyes. Here, a young, well-meaning Protestant farmer is goaded into joining the Ulster Defence Regiment by his bigoted mother and her brother. He receives a death threat from the IRA, and knowing that eventually he will be killed he commits suicide by driving into an army checkpoint. The final story, "Siege," concerns a small IRA extremist group who take an old aristocratic family hostage. Over the course of the siege the inability of these two groups to understand the other's perspective is tragically laid bare.

McCabe's only novel, the critically acclaimed *Death and Nightingales* (1992), is considered a modern classic of Irish literature. Part historical novel, part Gothic love story, this deeply moving tale takes place over a twenty-four-hour period on the twenty-fifth birthday of Beth Winters, a young Catholic girl who lives with her Protestant step-father, Billy Winters, who is a landowner. Beth's deceased mother was a Catholic who married Winters knowing she was pregnant by another man, a deception he could not forgive. Alternating between affection and cruelty, Winters' conduct drives Beth into an affair with Liam Ward, a young Catholic laborer, who hates Winters for his wealth and power. To say any more about the plot would be to spoil the novel for readers; however, one of the main themes running through the book is the fatalistic sense that the characters are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Just as he did in the short stories set in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, McCabe here explores the issue of a nation divided by religion, politics and class struggles. Set in the beautiful Fermanagh countryside in 1883, just one year after the Phoenix Park Murders of the new Chief Secretary for Ireland, Lord Frederick Kavanagh, and his Under-Secretary, Thomas Burke, *Death and Nightingales* exposes the Catholic – Protestant violence lying beneath the surface of this community of landowning farmers and tenant laborers. As in James Joyce's *Dubliners* story, "Ivy Day in the Committee Room," the figure of Charles Stewart Parnell looms large in *Death and Nightingales*. However, unlike Joyce's story, which takes place on Ivy Day (the anniversary of the death of Parnell), the figure of Parnell is very much a live presence in Irish politics at the time McCabe's novel is set. Various characters refer to Parnell either approvingly or disparagingly throughout the book, a device which allows the reader to quickly gauge the political persuasions and loyalties of the characters.

In 1999 McCabe published *Tales From The Poorhouse*, four dramatic, multi-layered prose monologues set in 1848, at the height of the Great Famine. The overlapping histories of the four characters begins with an opening monologue of a young girl admitted to the workhouse, followed by the stories of the Master of the workhouse, a besieged Protestant landlord, and the young girl's insane mother, also committed to the workhouse. No one gets off easy in these stories. Not only critical of the Protestant landlords who did not do enough to help their tenant farmers, *Tales from the Poorhouse* is also highly critical of the hypocrisy of the local Catholic priests and the gullible Irish who let their lives be ruled by a Church that was guided by its own self-interest.

Heaven Lies About Us (2004), brings together a collection of short stories McCabe wrote over a three-decade period, including his border trilogy and famine monologues. Taken together, these stories offer a necessary corrective to the idyllic version of Ireland promoted by various tourist and government bodies. Beginning with the terrible tale of a young child sexually abused by her bother, McCabe's prose immediately draws the reader into the world of his flawed characters and the struggles of the Irish soul.

Reviewing this collection for the *Telegraph*, Claire Messud encapsulates the allure of McCabe's fiction:

For readers keen to experience the power of which fiction is capable, the dread and sorrow it can elicit, the linguistic excitement it can provoke and, above all, the thrill of seeing anew, and more profoundly, what one thought one knew, McCabe is indispensable.

Adrienne Leavy in conversation with Eugene McCabe



Eugene McCabe.

Photograph courtesy of The Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

A.L. When you begin a book or a play do you have the story or the plot worked out in advance?

E.McC. I know what I want to explore because of some snippet I overheard, read, or observed that has lodged in my mind and refuses to go away. Writing about that can expand into something more interesting or with luck, universal.

A.L. You are a farmer by profession, and your connection to the land and the natural world clearly informs your work. Has your occupation, which is by nature time consuming and dictated by the seasons, dictated the trajectory of your writing career? In other words, have you had to tailor the time dedicated to writing to the demands of farming?

E.McC. When I was first published by David Marcus in Irish Writing in my early twenties, Rupert Hart Davis a London publisher, wrote and asked me to write a novel. I obliged and he replied saying that it was “unpublishable but found the dialogue alerting.” He asked, “have you thought of writing for the theatre?” Shortly thereafter I inherited Drumard and got married. I was 25 and flung myself into farming which is very arduous, especially for a young man unused to manual labor. Every day I thought about writing but had no energy left to get immersed in anything so demanding as a full-length stage play. When I turned 30 I realised I would have to make a start or nothing would ever be written. I sold all my milking cows, rented the land and began writing King of the Castle. It was a little over two years before I was satisfied that I had something to submit for production. At this time Irish Life, the most substantial insurance company in Ireland, were holding a competition for the best full-length play to be judged by distinguished judges... Tyrone Guthrie, Michael Mac Liammor, Cyril Cusack, Ria Mooney and Seamus Kelly. There were 169 entries. The judges were unanimous that King of the Castle was “outstandingly” and “head and shoulders” above the other entries.

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To answer your question, when I’m going to be deeply involved with writing I sell my stock and rent the land. Thus the long periods of silence. For a professional writer my output is small. I don’t have this passionate longing to get to my desk and turn out a novel or a play every two years. On the contrary, I postpone the idea of writing every day as long as I can, provided I am not going to be in trouble with publishers or contracts.

A.L. You have written in several different genres. Is there a particular form you feel more suited to, or does your material dictate the form?

E.McC. It’s really one or the other. After the disappointment of Swift at The Abbey I swore I would never write another full-length play, I would write prose (novels and short stories) where I alone would be responsible for the finished work. I have stuck to this which is why Field Day describes me as “as a reluctant writer.” They kept after me on and off to write a play for them. I politely but consistently refused. I have written no end of adapted stories, mostly my own, for the screen (television) but nothing for the stage.

A.L. I read an affinity between your work and that of Flannery O' Connor. Have you read her work, and if so, do you think she has influenced you aesthetically?

E.McC. It must be 30 years or more since I've read her. I remember not only being impressed but slightly unnerved by the unexpected ferocity of her themes. If I've been influenced it's deep in my unconscious.

One of the things that makes the trilogy of stories in *Christ in the Fields* so powerful is that they lay bare the alternative perspectives of Catholic and Protestant neighbors at the height of the Troubles. Did you consciously set out to structure the trilogy this way?

You can't live cheek by jowl with something so all pervasive as 400 years of a hostile standoff which in this border area tips into murder and retaliation. We are/were in no way involved but very conscious. I knew I would have to write about it sometime as dispassionately as possible. I dislike bringing class into this but the horror stories take place mostly at grass roots level in the fields and cities. From the middle classes up the entire country is republican but few if any get actively involved.

I was once very startled at a function by the C.E.O of the E.S.B.(The national electricity board) who cornered me about the Victims trilogy which he had watched. He began by saying the trilogy should have been a quartet. Did I ever read about the brutality involved in the colonization of Ulster? The flight of the earls had left the native Irish leaderless. They were driven to the mountains and bogs. Their revenge in 1641 was as merciless as their expulsion by the colonists. They did not recover their lands but did create a fear and hatred of the native Irish which has traveled down the centuries to this day. What had startled me about the C. E.O.'s suggestion was a casual;

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'They should get out'

'Who should get out?'

'The loyalists. If they don't like us they should go back to Mother England'

There seemed no answer to this impossible suggestion till I said

'Are you serious? The first pilgrims hadn't yet arrived in America'

'So what! They're not killing each other and advertising hatred every year with drums and bonfires'

He moved on and made me realise that republicanism runs deep through all classes except of course the majority of what's left of the landed gentry.

A.L. There are very few first-hand accounts by ordinary people of life during the Famine, yet the four monologues in *Tales From the Poorhouse* have an almost documentary feel to them in that they appear so realistic. How much research on the Great Famine did you do in preparation for writing *Tales From the Poorhouse*? Were there particular historical texts you relied on?

E.McC. Woodham-Smith has written the most brilliant and balanced account but naturally I read a dozen or more other texts selecting relevant details from each.¹

A.L. In structuring *Tales from the Poorhouse* were you influenced by Brian Friel's 1980 play *Faith Healer*, which consists of three monologues by Francis Hardy, the struggling faith healer, his wife Grace and stage manager Teddy?

E.McC. *Faith Healer* is wonderful but many writers were writing monologues for the stage.

A.L. The character of Roisin Brady, the subject of the first monologue in *Tales from the Poorhouse*, has to endure numerous tragedies including abandonment by her father, the death of her twin sister and her mother's madness, before entering the workhouse where she is preyed upon sexually by the Master of the workhouse. Was it difficult for you to create such a powerful young female character?

E.McC. I suppose imagination is a slightly boastful word to use as a reply, but once embarked on the story I was haunted waking and sleeping by what I'd read and caught up in the horror of her situation. A couple of critics have pointed out that she in a young Mother Courage.² This was not a conscious intention on my part but I can understand why they responded in that way. A Finish Scholar Gunilla Bexar dedicated her published work to me though we had never met. In all her reading about the famine she had come across nothing "so credible and moving." She thought it a great mistake that I hadn't used the material of the stories to write a novel and reach the general public. The philosopher and poet Raymond Tallis was given *Heaven Lies About Us* (which contains the monologues from *Tales from the Poorhouse*), and in his response to a friend, a professor Emeritus specialising in Shakespeare, he wrote that he found the four monologues "overwhelming." He ended his response by saying "that man is a genius."

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A.L. Another strong female character in your work is Beth Winters in *Death and Nightingales*. Like Roisin Brady, her fate seems predetermined by the historical circumstances (both political and personal) into which she was born, yet they both exhibit a determination to survive. Did you know their ultimate fate when you began writing or did that evolve with the characters?

E.McC. She lived in a Love/Hate situation. The novel was conceived by a story/myth I was told by John Collins who worked for us occasionally in our garden. The novel is dedicated to him. It was told with such conviction (the names of connected families involved were supplied) that incredible as it seemed, I couldn't shrug it off. I began taking notes and thinking about how to make it credible. Once begun it took on a life of its own. When I asked what became of the girl I was told she'd left for America that week. That was of course no narrative ending, so it then turned into a complex a tale of revenge.

A.L. BBC began filming a three-part adaptation of *Death and Nightingales* earlier this year. Were you involved in the script development? As a follow up, have you seen the finished series and if so, are you satisfied with it?

E.McC. I have not seen the finished work nor any clips from it. I was in email touch with the adapter Allan Cubitt. As a Londoner he was very ignorant about pastoral life. I put him right him about many farming details. I like the casting.

A.L. The mothers in your fiction are often harsh, unsympathetic characters. Is that a deliberate theme in your work?

E.McC. If that is the impression it's subconscious. Sometimes I find them (Mother, sisters, wife, sisters-in-law), a bit tiresome, but that's a universal gender thing which also applies the other way round.

A.L. Not only have religious and political differences caused deep divisions in Irish society, but the effects of class have historically been equally insidious. In your writing you explore the issue of class through characters who are the descendants of the original Ulster planters. Did you do much historical research in this area?

E.McC. I knew/know and was friendly with some Big House people. At the same time I was conscious that hundreds of years of breeding and domination and an appalling history of oppression will not ever be forgotten. Their behavior during the Famine and the mass emigration of a million impoverished Irish during the Famine backfired into a strong Irish-American lobby which brought about The Good Friday Agreement. It was pressure on London from this lobby that ended the violence.

A.L. In 1998 you published a children's novel, *Cyril: The Quest of an Orphaned Squirrel*, which was followed in 2001 by a sequel, *Cyril's Woodland Quest*. What prompted you to write a children's book? Do you plan to write another Cyril book?

E.McC. They're both the same tale. The second title is Japanese. I wrote it for Paddy my son who was dying from an infected appendix. He survived. It has been selling quietly ever since.

A.L. Your novella, *The Love of Sisters*, is a story of betrayal and reconciliation between two radically different sisters. What was the inspiration for this book? 100

E.McC. A familial scandal. Naturally I changed a lot of details.

A.L. Many of your characters seem to embody the dilemma of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, who famously stated in *Ulysses* that history was a nightmare from which he was trying to awake. Did Joyce's view of Irish history inform your approach to writing?

E.McC. I was familiar with that observation by Joyce, but any or all of us that are aware of everyday day atrocities worldwide must come to the same conclusion.

A.L. Aside from Joyce, whose stories in *Dubliners* exhibit the same linguistic economy and realism found in your work, were there any particular writers who influenced you? Are there any contemporary writers (Irish or otherwise), who interest you?

E.McC. Albert Camus' *The Stranger* had a powerful effect on me and must influence the darkness of my writing. And yes, Joyce was an enormous influence. Even in a few sentences you can spot his hand. Only Shakespeare (and some few others) have this unmistakable originality... The recognizable brush stroke of an inimitable master.

A.L. The Catholic Church comes in for some harsh criticism in your work, particularly with regard to the control it exercised over the lives of Irish people for so many generations. For a variety of reasons, the pendulum now seems to have swung the other way. What are your thoughts on this?

E.McC. I began my education at six years of age with a French order of nuns in County Kildare. I am grateful to them only in that they included the old testament (selectively), and introduced me to wonderful prose and great stories. From there I went on to Castleknock where I endured the soutane and the claustrophobia of an all-male atmosphere.

I took an Arts Degree in Cork (to tedious to explain why Cork), then an agricultural college, farming and marriage. We have been living in this house for 63 years. While my mother was alive I observed the externals because of her extreme piety. Thereafter I stopped practicing and have nothing but contempt for the institution, it's history and shameless hypocrisy.

A.L. Your play *Pull Down a Horseman* was first produced at the Eblana Theatre in Dublin on Sunday, April 17, 1966, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising. Another one-act play, *Gale Day*, was a co-production between the Abbey Theatre company and Radio Telefís Eireann to commemorate the Patrick Pearse Centenary. Fifty years on, what are your views on the recent 1916 Centenary celebrations?

E.McC. More subdued than 1966. The old enemy and its brutality have not been forgotten. The great men of the rising and the civil war that followed are fortunate to be dead. Connolly's dream of a socialist Ireland was pure fantasy. George Bernard Shaw wrote to Michael Collins' sister condoling with her on the death of her brother but pointing out that had he lived he would have experienced nothing but bickering and disappointment. We are still a conservative and largely church going people although the young are not even interested enough to have contempt for the church which has evaporated like an unpleasant dream. Pearse would be like a lost soul in modern day Ireland though he is still venerated by some of the older generation.

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A.L. *King of the Castle* was revived in 2017 by Druid Theatre and directed by Garry Hynes. To what extent if any did the audience reception differ from the original reception the play received?

E.McC. In the 1964 production I noticed that not a woman was clapping. The general reaction to that production was a numbed silence though the Irish and cross channel reviews were all consistently favorable. The recent production by Druid was warmly received. We have grown up.

A.L. Both the Good Friday Agreement of 2008 and the recent Brexit referendum present different aesthetic opportunities and challenges for stories about the contemporary and future Irish border. Are these themes that may find their way into your work?

E.McC. It's too early to guess what the reaction will be, but I imagine the remnants of the I.R.A. will creep out of the woodwork and try to revive the murder and mayhem. I doubt if they'll get any public support. I suspect there will be political change if a hard border emerges.

Thank you, Eugene.



Eugene McCabe

Photograph courtesy of *The Bobbie*

Hanvey Photographic Archives, John

J. Burns Library, Boston College.

Endnotes

1. Eugene McCabe is referring here to Cecil Blanche Woodham-Smith (1896-1977), an English historian and biographer, who wrote a highly influential study of the Great Famine : *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*. London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1962.
2. *Mother courage and Her Children* is a play written in 1939 by the German dramatist and poet Bertolt Brecht.

Works by Eugene McCabe

Plays

A Matter of Conscience (1962)

King of the Castle (1964)

Pull down a Horseman (1966)

Breakdown (1966)

Swift (1969)

Gale Day (1979)

Victims (1881)

Television Plays

Cancer (1973)

Heritage (1973)

Siege (1973)

Roma (1979)

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Novel

Death and Nightingales (1992)

Novella

The Love of Sisters (2009)

Short Story Collections

Victims: A Tale from

Fermanagh (1979)

Heritage and Other Stories (1979)

Christ in the Fields, A Fermanagh Trilogy (1993)

Tales from the Poorhouse (1999)

Heaven Lies About Us (2005)

Children's Books

Cyril: The Quest of an Orphaned Squirrel (1986)

Non-fiction

Shadows from the Pale: Portraits of an Irish Town (1996)

Essay: “Brian Moore’s *Lonely Judith*: A Crash Course in Craft”

by Tara Ison

I’m a writer because of Brian Moore. Or – I’ll back up – I’m actually a writer because I dreaded Chaucer.

As an undergraduate English lit major at UCLA, I’d opted for the “creative writing concentration,” less interested in writing fiction (how hard can that be?) than I was in evading a required literature seminar in Chaucer, which creative writing concentrators were allowed to do. My first workshop was taught by a professor I’d never heard of, a tweed-jacketed writer named Brian Moore. I recall very little of that class. I remember a gentle, unassuming man with a lovely Irish lilt and a round, weathered face, but not a single word he ever said about writing, about the stories we workshopped, about craft. I knew nothing of him as a writer, nor did I feel any interest in learning about him or his books. I remember meeting with him once in his office to discuss one of my stories (something about a woman sitting on a park bench, and a man strikes up a conversation with her...that’s all I recall, but that may well have been the extent of it), and I remember his pleasant professorial manner, but none of his advice or critique.

Here is what I do remember, as I wrote in my essay “How To Be A Writer,” from my book *Reeling Through Life: How I Learned to Live, Love, and Die at the Movies*:

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For our final class with the Irish novelist, he invited us out to his home in Malibu; our workshop trooped out to find, yes, a house on the beach, lunch laid out for us on the brick patio, ham and baguettes and wine and cheese, a house overstuffed with white furniture, honey wood floors and charcoal sketches on the walls, by, I assumed, famous artist friends of the writer, and shelves, shelves, shelves of books. We all drank a lot of wine on this most perfect, inspiring afternoon; the Pacific Ocean, the saline breeze, the halfhearted wine-infused literary conversation, the honey ham and honey wood floors, and the whisper in my ear: *This can all be yours, this is the writer’s life....* Such an alluring lesson. So apparently possible.

As a student - self-absorbed, unengaged, unlistening – that was what I learned from Brian Moore, the inspiration, what stayed with me. I didn’t want *to write*, but thanks to him and that lovely sun-and-chardonnay-soaked afternoon, I certainly wanted *to be a writer*.

* * *

My senior year of college I was living in France, ostensibly going to classes in *la littérature Française* at the *Université* but in reality passing time as I did most of my undergraduate years: reading detachedly, going to movies, drinking, knitting, and feeling self-indulgently bored. One day I wandered into a tiny English language bookshop, and a jerry-rigged shelf caught my eye, a sagging row of books all by the same author: Brian Moore. Oh, I thought, wasn’t he my creative writing professor, the Irish guy? I bought one: a paperback copy of *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*. I hoped it would be a nice change from trying to feel invested in Hugo and Flaubert. And why is this Judith so lonely, I wondered, what is that “passion” of hers? I hoped it was something lurid.

I sit down that afternoon with *Judith Hearne*.¹ I spend the next several hours in the gray shades of post-war Belfast, in a rundown boarding house run by a Mrs. Henry Rice. A soft Irish rain falls, seems always to be falling. I meet Miss Judith Hearne – a forty-something, sometime piano teacher, no family, no children, no husband – and observe her settle in to her rented room, unpack her belongings from a trunk. She places a photo of her dear deceased aunt on the mantle. She hangs a picture of the Sacred Heart devotedly over the bed. She meets Mrs. Rice's 50-something brother, James Madden, prosperous and newly returned from America. He is loud, uncouth, flashy, but he clearly enjoys talking to her, how she listens admiringly to his tales of living the American Dream. He appreciates her intelligent conversation, singles her out for his attentions. Maybe it's still possible, she thinks, maybe it's "like something in a story, people meeting, struck by a common *rapport*, a spark of kinship or love...." She visits her dear friends, the O'Neills, who embrace her as a beloved member of their big bustling family, thinks perhaps it's not too late for such a happy home and hearth of her own.... She goes to church, she prays, wonders if the Sacred Heart has chosen and sent her this man "to uphold her and help her uphold the right, to comfort her...." As Judith invests her hopes and heart in Madden as a suitor, a savior, I learn this is a man of pretense, wholly narcissistic, a racist, a rapist, a man only kind to Judith ("a pity she looks like that...") due to his own hopes that she has money to finance a business venture. When a spiteful Mrs. Rice and her hideous son Bernard reveal the truth of Madden's character and intentions to Judith, when she learns her great love is unrequited, she is crushed. She tries desperately to believe the richness of life lies still ahead of her, for she is a woman of taste and refinement, after all, with so much to offer, myriad other suitors are simply yet to be met, so many dear friends will always take her into the bosom of their own homes, God will always listen to and answer her prayers, the Sacred Heart will always be there with His love...but her faith flickers, falters. Is it possible He has forsaken her...? Is it all a lie? She unlocks her trunk, takes out a bottle of whisky, because there, in that bottle, is found salvation, love, beauty, hope, and begins to drink. And drink. When that first bottle is gone, the reality is still there: the aunt she spent the better part of her youth tending to was in truth an abusive harridan who left Judith with nothing to live on; she is running out of money, or any means of support, dangerously so; the O'Neills are only kind out of pity; any chance of romance – if it ever existed, for poor, plain Judith - died years ago. Judith's carefully constructed, self-delusional façade of a life crumbles, cracks. Give me a sign, she demands of God, but there is no answer, not even the priest cares to listen to her anymore, such a ridiculous, pathetic woman, but no matter, another bottle will set all to rights, and another, never mind her riotous drunkenness has exposed her secret shame to all, or that God has, yes, forsaken her at last, that He is just another unrequited love, just keep drinking, but the whisky has also stopped loving her back, turns on her, sends her spiraling down, no matter how much she drinks, pleads, cries, and I am crying with her because my god this poor woman, alone, mocked, dismissed, terrified, homeless, addicted, guilt-ridden, shamed, no one has or ever will be there to uphold or comfort her, it's too late for anything and everything, this is the loneliest, most loveless of women ever, and all is lost.

I'm devastated. I don't feel I'm merely a reader of this book – I've entered into Judith's heart and mind and soul, and as her spirit is irrevocably crushed I feel mine crumbling to ash as well. How is it I relate so deeply to this character, a woman whose life circumstances and temperament (I hope) are so different from my own? I'm a twenty-year-old Jewish atheist, comfortably middle class, a Southern California beach girl, an endlessly bright future ahead of me - I am untouched by such existential terrors as face poor Judy Hearne. How can I possibly be so moved?

1 All quotations from *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* by Brian Moore; New York Review Books, 2010

But I am not interested in literary or craft analysis – I don’t ask myself *how did he do it?*, this mild-mannered Irish writer who was my teacher. I’m not a writer, after all, no need to understand the machinery behind the curtain, to inspect the wheels and cogs. I’m just a reader, and as a reader I cannot remember when reading has felt so immediate and vital, so intimate. I hurry back to the bookstore, I fangirl-buy every Brian Moore novel they have: *The Feast of Lupercal*, *I Am Mary Dunne*, *Black Robe*, *Catholics*, *The Emperor of Ice Cream*, *The Statement*. There are post-war thrillers and philosophical treatises, spiritual quests, boyhood coming-of-age, and feminist indictments of societal structures. He transports me from an Irish island monastery to the streets of Manhattan, Paris, Carmel, Quebec, he illuminates the hearts and souls and minds of characters with dazzling Scheherazadian grace. I read everything of his I can get my hands on, passionately.

But I always return to Judith.

* * *

A few years later I come upon an idea for an interesting story, and I decide, as a lark, to write it as a novel – how hard can that be? I sit down to dash it out, and I am paralyzed; a novel is indeed a “loose, baggy monster,” the Henry James phrase I dimly remember from one of those undergraduate literature courses, and I have no idea how to get my arms around such a beast. I want to enter the hearts and minds and souls of my characters, I want to immerse my readers in their worlds and tender introspections, and despite the many workshops I sat through during that “creative writing concentration,” I have no clue how to achieve any of this. My characters are mocking me from a far distance, shutting me out; I pound on their doors, begging to be saved from the raging baggy beast. I am despairing and feckless. I hate writing fiction, I realize. Why would anyone do this? All I want is the beach house, a seaside picnic of baguettes and ham.

Ah, I think – maybe Judith can help. I pull *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* from the shelf (the cover long since torn off and disappeared, spine cracked, several pages unglued and messily paperclipped together), and reread it. I marvel anew at the intimacy and understanding with which Moore depicts his character, the absence of a distancing condescension, the empathy he is able to inspire. Then I reread it again. I get out colored markers, and track the omniscient narrator’s presence as it comes center stage to emcee the story, then retreats, allowing us to immerse ourselves in Judith’s perspective. I trace the slow reveal of Judith’s unreliability, Moore’s clever sleights of hand, I become aware of the breadcrumbs he leaves us, the tiny clues one might not even notice on a first read but are perfectly, deftly placed to lead us to moments of both inevitability and surprise. I retype excerpts word for word to revel in the varying textures of his prose, the effect of his syntactical rhythms. I debone the book chapter by chapter, to better understand the story’s structure, his ability to develop and sustain narrative momentum. When I at last start typing my own novel – and every novel and short story I have written ever since – I steal shamelessly from Brian Moore. When I stumble, I ask myself the WWBMD? bracelet of a question, and write accordingly, as best I can. Brian Moore is the professorial angel whispering at my shoulder as I write, the gentle beast-tamer, my Virgilian guide through the dark narrative woods.

* * *

Brian Moore was an Irish novelist, I tell my students. He was wildly prolific and eclectic, highly acclaimed in his lifetime, although you may not have heard of him. And they haven’t, not any of my undergrads or graduate students: he is on no one’s reading list, not part of the

go-to MFA canon of David Foster Wallace and Denis Johnson and Jeannette Winterson. I fill in Moore's bio for them: born in 1921 and raised in Northern Ireland, with the British Ministry of War Transport during World War II, emigrated to Canada in 1948, where he had a successful career for many years as a journalist and writer of pulp fictions. Wrote his first "serious" novel in his late twenties, initially called *Judith Hearne*, rejected by multiple editors before it was published in 1955. Wrote well over a dozen novels, several adapted into films, awarded many prizes, and three times short-listed for the Booker Prize. The famous quotation from Graham Greene, calling Moore his "favorite living novelist." Moved to Southern California, taught at UCLA for many years, died in 1999. My students look uninspired, unimpressed, uninterested, and I recognize the blank-faced look that must have been my own so many years ago.

As a teacher (I'm a professor of creative writing and literature now, made it even without the Chaucer) I have relied heavily upon Brian Moore, for many years – he is my own go-to exemplar, the best pedagogical tool I have discovered yet. I find a way to assign or utilize *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* in every course I teach. Brian Moore is not especially "fashionable," I acknowledge as I send my students off to read, there is nothing postmodern or fabulist or meta going on in this novel, it's about an Irish spinster in 1950s Belfast. Again, those blank looks. But we're going to study it, I tell them. Read it closely. They return the following week, and now I recognize the devastation on their faces; they, too, are overwhelmed, deeply reflective and disturbed by Judith's tragic trajectory, almost all of them, despite the vast differences in their circumstances of life. For a while we share our emotional, rollercoasting responses, as readers: the wrenching sadness, the depth of the character's humanity, the surprising touches of humor and flashes of revelation, the wrenching ultimate bleakness. We share how deeply moved we are.

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Then we get analytical. This book is a master class in craft, I say. So, how does he do it, this Brian Moore?

Let's focus on three aspects of the novel: the very first chapter, how Moore immediately draws the reader in, seeding questions in our minds we might not even be aware of, and laying the psychological and narrative armatures for the rest of the story; how Moore slowly reveals Judith's unreliability, leading to the reveal of her lonely passion, her alcoholism; how Moore manipulates the 3rd-person subjective point of view to first construct and then dismantle his character's psyche.

* * *

Chapter I, Sentence One:

The first thing Miss Judith Hearne unpacked in her new lodgings was the silver-framed photograph of her aunt.

How nice. Such devotion – Miss Hearne will reference her "dear aunt" five times in this first chapter alone, the repetition eventually feeling...a bit suspect. And "new lodgings," clearly this character is off to a fresh start...why? From what?

The place for her aunt, ever since the sad day of the funeral, was on the mantelpiece of whatever bed-sitting room Miss Hearne happened to be living in.

We will learn Judith's devotion, and its public display, is a self-delusion, a façade. The day of the funeral was not sad, it was a liberation from a life of pure hell – but a brief liberation, however, as we will also learn of Judith's pitiful financial circumstances, her counting of her bites of bread and cheese. "Whatever bed-sitting-room" she happens to be in...well, how many *have* there been, we might ask. Why so many?

Next she unwraps from white tissue paper

...the coloured oleograph of the Sacred Heart. His place was at the head of the bed, His fingers raised in benediction, His eyes kindly yet accusing....

Why accusing?

Two pages later, Judith accepts Mrs. Henry Rice's invitation to her sitting room for tea:

...it was always interesting to see how other people lived and, goodness knows, a person had to have someone to talk to. Of course, some landladies could be friendly for their own ends. Like Mrs. Harper when I was on Cromwell road and she thought I was going to help her in that tobacconist business. Still, Mrs. Henry Rice doesn't look that type. Such a big jolly person, and very nicely spoken.

So much going on. A person "has to have someone to talk to" – that first whiff of loneliness, despite the cheery voice. A hint of Judith's guardedness, which at this point we might take at face value but we will learn stems from her closet alcoholic's need for secrecy, privacy. A foreshadowing of Madden's interest in her for his own financial gain. And again – why so many landladies...? As the oblique references accrue, the true history of a drunken Judith having been repeatedly evicted from lodgings will emerge.

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Note: the novel has begun as told from a traditional 3rd-person subjective point of view, a very close 3rd, yet with touches of omniscience. But here, on page 3, for the first time Moore has seamlessly, almost unnoticeably shifted into 1st person, as we linger in Judith's thoughts - a strategy he will continue to employ to great effect.

Miss Hearne and Mrs. Henry Rice continue their pleasant chat, Miss Hearne making good show of her refined manners and Catholic piety. We meet the maid, Mary, "a tall, healthy girl with black Irish hair, blue eyes and firm breasts pushing against the white apron of her maid's uniform" – Mary, who will become a victim of rape at Madden's hands in Chapter VIII. We also meet Mrs. Henry Rice's son Bernard, who, as Miss Hearne decides later in her room, was

...the sort of person a woman would have to look out for. He looked nosy and she felt sure he was the sort of slyboots who would love prying into other people's affairs. And saying the worst thing he could about what he found. Instinctively, she looked at her trunks and saw they were locked. Just keep them that way, she told herself. I wouldn't put it past him to creep in here some day when I'm out...

The trunks are locked because they hide her precious stash of booze – something we won't learn until Chapter VII. And Bernard will indeed pry into her affairs, engineering the confrontation between Miss Hearne, Mrs. Henry Rice, and Madden that will trigger Miss Hearne's final spiraling descent. No detail in this introductory, foundational chapter is wasted

Chapter I's last beat: Miss Hearne gets into bed, says good-night to her dear dead aunt and the Sacred Heart, for:

They make all the difference, Miss Hearne thought, no matter what aunt was like at the end.

The strongest hint yet there's more to this "dear aunt" story than Miss Hearne is willing to admit, even to herself...

When they're with me, watching over me, a new place becomes home.

A seemingly warm and fuzzy ending to our first chapter – but that sentence will return, in a structurally-perfect gut-punch, as the novel's final line, ominous and haunting: Judith ends in a bed in a Catholic charity nursing home, her aunt's photo and the Sacred Heart oleograph looking down upon her. This is her final home – she will never know or have another.

Judith Hearne, Portrait of an Alcoholic:

Again, on a first read, those Chapter I locked trunks of Judith's might not register. In Chapter II, Judith discovers she's lost one of her badly-needed piano pupils, and she feels "the shaking start inside her," but that could just be concern over her diminishing income... although that's "four pupils gone in the last six months," so perhaps something else is happening here. And things have been bad since someone "spread that story about Edie and me all over town" – her friend Edie, currently herself abandoned and dying in a nursing home.... Moore plants these early seeds with such judicious care.

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Chapter IV, Judith eagerly awaits another chance to speak with Madden,

But when Mr. Madden came down to breakfast, she saw that he looked ill, or (because she knew the dreadful signs of it) as if he had been drinking.

How does she know the signs? We might guess that dear aunt of hers was a drinker, or – we can now trust – there is much more about this woman to be revealed.

Judith and Madden walk to church together, where she wonders if

this man who knelt beside her might not be the one the Sacred Heart had chosen Himself to help her in her moments of pain and suffering, to uphold her and help her uphold the right, to comfort her and act as a good influence in her struggle with her special weakness.

On a first read I'd assumed that "special weakness" was some generic human frailty, pulsing with Catholic guilt, but a page later Judith's focus on this seems less about piety and more about a specific source of shame:

O lord, she prayed, let it be, make it be, give him strength to see Your ways, let him be my guide, let him help me conquer my weakness, my wickedness...

Chapter V, Judith goes for her ritual Sunday tea at the O'Neills:

Then the sherry, golden, the colour of warmth, and a biscuit to nibble with it. The first sip was delicious, steadying, making you want a big swallow. But it had to last.

The others took tea. Cakes and cheeses were passed around and in the confusion of movement and talk, Miss Hearne lifted her glass stealthily and let the golden liquid flow down her throat, feeling the shudder of pleasure as it went down, warming her all the way...

That delicious first sip, ah yes, the alcoholic's trigger, the desire is sparked and can only be restrained by the need to appear "normal," but oh that sensual, enflaming heat...

By Chapter VII Judith has learned the truth about Madden:

She lay back on the bed and the tears were in her eyes and her whole body was shaking. She mustn't think of it, because if she started wanting it, she'd have to have it and feel awful afterwards and be sick for days. No, no, she told herself, and looked up to the Sacred Heart for strength. He looked down, wise and stern and kindly, His fingers raised in warning. No, He said, you must not do it. It would be a mortal sin....

Just a little one, it won't be more, I promise Thee, O Sacred Heart...

The alcoholic's classic bargaining has begun. She unlocks the trunk, gets out a bottle, for

...the rage had started inside her, the pleasant urgency to open it, to fill a glass and sip it slowly, to feel it do its own wonderful work. So she turned the Sacred Heart to the wall, scarcely hearing the terrible warning He gave her.

...She took off her clothes quickly, wise in the habits of it, because sometimes you forgot, later....

...Then, while the bottle of cheap whiskey beat a clattering dribbling tattoo on the edge of the tumbler, she poured two long fingers and leaned back. The yellow liquid rolled slowly in the glass, opulent, oily, the key to contentment. She swallowed it, feeling it warm the pit of her stomach, slowly spreading through her body, steadying her hands, filling her with its secret power. Warmed, relaxed, her own and only mistress, she reached for and poured a tumbler full of drink.

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And thus the portrait is complete, the cycle of self-denial, paranoia, secrecy, shame, compulsion, ecstasy – for a brief while, until Judith, like her friend Edie, will be destroyed by this passion at last.

3rd Person Subjectivity:

John Gardner likens a writer's use of 3rd-person subjective point of view to a film director's use of the camera, how degrees of psychic distance can be manipulated for a range of effects and narrative textures. We can watch, or summarize, a character's experience from the distance of a far-away wide shot, allowing for a larger framework, or we can dolly in for greater intimacy and immediacy, at times shifting the camera to allow us to view the world quite literally from the character's perspective.

I never fully appreciated the extraordinary elasticity and flexibility of the 3rd-person subjective before reading the *Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*; a short excerpt from Chapter II, just after Judith has met Madden for the first time and has returned to her room alone, illustrates Brian Moore's mastery with that camera (colored fonts mine):

Judy Hearne, she said, you've got to stop right this minute. Imagine romancing about every man that comes along.

Her busy hands flew, unpacking the linen sheets, putting them away in the dresser drawer. But she paused in the center of the room. He noticed me. He was attracted. The first in ages. Well, that's only because I've been keeping myself to myself too much. Go out and meet new people and you'll see, she told her mirror face. And the face in the mirror told it back to her, agreeing.

Why did he come home to Ireland? A visit, maybe, to see his family. But he doesn't seem on very good terms with his sister. He'll go back to New York, of course, back to his hotel. Mr. and Mrs. James Madden, of New York, sailed from Southampton yesterday in the *Queen Mary*. Mr. Madden is a prominent New York hotelier and his bride is the former Judith Hearne, daughter of the late Mr. and Mrs. Charles Hearne, of Ballymena. The honeymoon? Niagara Falls, isn't that the place Americans go? Or perhaps Paris, before we sail.

But the mirror face grew stern and cross. You hardly know him, it said. And he's common, really he is, with that ring and that bright flashy tie. Oh no, he's not, she said. Don't be provincial. Americans dress differently, that's all.

A church bell tolled far away and she prayed. The library book would be due Wednesday, wasn't it? Do you know, I'm awfully uninformed about America, when I come to think of it. Outside the gray morning light held, the rain still threatened. I could go down to the Carnegie library and read up on it. Especially New York. And then tomorrow at breakfast, I'd have questions to ask.

Maybe, she said, hurrying towards the wardrobe to pick out her red raincoat, maybe he'll be in the hall and I'll meet him and we might walk downtown together. I must hurry, because if he's going out, it should be soon.

But the hall was a dark, damp place with no sign of anyone in it. Mary had cleared the dining-room, restoring the chairs to their original anchorage around the table. The curtained door to Mrs. Henry Rice's kitchen was shut and the house was silent, a house in mid-morning when all the world is out at work.

She went out, dejected, and walked along Camden Street with her head full of black thoughts. Why had she bothered to come out at all? The library and looking up America was only nonsense, when all was said and done. Besides, going out only made you peckish and it was such a temptation to have a regular restaurant lunch. Well, you won't. You'll fast, that's what you'll do.

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Key:

Green: 2nd person point of view, used to illustrate Judith's inner-debates/ongoing conversations with herself. This dramatizes her emotional isolation – because who else does she have to talk to?

Black: traditional 3rd-person omniscient, often used to describe the setting or summarize action through indirect discourse; while the novel is almost entirely limited to Judith's perspective and understanding of her own experience, Moore uses this to watch Judith from a slight distance, give the reader some breathing room, move things along, allow us briefly into different characters' points of view or offer up bits of information that Judith herself doesn't have access to. It grounds the reader, and establishes a narrative authority, especially as Judith's unreliability is increasingly evident.

Purple: Moore simply slips into 1st-person interiority whenever he chooses, without marking the change for the reader by a "Judith thought" or a "she wondered," a well-oiled strategy he already established in Chapter I. This allows us direct access to Judith's consciousness, creating all the intimacy and immediacy of a 1st person narrative (what is more personal than

directly hearing a character's most private fantasy?) but without the potential claustrophobia or limitations of a singular perception. Note how the sixth paragraph combines 1st person introspection with a 3rd-person omniscient narrator's "getting the character across the room" in a single sentence – efficient and effective.

Underlined: I'll call this a 3rd-person omniscient narrator's little trick – taking on the voice of the mirror on the wall debating with Judith, another way of externalizing her own self-address and self-dialogue.

Red: while this could be a continuation of the 3rd person omniscient description of the scene, I feel the voice is actually Judith's, smoothly transitioning us back to her inner life.

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As a student, a reader, a writer, and a teacher, I'm grateful to Brian Moore. I read *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* differently now – as life's options have narrowed, I have far more in common with her than I once realized, and the heartbreak I feel is tinged with my own existential fears. But every time I read the novel, I am as deeply moved as the first time I met her, whether I'm analyzing craft, seeking a cautionary lesson, or just looking to feel that soft gray Irish rain.

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Bio: Tara Ison

Tara Ison is the author of the novels *A Child out of Alcatraz*, *The List*, and *Rockaway*; the short story collection *Ball*; and the essay collection, *Reeling Through Life: How I Learned to Live, Love and Die at the Movies*. She is a professor of creative writing at Arizona State University. For more information visit www.TaraIson.com

Interview: Tony Kilgallin in conversation with the late Brian Moore



Brian Moore and Jean Moore holding Tony Kilgallin's 8 month old daughter Shannon.
Malibu, CA, Easter weekend 1973.
Photograph Courtesy of Tony Kilgallin

Easter Saturday (April 21) 1973, Malibu

I: One of your many successful techniques is the maintenance of a sense of immediacy between your narrator and the reader despite shifting viewpoints. Which points of view have you experimented with?

M: Most of my books, while written in the third person, are presented as though they were written in the first. *Judith Hearne* is a book which seems to be written from the point of view of Judith Hearne, where in fact it is not, it's written partly from my point of view as the invisible narrator and partly from the point of view of the other characters. In *An Answer from Limbo* there is no invisible narrator. Instead, there are two third-person narrators, the wife and the mother, and a first-person narrator who is the writer. In that novel I used multiple points of view which made it, I think, the most technically complex of my novels. Also in *Limbo* no part of the action is ever repeated in narration. It's the opposite of the Rashomon technique where each person carries the narrative forward to a new point of action.

I: How has the modern novel changed in regard to authorial intrusion?

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M: Well, you know Joyce is said to be the writer who destroyed the omniscient nineteenth century novelist. Actually Chekhov did it earlier when he said that "the artist must not be a judge of his characters only an objective observer." And so, for the past fifty years we have been trying to keep the novelist out of his novels. We try to let the characters tell their own story. However, that may be changing now. The novel is once again trying to re-define itself. We are now seeing novels written which do not have a narrator, which actually do say "look, I am an author writing a novel, remember this. I am not trying to deceive you, you are listening to a man who is writing a novel and the devices of this novel are always on display." However, although I am interested in these experiments, I don't sit down to write a book with this or that experimental technique in mind. The technique must be subordinate to the problem of telling what you want to tell in each particular book. At the moment I am trying to write a book in which the basic situation is totally unreal. It's about a man who has his dream come true. Literally. So I must work especially hard to convince the reader to suspend his initial disbelief. And so I've worked to make all the other elements in the book terribly real so that the reader may be lulled into believing the unbelievable part. I first ran into this question of "non suspension of disbelief" with *Fergus* which was not my most successful book, and I think one of the reasons for its failure with many readers was that a great number of people could not accept the idea of revenants, or ghosts, or whatever you call them, interspersed into a completely realistic narrative, whereas they will read cheerfully people like Barthelme or Pynchon, or any of today's writers who basically deal all in fantasy, in irreal situations. They will accept these writers because these writers say "look, this is a novel, and we're writing about writing, and this is what it's all about, and therefore you accept it because you do not expect our characters to be real." I think *Fergus* was one of my more interesting books because I was attempting to do something unusual, which is to mix a very irreal thing with a very real thing and in this new book there is also an element of satire which enters into it. That may be the problem. The minute you deal with something that

isn't real, with fantasy, you are in some sense dealing in satire, because we don't write straight fairy-tales anymore.

I: Right, and satire is something that is new to you, though irony isn't.

M: Satire, I feel, is a weak and dangerous form because unless it is carried out in an absolutely masterful way, with a lot of Swiftian indignation, it is usually a cop-out, because in satire, black humour novels and the anti-roman, a lot of the solutions are basically cop-outs because the writer doesn't have to solve essential problems which are inherent in a true novel. A novel doesn't come to life unless in some way the reader is duped, carried, lifted, tricked into reading the novel.

I: Who is your ideal reader?

M: I suppose I'm writing for a reader like myself. And if I am to be moved by experimental writing, it has got to be magnificent, it's got to be as virtuoso as *Ulysses* or as interesting as Borges. To my mind one cannot write truly experimental books unless they are masterpieces. So that one's chance of failure is enormous. And then you have to have enormous self-confidence which I don't always have when I'm writing a book. I start every book feeling it is going to fail. If it comes, if it succeeds in being fifty percent of what I thought it would be, then I'm happy, very happy. To maintain my drive during the year, year and a half, two years that I'm writing the book, I have to feel that the book has a chance of being very good. For instance, when I was writing *Fergus* I would experience the usual *accidie* which writers feel at points when they say that this book is not going to go, or I'm not going to be able to carry it off, or I've gone to 150 pages and now I'll have to abandon it. It's a thing that happens to one all the time. But in *Fergus* it was exacerbated enormously by the fact that I had these revenants, these ghosts in it, and I was trying to say, "well, I myself might not accept this convention." For that reason a wholly experimental novel like the one I'm writing now is very, very difficult for me, because I am not working from my own strengths, which are realistic, I am not working from observation. I am not working from what I feel is my real strength which is that I am a truthful writer. When one habitually starts with untruth and unreality, the experimentation becomes the reason for the writing. And so, for me, the Barthean type of novel does not succeed. I can read Barth only in short bits. I can read Pynchon in short bits and in short bits I find him interesting. I think Beckett is a marvelous writer, but he has one essential flaw which seems to me almost a failure. It's that there is nothing in a Beckett story which drives the reader forward. The reader must exercise an enormous amount of concentration to move from page to page. Even though those pages are filled with poetry, images, great feelings and everything else, the grinding feeling persists that there is no story there. Ultimately, it defeats the whole purpose of reading. To me, reading should be, even on its highest level, a pleasure. If it isn't, it becomes an exercise for professors. Or exegetes.

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I: I find it impossible to rifle through any of your novels. Each page presents its own justification sufficient to rule out any need of flipping ahead, despite the linearity of your works. Hailey talked about his novels as page-turners compelling the reader to turn on as he turns the pages, but your pages have a different compulsion.

M: The reader is probably aware, subconsciously, that there is a structure here, which is the unliterary structure of storytelling. Perhaps there is an element of this in all Irish writing based on an oral tradition stemming from tales told in a farm kitchen which had to be told in a time-space intelligible to the audience. In other words, you could tell a long saga in Gaelic literature, one with many episodes like Scheherazade, but each episode had to be

memorable, the characters had to be central, and the story had to be able to end nightly with the storyteller knowing where and how he could take up the tale the next night. This requires a completely integrated sense of what a story is. Behind the complicated structure of *Ulysses* there is the basic myth, a story told within the framework of a single day in which a young man goes out in the morning to later meet an older man who winds up spending the evening with him. Also in Joyce you are always aware of humor, of scenes in which things happen. Something very ordinary is happening on a real level even in the midst of the most amazing verbal pyrotechnics. But nothing happens in these strange amorphous fictions of Barth and Robbe-Grillet. Things happen in Barthelme – I think he is an interesting writer, by the way, but he is quoted as saying he only believes in fragments. A man who believes only in fragments is the opposite of an Irish writer.

I: Are there other viewpoints available to you or your contemporaries?

M: Well, my idea of fiction hasn't really changed. From the beginning I decided that the weakness in writing about the "problems" of intellectuals was that everyone who writes is an intellectual or a would-be intellectual and so the story of the alienation of the artist has been done a thousand times. When I wrote my first book I decided that the interesting thing would be to describe – to find out how an ordinary person becomes alienated – loses faith. So I picked a very ordinary person, a silly, lonely, middle-aged spinster, whose religion was mostly emotional. And in that way I set myself what may have been part of my life's task, because I realized, even in the writing of this book, that through the ordinary you could perceive the extraordinary. We identify with ordinary people because, at heart, we or most of us believe that we are ordinary. Besides, we no longer live in an age of kings and heroes. We live in an age of Nixons and Eisenhowers. Another point. You cannot write about extraordinary people unless you yourself are extraordinary. Most people who are extraordinary are doers, and most people of that nature are not writers and do not write novels and this leads me to the thing which I think is interesting today – it is as if writers have realized that they are no longer capable of creating fiction from the lives of ordinary characters. Someone said, every middle-class fiction is basically a story of adultery. And now, because some modern writers realise they have lost touch with ordinary life and ordinary characters they have started to make themselves into extraordinary characters. Many of today's writers are their own oeuvre, their own work. The Mailer syndrome has become a way of life. The writers, God help them, look at Mailer, he's a middle-aged man, a small fellow with grey hair who couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag and fantasizes himself as a boxer. He fantasized himself as a politician. When he couldn't run for Ward Heeler, but the very fact of him fantasizing himself into those roles interests other people because he is a good phrasemaker and he writes well. People don't see, I think, the inherent, and sort of splendid, tragedy in Mailer: it is that he is an unfunny Walter Mitty. He is a man who wanted to write a great novel and hasn't written it. And because he hasn't written a great novel he has now become a public performer, as has Capote, as have so many people. There is a tradition in literature today which seems to me frightening; it's the writer as a performer. And the writer is performer is a writer who is no longer going to write and no longer writes – whereas the writer who is not a performer, let's say Bellow, or Philip Roth or even Updike, whether you like his work or not, is constantly writing.

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I: Can you see a real distinction between serious fiction and escape literature?

M: Serious fiction is a dream which can become a nightmare. Escape fiction is a dream which can only become a wet dream. It's a fantasy and it cannot be truly moving. The borderline between serious and escape fiction is that when you sit down to write serious fiction

you don't know how it will turn out; it can turn out to be a depressing book, a painful book, or even, if you're lucky, a tragic book. Because if it reaches tragic status there will be catharsis for the reader. But it can fail, and most often it does fail and remains a painful failure. Escape fiction doesn't fail because it knows its boundaries; it succeeds in what it sets out to do, which is entertain millions of people by gratifying their fantasy. Its aim and end is making money. It has nothing to do with writing.

I: Graham Greene differentiated between his novels and his entertainments. Is he an exception?

M: I think so, because he is a very peculiar writer, a very talented writer who really composes all his books within the thriller form. Perhaps with some he said "I'm not going to do anything except a thriller this time" so he decided to call it an entertainment, but the interesting thing is, that as the years go by we the readers don't differentiate between his works. I read *This Gun for Hire*, *Stamboul Train* the same way as I read *The Power and the Glory*. All three are completely identifiable as his work. *The Power and the Glory* may be better than the first two, but then *Stamboul Train* or *This England* is better than *The Comedians*, so it would be lovely if you or I could label all the things we do and say this is good, this is bad, or don't take this one seriously, but the world doesn't judge you this way. The world doesn't allow you to label your books – it labels them.

I: Can you compose novels without, identifying yourself in a way with a character?

M: Well, I was able to write *Judith Hearne* because I was lonely, and that made me Judith Hearne in one sense. Giving her a different sex and age allowed me to distance myself from my characteristics and thus make the book art not autobiography. Reference books and newspapers never seem to work for me. There has to be something in the central character of each of my novels with which I can identify. In *Catholics*, for example, the Abbot is seventy but I can identify with him. He is a religious, which, of course, I have never been, but I had a period of feeling depression once, some years ago, and I could, therefore, describe his depression because depression and loss of faith are probably very similar events. Secular or spiritual, they're the same thing. Once I could identify with his depression and grasp the fact that he might be depressed because he didn't believe in God anymore, thus making his whole life a sham, he became a character I could create. The obverse law, that is, if I have a character to whom I am unsympathetic, I always try as I write the book to become more sympathetic to him because it gives him depth and prevents him from being a caricature.

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I: The word "null" at the end of *Catholics* is more powerful than nil, *nada*, nothingness and void all put together. Did you experience this "null" while writing *Catholics* in particular, or was it a part of your earlier depression?

M: The doubts of the Abbot could also be the doubts of the person who is writing novels. If you are like me, when you are writing novels, you get up every morning, come out here and say "Why am I not doing something useful, like my brothers, like being a doctor and helping people in this world. I'm sitting here, a middle-aged man writing fantasies, spinning out stories which, in essence, may be read and enjoyed by some people for all the wrong reasons." You have no knowledge whether your books will be read when you are dead or even if they will be read ten years from now or whether they will be remembered two years from now. So that anyone who writes novels without having financial profit as his goal, who writes novels simply in the hope that he is going to create something that will last, is bound to be filled with self-doubt, and he is bound to be a person who becomes reclusive or gloomy at

times. So the Abbot's crisis of faith is my crisis of faith. Hopefully with a reader – a reader who identifies – the reader will recall his own crisis of faith which may have nothing to do with mine or with the Abbot's. That crisis of faith may be, if it's a woman, that she can no longer have any children or that her life, she may feel, is over, or that she has sold out to a bad marriage or something, but the fact that she hasn't had a crisis and identifies with the fictional character's crisis, that's what makes fiction work.

I: Can you use the novel you are writing as a mirror to reflect what you are becoming?

M: Well, I exorcise my troubles, I suppose – I don't like to think about it too much – but in some way I seem to exorcise my devils, if you like, by writing about them. I used to have recurring nightmares about school, about being caned at school and being late for school until I wrote *The Feast of Lupercal*. After that I never had the nightmare again. In some way, by writing it out I write it out of myself.

I: So it's like these Malibu waves: if you go with the wave you eventually don't have to worry about them.

M: Yes, I go with the wave in writing too in the sense that when I start a book I don't know if the book will succeed, I don't know if I will abandon it, I don't know how it is going to end, and it may end in a way which doesn't satisfy me. For all of these reasons, the kind of books I write don't become bestsellers. They have never really been best-sellers, although they have had an audience in different countries which is great from my point of view. But I don't write books that become best-sellers because unlike some great writers, people like Dickens and even Dostoevsky, I don't think of a market, of a body of readership, or a subject which would be of interest to people, or a subject which I feel is important and so, because it is contemporary and important I should write about it. I think I am more in the Joycean vein in that I don't think in terms of this book being like my last book, or of repeating a success. The thing I am interested in doing is not writing the same book twice. Many people write the same book over and over again and they are very good books. I am not knocking that. Evelyn Waugh said that everyone has very few tunes to play. He's right and he wrote a similar book over and over and it was always brilliant and you could read every one of them and enjoy them and each of them was done from a different point of view and was marvellous. In fact, he is probably the greatest English writer of the century, I think. But because I feel time pressing in on me, I want to write a different book each time, even if I fail. It encourages me when I think about Melville. His early books, now completely forgotten, met with great initial success and made him money; and then, stubbornly, he decided to write books each of which was different. *Bartleby* is so different from *Typee* and *Omoo* is different from *Moby Dick*. Every book of his stands up for me. Not that I am an unabashed admirer of Melville, but he's an interesting writer in that he did try to do something different. Joyce was gripped by this need for change and development when he wrote *Finnegans Wake*.

I: What do you think of Arthur Hailey's plan to write one book every three years until he turns sixty? Each book is plotted out automatically regarding a different corporate establishment.

M: Well, I think Hailey is the other type of writer, a marvellous businessman who writes dreams for the world, filled with research and that sort of stuff. Burgess is another one of these compulsive people who announces he is going to write nine novels. I sort of enjoy picking up Burgess' stuff because he says "I'm now doing a musical one, four reviews, six novels." I used to think, and still do, that that is the mark of a bad writer. The minute a writer says he is doing a trilogy, I always think 'forget it.'

I: You'd prefer to keep your trump cards hidden then? Do you also adhere to Joyce's motto "Silence, exile and cunning"?

M: I want to be a very private figure. I think it works best for me. I can do television interviews or things like that and it doesn't upset me or make me nervous. On the other hand, I don't think I am interesting enough for just anybody to look at or see me. I don't have a very colourful private life. If there is any interest in me, it is in my work. If there is any reason people should read me it's because of my work, not because I am a great raconteur on the Dick Cavett Show.

I: In terms of Cyril Connolly's book *Enemies of Promise* what enemies do you think you have overcome as a writer thus far in your career?

M: I haven't overcome any enemies because my writing career isn't over. The war is still going on and I don't know what enemies I have succumbed to. The real new enemy is great success because, particularly in America, the critics take writers to their bosoms when the first or second novel appears. They praise the writers to the skies. What has happened is that they have come in contact with something new in a writing style, but when the writer appears again he is doing a repeat performance and the critics start to denigrate him. The writer in his middle years gets bad treatment if he doesn't *épater les bourgeois* in a new way each time. So success is a danger, and great monetary success is always an enormous danger. It removes him from the class which he was in, unless he was born a duke, and very few dukes are good writers, or a millionaire, and very few millionaires bother to write. He is in trouble because he is starting to live a new life and to meet people who are different from the persons he knew formerly. The whole celebrity thing is a danger and an enemy.

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I: Could a writer who wished to avoid this celebrity game write under a pseudonym or remain anonymous?

M: Anonymity is still one of the most important tools the artist has. Matisse, the painter, wrote in "Jazz": "An artist must never be the prisoner of himself, or a manner, or of a success. The Japanese artists of the grand époque changed their names several times in their life. I admire that." They wanted to safeguard their liberties." In other words, your work, not you is what counts. And if the work is strong enough it lives on its own. Your style is there whether you sign your name to it or not. I'm probably going on a bit about this, but I admire people like Joyce and Conrad enormously for their public stance. They were interested, ruthlessly so, in their work becoming famous, but not themselves. They didn't want to stand up beside a new book as if it were a little street stall, as I often think so many of us are forced to do. Instead, the writer should be the Bunraku puppeteer, the man in black, the faceless mover and manipulator of his writings, the puppets. Salinger withdrew completely from the fray and his work was no less popular because of that; no one knows who Pynchon is because he doesn't give interviews. I tend to really admire that because he wants his work to be the important thing, not him.

I: Do you think your nomadic lifestyle has benefitted your novels in any specific ways?

M: If you don't move you are conditioned. My characters don't move, so perhaps I leave them in the position in which I would be if I hadn't moved. Writers like myself tend to live in a place long enough to know that they sort of know it, that they can use it. If the place fulfills these requirements a new literary territory has been gained, though it may not be as

powerful as the writer's original literary territory. Let's say that Ireland, Belfast in particular, was my original literary territory which would have made me an Irish writer committed in a sense to that area. By moving away from Belfast I was then able to write about it, but in the meantime I was living somewhere else, in Europe. I didn't live long enough in any one part of Europe, mainly Poland and France, to gain it as territory. I merely held it for a short period. Then, when I moved to Canada, I lived twelve years in Montreal, and without even knowing it it became literary territory for me.

I: Did *Catholics* spring from your original territory?

M: When I wrote *Catholics* it was unlike any of my other works in that when I had the idea of writing about monks on an island off the west coast of Ireland I had never been on an island where there was a monastery, though I had been to the west coast of Ireland. I knew nothing about that landscape, and so one year when we were in Ireland I went with my wife to Mayo and we saw an island off the coast. I arranged to go over on this boat on a day when the boat could come in to the mainland, take us out and bring us back that evening. I said to myself, if you are ever going to write this story now, you must remember everything about this day. I didn't take written notes, but I did remember the island, the boat, the boatman, and I got a feeling of place into the story which is probably stronger than in most of my other stories because it is completely concentrated.

I: Have any of your completed novels ever stopped you halfway through their composition?

M: *Limbo* was a book which I almost didn't finish because I ran into a serious problem and was going to ditch it. Thank goodness I didn't. I have written two novels, or parts of two novels, which I've never published because I couldn't solve the problem.

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I: Let's turn from that problem to the general state of publishing today. As an experienced writer what are your feelings towards the present market for novels?

M: Publishing today is in a state of crisis. There is a smaller, not a greater market for serious work than there was eighteen years ago when I first started writing. Publishers, particularly in the U.S., only push what are called the superbooks. Subsidiary rights, paperbacks, book clubs, those are everything to the hard cover publisher today. When I started to write there was such a thing as a "prestige" writer, the writer who didn't make any money, who lost money for his publisher, but whom publishers were proud to have on the list. That's not really true anymore. The commercial pressure on the new writer is indirect, but it's there. You know, you see people whose books absolutely never sell starting to disappear from sight. Why? Because in a way it is frightening for people to realize they have no audience. It's frightening for a man to sit down and write a book which may take him two years and to know that unless it is reviewed in *The New York Times* and *Time* and by three or four other publications it might as well-never have appeared. As far as the public is concerned, as far as librarians are concerned, his book just disappeared into the woodwork. And so many books do that. And so many people just don't have the heart to go on writing under those circumstances because they've invested a lot of their lives in the book and if it's ignored that's worse than getting bad notices. So many books are ignored today; those that are ignored completely don't sell five copies. Those that are noticed, whether it is well or badly noticed, sell, so we're back to the writer as performer again. There is less interest in prestige writers and fewer foreign writers.

I: Who do you remember reading most fervently?

M: It's awfully hard to remember with any real honesty. I remember being very impressed by *Madame Bovary*, but then reading and not liking his others. Altogether I like only two of Flaubert's. I was terribly impressed by Joyce, of course, and by poetry when I was young. Poetry is something no-one discusses any more. I read poems and would have liked to write like Isaac Rosenberg an English poet of my generation, and like Auden. I'd like to write like Yeats. Those people had more influence on me and the way I wanted to write than any prose writers of their generation.

I: And Wallace Stevens?

M: That was much later and was a different type of interest. One doesn't fall in love with writing and books in quite the same way at forty as one did at nineteen. Yet it is funny, if you read Waugh over again, if you liked Waugh, it is just as funny, the fourth or fifth time round. You begin to spot his bigotries, his snobberies and various things like that, but he still stands up remarkably well. I'll still pick up most books by Greene or English writers of that period. You just sort of know that they write in some way that will hold your attention, which is getting back to the thing we were discussing. They all have a deep and abiding sense of what is funny, what is plot.

I: I wonder if you prefer writers like Waugh and Greene partly because their keen sense of observation and their clean style of perception combines the best of journalism and fiction?

M: There's a journalistic element in all of Joyce's fiction too. He absolutely had to get the interior of the National Library right so he could write about it, and he was always sending letters off to people in Ireland for very unimportant seeming pieces of information which weren't really needed for his books. Like what was playing at the Gaiety on a certain day. It seemed ridiculous, but he needed all that bumph to create that one day, Bloomsday, and give it that absolute feeling of reality. It gives *Ulysses* a marvellous solidity. It's a book which is really finest in its first half, because that solidity is there, the day is there. It's when he began to lose the solidity that he began to write all these experiments, and yet it's still marvellous. The book is a classic of realism despite its irreality. When he goes into doing parodies of different English prose styles or parodies of mathematics, somehow the book, for me anyway, loses the magic of the early sequences, even in the sequences where he tried to write to a pattern-like musical sequence with the barmaids Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy and he tried to write about the viceregal carriage passing through Dublin and all the people it met and here is Bloom coming up one street and Boylan coming up another. All that stuff written to a musical scale was a piece of madness, but because he concentrates so terrifically hard on keeping that realistic pattern alive behind this experiment, the book still comes to life. If you go back and look at that part of the book you'll see that the descriptions of Long John Fanning, the High Sheriff, show the way he moves his head or his jaw. Or there's a description of the brother of, the famous Parnell, sitting playing chess in a cafe and Mulligan whispers to Haines that the man is Parnell's brother and the man makes a chess move, then puts his claw fingers to his forehead, thinks, then quickly looks at his opponent for a second through the claw fingers, then again looks at the chessboard, and it's so visual, I can't remember the words exactly, but there is the man, the living ghost playing chess and it's all there, everything that is good writing is there, the man is a living ghost, he's slightly sinister, slightly pathetic, he's a part of history, a part of that day, he was there, in that cafe on Bloomsday – everything works at that point. It is the point in a writer's life when his material meets his talent or his talent comes up to his material and in that part of *Ulysses*

Joyce's talent comes absolutely up to his material. It's what everybody is shooting for all the time, for if your particular talents meet up with your material at some point in your life you will write the book which is not bad. All the others are bad. They may be all right, but they are not what you dreamed they could be.

I: Do you still trust your own taste?

M: Well, I fear my taste because my taste often tends to make me destroy things rather than finish them. Anyone who has written eight novels and found that the critics liked one novel better than another, hated novel A and liked novel B, it makes you wonder. Ultimately, you have to rely on your own taste.

I: What would you look for in the students you will be teaching in your seminar at U.C.L.A. this fall? What attributes should a budding writer today possess?

M: The first thing I would look for is an omnivorous reader who got excited about what he read. If you don't read a lot and don't have a lot of enthusiasm you rarely, it seems to me, become a really good writer because you can't graduate from bad to good in taste. You don't keep learning, you atrophy. The second requirement would be a willingness to face criticism and work. Some people are incorrigibly lazy once they have written something. Which means they believe everything they write is marvellous. They won't rework it. Nobody who is any good has any confidence. No-one who is any good cannot be shattered by criticism because one of the secrets of writing is that you are writing for a reader, for an audience, for someone whom you must make understand you. It's no good to say "this really happened to me, my mother actually ran away with a three foot midget and that is why it is true." It isn't why it is true, that is why it is false, because it really happened. You have to make it really happen to the other person and to do that you must be willing to do a lot of rewriting. I believe in novels, and this is the one thing I have never wavered in, beginnings and endings are all, and in the beginning, particularly in this day and age, you may have to rewrite, as I often do, your first few pages fifty or sixty times to make them look absolutely simple, to make them look as if there is no strain in them. If you can do that, you carry the reader for twenty pages, he – every one of us – forgets about style because then you've done that essential thing, you have started the reader to swim in your sea, and he is all right then up until the end, when he has got to get out again. When he has to get out of the sea again, you are up to the second big hurdle in novel writing, will you get him out of the sea, or will he say, "that wasn't a sea at all, it was a pond." Endings are terribly important, they're the other great worry because so many endings are cop-outs, and that is why experimental writing is so difficult to do and it often doesn't work because a bad writer cannot be detected so easily in experimental writing. The writer can say, "I wanted to finish it this way, arbitrarily," whereas if you are in the sea of a Dostoyevsky or you are reading a book by Turgenev, you've got to get out of that book to your total satisfaction. You can't say "I forgive him because he decided that was sort of an amusing ending." It doesn't work.' You were asking a little earlier, "do you still trust your own taste?" and the thing we forgot to mention at that point, which is very important, I think, is that if you are a novelist who has had some critical success in, say England, America, Ireland, as I have, then it becomes very difficult for an editor or a publisher to tell you that your current book is no good and he doesn't want to publish it because if he says that he risks losing you as an author. He mightn't lose me because I might respect his judgment and might think it very honest of him to tell me that. If I disagreed I might take it to be published elsewhere, but if I did, I would at least listen to him. You see, there is far too much critical overpraise at the moment so that it is very hard to tell a person that his book is no good; therefore, if the writer is sensible, he worries that his friends won't

tell him either. And his friends won't because if they are less successful than he, he puts it down to jealousy, and they decide they'd better not say it to him. So it's extremely hard for him, before publication, to get an honest opinion. The critics may then tell him that he has written a very bad book but by that time he is committed, he's had it.

Malibu, Easter Saturday, 1973

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Bio: Tony Kilgallin

Tony Kilgallin was London born in 1941. His father built De Havilland planes during the war while Tony spent many summers with his Sligo born grandfather, the last male of twenty children. Tony's Dad was chosen to help build Canada's first supersonic aeroplane, the Avro Arrow, and the family moved to Toronto right after Tony's Uncle Jack was knighted by King George VI in recognition of his wartime service as Head of Customs and Excise for Great Britain. Tony had the great good fortune of having Marshall McLuhan as his Dissertation Director at the University of Toronto which led to his appointment as Assistant Professor of English at the University of British Columbia in 1967. His books include *The Canadian Short Story* (1971), *Lowry* (1973), *Napa Valley Picture Perfect* (2000), *Napa An Architectural Walking Tour* (2001) and *Tomales Bay* (2013). His children are Shannon, Sean and Michael Ryan. He is happily married to Patricia whose ancestors left Market Hill in County Armagh in the 1850's to found the village of Marshall on Tomales Bay, West Marin County, California because the landscape was ideal for potatoes and cattle...just like Market Hill. Tony has been a TV Producer and Host in Napa for 20 years. He and Patricia are blessed to live in San Francisco and Napa.

Essay: “All Shall Be Well: Bernard MacLaverty’s *Midwinter Break*”

by Richard Rankin Russell



Bernard MacLaverty

Bernard MacLaverty (b.1942) in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and a resident of Scotland since 1975, has, with the publication of *Midwinter Break* (2017), now published five novels and five original short-story collections. Four of the five novels—*Lamb* (1980), *Cal* (1983), *Grace Notes* (1997), and the present one will stand the test of time. His last novel until now, 2001’s *The Anatomy School*, was a bit of an indulgence, a meandering and often hilarious tale of a Catholic boy coming of age in Belfast. There are moments of real beauty in it, especially in its conclusion, but it lacks the staying power of the other four novels. The short fiction, most of which was collected in 2013, is simply the best that has come out of Ireland in the last fifty years along with that by the late William Trevor and the late John McGahern.

MacLaverty garnered significant early commercial success in the early to mid-1980s when his novel *Cal* was made into a 1984 film starring Helen Mirren and when *Lamb* became a 1986 film featuring Ballymena native Liam Neeson—both with screenplays by MacLaverty. Tom Adair has termed his careful, nuanced prose “shriven, plaintive, stealthy, and paradoxical, coupling lavishness at moments of magpie glitter. . .with restraint. . . . the ultimate Northern Irish prose style, all Catholic curlicues and Calvinistic sparseness” (“Pints of Bitterness,” n.p.). His prose is also complemented by what can fairly be called a “cinematic imagination,” which is attuned to striking visual images he has deployed to great effect over his forty-year career. Moreover, *Grace Notes*, his best novel, became a finalist for the Booker Prize and also earned the Scottish Saltire Book of the Year Award. Now, in his late 70s, MacLaverty and his fictional oeuvre finally seems to be starting to garner the critical acclaim they so richly deserve. With the publication of his *Collected Stories* and with this fifth novel his position one of the very best writers to emerge from the island of Ireland in the last forty years is assured.

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MacLaverty, however, has never written for commercial success and indeed, the long gap between *The Anatomy School* and the present one suggests he is content to wait until his carefully crafted prose is just right. The best MacLaverty fiction is fashioned slowly, mulled over in the mind, and seasoned in the harsh Glasgow winters. And yet, there is always a sprightliness and liveliness to it, a freshness. Were it a Scotch, to which I’ve likened its making and maturing process, it would be something like an Ardbeg—peated, but not heavily so, peppery on the palate, and with a long finish.

Midwinter Break stands with *Grace Notes* as one of MacLaverty’s two best novel. It is an exquisite portrayal of an older couple’s relationship *in extremis* over the course of their midwinter’s break in Amsterdam. Stella, a mother and homemaker whose child is grown and away is married to Gerry, a retired architect with a worsening drinking problem who does not appreciate the importance of her Catholic faith to her. She has surreptitiously booked this trip to investigate the possibility of joining a religious order there in Amsterdam. Once MacLaverty reveals that possibility is now closed to her—that her “sanctuary” is now unavailable—she must decide whether to save her marriage and stay with Gerry or not. MacLaverty excels in his noticing of little things—little things that collectively make up our world. He is a natural heir to Joyce and the other modernists such as Woolf in this regard and heir to one of the Irish author’s finest works—“The Dead”—as that Joycean intertext plays throughout the closing pages of the novel, as we shall see. There are debts as well to

Beckett, whose minimalist affirmations have colored MacLaverty's fiction before. Here, Gerry and Stella's entire relationship seems Beckettian since they are "living on," past the bad old days of the Troubles, post-Good Friday Agreement, sustained by daily rituals in a Scotland strangely untouched by the rise of the SNP and Brexit, although to be fair, it seems the novel was completed before that vote to leave the European Union in the summer of 2016.

And yet some things are never past, as the novel's stuttering attempt to retell the narrative of a pregnant Stella's having been shot in Belfast during the early 1970s reveals. That story suffuses *Midwinter Break* but does not overwhelm it. There is a clue early on that reveals how her body has been scarred by the shooting; that she still suffers mental anguish from it is only revealed near the very end of the novel when she finally lets herself re-experience that fateful day. When Gerry spoons with her in the bed the night before they leave for Amsterdam and "his now cool fingers accidentally touched the scar on her stomach," he thinks, "Hollow like another navel, a skin pucker. With another one behind her to match. Marked fore and aft, she was" (8). Their child Michael survives the shooting, as does Stella, yet she is rendered unable to have more children. That hole, that wound—that scar—binds them together and she turns to teaching and raising Michael to make it whole and he throws himself into designing buildings as an architect to do so, and later, to excess drinking. A telling moment in the novel occurs when Gerry is drinking alone one afternoon in Amsterdam and muses upon the bloody recent history of his native province. He muses after recalling how the Provisional IRA tried to burn down the ancient and venerable Linen Hall Library in Belfast (which ironically has a massive collection dedicated to the Troubles, including the IRA's fight for full Irish independence), "Since when did a fight for Irish freedom include the burning of books? The destruction of buildings. The IRA were disarchitects. Destroyers. Show me a building and I'll turn it into a car park" (81). Such destruction is the opposite of the Christian notion of creation *ex nihilo*: "Changed by flame to nothing." Instead, such terrorism is destruction of created things into nothingness "[i]n the name of a struggle, in the name of religion. Creating in absence" (82). Gerry and Stella, on the other hand, were *both* architects—he literally worked as one and she built up their lives and the life of their son Michael. Now, however, in the present, she considers leveling their marriage and home because of his drinking; Stella nearly becomes a disarchitect, tearing down their marriage. But Gerry has started the demolition process and is to blame: he is steadily leveling himself and their marriage by his increasing alcoholic dissolution.

Gerry sees their winter getaway as a chance to increase his drinking and perhaps see some local architecture, whereas for Stella it may become literally her getaway or "sanctuary" (she uses the word repeatedly) from him. Interestingly, she is drawn into the architecture of the religious center she visits because of her real need for spiritual sustenance, in contrast to Gerry, who wanders the streets of the city looking for another drink. When she first visits this place, she moves out of a passageway "into a space which took her breath away. The notion of being born came to her. Moving from the dark into the light, into the world. She was in a new place, had the feeling of being a new person. An amazing born-again feeling" (41). As "she walked around the space, savoring it, the sun broke through the clouds and shone whitely on the wet branches of the trees." She lifts her face to the rare Amsterdam sun and "became aware of the red world behind her eyelids" (42). Only later, during her harrowing remembering of the time she was shot in the early 1970s in Belfast, do we realize that her experience of this "red world behind her eyelids" (233), was the first moment she had been "winged" by Death and she knows, "some day, somehow she would move into soul. . . . Soul was her, minus her body" (42). In the present, we sense that Stella is once again being born into a new life—but it turns out that it is not the life she had imagined for herself as an older member of a Catholic cloister, but rather, her present life with Gerry, re-imagined and reconceived.

As this exquisitely wrought novel moves towards its conclusion, we realize that MacLaverty has subtly introduced a Joycean intertext—his short story “The Dead”—and employs that intertext to help us read this couple’s relationship. Famously, Joyce’s short story features a final snowfall that is “general over Ireland.” A similar snow descends upon the Amsterdam airport in the novel’s conclusion, snarling traffic and stranding Stella and Gerry there overnight. Just as the snowstorm in Joyce’s story reveals an epiphany—that the selfish Gabriel Conroy may now likely become generous and kind to his wife—so does the snow of MacLaverty’s novel. Gerry resolves to stop drinking and also to stop making fun of his wife’s Catholic faith, which has become increasingly important to her.

The Irish writer Anne Enright noted in her laudatory review of the novel, “MacLaverty may be one of the last writers who can tell us what it is like to be a true Catholic. Religion, for Stella, is where all her goodness comes from. . . . Gerry’s rejection of it feels like the best of her, or the best of life itself, is also being spurned by him” (Enright 2017, n.p.). MacLaverty told me previously that his immersion in Catholicism from a young age was enabling for him as a writer:

That language becomes your mental furniture of exotic and little things that people your mind as a young one. I’ve said before that it introduces you to imagery and to symbol. . . . At eight years of age, you know that the black vestments are for death, the white are for hope, and green for something else. I think that I have rejected Catholicism, yet I understand how as a child you can be introduced to the biggest and hardest problems in the world through it, to concern for other people, to try and save lives (“An Interview with Bernard MacLaverty” 22).

Like one of his great exemplars, Joyce, MacLaverty learned a tremendous amount about symbolism and imagination from his Irish Catholic upbringing, and like Joyce, even though he left the Church long ago, he nonetheless appreciates its formative influence on him.

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In *Midwinter Break*, As Stella weeps silently in the women’s room at the airport, she is apparently bereft of hope until she begins outlining a new Catholicism in her mind, one filled with kindness, generosity, justice, humility. Despite the priesthood “which had thrown up frequent monsters, right wing control freaks, sexual deviants,” she is hopeful that a new church might emerge “which was rational, kind, loving, ritualistic, Christ centred. One that would eventually involve women,” and that “has satisfying and beautiful rituals—like Easter. A faith which shows concern and benefits others, a religion of values, always on its toes to help, which in a thousand acts a day looks out for others and their need” (201). Gerry, on the other hand, is at the same moment remembering again his visit to hospital (he experiences it over a series of flashbacks in the novel versus her one, relatively brief vocalization of it to Kathleen and her long internal recall of it near the conclusion) when Stella has been shot and realizing, “He wanted to pray but couldn’t because he no longer believed. Prayer was just an intense wishing. For Stella to survive. For her not to be damaged” (207). Even though they have had separate belief systems for so long, the strength of their love and marriage is symbolized repeatedly throughout the novel by their holding hands, as they did long ago while she recovered in hospital when he “squeezed her hand as best he could” (208), as they do again now in the airport when he swears to give up drinking.

But these decisions come only after she spends the night away from him at another airport gate and re-experiences fully the day she was shot—a stunning passage that stands with the best of any prose MacLaverty has written. Its quotidian details—the dandelions growing in the crack of the pavement on which Stella lies after being shot, for instance—throw into relief the miracle of her and her baby’s survival and suggest how the ordinary can be miraculous too, a preview of her new life with Gerry in the future.

This scene runs for over six and a half pages and is mediated to some degree by MacLaverty's introduction of another intertext—this one, Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. As she tries not to think about that awful day, she thinks of bright and sunny days in childhood, including "July days when the tar of the roads went soft in the sunshine" (228). Abruptly segueing out of that memory, she thinks, "William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*—you couldn't make it up. A strange and great book, which she'd just reread. Not to be confused with Brian Faulkner—the prime minister of the time. The early seventies when the war was its worst. Maybe she should go back to the black stuff again" (228). She recalls returning the novel to the library and going to the butcher's and then, suddenly, suddenly, she becomes the protagonist in her own version of the novel, as it were, shot down and seemingly dying on the baking-hot street. As she leaves the butcher's, MacLaverty unrolls several sentences that flow into each other, showing both the abruptness of the shooting and its initial incomprehensibility to Stella:

And then it was back into the crossroads and the blare of traffic and the heat shimmer of the asphalt when the eye could see the gray-green of the distant hills. The air shivering, it was so hot. And the Brit soldiers' vehicle approaching the lights that led to Andersonstown before they pulled in on her side of the road. And then something happened. She is crossing the road on a pedestrian crossing when she is hit. It feels like a car. But how could that have happened? The lights would have been red. (230)

As she runs, she realizes she "had fallen her length, a slap forwards on the pavement—on her bump. . ." And

she couldn't understand why she was lying here. Sprawled. That was the word. She was sprawled on the ground on the dome that had grown within her. . . . In front of her face was her basket and there was a hole in the raffia which had not been there before and something was seeping out of it, forming a trickle—which was moving towards her because of the slope of the terrain. Something must have burst when she fell—the beetroot or the liver—because the effluent was somewhere between maroon and purple. And she felt wet. Had her waters broken? (232)

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This misapprehension that she is soon to give birth is quickly succeeded by another one—that she has already done so: "Somewhere a baby, a very young baby, a day-old-sounding baby was crying, yelling itself red in the face. . . and she thought, is that my baby?—have I given birth lying here dying? Has it come out of me somehow without me knowing. Jesus have mercy. This was not how it was supposed to happen" (232). As she lies there, bleeding and not knowing if she has delivered her baby or not, she sees "a bunch of dandelions growing up out of a niche in the ground right by her face where her bag was sweltering in the summer heat. A couple of yellow ones, ones in flower, ones in bud" (232). Watching them—this bright life in the midst of the sudden possibility of her death—she sees another one that is "gray fluff—ready to be blown to the four winds. Was there any time left for her? For her baby?" (233). Here MacLaverty draws on the tradition of the matured dandelion ready to have its seeds blown away—the "clock flower"—and has her briefly "read" it as a sign of time slipping away for her and her baby. A series of disconnected thoughts then flower: Watching a nearby soldier shout out her, she wonders, "What was the point of sending over people with such incomprehensible accents?", and then muses, "She was utterly convinced it was a boy—said he was always tackling her with his studs on show" (233). As she closes her eyes, MacLaverty deftly slips in another intertext—this time, a line from World War One poet Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth"—to further indicate her seeming dying: "Then she closed her eyes. *A drawing down of blinds.* She was aware of the red world behind

her eyelids—the red world of her body” (233; my italics). I would place this long passage about another atrocity from the Troubles at the same highly wrought emotional and aesthetic level as the shooting of the off-duty Ulster Defence Regiment soldier Robert Morton in *Cal*, whom the title character sees genuflecting in front of his eyes repeatedly after that murder by the IRA thug Crilly. But while the earlier novel portrays his murder in a snapshot of concise prose, here, MacLaverty shows adroitly how he can employ a long, seamlessly joined series of paragraphs to capture a young mother’s near-death experience as she flashes back to her own childhood, prays for her child in her womb, and somehow, survives it all. A miracle happened then—no doubt—but the miracle of MacLaverty’s prose remains its exquisite, shimmering power forty years on from his debut with his 1977 collection, *Secrets and Other Stories*.

Closed off from the outer world of life and bustle, she is taken into the ambulance, where she realizes, “if she’d been shot. . .her baby’d been shot,” and then she begins to pray, asking for a miracle, a miracle that she is still convinced she has been given. Thus, “She began to pray, with an intensity summoned up from her penetrated innards, that if anyone was to die here it should be her, and not her baby. What she needed was a miracle. So she said a prayer until she trembled. And she made a vow. That if her baby was spared she would. . .” (233-34). We know from an earlier passage when she talks to the Irishwoman Kathleen back at the religious center what she has vowed. As Stella tells Kathleen in a prosaic passage bereft of the poetically rendered internal monologue of remembrance I have just quoted that she experiences late in the novel, “I was shot. In the stomach. I lay there on the street and I said a prayer. Spare the child in my womb and I will devote the rest of my life to You.” As she continues, “the only prayer I could remember was an Act of Contrition. But that was not what I wanted. That’s to save yourself. I wanted to save my baby. How could it not be dead? I needed some kind of a miracle. . . It was what I was saying to myself. The prayer. The bargain I was striking. Lord, let my baby live and I will be in your debt for the rest of my life. And that’s the way it turned out” (189). This prayer has been Stella’s secret her entire life since the shooting: “I’ve never breathed a word of this. . .this pledge to anybody. Not even to my husband. Nobody. It seemed the bullet had passed through me. In one side and out the other.” She then muses, “It was a miracle or else the wee one must have ducked. The only damage, the doctors said, was that I would not be able to have any more children. My son Michael’s an only child” (190).

But now Michael, her miracle baby, lives abroad in Canada and Stella rarely gets to see him and his family; she feels she has no purpose since she cannot be an actively present mother or grandmother and furthermore, that she didn’t dedicate her life to the Lord as she indicated she would in the “bargain” she struck. She believes she is a failure, but in front of our eyes, she becomes the new architect of the novel, building Gerry up, getting him to stop drinking, and building a new identity for herself as she moves deeper into serving in the Catholic Church that is so dear to her. There is some wistfulness that emerges in MacLaverty’s moving portrayal of Stella’s faith that recalls his own early Catholic fervor: “The fact that I don’t believe a word of it now doesn’t diminish the effect it had on me then. It elevated me because of the intimacy I had with the maker of all things—the most important personage in the Universe. We were on the best of terms, able to chat day or night. It was only much later that I realized the workshop was empty” (“Introduction” to *Collected Stories* xiii).

Placated by Gerry’s vow to stop drinking completely and be more respectful about her faith, she then realizes she will not leave him and sell the house, as she stated she wanted to earlier that evening, and the novel ends not with another recall of her being shot, which she has just

experienced all over again, but with his realization that for him, she is the real miracle (243). Gerry's miracle, then, consists of his realization in the last sentences of the novel, that

Sitting beside Stella in this grey light seemed to Gerry such a privilege, such a wonderful thing to be doing, despite the nightmare of their surroundings. He believed that everything and everybody in the world was worthy of notice but this person beside him was something beyond that. To him her presence was an important as the world. And the stars around it. If she was an instance of the goodness in this world then passing through by her side was miracle enough. (243)

He's previously thought of her as "Stella, star of the sea" and questioned people's goodness—which for her, is founded in her faith. Now, she is his shining star and he quietly accepts her presence as a force for good—and while he does not believe in Catholicism, he accepts that she does and that it drives her own goodness.

A portion of Colm Tóibín's ringing endorsement of the novel adorns its front cover and is given in full on the inside front cover; it captures a crucial feature of *Midwinter Break*: "A work of extraordinary emotional precision and sympathy, about coming to terms—to an honest reckoning—with love and the loss of love, with memory and pain. Full of scenes that are rendered with exquisite accuracy and care, allowing the most detailed physical descriptions to be placed against the possibility of a rich spiritual life, this is a novel of great ambition by an artist at the height of his powers." Tóibín told me in conversation a year ago—after I asked him why this novel did not win or at least get shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2017—that while the short-listed novels were large landscapes, *Midwinter Break* was a "f---ing Vermeer." I remember thinking at the time what an apt description that was of it. There are only 34 Vermeers in the world, each an exquisite canvas of soft color and detail; each gives a glimpse into an interior world we would never have known otherwise. And so it is with MacLaverty's *Midwinter Break*, one of his only five delicately wrought novels. Would our lives have been poorer without getting to know Stella and Gerry Gilmore? Yes—without a doubt. Yet theirs is no Hollywood romance full of constant sighs and deeply meaningful looks; instead, their relationship, as Anne Enright wrote in her endorsement for the inside front cover of the novel, "shows us how ordinary and immense love can be." And because of his Joycean embrace and love of the ordinary, MacLaverty in turn shows us simply and achingly how *love itself is composed of the ordinary moments in our lives*.

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I still believe what I wrote in my 2009 study of MacLaverty's short fiction and novels: "The conflict between imprisonment and love remains his favorite dialectic. Although he certainly believes that we will continue to imprison ourselves and others, especially through our slavish adherence to warped ideologies, he more strongly feels that we desire freedom to release ourselves and others from our contemporary malaise of selfishness, thereby developing relationships and even finding love" (144). While Gerry and Stella have long recognized how imprisoning the warped ideology of the IRA is, a revulsion that comes up twice in the novel—in Gerry's realizing they are "disarchitects" and also in his and Stella's leaving the Irish pub in Amsterdam once the group starts playing IRA rebel songs—it takes this trip, this midwinter break from their daily lives, for them to realize their own imprisonment to destructive ideologies. Gerry's is clear enough—his rising level of drinking—but Stella's is subtler and just as destructive.

By thinking for so many years that she should have been serving the Lord more wholeheartedly—perhaps in a religious order—she has not realized that she has done so in many other ways, as wife, mother, and now grandmother, and now lay leader at Mass. By making what

she thinks is true religious service an idol, she has not fully realized how she can serve so many others in her daily life in Glasgow. The medieval anchoress Julian of Norwich has previously epitomized this religious devotion: “Her of ‘All shall be well’ fame. . . . Julian had a cell constructed against the outside wall of her church, like a wasps’ nest. It contained only a hard bed and a crucifix. . . . Stella loved the down-to-earthness of the medieval period, its vulgarity, the language itself with its flat, sat-on vowels and its ability to move in a blink to the religious, the mystical, the compassionate” (43). But Stella slowly realizes her own contemporary life must be part of others’ lives—that she cannot retreat to an cloister or isolated religious center. First of all, she is too old to join the center in Amsterdam, but it is already secularized. Although he might not recognize it as such, MacLaverty, in his portrayal of Stella’s coming to terms with living her faith out in a wider community of believers and non-believers, confirms the Reformation’s profound and ongoing vocational legacy: Every life, every vocation, could now serve the Lord. No longer did humans have to enter religious orders to serve God; they could now do it through their daily work, whatever it was as long as it glorified God.

When Stella prays now, she offers prayers for her loved ones, but she also gives thanks: “Prayers of thanks for her extraordinary life, for her remarkable survival. To be cradled in the hand of God. . . . Prayer was like a visitation, like checking her child, in the light from the landing, last thing at night. And nowadays she prayed for refugees everywhere, the put-upon, the full of fear, those fleeing from war.” She realizes, punning, that these prayers were “Something to be done morning and night. Before sleeping and after waking. Putting the world to rites” (32-3).

Giving thanks seems appropriate in reading MacLaverty’s most recent novel too: *Midwinter Break* is worth the sixteen-year-wait since *The Anatomy School*. It registers all the ways we hurt each other, yet it also makes space for belief, whether in Stella’s imagined future Catholicism or in the miracle of one couple’s lasting love for each other. By the end of the novel, the words of Julian of Norwich, “All shall be well,” now take on a new meaning as we realize that Stella’s embrace of ordinary life leads her deeper into love—for a changing Gerry and for her Lord, Whom she now feels free to pursue outside of the religious order she has formerly abstracted and idolized.

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A native of West Tennessee, Dr. Richard Rankin Russell is Professor of English at Baylor University in Texas, where he serves as Graduate Program Director. A winner of the Cleanth Brooks/Robert Penn Warren Prize for literary criticism (*Seamus Heaney's Regions*, 2014) and a 2012 Baylor Centennial Professor, Russell has written five monographs and edited three collections--all on writers from Ireland or Northern Ireland. He is currently finishing two monographs on James Joyce--one treating the varieties of Protestantism in his essays and fiction, in *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and another reading *Ulysses* through the Good Samaritan parable.

Essay: “Inscribing the Margins: Homage to Ben Kiely”

by Gibbons Ruark

I want to begin with a brief quotation from Wallace Stevens. These lines are from “The Comedian as the Letter C,” in a section agreeably named “Approaching Carolina,” which is the state I call home.

He gripped more closely that essential prose
As being, in a world so falsified,
The one integrity for him, the one
Discovery still possible to make,
To which all poems were incident, unless
That prose should wear a poem’s guise at last.

Or we might playfully reverse that sentiment and say that a *poem* should wear a *story*’s guise at last, which is part of what I hope happens in the first poem I wrote for Ben Kiely, in the early days of our friendship. You can tell this is an old poem if only because it has Ben living in Dublin for only 40 years. It’s called “Working the Rain Shift at Flanagan’s,” even though to my knowledge there was no pub named Flanagan’s in Dublin at the time. Think of some place like Mulligans in Poolbeg Street or Kehoes in Anne Street, if you like.

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Working the Rain Shift at Flanagan’s

for Ben Kiely

When Dublin is a mist the quays are lost
To the river, even you could be lost,
A boy from Omagh after forty years
Sounding the Liberties dim as I was
When that grave policeman touching my elbow

Headed me toward this salutary glass.
The town is grim all right, but these premises
Have all the air of a blessed corner
West of the westernmost pub in Galway,
Where whatever the light tries daily to say

The faces argue with, believing rain.
Outside an acceptable rain is falling
Easy as you predicted it would fall,
Though all your Dublin savvy could not gauge
The moment the rain shift would begin to sing.

They are hoisting barrels out of the cellar
And clanging them into an open van,
Gamely ignoring as if no matter

Whatever is falling on their coats and caps,
Though the fat one singing tenor has shrugged

Almost invisibly and hailed his fellow
Underground: "A shower of rain up here,"
He says with the rain, "It'll bring up the grass."
Then, befriending a moan from the darkness,
"Easy there now, lie back down, why won't you,"

As if the man were stirring in his grave
And needed a word to level him again.
His baffled answer rising to the rainfall
Could have been laughter or tears or maybe
Some musical lie he was telling the rain.

This is a far corner from your beat these days,
But why not walk on over anyway
And settle in with me to watch the rain.
You can tell me a story if you feel
Like it, and then you can tell me another.

The rain in the door will fall so softly
It might be rising for all we can know
Where we sit inscribing its vague margin
With words, oddly at ease with our shadows
As if we had died and gone to Dublin.

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To make clear how very lucky I was that Ben was the first living Irish writer I encountered (I had met many dead ones, both great and small, among my books), I'll give you a brief account of the *second* Irish writer I met. On Ben's recommendation I was in Charlie St. George's pub across from the train station in Limerick. (Ben's name and introductions were a passport for me to many people and corners of the island I would not otherwise have known, including the welcoming kitchen of the playwright Pauline Maguire's pub in Cahirciveen and the barman in a hotel in Lahinch who brightened to the Kiely name. I also had introductions to the likes of Bryan McMahon and Mary Lavin, but did not have the nerve to call on them in their homes. Somehow pubs were easier. Later in his life, Ben would ask where I was and where I was going when I phoned him. I'd tell him, and then he'd say, "Everybody I knew there is either dead or cured.") Anyhow, there was a fellow in Charlie St. George's in a rumpled topcoat damp from the rain and carrying a bulging and battered briefcase. Shortly after he heard me tell Mr. St. George that Ben *Kiely* had told me to call in, he sidled over and said "Do you know anything about contemporary Irish poetry?" Somehow, even though I *did* know a little, I had the presence of mind to say "No," and the next thing he said, and I quote him exactly, was "Well, I'm *it*." It turns out he was a certain Munster poet planning to take the next train to Dublin to see his publisher. When I left the pub an hour or so later, he was calling for another pint and planning to take the *next* train. This was in 1978, three years after Seamus Heaney's breakthrough book *North* had prompted Robert Lowell to call him "the best Irish poet since Yeats." I confess that I didn't know Heaney's work well at the time, and I may be the only American *poet* in my generation who owned 3 books by Benedict Kiely before buying one by Heaney. Robert Frost defined education as "hanging around

until you catch on." I *did* catch on and now find myself a great admirer of the man and the work, and, happily enough, it is through him that I can find my vagrant way back to my first indelible meeting with Ben.

The inscription in our copy of *The Haw Lantern*, entered in the bitter winter of 1988 in a house near Harvard Yard, as Seamus sank to his knees at his desk because his chair had been removed to the living room, saying "Bless me Father, for I have sinned," reads in part "Well met in Cambridge, among us outsiders trying to be *in* in America." Of course Heaney never tried anything of the kind, and I want to honor his example by insisting that I am myself, in the words of the old song, a "wayfaring stranger"- a frequent visitor to Ireland only because I had the luck to meet a favorite son of Omagh in an American University some 36 years ago. That was when Ben Kiely graced us with his presence in Delaware, and when we found ourselves next-door neighbors in the academy's halls, and then friends. To flash forward for a second, when I first came to Ireland a couple of years later, there was the keeper of a hospitable farmhouse on Knocknarea who thought my surname was German, and there were *many* others I met here who didn't recognize it as Irish. Not so Ben Kiely, for he had no sooner heard the name than he reached into his bottomless kit bag and quoted, from Mangan's "Woman of Three Cows," "O'Ruark, Maguire, those souls of fire, whose names are shrined in story-" So the first words I heard out of Ben were those of a poet, and he turned me toward a number of other poets as well.

Ben Kiely's writing habits were regular, and so nearly monastic as to prompt someone to refer to 119 Morehampton Road as Ben's "scriptorium." And indeed one might think of the many luminous digressions in his work as kin to the extraordinary marginalia of medieval manuscripts. But he was anything but chronological in his storytelling, so I'll feel free to follow his example and turn now to another time in Dublin, in Donnybrook, to be precise.

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September 1981. We were in the front snug of McCloskey's in Morehampton Road, Ben and I and John Ryan and two veterans of World War I, Timothy Sugrue of Tralee and Peter McBride of Omagh, then, respectively, 98 and 88. On the western front, Sugrue, a major in the Welch Regiment, knew Ford Madox Ford and Siegfried Sassoon. "Meet all the best people at Givenchy Ridge," said Ben. Anyway, war stories were told, I listened, and this poem ultimately came out of that afternoon:

Veterans

Backs to the window of the bar in Donnybrook,
Two bent but elegant soldiers remember
The Somme, living through it, how the river looked
Recalling the Liffey, the chilling number
Of wild Irish boys among the casualties.
The younger one lost an arm for his trouble;
The older, ninety-eight, first of the British
Officers to cross the Hindenburg, though able
To return intact, grows deaf to civil noise,
Yet quickens to the mention of a close
Compatriot bemedaled at the Parliament
Of London, who cheered all Dublin with his riposte:
"Insult the King and Queen? Not a bit of it boys,
Just couldn't take my eyes off the Duchess of Kent."

Ben visited Sugrue on his 100th birthday, which he spent in hospital, and read him my poem, writing to me with typical generosity that Sugrue had thus had birthday greetings from me, the Queen of England, and the Prime Minister of Ireland.

Much of our friendship was necessarily conducted by post, and I want to give you just one other characteristic example, not entirely unrelated to the story of those old veterans, since it features a song about Irishmen going off to fight for England. Sometime in the early 1980's, Ben sent me 9 long yellow legal pages in his own inimitable hand, the script he had obviously read from for a Sunday Miscellany piece about the old Drumquin Creamery. He sent it to me because of a passage partly concerning me, with a note overleaf saying "The enclosed may amuse you. It was 'written' for a radio talk, which explains why it isn't *written*."

Here's the passage, of which I'm very fond:

The ballad of Bonny Wood Green is on my mind at the moment because of a letter I have here from a young poet in the University of Delaware. He says quite pleasantly that he has been thinking of me recently for three reasons: and one of them is that he has discovered the lovely song *Bonny Wood Green*, on David Hammond's record, along with David's note that he (David) first heard it *sung* by me. Davy Hammond (always a gentleman) was being particularly gentlemanly when he said that he ever heard me *singing*: I'd be humbly glad to settle for the phrase *Raising My Voice*. But I was moved to think that an Ulster song from the lips of an old grandmother, who was dead and gone the evening the song was taped in Ballymena, should be carried across the ocean by the voice of David Hammond to be appreciated by a poet on the banks of the great river where William Penn landed.

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Despite the protestations there, Ben's widow Frances tells me that he loved that song and loved to sing it.

If there were inevitably more letters than meetings between Ben and me, there *were* nonetheless those memorable meetings. In 1983 came the first of two times I was in Dublin on my way to the Tyrone Guthrie Centre. Ben talked to me about some of the people who might be there. (He called the place in jest "The Tyrone Guthrie Centre for Incurable Authors," but went on seriously to praise it and the people who ran it and recall happily the one time he was there, to help with a television program.) He also gave me the loan of a big book about County Monaghan, which I was, in the fashion of the day, to leave for him to pick up from the doorman at the Shelbourne on his next foray into town. (Thinking of the Shelbourne, I can't help recalling another day when Ben walked my wife Kay and me from there over to lunch at the Unicorn. He linked arms with both of us, not only out of friendliness, but also out of the need to govern the pace, since his knees were troubling him, as well as the wish to be able to stop our progress in order to call our attention to something or other. At one of these pauses he said, "I want to show you something in Brendan Behan's own hand." I expected him to pull a scrap of manuscript out of his pocket, but instead he pointed up at a painted sign affixed to the wall of a building: NO PARKING, it read. Behan at his day job. The lunch we eventually arrived at was a long one, and ultimately landed Kay and me up in Schull in West Cork around midnight after a long drive through the rainy darkness, but I've never regretted staying on until Ben was ready to part.) But to get back to the Guthrie Centre. I had a fine time there, got some work done, and got to know the valiant Bernard and Mary Loughlin and the formidable but amiable John Jordan, for whose posthumous *Collected Stories* Ben wrote a fine introduction. There were also the lovely brother and sister Mick and Annie McGinn, who ran a most congenial one-room pub in Newbliss just 3 miles

up the road. Several years after I was first there, I was lucky enough to have organized for me a quite striking portfolio, using some beautiful antique typefaces for the titles, of a dozen poems I had written there, all of them fourteeners and most of those actual sonnets. It was printed as a limited edition and carries the dedication “For Ben Kiely/ who first welcomed me to Ireland.” The following are two poems from this collection. The first is one of several elegies I’ve written for my old friend the poet James Wright, whose background was Irish but who had his reasons for not visiting the land of his forbears. John Synge’s poem “The Curse,” which is alluded to here, has the subscript “To a sister of an enemy of the author who disapproved of ‘The Playboy.’ ”

Lord, confound this surly sister,
Blight her brow with blotch and blister,
Cramp her larynx, lungs and liver,
In her guts a galling give her.

Let her live to earn her dinners
In Mountjoy with seedy sinners:
Lord, this judgment quickly bring,
And I’m your servant, J. M. Synge.

My poem is called

To an Irishman Dead Sober

for James Wright

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Dear ghost, I don’t blame you for casting the fishey
On this fantastic island, precipitous
With drink and kinsmen conspiring to pry
Your company away from those few spacious
Hours you thanked for returning your soul
To you. Still, the sorriest wandering hours
Are history, and we might note the toll
They take, however grim. Forgive me, years
Ago, though it is painful now to say it,
We laughed ourselves lost in a ground fog of booze
And came to singing badly, two-man riot
In the night-dark Ladies’ Room. What made you choose
To rally us, though your throat was whiskey raw,
From Synge’s to Adam’s curse without a flaw?

And this is the title poem of this little group, deriving itself endlessly from that great anonymous quatrain

Western wind, when will thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?
Christ! if my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again!

A Small Rain

I sit with Mick McGinn and watch the swallows
Dipping till they nearly touch the roadway.
He tells me the rain is sure to return.
A heavy sky is holding the insects down.
At evening, off the road to Annaghmakerrig,
Two horses are running, their silk flanks shining,
The pool they run by starred with water lilies.
In the hayfield beyond them the sun goes down,
And a cloud the color of pearl is building
Over the simple hills of Monaghan.
Swallows are convening in the hollows
To keep me company for the final mile.
They swoop and twitter about a small rain
Coming, or somebody sure as the rain.

Some things will never let you go, and you're glad of it. Years after that sequence came out, when I was staying on my own in a cottage at Newquay, County Clare, my time in Monaghan came back vividly to me, and I wrote about it in a longer poem into which I tried to absorb the prosaic as Ben so often absorbed the poetic into his fiction. John Montague says in the "Wordweaver" film, "Ben was very sympathetic to my attempts to write poetry, although I think he had gone past the poetry stage." That is said with bemusement, but I think its serious implication may be that Ben had gone so far in his own writing as to render the conventional distinctions between poetry and fiction irrelevant. My poem is called:

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Newbliss Remembered in Newquay

The bar beyond the field is closed for ruination.
No time ago at all, as the neighbours clock it,
We could stand together at the sunroom window
And watch the publican's helpmeet snipping spinach
In our white-walled garden. It was understood.
They'd put it in the soup there'd be for dinner.
Days he didn't come, the soup would be potato.

Now I drive the night roads looking for music,
The walls of the shuttered pub and then the garden's
White walls catching my lights when I return.
Watching the new spring night on Aughnish Bay,
Nightcap in my hand at another window,
The days in Monaghan come back to me in Clare.
"I'm going into Newbliss now," I say.

"Ah," says Bernard laughing, "*Nouvelle Extase*,
Is it? A damned sight better you than me."
A man who lives here will get used to anything,
Even, as the story has it most days, nothing.
Nothing but the sky, the little hills and hedges.
As the poet's wife in Dublin said to me,
"Three days of that, you'll be cadging a lift

Into Cootehill to lay odds on the bacon slicer.
‘He’ll not get a dozen out of *that* one.’ ”
A stranger, I still find it passing strange.
Three pubs, one off-limits for the politics,
Another for the beer, so that leaves Annie
And Mick McGinn’s one-room establishment,
The only bar a man need ever want.

Once a day I idle in for a pint,
Then idle back, a good three miles each way,
Whether by the low road or over the Brae.
Here’s what’s happening there today:
Nobody’s there at first (the men are haying),
But midafternoon a fellow strolls in
And begins to take up the world with Mick.

I’m in a corner with a pint and the paper.
“Mick,” says the man, “did you hear it thunder
In the night?” “No,” says Mick, “I never heard it.”
“Mickey Reilly heard it thunder,” says the man,
Puts down his glass and seals his news with a nod.
And follows his muddy gumboots out the door.
There’s a clock on every wall, but they’re all wrong.

I’ve grown accustomed to knowing it’s time to leave
When the shadows start working the crossword puzzle.
It’s a long walk from the big house to the village,
And just as long going back, but worth it.
Here in Newquay, twenty-odd years later,
The incoming tide says “Time” to the darkness.
The bar beyond the field is closed for ruination.

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The last time I saw Ben was in October of 2000. Here is a Dublin diptych about that afternoon, with its left and right panels reversed from the way they stand in print. It’s called “On an Autumn Day” and the *second* part, dealing with the two very different Patrick Kavanagh memorial benches on either side of the Grand Canal, is called “Baggot Street Bridge”:

I leave you reading in a spill of sunlight
To walk the grassy verges of the Grand Canal.
Ducks paddle the water of their heritage,
Nowhere the emblematic whiteness of a swan.
From the plain bench sited in the poet’s memory,
I look across and see *not* what is there,
But the shade of a captioned photo from the *Times*:
“Rose Marie O’Malley of Rathfarnam naps
With her head in the lap of Patrick Kavanagh.”
Nobody’s there now. Just a seated statue
Like a farm boy tired at the end of haying.
I’d rather this called-for seat for the passerby,
Which I empty now by yawning and rising

To cross the bridge and amble back to you,
Passing, under a suddenly furrowed sky,
A blackbird dipping its bill in the teacup's
Worth of rainwater pooled in that brazen lap.

And then the *first* part of this is called “A Room in Donnybook”:

The first man ever to hear Paddy Kavanagh
Sing “Raglan Road” to “The Dawning of the Day,”
Who, indeed, lifted his voice and sang it with him,
Is lying with the counterpane up to his chest,
The pillows doing all that pillows can do,
Deep laughter in his voice despite the pain.
“It's my only back,” he says, “the same back
Put me in hospital when I was a novice
And the Jesuits lost me to the tender nurses.”
And, what he doesn't say, to a storied life
Of seizing the days in marvelous stories.
“Now,” somebody says, “Talk about the present.
You're slipping off on your own to the past.”
The answer to that one is a song from Donegal.
Autumn is in the tree he sees in the window,
Its lowering light idling up the headboard,
Glazing, where it waits leaning against the wall,
The hand-worn grain of his knobby blackthorn,
A gift from a friend in Omagh, still within reach.

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I want to close with a brief lyric that may take its cue from Yeats's line “I meditate upon a swallow's flight,” if waiting for one's beloved can be loosely regarded as a form of meditation, but it may resonate also with the epitaph on Ben's gravestone, taken from his magical story “A Ball of Malt and Madame Butterfly,” “He could still sing. His voice never grew old.”

Waiting for You with the Swallows

I was waiting for you
Where the four lanes wander
Into a city street,
Listening to the freight
Train's whistle and thunder
Come racketing through,

And I saw beyond black
Empty branches the light
Turn swiftly to a flurry
Of wingbeats in a hurry
For nowhere but the flight
From steeple-top and back

To steeple-top again.
I thought of how the quick
Hair shadows your lit face

Till laughter in your voice
Awoke and brought me back
And you stepped from the train.

I was waiting for you
Not a little too long
To learn what swallows said
Darkening overhead:
When we had time, we sang.
After we sang, we flew.

Editor's note: All poetry by Gibbons Ruark copyright of the author.

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Bio: Gibbons Ruark

Gibbons Ruark was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1941, and grew up in various Methodist parsonages in the eastern part of the state. Educated in public schools and at the Universities of North Carolina and Massachusetts, he taught English largely at the University of Delaware until his retirement in 2005. He has published his poems widely for fifty years. Recent poems appear in *The New Yorker* and the *Irish Times*. Among his nine collections are *Keeping Company* (Johns Hopkins, 1983), *Rescue the Perishing* (LSU, 1991), *Passing Through Customs: New and Selected Poems* (LSU, 1999), *Staying Blue* (Lost Hills Books, 2008) and *The Road to Ballyvaughan* (Jacar Press, 2015). The recipient of many awards, including three NEA Poetry Fellowships, residencies at The Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Ireland, a Pushcart Prize and the 1984 Saxifrage Prize for *Keeping Company*, he lives with his wife Kay in Raleigh.

Essay: “Getting in Good Trouble – A Conversation with Stuart Bailie”

by Yvonne Watterson



Stuart Bailie and Yvonne Watterson

Stuart Bailie joins me for coffee on an autumn morning in the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains. Far away from Belfast, Los Gatos is the perfect place to ponder politics, protest, and punk rock. This is where John Steinbeck wrote his angriest book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the soundtrack of Tom Joad’s California and America’s Great Depression – by any other name, it is a punk anthem fulfilling the writer’s goal “to rip a reader’s nerves to rags.” It is a call to outrage, to make “good trouble,” the kind of trouble that can redeem the very soul of a country, resonant and recognizable in the soundtrack of Northern Ireland since 1968. That soundtrack is *Trouble Songs – Music and Conflict in Northern Ireland*, a potent compilation of moments where music was “inspired, agitated, or brutalized” by the times. For young people who spent Saturday afternoons seeking refuge in Terri Hooley’s record shop, there is no better man to deliver this soundtrack, the story of Northern Ireland, than Stuart Bailie, self-proclaimed “wizened old geezer” - a middle-aged punk rocker.

Trouble Songs arrives at a seminal moment for Northern Ireland, the title of its first chapter an imperative from Stiff Little Fingers song - “if these words hit you at the right moment, they would be life changing” - *Take a Look at Where You’re Living*. Forcing his readers to take a closer look, Bailie begins his tour of Northern Ireland in 1968, when they blocked the lower deck of the Craigavon Bridge, singing “We Shall Overcome.” Perhaps the first time it was sung in Northern Ireland, this was the song that rang out from America, from freedom rides and sit-ins, union halls and churches, in the face of snarling dogs and high-pressure fire hoses. With all its promise, this was the song that sustained Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Congressman John Lewis, the last surviving speaker of the march to Washington DC in 1968, also the occasion of the “I Have a Dream,” speech. Lewis says that “without music, the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings. *We Shall Overcome* are those wings.” It is the quintessential *trouble song*.

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Bailie’s fresh perspective arrives fifty years since civil rights activists took to the streets in Northern Ireland and twenty years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, the anniversary of the latter a publishing deadline for Bailie, the promise of it indelible and on stage at a free rock ‘n’ roll concert for 2,000 Protestant and Catholic children at the Waterfront Hall in Belfast in May 1998. Organized to endorse a “Yes” vote for the Peace Agreement by U2 and Ash, a band from Downpatrick, it was the night that produced an indelible image of the country’s path to peace, when from behind David Trimble and John Hume, the leaders of Northern Ireland’s largest political parties, Bono stepped in to hold their arms aloft like prize fighters. Momentous, it was their first public handshake. Choreographed by U2’s front-man, it had also been done before. Bailie takes us back to a spring evening in 1978 at the National Stadium in Kingston, Jamaica. Without warning, during a rendition of “Jammin’,” reggae boss, Bob Marley, invites political opponents, Michael Manley and Edward Seaga, to join him on stage, to send out a positive gesture to a country in the grip of its most deadly period of political bloodshed and violence. They have no choice. It is an unscripted moment that will make the international headlines the next day, showing the world that if “we gonna make it right, we gots to unite!” The image is iconic - a singer holding the hands of two political leaders, a show of strength against forces that bring out the very worst in us. This is good trouble. This is one love.

While the biggest band in the world may have helped save Northern Ireland from impending uncertainty, two decades later the country is without a functioning government. Of course, circumstances In Belfast have changed significantly, summed up in the late Bap Kennedy's song "Boomtown." Kids in the city "don't know how lucky they are, they never heard a bomb," property prices are soaring, and there are career opportunities in the rebranded Northern Ireland Police Service. Is this progress? Like Kennedy, Stuart Bailie is not so sure, commenting on what he calls the Disney-fication of his city "Belfast has whored itself out a bit, which really depresses me. The Cathedral Quarter used to be all anarchy with exciting people trying to really change the fabric of the place, but now, it is all about theme pubs and stag weekends." Brexit and its implications for the border loom large, and people are nervous that a return to the bad old days is imminent. The distance between politicians and the people is expanding along with an increased sense of disappointment and division, as Bailie observes, "this is the only place on our islands where we don't have marriage equality, and the religious fundamentalists still have too much power." In America, the results of the 2018 mid-term elections also reflect a nation deeply divided, the legacy of Dr. King perhaps on the line. A feeling of crisis across the globe leads Bailie to conclude that we are poised for another great era of trouble songs, adding Kendrick Lamar and Eminem to a soundtrack that began with Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Marvin Gaye, every song an opportunity to envision a better future.

Bailie does not editorialize. *Trouble Songs* is about music and about how people related to it; it is about how someone like Stephen Travers, survivor of the Miami Showband massacre, can articulate the importance of music during the worst of times. Travers is quoted on the back cover of the book: "People often say that music was harmless fun. It wasn't. It must have terrified the terrorists. When people came to see us, sectarianism was left outside the door of the dancehall. That's the power of music and I think that every musician that ever stood on a stage, north of the border during those decades, every one of them was a hero." On the front cover, Bailie knew what he did not want. Wary of "Troubles porn, it would not feature men with tanks or bombs and guns; there would be no children at play in a black and white wasteland with sectarian graffiti on the walls and no British Army patrolling the streets. When a friend shared a picture of the Bogside in 1969, Bailie knew he had found his cover. Taken by the late French photographer Gilles Caron, the photograph captures a then 18-year old Ann Kelly in the aftermath of a riot. "I thought she looked so composed - she was her own person." With permission to use the picture from Caron's estate, Bailie told cover designer, Stu Bell, to "make it feel like Dexys Midnight Runners first album with a wee bit of the first Clash LP" *Score*. It is Bailie's acute awareness of words and images that enables him to handle with circumspection the identity crisis that still defines Northern Ireland. He avoids words like "terrorism," ensuring that *Trouble Songs* is not perceived as "a prod thing or a Republican thing," but a thing that belongs to everyone in Northern Ireland, and anyone with an interest – personal or political - in the role music plays where they live and beyond. *Trouble Songs* never patronizes the reader but does address music that sometimes patronized the people affected. Reflecting on political statements about Northern Ireland from the big stadium bands of the 1980s - Simple Minds, Sting, The Police, U2 - Bailie points out some people "got a wee bit fed up with what felt like tourism. We were the subject of *virtue signaling* before we even knew what it was." All over the world, bands were playing to sold-out stadiums with "something to say about Northern Ireland, recording grainy black and white videos depicting West Belfast as a cultural wasteland with slogans on the wall and children running in slow motion, but the band shots were actually filmed in Los Angeles." With a reality check, he tells me, "they didn't have the fucking courtesy to shoot their video in Northern Ireland." He refrains from lecturing on this topic in the book, opting for empathy as the path towards redemption for the soul of Northern Ireland, digging in to

recount the story without wagging his finger. He looks right at me and asks, “Was Christy Moore ‘more right’ than Paul Brady?” The answer hovers. From the back-seat, Bailie allows his readers to draw their own conclusions.

A fan of Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, and ‘the new journalism,’ Bailie draws from the influence of *England’s Dreaming* by Jon Savage. Obsessed with music and the details that work to create a strong sense of place, Bailie is interested in what people were wearing or what the weather was like. He wants to know “What’s the yarn here? What’s the story? How did this guy arrive in the story and how did he end up writing these lyrics?” Thus, each chapter could stand alone, thematic and episodic, reminiscent of the notes on music and culture on his blog, an online space where he relates “big stories in context and the rich significance of little moments.” Regarding the title of his blog – “Dig with It,” from Heaney’s “Digging,” he explains he wanted “something a bit funky, a bit groovy, a wee bit literate.” With a nod to the Heaney poem, “it’s bit jazz, a bit Irish literature - that’ll do.” The DIY ethic of bloggers appeals to Bailie – it’s very punk. Resentful of writing for pennies for local newspapers, having grown up in an era when writers were paid well for their words, he approached *Trouble Songs* the way most bloggers approach their writing – “you write for yourself on your own terms.” He knew there would be some fairly substantial spade work involved in the project and that writing about music is perhaps on a dying trade, but he also knew this is what he does best and that *Trouble Songs* was a story he could uniquely tell. He has been writing it in his head for decades. Back in 2007, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland approached him for an essay on popular music for their “Troubles Archive” series. He combed through the contents of plastic bags stuck under tables, boxes, newspaper cuttings that had yet to make it to either of two filing cabinets, each bulging with random information and transcripts of 30-year-old interviews from his time as musical journalist and Assistant Editor at NME. This was in the days before Wikipedia, when knowledge was power. He found as he unpacked the boxes that he was constantly delighted with his younger self – “a wee bit of a bad boy, a minor hooligan” who had been shown the way by a London act, The Clash, who sang about urban desolation and riots in Notting Hill and the impact of Northern Ireland in England in a song called “Career Opportunities.” He credits the Clash with opening his mind, encouraging him to think carefully about his social context: “I hate the civil servant rules, I won’t open no letter bombs for you.” Simple and spare, there was a moral code in the musical statements of The Clash, and it paved the way for a band like Stiff Little Fingers to sing about an “Alternative Ulster.” Punk rock may have saved Stuart Bailie’s life.

None of the big publishers were interested when he first approached them with the *Trouble Songs* idea and three chapters focusing on that night in the Waterfront in 1998, the Miami showband massacre, and The Clash. A music industry insider, he thought he would just knock on doors like a band with a demo tape. He was rejected repeatedly, agents and publishers telling him there was no market for the project. Then the British Council asked if he might be able to get it done in time for the *Peace and Beyond* conference in Belfast to mark the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. He pressed on, his punk rock ethos leading him to complete it as a solo project with help from the British Council, Bloomfield Press, and EastSide Arts, Belfast. He turned to crowdfunding with a Kickstarter campaign appeal, telling potential funders that this was “a call to my community to help carry a vital story,” which ultimately involved over 60 interviews and conversations with the likes of Bono, Christy Moore, the Undertones, Stiff Little Fingers, Orbital, Kevin Rowland, Terri Hooley, the Rubberbandits, Dolores O’Riordan and the survivors of the Miami Showband. His community responded and he sold almost 300 books before *Trouble Songs* was published. This was punk at its finest. Chuckling, he describes one of greatest rewards, an unexpected phone call from Waterstones book store advising him that they needed 50 more books

because everybody was buying it for their dads on Father's Day. A week later, he was hearing from fathers who wanted to buy the book for their kids. "Don't read a history book about the Troubles, read what Stu has to say instead." What of all those defeatist conversations with publishers who made him feel "a wee bit unloved" for such a long time? "Up yours." Naturally.

The son of working-class parents who pushed him to do well in school, Stuart Bailie attended the prestigious Royal Belfast Academical Institution, one of the city's oldest schools. Simply *Inst* to the locals, the porticoed institution is a handsome example of late Georgian architecture; it is a posh school where the headmaster shows up to morning assembly in gown and mortar board. In 1970s Belfast, Bailie remembers it was also 'semi-derelict,' its windows crisscrossed with tape to catch the shrapnel from a bomb blast in the city center, its classrooms violent and 'hard men' beating up first year students in the quadrangle. Too, it was "rock and roll high school," producing within a very short space of time, punk bands like The Zips, The Tinopers, Acme, Rudi, Victim, and Protex, who got a record deal with Polydor around the same time as they were doing their A-level exams. Bailie's English teacher was Frank Ormsby, a guy with a fringe and a Fermanagh accent that was out of place in Belfast. Occasionally he would toss the prescribed curriculum and instead share with his pupils something from *The Honest Ulsterman*, a publication he had edited since 1969. While such detours did little for Bailie's exam results, several years later he realized what Ormsby had given him, "an abiding joy for words. That's the gift of "a proper teacher - to love writing. Ormsby taught me not to pass an exam, but to love the words." A working-class student in a school above his social league, 16-year-old Bailie was in the company of aspiring lawyers and dentists. "I had no fucking clue what I was going to do. I wanted to be in a band." Already a scholar of music, he would buy two albums for 50 pence from Dougie Knights record shop and tape them. First, he loved Mott the Hoople, then Bowie, The Faces, Lou Reed. By the time punk arrived, Bailie had found his tribe. "Punk wasn't that weird – I'd already experienced Lou Reed."

Somewhat bemused, his parents watched their son go from being a model student in to a "wee bit of a delinquent" – a punk. Every weekend, he would make new friends at Caroline Music or Terri Hooley's record shop, Good Vibrations, which his friend, Hooley, describes as "a real meeting place . . . it was like an oasis in the middle of this cultural wasteland. We hadn't a clue what we were doing really; I was just this mad, ex hippy. But the energy of punk gave me the chance to relive my youth again. It was an exciting alternative for all of them." At the height of the conflict in Northern Ireland, punk rock was fermenting all over the city. Asked about his impressions of Belfast in 1977, the late Joe Strummer of The Clash was emphatic, "When punk rock ruled over Ulster, nobody ever had more excitement and fun. Between the bombings and shootings, the religious hatred and the settling of old scores, punk gave everybody a chance to LIVE for one glorious burning moment. Let it provide inspiration." At the time, the likes of Stuart Bailie or Terri Hooley had no idea that what they were doing was particularly noble or inspired or that it would thirty years later become the stuff of conferences on the role of music in peacemaking. During that period, every Saturday afternoon, Bailie and would walk up and down between the two shops, making five new friends on the way, "lifted out of this sectarian thing around us. It was magic." By 1978, he realized he was part of a tribe, a community committed to a more adventurous alternative. "You just knew if someone's got an Outcast or Rudi badge on their coat, you could talk to them." Punks stood out. They knew their rights and they didn't wear flares or long hair. Cultivating his own sense of style, Bailie learned how to use a sewing machine and turned trousers inside out to tighten the legs. He wore his dad's old suits with badges on the

lapels and when he showed up in his parent's kitchen one morning in one of those old jackets, his father responded, "I got married in that!"

Like most adults, Bailie has experienced the realization that once upon a time his dad was cool, "a bit of a boy," with an impressive record collection that included old 78s by Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, and Hank Williams. Bailie is full of similar surprises himself, and as our conversation draws to a close, he takes me back to summer drives with his parents around Millisle and Ballywalter, Clougy and Comber and a song that is indelible in his memory. He starts to sing, "When I was young and went to school they taught me how to write/To take the chalk and make a mark and hope it turns out right." From an old Hank Thompson song, it is a honky tonk number about getting over the girl. Often on rainy days, when those excursions seemed endless, his mum and dad would belt out the lyrics, with the windscreen wipers slapping time. "You gotta hear this," he urges. "It's just gorgeous. Play me a bit of Hank Thompson and I'm back there in the back seat, wondering just how many tears it took to clean that slate."

Trouble Songs - you gotta hear this.

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Bio: Stuart Bailie

Stuart Bailie lives in Belfast. He worked for the NME, 1988-2000. He was Assistant Editor at NME for three years and has also written for Mojo, Uncut, The Times, The Sunday Times, Hot Press, The Irish Times and The Irish Independent. He wrote the authorized Thin Lizzy biography, 'Ballad Of The Thin Man' in 1997. He has scripted a series of BBC Radio 2 documentaries on U2, Elvis Costello, Thin Lizzy and Glen Campbell. In 2007, he wrote and narrated a TV documentary on the story of music from Northern Ireland – 'So Hard To Beat' – which was shown on BBC4. Stuart has presented a BBC Radio Ulster show since 1999. He wrote a BBC blog for six years and was twice shortlisted in the Irish Blog Awards. He was co-founder and CEO of the Oh Yeah music center in Belfast, a resource for musicians and the music industry (2006-16).



Bio: Yvonne Watterson

Originally from County Antrim, Yvonne Watterson emigrated to the United States in 1988 and settled in Arizona where she works in public education. She has been recognized for her work in school reform and her activism on immigration. Yvonne is a frequent contributor to the *Irish Times* and blogs at Considering the Lilies & and Lessons from the Field, www.timetoconsiderthelilies.com Her blog has been a Bronze winner in the 2018 and 2017 Blog Awards of Ireland- Best of the Diaspora. She was invited to speak at the 2018 Irish Arts & Writers Festival, in Los Gatos, California, which is where her conversations with Stuart Bailie and Gerard Dawe took place.

Essay: “A Work In Progress: The Other World of Van Morrison and Gerald Dawe”

by Yvonne Watterson



In Another World
Gerald Dawe
ISBN:9781785371462

There is no denying poet Gerald Dawe’s sense of wonder for Van Morrison and for Belfast in his latest book, *In Another World*. Culled from all the material Dawe has published on Morrison since the 1990s, it is a portrait of these artists in and of Belfast, their “otherness” in the city that made them, a city that changed forever when sectarian violence took possession of it in the late 1960s. In his preface to this little volume of essays, Dawe invites his reader to partake of all on offer in Belfast the early and mid-1960s. It was a wondrous time for the northern capital, a mecca for all kinds of live music in dancehalls and ‘hops’ all over the city, and in living rooms and parlors, its people tuned into the radio. In his North Belfast home, young Dawe is immersed in a world of creativity, “fascinated by stories overheard” about the way things used to be - in the songs of his opera singing grandmother, of Cleo Laine and Sarah Vaughan, of Ella Fitzgerald on the gramophone. This is another world, a lost world where cool young men in Belfast wore black arm-bands following the news that Otis Redding had died in a plane crash in Wisconsin. It was in this other world that Ella Fitzgerald performed one night, and when Dawe’s mother returns from the gig, she tells him, “I’m sent.” In the heart of this rocking city, he places Van Morrison, a working-class man working out his songs with “the accent you heard in the streets,” leading the way for Dawe to emerge as a poet, with a confidence that it was possible to be both “a Belfast guy and lyrical.” Armed thus, two Orangefield Boys School alumni begin their journey in a “city dominated by work, work, work.” Theirs is a creative labor, different kind of work than expected of them in industrial Belfast - a creative labor. *In Another World* is a tribute to that labor and to the city that inspired it before The Troubles “put into quarantine those kinds of energies.”

As he has explained elsewhere, Dawe is a poet in love with “the notion of cramming a world into a short space on the page, by allusion, turn of phrase, suggestion,” a notion that is realized in this slim volume of just 116 pages. Reminiscent of Seamus Heaney’s thatcher, Dawe has the Midas touch, “pinning down his world, handful by handful,” with trademark exactitude. The world that produced Van Morrison and Gerry Dawe is a red-bricked “civic landscape of class distinction,” in which children learn their place very early in life. For Morrison, this world is revisited in his music, in songs of innocence and experience as a young man who worked in a meat-cleaning factory, a chemist’s shop, and as a window-cleaner in Orangefield. It is in these lyrics that Dawe finds a kinship with Patrick Kavanagh, in the “walking down familiar streets in search of that elusive authentic past, although when he asks Morrison about the Kavanagh connection in a 1995 public conversation, the transcript of which is included in the book, the singer keeps it simple: “It’s really all the same. The difference is you just do it with music.” This suffices for Dawe, the acclaimed poet who once responded when asked If he could write his epitaph in no more than 10 words, what it would be and why, “‘Gerald Dawe, Poet, born 1952 Belfast’. The simpler it is the better.”

In retrospect, Dawe is surprised by Morrison’s candor, aware of the singer’s reputation as a notoriously difficult interviewee. Throughout his career, Morrison has explained repeatedly that he will not and, more importantly, *cannot* “intellectualize” or engage in the kind of

navel-gazing analysis of his music that will compromise what Dawe calls “the fate of genuine artistic endeavor.” Not surprising then that Morrison has delivered more than a few blunt responses to interviewers who have not been paying attention, reminiscent of Bob Dylan in that famous 1965 press conference in San Francisco. When asked if he thought of himself as a protest singer or a rock and roll singer, young Dylan replied, “Oh, I think of myself more as a song and dance man.” Case closed. Similarly, any attempt to pigeon-hole Van Morrison is a fool’s errand. Cognizant of this, Dawe probes to determine the source of the songs, *where* the lyrics come from. Morrison tells him.

Morrison is a consummate performer, a recording artist who is still on the road honing his craft, doing what he refers to as “earning my living.” When he began his musical apprenticeship in the early 1960s, he seemed much older. He had written “Gloria” when he was a teenager, playing in the city’s clubs, Sammy Houston’s Jazz Club on Great Victoria Street and at The Maritime. Morrison served his time in Belfast, asserting himself with all boldness until 1967 when he “ran out of space” and left for New York. “I worked my way from my Belfast to New York and didn’t even know I was there because it was work,” Morrison once remarked in a 1987 interview. A year later, he would record *Astral Weeks*. Dawe clarifies that contrary to what many music critics have described as a breakthrough record for Morrison, *Astral Weeks* is a compilation of work – a vision - that he had begun sketching in Belfast. Considered together, its songs mark a poetic shift, presenting another mode - another mood - for the singer. Most resonant and relevant for Dawe is its centerpiece composition, “Madame George,” a farewell not only to Morrison’s youth, but also to a way of life in a city still unblemished by bombs and bullets and unnecessary bloodshed. For young Gerry Dawe, it is a farewell to a place where curiosity and creativity had flourished, where he and his friends “did not know a great deal about sectarianism. It just wasn’t part of the psychic landscape.” As Dawe describes it, “‘Madame George’ is a portrait of a society about to withdraw from public view at the same time as the voice which describes it is also leaving the scene.” The reality is that fifty years ago, *Astral Weeks* may not even have been on the radar in Northern Ireland, its people more intent on what was happening in Derry in 1968. For some, it would take thirty years to fully absorb the blow that *Astral Weeks* was their *Paradise Lost* - it was Seamus Heaney’s “music of what happens.” This poignant goodbye to Belfast may indeed prompt readers to indulge in fantasies about another world that might have been. What if the storm never came?

With the insight of a local who knows well the lay of the land, Dawe meanders through space and time, from the attic of his house in North Belfast overlooking the city’s amber lights below to streets and characters and urban rituals now familiar to a global audience – to Cyprus Avenue and Fitzroy, to the lower Falls and Orangefield, to Hyndford Street and the Beechie River and out to the Castlereagh Hills. There’s Madame George, and Sam and Van cleaning windows before breaking for tea and with Paris buns and lemonade in the corner shop; there’s “the soldier boy older now with hat on, drinking wine”; there’s the train from Dublin up to Sandy Row, and, in “Boffyflow and Spike,” which Dawe reads aloud while Morrison accompanies him on guitar, there is a *sense of wonder*: “wee Alfie at the Castle picture house; pastie suppers at Davy’s Chipper, gravy rings, barmbracks, wagon wheels, snowballs. A Sense of Wonder.” Going back to a time “when the world made more sense,” as Morrison proclaims in his 1991 *Hymns to the Silence*, it would be reductive to characterize *In Another World* as a sentimental trip to a place where the grass is always greener. Nonetheless, it is a journey of nostalgia, and it is worth noting, as Dawe has pointed out previously, the

etymology of the word: “Nostalgia is about the pain of home, -nostos – home, and algia – pain.” *In Another World* is a more nuanced imperative to get on with the show, summed up in the title track of Morrison’s 2003 album, “What’s Wrong with this Picture”:

I’m not that person anymore
 I’m always living in the present time
 Don’t you understand
 I left all that jive behind.

Morrison’s journey from “the home place” in pre-Troubles Belfast to a space where he could pursue artistic life on his own terms is not one that can be packaged in the myth of modern celebrity culture. As Dawe describes it, Morrison’s work inhabits a space that “has continuously moved in and out of his audience’s expectations,” the artist a wily critic of the crassness and commercialization of a music business that “thrives on and exploits disclosure” of the private persona behind a typically recalcitrant public self. Morrison leaves no doubt about this, once stating that “music is spiritual, the music business isn’t.”

Morrison shares with Dawe a childhood home that was full of music. His father, a shipyard worker and an avid record collector, was the key influence, with an enormous collection of rare American blues and jazz vinyl. As Morrison himself acknowledges, “There was probably only ten big collectors of blues and jazz in Belfast and my father was one of them.” Fitting then, that at the age of nine, Morrison was already a fan of Jelly Roll Morton, Lead Belly, and Solomon Burke. Orangefield Boys School was no match for the education he received from his father’s astonishing collection of jazz and Wild West books or from the movies of the day. His years at school were not helpful. A self-described freak, Morrison explains that “There was no school for people like me . . . either we didn’t have the bread to go to the sort of school where we could sit down and do our own thing or that type of school didn’t exist.” He was never taught about the Irish writers or any literary traditions. It was through other often solitary means that he discovered Dickens, Kerouac, Yeats, Blake, Kavanagh, Joyce, Heaney, and his own distinctive voice as an Irish writer. Unlike Dawe, a poet, literary critic and former Professor of English and Fellow of Trinity College Dublin, Van Morrison brings no academic credentials to his craft. He brings to it what he tells Sean O’Hagan in 2008, an exploration of the themes of “all Irish writing . . . Basically, Irish writers, and I include myself here, are writing about the same things . . . Often it’s about when things felt better. Either that, or sadness... It’s the story about going back and rediscovering that going back answers the question, or going back and discovering it doesn’t answer the question. Going away and coming back, those are the themes of all Irish writing.” Or more succinctly, “there are two stories in music - leaving and going home.”

Now in his early seventies, having just released his 40th album, *The Prophet Speaks*, Morrison describes himself as a “work in progress.” His second album in 2018, this is a collaboration with jazz multi-instrumentalist Joey DeFrancesco and marks a return to the blues and jazz that inspired him as a young musician in Belfast, a journey back to “the old way, the jazz way.” Previewing it from the Europa Hotel in Belfast, Morrison says “It goes back to *Into The Mystic* and various things I’ve written so it’s new and old; there’s a thread which is ongoing.” Still a journeyman, honing his craft, Morrison reiterates his commitment to the labor as inseparable from the homing instinct that is a powerful motif in his work, explaining in a statement to *Rolling Stone*, “It was important for me to get back to recording new music as well as doing some of the blues material that has inspired me from the beginning. Writing songs and making music is what I do, and working with great musicians makes it all the more enjoyable.”

Morrison shares the cover of the new record with the ventriloquist dummy from *Educating Archie*, evoking the radio program from his childhood. Apt, this tribute to a time and a place Dawe captures as one where “people really did get on with it; and get it on,” a stoic yet soulful quality, summed up once by Seamus Heaney as “keeping going.” Journeying back, it is a tribute to radio, a wireless portal into another world – a free world – in “the days before rock n roll.” As Dawe reflects, “radio was our way into the wider world. At first it was the big old woolen-faced box in the corner and then the moveable transistor which was carried around like an iPhone . . . the radio was a great connector; it made a younger generation feel that even while you might have been up in the back bedroom on your own, you knew there were thousands like you ‘listening in’ and that conversations were had about whose new single was just out, or an album. Or simply playing back music from before.”

Dawe’s final chapter of this particular journey *In Another World* opens lines from the late Mose Allison, a genre-defying artist revered by Morrison, who once referred to himself as “the man without a category” in a world eager to place him in one. Closing the book on Van Morrison’s Belfast, it is through Allison’s lens that Dawe ponders the only question that continues to matter. This world is another world once more:

*'When am turns to was and now is back when,
Will someone have moments like this,
Moments of unspoken bliss?'*

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Gerald Dawe

Bio: Gerald Dawe

Gerald Dawe was born in Belfast in 1952 and educated at Orangefield Boys' School and at Ulster University. In 1974, he moved to the west coast of Ireland where he lived and taught at University College Galway (1974-1988). He was appointed Lecturer in English at Trinity College Dublin in 1988 and has lived in Dublin since 1992. Dawe's first collection of poems, *Sheltering Places* (Blackstaff), was published in 1978. His second collection, *The Lundys Letter* (1985), published by The Gallery Press, was awarded the Macaulay Fellowship for Literature. His Selected Poems appeared in 2012. Dawe's most recent collections are *Mickey Finn's Air* (2014) and *Early Poems* (2015). In addition to his poetry, Dawe has edited various anthologies of poetry and literary criticism including *Earth Voices Whispering: Irish poetry of war* (2008) and *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets* (2018). He has also written a unique study of war and revolution and their impact on the writing lives of Irish poets and novelists from WW1 and the Easter Rising through the War of Independence to the Civil War, WW11 and the Northern “Troubles,” *Of War and War's Alarms* (2015). His other publications include *In Another World: Van Morrison & Belfast* (2017) and *The Wrong Country: Essays on Modern Irish Writing* (2018).

His various awards include a Hawthornden International Writers Fellowship and a Moore Institute Fellowship, NUI, Galway. He has been visiting professor at Boston College and Villanova University, and was a visiting scholar at the Moore Institute, NUI, Galway and at Pembroke College, Cambridge (2016-17). An archive of his papers is held at the Burns Library, Boston College. Dawe was Professor of English and Fellow of Trinity College, Dublin until his retirement in 2017. He lives in Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin.

Two poems by Gerald Dawe

John Cheever's Dublin

Trees thicken
in the uncertain light
and manic gulls
screech all over the place.

'Less of the old'
I hear you say.
But what can be done
about the boozed-up

late-night caller's
rant down the phone-
a wreckage of years
unrecoverable like ash?

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Neighbourhood Watch

No one actually *lives* here,
the houses are all for let.

Rank gardens run wild,
utility boxes upended,

busted chairs and sour carpets
left to the elements,

the pizza trays, the tall necked
bottles, Xmas decorations

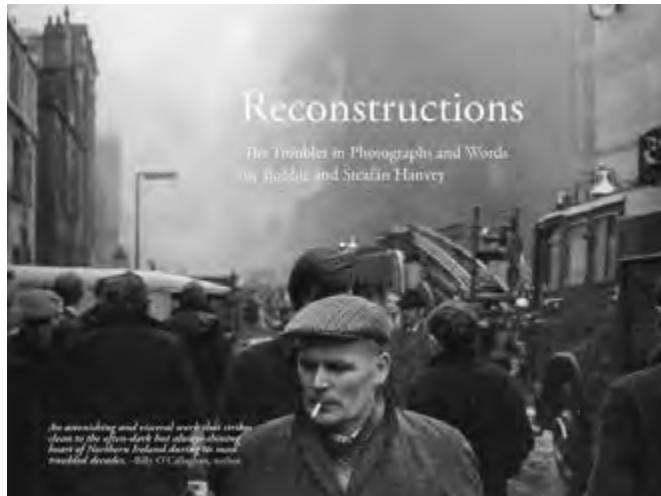
from a few years ago.
Hear the pigeon coo

for you and me. It goes
coo-coo, wise-up; get a life.

Spotlight on Reconstructions: The Troubles in Photographs and Words

Poems and words by Steafán Hanvey, photography by Bobbie Hanvey

by Adrienne Leavy



ISBN:9781785372162

PIRA Bomb in Belfast city center,
c. 1973. *Photograph courtesy of the
Bobbie Hanvey Photograph Archives,
John J. Burns Library, Boston College.*



Steafán Hanvey

How does one aesthetically convey the world that was Northern Ireland during the 1960s and in the violent sectarian decades beyond, a period of time euphemistically referred to by everyone at home as *The Troubles*? Poets, novelists, filmmakers, musicians and visual artists have responded to this question in their own individual fashion, and now there is another worthy artistic contribution to the canon, one which Medbh McGuckian terms “both potent and devastating” - *Reconstructions: The Troubles in Photography and Words*, by acclaimed veteran photographer Bobbie Hanvey and his son, the poet and musician Steafán Hanvey. An interdisciplinary collaboration between two gifted artists who know their subject intimately, the book includes a carefully curated selection of Hanvey’s most iconic photographs, dating back more than four decades, which are juxtaposed with prose poems and contextual commentary by Steafán.

Bobbie Hanvey was born in Brookeborough, County Fermanagh, and has lived in Downpatrick, County Down, for most of his adult life. He began his career as a psychiatric nurse, but abandoned this profession for photography, where he fulfilled a broader calling to minister to the wider community “by documenting the madness all around him with his camera and microphone.” An ardent campaigner for civil rights in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Hanvey is an acclaimed photographer with an extraordinary ability to connect genuinely with people from all walks of life, social class and political affiliations. Over the past several decades his camera has captured the eerie aftermath of bombsites and shootings, the reality of the marginalized travelling community in Ireland, and numerous iconic portraits of Irish writers and poets as well as politicians such as Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams. His work is now archived in the John J. Burns Library at Boston College, Massachusetts.

Singer-songwriter Steafán Hanvey was born in Downpatrick, County Down. In addition to producing two albums he has directed and toured worldwide a multi-media performance, *Look Behind You! A Father and Son's Impressions of the Troubles Through Photographs and Song*, which incorporates songs, spoken word and projections from his father’s collection. He is currently producing a covers album of anti-war songs, a documentary film, and is also working on his third studio album.

In a forward to the book, Steafán recalls the experience as a young boy of helping his father develop his photographs in their home:

Growing up in the house anomaly built meant that I was present at the conception of many of these photographs. I witnessed their act of becoming, as it were, and marvelled as they developed a life of their own in chemical trays. I pegged many of them on the drying-line myself and often had a hand in the framing before they took up residency on the walls of our home.



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Night shot of fire (malicious) at the business premises of Hugh J. O'Boyle, building contractor, Downpatrick.

Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

Steafán may not be a photographer, but his poetry reveals a cinematic eye and an easy way with metaphor and imagery. The poem "All Key-Holders Attend...(The Devil's in the Retail), compares a malicious fire to a business premises in Downpatrick in the early seventies to the sinking of the Titanic, which was built at the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast:

No sound needed to hear this one:

Hugh J. O' Boyle's hardware store is roaring
like a Titanic furnace, going up,
just like t 'other went down.
Both would only shine bright once,
and the very thing that did for the ship
was exactly what these firemen could have done with
on this night to remember.

A photograph of a diminutive woman, Sara Primrose, posing with an RUC neighbourhood-watch patrol from the Clogher station in Co. Tyrone, is arresting enough (no pun intended), but Steafán adds additional historical resonance to this image in the first stanza of his sonnet “Gotcha!” which accompanies this photo: “If not for the smiles, it could be the Famine: / Headline: ‘Defaulter caught mid-eviction.’”



RUC officers from Clogher station
with Sarah Primrose.

Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photograph Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

Not all the photographs and poems in *Reconstructions* deal directly with the Troubles. The long prose poem “Mongrel Tongue (Between You, Be It!),” was written in response to a 1986 photograph of the poet Seamus Heaney in Bellaghy, Co. Derry, wearing his father’s hat and coat, and holding his father’s stick. In the poem, Steafán addresses the poet with the wisdom of hindsight, in the poet’s life and career up to the point when he posed for this photo and beyond. One of the most poetic entries focuses on a photo of Michael Longley in profile. Titled “Longley’s Lists,” this perceptive poem is quiet in tone, yet imagines the poet as a wanderer through the depth and breadth of Ireland, finding solace in the County Mayo landscape, specifically “his soul-scape / of Carrigskeewaun,” and in “his beloved Belfast.”

Characterizing Steafán’s poems as “Nobly disheveled,” Longley writes that they are “an unrestrained response to the work of his father, the great Irish photographer Bobbie Hanvey.” Longley views such responses as “bold improvisations on [Hanvey’s] themes of conflict and community,”

which “cry out to be read.” McGuckian, who was equally impressed with the volume, draws attention to the importance of the book as a cultural archive in its own right: “This unique and heady blend of documented violence and photographic memory poses timely questions for present social understanding of the way we were.”

At the conclusion of his introduction to *Reconstructions*, Steafán writes that it is his hope that his prose poems do justice to the work of his father. He also writes: “I also hope that in my presentation of each reconstruction that I have afforded the less-fortunate - those who lost their lives, and those who were hurt and are hurting still – their due respect.” As this book demonstrates, bearing witness, even with the passage of time, is difficult. In one of his most chilling prose poem recollections, “Though I Walk in the Valley,” based on a photograph by Hanvey of Detective Chief Inspector Jimmy Nesbitt, who caught the notorious Shankill Butchers, Steafán recalls a night of fear working with an English and Australian media crew in this part of Belfast. It was an anomalous situation for Steafán to find himself in, as he acknowledges in his poem: “I was driving but every bit the passenger,/ the irony being that I’d much more/ in common with the folks of the Shankill.’ His commentary expresses a guarded optimism for the future:

I would like to think we could go some way to fixing that
so that no one has to live in fear of the other: that without fear,
we could learn more about each other.
The first steps are in the knowing.



Seamus Heaney at a turf bog in Bellaghy

Photograph courtesy of the Bobbie Hanvey Photographic Archives, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

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With this timely and thought-provoking book, Steafán and Bobbie Hanvey have contributed a work that hopefully will assist the community in Northern Ireland and those affected who live further afield in “the knowing.”

Reconstructions: The Troubles in Photographs and Words is available to purchase from Merrion Press/Irish Academic Press www.merrionpress.com The Guardian Book Club, Amazon UK, Amazon USA and Amazon Canada. It has also been released as an audio book and is available in this format from Amazon and iTunes.

For more information about this project and Steafán’s other work, visit www.steafanhanvey.com



Bobbie Hanvey and Steafán Hanvey

Photograph copyright Alan Lewis.



Bobbie Hanvey

Photograph courtesy of Sky News.

Essay and interview: “Safer Insane: Reflections on the 2018 Man Booker Prize Winner, *Milkman* by Anna Burns”

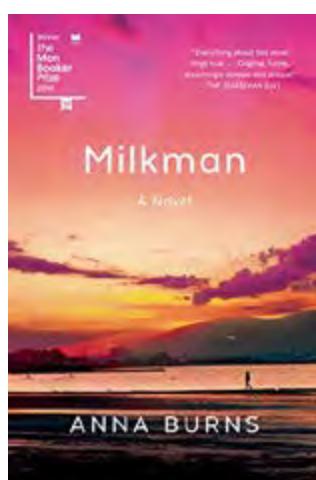
by Malachi O’ Doherty



Anna Burns

Photograph copyright
Malachi O’Doherty

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Milkman
ISBN: 9781644450000

It is madness to be a minority of one. So speculated Orwell, though it may be the sanest position to be in. That’s not how it works in the community described by Anna Burns in *Milkman*. There her main character - unnamed - gets a simple account of what is wrong with her thinking. You may be estranged from a community because you think the community is strange but being right isn’t what counts. If you are on your own you would be mad to stand against everyone else.

It is that ability to survive by fitting in that is valued most in the grotesque, self-centred ghetto described in *Milkman*.

The narrator’s failing as a member of that community is her inclination to observe and think for herself.

At a recent poetry reading in Belfast, Arts Council Literature officer Damian Smyth held up a copy of *Milkman* and proclaimed it the great Troubles novel we have been waiting for and said we will still be talking about it in thirty years.

I am inclined to agree, though I hesitate to push back to second place Deirdre Madden’s *One By One In The Darkness*.

But where Madden’s exploration of the impact of raw violence on family and community is a realistic novel, *Milkman* takes us into a bizarre parallel world of Seventies Belfast through the introspections and observations of a teenage girl. This account of life in a republican community is exaggerated and satirical but this is satire as Kafka and Orwell used the form. There is some of Flann O’Brien in here too.

The horrific truth at the heart of the novel is that when a community is impelled to be united around defence of a political ideology it is stunted in every way.

When it is committed to endorsing political propaganda it loses its imagination.

This is the most cutting critique of paramilitary culture we have had.

In one telling scene, students in a night class argue with a teacher who insists that the sky is not blue, until she demands that they look out the window and describe what they see.

For the first time in their adult lives they observe the complex panoply of colour in a sunset. Our main character had thought she could safely shut herself off, reading novels as she walked about. She interprets the rules of her community yet evinces behaviour which can only have her branded as suspect. She isn’t complying with what others expect of her, and she is supposed to know what is expected without anyone telling her.

I met the author, Anna Burns, shortly after her win in the Faber offices in London next door to the British museum and, for all the literary theory that tells me not to confuse an author with her creation, I couldn't help wondering if she was herself the refugee from a ghetto mentality that the narrator of *Milkman* is later.

First, I have to deal with her wariness of me. She very sharply tells in the in the reception area to save my questions until we get upstairs. Later she scolds me sharply for interrupting her. 'If you want me to answer your question then you should listen to me while I am speaking.'

Does she fear perhaps that I, coming from Belfast, am here to police her thoughts the way her characters police the manners and movements of her character?

When we are sitting down in the boardroom - she takes the hard chair for comfort - she says that she is not sure she has much to say; she does her thinking through her writing. She immediately refuses to have her book assessed as anything but fiction and describes a process of creation that is almost like automatic writing.

She says, "I just write down what I get. I wait for the writing to come. I don't plot it out. I wait till I hear a voice telling me ... Often I am astonished by what turns up."

There is no plot, no plan, no deliberate intention to describe the world she grew up in. 'I am not writing about Ardoyne - It is very important to me to stay true to the world of fiction regardless of what place it might seem to be based on. In this world, the aspect that I am writing about is that insular, constrictive way of living with the spirit bursting through every now and then.'

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She says she doesn't know when she starts a book where her stories are going and only finds out in the writing. She suspects that journalists work in the opposite direction, having the story already written in their heads before they meet her.

'I'll go where the energy is, always. I follow my instinct. I believe in holding my nerve through those bits of intuitiveness where I don't know what is coming after the first step.'

In *Milkman* it is the community which decides who you are and even what kind of life you are living.

Our narrator is being stalked by a manipulative paramilitary - or at least by one who is known as such. She hears gossip around her about the relationship she is presumed to be having with Milkman. Given that what she hears reflected back to her about her own life is wrong, one has to suppose that the community may be wrong about Milkman too.

'Milkman' is the nearest that anyone comes in the book to having a name, and even this one is in doubt. She judges that those who call him 'the milkman' are less well acquainted and that the use of the word as name without an article is an indicator of closer insight into the man and the dangerous milieu in which he moves.

There is 'nearly boyfriend' and 'Somebody McSomebody'. This is the code in which such a cramped community discusses its people and its affairs. In such a world people do not make direct contact with each other, they are never explicit. And yet everyone knows the danger of being even remotely individualistic. There is the backdrop of warring communities and warfare between this community and the state. The paramilitaries are the 'renouncers' and

the ‘defenders’ but this is plainly about Belfast and the republicans and loyalists. And the book is an indictment of the impact of paramilitary culture on a neighbourhood.

Yet, while Anna doesn’t mind if the book is read that way, she insists it wasn’t written to make that point.

As a child in Ardoyne she had been most shocked by tarring and feathering attacks on women who had mixed with soldiers.

‘And then of course kneecapping. I was going to a disco once at the bottom of Etna Drive - We went into the shops, my friends and I, to get sweeties or crisps and I remember this man - obviously he’d got drunk before they’d kneecapped him. They used to let you get drunk first. He was lying just outside the door and to me, the way his legs were, it was as if he had about eight legs.’

She says she coped with violence at the time by not reflecting on it.

‘Of course there were other people who watched every news programme, they had the tv on all the time, they were always talking about the Troubles. It was as if they had maps on the wall moving pins about. And I could see it was their way of coping. Now I can see that. But I used to stay away from them. They were too scary with their intensity about the Troubles.’

She did not get much of an education because she ditched school. Unlike most ditchers she studied alone in derelict buildings, at first from a book on accountancy that she borrowed after persuading a teacher to enrol her in an accountancy O Level.

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Later she took night classes in the College of Business Studies.

She went to English class after work. She had moved to the university area and got occasional work as a copy taker for the Belfast Telegraph and the Irish News.

‘I was always tired and there was a teacher who was boring. And it was very hot and we would doze off. Then one day this teacher strode in - Pat McCann - and he said, what are you all doing? You are all sleeping. This is English!

‘He just woke us all up and he introduced me to literature. After that one class I went home buzzing - I wanted to go to his class. I wanted him to teach me.’

She says, ‘put that in your article. Pat McCann seriously made lightbulbs go off everywhere. He was an amazing teacher. The energy and the love for English. Thank God our teacher was sick that day and he walked into the room.’

Anna went to university in London to study Russian and dropped out to get sober. She had been drinking from an early age and says weaning herself off drink through the Twelve Step programme was the hardest things she has ever done.

‘When I got sober there was this awful grief. How can I be social again and go out for a night? Everything was around drink.

‘But I made some absolutely amazing friends and I could see, OK, this is another way to be in the world. Sober and reflective. It was wonderful. I met lovely honest people.’

It was in England that she started to read about the Troubles and recapture a sense of what she had lived through, blanking out the horror at the time.

'And I started getting my feelings. I would read about something I remembered but which hadn't engaged my feelings at the time. And then I would start to get my feelings. I would be sitting in my room in London having a reaction emotionally to something that happened fifteen or twenty years ago. And that's how it started to get reconnected. I got my felt reality about that experience.'

And having gone through the deferred emotions she was able to write about that time 'on an even keel.'

But she didn't stay with the Twelve Step Programme.

One of the pleasures of the meetings was the new experience of being able to talk without people interrupting or giving advice.

She says, 'I had never had that before in my life.'

But though the Twelve Step programme is spiritually based she says she could 'never get the God stuff.'

'I did find that at the Spiritual Healing because I have always known there is something more than me. I have always felt that.'

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Spiritual Healing is centred at White Eagle Lodge in Hampshire.

'I went there for healing. I just met absolutely lovely people. They are all delighted I have won the Booker and they are jumping up and down. That is where I found more of a connection.' Anna is among people who affirm her now, and from the comfort of that position she has written a book about a perplexing community in which no one allows you to be safe unless you surrender your imagination, and not even then.



Bio: Malachi O'Doherty

Malachi O'Doherty is a journalist and broadcaster who contributes frequently to the Belfast Telegraph and several BBC programmes. He is the author of a recent biography of Gerry Adams, *Gerry Adams: An Unauthorized Life*, published by Faber & Faber in 2017. This was his seventh book, with others including works of memoir, reflections on religion and politics in Ireland and one on cycling, *On My Own Two Wheels* (Blackstaff 2012). In 2013 he was awarded a Ph.D. by Queen's University Belfast and in 2018 he received a Major Artist Award from the Northern Ireland Arts Council.

Photo copyright Paul McErlane.

Spotlight on Paul McVeigh



Photo copyright Roelof Bakker



Hailing from Ardoyne, the same area of north Belfast as Anna Burns, this year's Man Booker winner, author Paul McVeigh began his career as a playwright, director and writer of comedy shows before turning his hand to fiction, first with short stories and more recently with his impressive debut novel, *The Good Son* (Salt Publishing 2015). Critically acclaimed, the novel was shortlisted for the 2015 Guardian 'Not the Booker' Prize and in 2016 it won the Polari First Novel Prize. Other awards include being shortlisted for the Authors' Club Best First Novel Award 2016 and selected as a finalist for The People's Book Prize 2016. *The Good Son* was also voted Best of Year 2015 in *Elle Magazine*, *The Irish Independent*, *Wales Arts Review*, and the novel was chosen for World Book Night 2017.

Set in Belfast at the height of the Troubles in the late 1970s and early 1980s, *The Good Son* chronicles with black humor the plight of its ten-year-old working-class protagonist, Mickey Donnelly. Political and familial turbulence intersect and collide in a story that is by turns darkly funny and heartbreakingly sad. As the introduction to the novel tells us, Mickey is smart, which isn't a good thing in his part of town. Despite having a dog caller "Killer," and being in love with the girl next door, everyone calls him "gay." It doesn't help that his best friend is his little sister, Wee Maggie, and that everyone knows he loves his Ma more than anything in the world. Mickey doesn't think much of his older brother Paddy, nor does he care for his Da. In his efforts to protect his mother from herself, Mickey upends what it means to be a "good son."

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In Mickey, McVeigh creates a character who has been described by critics as "the funniest, most endearing human being," and a "superb creation," whose thoughts and feelings bubble onto the page "in an immaculately-rendered voice, droll, cheeky and authentic." Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Olen Butler has also offered high praise for McVeigh and his spirited character:

Paul McVeigh brilliantly achieves a very difficult thing: he turns a coming-of-age tale into high art. Mickey Donnelly navigates The Troubles like Huck Finn navigates the Mississippi river letting us see the human condition through penetringly fresh eyes.

In an interview with James Meredith for *The Honest Ulsterman*, McVeigh explained why he chose to explore the Troubles from the perspective of a child, a child who remarks in the first sentence of the novel, "I was born the day the Troubles started":

I felt it was important. I wanted to tell the story completely from a child's perspective. I started with this line because I wanted to say right from the beginning – this child knows nothing but the Troubles. He lives in fear. He is never safe.

But like any child growing up in a war zone he accepts this as normal (to an extent). The effects of the Troubles echo through to this day and not all of the behaviour has gone. It can help younger generations understand their parents and why they act the way they do.

And I believe it affects them too. It cannot be a coincidence that we have the highest rate of teenage suicide in Europe, years after the Troubles ended.

McVeigh's short stories have been published in national papers, literary journals and anthologies, as well as read on BBC Radio. He is the co-founder of the London Short Story Festival and Associate Director of Word Factory. He is currently editing with Lisa Frank an anthology of short stories set in Belfast, *Belfast Stories*, (Doire Press, June 2019). He also has short stories forthcoming in the anthologies, *Being Various: New Irish Short Stories*, edited by Lucy Caldwell (Faber & Faber 2019), and *Common People: An Anthology of Working-Class Writers*, edited by Kit de Waal (May 2019).

For more information on McVeigh and his work visit <http://paulmcveighwriter.com> or his blog site, <http://paulmcveigh.blogspot.co.uk/>

Review: *Cúchulainn, Ulster's Greatest Hero* by Réamonn Ó Ciaráin

by Byddi Lee



Cúchulainn: Ulster's Greatest Hero
by Réamonn Ó Ciaráin
ISBN:978-1-904174-04-2

Ó Ciaráin's *Cúchulainn, Ulster's Greatest Hero* conveys the dazzling stories of a splendid hero from ancient Irish lore with vigour and elegance. Réamonn Ó Ciaráin is a writer rigorous in his attention to detail, balanced with compassion for his subject. He moves the reader effortlessly along on a journey, spinning stories rich in mythology and weaves them through the account of Cúchulainn's life in seamless accord.

Illustrated with paintings by Dara Vallely, the physical book is magnificent to behold. The robust imagery engages our innermost tribal essence, freeing our minds-eye and transporting us to an ethereal plane. Fantasy melds with lucid narrative as together Ó Ciaráin and Vallely depict the mystical conception, life and death of our hero in this vivid meeting of worlds.

Based on the modern Ulster Irish language version, *Laoch na Laochra* also by Ó Ciaráin, the writing in this text retains the authentic flavour of locale by using the Irish place names. An effective appendix helps the reader keep track of people and places in the story. A resource that is particularly useful and engaging due to the pronunciation guidelines, and not being proficient in the Irish language, I welcome its gentle nudge towards my education in my native tongue.

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The translation doesn't feel forced. The words flow with ease and grace retaining the essence of storytelling from a bygone era in stunning and dramatic expression that refuses to skirt around the violence of battle.

Even with the ethereal quality brought in by the otherworldly characters, there is a sense of historical accuracy. We can appreciate how Iron Age people must have relied on their belief in the supernatural in the absence of scientific fact to explain the wonders of their world. The embellishments and exaggerations over time and numerous recounting of the tales, add to the wonder and mystique of the legends they have become.

This account begins with Cúchulainn's conception. The Celtic god of harvest claims his paternity in a dream to Cúchulainn's mother.

When the child, originally named Séadanda, is born, he is deemed special, as prophesied by the chief Druid. Séadanda receives special education and training as he grows up in Dundalk. He grows up listening to tales of the great warriors of Ulster and yearns to be one so much so that he takes off on foot by himself and heads to Eamhain Mhacha (Navan Fort) in Armagh to join his heroes, the Craobh Rua warriors, based there.

The young warrior, Séadanda earns a new name when he, in self-defence kills the hound belonging to Culann, the master smith and weapons maker for the Craobh Rua. Séadanda promises to act as Culann's hound until a replacement can be found and thus becomes Cúchulainn – the Hound of Culann – often referred to as the Hound of Ulster.

Ó Ciaráin spends a lot of time chronicling the feats and achievements of the young warrior. Once Cúchulainn is gripped by an 'anger-frenzy' no man is safe, sometimes not even Cúch-

ulainn himself such is the energy of the great powers he unleashes during these frenzies. On many occasions, *Cúchulainn has encounters with spirits from the ‘other world’ who serve to both guide him and torment him depending on if they are friend or foe.*

We meet the beautiful Eimhear, the great love of Cúchulainn’s life. Her father convinces The King of Ulster to send Cúchulainn to Scotland for battle training, hoping the young man never returns to claim his daughter’s hand.

While in Scotland, *Cúchulainn meets Aoife* in single combat. He gets the upper hand and she pleads for her life whereupon Cúchulainn makes three demands upon her, one of which is that she bear him a son to be schooled at Eamhain Mhacha like his father. Later in the text, our hearts break for Cúchulainn as he is forced to face his own son in combat.

Having survived his rigorous training in Scotland, Cúchulainn returns for his beloved Eimhear’s hand in marriage. Their marriage has its trials, as one might imagine in Iron Age times with its battles not to mention the spirits meddling from the underworld, but Eimhear and Cúchulainn’s love lasts to the grave.

We are immersed in the stories of Cúchulainn as he interacts with the many characters in Eamhain Mhacha. There’s Bricre whose aim in life appears to be stirring up discord and mayhem; a dangerous game with these Ulster warriors who are prone to descend into anger frenzies. There are entertaining descriptions of not just the warrior’s competition for prime position among themselves but also the rivalry between their wives for prestige.

A large portion of the book details The Cattle Raid of Cooley. When Méabh, the Queen of Connaught craves more power, she decides to invade Ulster and take possession of the prize bull of Cooley. Cúchulainn must defend Ulster on his own due to his fellow warriors being laid low by a curse. Attack after attack, *Cúchulainn prevails but each time at great emotional and physical cost to him.* Eventually, he must fight his best friend, Firdia. Réamonn Ó Ciaráin remains true to his narrative style while evoking a strong emotional response in the reader as he depicts Cúchulainn carrying Firdia’s body, dead by Cúchulainn’s own hand.

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By the time we get to the final part of the book, entitled *The Death of Cúchulainn*, we know we must prepare ourselves to say goodbye to our hero. It is an emotive section, even with Ó Ciaráin’s consistent use of a narrative style that serves to document story more than manipulate sentiment. Suffice it to say, I had to blink back tears as I read the Hound’s last words, “... Tell Eimhear that it was her who was in my thoughts at the end.”

We grieve with Eimhear as she laments over the grave of her beloved Cúchulainn.

No review of this book would be complete without mentioning the role women play in this chronicle. Ó Ciaráin gives equal weight with consideration and sensitivity to the prominence of powerful and influential women such as Eimhear, Queen Méabh, Aoife and her nemesis Scáthach who trained Cúchulainn in his battle skills in Scotland – yes, that was a woman.

In sections of the book, indented passages indicate poetry which I suspect Ó Ciaráin has preserved in its original or as near to original form as possible. Being no expert in poetry, ancient or otherwise, I feel unqualified commenting other than to say that it lends the narrative a definitive heft of authenticity, which, even though the words are English, whispers with the music of the Irish Language.

Reading this type of literature was a new experience for me. Its novelty served to enlighten and excite my imagination. I wholeheartedly value its vibrant legacy. I picture these characters existing here, in this place I call home. It reinforces my sense of living in a historically important place. No drive to Dublin will ever be the same again. As I view the stretch of road between Armagh and Dundalk or *Muirtheimhne* with eyes educated by this text, I think of the battles that took place here and the bloodshed sparked by a bull that symbolized more than just a bull. And above all, I tunnel back through time to imagine Séadanda as a young boy striking out across these fields and mountains towards his epic destiny at Eamhain Mhacha (Navan Fort, Armagh).



Bio: Byddi Lee

Byddi Lee grew up in Armagh and moved to Belfast to study at Queen's University. She has since lived in South Africa, Canada, California and Paris before returning to live in her hometown, Armagh. She has published flash fiction, short stories and self-published her novel, *March to November* in 2014. Byddi also writes a blog about life, both at home and abroad called, "We didn't come here for the grass." She runs Flash Fiction Armagh and volunteers as a board member for the John O Connor Writing School in Armagh. She currently is writing a trilogy set in a near future Ireland.

Spotlight on the Patrick Kavanagh Center



Patrick Kavanagh

Rural & Literary Resource Centre

FAILTE • WILKOMMEN • BIENVENIDO • BIENVENUE

Welcome to Kavanagh Country

Nestling among Monaghan's intimate rolling hills, the drumlin parish of Inniskeen has been among other things an inspiration for legends, a haven for highwaymen, a home to poets and remains largely unchanged from the turn-of-the-century landscape which so inspired Patrick Kavanagh, one of Ireland's foremost literary figures.

Born in 1904 into a poor farming family, Kavanagh was destined to become another small subsistence farmer, scraping a living from the poor soil and stony hills of his sixteen-acre farm. But fate intervened: "I dabbled in verse and it became my life". Working on the land, witnessing daily the miracle of creation, Kavanagh began to write of his experiences and became 'the authentic voice of the Irish country poor'. "There is nothing as dead and damned as an important thing", he wrote, only the "bits and pieces of everyday" can achieve immortality. And since his death in 1967, the growing popularity of his work among diverse cultures and age groups has proven the eternity of Kavanagh's magic-fringed everyday world.

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Inniskeen

Founded as an island monastery (Inis Caoin - the Pleasant Island) by St. Daig in the 6th Century, Inniskeen has preserved an old world charm. The 10th Century Round Tower, the 12th Century Norman look-out post, the 19th Century railway station, along with many fine stone buildings are a vivid reminder of the many generations who made Inniskeen their home and thus have become an eternal part of the South Monaghan landscape. Their story is told in the Patrick Kavanagh Rural & Literary Resource Centre.

The Patrick Kavanagh Rural & Literary Resource Centre

Drama unfolds in the fictional village of Dargan in Kavanagh's classic novel, "Tarry Flynn". The old Parish Church frequented by Kavanagh and a prime source of material for his writings, is now home to the Patrick Kavanagh Rural & Literary Resource Centre. The Centre houses exhibitions on local history and on Kavanagh, a sixty-seat Audio-Visual Theatre and a Research Library. Also on view are twelve specially commissioned paintings illustrating Kavanagh's epic poem "The Great Hunger", a miniature model depicting Kavanagh's classic, "A Christmas Childhood", Kavanagh's Death Mask and other memorabilia associated with the poet.



"Hypocrites, humdrags', the priest went on, coming here Sunday after Sunday - blindfolding the devil in the dark as the saying goes. And the headquarters of all this rascality is a townland called Drummay. The congregation smiled. Tarry Flynn stooped his head and smiled too, although he was a native of that terrible townland. The calf-dealer at the door cocked his ear more acutely; he too, was interested in his townland and pleased when its evil deeds got the air."



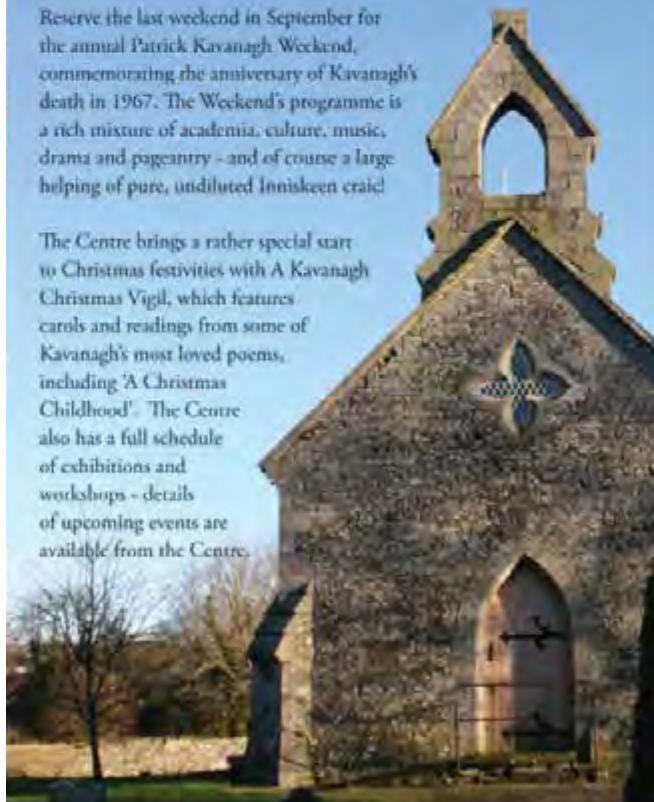
"The sunlight through the coloured windows played on their congregation but could not smooth parchment faces and wrinkled necks to polished ivory. Skin was the colour of clay, and clay was in their hair and clothes. The little village fields went to Mats."

A special feature of the Patrick Kavanagh Centre is our unique performance tour of Kavanagh Country, which takes in many local sites immortalised by Inniskeen's most famous son, with anecdotes, historical facts, wild rumours and even the odd poem along the way. The tour rounds off back at the Centre. Advance booking is essential to avoid disappointment.

As part of The Gathering 2013, The Patrick Kavanagh Centre will host a brand new festival "Inniskeen Roads: July Evening Festival" (2th – 14th July 2013). The festival will feature re-enactments and recitals by actors in period costume, visitors are encouraged to take part.

Reserve the last weekend in September for the annual Patrick Kavanagh Weekend, commemorating the anniversary of Kavanagh's death in 1967. The Weekend's programme is a rich mixture of academia, culture, music, drama and pageantry - and of course a large helping of pure, undiluted Inniskeen craic!

The Centre brings a rather special start to Christmas festivities with A Kavanagh Christmas Vigil, which features carols and readings from some of Kavanagh's most loved poems, including 'A Christmas Childhood'. The Centre also has a full schedule of exhibitions and workshops - details of upcoming events are available from the Centre.



Schools Programme

The Kavanagh Centre organises tours, worksheets and notes for Primary and Second Level students. Pre-visit material is available for all age levels, incorporating topics such as history, topography, folklore and legends as well as Kavanagh's life and work, hence a day out in Inniskeen is of benefit to a wide range of disciplines. The Centre specialises in preparing exam students for questions on Kavanagh. Our 'Kavanagh Notes for Leaving Cert.' are currently available by mail order from our Centre. For tours, advance booking essential. Also available in the library is a unique selection of Books of local and national interest.

Admission:

Under Schools Programme Charges: Primary Students in groups €3 each, Junior Students in groups €7 each. Leaving Certificate Students €7 each, including L.C. Preparatory notes.
For tours advance booking is essential.

The Patrick Kavanagh Centre is owned and run by the community of Inniskeen. The project was developed with financial assistance from FAS, The International Fund for Ireland, Monaghan County Enterprise Fund and INTERREG.

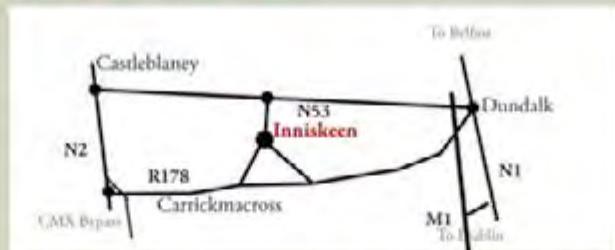
Winner 1994 Lakelands O'Neill Enterprise Award
Winner 1994 1994 FAS Community Initiative Regional Award
Winner 1994 National Access for the Disabled Award

The Patrick Kavanagh Centre and the village of Inniskeen are 100% wheelchair accessible.

Photography acknowledgements: Godfrey Graham & Claire Cunningham. Cover image: John Skelton.



How To Get There



From Carrickmacross (11km) Take Dundalk Road. Turn left at Kelly's Pub

From Castleblaney (19km) Take Dundalk Road through Culloville. Turn right and follow signposts for Kavanagh Country

From Dundalk (11km) Take Carrickmacross Road R178. Turn right at The Rock Inn pub.

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Open:

From mid January to 31st May

Weekdays: Tuesday to Friday 11am to 4.30pm
Closed Saturday, Sunday & Monday

From 1st June to 30th September

Weekdays: Tuesday to Friday 11am to 4.30pm, closed on Monday
Saturday by prior appointment with the Centre
Sunday from 3pm to 5.30pm

The Patrick Kavanagh Centre, Inniskeen, Co Monaghan, Ireland
Tel: 00353 (0)42 937 8560 Fax: 00353 (0)42 937 8855
Email: info@pkc@elrc.com.net Web: www.patriotkavanaghcountry.com

Essay: “Patrick Kavanagh: Poet of the Earth: An Introduction”

by Una Agnew



The Mystical Imagination of **PATRICK KAVANAGH** A Buttonhole in Heaven?

UNA AGNEW

Patrick Kavanagh 1904-1967 is counted among Ireland’s finest poets. His poetry reflects the soul of a people rooted in Irish soil and imbued with a spirituality that stems from centuries of Christian heritage. Many of his poems instil reverence, not only for the created universe but also for the gift of life itself, qualities that make his work especially relevant today. For myself, born and reared in north County Louth, within sight of Slieve Gullion, and sharing the poet’s landscape, I find a personal affinity with his commitment to the beauty of ordinary things, his delight in authentic experience, and his overwhelming sense of God’s presence playing over the surface of the land.

Kavanagh’s grounded philosophy, his criticism of the status quo, his lyrical ability to express the magic of ordinary daily life are characteristics that render him popular as an Irish poet. Yet, followers from around the world have also found an affinity with his celebration of all growing things, his mischievous sense of humour, his attention to the commonplace, and his remarkable insight into the human condition. He confirms his own prediction that ‘...*posterity has no use / For anything but the soul*’.¹ Despite his dishevelled appearance, and disconcerting behaviour at times, he finds easy access to the soul-dimension of life. This endows his work an enduring quality. His claim for immortality as a writer may appear over-confident yet, when his complete work is examined, his attention to matters of the soul becomes clear. His understanding of God is an evolving reality in his work which calls for an innate lyrical ability to uncover mystery in the mundane. His poetic technique is achieved by filtering the simple events of daily life through the lens of his mystical imagination.²

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It was the publication of *Collected Poems* in 1964³, which created an important literary landmark for Kavanagh, since it made widely available for the first time⁴, a significant spread of the poet’s work that spans his life-journey from his roots in Monaghan to Dublin’s Grand Canal. But even when he was being lauded for his work, he was reluctant to accept graciously any accolade for his achievement. When caught in the limelight, he relapsed into his less congenial *persona* and responding to questions in a manner that guaranteed him further marginalization by his critics.⁵

One interview, more successful than most, was that of South African poet and broadcaster Peter Duval Smith,⁶ where Kavanagh spoke freely of his life as a poet. It was particularly revealing of ‘the autobiographical nature’ of his work. The portrait that emerged was that

of a writer who, over a lifetime, had struggled with poverty, with the pain of being different and with trying to understand his role and mission as a poet. Kavanagh's anger and biting criticism of the political and religious society of his time was evidenced in his satirical writings⁷ and deemed justifiable in the light of the oppressive society in which he had lived. His interviewer saw emerging in the poet's work, the character of a man who wrote as a means of managing his life. Kavanagh admitted to a sense of failure in his mission to poetry, due to his severe inferiority complex, a factor that spurred him on even more. Writing for him was therapeutic, though he admits he never understood why he had written certain poems at specific times. He preferred to be engrossed in the present moment, in 'the little things of everyday', and 'what he might write tomorrow'.

The reader therefore, who engages with his work, sees the unfolding of his life and thought processes in the sequence of his poems and writings. These record his life more truly than the anecdotal material often passed on as his life-story. Their sequence traces a spiritual pathway through his life and become the tools he uses to converse in depth with the ups and downs of his life as they unfold

Is he a particularly *Irish* poet then? His interviewer asks. Kavanagh demurs at this suggestion. It is a label he dislikes. He believes that nationality had little to do with real poetry and those who, in the past, strove to see Ireland as a spiritual entity, were wrong.⁸ He is convinced that 'the spiritual adrenalin which the poet produces, is not to be found within nationalistic formulae'.⁹ The main work of the poet, he believes is to serve 'the spark of divine intelligence in his poetry and render 'the final fusion of all crudeness into a pure flame.'¹⁰ There is undoubtedly, a mystical thread running through his work.

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Verse he believes, is 'the best medium for releasing the private self, the heart's cry since it can give nobility to intimacy'.¹¹ Citing Coleridge and Blake he is convinced that what is most personal in poetry, 'the passionate cry' is also most universal and that in healing himself through his poetry he is, in a sense, healing many people.¹² The challenge for anyone who engages seriously with the life of the poet Patrick Kavanagh demands a close attention to the poet's own words, to his 'heart's cry' as priority, in order to ensure the integrity of the profile. As a woman I am encouraged by the poet's intuition about himself that he was often best understood by women:

While men the poet's tragic light resented,
The spirit that is Woman caressed his soul.

Kavanagh's Life in Three Stages¹³

Kavanagh's life, then, can be seen in *three* parts: his beginnings as a twenty-year-old poet farmer in love with his drumlin homeland and 'childhood country'.¹⁴ This first stage portrays him as a learner poet that yields his first published collection: *Ploughman and Other Poems* in 1936.¹⁵ Despite the mixed success of his early autobiography *The Green Fool* (1938),¹⁶ he leaves Inniskeen in 1939, albeit reluctantly, to become a full-time writer in Dublin. His second stage as an exile in Dublin sees him battle with poverty and struggle for acceptance among the Dublin literati. His backward glance at his childhood country gives voice to nostalgic reminiscences that only poetry can express. Intent of his mission to poetry, he publishes, *The Great Hunger*, a critique of rural society of his time and one of his most important works.

The early 1950s brings about a turning point in Kavanagh's life, where his inner life becomes more clearly focused. This third stage of his life as a writer sees him struggle through pain and failure to realise the ultimate poetic harvest of his life. His 'dark night' of failure, humiliation and illness, prepare him to re-emerge as a poet of poise and eloquence, reborn to celebrate life anew in 1955 on the banks of the Grand Canal in Dublin. His Canal bank poems are among his most enduring. Though never fully tranquil in his demeanour, a certain measure of calm and repose surround his final years until his death in 1967. He is buried in his native Inniskeen.

Stage One: Patrick Kavanagh, Poet and Farmer: His doorway to life.¹⁷

Patrick Kavanagh was born in 1904 in the townland of Mucker in the parish of Inniskeen. His father James was a shoemaker by trade, born into the Callan household, love-child of Nancy daughter of the household. The Callans had lost their land, through inability to pay rent during the nineteenth century agrarian disputes in Ireland. Learning the trade of cobbler or shoemaker was the only option for James to support his household. James' natural father, Patrick Kevany,¹⁸ was a teacher and agriculturalist, son of a farming family in Easkey, Co Sligo, educated at the Royal Albert Agricultural College in Dublin, and appointed to teach at the local Kednaminsha National School in 1850. The local landlord of the Bath Estate, Tristram Kennedy, had spotted the talented agriculturalist at the College in Glasnevin and secured his services as teacher in one of the newly built schools on his estate. In post-famine Ireland, it was important that agriculture science be part of the regular school curriculum. Kevany was an excellent asset to the Inniskeen area and gained confidence there as a teacher. He fell in love with the local widow, Nancy Callan but their love story ended tragically when he was reported by the then landlord Steuart Trench, for cohabiting with a woman out of wedlock. He was forthwith banished from the school and subsequently left the area, never to return. Nancy Callan was left to rear her son, James Cavanagh alone. Kevany had been willing to give his name to the child but at baptism it was altered to Cavanagh/Kavanagh, the result, it appears, of a clerical error.

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Despite the stigma surrounding the circumstances of his birth, and his mother Nancy's shame at being blamed for the banishment of a gifted teacher, James Kavanagh grew up to be a skilled and respected householder, dedicated to the care of his mother until her death in 1896. The following year, 1897, he married Brigid Quinn, a farmer's daughter from nearby Tullyrain, County Louth, and together they reared a large family, ten children in all. Patrick was the fourth child and first son in a family of seven girls and two boys. A further son James Colmcille died at birth.

The Kavanaghs worked hard to improve their livelihood and provide for their large family. Their dream was to own a farm of their own. This dream was realized in 1926 when a small farm in the nearby townland of Shancoduff became available for sale. It was purchased forthwith by Mrs Kavanagh. Though the farm was north-facing and poorly drained, as its name *Shancoduff* indicates,¹⁹ nevertheless, it was a proud acquisition and a life-changing event for the family. By this time, Patrick was twenty-two and already working as part-time shoemaker with his father and part-time local farm-labourer in the neighbourhood. Encouraged by his father, he continued his interest in writing, publishing verse occasionally in the *Dundalk Democrat*.²⁰ His mother, however, was eager that he become a farmer, on equal footing with his neighbours. So, Patrick joined in the family excitement of acquiring land which would reinstate the Kavanaghs as County Monaghan small farmers. Initially he revelled in the poetry of fields, hedges and the fertility of the soil. Inwardly, however, his heart was in writing.

The experience of owning his own fields served to heighten his lyrical affinity with all growing things and with the unfolding seasons on the land. Despite his best efforts, he preferred to write about his fields rather than farm them for profit. The sonnet ‘Shancoduff’ shows he has taken his identity as a farmer and ownership of his land to heart, despite the impoverished quality of the soil. These black hills were his own. Shancoduff would be stamped with the Kavanagh identity on the Monaghan landscape forever. In a few years he would become the self-styled ‘Green Fool’ conversing with the fields, as he walked apart, musing on his calling to be a poet of ‘drumlin hills’. Contemplating his landscape, he loved the juxtaposition of the sublime with the ordinary: these little hills were his Alps, their poor watery hollows hoarded ‘the bright shillings of March’. He was a poet of land ‘*that the water hen and snipe must have forsaken*’ yet this was ‘*love’s doorway to life*’. Whitethorn hedges, primrose banks, stones, weeds, streams... all became part of his lover’s repertoire in verse. ‘Shancoduff’, is, in many ways a signature poem which shows how a poet falls in love with a field and makes it his life.

It was expected, therefore, that Kavanagh would combine his initiation into farming life with his early attempts at verse. In his autobiography *The Green Fool*, he recounts how his on-going education was taking place in the fields during his daily round of farm work.

Poet and farmer shared this apprenticeship. From the tops of the drumlins he dreams over the landscape of Slieve Gullion, South Armagh, eastwards towards Dundalk and the sea at Annagassan. He brings schoolbooks in his pocket to the fields and to satisfy his hunger for reading, hides snatches of his favourite authors in the ditches or under the rafters of an outhouse to hide them from his mother who distrusted his day dreaming ways. Shancoduff became his outdoor study. He would climb his drumlin fields, sit on a ditch under the big Forth of Rocksavage and, to quote his brother Peter, ‘let nature do the farming’! In *The Green Fool* he illustrates how this happened:

If anyone goes around those untrimmed hedges today, he will find stuck among the forked branches of the stunted ash-trees the faded leaves of many a highbrow magazine. I stocked every fence with a book or paper of some kind, as I walked around the hedges, bill-hook on my shoulder, I might feel inclined to read a poem or a short story. I knew just where to find what I wanted. The hedges were the shelves of my library.²¹

The poem ‘Innocence’, written several years later (1951), vindicates the poet’s awareness of his early imaginative formation on this humble hill farm.²² He admits to a love-affair with his ‘triangular hill’ which offers ‘*love’s doorway to life*’. In a defensive frame of mind, he recounts how this declaration of love for a hill had incurred the ridicule of others—(from a section of Dublin literati perhaps), who may have disparaged this unremarkable landscape as insufficient subject matter for a serious nature poet. Yet, Kavanagh knows the significance of place, its imaginative legacy and the formative power of homeland along with the pledge of immortality it offers. His early ‘doorway to life’ is rooted forever in his imagination.

Many of his early poems are written in the first person or in thinly disguised alter ego. They reflect the life of a poet engaged in the simple tasks of farming, in love with the variety provided by the seasons: the weeds and flowers, ‘*the rutted cart-tracks*’ and ‘*the light between the ricks of hay and straw*.’ Metaphors of earth and clay, growth and fertility, begin to permeate his work. So too does his faith in God. Kavanagh’s Catholic faith derived from family, school and parish had a compelling influence on his life. With limited theological assistance, he struggled to understand and evaluate the religious mindset he inherited. Painstakingly he questions the very tenets of his faith. Gradually, he distils his own sense of God and God’s place in his life and in the universe.

'To the Man After the Harrow' is a conversation with himself which captures the subtleties of his early struggle to combine poetry with farming. He is learning much from his farming skills, from leaving '*the check-reins slack*' and letting '*the harrow play*'. Though this poem remained unpublished until 1940, it sheds light on the prophetic nature of the poet's work. The farmer (the poet) talks to himself as he embarks on the task of spring sowing. A strong biblical resonance is evoked by likening the seed to the word of God, and the poet its newly ordained minister. Indeed, the priesthood of the poet was never far from Kavanagh's thoughts. We hear the fledgling poet daring to embark on an obscure destiny, enduring the harrowing disapproval of onlookers who are quick to dismiss poetry as a waste of time, and loss of attention towards his newly acquired farm. Yet, Kavanagh seems to know that his early exploration into soil, as into verse, forecasts the beginning of a new creation? '*For you are driving your horses through/ The mist where Genesis begins.*

Something new *was*, indeed, coming to life. The poem 'Kerr's Ass'²³ confirms the significance of early events that contributed to the awakening of his poetic imagination and left him with a lasting source of inspiration. An early family incident recalls borrowing a neighbour's donkey to bring butter to Dundalk market. The event may seem at first, casual, even banal; yet years later, as an exile in London in 1950, the poet recaptures the significance of this early incident in all its innocent clear-sightedness. He sees into its essence: a moment pregnant with imaginative energy. Now in London, he ritually names and re-members the familiar items of animal harness: '*the winkers, the choke-band, the collar and the reins*'... a formula that brings his childhood world to life again, his birthing as a poet '*And the god of imagination waking/In a Mucker fog.*

Similarly, memories from school-days recall something of his early self-discovery as a poet. 'If roots I had', he acknowledges, '*they were in the schoolbooks*'.²⁴ One of his first conscious moments of enchantment in the hall of literature is captured in *The Green Fool*. This moment of enlightenment occurs in the modest two-teacher National School at Kednaminsha, during a reading lesson, while he was a pupil in 5th class.²⁵ In *The Green Fool* he recalls the impact of a few lines of a poem by James Clarence Mangan and how they affected him.²⁶ It was a normal day at school but on this occasion Miss Cassidy, the teacher was in bad humour. There was silence in the classroom when a girl's voice came through from next door.

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From the classroom on our left a girl's voice came through to us. She was reading a poem.

*I walked entranced
Through a land of morn,
The sun with wondrous excess of light
Shone down and glanced
O'er fields of corn
And lustrous gardens aleft and right.
Even in the clime
Of resplendent Spain
Beams no such sun upon a land
But 'twas the time
We were in the reign
Of Cahal Mór of the Wine Red Hand.*

Listening to Mangan's poem I was rapt to that golden time in which poets are born. I felt as though I were in the presence of a magician, and I was; there was witchery in some of Mangan's poetry, it wasn't normal verse. Mangan's poem as read by that girl awoke in me for the first time those feelings that are beyond the reach of reason.

Unimpressed eventually by conventional education, Patrick left school a few months before his fourteenth birthday, he was not promoted into Sixth Class.²⁷ On leaving school, he joined his father at the cobbler's bench, yet continued to be self-educated. His father, though modest in his literary tastes, was a keen reader of newspapers. He believed in his son's aspirations to be a writer but feared he was too thin-skinned to compete in this difficult way of life. Patrick foraged for whatever reading material he could find and published verse occasionally in the *Dundalk Democrat*. Almost by accident, one day as he searched in a Dundalk news agency for a newspaper for his father, he discovered the *Irish Statesman* and encountered for the first time an appreciative editor, George Russell (AE), who appreciated Kavanagh's talent and published some of his poems.

It was Kavanagh's visionary trait in dealing with his everyday life as a farmer that attracted the attention of AE. Insight into the transformative power of the plough comes to light in an early poem 'Ploughman'. Though the farm was intended to give him respectability, identity and economic security as a Monaghan farmer, he discovers instead his calling to become 'poet of the plough.' 'Piers Plowman' he will later call himself in his 'City Commentary' in Dublin in the 1940s.²⁸ He is indeed the artist who 'paint[s] the meadow brown' with his plough. But it is the final lines of this poem disclosing Kavanagh's intuitive discovery of '*a star-lovely art/ In a dark sod*' that convinces Georges Russell (AE) that his protégé will one day find his place in the gallery of acclaimed Irish poets.

In the wake of his father's death in 1929, Patrick becomes the nominated 'Head of the Household' in his home at Mucker. Still eager for her son to be a successful farmer, Mrs Kavanagh allocates the little room over the kitchen as her son's bedroom and writing-den; his self-styled Parnassus room. It was small, unheated, unlit except by candlelight. It is here he retreats each evening after his day's work on the farm, to read and work on his poems. Describing his 10 by 12 attic room, Kavanagh is more likely to find inspiration through the little window of his cramped space than in the cluttered of the religious pictures that deck the walls. 'My room' he admits, '*is a dusty attic/But its little window/Lets in the stars*'²⁹

While pursuing his normal farming tasks, Patrick continues to write, spurred on still by his strange desire to become a writer. Writing materials were scarce. He often wrote on the back of a cigarette package or with the butt of a pencil on an old accounts-ledger, leftovers from his father's shoemaking days. Ensconced in his little room above the kitchen and using the table of an old Stowe sewing machine as writing desk, he kept his favourite cuttings from the *Dundalk Democrat*, *Ireland's Own* and *the Messenger*. In addition, there were a few school books which formed the extent of his early library. Later he managed to acquire a few classics which he read and re-read: *Moby-Dick*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Idiot*, *Traits and Stories of the Irish Peasantry*.

Gradually, he believes that the irregular drumlin landscape of County Monaghan, is imprinting itself bizarrely on his psyche. Kavanagh's evolving self-portrait as a writer expands as he writes. He sees himself as a thinker, given to solitary rumination as he walks the fields alone, lost in contemplation. To the spirit of Joan Russell, a Dublin girl who died young (possibly of tuberculosis) and whose life had touched him, he outlines his plight and asks her to pray for him '*who walked apart/ On the hills/ Loving life's miracles.*'³⁰ Already we see a predisposition for solitary contemplation and a poignant sense of being different.

Learning to become ‘airborne’

In the course of his early writing, Kavanagh sought to free himself from the kind of negative thinking that propelled him, on occasion, into ‘*the dark places of soul*.’ His poem ‘To a Child’ (1931), offers an insight into a tendency towards introspective thinking that threatens to erode his self-confidence and plunge him further into darkness. Plagued by over sensitivity and feelings of inferiority, (his ‘*lean grey wolves*’ of paranoia and guilt), he discovers a healing technique, an ability to become ‘*airborne*’. The lines that first achieve this are many years later acknowledged in his 1964 *Self-Portrait*,³¹ as a landmark poem that gives him his first sensation of ‘*weightlessness*’, which could perhaps be translated as transcendence. Here he touches a nerve of creative redemption. Having followed the child on a downward spiral, he changes course and embarks on an upward movement: ‘*Child, there is a light somewhere/ Under a star./ Sometime it will be for you/ A window that looks/ Inward to God.*’ The window-of-light metaphor, expressed in this poem becomes a trademark of Kavanagh’s ongoing capacity to find chinks and apertures, windows of prayer, in the darker contexts of his life.³² Poetry will be his gateway to transcendence.

In 1939, Kavanagh eventually leaves behind his drumlin hills and whitethorn hedges, though his childhood country, as we shall see, will always be a part of who he is. He has already established himself as a Monaghan poet. He has staked out his poetic landscape with as much care and detail as an ordinance-survey map maker. He has acknowledged the sources of his inspiration in the fields, on the hills, in schoolbooks and in the many features of his childhood country. He has learned enough of the trade of farming to immortalize in poetry its sowing, reaping and harvesting rituals. He will nevertheless, exchange one kind of husbandry to be free, in the word of William Blake, ‘to thresh the sparks of truth from the husks of material words. Like Blake his task, he believes, will involve the threshing of ‘a starry harvest’ as he sets out for Dublin to dedicate himself, full time, to writing.³³

Stage Two: Exile in Dublin and Monaghan Retrospective

When Patrick Kavanagh abandons the family farm to go to live in Dublin in 1939, he does so in the belief that, free from the constraints of farming, he will be free to pursue his writing ambition. He had already experienced life as a full-time writer in London, while completing his autobiography, *The Green Fool*, so the idea was not completely new. He would now, he hoped, have an opportunity to meet with established Irish poets and writers. This dream, he soon learned, was an illusion. Too many writers seeking to eke out a living in the city meant that he was often ignored and excluded as a blow-in peasant poet. Secretly, however, many envied him his lyrical genius already evident in *Ploughman and Other Poems* (1936), as well as in his poems published from time to time in *The Dublin Magazine*.³⁴ He attempted to make his way into journalism, with occasional newspaper articles and film reviews for the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Press* and the *Catholic Standard*, but he survived mostly on the financial support of his brother Peter, who qualified as a National School teacher in 1936 and found employment as a teacher in Westland Row Christian Brothers school, Dublin, in 1939.³⁵

Arriving in Dublin on the eve of the outbreak of war in Europe (1939) and living with his brother, at what is now, No. 51 Upper Drumcondra Road, Patrick was more homesick than he had anticipated. He was also feeling guilty for having left the farm whose acquisition was so highly prized by his parents. Headlines of war in the daily newspapers and the bustle of city life, made him long for the quiet rhythms of his native fields.³⁶

His sonnet ‘Peace’³⁷ reveals something of the nostalgia he feels for his life as a farmer in his homeland of Inniskeen.

And sometimes I am sorry when the grass
Is growing over the stones in quiet hollows
And the cocksfoot leans over the rutted cart-pass,
That I am not the voice of country fellows
Who now are standing by some headland talking
Of turnips and potatoes or young corn
Or turf banks stripped for victory.

The final couplet of this sonnet emits a whimsical sigh of regret, akin to self-mockery at having perhaps, made a foolish mistake: ‘*Out of that childhood country what fools climb/ To fight with tyrants Love and Life and Time?*’ Although the poem is dated 1943, it was not published until 1960.

Equally nostalgic are the idealised memories of home depicted in his poem *The Long Garden*.³⁸ His poet’s imagination focuses on familiar details culled from his earliest memories: the clothes-line in the yard, a neighbour’s orchard, the sound of the Carrick train going by, the village shop, the chapel hill and, in the distance, Drumcatton, the meeting place of lovers. His imagination lingers further over cameos of an Eden world, where apples are golden, the blackbird’s song is mystical, and the earthiest places hold unexpected ‘pockets of God.’

It was the garden of the golden apples,
A long garden between a railway and a road,
In the sow’s rooting where the hen scratches
We dipped our fingers in the pockets of God.

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‘On the stem of memory imagination blossoms.’³⁹ His memory teems with images of home. He hears again the talk of cyclist boasting of their exploits. He recalls every contour of this locality. His poetic landscape is now enshrined in memory and stretches from Inniskeen to Dundalk, north towards Forkhill and Slieve Gullion, into Creggan and Crossmaglen, back by Fetherna Bush and Annavackey on the Armagh Border. Now resident in Dublin, he relives every twist and turn of these country roads as he recaptures memories from the past. One vivid memory was that of carting farmyard dung to his farm at Shancoduff. A local poet, Art McCooey, of an earlier era, is remembered in one of his poems for a similar achievement. These early memories he realises are the building blocks of his poetry, constructed, not in ready-made sonnets, but fashioned from experience, alive and active in ‘the unmeasured womb’ of life. Poems such as Threshing Morning, Spraying the Potatoes.

Kavanagh’s address to the stony grey soil of Monaghan indicates a growing disenchantment with the land and a more assured poetic technique.

O stony grey soil of Monaghan,
The laugh from my love you thieved;
You took the gay child of my passion
And gave me your clod-conceived.

He ends his quarrel by declaring: *O stony grey soil of Monaghan, / You burgled my bank of youth!*⁴¹ But, even now, Kavanagh's dealings with '*the stony grey soil*' is far from over. He had come to Dublin intent on making an epic statement about the enslavement of small Irish farmers by the land that imprisoned them. Young men and women were tied to their small subsistence holdings out of fear, held in a bondage that resulted in relentless drudgery, spiritual famine and sexual frustration.

While it is not possible in this limited space, to give this long poem, *The Great Hunger* the full attention and analysis it deserves; others have done this better in separate works,⁴⁰ it must however be kept in context as a landmark poem in the autobiographical unfolding of the poet's work.

Its composition was something of a *tour de force*. He and his brother Peter were sharing accommodation at 122, Morehampton Road in Dublin⁴¹ in early 1940, when Patrick wrote this ground-breaking poem long-hand in the space of a few weeks. It was as if the poem had already been conceived in his mind and carried alive from Inniskeen to Dublin. All fourteen sections, over 750 lines, depict rural life as 'an apocalypse of clay', devoid of emotional and imaginative fulfilment, leaving its inhabitants spiritually and imaginatively bankrupt. Paddy Maguire, its anti-hero, is the inveterate dreamer whose intimations of a more fulfilled existence fail repeatedly. He is the quintessential lonely bachelor farmer imprisoned by his small farm.

But was *The Great Hunger* not also a personal catharsis for Kavanagh himself?⁴² Did he at one time fear that Paddy Maguire's lot could be his too if he stayed, bound by loyalty to the 'few watery fields' purchased at great personal cost, to ensure the immortality of the Kavanaghs? Often in his masterpiece we catch a glimpse of Kavanagh's sub-text, his asides and occasional commentary on the inexorable fate of Paddy Maguire and this one over-riding question: 'Is there some light of imagination in these wet clods?'

Despite mixed reviews at the time of publication, *The Great Hunger* remains one of Kavanagh's major literary achievements and a powerful social critique of rural Ireland in the 1940s. The figure of Paddy Maguire epitomises the spectre of unlivable life, oppressed by church, state and social norms; a tragic existence that haunted every corner of the land. The publication did not sell well.⁴³ Nevertheless, *The Great Hunger* was considered by one critic several years later as 'the best poem printed in Ireland since Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*'.⁴⁴ Even today, this poem is important because it told the truth and demonstrated clearly why massive emigration from rural Ireland was inevitable.

From Section IX:

Nobody will ever know how much tortured poetry the pulled
weeds on the ridge wrote
Before they withered in the July sun,
Nobody will ever read the wild, sprawling, scrawling mad
woman's signature,
The hysteria and the boredom of the enclosed nun of his thought.
Like the afterbirth of a cow stretched on a branch in the wind,
Life dried in the veins of these women and men:
The grey and grief and unlove,
The bones in the backs of their hands,
And the chapel pressing its low ceiling over them.

With time, Kavanagh disliked the ‘whinge’ of victimhood present in his masterpiece. He continued to search for a more whimsical format, a humorous fiction to accommodate the figure of the impoverished poet farmer, the hapless dreamer and lover, epitomised by the anti-hero figure in the novel *Tarry Flynn*.⁴⁵ It was published eventually in 1948 and in 1964 Kavanagh stated: ‘I am humble enough to claim (it) is not only the best but the only account of life as it was lived in Ireland this century’.⁴⁶

The Love-story of ‘Raglan Road’

Dublin of the 1940s offered Kavanagh new adventures. He had, after all, kicked the traces of farming life and, freed from its constraints, was free to write, consort with writers in the Palace Bar and fancy girls on Grafton Street. There was one woman who caught his attention in a special way with whom he became romantically smitten. She was a medical student, Hilda Moriarty from Dingle, who had lodgings on Raglan Road, in the vicinity of the apartment he shared with his brother at 62 Pembroke Road. Flattered by the open admiration of a poet, Hilda agreed to walk out with him, despite misgivings about his dishevelled appearance and dubious hygiene. The relationship survived for a few months during which time Kavanagh wrote her one of his tenderest love-poems.

‘Bluebells for Love’ was written to commemorate a walk with Hilda in May 1945 among the bluebells on the grounds of Lord Dunsany’s estate in Dunshaughlin.⁴⁷ His opening line: ‘There will be bluebells growing under the big trees’ has an unmistakeable echo of the then popular Vera Lynn love-song: ‘There’ll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover’... His new-found ecstasy, however, is short-lived. Rejected by Hilda, he suffered badly from unrequited love which seemed to plunge him, for a time at least, into a depressed state. Using his pen as therapist, he proceeds to write his famous love-ballad ‘On Raglan Road’, which was therapeutic and at the same time offered an outlet for his creativity.

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The poet’s capacity for self-dialogue, evident in this poem, becomes more pronounced as his life advances. It is as if he must square the unfolding of his life with himself first, and, have reached some sense of meaning, offer his findings to posterity. Laced with a hint of self-mockery, he cautions himself against giving his heart away too easily. Regretting his overinvestment in love, he relegates his ‘*femme fatale*’ that he has loved ‘*too much*’ to the category of ‘*a creature made of clay*’; a clever put-down of the woman whom he allowed break his heart. Though he has loved and lost, Kavanagh is forced to learn from his experience: ‘*When the angel woos the clay, he’d lose his wings at the dawn of day*’. Poetry, he has learned, can still be his ministering angel. He will need its poetic wings to escape many more heartbreaks to come. There lingers a sadness, however, in ‘On Raglan Road’ resulting from having been rejected by the woman he had idolized. Nevertheless, his soul has been sensitised and his sensibility deepened by heartbreak. He seems to emerge with a new insight into what is most important in his life-- poetry.

His Mother’s Death

In the autumn of 1945, Patrick Kavanagh’s mother died rather suddenly. His tribute to her is thoughtful and heart-warming; its appeal universal. She is at once his mother, and at the same time a universal Irish mother with whom all can identify. He sees her as one who has endowed him with his earthy qualities of personhood, yet one whose soul transcends death

and the narrow confines of her grave in Monaghan clay. Her spirit still walks tall ‘among the poplars’ and is present in the round of farming tasks. Her well-remembered words: ‘Don’t forget to see about the cattle’ remain as a poignant memory for a son whose mother knew him so well.

In Memory of My Mother⁴⁸

I do not think of you lying in the wet clay
Of a Monaghan graveyard; I see
You walking down a lane among the poplars
On your way to the station, or happily

Going to second Mass on a summer Sunday –
You meet me, and you say:
‘Don’t forget to see about the cattle -’
Among your earthiest words the angels stray.

‘Pegasus’

Meanwhile, life as an emerging writer in Dublin continues to be fraught with difficulty. During the years 1944 to 1946 Kavanagh fails to find regular employment.⁴⁹ He fears a permanent ‘glut in the market’ which denies him a niche among Dublin writers. This sense of rejection inspires a poem called ‘Pegasus’, often quoted as a true picture of Kavanagh’s struggle for recognition as a writer. It expresses his lonely existence as poet, unwanted by Church and State, and Irish society at large. Wittily, he pictures his poet’s soul as an old horse that fails to sell at country fairs, treated with disdain and derision, his value depreciating by the hour. In the final stanza, the rejected animal sprouts wings, becomes the wingèd Pegasus, free to traverse at will the vast land of the imagination.

‘Soul,’ I prayed,
I have hawked you through the world
Of Church and State and meanest trade.
But this evening, halter off,
Never again will it go on.
On the south side of ditches
There is grazing of the sun.
No more haggling with the world...’

As I said these words, he grew
Wings upon his back. Now I may ride him
Every land my imagination knew.

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Despite failure to find a steady income, Kavanagh soon becomes at least partially reconciled to accepting the trials involved in being a poet and writer in Dublin. He commits himself, for better or worse, to his destiny. Later in 1953 we find him penning a ballad that may appear trivial, yet it constructs an accurate portrait of himself as life in Dublin has shaped him. There is an innocent playfulness in his demeanour towards the little children who play along the railings of Pembroke Road. In the eyes of adults, he is a character, a lonely figure of

amusement, his dishevelled look is part of his trademark appearance that nonetheless shelters a solitary soul. His preoccupation with matters of soul are, he deems, his singular pledge of immortality. Despite his unachieved potential he is uncannily aware that he will *still* be remembered ‘in a hundred years or more’.

He knew that posterity has no use
For anything but the soul,
The lines that speak the passionate heart,
The spirit that lives alone.
O he was a lone one
Fol dol the di do,
Yet he lived happily
I I tell you.

This second phase of Kavanagh’s life has further cemented his name as a writer although he had not yet received the credit he deserves. He now accepts that he is has, to some extent at least, become a feature of Dublin’s literary life as evidenced by his ballad, ‘If ever you go to Dublin town’. But now, well into his forties, Kavanagh begins to engage more and more in the mapping his soul’s journey, thereby offering an alternative autobiography in contrast to anecdotal account of his social waywardness. He is often angry at the hypocrisy he sees in church, state and academic circles and makes bitter satirical forages into outbursts of clever satire.⁵⁰ This is not his best poetry.

Despite outrage, Kavanagh retains within, a dimension of spirit untouched by bitterness and resentment, even in the face of exclusion from certain honours that could have been awarded him by the Irish Cultural Committee or Arts Council of Ireland at the time. Opportunities such as these might have guaranteed him, a stronger national, even international profile, opportunities to travel abroad, with greater guarantee of financial security.⁵¹ Resigned to his fate of partial neglect by those who wielded power, his diary articles in *Envoy* between December 1949 and July 1951 reveal a constant preoccupation with matters of soul and spirit. His ‘inner history’ is given prominence in his poem ‘Auditors In’ (*The Bell*, 1951) which seems to create a turning point in his life and a preparation for the final chapter of his poetic pilgrimage on the banks of the Grand Canal.

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Third Stage: Turning Point and Rebirth on the Canal

The late 1940s and early 1950s seem to have been a barren period for the poet. Perhaps he had a presentiment that he was running out of ideas, that inspiration was ebbing away. He had, after all, explored his Monaghan landscape and its way of life in poetry and prose both in its immediate impact and retrospectively. His poetic identity is by now, firmly allied to its drumlin hills. Is this what he was born for? Has he fulfilled his mission to poetry? The outcome of this self-questioning culminates in a decision to make a full assessment of his life, a self-audit! He begins by asking: What is this thing called poetry to which he has dedicated his life?

Is verse an entertainment only?
Or it is a profound and holy
Faith that cries the inner history
Of the failure of man’s mission?

'Auditors In' is a protracted conversation with self. By examining his inner motivation for being a poet, Kavanagh stumbles on his *inner* landscape, his soul territory.⁵² The poet Seamus Heaney notes the qualitative change in Kavanagh's later work that surfaces a new level of self-possession, self-understanding and radical innocence.⁵³ Without abandoning his characteristic 'humourosity', his writing mirrors these changes. So far, Kavanagh has used his poetic gift to distil wisdom from the ups and downs of his life.⁵⁴ The practice of muttering to himself as he walks along Dublin's Grand Canal during the nineteen fifties is likely to be interpreted as eccentric, yet this practice affords him an opportunity for inner conversation, even selftherapy.⁵⁵ People as widely divergent as President Obama and the actor Russell Crowe have quoted his words attesting to the universal impact of Kavanagh's words.⁵⁶ 'To cure oneself is to cure many people' he believes has a proven record.⁵⁷

'Auditors In' shows that Kavanagh is convinced that pursuit of a 'cursed ideal' has only deluded him, robbed him of attending to the ordinary, the everyday, the stuff of poetry itself.⁵⁸ However much he tries to hide it, he knows his poetry derives from '*grief-born intensity*'.⁵⁹ His vain search for perfection in life, has only jeopardised his true gift for '*loving to the heart of every ordinary thing*'.⁶⁰ Despite his previous difficulties in attaining recognition as a poet, the writing of 'Auditors In' seems to help him re-find something of his essential self, at what he calls, '*the end of a tortuous road.*' His poetic journey now takes him, almost by surprise, to the touchstone of his true self. His eyes have been opened to the enduring lesson that from now on it is inner journeying that matters. His exile into self will be a personal, solitary one inspired by his compatriot, James Joyce, though qualitatively different.

The writing of 'Auditors In' was a milestone for Kavanagh. He has broken new ground in self-awareness and his sights are set on a new harvest. For the first time in many months he is proud of his achievement and is wont to recite this poem for close friends and family as though he believes it is his real autobiography to date.⁶¹ He has recovered his self-belief. '*God unworshipped withers*', comes as a stark reminder to a poet in crisis. A withering of self or of God? Kavanagh adjudges them synonymous!

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Kavanagh's '*Placeless Heaven*'

But knowing what he must do and doing it are two different things for Patrick Kavanagh. His mid-life transition is still somewhat in disarray, as he continues to question his new direction, tempted to lose faith perhaps in the very landscape that first inspired him. Inspiration derived from townlands such as '*Ballyrush and Gortin*' may have been wearing thin. He questions whether small-time farm life can provide him with subjects of the epic stature to which he aspires as a poet. And then, with characteristic '*humorosity*' he discovers a magic formula culled from 'the stem of memory.' His landscape of origin seems to become 'airborne.' Memory of a heated row and the disputed boundary over 'half a rood of rock' surfaces in saga format from the past. Imagination weaves a heroic cloak over the incident so that Ballyrush and Gortin are transposed into a timeless, placeless zone. Mention of Homer's Iliad, however humorous, is key. Kavanagh has transported himself from the local to the transcendent. In the words of Seamus Heaney, Ballyrush and Gortin 'have been evacuated of their status as background and exist instead as transfigured images'.⁶²

Epic

I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided: who owned
That half a rood of rock, a no man's land
Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.
I heard the Duffys shouting 'Damn your soul'
And old Mc Cabe stripped to the waist, seen
Step the plot defying blue cast-steel-
'Here is the march along these iron stones'.
That was the year of the Munich bother. Which
Was more important? I inclined
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin
Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind.
He said: I made the *Iliad* from such
A local row. Gods make their own importance.

Life in Dublin continues to be problematic for Kavanagh who is often the target of ridicule and discounted as a mere 'peasant poet'. Many failed to see that Kavanagh had, by now, transcended locality, entered the territory of the universal and made the territory of soul his happy hunting ground.

A New Venture: *Kavanagh's Weekly*

Launching their own newspaper during the spring and summer of 1952, is a new venture for the Kavanagh brothers: Patrick and Peter. *Kavanagh's Weekly*, funded by Peter, provides his brother with a much-needed outlet for self-expression. In 13 editions, Patrick is often editor, feature writer and poet in-residence all in one. Still vexed in his soul, despite recent resolutions, he rails in his writings against Church, State and society at large until he seems at least temporarily purged of anger. The paper folds through lack of finance on its thirteenth edition. In this final edition Patrick writes a poem of superb quality that once more offers an insight into the soul of one who thinks deeply about life and about God. Where does he stand now having unburdened his soul?

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'Having Confessed' presents the possibility of a surprise encounter with God '*in the unconscious room of our hearts.*' The God of Patrick Kavanagh is gentler than the God envisaged by church preaching in 1950s Ireland. Kavanagh becomes guru extraordinaire for himself and for all who fear a judging God. '*time has its own work to do,*' is his priestly reassurance. '*We must be nothing, / Nothing that God may make us something...*' No spiritual writer could have better grasped the gradual relinquishment of ego that surrender to Mystery entails nor the spiritual consolation available to the contrite soul. Its teaching is on a par with classic Christian mysticism.

1954 Kavanagh's *Annus Horribilis*

But difficult times still lie ahead. The year 1954 was a year which severely tested the poet. Kavanagh sees this year as a time that almost breaks his poet's spirit. He had been victim of a libellous 'Profile' published by the *Leader*, October 1952 which resulted in his taking the newspaper to court on an issue of defamation of character. In the course of the trial which began during the first week of February 1954 and lasted for seven days, Kavanagh was cross-examined for several hours. He spent a total of thirteen hours in the witness box

and, despite outer appearances, reaches his lowest point of morale as he endures lengthy cross-examination by John A. Costello, one of the cleverest barristers in Dublin at this time. During this trial his spirit writhes in over-exposure and embarrassment. His health too is in jeopardy since it transpires that he is suffering from lung cancer, caused undoubtedly by years of heavy smoking and poor diet. The loss of his law-suit, a serious illness, along with other personal misfortunes made 1954 the worst year of his life.⁶³

A few well-chosen words in sonnet form address the departing year 1954, which he accuses of coming close to shattering '*his lamp of contemplation*.' The poem entitled 'Nineteen-Fifty-Four' initially untitled, was first published in *Nimbus* 1956, gives voice to his shattered self. Kavanagh is astute enough to realise that acknowledging his sense of failure is the only way forward. '*Making the statement is enough*,' is a sound principle that will prove therapeutic.⁶⁴ Suffering, he knows, can be ultimately beneficial. '*Is any suffering useless*' writes Kavanagh years later in *X* quarterly review, '*and is there any way home but through it?*'

Once more writing is found to have healing powers. Admitted to St James' Hospital in February 1955, he undergoes surgery at the hand of Surgeon Keith Shaw, necessitating the removal of a lung, but the operation saves his life. He is discharged and enters a period of recuperation during the summer of 1955. As luck would have it, the weather proved exceptionally fine and Kavanagh luxuriated in sunshine seated in his customary perch, near Baggott Street Bridge, on the banks of the Grand Canal in Dublin.

Once recuperation takes hold, Kavanagh feels he is on the journey back to health. Now everything becomes material for celebration. He is in love with life again. In 'The Hospital,' he even loves '*the functional ward of a chest hospital*,' its '*gravelled yard*,' it's damaged gate, '*the seat at the back of a shed that was a suntrap*': the most banal objects can inspire love and, therefore, poetry. With a new heightened awareness of love's power to transform the commonplace, Kavanagh arrives at a definition of poetry that is classic: Poetry's function is to '*record love's mystery without claptrap*,' hold it still, and confer on it the permanence of art.

Rebirth and renewal come flooding back to Kavanagh as he recuperates in the warm sunshine of 1955, reclining on the banks of the Grand Canal, thrilled to be alive in the wake of his encounter with death. In a new mood of self-confidence and commitment to the '*madness*' of being a poet, he finds himself reclaiming his precarious existence as one who dances '*on mile high stilts*' out of reach of the populace.⁶⁵ Arrogant perhaps and self-opinionated, he nevertheless vindicates the poet's rightful claim for a solitary existence, lived on the perilous ledges of poetic consciousness, a kind of madness perhaps, but one he cherishes as his own.

Kavanagh differs essentially from many Irish writers in that he has a consistent and it seems, an unshakeable belief in God. Whatever quarrels he may have had with organised religion or the institutional Church, his professed belief in God's mercy is beyond question. His awareness of God seems to evolve in tandem with the development of his spiritual consciousness. He has outgrown the prescriptive God of his early catechism along with the abstract concepts of religion, which enables him now to find a God freed from the shackles of definition, recrimination, and the narrow confines of reason. Kavanagh's God is expansive, a God madly in love with '*the daily and nightly earth*' and endlessly forgiving of human failing. One of his most memorable God-poems captures the Celtic imagination with its total identification of God with the manifold splendour of a cut-away bog.

The One

Green, blue, yellow and red -
God is down in the swamps and marshes,
Sensational as April and almost incred-
ible the flowering of our catharsis.
A humble scene in a backward place
Where no one important ever looked;
The raving flowers looked up in the face
Of the One and the Endless, the Mind that has baulked
The profoundest of mortals. A primrose, a violet,
A violent wild-iris -but mostly anonymous performers,
Yet an important occasion as the Muse at her toilet
Prepared to inform the local farmers
That beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God
Was breathing His love by a cut-away bog.

The waters of the Grand Canal are music to the ears of a recovering poet resting on its banks during the late summer of 1955. His soul is filled with gratitude as he revels in the plenitude of '*green and blue things*'. Kavanagh expresses this gratitude in 'Canal Bank Walk':

Leafy-with- love banks and the green waters of the canal
Pouring redemption for me, that I do
The will of God, wallow in the habitual, the banal,
Grow with nature again as before I grew.

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The sound of flowing water reminds him he is whole again, baptised once more in body and soul, re-born into his mission as poet and celebrant of life. His eye caresses the wonder of a '*bright stick trapped*' in the flowing stream as well as the heart-warming sight of '*a couple kissing on an old seat*'. His lyrical soul expands with '*overflowing speech*' to match the wonder of being alive with all his senses fully restored.

Having been convinced earlier that he was in danger of imminent death, Kavanagh humorously envisages his funeral - complete with the modest tomb he requests his brother to have raised to his memory. This imagined commemoration builds to a climax in '*the tremendous silence of mid-July*'. Water cascading through a nearby lock only accentuates the quiet, as pilgrims hasten towards this hallowed spot, bringing with them myths of a poet's life from Athy and '*other far-flung towns*' life along the Grand Canal. A passing swan, with lowered head offers condolences for the passing of a poet, while mystical light shines '*through the eyes of bridges*', highlighting the hallowed spot, witness to a poet's legacy. All he asks for by way of tomb, is '*a canal-bank seat for the passerby*':

Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin

O commemorate me where there is water,
Canal water preferably, so stilly
Greeny at the heart of summer. Brother
Commemorate me thus beautifully
Where by a lock Niagarously roars
The falls for those who sit in the tremendous silence
Of mid-July. No one will speak in prose
Who finds his way to these Parnassian islands.
A swan goes by head low with many apologies,
Fantastic light looks through the eyes of bridges-
And look! a barge comes bringing from Athy
And other far-flung towns mythologies.
O commemorate me with no hero-courageous
Tomb – just a canal-bank seat for the passer-by.

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Bringing home his poetic harvest

Published in 1958 in the wake of his poetic rebirth (1955) the poem ‘October’ has all the signs of completion. Like a thoroughly satisfied farmer whose land has yielded its crop, now safely harvested, Kavanagh celebrates with an October lens the rich harvest of his life. *‘It is October over all my life.’* He is overcome by a strong intuition that he is already in heaven, his mission on earth accomplished. October is a month he associates with feeling of plenitude and peace. Sustaining a harvesting metaphor throughout, and still wrapped in a timeless cloak, his experience is even more all-embracing in a flashback to his nineteen-year-old self, transfixated in light by the ‘fox-coverts,’ not yet committed to the task of becoming a poet. What he was *then* and what he is *now* have become fused into one.

Saying ‘yes’ to his life in this way opened up the possibility to be resolved, to live in gratitude with equanimity and calm; to become, (in his own words), ‘capable of receiving with grace, the grace of living’...Even at this late stage of his life, perhaps he is still hoping to achieve that ‘smooth courteous’ exterior to which he had once aspired in youth.⁶⁶ But life, however awkward and misshapen, he knows, *is his* supreme gift, worthy of unreserved respect.

The Self -slaved (excerpt)

I will have love, have love
From anything make of,
And a life with a shapely form
With gaiety and charm
And capable of receiving
With grace the grace of living,
And wild moments too
Self when freed from you.
Prometheus calls me on.
Prometheus calls me: Son,
We’ll both go off together
In this delightful weather.

Conclusion

Many have difficulty reconciling Kavanagh's occasional vulgar outbursts with his poetry that is refined, lyrical and soulful. These opposing realities seem irreconcilable. They lose sight, perhaps, of a poet possessed of a highly creative imagination, an exceptional sensitivity and profound spirituality, yet often misunderstood and underestimated. His struggle for integrity is unmistakable throughout his work. Try as he might, he was never fully healed of a woundedness that seemed to justify the cultivation of an outer persona as protection for his acute sensibility. His poetry, I believe, is the essential expression of someone possessed of an enduring integrity, who, against the odds, pursued a lifelong mission to become a writer. If we do not read his life as mirrored in his ongoing inner conversations, we may miss the essential Kavanagh.

Aware that his outward behaviour is a continuous discrediting factor, he seemed to throw down the gauntlet and challenge his literary audience to uncover his authentic inner history: a history saturated with musings on the meaning of life, the hidden beauty of simple things, and the prophetic function of the poet. Toward the end, Kavanagh was beginning to realize how tiresome it was to portray outwardly a caricature of his true self. The habit of being selectively vulgar had become second nature, but the veneer was wearing thin. Ultimately, he sees life exacting from him the challenge to '*be reposed and praise, praise, praise / The way it happened and the way it is.*'

Notes

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- 1 'If ever you go to Dublin Town' (first published in the *Irish Times*, 21 March, 1953) and in: Antoinette Quinn ed. *Patrick Kavanagh: Collected Poems*, 2004, pp. 191-193.
- 2 U. Agnew, *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh: A Buttonhole in Heaven*, The Columba Press, 1998, revised paperback edition 1999. Currently reprinting at Veritas Publications, 2018
- 3 Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, London: MacGibbon and Kee, London: 1964. It was simultaneously published by Devin Adair, New York, 1964.
- 4 It is true that the poet's brother, Peter Kavanagh made heroic efforts to collect and publish his brother's work in *Patrick Kavanagh: Recent Poems*, The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, New York: 1958, nevertheless, this was the first collection from two well established publishing houses. See note 3 above.
- 5 The interviews and reviews following the publication of *Collected Poems* is well documented in Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001, pp.424-6
- 6 This interview by Peter Duval Smith is available on CD entitled: *Irish Poets*, A BBC recording from the Third Programme, 18 August, 1964
- 7 Quinn, *Collected Poems*, 2004, pp. 'The Paddiad'150-56, 'Jungle' p.149 and 'Adventures in the Bohemian Jungle', pp.158-67.
- 8 'Nationalism and Literature' in: *Collected Pruse*, London: Martin Brian and O'Keeffe, 1973, pp. 246-51.
- 9 'The Poetic Spirit' *A Poet's Country*, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003, pp.243-45 at 243.
- 10 Patrick Kavanagh, 'From Monaghan to the Grand Canal', Studies', Spring 1959 p.29-36. Reprinted in *Collected Pruse*, ed. Peter Kavanagh p.225. *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. A Quinn, pp.272 -81 at 275.
- 11 *Envoy*, 'Diary, June 1950', Quinn, p.263
- 12 'Diary' in: *Envoy*, Vol. 1. No.1, Dec 1949. p. 87.
- 13 See Una Agnew and Art Agnew, 'Love's Doorway to Life' a triple CD production by Eist audio production, www.eist.ie, 2017. A similar three-part structure was used for this production. Many of the ideas used in this audio production are repeated in written form here.
- 14 His 'childhood country' as an expression figures largely in his early Dublin period. First mentioned in the poem 'Peace' written in 1943 but not published until 1960.

- 15 *Ploughman and Other Poems*, Macmillan, London, 1936
- 16 *The Green Fool*, London: Penguin Books, 1975 (Michael Joseph, London: 1938).
- 17 Unless otherwise stated, all biographical information in this section is taken from Agnew (1998) Unpublished PhD Thesis, *Word Made Flesh: The Spiritual Dimension of Patrick Kavanagh's Work* (UCD, 1991)
- 18 This pioneering research regarding James Kavanagh's paternity and background material relating to his father Patrick Kevany (Patrick Kavanagh's grandfather) was first published in: U. Agnew, PhD Thesis (1991) and subsequently in: *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh* (Agnew 1998). A more detailed study entitled 'Patrick Kavanagh and his Tullamore Connections' was published in: *Offaly Historical Journal*, Vol 8 (2015).
- 19 Place names ending in -duff are derived from the Gaelic word *dubb* meaning black, which indicates that the land is north-facing, whereas the suffix -bane or -bawn comes from *bán* or white, which means it gets the sun.
- 20 The *Dundalk Democrat* is a local weekly newspaper, in existence since 1849 that covers local events and is read widely in counties Louth and Monaghan. Kavanagh's first poems were published here.
- 21 *The Green Fool*, 'The New Farm' London: Penguin Books, 1975 (1938), p. 208.
- 22 Quinn (2004) p.183. First published in *The Bell*, November 1951.
- 23 Quinn, (2004), p.173. Poem first published in *Envoy*, October 1950.
- 24 *Kavanagh's Weekly*, May 1952
- 25 Agnew, (1998), pp. 45-57 and 75-87. Patrick Kavanagh attended school at Kednaminsha National School from June 1909 until June 1918 when his name is removed from the roll-book.
- 26 *The Green Fool*, 'The Well-learned Scholar' London: Penguin Books, 1975 (1938), pp. 83-4.
- 27 The Kednaminsha school registers confirm this fact. 'not promoted' is inscribed after the student's name, June 1918.
- 28 In 1942 Kavanagh made his first contribution to: 'City Commentary' to the *Irish Press* under the pseudonym 'Piers Plowman'.
- 29 Peter Kavanagh ed., 1984, *Patrick Kavanagh Complete Poems* pp.12-13 *Complete Poems* version preferred to A. Quinn's (2004) version, pp.10-11, except in final stanza where Quinn is preferred and the word 'is' replaces 'in'.
- 30 'Joan Russell', Peter Kavanagh ed. 1984, *Patrick Kavanagh Complete Poems*, pp. 207-208. These lines are also inscribed on the wooden cross that currently marks the poet's grave in Inniskeen.
- 31 See *Self-Portrait*, in: Quinn ed. *A Poet's Country*, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003, pp. 314-5.
- 32 'The light between the ricks or hay an straw/ Was a hole in heaven's gable' in: 'A Christmas Childhood', 'Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.' in: 'Advent', 'Fantastic light looks through the eyes of bridges -', in: 'Lines Written on a Seat on the Grand Canal, Dublin' See Agnew, *The Mystical Imagination* pp. 124-127 where I have referred to instances of Kavanagh's use of this metaphor.
- 33 See Patrick Kavanagh: 'To the Corn Goddess' *The Irish Times*, Nov 8th, 1939.
- 34 See Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, p.67. 'Shancoduff', 'Primrose', 'In Memory of my Father', 'Poet' and 'To Anna Quinn' are among those published in Dublin Magazine 1938/39.
- 35 Biographical details here are based on: Peter Kavanagh, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Life Chronicle*, New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, Chapters 7 and 8, pp.89-111, *Lapped Furrows: Correspondence 1933-1967 between Patrick and Peter Kavanagh*, New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1969 pp. 45-46. See also Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2001, Chapter 8; 'I had a Future' pp. 119-145.
- 36 Places 'where the tide of humanity flows calm' in: 'Europe is at War: Remembering its Pastoral Peace', *Irish Times*, 25 October 1939.
- 37 Unless otherwise indicated the text of poems quoted is that of Antoinette Quinn, ed., *Patrick Kavanagh: Collected Poems*, London: Allen Lane, Penguin Book, 2004. 35
- 38 First published in: *The Listener*, December 1941
- 39 A line from the poem 'Fr Mat'. See Quinn, *Collected Poems*, 1
- 40 See Desmond Swan, *Apocalypse of Clay: A Study of Patrick Kavanagh's Masterpiece The Great Hunger and Ireland's Coming of Age*, Currach Press, 2013 and Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* a one-man show by Peter Duffy.

- 41 Peter Kavanagh ed., *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh with Commentary*, The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, Notes on *The Great Hunger* pp.421-422.
- 42 *The Mystical Imagination*, Agnew, 1998, p.41. See also: Peter Kavanagh, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Life Chronicle*, New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, pp. 123-135.
- 43 *The Great Hunger*, The Cuala Press, 1942
- 44 *The Leader* 'Profile', October 1952 (unsigned)
- 45 Tarry Flynn, The Pilot Press, London, 1948 and Devin Adair, New York, 1949
- 46 *SelfPortrait*, Dublin, The Dolmen Press, 1964, p.8
- 47 Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (2001) pp.223-4.
- 48 His mother died in November, Patrick Kavanagh published this poem Dec 7, in the *Standard*. A weekly Catholic newspaper.
- 49 Patrick Kavanagh *Selected Poems*, ed. A Quinn, Penguin Books, 1996. Notes pp. 165-66.
- 50 Fionnuala Doherty, *Patrick Kavanagh's Foghorn Days: The Concept of the Artist in Kavanagh's Journalism, 1939-1957*. Unpublished M. Phil Thesis, 2000
- 49 Kavanagh is aware that Seán O'Faolain was awarded 1000 pounds as Chairman of the Arts Council.
- 50 Kavanagh was offered no such opportunity. See *Lapped Furrows* p.200. It is also well documented that Kavanagh was not to be invited back to Áras and Uachtaráin, since a certain lack of genteel behaviour had been noted and criticized. Cultural Committee vetoes photos LF p.169.
- 52 Douglas Houston, 'Landscapes of the Heart: Parallels in the Poetries of Kavanagh and Auden in: *Studies*, Winter, 1988, pp. 445-59.
- 53 Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue; The 1986 T.S. Eliot Lectures and Other Critical Writings*, London: Faber and Faber, 1989, 'The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh', pp. 3-14 at 14.
- 54 'Diary' published monthly in *Envoy* between December 1949 and July 1951.⁵⁴ gives further evidence that the habit of self-dialogue was habitual and gives opportunities to probe some universal truths about his life.
- 55 Antoinette Quinn ed., *Patrick Kavanagh: A Poet's Country Selected Prose*, Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2003. A selected list of the magazines to which the poet contributed is listed pp. 318-19. Note This 'Diary' *Envoy* (1949 to 1951), *Kavanagh's Weekly* (1952) as well as the *The Bell*, *Studies*, *Creation* and a host of magazines to which Kavanagh contributed during the 1950s and onwards.
- 56 President Obama quoted from 'On Raglan Road': 'And I said let grief be a fallen leaf' during the eulogy he delivered on the death of Beau Biden, June 2015. Russell Crowe also quoted Kavanagh's poem 'Sanctity' during his 2010 BAFTA award speech.
- 57 'Diary', *Envoy*, December 1949, pp. 86-90 at 87. A writer, Kavanagh believes, unlike the journalist who views experience from the *outside*, 'stands *inside...*and cries how it hurts...'.⁵⁷
- 58 'The Gallivanting Poet' *Irish Writing*, December 1947 in: Antoinette Quinn, *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, The Lilliput Press, Dublin (2003), p. 199
- 59 'Prelude' pp.206-09 at 207
- 60 'Moment on the Canal', *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, New York: Kavanagh Hand Press, Inc., p.315.
- 61 See note to 'Auditors In', Peter Kavanagh ed. *The Complete Poems*, New York: Kavanagh Hand Press, 1996 p.455.
- 62 Seamus Heaney, 'The Placeless Heaven', p.5 see note 52 above.
- 63 Patrick Kavanagh, 'Suffering and Literature 'in: *A Poet's Country*, Quinn ed. pp. 282-86 at 285
- 64 'Is any suffering useless' Kavanagh asks, 'and is there any way home but through it' *A Poet's Country*, 'On a Liberal Education', pp 289-98 at 297
- 65 'Come Dance with Kitty Stobling' Collected Poems, Quinn, 2004.p.221
Reference here is to a poem entitled 'The Gift' which is difficult to source but is printed in
Patrick Kavanagh, *Complete Poems*, Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1972, pp162-3.



Bio: Una Agnew

Dr. Una Agnew (St. Louis Sister) was born in County Louth, Ireland and is Associate Professor Emerita of the Faculty of Theology and Spirituality at Milltown-Institute, Dublin. She studied Spirituality at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, 1971-1974 and lectured widely on spiritual topics. She completed her doctoral study on the spiritual dimension of the poet Patrick Kavanagh in 1991 at UCD and published *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh: A Buttonhole to Heaven* Dublin: Columba Press, 1998, currently being reproduced by Veritas Publishing House, Dublin, 2018. A leading expert in Kavanagh studies, she and her brother Art Agnew have also completed an audio production of the poet's life, reflected in his work (*Love's Doorway to Life: An Alternative Biography* (2017) Eist Audio Productions, www.eist.iestudios Among her other interests are: the interface between literature and spirituality, spiritual guidance, local history, sport and ballroom dancing.

Poem: “In Memory of My Mother” by Patrick Kavanagh translated into Irish by Caitríona Ní Chléirchín

I gCuimhne ar mo Mháthair

Ní smaoiním ort is tú i do luí faoin chré fhliuch
sa reilig i Muineachán; chím thú
ag siúl leat síos lána na gcrann poibleog
ar do bhealach chuig an stáisiún, nó ar do bhealach sona

chuig an dara hAifreann ar Domhnach sa tSamhradh –
casann tú liom is deir:
'Ná déan dearmad amharc i ndiaidh na mbeithíoch'-
Dá thíriúla do rá, is ann a théann na haingil ar cheilt.
Smaoiním ort, tú ag siúl iomaire cinn
de choirce ghlas an Mheithimh
chomh hiomlán ar do shuaimhneas, chomh lán de ghus -
Buailimid muid gan choinne le chéile ag cionn an bhaile

ar lá aonaigh is i ndiaidh do na margáí
ar fad a dhéanamh, thig linn siúl le chéile
idir na siopaí is na stainníní
Saor i sráideanna oirtheachra na smaointeoirreachta.

Ó níl tú i do luí faoin chré fhliuch
mar tá tráthnóna fómhair annanois
agus tá muid ag carnadh na gcrúach féir
i gcoinne sholas na gealaí

is tú ag miongháire aníos orainn go síoraí.

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Caitríona Ní Chléirchín

In Memory of My Mother

I do not think of you lying in the wet clay
Of a Monaghan graveyard; I see
You walking down a lane among the poplars
On your way to the station, or happily

Going to second Mass on a summer Sunday -
You meet me and you say:
'Don't forget to see about the cattle - '
Among your earthiest words the angels stray.

And I think of you walking along a headland
Of green oats in June,
So full of repose, so rich with life -
And I see us meeting at the end of a town

On a fair day by accident, after
The bargains are all made and we can walk
Together through the shops and stalls and markets
Free in the oriental streets of thought.

O you are not lying in the wet clay,
For it is a harvest evening now and we
Are piling up the ricks against the moonlight
And you smile up at us - eternally.

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Patrick Kavanagh

Editor's note: "In Memory of My Mother" is reprinted from *Collected Poems*, edited by Antoinette Quinn (Allen Lane, 2004), by kind permission of the Trustees of the Estate of the late Katherine B. Kavanagh, through the Jonathan Williams Literary Agency.

Poem: “Banríon an Uaignis / the Queen of Loneliness”

by Caitríona Ní Chléirchín Translated into English by Peter Fallon

‘Bíonn laethanta ann...’

Chan é go bhfuil cóiné orm
in uamhach in aice le tobar fíoruisce
taobh le caisléan i m'aonar
nó go bhfuil mé faoi cheilt ag an domhain
ach mar sin féin bíonn laethanta ann
go mbraithim chomh huaigneach
léi siúd, banríon an uaignis
go luath ar maidin agus go mall san oíche
ag triail ar an tobar léi féin
bíonn laethanta ann nuair a bhraithim
go gcaithfidh mé a bheith i mo bhanríon
ar an uaigneas i gcónaí
corruair ar oícheanta earraigh
tig suaimhneas orm ach
bíonn laethanta ann
nuair a bhraithim
go bhfuil mé ag labhairt ó bhun na habhann
is nach glcoiseann éinne mé
is an cumha a bhraithim
níl léamh ná scríobh na insint béal air.

‘There are days that I feel...’

Not that I've taken to living
in a souterrain by a freshwater well
in the palace grounds, all on my own,
or even that I'm steering clear of the world,
but, it's true, there are days that I feel -
oh - as lonely as she, her highness,
Queen Loneliness, as she makes
her way to the spring, and she alone too,
first thing in the morning, last thing at night.

There are days that I feel
I must myself become a queen,
one with a semipiternal sorrow.
On spring evenings the odd time
a stillness comes over me,

but then there are those days that I feel
my voice, one that no one can hear,
travels up from the murk of a river in spate,
and I feel a soreness
none could read or write or ever relate.

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Caitríona Ní Chléirchín

Translation by Peter Fallon



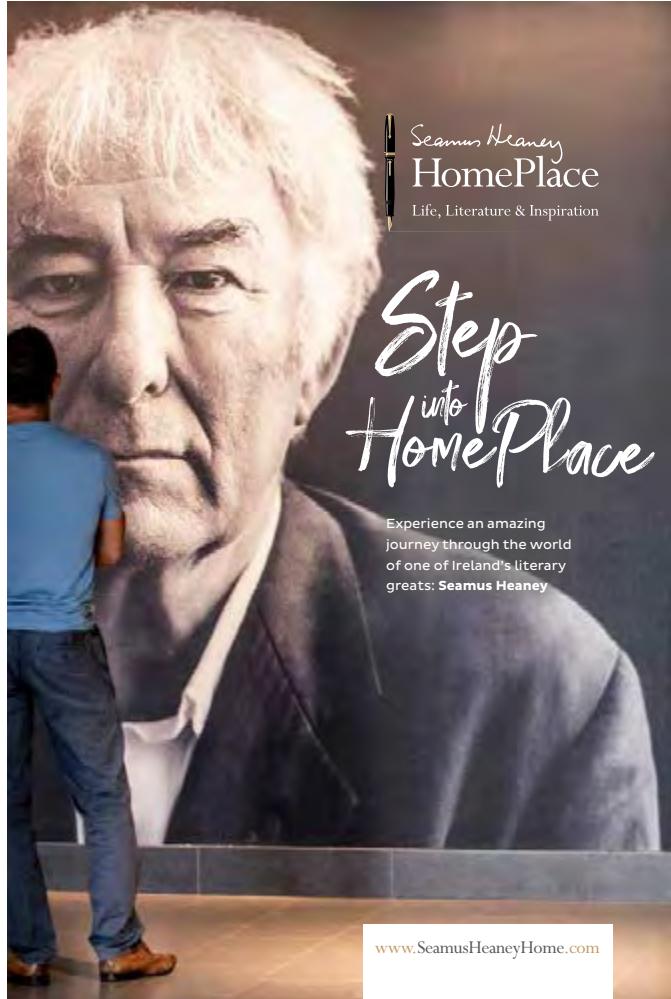
Bio Caitríona Ní Chléirchín

Caitríona Ní Chléirchín is an Irish-language poet, critic and lecturer originally from Gortmoney, Emyvale in Co. Monaghan. Her début collection *Crithloinnir* won the Oireachtas Prize for New Writers in 2010 and her second collection *An Bhrídeach Sí* published in 2014 has won the Michael Hartnett Prize 2015. She has published poetry in *Comhar, Irish Pages, Cyphers, The Stinging Fly, Feasta, Blaiseadh Pinn, The SHOp, An t-Ultach* and *An Guth*. She also writes reviews, academic and journalistic articles and over 20 reviews in *The Irish Times, Comhar, and Taighde agus Teagasc* and others.

She is also an Irish-language and literature lecturer at Fiontar agus Scoil na Gaeilge DCU. Her doctorate was a psychoanalytical body-centred reading of the Irish-language contemporary poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Biddy Jenkinson.

Micheál Ó Ruairc has described her as the new love lyricist writing Irish poetry today in *Comhar*, December 2010. Liam Carson has compared her work to that of the famous Russian Poet Marina Tsvetaeva, in his review of her first collection in Poetry Ireland Review 104, 2011.

Spotlight on the Seamus Heaney HomePlace



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The Seamus Heaney HomePlace is located in the village of Bellaghy, situated just 45 minutes from both Belfast and Derry City. For more information or to book tickets for an event or exhibition visit www.seamusheaneyhome.com or e-mail seamusheaneyhome@midulstercouncil.org

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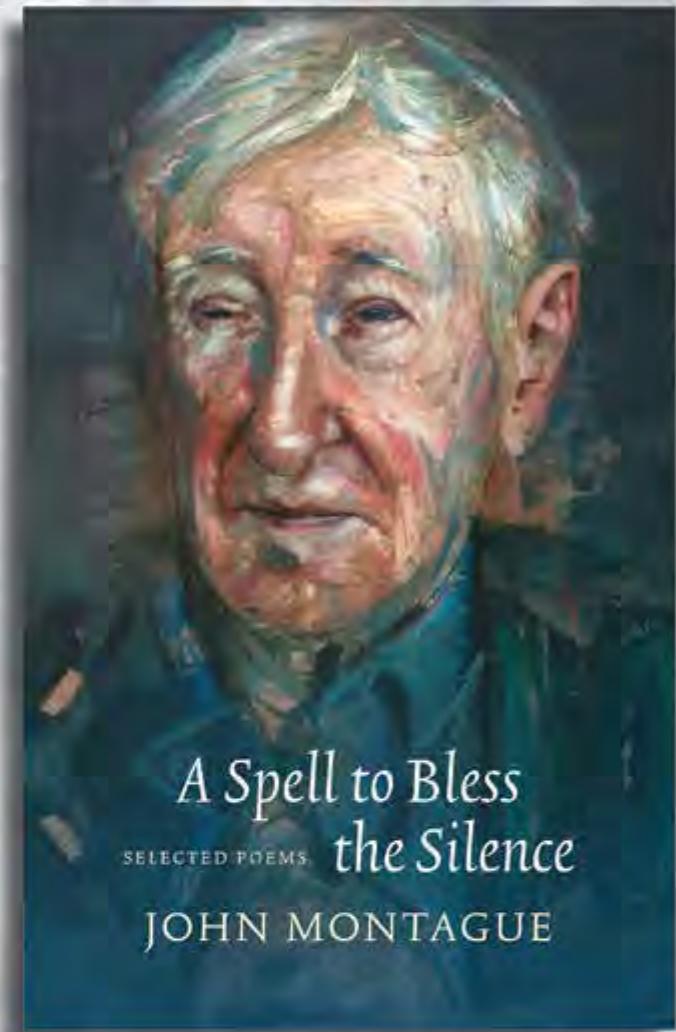
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