

The Poetics of Return: Five Contemporary Irish Poets and America

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ABSTRACT

SETH M MARTIN: *The Poetics of Return: Five Contemporary Irish Poets and America*
(Under the direction of George Lensing)

A thematic study grounded in transnational and transatlantic studies of modern and postmodern literatures, this dissertation examines five contemporary Irish poets – John Montague, Padraic Fiacc, James Liddy, Seamus Heaney, and Eavan Boland – whose separation from Ireland in the United States has produced a distinct body of work that I call, “the poetics of return.” As the biological heirs of the Civil War generation and the intellectual heirs of the Irish high modernists, these poets are some of the leading lights of the renaissance in Irish literary arts after midcentury.

This dissertation argues that an important aspect of this era has been its reevaluation of narratives of political and artistic exile; those created by nationalists and republicans, on the one hand, and modernists such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, on the other. Drawing on the criticism of Patrick Ward and Seamus Deane, I argue that the atomization of the critical vocabulary of exile has enabled modern poets greater means to consider the cultural anxieties surrounding their separation from Ireland. Accordingly they have become less interested in the meaning of leaving Ireland and more interested in the meaning of return. This project engages a range of scholarly literature devoted to the Irish poets and poetry of the last half century and reevaluates a number of standard readings and assumptions.

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INTRODUCTION

SOME NOTES ON EXILE AND RETURN

"It is suicide to be abroad but what is it to be at home? ... A lingering dissolution."
(Samuel Beckett, "All that Fall")¹

Exile, most agree, is a tired subject in Irish literary studies. In his *Field Day* pamphlet "Heroic Styles" (1984) Seamus Deane warned fellow Irish writers that they were guilty of "fetishizing" exile.² Two decades later Michael Kenneally wrote to fellow critics that "the synonymous association of Irish writers with exile and emigration is...a *donné* in literary criticism."³ In plainer terms, Gerald Dawe dismissed most discussions of exile as "faddish talk."⁴

Poets, too, share in the fatigue. In his light verse sequence *The Prince of the Quotidian* (1994), Paul Muldoon bristled at Deane's description of him in the *Times Literary Supplement* as a poet "in exile." Flanked at Princeton University by expatriate dissidents like Joseph Brodsky and Cuban poet Heberto Padilla, Muldoon was eager to beg off of Deane's comment:

The term serves mostly to belittle

¹ Samuel Beckett, "All That Fall" (1957) *The Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1984) 6.

² Seamus Deane, "Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea" *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985) 57–58.

³ Michael Kenneally, [untitled] *New Hibernia Review* 8.1 (Spring 2004) 146.

⁴ Gerald Dawe, "A Testimony to the Human Spirit" *Irish News* (28 April 1994).

the likes of Brodsky and Padilla

and is not appropriate of me.⁵

And there are stranger examples. Eamonn Wall, for instance, describing what made his friend James Liddy's poetry unique, explained that Liddy "could never feel like an exile and he has never written through the voice of one."⁶ In his memoir, *The Doctor's House*, Liddy himself was less dismissive about the importance of exile to his poetic voice, yet he sensed a hint of the poseur or the cynic in the term's use:

I am an exile, I am not an exile. "Exile" has enough alienation in it to be a real condition, yet it can be read as part of the flashy itinerant supernaturalism of the voyageur. The spirit whence it is employed or patroned.⁷

It seems that in the current literary climate it is the Irish critic's duty to be weary of exile and the poet's duty to be wary of it.

Yet exile persists – stubbornly, inevitably – in critical and creative conversations about Irish poetry, and the longer it remains the more the relevant question becomes not *if it should* but *why it does*. The following passage from Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* is often evoked as though it contains the seeds of an answer. "Exile," Said writes,

is predicated on the existence of, love for, and real bond with one's native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss...No one today is purely one thing.⁸

Is exile then the inescapable condition of modernity? It stands to reason that poets from Ireland, whose history since Tudor colonization is suffused with bitter arguments over

⁵ Paul Muldoon, *The Prince of the Quotidian* (Wake Forest, NC: Wake Forest UP, 1994) 36.

⁶ Eamonn Wall, "From El to Axel's: Irish Poets Stateside," *Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice: A Tribute to James Liddy*, ed. Michael S. Begnal (Galway: Arlen House, 2006) 29.

⁷ James Liddy, *The Doctor's House* (Cliffs of Moher, Co. Clare: Salmon Poetry, 2004) 133.

⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994) 336.

pure, divided, and fractured identities, speak to a general feeling of exile that goes beyond the term's specific political, cultural, or social applications.⁹ Perhaps modern Irish writing has more successfully articulated Said's "universal truth" than other literatures. If exile is fundamentally misunderstood, Said might argue, it is nevertheless deeply felt.

In his excellent study, *Exile, Emigration, and Irish Writing* (2002), Patrick Ward lays out a more rigorous thesis. Ward argues that the basic problem with discussions of exile in the context of Irish literature – those which produce both the weariness and wariness discussed above – is that exile is a term that has been overdetermined by Irish political history. Drawing on Said's thinking as well as Deane's, Ward claims that the figure of the Irish writer-in-exile is essentially a modern literary invention that has much less to do with the historical, political, or social realities prior to the twentieth century and more to do with the literary fashion set by international Irish modernists such as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and, to a lesser extent, W. B. Yeats. From the long perspective of history, Ward explains, the Irish political exile and the Irish artist have inhabited the same body fewer times than we might imagine, and the modern obsession with it comes down to arguments over its suitability and attractiveness as a metaphor. He writes:

This twentieth-century view of exile arises no doubt, out of the experiences of Romanticism, the mass movement of populations (voluntary and compulsory) and resistance to nationalism by many Modernist and Post-Modernist artists and intellectuals. It differs clearly from the pre-modern idea of exile in that it is looser, more ambiguous, voluntarist and concerned with distinguishing the intellectual from the masses.¹⁰

⁹ See Bruce Nelson, *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012) 17–29.

¹⁰ Patrick Ward, *Exile, Emigration, and Irish Writing* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2002) 184.

In Ward's telling, Stephen Dedalus's famous resolution in chapter five of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* – to “encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge within the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” – is a misunderstood passage of revolutionary dimensions.¹¹ Its declaration (hardly endorsed by Joyce) that the artist must leave Ireland in order to find the Irish, and that the Irish conscience is as yet “uncreated,” has proven an attractive justification to subsequent generations of Irish artists and western artists more widely. Considered in one way, it urges the young artist to think of personal aesthetic development as a matter of national and, in this context, racial importance. Understood in another, it convinces the artist that the “reality of experience” exists somewhere else, somewhere beyond the shores of Ireland. Either way, it provides a romantic impetus to the Irish writer's vocation: what the heroic Gael was to the nineteenth century, the writer-in-exile is to the twentieth.¹²

In response to the problem of overdetermination, Ward encourages scholars and critics to adopt a vocabulary of more modest terms (such as *migration*, *emigration*, *alienation*, *displacement*, *dislocation*, *expatriation*, etc.) borrowed from cultural scholars in other disciplines to help sort out the important ideas from the messy catch-all of exile. In the following passage from Liam Harte and Lance Petit's 2000 essay “States of Dislocation,” note how the authors carefully atomize what once might have been referred to simply as *exile* and separate it out into its component parts:

[n]ot only has [Irish] emigration been a fundamental social fact for many generations, but also the Irish imagination is partly defined by its propensity to engage creatively with

¹¹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916; New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 253.

¹² See also Stan Smith's introduction to his excellent study on a similar topic *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity: Ireland between Fantasy and History* (Dublin: Irish Academic, 2005) 1–16.

displacements, migrations, and the peregrinations, from the ancient voyage tales to contemporary narratives of exile and global nomadism.¹³

Whether Harte and Petit's granular approach affords the Irish writer greater clarity to express her experience, or simply allows for greater evasion, it certainly absolves both writer and critic from using a term seen as too grandiose or wizened to be useful.

Jahan Ramazani's recently proposed "transnational poetics" has also proven popular for shedding light on the modern condition of exile, particularly with American critics.¹⁴ Ramazani calls for the disassembling of so-called "mononational narratives" (both within the context of the modernist and post-modernist literatures as well as in the current era of global movement) and argues instead that "[g]lobe-traversing influences, energies, and resistances" are the defining features of twentieth and twenty-first century literature written in English.¹⁵ Ramazani pays particular attention to Irish poetry as a heuristic of his transnational poetics. He reasons that:

Because Irish poetry is often assumed to be even more "provincial" and "rooted" than other varieties of contemporary poetry, it deserves special attention in an exploration of what a transnational disciplinary paradigm can reveal and a national paradigm can make harder to see. Critical discussions of Irish poetry and culture often still bear vestigial traces of Irish Ireland...yet we should not forget that postwar Irish poetry frequently transnationalizes the local.¹⁶

Ramazani suggests that last two generation of Irish writers have effectively dismantled the nationalist and isolationist aesthetic bequeathed to them by the Irish Literary Revival,

¹³ Liam Harte and Lance Petit, "States of Dislocation: William Trevor's *Felicia's Journey* and Maurice Leitch's *Gilchrist*" *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures: Dislocations*. Eds. Ashok Bery & Patricia Murray. (London: Macmillan Press, 2000) 70.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Brian G. Caraher and Robert Mohony, eds. *Ireland and Transatlantic Poetics: Essays in Honor of Denis Donoghue* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Jahan Ramazani "A Transnational Poetics" *American Literary History* 18.2 (2006) 332.

¹⁶ Ramazani 346; The term "postwar" in this context means after World War II and not, as is sometimes the case in Irish historical writing, after 1921 or 1923. Irish historians of the Republic often refer to the period after World War II as "post-Emergency."

and set about “transnationalizing and “globalizing” the Irish idiom in order to discover something new as well as rediscover and recover the past.

Ramazani’s thesis appears well suited to consciously internationalist poets such as Derek Mahon and Eavan Boland, but, in what seems an unlikely choice, he builds his case for the Irish transnational on the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Confronting the poetic environments created by a purportedly “rooted” poet, Ramazani nevertheless claims that “the imaginative topography of Heaney’s poetry is an intercultural space, a layered geography” that bears witness to a “transnational sedimentation of the Irish ground” (346). We see the “transnationaliz[ing]” of “Irish ground” at work in Heaney’s “Bogland” (1967), a poem that, while it supplies the “Irish mind” with a new “symbol of geographical memory,” does so by constructing the Irish bog in parallel form to the American prairie.¹⁷ At each stage of the bog cutters’ “vertical quest,” they unearth “treasures” comparable to those discovered by westward-leading American pioneers (Shapiro 20). “Bogland” concludes by noting that “Atlantic seepage” fills the bog’s bottomless “wet centre,” suggesting that the bog’s composition and location – its very essence – are characterized by ambiguities rather than definitions.¹⁸ Considered in this light, “Bogland” serves as an apologia for Heaney’s poetic project as a whole: his poems’ surface provincialisms belie the extent to which they are inclusive and distributive of other places and other literatures, particularly, as I will argue in chapter three, to those of the United States.

¹⁷ Alan Shapiro “Crossed Pieties” *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney* ed. Robert F. Garrat (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1995) 20.

¹⁸ Seamus Heaney, “Bogland” *Door Into the Dark* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969) 41–42.

With its juxtaposition of American and Irish myths of landscape, Heaney's "Bogland" highlights the long history of reciprocal myth-making shared by the two countries. Diaspora historian Kerby Miller writes of nineteenth-century misperceptions of America as "'a halfway stage to heaven'" that circulated among rural Irish communities after the Famine, and which were themselves echoes of rumor and legend dating back to the Middle Ages.¹⁹ Meanwhile, supporters of various Irish causes tended to be far more fervent and radicalized among immigrant groups in cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago than in the four provinces.²⁰ a cultural shift that does seem to have been new and consequential, however, occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s among the younger intellectuals of Ireland. With the sudden, widespread presence of American imprints and literary journals available from Irish book sellers, American literary and academic culture began to overshadow that of Britain and Europe.²¹ In a pair of influential essays published in 1959, Brooklyn-born poet John Montague attempted to direct the country's literary community away from England and France and toward

¹⁹ See Kerby Miller, *Ireland and Irish America* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008) 100–105.

²⁰ The Anglo-Irish Treaty, for example, enjoyed significant support in Ireland, while being decidedly unpopular among the Irish in America. See Brian Hanley, "Irish Republicans in Interwar New York" *Irish Journal of American Studies* (June 2009) 1–12; and Miller, *Ireland and Irish America* 281–99. Also fascinating in this context is Ernie O'Malley's recollections of his American speaking tour in 1928–9 in *Broken Landscapes: Selected Letters of Ernie O'Malley*, Cormac K.H. O'Malley and Nicholas Allen, eds. (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2011) 48.

²¹ This was also the case in parts of Western Europe thanks in part to the Marshall Plan and the State Department's support of projects such as the Salzburg American Seminar. Beginning in 1947 and held each summer thereafter, the seminars introduced to young European intellectuals to American intellectual culture. John Montague attended the seminar in 1950; see Montague's memoir *Born in Brooklyn* (Fredonia, NY: White Pines Press, 1991). See also in this context Edna Longley, "Irish Bards and American Audiences" *Poetry & Posterity* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2000) 236–248; and John F. Harrington, "Transatlantic Transactions: Irish Players and American Reviewers" *Ireland and Transatlantic Poetics: Essays in Honor of Denis Donoghue*, eds. Brian G. Caraher and Robert Mohony (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2007) 168–178.

publications coming out of the US. He exhorted his peers to pay attention to American experimentalism in poetry:

American verse has, finally, come of age, with an impressive terracing of generations, from living masters—like Frost, Williams, and Pound—to the newest, brightest recruit from Harvard, Iowa or San Francisco. The European pilgrimage is no longer a necessity, except as a brief, leisurely interlude, probably on a travelling fellowship. In a world dominated by American-type modernity, expatriation is the problem of the European artist; influence the prerogative of the American.²²

The sheer bulk of scholarship produced in the last fifty years that addresses the interplay between Irish and American poetry is a testament to either Montague's success in winning over his contemporaries or his foresight in anticipating the inevitable. American critic Ben Howard vouches for the success of Montague's campaign in a survey of Irish and American poetry published in 2000:

[I]t would be an exaggeration to describe this cultural cross-fertilization as a literary movement, but it's fair to say that over the past two decades the presence of Ireland in American poetry, and vice versa, has produced an original body of work, as rich in questions as it is cross-cultural perceptions. To survey this body of work is to note recurrent issues, most centrally those of place, history, voice, and identity, addressed respectively from American and Irish standpoints. It is also to note persistent tensions, engendered by the foreign-born poet's ambivalent position. Whether Irish or American, the poet is at once an insider and an outsider, whose aim is to see the native culture truly as it is.²³

While exile has thus remained something of an incorrigible idea for the Irish, its concentration has shifted westward over the course of the twentieth century, from the Continental peregrinations of Joyce and Beckett to the tenured "jet-sitting" of Heaney and Boland.

²² John Montague, "American Pegasus" *Studies* 48 (1959) 183.

²³ Ben Howard, "Buffaloed and Beguiled: Reciprocal Visions of Ireland and America" *Sewanee Review* 108.1 (Winter 2000) 59. If anthologies can still be trusted as indicators of a subgenre's movement into maturity, then Daniel Tobin's compendious and beautifully arranged volume *The Book of Irish American Poetry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011) supports Howard's earlier opinion.

My dissertation considers Irish poetry written in the intervening years between Montague's observation and Howard's, a period that saw Irish poetry rise from the doldrums of the "malaise era" at midcentury to the global recognition it now enjoys.²⁴ I concentrate here on five poets – John Montague (b. 1929), Padraic Fiacc (b. 1924), James Liddy (1934–2008), Seamus Heaney (b. 1939), and Eavan Boland (b. 1944) – all born in that decisive period between the creation of the Irish Free State and the conclusion of the second world war. Although their formative experiences and backgrounds vary, they share myriad experiences and points of reference as members of the same generation. Their parents were members of the original "Troubles" generation that lived through (and in a few cases participated in) the chaos of the 1920s: a period of guerilla warfare, shifting allegiances, violent reprisals, increased sectarianism, partition, and a new and pervasive militarism in Irish life.²⁵ Despite this, their children were the first generation in nearly three centuries to witness the growth of the Irish economy under Sean Lemass's expansionist economic programs of the 1960s and the first since the 1830s to witness the growth of the Irish population in Ireland. With the reemergence of the "Northern Crisis" in the late 1960s, however, they also witnessed a similar violence and paramilitarism that disfigured their parents' lives. Lastly, each poet's career (with the exception of Fiacc's) has been influenced by the taste of American universities and literary foundations for Irish poets and poetry, a development that has more than any other reshaped how Irish poets imagine their vocation and their audience.

²⁴ For a detailed explanation of historian J.J. Lee's phrase "malaise era," see his *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 271–328.

²⁵ Among scores of histories that have been written about this period, particularly helpful to me are Lee's *Ireland, 1912 – 1985* 56–168 and two books by Michael Laffan *Ireland and Partition, 1911–1925* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1983) and *The Resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin Party, 1916–1923* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999).

The title of my dissertation, *The Poetics of Return*, indicates how I have chosen to confront the issues of exile, alienation, emigration, dislocation, displacement, etc., that to have remained an abiding interest for these poets and their readers despite protestations. As metaphorical “forms of exile” (to borrow Montague’s phrase) have replaced political and social exile, the locus of creative anxiety has shifted away from the initial act of leaving and toward the possibility, necessity, or even desirability of return. Note, for instance, how Liddy frames his “relationship to Ireland” in a 1996 interview:

My relationship to Ireland is dictated by the customary law of birth, exile, and possible return; it is the usual gathering of panic and confusion, complicated at the end of the century by the sudden loss in the culture of a sure sense of cyclic return.²⁶

Channeling Said’s earlier diagnosis of an “unexpected, unwelcome loss” of “home” as an idea, Liddy presents this *loss of return* as occurring at a cultural level rather than a personal level. My reading suggests that the other poets in this study are similarly sensitive to such a sense of loss and express it in similar terms. Whether or not the figure of the writer-in-exile is a modern fantasy, each of the poets discussed here assumes that a more natural rhythm to the poet’s life has been disrupted, perhaps irretrievably, by the new realities of the global era.²⁷ Heaney wonders in “The Flight Path,” for instance, what psychic disturbances attend the Irish poet’s “coming back” during an era of quick and easy transit:

Up and away. The buzz from duty free.
Black velvet. Bourbon. Love letters on high.
The spacewalk of Manhattan. The reentry.

Then California. Laid back Tiburon.
Burgers at Sam’s, deck-tables and champagne,

²⁶ Brian Arkins and James Liddy, “From McDaid’s to Milwaukee: Brian Arkins Interview James Liddy” *Studies* 85 (1996) 338.

²⁷ See, in this context, Fintan O’Toole *The Ex-Isle of Erin* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1997).

Plus a wall-eyed, hard-baked seagull looking on
...
Coming back, less long goodbye than standoff.²⁸

Boland, an indefatigable critic of the Irish rhetoric of bounded place, nevertheless composes a poem in California that longs with a Yeatsian yen for an insular piece of Irish ground to call her own:

I have two daughters.

They are all I ever wanted from the earth.

Or almost all.

I also wanted one piece of ground.

One city trapped by hills. One urban river.
An island in its element.

So I could say *mine*. *My own*.
And mean it.²⁹

Her sentiment seems to reach back for something that she worries is no longer there, no longer available to her. In this she echoes an emotion articulated in Brian Coffey's *Missouri Sequence* written four decades earlier: "there is a love of Ireland/withering for Irishmen."³⁰

I should note that this dissertation, in confronting these issues, does not intend to be an exhaustive or even comprehensive treatment of the topic of exile and return in contemporary Irish poetry. Many poets who would fall quite naturally under my rubric do not appear, some of them quite major figures such as Paul Muldoon, Derek Mahon, Medbh MacGuckian, and Eamon Grennan. Rather, I have thought of this dissertation as a

²⁸ Seamus Heaney, "The Flight Path" *Opened Ground* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998) 385.

²⁹ Eavan Boland, "The Lost Land" *New Collected Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009) 260.

³⁰ Brian Coffey "Missouri Sequence" *Selected Poems* (Dublin: New Writers' Press, 1971) 30.

starting point for a longer and more generous project. My purpose in writing about lesser known figures such as Padraic Fiacc, James Liddy, Greg Delanty, and Eamonn Wall is to invite their unique voices into a scholarly dialogue that has tended to exclude them.

* * *

My first chapter examines what Elizabeth Grubgeld calls the “double birth” of John Montague and Padraic Fiacc, each of whom spent a significant portion of his childhood in New York City during the Depression.³¹ Returning to Ireland and aspiring to the “insular Irish” role of poet, Montague and Fiacc initially create narratives of nativism and belonging in their poems as bulwarks against their outsider position before eventually drawing on that same outsider position as a source of poetic identity. I also discuss their significance as the sons of political exiles, their fathers having emigrated to the United States in the chaos following the Irish Civil War, owing, the poets presume, to their involvement. The emigration and dissolution of their families in Depression-era New York is the formative event in the lives of both poets, and they rely on the mode of elegy and lament when addressing their experiences in both Ireland and America. Though the nature of their poetry and its legacy is vastly different, Montague and Fiacc serve as plausible starting points in defining the contemporary problem of return.

In chapter two, I turn to a very different figure in James Liddy, a poet who seems at ease with his decision to emigrate to the U.S. As a protégé of Patrick Kavanagh and a devotee of Joyce, Liddy was one of the pivotal figures in the revival of the arts scene in Dublin in the 1960s before he emigrated to San Francisco in 1967 in search of the Beat poets and the era’s sexual freedom. In the scant scholarship that exists on Liddy, he is

³¹ Elizabeth Grubgeld, “Topography, Memory, and John Montague’s *The Rough Field*” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 14.2 (January 1989) 26. Grubgeld is writing of Montague only, but it seems to me that the term applies equally well to Fiacc’s situation.

approached as a figure uninterested in the notion of exile. In a careful reading of his poetry, I show that this characterization ignores his determined search for meaning in what he recognized as an unprecedented paradigm for the Irish poet. Liddy is among the earliest Irish poets to lead a life split between America during the academic year and Ireland during the summers. As such he is among the earliest to voice its freedoms and loneliness.

Chapter three considers the odd case of Seamus Heaney, who has benefitted more than any poet from his professional association with American institutions and audiences, first at the University of California, Berkeley in 1970 and then at Harvard from 1984 to 2006. Yet Heaney's poems continue to take little account of his time outside of Ireland, nor of American places and events. Both Michael Allen and Carol Tell have attempted to pull together a canon of Heaney's "American poems"; building on their scholarship, I show how these poems assist in the development of "vision" in his work.³² With reference to a small group of poems, I argue that Heaney is unable to properly "see" American places except as points from which to return imaginatively to Ireland. Imaginative return is an important aspect of what Peter McDonald calls Heaney's "visionary poetics."³³ While scholarship on Heaney's "sense of place" is exhaustive, I use Ramazani's basic framework to explain how Ireland has subtly shifted from a "bounded place" to a "layered space" in his work.

³² Michael Allen, "The Parish and the Dream: Heaney and America, 1969-1987" *Southern Review* 31.3 (Summer 1995) 726-38; Carol Tell, "Found, Happy, and Away from Home: Seamus Heaney's Westering" *Part-Time Exiles: Contemporary Irish Poets and Their American Migrations* (Bethesda, MD: Academica Press, LLC, 2001).

³³ Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 20-40.

My last chapter continues the discussion of imaginative return by applying it to Eavan Boland's 1998 collection *The Lost Land*, the first to appear after her appointment to the faculty of Stanford University in 1995. I consider how Boland's nomadic childhood outside of Ireland has challenged her Irish identity, which comes into particular focus in her first years in California. While resolutely identifying herself as an Irish poet, Boland remains wary of the nationalist poetics that she associates with the Irish "sense of place." Beginning with *War Horse* (1975), her poetry complicates and destabilizes this sense of place by grounding an Irish identity in her role as mother and wife. *The Lost Land* records the crisis of identity that occurs when Boland finds herself separated from her adult daughters who have remained in Ireland. Whereas Heaney's visionary act of return results in a descriptive assuredness, Boland's inevitably seeks out uncertainty and ambiguity.

Whatever their travels, each of the poets discussed above is overwhelmingly concerned with Ireland and Irish matters. In my conclusion, then, I look briefly at a younger generation of Irish poets who have "gone native" in the United States, and I identify a subgenre of poems that presents Ireland and America and as a single hybrid environment which I call the "migrant place." I argue that Howard's discussion of "cross-fertilization" above can be applied with accuracy to the methods adopted by poets such as Greg Delanty, Eamonn Wall, and Matthew Sweeney in creating this new environment. Rather than constantly looking back from America to Ireland, these poets bring Ireland forward into the landscapes of their adopted home. The result is a more clearly envisioned example of Ramazani's transnational poetics than is Heaney's. These poets' shared interest is the migrant place, of which America and Ireland are interrelated,

constitutive parts, with neither here nor there (and thus no genuine “exile” nor “return”) but a constant transit.

* * *

Writing this dissertation, I have come across dozens of poems, stories, songs, memoirs, customs, and legends whose relevance to my thesis seems at once enormous and indefinable. In keeping with academic discipline, I have left almost all of these wonderful *triviata* out of the general flow of my argument. But I will conclude by citing one particular historical note – a *multum in parvo* – that has remained with me since the earliest days of this project. In a 1935 essay, historian Mary Byrne describes a peculiar legal custom practiced by some coastal clans during the medieval period in Ireland.³⁴ In this custom she calls “setting adrift,” Byrne describes how a bastard child would be placed in a small currach, sometimes with a day’s worth of food and potable water, and shoved out into the sea. The people then watched to see if heavenly favor would bring the child safely back to shore. If it did, the child was welcomed back with all the legal rights of other bastards restored, but he would be forever suspected as one who had left the soil of his native land and been transformed into something different. If, on the other hand, the winds of providence took him out to sea to be drowned or marooned on unknown shores, the clan wondered what awful fate had befallen him or to what accursed place he might have traveled, never to return.

³⁴ Mary Byrne, “On the Punishment of Setting Adrift” *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature: an Anthology of Criticism*, ed. Jonathan Wooding (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000) 22–26.

Chapter 1

THE DOUBLE BIRTH OF JOHN MONTAGUE AND PADRAIC FIACC

“So succession passes, through strangest hands”— John Montague, “The Country Fiddler”¹

Before a public poetry reading in Belfast in the mid 1970s, Padraic Fiacca mentioned to John Montague in passing that they were both sons of “fathers who had sweated working in the New York subways.”² Fiacca does not reveal what, if anything, Montague made of this revelation, but if nothing else the anecdote reminds us of the experience shared by two Northern Irish poets whose work and legacy, at first glance, appear strikingly different. Alongside Seamus Heaney, Montague is probably the most lauded living Irish poet, often credited with revitalizing Irish poetry at midcentury and clearing the way for the more celebrated generation of Northern poets – such as Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Medbh MacGuckian, and Paul Muldoon – who followed his modernizing and internationalizing example. Montague won widespread acclaim with the book-length sequential poem *The Rough Field* (1972). Fiacca, by contrast, has endured long stretches of critical obscurity and neglect, punctuated every half decade or so by a new effort to revive interest in his work. If known at all to a general readership, Fiacca is probably best remembered as the poet responsible for the controversial anthology

¹ John Montague, *The Rough Field* 5th ed. (1972; Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest UP, 1989) 14. Hereafter passages taken from *The Rough Field* will be identified by the abbreviation *TRF*.

² John Brown, “Interview with Padraic Fiacca” *My Twentieth-Century Night Life: A Padraic Fiacca Miscellany* ed. Patrick Ramsey (Belfast: Lagan Press, 2009) 306.

of Ulster “Troubles” poetry *The Wearing of the Black* (1974), which ignited a furor of negative publicity in both literary and political circles in Ireland. As he later admitted to John Brown, “I must have been a sadist and a masochist to do an anthology of ‘Troubles’ writing. I’m an American and an outsider” (318).

Even if all poets, as Charles Wright once observed, are exiles in their art, Montague and Fiacca are doubly removed from the center points of belonging. As Fiacca’s appeal to an essential otherness suggests, the American contexts of these poets’ biographies mark each as an outsider, and each has had to contend with the nativist biases that still held power in Irish letters deep into the last century. This “bardolatry” has been decried by one prominent critic as the prerogative of an “insular Irish” conception of the poet. In differing ways, the work of these two Northern Irish poets has attempted to expose the flaws of such an insularity, even as both poets bear the burden of this conception.³ One might argue that Montague and Fiacca are the sons of the last true wave of political and economic exile from Ireland to America following the Anglo-Irish Treaty and partition. They are probably among the last poets for whom the conventional use of the term “exile,” as it has been understood in Ireland from at least the 17th century, is appropriate.⁴ Though certainly, as I show in subsequent chapters, they are not among the last to trade on narratives of exile to help explain their migrations abroad.

³ Daniel Tobin, *Awake in America: On Irish American Poetry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011) 118.

⁴ I distinguish here between the “political exile” that was hastened, if not prompted, by republican activity during the Irish Civil War period and the various later periods of concentrated outmigration due to economic conditions in the 1950s and early 1980s. Some writers consider these outmigrations as virtual periods of “economic exile.” See, in particular, Eamonn Wall, *From the Sin-é Café to the Black Hills: Notes on the New Irish* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

Born in Belfast in 1924, Fiacca emigrated with his family from the new Northern Ireland to Manhattan in 1929.⁵ Reared and educated in Hell's Kitchen, Fiacca did not return to Belfast until he was 22, and spent much of the 1950s moving between Belfast and New York before achieving a moment of literary fame when he won the Æ Memorial Prize, the first Northern poet to do so, for his unpublished manuscript of poems *Woe to the Boy* (1957). Montague, for his part, was born in Brooklyn in 1929, the same year as Fiacca's emigration, but was sent back to Ireland at the age of four to be raised by his paternal aunts in rural County Tyrone.⁶ Much as Fiacca had done in returning to Ireland, Montague returned to the United States to apprentice himself as a poet in his early twenties, spending time traveling, writing, and teaching. The uprootings that characterized the early years of these poets were the direct consequence of their fathers' flights to New York during that tense period of uncertain affiliations and political reprisals following the Irish Civil War, which included, importantly, the onset of the original Northern "troubles" of the 1920s. Political murders were particularly concentrated in the new "border country" created by partition (what Montague calls "the earthworks of anger" in "The Black Pig" section of *The Dead Kingdom*).⁷ Both Bernard

⁵ According to Fiacca, his father Bernard left Belfast in 1928 to establish a foothold for his family's grocery business in Manhattan. Fiacca's mother, Annie, was reluctant to join him, but eventually acquiesced after winning a large sum of money on a horse race, enough to finance second-class passage for herself and her three young sons on a Cunard ship bound for Nova Scotia. See Northern Voices Television, "In Conversation with Padraic Fiacca" *Our Generation: The Northern Irish Archive, 1965–2010* (2010). Web. 2 June 2012.

⁶ James Montague emigrated to the Bushwick area of Brooklyn in 1925, soon after the details of the new Northern Ireland border were finalized. His wife Molly joined him in 1928. Having two older sons and living in poverty, the couple did not plan to have another child. Thus, Molly's pregnancy with their third son, John, was not entirely welcome and proved to be difficult. Montague, *Born in Brooklyn* (Fredonia, NY: White Pines Press, 1991).

⁷ Montague, "The Black Pig" *The Dead Kingdom* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest UP, 1984) 43. Hereafter passages taken from *The Dead Kingdom* will be identified by the abbreviation *DK*.

O'Connor (Fiacc's father) and James Montague hailed from this border country – O'Connor from Cavan and Montague from Tyrone – and their sons enlarge the importance of the Civil War and partition in their decisions to abandon Ireland for fresh starts in New York.⁸ Each poet has recognized his father's "flight" as the defining fact of his familial legacy and has used poetry as a means to explore the repercussions of his father's exile in the disruption and dissolution of their respective families.

To address their experience of exile, both poets have adopted, in large scale, the "modern" elegiac mode as identified in Jahan Ramazani's influential study *The Poetry of Mourning* (1994). Like other modern poets of mourning (many of them noticeably American), Montague and Fiacc imbue their elegies with "an extraordinary diversity and range, incorporating more anger and skepticism, more conflict and anxiety."⁹ Within a paradigm of mourning that tends to reject the premodern convention of consolation, both poets frame their parents' American exile as death prefigured. Each departure – exile and death – is inextricable from the other, though the former looms larger. The act of remembering, therefore, becomes synonymous with a conspicuous act of mourning. Their parents' lives in America are figured as a type of purgatory, their eventual physical demise an afterthought.

In "Stele for a Northern Republican," later collected into the fifth canto of *The Rough Field*, Montague travesties the trope of the resurrection (one of the most powerful

⁸ It is important to note that the evidence for either man's involvement in the armed conflict is almost entirely anecdotal. Fiacc, in particular, is vague in interviews about what exactly he believed his father's involvement entailed, or if he was involved at all.

⁹ Jahan Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 1.

conventional consolations of the elegy) when he describes finding the fruits of his father's violent past reemerging in the fields surrounding his childhood home:

A generation later, the only sign
of your parochial struggle was
when the plough rooted rusty guns,
dull bayonets, in some rushy glen
for us to play with.

(TRF 42)

James Montague appears here, as in much of his son's poetry, as a sower of discord: a rural farmer pressed into the service of the IRA.¹⁰ As the son fated to return to the neglected home place, Montague must reap the yields of his father's absence, imagined as ploughshares beaten into swords. For his part, Fiacca defies consolation by reveling in the absurd incongruities between his father's character as he knew it and Bernard O'Connor's supposed heroism in the cause. In "The Wearing of the Black," for example, he recalls listening to his mother singing the popular parlor ballad "The Blue Bells of Scotland," and he latterly interjects his own rejoinder to the ballad's plaintive question:

'Where, O where has my Highland Laddie gone?'

*He is gone to America for
He is on the bloody run!*¹¹

Rather than construct encomia, these elegies demythologize the figure of the heroic exiled republican freedom fighter so glorified in patriotic ballads and songs popular on both sides of the Atlantic – a figure perhaps most embodied at the time by republican

¹⁰ Montague's description of his father burying guns near the family farm evokes the uncertain nature of the negotiations that ended the Civil War and conforms to Eamon De Valera's directive to republican fighters in early 1923 to bury their guns and armaments until the time they would be needed again. See Michael Laffan's audio lecture, "The Irish Civil War" University College, Dublin (historyhub.ie, 2011), and Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 426–429.

¹¹ Fiacca, "The Wearing of the Black" *Nights in the Bad Place* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1977) 37.

revolutionary, internee, hunger striker, and writer Ernie O'Malley.¹² The poets' fathers, by contrast, appear in their son's poetry as men emasculated and ultimately undone by their exile. Whatever patriotic fervor for their homeland or new passion for the "American dream" they might have held gives way to a weary acquiescence to the realities of immigrant life in Depression-era New York. James Montague becomes, in his son's estimation, "the least happy/man I have known," transfigured into a specter of sadness and pity after his emigration:¹³

...His face
retained the pallor
of those who work the underground:
the lost years in Brooklyn
listening to a subway
shudder the earth.

(TRF 45)

Montague continually returns to his father's occupation "underground" as a ticket clerk in a Brooklyn subway station as an apt metaphor for a kind of living death typifying his life

¹² O'Malley (1897-1957) was an officer in the Irish Republican Army during the Irish War of Independence and later a leading agitator in anti-Treaty guerilla operations during the first months of the Free State. He was imprisoned a number of times by both English and pro-Treaty Irish forces and nearly executed before gaining his freedom in 1924. During 1928 and 1929, the year of Montague's birth and Fiacca's crossing, O'Malley gained notoriety among Irish ex-patriots and Hibernian societies in the United States (and in New York in particular) during a fundraising tour organized by Eamon De Valera on behalf of the American Promotions Committee for *The Irish Times*. O'Malley's feats of bravery and intrigue – remarkable though they were – were easily exaggerated by overeager hosts given to mythologizing the struggle. See *Broken Landscapes: Selected Letters of Ernie O'Malley*, Cormac K.H. O'Malley and Nicholas Allen, eds. (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2011) 48. Also Richard English, "The inborn hate of all things English: Ernie O'Malley and the Irish Revolution 1916–1923" *Past and Present* 151 (May 1996): 174–199; English, *Ernie O'Malley: IRA Intellectual* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998); Nicholas Allen, "Ernie O'Malley's Afterlife" in *Broken Landscapes* xi–xxvi.

¹³ I sense both poets are interested in Yeats's early dramatic verse allegory *The Wandering of Oisín*. Montague's description of his father as "the least happy man/I have known" recalls the chained woman's direction to Oisín in Book II to

Flutter along the froth lips of the sea
And home to me again,
...
And tell me that you found a man unbid,
The saddest of all men.

The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner Paperback, 1996) 386.

in America. He may have survived the civil war and its subsequent reprisals, but James Montague's exile is presented as a suspended, spectral existence, lacking color and definition.

Fiacc more often trades pity for disgust by portraying his father as a drink-sodden depressive who relives a radical past in sad pantomime:

Father asleep in Central Park without
A hole to hide in you're dead now but

Not inside. Inside it is still
Old Nineteen Twenty wirelasses

Jangle glass beads:
Ay, you steal back
For the cop to beat you over the head

With the night stick for 'drunk as sin'
Singing the Red Flag again
but nobody
Cares: It's not an insult any more.¹⁴

Yet for all Bernard O'Connor's clownishness, Fiacc suggests that Ireland is still a poorer place for his having left. And the hole that Fiacc finally invites his father's spirit to inhabit is not his American grave but the absence created in his homeland by his leaving:

Hide in the bogpit waste we've made
of this place
Ourselves just by running away from it.
(SPF 36)

In a similarly loveless elegy, Fiacc finds a telling poignancy in his father's descent from ardent IRA recruiter to a mournful and self-pitying subway worker. His travesty of the *Paternoster* emphasizes Bernard O'Connor's impotence:

Our father who art a Belfast night
—pub bouncer had to have
A bodyguard, drilled recruits for

¹⁴ Fiacc, "Goodbye to Our Father" *Selected Padraic Fiacc* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1979) 36. Hereafter *Selected Padraic Fiacc* will be designated by the abbreviation *SPF*.

died

With no hankering

To fly back ‘home,’ the way that you never

Of the fields of that crossroad town between

Leitrim, Longford and Cavan, begot

Bull-bellowing out in
That hollowing slum subway
'God damn it Christ, why?
That child belonged to me!'

(RP 93)

As in the previous elegy, Fiacca allows his father the briefest moment of reprieve when he is appealed to prayerfully as an intercessor. In death, Fiacca's mother and father achieve a kind of intimacy that eluded them in life. But the cost of this intimacy is dear:

Pray
For us now that you and she
Bed together in your American grave
And at what an unnatural price!

(RP 94)

Fiacca's description of his parents' situation as "unnatural" is a revealing final note. There is a strong sense in both poets' work that their parents' exile is a disruption to a more natural order – a precursor to the "anomalous" condition defining the Northern Irish polity identified in David Lloyd's scholarship¹⁷ – and that Ireland's civil war and civil strife transformed their parents' generation into grotesques of loss and violence. Fiacca's maternal grandparents, for instance, were "burnt out" of their home in Lisburn during an anti-Catholic riot in 1920 as a result of their staunch support for the nationalist cause. In a series of couplets recalling the bellicose "fruits" of James Montague's "parochial struggle," Fiacca testifies to his own family's hostility to the newly created Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) in the years between "the slump and the sellout":

My father is a Free Stater 'Cavan buck.'
My mother is a Belfast factory worker. Both

Carry guns, and the grandmother with a gun
In her apron, making the Military wipe

Their boots before they rape the house. (These

¹⁷ See David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing in the Post-Colonial Moment* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993).

Civil wars are only ever on paper.)
(*RP* 18)

The narrowing circles of these “civil wars” run ever tighter. A number of Montague’s poems ruminate on the internecine political murders and executions post-Treaty. He listens intently to his father’s tale of receiving orders from “the Dublin organizer, /shot afterwards, by his own side” (*TRF* 42). Such guilt runs matrilinearly, too: Montague’s maternal uncles spent time as internees in Ballykinlar during the Anglo-Irish War. He recalls that when

Sprung, after the Treaty,
they serve as officers in
the new Free State Army,
their first national duty
to hunt down old comrades,
split by the Treaty.
(*DK* 65)

The horror of their duties remains with these men, but as the memories buoy up during their later, quotidian lives, Montague records them with a note of bathos rather than horror. In an elegy for a favorite aunt and uncle, “Abbeylara,” Montague includes a brief portrait of his Uncle John:

In the house at Abbeylara
it was always busy & warm,
Uncle John bending down to
pat a terrier with eyebrows
as busy as his own, or
crackling his newspaper,
*“I saw Mick Collins once,
black haired and laughing,
they shouldn’t have shot him.”*
(*DK* 16)

Despite the Irish conflict’s greater narratives of bitter division between Irish and British, Home Rulers and Loyalists, Republicans and Treatyites, or Catholics and Protestants,

both poets suggest the inwardly directed nature of the violence – a “bogpit waste” created, in Fiacca’s words, by “ourselves” via intratribal and, ultimately, intrafamilial crimes.

Internequine political conflicts come to serve as metaphors for the conflicts between the parents. If their fathers appear defeated and resigned in their new world surroundings, their mothers become combative and hardened by resentment, refusing to acclimate to a new home. The poems suggest that these courtships and marriages are doomed from the start because of the noxious environment in which they began. In one of his many elegies for his mother, Montague recreates his parents’ early life together:

His Irish Molly
father called you,
your courtship & wedding
to the sound of marching.
Remember your honeymoon
in troubled Dublin:
a brattle of gunfire
as our pious father
hurries to early Mass...
(DK 64)

After emigration such external battles turn inward. For Molly Montague, America is a “muddy cup/she refused to drink.” His parents’ reunion, rather than joyous, is “the shattering of/that early dream,” something more properly found in a scene “played by Boucicault/or Eugene O Neill”:

His landlady didn’t know
my father was married
so who was the woman
landed on the doorstep
with grown sons

my elder brothers
lonely and lost
Father staggers back
from the speak-easy
for his stage entrance
[....]
so,

she laid in to him
with the frying pan

till he caught her
by the two wrists,
*Molly, my love, if
you go on like this
you'll do yourself harm.*

(DK 64)

The final three lines mark the transition of the logic of internecine conflict from the political arena to the marital: “*Molly, my love, if/you go on like this/you'll do yourself harm.*” Montague imagines himself being conceived in the aftermath of this moment of domestic turmoil. Much as his parents’ courtship proceeded to “the sound of marching” and the “brattle of gunfire,” their final, desperate act of lovemaking occurs to the sound of “the clatter of/garbage cans” under “a crumbling brownstone/roof in Brooklyn” where

like a loving man
my father leant
on the joystick
& they were reconciled
made another child

a third son who
beats out this song
to celebrate the odours
that bubbled up
so rank and strong

From that muddy cup
My mother refused
to drink but kept
wrinkling her nose
in souvenir of

*(cops and robbers,
cigarstore Indians
& coal black niggers,
bathtub gin and
Jewish neighbors)*

(“A Muddy Cup” DK 66–7)

Montague senses that his mother associates him with this “muddy cup,” an America that she rejects outright. He is the material product of a failed and loveless marriage and another aspect of what she considers to be the despoiled urban milieu of working class Brooklyn. That she sent him away to be raised by paternal aunts is difficult enough for Montague. That she failed to bring him back to her when she herself returned to Ireland a few years later – to Fintona a mere seven miles away from Garvaghey – is a lasting testament to the cruelty of the poet’s familial exile. Such a realization informs the Oedipal outlines of *The Dead Kingdom*’s rawest emotional poem, “Intimacy,” in which the poet recalls his attempts as a young man to win the affections of his estranged mother, as he might a lover:

‘Mother, mother,’ I whisper,
over the years we had won
to a sweet intimacy together.
She would come with me often
to Fintona’s first picturehouse,
rigged out like a girlfriend
in her evening finery, snug
in the best seats, munching
soft centred chocolates. Naturally
we chose romances, Sir Laurence
stalking the cliffs in *Rebecca*,
Leslie Howard defending the South,
courteous through cannons smoke,
and I thought I might bring her
to some sad story of Brooklyn,
the bridge’s white mirage shining
over broken lives like her own,
but she wept, and dabbed her eyes;
‘I hate films about real life.’

(DK 70)

By plying his mother’s Brooklyn memories as one would a lover’s secrets, Montague hopes that she will help him understand the tragic dimensions of his family’s life, but she continues to evade him in spite of the “sweet intimacy” they have achieved. Molly Montague subsumes the “brokenness” of her real life into the easy melodrama of film. If,

on the one hand, the image of the “rusty guns” and “dull bayonets” in “Stele for a Northern Republican” confound the elegiac convention of consolation through inheritance or resurrection, “Intimacy” dramatizes Montague’s frustrated search for a narrative of origin – “some sad story of Brooklyn” – in which he might find some solace. Molly Montague returns to Ireland a “broken” person and a divisive figure in the poet’s life who only furthers his feeling of disconnection.

Fiacc’s mother, Annie, whom the poet remembers as having the air of a stylish “flapper” during their crossing on the Cunard ship *Antonia*, became the family’s sole economic provider. She worked at a factory near 14th street following Bernard’s bankruptcy and descent into alcoholism. Her absence from her son is not so much an emotional or psychological distance but an unfortunate reality of economic hardships, but no less wounding for it. Fiacc wonders

Will the wound ever close
On the boy of ten
.....
Mother will
Never come home
From the Box Factory
(“An Old Man Has A Bad Dream,” *SPF* 37)

Chris Agee identifies this “American ‘wound’” as the relevant trope in all of Fiacc’s verse, one that unites his two most deeply felt environments: Hell’s Kitchen and Belfast. The wound, Agee writes, “strongly suggests that the traumatic jolt of a forced immigration lies close to the heart of the two characteristic features of his poetry: a special feeling for the world of childhood and a knack for universalizing the sordid, mean,

pinched, vicious sectarianism of a Belfast riven by the Troubles.”¹⁸ The “sordid, mean, pinched” world of Fiacc’s own childhood was not only Belfast, of course, but also New York. Though he was initially filled with a child’s wonder at the color and movement of the streets, he took from his mother a strong antipathy for the city that she viewed as the cause of her family’s poverty. “In my mother’s day America was exile,” Fiacc later explained:

My first impressions of New York were that it was full of bright lights and yellow taxis and movement. I loved the brightness. I was excited. I was very close to my mother and I knew instinctively that she did not want to go to America. I came to hate every part of New York—even the brightness—for no matter how glittery it was I was determined to hate it because my mother hated it.¹⁹

Such was Annie O’Connor’s influence on her eldest child that when she began to suffer from a fatal illness in the late 1940s, he recalls that “my hatred for America increased to the ratio that I watched my mother wither.”²⁰

Montague has called his parents’ generation of political and economic exiles the “real lost generation” (*DK* 65). As prodigal sons, he and Fiacc are the living heirs to an Irish Republican culture that, in the years following the Anglo-Irish Treaty, was as much defined by its absence from the newly partitioned island as by its presence in the newly formed Free State.²¹ Montague and Fiacc therefore chronicle the Irish condition from the ambiguous vantage of the native foreigner, burdened by a familial sense of loss and

¹⁸ Chris Agee, “Fiacc’s America: To Hell’s Kitchen and Back” *My Twentieth Century Night Life* 256. [orig. pub., *Padraic Fiacc: Post of the Pagan City*. Fortnight Educational Supplement 370 (1999)].

¹⁹ John Brown 306.

²⁰ Fiacc, “Hell’s Kitchen: An Autobiographical Fragment” *My Twentieth Century Night Life* 123.

²¹ Writing of Montague, Guinn Batten observes that his poetry in general “confront[s] the lost cause that is his genetic and historical legacy,” “‘Something Mourns’: Wordsworth and the Landscape of Mourning in *The Rough Field* 1972)” *Well Dreams: Essays on John Montague*, ed. Thomas Dillon Redshaw (Omaha, NE: Creighton UP, 2004) 189–190.

betrayal and yet also free from the oppressive weight of tradition and free to admit American idioms into their poetry. Their poems often bear the psychic trait of what Elizabeth Grubgeld has dubbed “a double birth” – an alternating fealty to and distance from both their Irish and American origins.²² Each poet recognizes his divided sense of self as iterative of Ireland’s fractious national history, and yet each brings to the “Northern Crisis” a sense of what Daniel Tobin identifies as the diaspora condition particular to the children of Irish American exile: a condition that searches for symbols of authentic belonging while simultaneously recognizing an irreconcilable and irreducible foreignness.²³

II. Narratives of Succession

Antoinette Quinn has observed that within traditional Irish folkways the bard carries strong associations with the tribe and the family, functioning as “recorder, elegist, [and] the assuager of ‘tribal pain’.”²⁴ In response to their acute feelings of foreignness, both poets have sought out in their elegies narratives of succession that reconstitute their right to, in a sense, speak for their tribe. Having perhaps the deeper hurt from his feelings of maternal abandonment, Montague has been more steadfast and formal in searching out and defending a familial blood right to his role as poet. In the oft-anthologized “The Country Fiddler,” for example, he elegizes his bachelor uncle – who was also his

²² Elizabeth Grubgeld, “Topography, Memory, and John Montague’s *The Rough Field*” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 14.2 (January 1989) 26. Grubgeld is here writing of Montague only, but it seems to me that the term applies equally to Fiacca’s condition.

²³ Tobin, *Awake in America* 118.

²⁴ Antoinette Quinn, “‘The Well-Beloved’: Montague and the Muse” *Irish University Review* 19 (1989) 27. See also Grubgeld 27.

godfather and namesake – as a means to dramatizing his uncertain ascent to his vocation.

In leaving Ireland, his uncle also leaves behind his “music,” represented in the old fiddle:

My uncle played the fiddle – more elegantly, the violin –
A favourite at barn and cross roads dance,
He knew *The Morning Star* and *O’Neill’s Lament*.

Bachelor head of a house full of sisters,
Runner of poor racehorses, spendthrift,
He left for the New World in an old disgrace.

He left the fiddle in the rafters
When he sailed, never played afterwards,
A rural art silenced in the discord of Brooklyn.

A heavily-built man, tranquil-eyed as an ox.
He ran a wild speakeasy and died of it.
During the Depression many dosed in his cellar.

I attended his funeral in the Church of the Redemption,
Then, unexpected successor, reversed time
To return where he had been born.

During my schooldays the fiddle rusted
(The bridge fell away, the catgut snapped)
Reduced to a plaything, stinking of stale rosin.

The country people asked if I also had the music
(All the family had had) but the fiddle was in pieces
And the rafters remade, before I discovered my craft.

Twenty years afterwards, I saw the church again,
And promised to remember my burly godfather
And his rural craft, after this fashion:

So succession passes, through strangest hands.²⁵

Much as he does with his father’s guns and bayonets, Montague discovers his uncle’s

fiddle when it is already rusted and reduced to little more than a “plaything.” In such a

²⁵ “The Country Fiddler” first appeared in *Encounter* in 1962. This version is a revised draft of the poem as it appears, untitled, in the opening canto of *TRF*, 13–14. Early versions of the poem, including that which appeared in *Encounter*, contain a penultimate stanza punning on the various meanings of the verb “to fiddle.” The stanza alters the tone of the poem considerably and thus the shorter version that appears in *TRF* is, in my opinion, a fortunate revision. Also of interest is the later substitution of the tune “O’Neill’s Lament” in line 3 for the “The Fowling Piece,” which we find in earlier drafts. The emendation ties the poem more closely to *TRF*’s larger interest in the legacy of Hugh O’Neill and “the flight of the earls” from Tyrone in 1607. See “The Country Fiddler,” *Encounter* 18.5 (May 1962) 19.

state of disrepair the fiddle becomes, like the guns and the bayonets, a totem of destruction and loss rather than a totem of creation and community. “The Country Fiddler” is one of a number of Montague’s poems whose anecdotal style is at odds with the near-mythic outlines of its narrative. In the particular case of this poem, the poet is deliberately cautious in assuming the role of rightful heir to his uncle’s position as “Bachelor head of a house.” He is quick to note his position as his uncle’s godson, his presence at the uncle’s funeral, and his return years later to the gravesite to honor the dead man with a promise of obligation. Yet for all the poet’s ready and eager credentialing, the poem’s concluding line emphasizes the fact that the younger Montague remains a stranger in the process of succession.

Of perhaps greater interest to the poet is the withering away of both artist and instrument caused by the disruption of familial succession. The uncle’s exile registers as the concomitant death of his art.²⁶ We might notice that, in striving to continue an artistic tradition, Montague crafts an elegy that abides by the more traditional conventions of the form. The poem works toward a genuine moment of consolation that Ramazani (by way of Freud) would recognize as “normative.”²⁷ In much the same way as Milton mourns the death of Edward King in “Lycidas” or Tennyson mourns Arthur Hallam in *In Memoriam*, Montague sees the continuation of the deceased’s art as a way to honor that figure. To search for a closer comparison, Seamus Heaney’s “Digging,” while not an elegy, similarly presents a poet shaping a narrative by which his vocation can be seen as a

²⁶ The tidy history presented in the poem is indeed the result of artistic license, though it remains unclear whether Montague believed it to be true at the time of composition. In “The Figure in the Cave” Montague recalls his Aunt Freda telling him that he had “got it all wrong” and that his uncle had taken a fiddle with him to New York and had supposedly played a jig on the gang plank upon arriving at the harbor. See *The Figure in the Cave and Other Essays*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1989) 11.

²⁷ Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning* 1–31.

continuation of familial work. For all this, though, Montague cannot ignore the original displacement. The taking up of poetry is not merely an individual act but one performed in tandem with his uncle as a means of fulfilling a promise of the exile's return. The poem's final image testifies to the fact that succession has passed, but there has been an irretrievable break in the transmission of his uncle's "rural art" to the succeeding generation. Grubgeld argues that Montague's poems tend to invoke a "heritage of dispossession" rather than a heritage of possession, but in "The Country Fiddler" even this heritage of dispossession "is threatened by further forfeiture, the loss of the means of inheritance."²⁸ As a symbol of traditional folk art, the fiddle is not only forgotten but broken long before the inheritor might learn to play it. Such a loss might be overcome, but it cannot be undone. An undeniable lacuna exists at the heart of Montague's conception of himself as an artist in the Irish tradition. As the son of exile, he cannot help but forever feel an outsider and interloper.

Fiacc's "Old Poet" speaks to this particular heritage of dispossession as well, but whereas Montague confronts a total absence of mentorship and instrument in "The Country Fiddler," Fiacc struggles with a lack of access to what he perceives to be the authentic Irish experience and the proper subject of his poetry. The titular "old poet" is Padraic Colum, the well-known Revival-era scholar and poet and Fiacc's mentor at the beginning of his writing career in New York. While still in high school, Fiacc assembled a manuscript of poems (heavily influenced by his mother's homesickness and love of Yeats) about the estrangement of an Irish exile in America called *Innisfail Lost*. The manuscript found its way to Colum at Macmillan, who, impressed by the maturity of the poems, sought out Fiacc. Colum encouraged Fiacc to pursue a style drawn from

²⁸ Grubgeld 26.

nineteenth-century Gaelic nature poetry in English as well as from the Revival mode of Yeats. Fiacca recalls Colum's steering him away from poems about New York street life (as he was then composing) and toward the bucolic and mythical subjects of Irish Revival poetry. In the second movement of the poem, Fiacca brings to life a scene of poetic discussion as he accompanies Colum home through wintry Central Park:

The pines stood up as guests about the Hundred and First Street Lake
A table of frozen black glass.
He waved a hand up to the copper beech
To let the grey-faced student strolling with him
A tworthree bit of say

Arguing about El Greco and de Valera
The eye more on the sparrow than the ear on his own word
Who strolled the streets of Dublin with James Joyce
And had, like the rest, a bit of a tiff with Yeats...

Under the iced branches of Central Park West
With a voice could be of Daniel Corkery
Said what Yeats said what the best said
'Dig in the garden of Ireland, write of your own':

When we came to Ninety Sixth Street he
Flung eyes over the old roads
Of the midlands still looking home,
Blotted out a penthouse here to scan a hill there
Skimmed the snow on the grass as a boythrown stone
Skies the skin of water shyfully...

As season's passing, the rain
Left on the pavements where the pigeons are
The dead leaves of a summer sun.

(RP 40)

Fiacca's concerns in "Old Poet" pertain less to the disruption of a dynastic line than to the loss of the "proper" subject and idiom of the Irish poet. It captures both the wish of a young Fiacca to abide by Colum's advice to "Dig in the garden of Ireland" and the irony in Colum's advice to "write of your own." These warring impulses coalesce in the beauty and absurdity of Colum's second sight, which can blot out the unwanted features of

midtown Manhattan in order to manufacture a vision of the Irish midlands.²⁹ Fiacca aligns Colum's second sight with his own boyish ability to blot out the cityscape: "As a boy, I had Rimbaud's capacities to transform, say, the reservoir into the raging Atlantic..."³⁰ The second movement's concluding tercet, at first blush enigmatic, becomes perhaps clearer within this larger framework of transformation:

As season's passing, the rain
Left on the pavements where the pigeons are
The dead leaves of a summer sun.

In the first movement of "Old Poet," Fiacca borrows from the long Irish tradition of using birds as symbols of emigrants and exiles. Colum becomes a "clay-/reared winging bird" who despite his great distance from his home, "[s]till sings the single word" of "[t]he workhouse and the road/The turf bog, the poplar in Mullingar,/The furze bold as flesh..." (RP 39). In this second movement, then, Fiacca sees himself reflected in the New York street pigeons milling about the wet pavements and picking over "the dead leaves of a summer sun," perhaps indicating the moribund example that Colum is pushing on him. Remembering his obsession with Yeats, we are meant to notice the difference between these street pigeons he associates with himself and those Yeats describes in poems such as "In the Seven Woods."

Much as "The Country Fiddler" identifies an insuperable gap in Montague's lineage, Fiacca realizes that Colum has encouraged him to adopt a mode and subject that he cannot possibly inhabit. In writing of the street life of the Irish immigrant poor in Hell's Kitchen, Fiacca was indeed writing "of his own" at that time, yet the old poet is

²⁹ Fiacca's description of Colum's transformative vision shows some similarity to the process Seamus Heaney describes in the poem "Remembering Malibu." For my discussion of "Remembering Malibu," see Chapter 3, pp. 147–153.

³⁰ Fiacca, "Hell's Kitchen" *My Twentieth Century Night Life* 118.

unable to envision the poetic possibilities of such a subject. Fiacca would later write that Colum's insistence on his training in the Gaelic tradition only confirmed in him the persistent problems of an escapist poetics:

[Colum] gave me Gaelic literature and folklore and myth and that became important in my work. And, of course, the more I dug, the more I was horrified. Colum was trying to take me off the streets of New York and I guess I was flattered that an older, established poet was interested. In New York even if you want to escape reality you have got to face it for it just keeps coming and coming at you—there might be five or six murders a night every night in Manhattan. You see I had this terrible longing for Ireland and Padraic nursed that in me; there are the translations of early Irish literature but these poems are not about escape... "And great King Conor of himself said/Did you ever see a bottomless bucket/In the muck discarded?" How New York can you get? The link between early Irish poetry and New York is that both force you to face reality.³¹

Such misgivings are apparent even in this earlier poem, yet Fiacca largely adheres to Colum's model throughout the first decades of his career, soft-pedaling poems that address New York life in favor of poems that seem to filter the desperation of that life through the acceptable idioms of rural Irish folkways. Reading these poems in mind of Fiacca's biography (and with the benefit of his subsequent verse) gives them an odd, faintly allegorical quality. Here, for example, is Fiacca's most widely published early poem, "The Stolen Fifer," given pride of place both in Fiacca's entry in the Devin-Adair anthology *New Irish Poets* (1948) and in his award-winning manuscript *Woe to the Boy* (1957):

I was brought up in a rampart
On top of a slieve where the heart
Had its wine fill of beauty once.
I was brought up in a trance.

I was brought up in a tower
I was brought up with the poor and the done
Old man so that the Wind of the *Síd*
Did not find it hard on its power
To weave the Web of Dream over me.

³¹ John Brown 309.

Now I am locked in the *dún*
 And the people of wing and of wind and of wine
 Sing to me at the side of the moon
 And sing to me till the last star shine.

And I am a boy forever from growing
 And I am a man forever from sowing
 And no man knows what I be knowing
 When wind is on the pine and blowing.

I was brought up on top of a slieve
 And cannot live on the earth, for the town
 Of the earth which I do not believe
 In, pulls me down, pulls me down.³²

Fiacc's self-conscious adoption of a faux-Gaelic idiom in words like *slieve*, *Síd*, and *dún* and the rustic diction in the line "And no one knows what I be knowing" come across as studied, betraying too much the influence of Colum. Hemmed in by its imaginative conceit, "The Stolen Fifer" yearns to be a more frankly biographical poem. Both the "boy" "brought up in the rampart" on the *slieve* ("mountain") and later the man "locked in the *dún*" ("town") express the spiritual yen Fiacc experienced in Hell's Kitchen and later in a Franciscan theological seminary in Calicoon, New York, where the poem was probably composed.³³ The final stanza's resolution not to "live on the earth" aligns with David Gilligan's perceptive analysis of the environments of Fiacc's poems written in the Gaelic mode:

In Fiacc's cosmography, the natural world is an "upper storey" category, is other-dimensional and at odds, set apart from, the "manufactured world" below, upon which the dust of death sifts. In some of these early poems, the mechanistic world, the city eats up grace and nature, the modern urban experience devouring the rural, Gaelic past.³⁴

³² Fiacc, "The Stolen Fifer" *The Selected Padraic Fiacc* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1979) 1.

³³ There is something here, too, that calls back to the middle third of Yeats's *The Wanderings of Oisín* (which Fiacc knew) that allegorizes the poet's unhappy adolescence in London. This land is the "Isle of Many Fears" where "rose a world of towers/And blackness in the dark," *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* 372.

³⁴ David Gilligan, "Darkness Visible: Some Hidden Aspects of the Poetry of Padraic Fiacc" *My Twentieth Century Night-Life* 191.

Fiacc never reconciles himself spiritually to the “manufactured world,” nor to the “mechanistic world,” but, as I will argue, his poems eventually discover the means to overthrow outmoded Irishisms and expose and critique the rapaciousness of the modern urban experience from within. Rather than working from above, his poems again sift through the “dust of death” at street level.

III. American Influence and Montague’s *The Rough Field*

Upon its publication, Montague’s *The Rough Field* was widely considered Irish poetry’s first virtuoso performance since Patrick Kavanagh’s *The Great Hunger* (1942). Writing only three years after it appeared, Seamus Deane celebrated the sequence as an epoch-making achievement. “After the publication of *The Rough Field*,” Deane wrote, “many of the facts of Irish poetry assumed shape and meaning; and...the epic attempt in that poem marks the reuniting of the political and literary traditions which had previously been separated.”³⁵ Gregory Schirmer went further in his praise, recognizing *The Rough Field* as the crowning achievement of a poet who had worked doggedly to reanimate and then redirect a moribund literary culture during the “malaise” era.³⁶

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the poems that Montague published in the 1950s and 1960s almost single-handedly led Irish poetry out of the Sargasso Sea of provincialism in which Montague found it and into the increasingly cosmopolitan world of post-war poetry beyond the shores of Ireland...The extraordinary flowering of Irish

³⁵ Seamus Deane, “Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism: A Survey” *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle Hume: Carcanet Press, 1975) 15.

³⁶ See J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 271–328. Though Lee uses the term “malaise” primarily to characterize the political and civic atmosphere of post-Emergency Ireland, it is equally descriptive of the literary scene, of which Montague has written “what prevailed in the poetic world of Dublin was acrimony and insult; a poem was to be kicked, not examined: the begrudgers ruled.” See “Introduction” *Poisoned Lands* (1961; Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1977) iv.

poetry during the past three decades, built in part on the foundation laid by Montague, has produced a literary environment in which worldliness, sophistication, and a generally pluralistic view of Irish culture are more or less taken for granted.³⁷

The two critics characterize the sequence's legacy somewhat differently – Deane as the “reuniting” of a frayed “tradition” and Schirmer as the sounding note of a new way forward – yet both recognize that its influence lay in its mission to “open up” the Irish poem to the greater world. *The Rough Field* is at its most “Irish” (so the thinking goes) when it is at its most worldly, sophisticated, and pluralistic, attempting neither in scope nor in technique to be an isolationist piece. Its intense focus on a particular “rough field” suggests other “rough fields” that exist outside of Ireland – in America, but also on the continent, in Australia, and even England. The sequence registers the bitter reality of exile as a formative rather than an aberrative part of the Irish experience.

Just as Montague's later collection *The Dead Kingdom* seeks out the story of his origin through his strained relationship with his mother, *The Rough Field* obsesses over a paternal idea of inheritance. In terms of subject, Montague is interested primarily in his father's decision to leave Garvaghey for New York and life “in a Brooklyn slum,” but that decision is filtered through other possible models of troubled inheritance – from the infamous Flight of the Earl's to his family's long tradition as caretakers of the local parish's music, poetry, history and laws, a tradition disrupted during his father's generation.

³⁷ Gregory A. Schirmer, “‘A Richly Ambiguous Position’: Re-viewing *Poisoned Lands*, *A Chosen Light*, and *Tides*” *Well Dreams* 82. Whatever *TRF*'s intentions to create a “pluralistic view of Irish culture,” it was nevertheless adopted by the nationalist community in the North as a profound political statement on their behalf, as Deane's comment registers. This partisan support gave the sequence a frisson of danger in the charged environment of the early 1970s. A testament to this danger was Montague's decision to stage public performances of the piece, set to music by The Chieftans, in Dublin's Peacock Theatre in December 1972 and London's Camden Town theater in March 1973, but not in Belfast. See, for instance, Liam Ó Dochartaigh, “*Ceol na mBréag*: Gaelic Themes in *The Rough Field*” in *Well Dreams* 195.

The Rough Field exhibits its pluralism most clearly in its form and technique. While it revisits characteristically Irish verse tropes such as the *dinnsheanchas* (the lore of place names) or the *Amhrán na mBréag* (the song of lies), its attempt at the long form is modeled closely on American modernist experiments with additive and long form, particularly William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* (1946–63).³⁸ The immediacy of *The Rough Field*'s success can be explained at least in part by the fact that a majority of its material had been published previously, though not arranged – or “orchestrated” – as it would be in the book-length sequence.³⁹ Montague seems to have conceived *The Rough Field* as a multi-textual collage in the manner of *Paterson* as well as other mid-century American experiments with “open form.” The book weaves together historical documents, cultural arcana, folk mythology, visual images, and personal anecdote to create a portrait of Irish history as it illuminates a particular place — the poet's childhood farmstead in Garvaghey, County Tyrone.⁴⁰ Much as Williams had done with the first five books of *Paterson*, Montague began constructing and refining *The Rough Field* in the public eye, publishing five of the sequence's 11 cantos as short-run Dolmen chapbooks between 1966 and 1970.⁴¹ Public drafting granted the individual poems and cantos a feeling of

³⁸ Montague admitted this influence in his “Preface” to the fifth edition of *TRF* (1989) vii.

³⁹ A number of critics have used the term “orchestrations” to describe *TRF* and *DK*, but I have chosen to use the term “sequence” in keeping with the term most often used by Montague himself to describe these long works.

⁴⁰ “Garvaghey” is an Anglicization of the Irish *garbh achadh* meaning “rough field.”

⁴¹ These were *Patriotic Suite* (1966), *Home Again* (1967), *Hymn to the New Omagh Road* (1968), *The Bread God* (1968), and *A New Siege* (1970). Thomas Dillon Redshaw, “John Montague: An Appreciation” *Eire-Ireland* 11.4 (1976) 127–128.

“multivalence,” as one critic notes, “gaining new resonances from their charged contexts.”⁴²

Each of the work’s 11 cantos reveals a different shaping influence – familial, religious, economic, military, political, etc. – working on the lives of those living in Garvaghey. While such a structure might seem to mark the sequence out as a parochial and perhaps even an “insular Irish” work, *The Rough Field*’s unifying motif is the destructive legacy of exile, dispossession, and abandonment upon those who left Ireland and those who remained. For this reason, other places and other modes of being shape the history of Garvaghey implicitly. Garvaghey’s “narrow fields [that] wrought such division” assume the character of a “scar” that has closed but not necessarily healed.⁴³ Within this historical understanding, Montague is able to tie his own family’s history of exile in America to greater historical events, such as the aforementioned flight of the earl of Tyrone (*Tir Eoghan*) Hugh O’Neill and his fellow rebel leader Hugh O’Donnell in September 1607. In a revealing study of *The Rough Field*’s Gaelic influences, Liam Ó Dochartaigh argues that Montague places himself in the tradition of the Gaelic bards who composed formal lamentations following the earls’ flight, particularly lamentations such as Ainnrias mac Marcuis’s “Anocht is uaigneach Eire” (“To-night is Ireland lonely”):

To-night is Ireland lonely,
The expulsion of her true race causes
The cheeks of her men and fair women to be wet—
A home it is a wonder should be lonely.⁴⁴

⁴² Antoinette Quinn, “‘The Well-Beloved’: Montague and the Muse” *Irish University Review* 19 (1989) 33. Paul Grattan has identified both Montague and Fiacc as poets “continually absorbed in a permanent revolution of revision and reformation—a process which evokes the natural selection of words evolving rather than imposing meaning *sub specie aeternatus* after the fashion of ideological conceits.” “Cúchulainn Cauterised: Padraic Fiacc’s Twentieth Century Night-life” *My Twentieth Century Night-Life* 249.

⁴³ Montague, “Home Again” *TRF* 11.

⁴⁴ Ó Dochartaigh 196–97.

Montague alludes to “Anocht is uaigneach Eire” in Canto IX *A New Siege* as well as to Standish O’Grady’s annotations of Mac Marcuis:

The Earl’s being gone, the bard sees a pall of hopeless dullness settle upon Ireland; no more shall any laugh there, or children gambol; music is choked; the Irish language chained; no longer shall chiefs’ sons so much as speak whether of the Winefeast or of hearing mass; gaming is at an end, and all pastime; the improvised panegyric shall not be poured forth, nor tales recited to procure sleep; books will not be looked at, nor genealogies heard attentively.⁴⁵

O’Grady’s summary of Mac Marcuis’s lament shows the work to be strikingly similar in tone to *The Rough Field*. The wages of exile in the twentieth century are the same as those of the seventeenth: the loss of music, language, scholarship, and kinship. Montague – an unexpected, American-born heir – acts as both witness and elegist to ways of life and habits of being that have passed or are passing away. He best captures his bleak duty to which he attends in a brief epigraph:

I had never known sorrow,
Now it is a field I have inherited, and I till it.
(TRF unpaginated)

As the self-appointed mourner of the land and its history, Montague writes with a view to both distant and recent histories of dispossession:

I assert
a civilization died here;
it trembles
underfoot where I walk these
small, sad hills...
(TRF 45)

⁴⁵ Standish O’Grady, *Catalogue of Manuscripts in the British Library* (1926; Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1992) I: 399. Quoted in Ó Dochartaigh 197. Ó Dochartaigh notes that O’Grady’s annotations on Mac Marcuis and other Gaelic bards were written in the British Museum between 1889 and 1892, but not made available generally until 1926. The Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, established in 1940 as a state-sponsored organ of Irish scholarly culture, took an interest in printing and promoting works such as O’Grady’s. See also Gerry Smyth, *Decolonisation and Criticism: The Construction of Irish Literature* (London: Pluto Press, 1998) 129.

Yet even as he returns to Garvaghey and effortlessly “assume[s] old ways of walk and work,” his experience of return calcifies into a feeling of not belonging and never having belonged to the land in the first place. “With all my circling,” he writes at the close of the opening canto, “a failure to return” (*TRF* 11). These lines and others like them scattered throughout *The Rough Field* betray what Grubgeld has defined as the interrelated anxieties over “origin” and “occupancy” involved in Montague’s development. Asserting that much Irish poetry of the twentieth century “revolves around the question of occupancy and the concurrent question of origin,” Grubgeld outlines the following distinction:

Origin encompasses time, occupancy embraces space, and being requires both... Heidegger asserts that the word ‘being’ in a great many languages means to be located in a place, as well as to exist. If we exist, we are located; if we are located, we can be sure of our existence. This being, or dwelling, he says, functions as a prerequisite to any significant ‘building’ within space. The idea that to be *here* is to exist means that establishing occupancy and knowing origin are great needs.⁴⁶

As with “The Country Fiddler” discussed earlier, it is helpful to understand Montague’s purpose in *The Rough Field* as a quest to know his origins and establish occupancy in Garvaghey in order to “build” in the space of the poem – to build what William Carlos Williams called a “knowable world.” This knowable world must have “not only certain spatial possibilities but temporal ones as well,” which a longer poetic structure could strive to represent.⁴⁷ By bearing witness to both Garvaghey’s topography and its history – by fully locating himself within Garvaghey as a real place – Montague is, at a basic level, asserting his existence. The smaller poetic units that make up *The Rough Field* render meaningful the topography (the “space”) of the place that Montague was sent back to by

⁴⁶ Grubgeld 26, italics mine. Grubgeld relies on Albert Hofstadter’s translation of Heidegger’s “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1971) 135–151.

⁴⁷ Margaret Dickie, *On the Modernist Long Poem* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1986) 82.

recovering the historical events (the “time”) associated with it – i.e., knowing origin to establish occupancy. The text of the poem becomes the site where these negotiations between origin and occupancy take place, where they effectively exist. The organizing poetic principle of *The Rough Field* is, as Thomas Dillon Redshaw notes, a constant exchange between history, topography, and text.⁴⁸ This exchange signifies the meaningful existence of the poet who might not have ever existed given the circumstances of his conception. It also signifies the meaningful existence of the place, whose existence within traditional habits and folkways is doomed by economic progress (as Montague makes clear in Canto VII, *Hymn to the New Omagh Road*).

Though its potential for mawkishness is great, *The Rough Field* avoids simple sentiment and nostalgia by admitting into the narrative structure of the poem a variety of complementary and competing voices, styles, and points of view. Montague eschews the formal Victorian era models of place poetry (such as those of George Moore) in favor of the experimental collage methods found in longer American sequences of the midcentury.⁴⁹ As David Gardiner notes, Montague intends to reclaim Tyrone as much from the English poetry of place as from its colonizing historical forces.⁵⁰ To that end, *The Rough Field* includes not only reproductions of John Derricke’s famous Elizabethan woodcuts depicting the conquest of Ireland, but also fragments of other texts – official documents, letters, diaries, flyers, and newspapers – within the margins of the page to

⁴⁸ Thomas Dillon Redshaw, “John Montague’s *The Rough Field: Topos and Texne*” *Studies* 249 (Spring 1974) 31–46.

⁴⁹ See Montague, “George Moore: The Tyranny of Memory” *The Figure in the Cave* 86–97.

⁵⁰ David Gardiner, “Unsentimental Prophecy: John Montague and the *Dolmen Miscellany* (1962)” *Well Dreams* 73.

complicate the reading of the poem.⁵¹ Where these marginalia differ from, say, Eliot's footnotes to *The Waste Land* is that their purpose is not to anchor obscure references but to become part of the creative body of the poem itself, commenting upon, enriching, and even distracting the reader from what would otherwise be considered the poem proper. An example is Montague's portrait of his paternal grandfather, John Montague – "country lawyer/Hedge school master, Redmonite" – which exists simultaneously in two distinct strains. Here first is the marginal gloss, quoted from a nineteenth century newspaper account, describing his grandfather's rise to local political influence:

On the recommendation of the Earl
of Belmore, H.M.L., the Lord
Chancellor has appointed the
following gentleman to the
Commission of the peace of
Tyrone County: on behalf and
under the Seal of H.M. Queen
Victoria: Dr. J.J. Todd, Omagh;
William Anderson, The Grange,
Tullyhogue; Neil Bradley,
Strabane; Robert Hall Anderson,
Sixmilecross; John Montague, Garvaghey.
(TRF 12)

This official account of John Montague's rise within the Victorian colonial order, whose local authority can be traced, rather grandly, to the Queen herself, vies with Montague's more personal vision of his grandfather derived from a "silvered daguerreotype":

Such posed
Conceit recalls post Famine years
When Catholics regain the precious
Right to rise above their neighbors.
Labourers stooped in his fields while
John Montague presided at Petty Sessions
Or attended a meeting of a Belfast firm.
Sundays rattling the leather reins,
He drove a sidecar over the Fox's leap

⁵¹ On the Derricke woodcuts, see David Gardiner, "Reading the Renaissance: John Derricke's *Images of Irelande*... (c. 1579) and the Dolmen Press (1966–72)" *Nua: Studies in Contemporary Irish Writing* 1.2 (Autumn 1998) 47–57.

To the dark glens of Altamuskin
Where the Tagues came from. A blend
Of wild Irish and Ulster Puritan —
The dram of poteen beside Cardinal Manning
In his bedroom — combine to make
A rustic gentleman.

(TRF 12–13)

The interplay between historical record and familial memory provides a depth to “this rustic gentleman” (and his “conceit”) that neither paradigm could achieve on its own. Unlike the “labourers stooped in his fields,” John Montague and his side car have mastery over the roads of Tyrone, the newly built arteries of commerce. Yet his position is precarious and fleeting, and he contains within him the two warring cultural traditions – “wild Irish and Ulster Puritan” – that will lead to his family’s downfall. In a passage that recalls Mac Marcuis’s complaint that “a home it is a wonder should be lonely” Montague appends this conclusion to the portrait of his grandfather:

Sixty years
Later, his succession was broken,
Sons scattered to Australia, Brooklyn.
The rotting sidecar propped a hole
In the hedge, box lanterns askew.
All the sadness of a house in decay
Showed in the weed-grown cobbles.

(TRF 13)

The marginalia thus provides the poem itself with a sense of topography – both intellectually and textually – limning the processes of composition that the poet has brought to bear on the poem. Reveling in a type of fragmentation that belies its unifying impulses, *The Rough Field* keeps with Joseph Frank’s famous definition of modernist form as formalism “based on a space logic that demands a complete reorientation in the reader’s attitude toward language.”⁵²

Montague attempted to effect such a “reorientation” outside the poetic text as well, and we can appreciate the manner in which he went about clearing the intellectual space for his project in two important essays, both published in the summer of 1959. Writing for an American audience in *Poetry*, Montague diagnosed the ills besetting Irish poetry that inspired his self-described escape from the “ingrown, discouraging climate” of post-Emergency Dublin to America in the mid-1950s.⁵³ Whatever the wisdom of the Republic’s neutrality during World War II, Montague argues that what followed was an Irish arts culture adrift from modern liberalizing ideas and influences. As a consequence, “the chief characteristic of modern Irish verse is isolation,” Montague writes,

the evasive action of the sniper or the withdrawn world of the dreamer and introvert. During the early part of the century, Irish poets were participants in a national drama; even minor figures of the period gained wide recognition in England and America. With the death of Yeats, this public glory departed; the subject-matter of Irish poetry became increasingly limited and local, historically irrelevant in a world of war. In reaction, the better Irish poets seemed almost to court obscurity, seldom publishing in volume form. Recent Irish poetry is rarely represented in general anthologies; while reviewers in

⁵² Joseph Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968) 13.

⁵³ It seems necessary to give some background on the events that led Montague to return to the United States in the 1950s. After completing a double first in English and history at University College, Dublin (where, as a rural Northerner born in Brooklyn, he felt ostracized from the undergraduate literary community surrounding Anthony Cronin and John Jordan), Montague attended the Salzburg American Seminar in American Literature during the summer of 1950, developing a relationship with Saul Bellow and an interest in American experiments in literature. At Bellow’s urging, Montague applied for and won a Fulbright Fellowship in 1952, which allowed him to continue working on a thesis on Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* at Yale University. In addition to reconnecting with Bellow in New Haven, Montague studied with Robert Penn Warren and attended lectures conducted by W.K. Wimsatt, and Rene Wellek among others. After Yale, Montague traveled extensively across the United States picking up engagements at the Indiana Summer Seminar, the Iowa Writer’s Conference (with the help of John Crowe Ransom), and, finally, the University of California, Berkeley, where he worked closely with Robert Snyder and Robert Duncan. Along the way, Montague’s talent for developing literary friendships put him in steady contact with an impressive list of poets including William Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell, Galway Kinnell, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, and Charles Olson. After leaving Berkeley, Montague returned to Dublin before eventually moving to Paris to begin work as the French correspondent for the *Irish Times*. Montague returned to teach at Berkeley in 1965–1966. See John Montague “The Figure in the Cave” *The Figure in the Cave*, 1–19; Montague, “Fellow Travelling with America” *The Figure in the Cave* 174–187; Montague, *The Pear is Ripe: A Memoir* (Dublin: Liberties Press, 2008) 11–53.

England and America can hardly be expected to appreciate the special context from which it springs.⁵⁴

The great international Irish modernists, Yeats and Joyce, had cast a long and occluding shadow over succeeding generations of Irish writers, perhaps obscuring more avenues of exploration for the poet than they illuminated. The so-called thirties generation, represented by writers such as Samuel Beckett, Louis MacNeice, Denis Devlin, and Brian Coffey, had mostly left Ireland and Irish contexts. By the time Montague arrived in Dublin in 1946, the only major poets were Austin Clarke and Patrick Kavanagh, and Clarke was in the midst of a fallow period that would last nearly two decades. While Montague considered Kavanagh a genius, he found the irascible older poet to be problematic as a figurehead.⁵⁵ Quite aside from the bilious atmosphere surrounding Kavanagh and his coterie of McDaid's poets,⁵⁶ Kavanagh's rejection of Yeats in favor of an insistent parochialism was, to Montague's thinking, doubly wrong, both isolationist

⁵⁴ Montague, "Isolation and Cunning: Recent Irish Verse," *Poetry* 94.4 (July 1959) 264. While it is difficult to doubt the sincerity of Montague's criticism, I wonder if he is writing to the biases of his American audience by employing two particularly reductive stereotypes in common use within republican and anti-republican rhetoric abroad: the Irishman as gunman or dreamer. Moreover, Montague's privileging of "publishing in volume form" overlooks the vibrancy of the Irish periodical culture of midcentury. See, for instance, Gerry Smyth 101–46. Montague's attention to poems published in volume form perhaps stems from his obsession in the 1950s with the imprimatur of English publishing houses and practices – particularly Faber – and his work as compiler and editor of collected editions of Patrick Kavanagh, John Hewitt, and Austin Clark. See Dillon Johnston "‘Like Snow Off a Rope’: Montague's Publishers and His British Readership in the Sixties" *Well Dreams* 46–61.

⁵⁵ Montague's close friend and publisher Liam Miller had brought out Clarke's *Ancient Light* (1955), the elder poet's first collection of new work in nearly two decades. Montague himself undertook the arduous task of collecting and editing new selected editions of both Kavanagh and Hewitt for London publishers MacGibbon and Kee. For a lengthy analysis of Montague's editorial work during the 1950s. See again Johnston "‘Like Snow off a Rope,'" *Well Dreams* 46–62.

⁵⁶ McDaid's pub in Dublin was, for a period of time in the 1950s, the center of writers within Kavanagh's circle, including younger poets who admired Kavanagh. James Liddy was one such poet. See Chapter 2, p. 91.

and as fundamentally ahistorical as Yeats's own fantasies of peasant life.⁵⁷ In the Dublin academic journal *Studies* (then the organ of the Irish Catholic intelligentsia), Montague argued that Irish poets, readers, and publishers were ignoring new American experiments in poetry to the detriment of their own literature. By contrast, American modernists, whom Montague would later call "the best generation of poets since the great Romantics" had bequeathed a fertile acre for the following generation of poets to grow in.⁵⁸ The Americans' strength lay in positing a plurality of traditions rather than a single, monolithic tradition:

The full range of Anglo-American activity can no longer be interpreted in terms of one tradition, like a vast historical umbrella: the individual poet chooses, creates his tradition from the living elements in his background, whether Californian or Bostonian or Admass American. The integrity of his achievement lies in his ability, like a diviner, to find where, in darkness and noise, the living water flows. All this is much better understood in America than here.⁵⁹

By the "American approach to tradition" Montague meant the tradition he felt had been initiated by Whitman and followed by Williams, Olson and Crane more so than the tradition of Eliot and Pound, which dominated the British model. More importantly, Montague believed that the American modernists' approach to reconstructing and reinterpreting poetic tradition lent itself to longer and more discursive poetic structures in free verse, such as Crane had achieved in *The Bridge* (1930),⁶⁰ or to delineating new

⁵⁷ For Montague's criticism of Kavanagh, see Timothy Kearney, "Beyond the Planter and the Gael: Interview with John Hewitt and John Montague" *The Crane Bag* 4.2 (1980) 722–730.

⁵⁸ Earl Ingersoll and Ben Howard, "Elegiac Cheer: A Conversation with John Montague" *Literary Review* 31 (Fall 1987) 28.

⁵⁹ Montague, "American Pegasus" *Studies* 48.190 (Summer 1959) 191. "Admass," in this context, means the public that is influenced by mass media communications.

⁶⁰ For a lengthy discussion of *TRF* and Crane's *The Bridge*, see Sidney B. Poger, "Crane and Montague: 'The Pattern History Weaves'" *Eire-Ireland* 16.4 (1981) 114–124.

modes of poetic expression, as in Robert Duncan's experiments with "composition by field."⁶¹ In England (and by extension Ireland) the novel had sapped the prestige of the long poetic sequence, but American modernism held forth the possibility of a "new epic" poetry, which R. H. Pearce promised would be

a new form altogether: a poem of the breadth and scope of the epic, yet without its heroically plotted articulation: a poem which, working solely as poem, would engage its reader's sensibilities in such a way as to reinvigorate and reform them and would then relate him anew to a world which, until it were poetically transubstantiated, could not give him the one thing he most wished for: humanity articulated by history.⁶²

Montague had been drawn as a young reader to old Irish language poetry in part because it worked on large canvasses. In the poetry of Williams, Crane, and Olson, as well as that of his nearer contemporaries such as John Berryman, Kenneth Rexroth, and Robert Lowell, he found a primer to the reemergence of the long form in modern Irish poetry. Moreover, he found in the scholarship of Pearce and M. L. Rosenthal a defense and enthusiasm for these projects. The coherence of the American orchestrated sequence offered a way to explore the incoherence of his childhood. What Margaret Dickie writes of the American modernist long poem might apply with justice to Montague's process in constructing *The Rough Field*: it represented a "movement of constant revisions in which the [poet] whose initial ambitions had been to extend the resources of language found its limits and deepened the awareness of [his] own limits."⁶³ In keeping with Williams's intention in *Paterson*, Montague hoped to find in private obsessions the means to "poetry as a public language" (4).

⁶¹ Duncan, "Introduction" *Bending the Bow*, 6th ed. (New York: New Directions, 1968) ix. Duncan encouraged the poet to "wor[k] with all parts of the poem as *polysemous*, taking each thing of the composition as generative of meaning, a response to and a contribution to the building form."

⁶² Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1961) 63. Quoted in Redshaw, "Topos and Texne" 34.

⁶³ Dickie 8.

During his time in the US in the 1950s, Montague made an initial misstep in trying to bring this American influence to bear on poems about America itself. A vestige of these early experiments can be found in the “American poems” of his first chapbook for Dolmen, *Forms of Exile* (1958). Both “Downtown, America” (with its playful, Cold War-era rejoinder “These are normal things and set the heart at rest”) and the sullen triptych “American Landscapes” have the feel of sketches for a longer work,⁶⁴ yet Honor O’Connor seems essentially right in judging them “verbal postcards...vivid, but of little consequence except as souvenirs of Montague’s being there.”⁶⁵ His being there, however, was consequential. Montague claims that it was his discussions with Williams at the Iowa workshop in 1954 that encouraged him to escape the isolating tendencies of his Irish contemporaries by building a longer work “writ[ten] in the Ulster accent.”⁶⁶ *Forms of Exile* thus contains early workings of Irish character archetypes in poems such as “The Sean Bhean Bhocht” and “The Prodigal Son.” The latter poem stands as Montague’s earliest reflection on the situation of the returned exile, and it places at its narrative center an idealized version of the poet’s father, who made his only return to Tyrone in December of 1952, a few months before Montague left Dublin for Yale. In “The Prodigal Son,” the exile makes a yearly return to his ancestral home for reasons of “custom or the virtue/Of remembering his family” but finds that his return is neither expected nor

⁶⁴ Of these, only the second section of “American Landscapes” – “Bus Stop in Nevada” – appears in later collections, first in *Poisoned Lands* (1961) and later in *The Collected Poems* (1995). Montague’s popular sequence of love poems, *All Legendary Obstacles* (1966), ultimately put the atmospheric elements of these early American poems to better use, as did his short story “The Oklahoma Kid” in *Death of a Chieftain and Other Stories* (1964; Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1999) 42–58.

⁶⁵ Honor O’Connor, ““Forms of Exile: Poems and Satires, 1946–58” *Well Dreams* 42.

⁶⁶ Stephen Arkin, “An Interview with John Montague” *The New England Review* 5 (Autumn/Winter 1982) 226.

required by those left behind; indeed, the poet imagines that: “[n]o one grudges him his absence:/ Yesterday seems perpetual.”⁶⁷ In its consideration of the various burdens of absence and presence particular to the Irish exile, the poem seems a clear precursor to “The Fault,” the fifth canto of *The Rough Field*, which addresses his father’s exile and return trip in 1952.

Montague’s time at Iowa and other American workshops also alerted him to the important legacy of Williams’s prose work *In the American Grain* (1925), in which Williams composed short prose vignettes to imaginatively reconstruct important figures and events in the history of North America.⁶⁸ The value of a work such as *In the American Grain*, particularly in its relationship with *Paterson*, was in supplying the poet with an approach to history and mythology that could be put in service to a poetry of personal experience and personal expression. By this, Montague was able to escape the long shadow of Yeats and his esoterica. As Tobin has written:

Montague’s double vision is obviously less obsessed with matters otherworldly and more concerned with those internal conflicts—the quarrel with self—that arise expressly out of the crucible of self and history. Another way of stating this is to say that where Yeats would incorporate the realm of history and politics as well as his own complex life into the Great Wheel of some mythic vision, Montague weaves the vestiges of mythology and the visionary into the *prima material* of his personal history.⁶⁹

Following Williams’s example, Montague sought a thorough training in “the tradition” for the primary purposes of learning what to discard and what to leave in.⁷⁰ Several of Montague’s landmark essays, such as “A Primal Gaeltacht” and “In the Irish Grain,”

⁶⁷ Montague, “Prodigal Son” *Forms of Exile* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1958) 5.

⁶⁸ Montague referred to *In the American Grain* as “an almost Bible for younger American poets.” See “American Pegasus” 191.

⁶⁹ Tobin, *Awake in America* 115.

⁷⁰ Montague, “American Pegasus” 183–184.

served precisely this purpose: going in search of relics from the Irish past that could be brought forward to illustrate Ireland's present situation.⁷¹

At a practical level, Williams's example showed Montague how to face the problem of organization and coherence in a long work in the modern era of free verse and looser forms. Because the marginalia created a multi-generative text, the work needed a governing or unifying thread to maintain tension. In Book I of *Paterson*, Williams famously uses the Passaic River, which, as it passes along the "back" of Paterson, marks time's passage and symbolizes the mysterious creative processes fueling the poem. Though the body of the townland is "Immortal,"

...he neither moves nor rouses and is seldom
seen, though he breathes and the subtleties of his
machinations
drawing their substance from the noise of the pouring
river
animate a thousand automatons. Who because they
neither know their sources nor the sills of their
disappointments walk outside their bodies aimlessly
for the most part,
locked and forgot in their desires—unroused.

—Say it, no ideas but in things—
nothing but the blank faces of the houses
and cylindrical trees
bent, forked by preconception and accident—
split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained—
secret—into the body of the light!

From above, higher than the spires, higher
even than the office towers, from oozy fields
abandoned to grey beds of dead grass,
black sumac, withered weed-stalks,
mud and thickets cluttered with dead leaves—
the river comes pouring in above the city
and crashes from the edge of the gorge
in a recoil of spray and rainbow mists—

⁷¹ "A Primal Gaeltacht" is considered the essay that sparked the interest of poets such as Heaney and Muldoon in the *dinnsheanchas* tradition – the lore of Irish place names. See the *Irish Times*, July 30, 1970, [p. 7].

....

Jostled as are waters approaching
the brink, his thoughts
interlace, repel and cut under,
rise rock-thwarted and turn aside
but forever strain forward—or strike
an eddy and whirl, marked by a
leaf and curdy spume, seeming
to forget .

Retake later the advance and
are replaced by succeeding hordes
pushing forward—they coalesce now
glass-smooth with their swiftness,
quiet or seem to quiet as at the close
they leap to the conclusion and
fall, fall in air! as if,
floating, relieved of their weight,
split apart, ribbons; dazed, drunk
with the catastrophe of the descent
floating unsupported
to hit the rock: to a thunder,
as if lightening had struck.⁷²

The river's smaller movements and undercurrents are unpredictable – like its waters the town's thoughts “interlace, repel and cut under,/ rise rock-thwarted and turn aside/...strike/an eddy and whirl...” – yet its greater movement “forever strain[s] forward” towards the falls and the rocks below, only to rise again and move on more swiftly.

Williams's image-building with the waters shows a sublime freedom of whim and contradiction that moves within a closed system of inevitable progress. The river, as an analogue to time's passage, animates the material reality of the town of Paterson – its “dreams” – yet is kept somewhat apart from the town and beyond its influence (at least initially).

Montague, too, chooses a controlling symbol to mark the passage of time – the road – but its important difference with Williams's Passaic River suggests how Montague

⁷² William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1992) 6–8.

intended his sequence to differ from its model. As a means of traversing the geography of Ireland, the road exists within the colonial paradigm of time and space: the result of planning, surveying, clearing, and labor. Here movement is controlled by the forces of colonial authority and commerce; the road is an entirely man-made and determined thing that governs movement yet remains unmoving. The poem begins in Belfast in 1961, a town that, like Paterson, is enfolded by low mountains and shaped by a river. Yet the poet's eye does not trace the banks of the River Lagan west to his childhood home in Co. Tyrone. Rather, "*Catching a bus at Victoria Station/Symbol of Belfast in its iron bleakness,*" the poet's eye moves with diminished capacity, not seeing all that it might of the world that passes:

We ride through narrow huckster streets
(Small lamps bright before the Sacred Heart
Bunting tagged off for some religious feast)
To where Cavehill and Divis, stern presences
Brood over a wilderness of cinemas and shops,
Victorian red-brick villas, framed with aerials,
Bushmill hoardings, Orange and Legion Halls.
A fringe of trees affords some ease at last
From all this dour, despoiled inheritance,
The shabby through-otherness of outskirts:
'God is Love', chalked on a grimy wall
Mocks a culture where constraint is all.

....

Through half of Ulster that Royal Road ran
Through Lisburn, Lurgan, Portadown,
Solid British towns, lacking local grace.
Headscarved housewives in bulky floral skirts
Hugged market baskets on the rexine seats
Although it was near the borders of Tyrone —
End of a Pale, beginning of O'Neill —
Before a stranger turned a friendly face,
Yarning politics in Ulster monotone.
Bathos as we bumped all that twilight road,
Tales of Ancient Order, Ulster's Volunteers:
Narrow fields wrought such division,
And narrow they were, though as darkness fell
Ruled by an evening star, which saw me home

...

To a gaunt farmhouse on this busy road...

(TRF 10–11)

The total effect of Montague's opening is to bring the bleakness of British Belfast (with its hints of Orange parades) with him down the Royal Road, beyond "the Pale" and into Tyrone. Unlike the flowering Parkhead that Williams presents as "embracing" Paterson, Cavehill and Divis are "stern presences" that "brood over a wilderness of cinemas and shops." And even when Montague reaches his own rural homestead, the "gaunt farmhouse on this busy road," no fresh vision of the natural world attends this arrival.

Unlike Williams' sublime landscape, Garvaghey is fetid and staid, used up:

No Wordsworthian dream enchants me here
With glint of glacial corrie, totemic mountains,
But merging low hills and gravel streams,
Oozy blackness of bog-banks, pale upland grass:
Rough Field in the Gaelic and rightly named
As setting for a mode of life that passes on
Harsh landscape that haunts me,
Well and stone, in the bleak moors of dream.

(TRF 11)

Montague echoes Williams's images of "oozy fields/abandoned to grey beds of dead grass" in his own "[o]ozy blackness of bog-banks, pale upland grass." While Williams's setting is the detritus through which the spring-swollen Passaic River breaks in *Paterson*, Montague frames the bog-banks as a final resting place where the gravel streams peter out. There is never the sense (as in *Paterson*) that the mounting images will overwhelm the work or that the poetic method is in some ways celebrating or praising his subject. The steadiness of Montague's frontloaded four-stress line suggests an absolute formal control over the opening, and the funereal tone, too, suggests more a procession of lament than giddy discovery. In comparison with Paterson, Garvaghey (and Northern Ireland more generally) seems a dead thing, its dreams calcified into the symbols of "well and stone."

Though Montague worked doggedly in the midcentury to promote the work of the best living Irish poets – Clarke, Kavanagh, and Hewitt – his own poetry looked to revive Irish poetics by way of a new American model of poetry. When Redshaw, early on, identified *The Rough Field* as “largely American in genesis and spirit” he was reaching beyond the specificity of Montague’s biography to the debts its author owed to a compositional technique.⁷³ Inasmuch as *The Rough Field* confidently asserts the poet’s own biography as a microcosm through which to understand Irish history, it also recognizes a current of understanding that flows in the opposite direction. As Williams writes in the verse preface to *Paterson*:

For the beginning is assuredly
The end—since we know nothing, pure
And simple, beyond
Our own complexities.⁷⁴

A fitting circularity obtains in the fact that *The Rough Field*, a long sequential poem that sounds a death knell for rural Irish life, has come to be seen as a landmark in the rebirth of Irish poetry in the 1960s. Of all Montague’s poems, *The Rough Field* owes much to his “double birth” which allows him a unique intimacy and objectivity when considering his beloved ancestral plot of Garvaghey. The rough field itself symbolizes Montague and his family’s “complexities.”

⁷³ Redshaw, “*Topos and Texne*” 45.

⁷⁴ Williams, “Preface” *Paterson* 3.

IV. Fiacc's "Hellfast"

When Padraic Fiacc, in 1946, returned to Belfast on the Swedish mercy ship the *Grispholm* – the first non-military vessel to make the voyage east, through mine-filled waters, after the war – he was in most perceptible ways an American. Educated in the parochial and public schools of Manhattan, he spoke with a pronounced New York accent and his retiring demeanor belied a toughness honed to an edge by life in the tenements of Hell's Kitchen. However much he shared his mother's resentment of America, Fiacc could not escape the manners and habits of the environment that had formed him. Even after adopting his demonstratively Irish *nom de plume*, he was still known to friends and neighbors in Belfast as "Joe O'Connor" from New York. As Gerald Dawe observes, issues of self-definition and citizenship haunted Fiacc as did official narratives of cultural belonging, those which, at midcentury, had yet to be explored by way of a post-nationalist dialogue on Irish identity. "The trouble was where he was really from," Dawe remarks,

Brought up in Belfast, he was, like James Joyce, a British subject; in New York he was an American citizen, but he also viewed himself as Irish and a citizen of the (relatively) new state of Éire. These contradictions would have been apparent to him in post war Belfast. Indeed, he renounced his American citizenship in an effort to simplify the situation, but the contradictions would resurface and ultimately propel Fiacc into an emotional and intellectual turbulence that anticipates, by quite some way, the contemporary theoretical preoccupations of postmodern interest in hybridity and issues of national identity.⁷⁵

In the poems that Fiacc allowed to be published in the first two decades of his career, we discover a poet appropriating the linguistic codes of what he perceives to be an authentic "Irish" identity in a frustrated search for a fruitful poetic voice. "Stolen Fifer," quoted

⁷⁵ Dawe, "Odd Man Out" *Poetry Ireland* 83 (2005) 84.

earlier, is perhaps the best example of this aesthetic in practice, but another poem of the same period, “Poet” boldly asserts:

I am the chaunt-rann of a Singer
Who has sung to heart at night
How the rust-loch’s hazel waters
Mirror the stars all right...⁷⁶

Like many a younger writer’s poems of self-definition, these lines speak more to his insecurities than to his confidence in laying claim to his vocation. The pawed-over tropes of *fin de siècle* Yeats – the identification of the poet as a medium for a mythical “Singer,” the easily assumed symbolic weightiness of the heart, the hazel waters, the stars – are dutifully rendered as badges of belonging within the lingering Revival mode. Even the alternating four- and three-stress line quatrains call out strongly to the catalectic ballad meter favored by Yeats in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910). The only element that fires the imagination is the hybrid compound term *chaunt-rann*. Meaning “verse chanter,” *chaunt-rann* appears to be Fiacca’s own neologism, made by yoking together obsolete English and Irish words.⁷⁷

The persona of the verse-chanter, however, would not see Fiacca through the rest of his career. As Northern Ireland slid back into sectarian violence in the late 1960s, and as Fiacca himself deteriorated following the end of his marriage, his published work took on a character that upon first glance appeared radically altered from what had preceded it.⁷⁸ The poems that make up Fiacca’s three collections in the 1970s – *Odour of Blood*

⁷⁶ Fiacca, “The Poet” *Woe to the Boy* (1957; Belfast: Lapwing, 2006) 13.

⁷⁷ See Anthony Bradley, *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980) 387.

⁷⁸ In an interview, Fiacca claims that he was first diagnosed as a schizophrenic in the early 1970s, coincident with the renewed Troubles. See John Brown, 310.

(1973), *Nights in the Bad Place* (1977) and his contributions to his own anthology *The Wearing of the Black* (1974) – did away with the nineteenth-century gaelicisms that he had crafted under the influence of Colum. In truth, this shift signaled not a radical change in Fiacca's work so much as his willingness to reassert the darker aspect of his writing, returning to his youthful poems that "were nasty, wonderful and full of terrible longing."⁷⁹

In the wake of the black anthology controversy in particular, Fiacca's work proclaimed a fragmented and scattered sense of self and origin.⁸⁰ If "The Stolen Fifer"

⁷⁹ John Brown, 308.

⁸⁰ The fallout over *The Wearing of the Black* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1974) remains, for good or ill, the defining moment of Fiacca's literary career. The anthology of contemporary Northern Irish poetry aimed to address (both directly and indirectly) the explosion of sectarian violence in Belfast and Derry. The appearance of any new anthology of poetry during this period invited controversy in the claustrophobic literary circles of Northern Ireland, but the *sturm und drang* created by the "black anthology" (as Fiacca came to call it) was of an entirely different order. Debate over the anthology had little to do with the usual literary turf wars fought over inclusion and exclusion. Sprawling across four vaguely-themed "movements," the anthology remains perhaps the most egalitarian ever produced during the period. Fiacca, as sole editor, included poems contributed by 73 different poets, mixing and matching older and younger poets, established names with unknowns. The better known contributors included Seamus Heaney, John Montague, Derek Mahon, Eavan Boland, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon, John Hewitt, and Ciaran Carson. The more obscure poets ranged from the ordained priest "Paul" to scholar Terence Brown to two Belfast teenagers, Anthony McVeigh, and the anonymous "PP." The anthology also contained around a dozen poems composed by poets from outside Ireland, including a young American teacher working in Derry named Terence Maxwell (who helped Fiacca conceive the project and was involved in its initial preparation) and New Zealand poet Fleur Adcock. A few of the anthology's most vocal critics, such as James Simmons, Frank Ormsby and Michael Longley, were themselves contributors and claimed variously that Fiacca had misrepresented the purpose of the anthology to them and, more importantly, had seemed to exploit and sensationalize the violence and political crisis in Northern Ireland for his own artistic gain. Ormsby in particular accused Fiacca of foreseeing the controversy and hoping to raise his profile by capitalizing on it. A fairer observation made by Ormsby and others is that Fiacca's own verse is wildly overrepresented in the volume. His 21 poems is eight higher than the next most honored contributor, John Hewitt. Seamus Heaney had the third most with nine poems included.

Debate about the anthology and Fiacca quickly spilled over from the literary pages of Simmons's *Honest Ulsterman* and the *Irish Times* to the wider political discourse in Northern Ireland. Fiacca found himself in the strange position of being accused by military and paramilitary groups on either end of the ideological spectrum of providing propaganda for the other side. Fiacca's introduction to *The Wearing of the Black*, in fact, acknowledges the controversial nature of the collection and anticipates much the criticism that followed. "I am aware that in compiling this anthology," Fiacca writes:

I might be accused of a cynical exploitation of what is, it is hoped, a transient situation. It is self-evident, however, that the violence, division and hatred, that, in their acute phase, disfigure the

and “Poet” betrayed a spiritual incompleteness and longing, the speaker of these poems was at least bolstered by a feeling of mystical wholeness discovered in his interactions with the natural world. The more or less fluid lyricism and the formal assuredness of these poems said as much. What appears in the poems of *Odour of Blood* and after is a bare-boned prosody, scoured of formal niceties. The familiar rhetorical methods of his earlier published work – its anaphora, parallelism, apostrophe, chiasmus, and regular strophic patterns – are replaced by a tortured syntax, grinding enjambment, and an often rambling, paratactic organizational logic. Fiacca even goes so far as to scour the poems of articles and demonstrative pronouns. If *The Rough Field* answered Northern Ireland’s civic breakdown by furnishing a unifying and synthesizing poetics, Fiacca’s elliptical style and broken syntax seemed to channel the horror and confusion unfolding in Belfast in a voice shattered by the chaos.⁸¹

Although Fiacca claimed as late as 1970 that he did not feel that the violence of the troubles was a fit subject for his poetry, by the time *Odour of Blood* appeared in 1973 it contained a number of startlingly frank poems that addressed the subject at the street level. Not surprisingly, Fiacca’s prosody signaled an increased focus on the world of the child, particularly the sorrowful and victimized child. With it, Fiacca was able to plot a

face of Ireland, have roots that run deeper and spread wider than the events of the last six years. (158)

However prescient, Fiacca’s attempt to preempt criticism failed to do him or the reputation of the anthology much good. To cite one more recent example, literary historian Heather Clark describes *The Wearing of the Black* as having been “met with near universal scorn from the literary community in the North.” See “Review of *The New North: Contemporary Poetry from Northern Ireland*” *Harvard Review* 36 (2009) 231. See also James Simmons, “The Man Most Touched” *Honest Ulsterman* 46/47 (1974/75) 66–71; Fiacca, “Fiacca Answers Back” *Honest Ulsterman* 50 (Winter 1975) 133–136.; Fiacca, “The Birth of a Black Anthology” *Threshold* 28 (1975); and Elmer Kennedy-Andrews *Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland, 1968–2008* (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2008) 118–136.

⁸¹ Terence Brown, *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 146.

through-line from his own early life in Belfast to his childhood and adolescence in Hell's Kitchen to the besieged life of his daughter and the other children of Belfast. A controversial poem and early bellwether for Fiacca's style is "Elegy for a 'Fenian Get'," an acidic lament for nine-year-old Patrick Rooney who was the first child murdered in the renewed conflict, killed by a stray bullet during an RUC raid of a Catholic neighborhood in Belfast in August 1969:

Clouded with slow moving orange smoke
Swirls over the hill-street, the shop

Where I bought the First Holy Communion
Dress
Is boarded up with wire and the around the
back
Of it the altar boy was shot dead
By some trigger-happy cow-boy cop

Whose automatic fire penetrated
The walls of the tower flat the young
Father

Hid the child in out of a premonition!⁸²

Fiacca replaces the ballad quatrains of "Poet" with ragged couplets that unfold in the manner of periodic prose: the subject of the elegy is nearly lost amid Fiacca's piling up of subordinate clauses and relationships which continue to defer the completion of the thought. Rooney's murder is not even syntactically the subject of the poem's long sentence. The actual governing subject is "the shop" where Fiacca bought his daughter Brigid her "First Holy Communion dress." This shared point of geography maps out a web of connection, bringing Patrick Rooney together with Fiacca's own daughter, who by the time the poem was published had been herself "hid" away south in the Republic, by a

⁸² Fiacca, *Odour of Blood* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1973) 18.

mother with her own premonitions.⁸³ Like so many poets living in war zones, Fiacca is obsessed with rendering the casual absurdity of violence as it happens; thus, the elegy presents the poet's search for cause and effect as muddled and possibly misguided: the poem literally follows a line of sight from the the boarded-up (and perhaps burning) shop back to the tower flat of the murder and finally into the father's head where his "premonition" begins the whole tragic chain of action.

If such an elegy appears callous or merely unsuccessful, it fails in part by failing to adhere to the customary strategies of the elegy. Francis Hagan has attributed critic's distaste for Fiacca to just such "failures." Fiacca's elegies refuse to abide by an "aesthetic which privileges certain linguistic strategies, in particular a certain type of equation between language and its occasion."⁸⁴ His "difficult style" seems to "come nowhere near meeting its dreadful occasion...[i]ndeed it seems rather to betray it." Defenders of Fiacca such as Dawe see the formalist strategies of mourning preferred by poets such as Heaney and Michael Longley as tending to "stabilize the violence by drawing it into its own circuit of imaginative ordering."⁸⁵ The implication is that Fiacca's style purposefully creates instability through prosody to better represent the discomfiting reality of violence as it happens and to describe the corners in the mind where it lingers and settles. In a

⁸³ Fiacca's wife, Nancy Wayne, was an American from a prominent Midwestern family. She had discovered Fiacca's poems in *New Irish Poets* (1948) and arranged to meet him when he returned to New York in 1952. A fellow Catholic and aspiring writer, Nancy was drawn to Fiacca partly because of his decision to leave his seminary, as Wayne had similarly abandoned religious orders. In a 2010 interview, Fiacca mentions that Nancy withdrew from her convent school after, so she claimed, a fellow postulant attempted to poison her. Nancy was often ill and the civic breakdown in Belfast finally convinced her to leave Fiacca and Belfast to move south with the couple's daughter in the early 1970s. See "In Conversation with Padraic Fiacca" (29:10–33:10).

⁸⁴ Francis Hagan, "Failure as Strategy in the Poetry of Padraic Fiacca" *My Twentieth Century Night Life* 225. For a more recent critique of Fiacca's style and substance, see again Kennedy-Andrews *Writing Home* 118–136.

⁸⁵ Gerald Dawe, "Introduction" *Ruined Pages* 10.

provocative appraisal of Fiacca's work made in 1979, James Liddy judged Fiacca's poetics to be the best-suited to reflect the confusions and furies of a besieged populace: "Fiacca [is] the first of a European species to appear in Irish writing: a Holocaust child, whose mental cast is formed by the milieu of violence" which has made him "the most considerable poet emerging from the Ulster disturbances."⁸⁶

Following his public excoriation in the 1970s, there seems to have arisen a need in Fiacca and his publishers to account for this unique "mental cast." Blackstaff's *The Selected Padraic Fiacca* (1979) chose to present Fiacca as a naïve nature poet shocked by recent events into a new urban, militaristic modality. This narrative begins with Fiacca as a contemplative observer of the natural world – the "chaunt-rann" – whose prime concerns are his feelings of separation from the spiritual realm. As his home of Belfast plunges suddenly into violence in 1969, Fiacca reemerges as "der bomben poet" (as a German documentary team called him). In the introduction to the volume, Terence Brown, who had been almost alone among Irish scholars in engaging seriously and sympathetically with Fiacca's poetry in his study *Northern Voices* (1975),⁸⁷ pitched Fiacca as a poet of two distinct movements, described simply as the "early poems" and the "later poems."

"Fiacca's early poems on first reading," Brown begins

seem apparently simple lyrics in that tradition of Irish verse in English which owes its inspiration to Gaelic poetic practice. Here are poems that remind [one] of translations from the Gaelic, attending to the natural world in bright, finely etched images, evoking the mythological past, the dedication of the scholar, the freedom of the poet, the austere reflections of monk and hermit, all suggestive of a timeless world of Irish antiquity that can still sustain poetic utterance of a conventional kind.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ James Liddy, "Fiacca, Padraic (1924-)" *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, ed. Robert Hogan (London, Macmillan, 1979) 237.

⁸⁷ Terence Brown, *Northern Voices* 141–48.

⁸⁸ Terence Brown, "Introduction" *SPF* vii.

These “early poems,” Brown continues, suggest “a poet primarily concerned not with art as the rearrangement of experience into satisfying aesthetic forms but a writer concerned in an innocent, almost naïve fashion with the intensity of the moment” (*SPF* vii). By contrast, Fiacca’s “later poems”:

deal in their uncompromisingly stark way with the brutalities and horrors of urban guerilla warfare and military repression [through] ambitious experimentalism, which insists that a poem must risk obscurity or even fragmentation in the interests of truth to experience...(*SPF* xi)⁸⁹

This narrative of an “early” and “late” Fiacca was attractive for making sense of a poet writing in what appeared to be two irreconcilable modes. It also tended to misrepresent Fiacca’s development as a linear progression (or regression) from nature poet to urban chronicler. It was only a decade and half later, after Gerald Dawe and Aodán Mac Póilín’s painstakingly researched collection *Ruined Pages* (1994) appeared that something closer to a holistic picture of Fiacca’s development emerged. The portrait *Ruined Pages* paints is of a poetic schizophrenic, working in many disparate voices and on several large-scale projects all at once. The “chaunt-rann” persona of the poems Fiacca published in periodicals during the first decades of his career was just one of many, one weighted in favor of an uncomplicatedly “Irish” identity. What also emerges from *Ruined Pages* is the portrait of a tempestuous personality all too ready to destroy or otherwise bury whole swaths of his own writing. In his fascinating biographical notes, Mac Póilín estimates that Fiacca burned the better part of three complete collections of poetry before

⁸⁹ See also James Liddy, “Fiacca, Padraic (1924-)” in which Liddy follows Brown’s example in propagating the idea of an “early” and “late” Fiacca: “Fiacca’s early poems are pleasantly low-keyed and sometimes suggest translation from early Irish nature poetry,” Liddy writes, “[t]his bright visual quality is present in his later work, but lyric absorption reaches for social absorption” (237).

his twenty-fifth birthday, along with most of his letters from Colum.⁹⁰ Moreover, Mac Póilin shows that Fiacca's submission to the Æ Memorial Prize panel in 1957 contained more than just the Gaelic-tinged poems of *Woe to the Boy*. The entry included excerpts from three novels, a complete play – all later destroyed or lost by the author – and a second manuscript of poems titled “Haemorrhage.”⁹¹ Many of the poems that made up the 1957 “Haemorrhage” manuscript, including the title poem, reemerged in *Odour of Blood*, the collection that is supposed to signal Fiacca's “later” shift towards poetry reacting to the Troubles.⁹²

Fiacca's unconventional and often immoderate handling of his own work made it easy to misread his poems by misunderstanding their original contexts. “Donkey Years,”

⁹⁰ In addition to *Innisfail Lost*, which originally caught the attention of Padraic Colum, the other two collections were *Brendan Odysseus* and *River to God*. The former collection, renamed *Red Man* in its later stages, took as its central conceit the myth of the lost tribe of wandering Celts in North America (some half-century before Paul Muldoon's *Madoc: A Mystery*). The latter, *River to God*, dealt with the drowning death of a fellow student at St. Joseph's Seminary in Calicoon, NY. The plates of this manuscript were apparently destroyed under orders from the seminary's authorities. See Aodán Mac Póilin “Biographical Outline” *Ruined Pages* 13–14.

⁹¹ The history of the George Russell (Æ) Award and Fiacca's place within it is both a fascinating and telling portrait of the political machinations of literary recognition in mid-twentieth century Ireland. The award was organized in 1939 as a living memorial to George Russell, honoring the work of an Irish poet under the age of 35 and to be awarded every five years. The bursary was £100 provided by the Bank of Ireland. The selection committee consisted of the sitting chairs of English Literature at Trinity College and University College, Dublin as well as persons nominated by the presidents of the Royal Dublin Society, Royal Irish Academy, and Irish Academy of Letters, respectively. The first winner in 1939 was Patrick Kavanagh, followed in 1945 by Valentin Iremonger, and in 1950 by Richard Murphy. The award was not given in 1955 because no entries were thought to exhibit sufficient worth. In 1957, Fiacca received the award in recognition of an application that included the manuscripts to two unpublished novels and two unpublished collections titled *Woe to the Boy* and *Haemorrhage*. The award was given for the *Woe to the Boy* manuscript, specifically. The decision came as a surprise, not least because Fiacca assumed that poets from Northern Ireland would not be seriously considered (despite the fact that Russell himself was from Co. Armagh). The award gave Fiacca a modicum of instant fame and recognition, particularly in Belfast. Fiacca's wife Nancy, however, seems to have resented her husband's increased notoriety, and it initiated a strain on their marriage that would only grow. Though the award usually portended a publishing deal, *Woe to the Boy* was never published. Parts of it would appear a decade later in *By the Black Stream*. *Woe to the Boy*, as it was originally constituted in 1957, was published by Belfast's Lapwing Pamphlets in 1994. Fiacca, “Isolation in Contemporary Ireland: The Æ Winners” *Hibernia* (December 1967).

⁹² Mac Póilin 14–15.

the poem that concludes his *Selected*, should suffice here as a case in point. As one of Fiacca's "later poems," it would thus seem to represent the new "social absorption" that Liddy recognized as the hallmark of Fiacca's interaction with crisis-era Belfast. The poem begins:

A good soldier does not look
Behind him in and out
Of hospital, jail, asylum

Mixing Scotch and pill
Will be lucky if some day he
Wakes to find the boy he'd kill

So much become the living
Epitaph of every other
Man's half blind squint...

Given its placement in the *Selected*, "Donkey Years" seems at first reading like a poem in conversation with Fiacca's other poetry of the period. He trades on the piquancy of the vague epithet "soldier" within the context of Northern Ireland, where the term might be easily used to refer to any number of official, unofficial, or quasi-official military units – even, in the darkly comic poem "Soldiers," to children.⁹³ Nonetheless, Fiacca often uses the term "soldier" to refer to British paratroopers stationed in Northern Ireland, as well as to special units of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). A reader familiar with Fiacca's work would probably connect the detail of the soldier in "Donkey Years" having killed a

⁹³ "Soldiers," which Fiacca dedicates to Seamus Deane, begins:

The altar boy marches up the altar steps.
The priest marches down, 'Get up now
And be a soldier!' says the nun
To the woman after giving birth, 'Get up now
And march, march: Be a man!'

And the men are men and the women are men
And the children are men!

(SPF 67).

boy to the tragic events recounted in “Elegy for a ‘Fenian Get’.” But this poem unravels along different lines. As its middle stanzas indicate, the “boy he’d kill” is the specter of the soldier’s own feckless and tempestuous youth:

Back down the morning’s steep
Crack in the shaving glass
Brow beats you to an ugly guilt

From the beginning hurtled
School books to the ground
Won jungle greenery to hack

Spray or bomb any island
Hardly on the map, forgotten
As the war behind our back

Sons find a bore...

The poem’s concluding stanzas make clear that the speaker is himself the soldier that has returned and that the terror of the war remains

Always with us like the poor

Undetonated yet human grenade
On back-street sea shore waits
What poison in our puppy fat

Can still make me kneel down at
My own mutilated body glad
‘Bang! — Bang! Bang! — Bang!!

Look. I’m dead. I’m dead!”
(SPF 69)

Because *Ruined Pages* arranges Fiacca’s poems chronologically by date of composition, we can date “Donkey Years” to Fiacca’s second New York period, between 1952 and 1956. His mother’s death brought him back to America to care for his young sister, alcoholic father and brother Rory, who, after having run away from home to enlist, had returned from the Pacific theater in World War II “unrecognizable.”⁹⁴ Lines 15 and 16 –

⁹⁴ John Brown 311.

“Won jungle greenery to hack/Spray or bomb any island” – suggest that the poem’s addressee/speaker might in fact be Fiacc’s brother Rory, or possibly a general composite drawn from Fiacc’s observation of returning GIs.⁹⁵ What is reasonably clear is that “The Donkey Years” predates the renewed troubles by over a decade, and so it speaks to the troubles only indirectly, by way of a perceived antecedence of the earlier conflict reified in the latter. Freed of its associations with the troubles, “Donkey Years” takes its more natural place among Fiacc’s struggle with life in New York upon his return from Belfast, when the poet observed American World War II veterans straining to return to civilian life. The poet recalls in these years an attempt to capture the postwar grimness of New York using the stylings of film noir and “hard-boiled” detective novels. “In the evening, when I was playing mother,” Fiacc recalls, “I wrote those tough-guy poems of the early 50s – the sort of poems you would write if you never took a cigarette out of your mouth.”⁹⁶ These poems operate with nearly all the imaginative and metaphorical machinery of Fiacc’s later poems that address Belfast; they use a pared down, elliptical prosody and explore an obsession with explosion and disfigurement.

Following the controversy over the black anthology in the mid-1970s, Fiacc began appealing to his identity as “an American and an outsider” as a means to explain himself and his approach to sectarian matters. In a full-throated defense of the anthology published in the same journal that had savaged it, Fiacc concludes that his unsparing focus on the violence of the troubles must be a product of the “American dimension in me,” because “the tradition on these two islands has never been to face up to evil within

⁹⁵ Another brother, Peter, served in the European theater. Fiacc dedicates the poem “Icon” to him.

⁹⁶ John Brown 311.

Fiacc remains unreconciled to his childhood in Hell's Kitchen, so it stays for him an open "wound," an important point of distinction from Montague's symbol of the "scar" in *The Rough Field*. Memories are not called forth by the poet but rise up like weeds through the city sidewalk:

How raw you are today, early years
Ingrowing, growing in through
The fracture between
The body and the mind.

I don't rightly know what the wound is
New York, you, me, us?

Some wounds don't heal
And when they don't heal, they start
To weep [...]

("Hell's Kitchen" 117)

"New York Night" provides the earliest appearance of the "tar" that reappears in later poems such as "Glass Grass" as a material metaphor for sectarian hatred, filling the lungs of everyone in Belfast, himself included: "[t]he black is in my lungs now, and in my poems" (*SPF* 63). Here the tar is the site of a fainting fit:

Hailing a cab
I black out on tar
Am slapped back awake
By cop time nagging
'Do you know who you are?'

("Hell's Kitchen" 124)

Fiacc lets the sinister implication of the question hang over the poem until it meets with his own searching question "Will it ever be different?"

Horizons fawned at of male and girl
For a tiny tip, a bob twirl
Up, flip down, crown or tails?

Tails when the gamble is spent
From cold Belfast to these hell-gales.
Emerging from this air-conditioned house
Of ill fame, I am this man, that mouse.

("Hell's Kitchen" 125)

The fragments and rediscovered poems that were broadcast in “Hell’s Kitchen” (1980) and “Atlantic Crossing” (1981) show Fiacca’s vision of Belfast during the 1970s to be largely a recalibration of poems he had written about Hell’s Kitchen two decades earlier. He later dubbed this hybrid imaginative environment “Hellfast,” and the link between the two places remained vivid in Fiacca’s mind: both “the bad social vibes” and “the violence that happened on the streets...”⁹⁹

The conclusion one draws from *Ruined Pages* and the autobiographical fragments is that the “Belfast” appearing in Fiacca’s verse rarely constitutes a pure reflection of a single time and place, but is better understood as an amalgam that includes his parents’ and grandparents’ Belfast of the 1920s as well as Hell’s Kitchen and New York at midcentury. *Ruined Pages* opens not with “Stolen Fifer” but an earlier poem, “Der Bomben Poet,” first composed in 1941, the year Fiacca graduated from Haaren High School in New York City and matriculated to St. Joseph’s Seraphic seminary in upstate New York.¹⁰⁰ The poem gives Fiacca’s immediate reaction to the Luftwaffe bombings of Belfast during the “Belfast Blitz” of April 15, 1941, the poet’s seventeenth birthday.

Today is my birth
-day. I am seventeen.

My home town
Has just been
Blown up:

Dead feet in dead faces,
Corpses still alight,
Students helping kids
And old people out of

⁹⁹ John Brown 314.

¹⁰⁰ “Der Bomben Poet” was first published in *Missa Terribilis* (1981). The title was the only update to the original poem.

Still burning houses.

I have nothing to write
Poems about.

This is my twentieth-century

Night-life.

(*RP 2*)

Fiacc has called this first poem as “therapeutic” and “mad,” an immediate response to seeing the newspaper headline “Belfast Bombed” during a morning bus commute.¹⁰¹ Rather than madness, though, the more lasting impression is of a haunting prescience. The first line’s sense of nativity – “Today is my birth-” comes from a stoic realization, reminiscent of Adorno, that poetry may not have power to speak to this experience of urban bombardment: “I have nothing to write/Poems about.” It shows a young poet who has understood all too clearly that the new character of the world he inhabits will demands a willingness to face up to mass violence; that such a task will be his “twentieth-century/Night-life.” In this way, “Der Bomben Poet” anticipates an observation that Fiacc made four decades later about the unique challenge facing his generation of poets:

Our generation, almost as old as this century, has been voided from a womb-culture into a bomb-culture: 20th century schizophrenia in which the individual is not split in two, but, torn asunder, exploded and disintegrated into fragments[...]¹⁰²

Fiacc’s choice of metaphor in this passage is apt, given the critical discussion of his “double birth,” but his comments point to concerns beyond the American/Irish contexts of his work. His experience in New York and Belfast – and together in the poetic landscape of “Hellfast” – are representative to him of a more general condition of urban

¹⁰¹ John Brown 307. Coincidentally, one of the other major news items carried in all newspapers on April 16, 1941 was Roosevelt’s support for all men between the ages of 18 and 45 to register immediately for the draft. Fiacc’s desire to avoid conscription influenced his decision to matriculate and remain in seminary as well as his subsequent resolve to return to Ireland.

¹⁰² Fiacc, “Atlantic Crossing: An Autobiographical Fragment” *My Twentieth-Century Night Life* 133.

modernity in which an encroaching milieu of violence and militarism forces him to imagine the body, the psyche, and the polis as filthy, torn, fragmented, exploded, and disintegrated things. “Hellfast,” unlike the rough field of Garvaghey, is not a meaningful meeting place of various historical strains, most of them sorrowful, but a nightmarish cityscape of degradation and fugitive meaning.

V. Prodigal Sons

For the Irish poet, and in particular the Northern poet, an American origin adds a third coordinate to the Irish/English colonial dichotomy that has preoccupied Irish art from at least the time of Tudor colonial expansion. Perhaps as a consequence, Montague and Fiacca have been more ready to reject the formal demands of the English lyrical tradition and turn to American verse models and experiments in order to provide a new idiom – a Williamsian “new dialect” – with which to discuss the Irish question. For each poet, the cultural stagnation and colonial impasse that precipitated the Troubles is discoverable, if on a smaller scale, in the malaise of Irish art at midcentury, where, in Terence Brown’s estimation, the “befouled and noxious” psycho/sexual condition of the country needed to be “cleansed by the fresh waters of poetry.”¹⁰³ Much of this water, it turns out, came from the Atlantic.

The aspiration to replenish Irish poetry, however, moves these poets with unequal force. For all his wariness – his anger, bitterness, rage and confusion – Montague’s structural virtuosity in *The Rough Field* speaks to the possibilities of self-actualization and freedom through careful attention to – though not an adherence to – Ireland’s

¹⁰³ Terence Brown, “*The Dead Kingdom: A Reading*” *Irish University Review* 19 (1989) 103.

historical and mythological patterns. In witnessing his aged mother's burial at the end of a companion sequence *The Dead Kingdom*, Montague claims, with apparent finality, that

I want no truck
With this narrowing world
Of bigotry and anger.

To be free from the historical nightmare of recurring division and conflict is to embrace the body's physical genius in shedding dead cells in order to recombine and regenerate new life. Such is Montague's model for historical as well as personal consciousness:

Consciousness, a firefly
Sparkling with cognition,
Living through a thousand
Minor deaths, as the atoms
Of the body decay, separate,
To be endlessly rewoven,
Endlessly reborn, my body
Of seven years ago, shed;
This final death, a freedom;
A light battling through cloud.
(“Northern Lights” *DK* 88)

While Montague's poetry finds strength and succor in imagining such atomization, Fiacc's poetry finds only continued marginalization and fragmentation in the deepening schizophrenia of the “bomb-culture.” He seeks no transcendence in pondering the deaths of those close to him or completely unknown to him, and largely abjures metaphorical, mythological, or physiological conceits that might, returning to Dawe's description, “stabilize the violence by drawing it into its own circuit of imaginative ordering.”¹⁰⁴

Contrast Montague's elegy above with one of Fiacc's elegies for his mother, “Fire Light,” in which no rebirth – or “sea change” – is imagined possible. There are only new and deepening absences, as the poet in his characteristic rage to tear apart language, reads and then dutifully destroys a newly discovered box of his mother's letters:

¹⁰⁴ Gerald Dawe, “Introduction” *Ruined Pages* 10.

For that near to the empty sky
How cold and bare attics are

Of a pig-iron morning you
Of the scrubbing board fist

Born to, did die...

The sticks too damp to light
The fire, I use your letters

Only to learn that your mis-
spelt words hiss in the blaze

Like tears won't burn in this
Blood sea we drown in but
Do not die in even when

The trying to, the 'sea change'
Is burning you 'away on there'

The more to smelt us back together
Again

 In this so strange
'So Be It Now' as if

It never really were
Or never will be

Only always is...¹⁰⁵

In their role as prodigal sons, both poets perceive themselves as inheritors of a broken tradition, not just poetically, but culturally and politically. Both poets engage the American possibilities of their identities, experiences, and influences in order to address the fractures that attend exile when it tries to return to the "native" place. We might say that in choosing to stress an essential American part of their biography, each poet confronts the failures of the Anglo-Irish War and Irish Civil War to create a unified state, and, though to a much lesser degree, the intermittent failures of twentieth century Irish art – whether in the sweeping cultural ambitions of the Revival or in the insular parochialism

¹⁰⁵ Padraic Fiacc, "Fire Light" *Odour of Blood* 34.

of the “tragic generation” – to produce the unified and productive artistic mind that was its purported goal.¹⁰⁶ Yet it is from these same failures that both poets find the means to envision a post-nationalist Irish identity.

Despite the sadness and loss at the center of his own family’s history, Montague has remained confident in the power of art to heal the political divisions that defined the Irish twentieth century. To that end, he has referred to poetry as “a redemptive process,” one that “tries to explain and extract something of beauty from horror, and it tries to absorb some of the distress and to transform it into some kind of beauty.”¹⁰⁷ In his introduction to the *Faber Book of Irish Verse*, Montague expands the point in claiming that “a poet is someone who, through words, turns psychic defeats into victories.”¹⁰⁸ Montague’s positive faith in art has informed and shaped how other poets have conceived of the meaning of their exile and return. Certainly we see its influence on the redemptive poetics of Liddy, Heaney, and Boland, whose work embrace poetry as a paradigm of self-renewal, if not historical renewal. By contrast, Fiacca’s work fuels little such hope, and, more to the point, presupposes a poetics that necessarily rejects such proclamations of redemption and victory. Francis Hagan has likened Fiacca’s alternative poetics to a “failure as strategy.” Such a strategy of failure is in league with the destroyed icon of the Virgin Mary in a raided Catholic home in the poem “Credo, Credo”:

And even should you shoot the swarthy
-faced Mother with her ugly Jewish Child

¹⁰⁶ For Terence Brown’s coining of the widely used term “tragic generation,” see *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–1985* (Dublin: Fontana, 1985) 211–238.

¹⁰⁷ Stephen Arkin, “An Interview with John Montague” *The New England Review* 5 (Autumn/Winter 1982) 238.

¹⁰⁸ Montague, “Introduction” *Faber Book of Irish Verse*, ed. John Montague (1974; London: Faber & Faber, 1978).

Who bleeds with the people, she'll win
Because she loses all with the people,
Has lost every war for centuries with us.¹⁰⁹

As I will explore in the next chapters, Montague's response to his "double birth" has been the most influential for the poets who have followed him. But Fiacca's vision of the Irish Madonna lurks too; its example of inevitable and irrevocable loss. Fiacca's poetry will help us to understand the moments of panic and anxiety about the impossibility of return, worries that poetry itself cannot redress the loneliness and fragmentation that attends the modern Irish experience of emigration, dislocation, separation, and exile.

¹⁰⁹ Fiacca, "Credo, Credo" *Nights in the Bad Place* 46.

Chapter 2

BIRTH, EXILE, AND POSSIBLE RETURN: JAMES LIDDY AS *VOYAGEUR*

*"I step into the breeze tonight on Waller street
I am the convention poet in exile*

*There are no ancestral voices calling
Come home and be the Bard."*
—James Liddy "Elegy"¹

While James Liddy could not claim a "double birth" like John Montague and Padraic Fiacc, he considered wanderlust part of his familial inheritance. His maternal grandfather boasted of having opened the first supermarket in New York City, where the family grew rich in the years before World War I by catering to the needs of Irish immigrants.² Liddy's mother, Clare, named for the county that her family left, was born along the "Irish Riviera" in Far Rockaway, New York and sent back to Ireland as an adolescent for her schooling. Though she later married into a respectable upper middle-class Catholic family in Ireland, Clare remained always in her son's imagination as an exotic émigré, an American *bon vivant* of 1920s Dublin who dined and danced with the

¹ James Liddy, "Elegy" *Blue House: Poems in the Chinese Manner* (Honolulu & Los Altos, CA: The Nine Beasts Press, 1968) 44. An earlier draft of the poem appeared in Hayden Murphy's *Broadsheet* 3 (1968), unknown pagination.

² Padraic Fiacc, "Blue Fool" *My Twentieth Century Night-Life* 78. Inspired by the success of these supermarkets, Fiacc's father Bernard opened an Irish grocery upon first emigrating to Manhattan.

artists, intellectuals, poets, politicians, and former rebels that populated a more exciting and romantic period in Ireland.³

Raised in the small village Coolgreany, Liddy was sent to Glenstal Abbey in Co. Limerick to be educated by the Benedictines and entered University College, Dublin in 1953 with a vocation for law. During his first term at UCD, he attended a reading and lecture given by Patrick Kavanagh that inspired him to return to his childhood love of writing. Throughout the late 1950s, Liddy divided his time between the practice of law and the small circles of bohemian Dublin, but languished in the routines of both worlds. It was thus that when Montague's "American Pegasus" appeared in *Studies* in 1959, Liddy was one of the young writers most receptive to its challenge. In 1962, Dolmen published his whimsical prose and verse paean to James Joyce called *Esau, My Kingdom for a Drink*, and he used his friendship with Dolmen publisher Liam Miller to reach out to Montague. Having cultivated a relationship Liddy persuaded Montague to place his new poem, "The Siege of Mullingar," in the second issue of Liddy's experimental arts journal *Arena* (1963–65), edited with Liam O'Connor and Michael Hartnett. "The Siege of Mullingar" would become one of the most consequential Irish lyric poems of the 1960s, and its appearance on the front cover of *Arena* increased the journal's profile among Dublin artists.⁴

"The Siege of Mullingar," later absorbed into Book VIII of *The Rough Field*, was a touchstone for the sixties generation in Dublin. In parodying Yeats's "September 1913,"

³ Liddy, "Her Disposition" *Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice: A Tribute to James Liddy* (Galway: Arlen House, 2006) 47.

⁴ See David Gardiner, "'The Last Summer': James Liddy's *Arena*" *An Sionnach* 1.1 (2005) 71–86 and Thomas Dillon Redshaw, "'We Done Our Best When We Were Let': James Liddy's *Arena*, 1963–1965" *South Carolina Review* 38.1 (2005) 97–117.

it chastises both the remnants of high-toned Revival-era sanctimony and the bourgeois Catholic moralism of the postwar and post-Emergency years. Much as “American Pegasus” had done for the literary gatekeepers of Ireland, the poem’s allusive refrain – “*Puritan Ireland’s dead and gone/A myth of O’Connor and O’Faolain*” – warned Irish political and ecclesiastical authorities that a social revolution, which had been absent from the Irish political revolution of forty years earlier, had now arrived.⁵ The titular “siege” refers to the public carousing by young men and women at a festival of traditional Irish music, the *Fleadh Cheoil*, held annually in the Co. Westmeath village of Mullingar. The behavior of the young people scandalized many local observers, but to Montague it suggested a more general sexual awakening in Ireland:

At the Fleadh Cheoil in Mullingar
 There were two sounds, the breaking
 Of glass, and the background pulse
 Of music. Young girls roamed
 The streets with eager faces,
 Shoving for men. Bottles in
 Hand, they rowed out for a song:
Puritan Ireland’s dead and gone,
A myth of O’Connor and O Faoláin.

In the early morning the lovers
 Lay on both sides of the canal
 Listening on Sony transistors
 To the agony of Pope John.
 Yet it didn’t seem strange or blasphemous,
 This ground bass of death and
 Resurrection, as we strolled along:
Puritan Ireland’s dead and gone,
A myth of O’Connor and O Faoláin.

Further on, breasting the wind
 Waves of the deserted grain harbor
 We saw a pair, a cob and his pen,
 Most nobly linked. Everything then
 In our casual morning vision

⁵ On the Irish Revolution’s lack of a true social revolution, see Michael Laffan, *The Resurrection of Ireland* 3.

Seemed to flow in one direction,
Line simple as a song:
Puritan Ireland's dead and gone,
*A myth of O'Connor and O Faoláin.*⁶

The note of change in “The Siege of Mullingar” encouraged an already burgeoning sense of liberation in Liddy. With the founding of *Arena*, his poems and essays clamored for a new era of artistic and sexual freedom, one to which he felt that he properly belonged. After a brief stay in Spain in 1965, Liddy left behind Catholic Europe for good and emigrated to San Francisco in 1967. Thomas Dillon Redshaw would later reflect that Liddy’s emigration represented a watershed moment in the small literary world of Dublin. Liddy, Redshaw writes, had become “*the fugitive poet.*”⁷

In a 2006 essay, Eamonn Wall distinguishes Liddy’s poetry from that of other Irish émigrés by arguing for the relative unimportance of the concept of exile to Liddy’s work. Wall cites Liddy’s devotion to his mother and his identification with her American origins as the prime reason. Despite her return to Ireland, Clare Liddy remained an exotic American *femme fatale* in her son’s mind, and Wall argues that Liddy conceived of himself as in some part American as a result. Much like Montague and Fiacc, Wall draws on the idea of succession to make his point, writing that America had been a “part of [Liddy’s] inheritance since birth” and thus “he could never feel like an exile and he has never written through the voice of one.”⁸

⁶ Montague, *TRF* 68–9. For a reproduction of the original cover, see James Liddy, *This Was Arena*, ed. James Liddy (Co. Kildare: Malton Press, 1982) 27.

⁷ Thomas Dillon Redshaw, “By James Liddy: A Descriptive Checklist, 1962–2004” *An Sionnach* 1.1 (2005) 108.

⁸ Eamonn Wall, “From El to Axel’s: Irish Poets Stateside” *Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice: A Tribute to James Liddy*, ed. Michael S. Begnal (Galway: Arlen House, 2006) 29.

Despite my disagreement with Wall's reading of Liddy and exile, he is correct to call critical attention to Liddy's closeness with his mother. No proper account of Liddy's work can fail to recognize the formative power that this relationship had on his artistic outlook. We have seen how Padraic Fiacc adopted his mother's distaste for New York and how that distaste colored and shaped his poetry as well as his public persona for decades afterwards. But where Fiacc associated his mother's experience in New York with alienation, degradation, and exile, Liddy's poems about his mother imagine her as a figure of security, wholeness, and safe return. In "How Mother Came Home" (1980), Liddy addresses this issue directly, recreating his parents' return from America in 1939. He imagines his mother's return in particular as following from two other formative events whose relevance becomes clear only retrospectively. "Yeats and Pius XI had just passed away," he writes, "so it would be a stranger world." Within the dream logic of the poem, these two figures, one representing Irish art, the other Irish religion, pass away so that Clare Liddy emerges to represent both poetry and the church. The child's experience of the "stranger world" is offset by a vision of his mother:

Then they waved and came down
The gangway smiling and one held out
The love that fucks the heart day in day out
And that with passion winds raves the mind.
She gave me a blue cellophane basket of
Fruit from New York and a pale yellow
Bunny (my first friend Billy),
The Goddess pure and in fur coat stole
The psychic places growing girls should find
(my emotions will never now be trite).
Beauty is strange as a secret woody mole,
From that day forth I have not been right.⁹

⁹ Liddy "How Mother Came Home" *New England Review* 3.2 (1980) 234. The poem makes an interesting comparison with Montague's love poem to his mother "Intimacy." See Chapter 1, pp. 29–30.

The parts of his character that Liddy most cherished – his sense of Irishness, his love of the Catholic church, his artistic temperament, emotional depth, and, as this poem addresses playfully, his homosexuality – he considered a spiritual inheritance from her.¹⁰ Although this last aspect of his identity “charted” his “imagination,” it was also, if he is to be believed, the sole source of contention between them. Speaking to Brian Arkins in 1996, he muses on their meaning to one another:

My mother and I were everything, Princess and subject, muse and artist, mistress and servant, matriarch and rebel... but on one thing we were divided: I saw the open sexual life as the embodiment of love and purpose, and she saw it traditionally as salacious and rank. She defended monogamy, I adored (sometimes in moderation) the sybarite.¹¹

The subject upon which they were divided – Liddy’s “open sexual life” – may have been the private reason for his decision to leave Ireland, but I will argue that Liddy conceived of his exile both as an artistic conceit (in the manner that Patrick Ward describes in *Exile, Emigration, and Irish Writing*) and as part of a broader historical inheritance:

My relationship to Ireland is dictated by the *customary law of birth, exile, and possible return*; it is the usual gathering of panic and confusion, complicated at the end of the century by the sudden loss in the culture of a sure sense of cyclic return. (338, italics mine)

Liddy locates his emigration to the U.S. within a broader tradition of Irish “customary law,” but he feels that the inevitable completion of that cycle (i.e., the return) has been lost for poets of his generation. He goes on, suggesting reasons for this loss:

As a new twentieth century nation [Ireland] had almost too much identity, too certain of the curves of our psychic past – now as the result of academic revisionism and the permeation of a universal sex/drugs/rock and roll cocoon we are left with a diminishing local definition of ourselves. *Yet the point of my witness and my rhythms lies between the points of return to somewhere and an expectation of arriving at nowhere.* (338, italics mine)

¹⁰ See Brian Arkins, *James Liddy: A Critical Study* (Galway: Arlen House, 2001) 3.

¹¹ Brian Arkins, “From McDaid’s to Milwaukee: Brian Arkins Interview James Liddy” *Studies* 85 (1996) 340.

Liddy makes clear that the emotional complication of his exile does not inhere in the leaving but rather in the incomplete act of return, which results in a “diminishing local definition of ourselves.” We see in Liddy’s poetic interaction with American places and influences the search for a new “local definition” of himself, one complicated by his desire to “return to somewhere” but his “expectation of arriving at nowhere.” Whatever his feelings personally, Liddy’s poems draw creatively from the ambiguity of this somewhere/nowhere dynamic. In the next chapter, I will show how Seamus Heaney has responded to a similar realization by more aggressively asserting a vision of Irish place that is largely an “Ireland of the mind” and that keeps American place mostly outside of his “imaginative geography.”¹² Taking a different tack, Eavan Boland has decided to create alternative histories involving various migrations between Ireland and America. But Liddy’s poetry continues to bear the imprint of Montague’s “American Pegasus,” and he is the conduit through which Montague’s poetic philosophy has passed as a living model to a younger generation of poets such as Wall and Greg Delanty, whom I will explore in the conclusion. Liddy’s poems seek out something similar to William Carlos Williams’s “new dialect,” which Liddy refers to as a “joint townland sound,” a poetic voice comprised of both Irish and American localities. Finding common cause between the two literatures, Liddy notes that:

[...] vital in the American composition and process have been the significance of the local voice, whether New York, the West Coast, New England, the Mid-West, etc. I hope I have combined both the Irish and American reliance on locality and place. (337)

¹² See Chapter 3, p. 115.

II. Personal Odyssey, Poetic Departure

The second half of Wall's claim quoted earlier – that Liddy has “never written in the voice” of an exile – is difficult to reconcile with Liddy's work from the early 1960s to the mid 1970s. In the poems written before he left Dublin for San Francisco in 1967, we discover the notion of exile approached as an artistic conceit. As Ward writes of Joyce and his alter ego Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

[Dedalus] is, as the diary form signals, a self-constructed hero of consciousness, subject and object, author and text, Irish and European, singular and plural. The ontological duality which Joyce as text and creator came to represent paradigmatically, set the imaginative boundaries for most Irish artists who succeeded him, and the terms of their acceptance of the categories he rewrote or their opposition to, or discomfort with, such configurations. After Joyce exile and art in written forms ceased to signify individually. They fused symbiotically with discourses emanating out of neo-realist Catholic practices and perhaps, just as importantly, in critical commentary on all Irish writing in the English language.¹³

Liddy is among those writers for whom Joyce so completely “set the imaginative boundaries.” We discover in his earliest published poems an urge to inhabit the poem as both subject and object in order to trace minutely the lines of his developing artistic consciousness, which is inseparable from a conviction to give and receive love. In an early poem titled “Personal Odyssey” (1962), he reflects that a commitment to a life of nonconformity and self-discovery will require his willingness to leave Ireland behind. This solemn pledge comes across, however, more as play-acting than genuine resolve. He addresses the poem to his parents and to Ireland itself but the tone remains affectionate throughout, and his use of the familiar Irish conceit of the sea-faring journey likewise softens the poem's bite:¹⁴

¹³ Ward 235.

¹⁴ For the connection between sea-faring journeys and the concept of exile in medieval Irish literature see Jonathan Wooding, “Introduction” *The Otherworld Journey in Early Irish Literature: an Anthology of Criticism* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000) xi–xxvii.

Yes, I promise I will spread my sails to leave you
because when I was young I took an oath

to make myself an individual however peculiar
I might look or however far I might have to travel...¹⁵

Liddy claims a grand pedigree in the lines that follow, casting his adolescent self in the mold of other romantic poet figures such as Wordsworth or Rimbaud. The poem's narrative of a youth fleeing his childhood home at night to embrace his poetic vocation is impressively vatic if not, as the poem's title implies, epic. It continues:

I left the house late at night and started
walking under the million falling leaves of experience,
an adolescent tagging along the country lanes,

Ulysses beneath my arm, at the first cross roads,
I found my future waiting in the nearest field.

I bent down and picked up the talents on the grass,
the flames I held against my body implored: *love*
should be given to others in our brief stay,

friends are our connectors with Divinity
as the spirit requires in its journey and return home.

I crept back bringing them to my room
And learned from the flames for seven long years.
(CP 29)

Liddy frames his poetic calling in the metaphorical terms of an annunciation or a Pentecost: he receives his gift in the form of a "flame" that gives him intimate knowledge of "Divinity" (available through friendship and free love) and which charges him with the spiritual task to "journey and return home." After a period of gestation – "seven long years" – these flames become incarnate and bring about a rebirth:

I sailed over the waterfall of the womb;
my eyes discover where they should look; like a child
I peer into the faces of persons needing me.

¹⁵ Liddy, *Collected Poems*, ed. Brian Arkins (Omaha, NE: Creighton UP, 2001) 29. Hereafter, passages taken from *Collected Poems* will be signaled by CP.

In my twenty-eighth year the weak dreams of a sapling—
a vision of the creature I seek *enters my belly*...
I found after a precarious boy sightseeing a man

who talks sometimes at evening at the café
in a desert port, soul searching. Be a songster.
(CP 30)

In a telling connection, Liddy's aspiration to the poet's life is coeval with a sexual awakening that embraces both masculine and feminine sexuality and in which the child eventually adopts the role of both the "father and mother" to whom he dedicates the poem. Speaking of Liddy's work more broadly, Daniel Tobin has identified the poet's gift as the "generative imagination with the feminine power to give birth."¹⁶ This ability to encompass both genders is in keeping with Liddy's hermaphroditic symbology of his homosexuality.¹⁷

Yet just as transformative is the influence on Liddy of Joyce. Dedalus, again, is the most relevant antecedent for the younger Liddy of "Personal Odyssey."¹⁸ He acknowledges this debt by imagining the figure of his younger self clutching a copy of *Ulysses* beneath his arm as he goes off to seek his future.¹⁹ By figuring his poetic apprenticeship in gestational terms, Liddy evokes Dedalus's oath in *Portrait* that he will emigrate to Paris to "forge within the smithy of my soul the uncreated consciousness of

¹⁶ Daniel Tobin, "Starting from Wexford: James Liddy and Walt Whitman" *North Dakota Quarterly* 64.2 (1997) 118.

¹⁷ This is a characterization that Liddy shares with, among others, John Ashberry. For a discussion of Ashberry's "queer poetics" that has many lines of similarity with Liddy's, see John Emil Vincent, *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 29–57.

¹⁸ During this same period of time, Liddy was the caretaker of the Martello Tower at Sandycove.

¹⁹ Liddy's first published work for Dolmen in 1962 (his "twenty-eighth year") was an impressionistic panegyric to Joyce called *Esau, My Kingdom for a Drink*. Its breathless style led to a famously cutting review by Myles na Gopaleen (Brian O'Nolan) in the *Irish Times*. See "Humble Homage (Book Review)" *Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice* 33–34.

[the Irish] race.”²⁰ Liddy’s vision substitutes an utterance of sexual dream imagery (“a vision of the creature I seek enters my belly...” for Dedalus’ artisanal craft work. Yet his goal in leaving is similar, if less grand. If he does not become a great artist, he will assume the humbler role of the “songster”: “a man//who talks sometimes at evening at the café/in a desert port, soul searching.”

That the barstool poet (the “songster”) might also be a great artist was confirmed in the figure of Kavanagh, whom Liddy met with frequently at his de facto “chapel” of McDaid’s pub on Harry Street in Dublin. There Liddy took his place as one of the disciples of Kavanagh during the infamous “Baggotonia” era that Montague criticized in *Poisoned Lands*.²¹ Despite Montague’s influence, it was in fact Kavanagh who first introduced Liddy and many other younger writers in Dublin to the American Beat poets and to Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* in particular, which Kavanagh claimed to keep by his bedside.²² As David Gardiner notes, Liddy’s visionary Catholicism disposed him favorably to Kerouac’s definition of the Beat as “coming equally from ‘beat,’ as in haggardly and artistically occupying life in the everyday world, and from ‘beatific,’ as in occupying the lives of the saints.”²³ It was something of this quality that inspired Liddy to choose the following passage from Robert Lowell’s translation of Rilke’s “Die Tauben” as the epigraph for each issue of *Arena*:

Back in the dovecote, there’s another bird,

²⁰ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 253.

²¹ See Arkins 335. For a lively memoir of the Baggot Street era, see John Ryan, *Remembering How We Stood: Bohemian Dublin at Mid-Century* (New York: Taplinger, 1975). For Montague’s rebuke of the “McDaid’s poets,” see “Introduction,” *Poisoned Lands* iv; also Chapter 1, p. 40, note 36 and p. 50, note 56.

²² Antoinette Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2003) 430.

²³ Gardiner, “‘The Last Summer’” 82.

by all odds the most beautiful,
one that never flew out, and can know gentleness...
Still, only by suffering the rat race in the arena
Can the heart learn to beat.²⁴

Whatever other factors may have precipitated Liddy's move to San Francisco in 1967, perhaps none was more important than his growing wish to live out the poet's life at the epicenter of the artistic and sexual revolution, even if it meant "suffering the rat race in the arena."²⁵ Despite its traumas, such a life would entail a "return to simplicity," as Kavanagh put it in a 1965 poem:

The right way is the wrong way as Rock and Roll and the Beatniks
See.
Virtue of necessity...²⁶

More than just making virtue of necessity, the Beat poets also appealed to Liddy as agents of a vibrant print and performance culture that he hoped to emulate in the pages of *Arena*. The Beat movement captured the gaiety and immediacy of the poetic moment while simultaneously clearing away the sclerotic tradition of institutional literature that Kavanagh had scorned as "bawling lecturology."²⁷ Throughout the mid-1960s, Liddy looked beyond an expressly Irish literary inheritance to the experimental work found in small books published by City Lights Press in San Francisco. He recalls that

²⁴ Liddy, *This Was Arena* 7.

²⁵ It should also be noted that San Francisco had been considered since the late 19th century as one of the most desirable destinations for Irish emigration. Donald Jordan and Timothy O'Keefe's recent collection *The Irish in the San Francisco Bay Area: Essays on Good Fortune* (San Francisco: The Irish Literary and Historical Society, 2005) seems to affirm this.

²⁶ Patrick Kavanagh, "Shancoduff" (1965) *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh*, ed. Peter Kavanagh (New York: Kavanagh Hand Press, 2001) 363.

²⁷ Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh* 430. See also James Liddy and Anthony Cronin, "Patrick Kavanagh at Northwestern," *Nine Queen Bees* (Zero Issue), ed. James Liddy (Summer 1970) 7–9, in which Liddy and Cronin reprint Kavanagh's remarks at the Yeats Symposium as "bawling lecherology." The discrepancy is probably due to differing accounts of Kavanagh's remarks by Donald Torchiana and Kavanagh himself in the RTE Guide and various letters. Quinn mistakes the date of Kavanagh's remarks for March 30, 1965, whereas Liddy and Cronin correctly identify the date as April 30, 1965.

After sportive visits to the grand bookshop Hodges and Figgis on Dawson Street to buy another set of black and white City Lights books, I adjusted to the siren note of the Apocalypse carried by the Beat Generation. I knew the mainstream family had faded like the Fourth of July; it was time for experiments with literary form, poetics, the idea of performance, as well as with libido in general.²⁸

On June 11, 1965, Ginsberg along with Gregory Corso and Lawrence Ferlinghetti sounded the “siren note of the Apocalypse” at the infamous “International Poetry Incarnation” held at the Albert Hall in London and attended by an estimated 5,000 people.²⁹ For Liddy, the fading “mainstream family” included not only the brahmins of American modernism but also the sacrosanct Anglo-Irish Revival figures such as Yeats and George Russell (Æ), whose reputations were carefully tended by academics on both sides of the Atlantic. A galvanizing moment happened in April 1965 when Kavanagh used his remarks at the Yeats centenary symposium at Northwestern University to belittle the honorary poet and dismiss both the Irish and American poetic traditions as a creation of craven academics. The poets that Kavanagh singled out as worthy of praise during his remarks were Kerouac, Ginsberg, Corso, and Ferlinghetti, calling them “the only people in America that are alive.”³⁰ Kavanagh’s much-publicized stunt in Chicago – and its resulting backlash in Irish literary circles – convinced Liddy’s that he should separate himself from a milieu that in his view was small-minded and in thrall to a trumped-up past.

²⁸ Liddy, *The Doctor’s House* (Co Clare: Salmon Poetry, 2004) 75. A telling difference between Liddy and Montague is recognizable in Liddy’s dismissive reference to the “mainstream family” of Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore. Compare this description to Montague’s more reverential reference to “an impressive terracing of generations” in “American Pegasus.” See Introduction, p 7.

²⁹ For Kavanagh’s description of the Albert Hall reading, see Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh* 445. For a near contemporary account of the reading, see Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968).

³⁰ Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh* 430.

Liddy aired his grievances publicly in “Extracts from a Journal of Departure” (1966), which he wrote partially in Spain. Reviewing the piece for an Irish periodical, Fiacca understood by its confessional tone that Liddy was “preparing himself for exile,” but, unlike Stephen Dedalus, “not in cunning nor with silence.”³¹ Rising to such criticism, Liddy subsequently focused the thesis of “Extract” far more effectively in “Reasons for Departure,” another poem of artistic purpose that opened his second collection *Blue Mountain* (1968). Trading the measured stanzas of *In a Blue Smoke* for a longer, more irregular six-and-seven stress line, “Reasons for Departure” derides scholars who have “come lately into the trade area from Berkeley to U.C.D.” and calls out by name Kavanagh’s opponent in the Yeats affair, Padraic Colum. Rejecting the claim that departing poets were simply jealous or thin skinned, Liddy assigns the blame to the “elderly bores” of the prevailing “book columns” and their “bourgeois” Catholic sensibilities:

But the reasons why we do leave are simple and I’ll say it
 For one should explain things to the young who live in a prison
 Run by elderly bores, whose function is to disillusion.
 We do not want to read what they put in the book columns,
 Sad pomposities written by lounge-drinking computers
 Who outside the bourgeois details of marriage have never liked it
 Either up or down but variously export their insincere lies
 To flatter the Great Society’s culture-loving ear
 Which believes in mass producing books like car hooters.

The sensitive young artist, Liddy reasons, can not thrive in the garish and mechanized literary culture of midcentury Ireland, which “mass produc[es] books like car hooters” for American audiences. Such an artist can not be an individual and remain free in his solitude. The opposite of the “lounge-drinking computers” is “the solitary mind” whose

³¹ Padraic Fiacca, “Blue Fool” 78.

first obedience is to rendering concrete and sensual “the small world of known objects.”

These minds, Liddy argues, must leave Ireland because

It behoves [*sic*] us to travel where art is part of dignity
And praise given to the solitary mind, where mutual desiring
Projects on to a small world of known objects Singularity
Which performs the miracle of unlatching hearts
And being alive leads to the earth a woman of sandals.
Nights by the door breathing in a season of lamps and candles.
The ideal is to a strange extent visual, touchable by us
And caressable human beings though precious and delicate.
A cooker to be lit, papers stacked on a chair, a dry paintbrush
In a dusty room where Max Jacob’s sun poses:
The fact that we can live in time and beyond any given day,
Create a sense of total existence such as a prelate
Might know beneath his braided vestment on a Sunday,
And in the cool evening between sheets without pretence [*sic*]
We lie together and worship God in our own clay.

Within this exchange, the bond (“Singularity”) created between poet and reader (or between artist and audience) is both miraculous and a paradigm for love. The sexual implications of Liddy’s literary awakening laid out in “Personal Odyssey” resurface powerfully and more purposely in this poem’s concluding image: the poet and reader are rendered as two lovers in bed, and their literary intimacy is also a sexual intimacy that disposes them to “worship.” Sex thus reveals the divinity of the human body as both a maker and a made thing.

The irony of “Reasons for Departure” is that it clearly anticipates a self-imposed exile to the continent. America, with its “Great Society” programs and mass industrialization, comes in for as much of a drubbing as Ireland. Moreover, the poem’s distinct iconography and its debts to Auden’s “In Praise of Limestone” suggest a continental destination for the exiled writer. It seems, though, that Liddy’s interest in art as a spiritual incarnation began to square his theological instincts with the “dictational” poetics of Jack Spicer and other poets at the center of the Berkeley Renaissance. Liddy

admits in “Reasons for Departure” that his “ideal is to a strange extent visual,” and more importantly “touchable,” even “caressable,” as a human body might be. Furthermore, contact with the tangible artifacts of the artist’s offices (Max Jacob’s “dry paintbrush”; the prelate’s “braided vestment”) “create[s] a sense of total existence.” The poem erases any distinction between sexual freedom, artistic freedom, and intellectual freedom. Liddy is here a poet for whom the physical body and the material text of the poem are equal sites of exploration, play, seduction, and adoration, and his poetry becomes predicated on the belief that the sexual energies and the poetic energies are one and the same.

III. The Irish American *Voyageur*

The first small chapbooks and miscellanies that Liddy produced in San Francisco show a new interest in 9th century Chinese poets Du Mu and Li Shangyin,³² but it was Spicer’s poetry that most affected his own work.³³ Though Spicer had died in 1965 from complications related to his alcoholism, Liddy later explained to Milwaukee artist David Baptiste Chirot that he had hoped to commune with Spicer’s spirit by visiting the dead poet’s haunts and befriending those who had known him. Chirot remembers that Liddy had

...come to America out of a deep love of Jack Spicer – he had to see where Spicer had lived, know the people he had known – in as many ways as possible – to be sure – the Biblical knowing and conversational – archeological – poetical – friendships – letters —

³² The fourth and final section of Liddy’s “Elegy” for Patrick Kavanagh (quoted as the epigraph to this chapter) was the result of a new spare aesthetic learned from the Tang dynasty poets. Along with former students Jim Chapson and Thomas Hill, Liddy published a miscellany called *Blue House* (1968) that was dedicated to verse inspired by Chinese “pure poetry” yet dedicated to the memory of Jack Spicer.

³³ As might be imagined given the intervening years, second-hand accounts differ on whether Liddy was aware of Spicer’s work before he moved to San Francisco. In contrast with Chirot’s account, California poet George Stanley, a long-standing friend of Liddy’s, remembers that underground publisher Graham Mackintosh (White Rabbit Press) introduced Liddy to Spicer’s poetry after Liddy had arrived in San Francisco. Because Liddy introduced Stanley to Kavanagh’s work, Stanley recalls pointing out that they had “exchanged masters,” “When I First Met James” *Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice* 38.

It hadn't mattered to him that Spicer had died a few years earlier – he told me he fully expected the presence of Spicer to be there, completely alive – and that the traces and ghosts of him – would be found walking about, or at a bar – beside a radio – not dead at all –

The idea of a pilgrimage directly into what remained of the poet's life – in the persons of his friends, in the sites still extant in which he moved – all this was a sign to others of the making of the impossible the reality of one's life – the contact with a dead poet turning one's life around – a pivot of the hip swinging one round the corner of the bar – into the arms of a different future...³⁴

One of the results of this “pilgrimage” is a poetry in which the earlier figure of the voyager in “Personal Odyssey” is joined with the new character of the flâneur, a hybrid figure whom Liddy would later call a *voyageur*.³⁵ Along with the asyndetism of Chinese verse, Liddy delved into prose poems and longer, discursive free verse forms derived from Spicer's work. In such poetics, Liddy could indulge a spiritual and sexual expansiveness more deftly. As he boasts in “A White Thought in a White Shade”: “My poems are never tired/of these long walks in words...” (CP 141).

Liddy's *voyageur* is the exiled gay poet who walks out into a strange city at night “expecting to arrive at nowhere,” bringing with him a radical new language of imagination. We find the apotheosis of the *voyageur* in *Baudelaire's Bar Flowers* (1975), a collection composed of loose translations of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* in addition to original poems and verse letters written in the mode of the French symbolists. Kevin McEneaney has claimed that “the whole book is both atonement and memorial to Kavanagh.”³⁶ Liddy admits in one of the collection's letters to “Paddy” that shortly before Kavanagh's death the older poet had wanted to discuss Baudelaire, but Liddy had

³⁴ David Baptiste Chirot, “James Liddy, 1934–2008, For Jim Chapson” <http://davidbaptistechirot.blogspot.com> (November 8, 2008). Accessed February 20, 2012.

³⁵ Liddy, *The Doctor's House* 133.

³⁶ Kevin T. McEneaney, “Hibernian Gold” *Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice* 56.

been too absorbed in a Dáil debate about “gun running” on the radio.³⁷ The larger impression, however, is of Liddy’s daring and liberated voice, unmoored from the example of his immediate Irish mentors. He skillfully translates Baudelaire’s death horror into the “outlaw thrill” of cruising (“Dream of a Strange One” *BBF* 52). In “Correspondences,” for instance, Liddy describes his sexual urges in a bar coming to him like “the murmur of evil,” but the fear of damnation that haunts Baudelaire’s original poem is reconfigured here as a confirmation of divine election. His “evil” premonitions are proof that

[...] you are chosen for the works of love
 ...
 It was always this black mystery
 Of you and a few others being chosen.
 (*BBF* 8)

Likewise, the cursed souls unleashed in the desert in Baudelaire’s “Damned Women” reappear in Liddy’s translation as urban bar cruisers given free reign over their desires in “Delphine and Hippolyta”:

Go you freaked out queers
 Prowl like wolves through the cities
 Extravagant lovers accept your destiny
 Flee the normal you carry in your hearts.
 (*BBF* 37)

Baudelaire’s Bar Flowers continually discovers spiritual solace and strength in a socially outcast state and among social outcasts. Recalling the disagreement between Liddy and his mother, it is interesting to note that what Liddy’s *voyageur* celebrates above all other forms of sexual freedom is the freedom from the strictures of monogamy. For instance

³⁷ Liddy, “Dear Paddy” (ii) *Baudelaire’s Bar Flowers* (San Francisco: Capra Press; White Rabbit, 1975) 17. Hereafter, *Baudelaire’s Bar Flowers* will appear as *BBF*. For the more standard English translation of *Fleurs du Mal*, I am relying on William Aggeler’s translation of *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954).

Liddy translates Baudelaire's "without bridle and bits and spurs" as "with no wife or husband." Thus unencumbered,

We'll gallop on this wine
To a faggot heaven

Like two angels ecstatic
With Riviera fever
We'll reach the beach
In the blue morning.

On the wing of the whirlwind,
Baby,
Side by side

We'll drive up to paradise
Of making it with someone
New.³⁸

(BBF 48)

In this context of sexual freedom and ecstasy, Liddy inevitably contrasts Ireland and San Francisco in his respective translations of "A Voyage to Cytherea" and "Lesbos."³⁹ Although Cytherea is the island of "love's birth," the returning *voyageur* finds it, contra Yeats in "Sailing to Byzantium," a country for old men:

What is that dark sad island?
It is Cytherea
Of the songs, Eldorado of the fuckless.
Look, after all, it is a poor place.
(BBF 14)

When the *voyageur* encounters the body of the hanged Cytherean, he recognizes the doomed man as a figure of the gay Irishman and thus a possible image of himself had he chosen to remain in Ireland:

Cytherean, pupil of so radiant a sky

³⁸ It is difficult to read the phrase "Riviera fever" without hearing a sly allusion to his mother's birthplace at Far Rockaway, on Long Island's "Irish Riviera."

³⁹ Baudelaire's "Lesbos" was one of the original "condemned poems" left out of the 1857 edition of *Fleurs du Mal*. For a discussion of "Lesbos" in the context of the condemned poems, see Anna Balakian's landmark article, "Those Stigmatized Poems of Baudelaire" *The French Review* 31.4 (1958) 275.

Silently you allowed the insults
In expiation for your masonic practices
And sins that forbid a nice home

Hanged man, your country is mine...
(BBF 15)

Turning again to Venus in apostrophe, the speaker assumes the identity of both the *voyageur* and the hanged man, speaking in the double voice of the exile longing for a homeland but unable to return:

In your island, Venus, I found nothing
But a gibbet on which I hung . . .
God, make me fondle and allow fondled
My heart and body.
(BBF 15)

Lesbos, by contrast, is celebrated as the home of unconventional love that the *voyageur* discovers, presided over by the “Male Sappho the poet and the lover/More beautiful than Venus...” (BBF 31). Unlike Cytherea, which is the “Eldorado of the fuckless,” Lesbos is

...made...for fucking so much
Queen of the feverish empire of the night
And of inexhaustible freakish ways
(BBF 33)

In his celebration of Lesbos, Liddy ultimately returns to the characterization of San Francisco he made first in his translation of “Correspondences” – a wonderland of the sexual elect who have been chosen to take part in a “black mystery.” Liddy thus praises Lesbos,

For Lesbos has chosen me out of everyone
....
I from childhood on part of the black mystery.
(BBF 32)

Baudelaire's Bar Flowers seems to be the celebratory end that “Personal Odyssey” had evoked a decade earlier. Yet rather than a “desert port,” the *voyageur* has lit upon a port city with countless opportunities for sexual exploration and companionship. The

alienated Irish exile at the European café is reborn as the “freaked out queer” at home with the “damned souls” of San Francisco. The exile’s journey home, assumed to be inevitable in “Personal Odyssey,” now seems unthinkable.

In 1974, the year he turned 40, Liddy was offered a one-year position at University College, Galway. It was the first time that he had spent more than a few weeks in Ireland since leaving for San Francisco seven years earlier. The appointment allowed him to explore again the wilds of southwest Co. Clare, the ancestral home of his mother’s family, where he spent many summers as a child and young adult. The pull of Spicer’s California aesthetic was still strong, and the resulting collection *Corca Bascinn* (1977) approaches Irish place with techniques learned from the Berkeley Renaissance. Liddy adopts Spicer’s experimental structure of the “serial poem” in which the idea of the “book itself” provides the sole organizing principle of the collection.⁴⁰ Peter Gizzi writes of Spicer’s conception of serial poetry in helpful terms:

Spicer explains that a true serial poem moves forward without looking back...the individual “books” are not organized according to a narrative progression, and all its books are contemporaneous. Seriality, then, is not just a manifestation of temporal sequence, and it does not serve any overarching narrative or rhetorical concern. For Spicer, serial composition is the practice of writing in units that are somehow related without creating a totalizing structure for them. Their connection is purely poetic. That is, the poet must ignore the poem’s progress in order not to unify its content into a message she or he can control. Like Orpheus, the poet is instructed not to look back.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Both in terms of structure and theme, I suspect that Liddy drew consciously from Spicer’s serial poem *Holy Grail*. Spicer organized *Holy Grail* into seven “books” (each corresponding to a character in the grail legend) of seven poems each, while *Corca Bascinn* is organized into nine sections, eight of which contain between four and six poems (the other section “Love Song of Corca Bascinn” is a single poem of loosely connected stanzas). See Jack Spicer, “Holy Grail” *My Vocabulary Did This To Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2008) 329–358.

⁴¹ David Gizzi, ed. *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer* (Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1998) 50.

Spicer acknowledged the impossibility of the poet abiding totally by the established rules of the serial poem: just as Orpheus looked back, so would the poet. But Gizzi presents this infidelity as another element of Spicer's process as well: "...the rules only generate more imaginative forms of evasion" (50). The creative tension in *Corca Bascinn* comes partly from Liddy's choice of a poetic and organizational form that "moves forward without looking back" in order to address the very same desire to look back. While he largely achieves contemporaneity when he focuses on the aspects of Irish landscape that seem to encompass a contemporaneous history and mythology, the collection's final section "Exile" breaks this spell. In it the poet remembers his time in Co. Clare from the vantage point of a room in the French Quarter in New Orleans. *Corca Bascinn* thus waits until its final section to reveal that an organizing principle of *before* and *after* has been at work throughout the poem. The collection's final poem admits to this break with form, confessing that "There's no keeping faith with [anything]." New Orleans emerges, finally, as the site of looking back, of memory: "Mnemosyne's town."⁴²

Corca Bascinn is concerned with the possibility, if not the inevitability, of reconciling conflicting environments, identities, and states of mind. These reconciliations are not limited to the two settings of the serial poem, Co. Clare and New Orleans. Yet the most important for our purposes is the reconciliation between Ireland and America, which Liddy had separated into the Cytherea/Lesbos dichotomy a few years earlier in *Baudelaire's Bar Flowers*. *Corca Bascinn* unites Clare coast with south Louisiana in a kind of imaginative symbiosis. The muggy cypress bayous are teeming with life, but so too are the frigid rock pools of the Clare coast: one just has to know where to look.

⁴² James Liddy "There's no keeping faith with" *Corca Bascinn* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1977) 64. Hereafter, I will use the abbreviation *CB* for *Corca Bascinn*.

By asserting that *Corca Bascinn* approaches its two settings as appositional rather than oppositional, I depart from Michael Begnal's reading. Begnal argues that the "Exile" section

[...]announces a critical development in [Liddy's] poetic career. The idea of exile, of elsewhere, is now as important as Ireland. Ireland has symbolically taken on an identification with death, while New Orleans, with its social freedom, that of the promise of new experience....Liddy makes a lateral liberating move – he will no longer wait dolorously in the shadows of ancestors and tradition, but instead create a new world out from older confines[...]⁴³

As my reading of Liddy's development shows, "the idea of exile, of elsewhere" was a prominent part of Liddy's poetry from at least 1962. But a more substantive difference between my reading and Begnal's involves his assertion that *Corca Bascinn* reifies, rather than relieves, a symbolic divide between Ireland and America. The "Exile" section's final line is a Blakean evocation of "Love's sperm & death's sperm," which Begnal interprets as corresponding to the creative forces that each place exerts on the poet: New Orleans with sex (and therefore "social freedom") and Ireland with death. My reading of the "Exile" section posits that "love's sperm" and "death's sperm" are discoverable in both places, though perceived and expressed by the poet differently. The more relevant distinction to make would be between the Clare coast as *primal* (though not, I think, *primitive*) and New Orleans as *civilizational*, but even this distinction seems heavy-handed, as Liddy points out:

As in poetry
As in the beginning
Under walls
A town's carouse
As in rockpools or on the seabed

⁴³ Michael S. Begnal, "Love's sperm & death's sperm": A view of *Corca Bascinn* and Comyn's Lay" *Honeysuckle, Honeyjuice* 85.

Complex structure is a disadvantage.⁴⁴

Whether in the rock pools of Clare or the bars of the French Quarter, a certain “return to simplicity” adheres throughout *Corca Bascinn* both thematically and formally. While George Stanley (along with Begnal) is undoubtedly correct that *Corca Bascinn* addresses the “crisis of what meaning love can have when the world, at midlife, inverts itself,” this inversion itself does not imply a sorting out of sex and death into separate boxes.⁴⁵

Though we find the west of Ireland full of ghosts, it is likewise full of sexual promise. New Orleans, for its part, is characterized by a kind of “sex death” given symbolic expression by the Quarter’s morning glories (“I write June innerred petalled” *CB* 59).

The opening section, “Shore,” admires the vibrant life in coastal rock pools, especially the sea anemones that are “the most beautiful animals of the sea shore mistaken for/Flowers.” Though potentially deadly, the anemones receive praise from Liddy for their sexual genius – the reconciliation of the male and female sexual organs into a single body:

The tips of the fronds become swollen
The tide comes in they fuse to make spores
Male cells attracted to the female by some chemical
 substance given out by the female
As us
To visitors from the Land of Youth.
 (“The tips of the fronds become swollen” *CB* 10)

⁴⁴ Liddy, “As in poetry” *CB* 11. Liddy’s passage echoes W.C. Williams’s conclusion to the epigraph poem for *Paterson*, see Chapter 1, p. 59.

⁴⁵ George Stanley, “Beyond the Sublime: Reading James Liddy” *Irish University Review* 28 (1998) 100. Begnal senses that “...[the] poet reached the end of his thirties and a sense of mortality cre[pt] in...West Clare is where Liddy walked in the shadow of death...” (80).

Liddy imagines this elision of sexual difference occurring in human interactions as well:
“We talk to the girl or is it the guy with purple threaded shirt.”⁴⁶ The illusory movements of the sea anemones transform the familiar coast into “Such Otherworld,” a hyper-reality rife with

Old
Magic with a bunch of blossoms
The boys and girls wear green cloaks
With some kind of fringe
And soft yellow hair
(By wonder of his hair).
Living flowers
And whether they are real kids
Or we’re real doesn’t matter
You’ve come to adore

(CB 10)

Just as the otherworldly sea anemones work as the defining metaphors of the “Shore” section, these “Living flowers” reemerge as the “morning glories” of “Exile,” providing *Corca Bascinn* with a sense of imagistic completion. Liddy sits in the French Quarter writing “innerred petalled/Hibiscus letters to ex-lovers” who are back in Clare with its “grassy cliffs of sea pinks.” Both places are imagined in full bloom:

Hills are in blossom both sides
The Hibiscus you never saw
Herbs shrubs and trees specially
Orange flowered flame of the bosom
The hollyhock that this the rose-mallow
(My Mallow poets gather your rosebuds)
Blossom over blossom
Tremble and shake in mad June dog days
Moments of memory of the sex death
Pollen-odoured warm warmer nights.

(CB 10)

New Orleans shares an appropriate symbol of the “sex death” in its morning glories whose bloom in the first light of the morning is curdled by the afternoon sun. In his

⁴⁶ Liddy, “The tips of the fronds become swollen” CB10.

reflection on the French Quarter in his 2004 memoir *The Doctor's House*, Liddy

remembers New Orleans as a city defined by these ephemeral flowers. “Flowers stop here”

he writes:

Site of pushing the forward instincts to the limit.

What I wish is insurgency. That can be said with flowers. The seemingly mild flags, the purple, the white, are the morning's soldiers. They die first. They give up their petals for the future—reincarnation.

The light of the earth is a city.

Under the sun of the new world you march to a different waterfall. Spouted Cupids and Venuses engage in swimming. O Bella Roma built on swamps. Carnival built on slavery. Canal digging by the Irish who were worth nothing.

The Morning Glories just down the street from the door are all over the parking lot, on the side of the slave quarters (now apartments), in profusion along the walls. When you get up late morning is still with these blooms, a parade ground of paradise. In the street the dingy, the seedy, the infected, the going shortly to heaven....

We must remember how our blossoms came when we were young. We were as thick as leaves and desperate; freaks, souls. We thought we would not see the end of the Vale of Despondency after the next outburst of Irish rain....

The smell of olive trees now in Jackson Square, not decay, but ruin.⁴⁷

Rather than a “new world” created out of “older confines,” as Begnal argues, New Orleans is *defined* by an old world aesthetic. Far from escaping the dolorous “shadows of ancestors and tradition” in New Orleans, Liddy shows himself visiting the Chapel of Our Lady of San Guadalupe (the so-called “Mortuary Chapel”) to “summon [his] ancestors” (CB 62). Another poem, “Cypressed” is set in one of the city's St. Louis cemeteries:

Cypressed
Yet moonlight on the cemetery
 is a comfort
Durable wood
Dense dark foliage
Baudelaire's Creoles ‘...fragility,
 the slenderness of their bodies

⁴⁷ Liddy, *The Doctor's House* 128–29.

their velvety eyes...'
 Signs of mourning
 The moonbeams sheening
 The gates of Constantinople stood a
 thousand years
 Turning death into jewellery
 In New Orleans they used a cypress shingle.
 (CB 63)

Just as the anemones could be seen as yellow haired girls and boys, the morning glories that bloom in the still mornings of the Quarter reappear in the afternoon as “hookers on Dauphine & St. Anne/Anglo-saxon evening glories, boys in/Vests and shorts hop into cars” and “young prostitutes of both kinds/dream of \$50” (CB 60, 61).

A renewed feeling of estrangement from both Ireland and America makes Liddy ask himself in the collection’s final poem:

Is there a way
 Of having a real country
 Or do you just travel frontiers, man?
 (“There’s no keeping faith with,” CB 65)

The introspection in these lines runs much deeper than in previous explorations of “convention exile.”⁴⁸ The juxtaposition of the year in Ireland with the following year in America complicates Liddy’s approach to the question of exile. Exile fades as a performative literary trope or as a “customary law” for the Irish and reemerges as a personal challenge to Liddy’s aesthetic vision. The dichotomy at work in *Corca Bascinn* is less between a dead Ireland and living America than between commensurate feelings of belonging and estrangement present everywhere he travels. The impossibility of return is now a philosophical as much as a social or historical condition. Even if Liddy was able to write in an early editorial for *Arena* that “[l]ove is false sentiment, ‘bad faith,’ except

⁴⁸ Liddy, “Elegy” *Blue House* 44.

where it is in relation to death,” *Corca Bascinn* marks the point at which Liddy’s poems start to bear the full burden of that belief.⁴⁹

IV. Arriving at Nowhere

If we look only at Liddy’s later verse in collections such as *In the Slovak Bowling Alley* (1990), *Gold Set Dancing* (2000), *I Only Know That I Love Strength in My Friends and Greatness* (2003), and *On the Raft with Father Roseliep* (2006), we rarely discover American and Irish places approached as oppositional landscapes. Both are equally capable of engendering wonder or disappointment in the poet. This equanimity is the hard won product of Liddy confronting the “customary laws” of exile at certain important moments of his career. In this respect it is incorrect to say, as Wall does, that Liddy has always refused to speak with the exile’s voice in his poems. Indeed, a number of the poems themselves are focused on weighing its suitability. Rather, in working through an Ireland/America juxtaposition, the poems – and the poet – acknowledge the impossibility of finding any sort of permanent home. Liddy wonders in his memoir *The Doctor’s House* if exile might only be a natural progress of the artistic temperament, as the artist grows beyond the “first social force of Mammy and friends”:

I am an exile, I am not an exile. “Exile” has enough alienation in it to be a real condition, yet it can be read as part of the flashy itinerant supernaturalism of the voyageur. The spirit whence it is employed or patroned. The artist type is outside the first social force of Mammy and friends; distance beckons new interruptions, and maybe memory spins to backlash.⁵⁰

Yet there are perhaps deeper ramifications for the poet’s life:

⁴⁹ Liddy, “Two Offerings for W.B. Yeats” *This Was Arena* 59.

⁵⁰ Liddy, *The Doctor’s House* 133.

The books on the table are piled-up differently: if I had stayed would my life have been changed by John Wieners, Lorine Niedecker, and above all Jack Spicer? Sitting by a great lake stung by the idea: Ireland is dead, clarify your mind...(133)

Many of Liddy's later poems effect an effortless hybridity, moving with ease between Irish and American spheres.⁵¹ In lieu of the more common narratives of estrangement, loneliness, resistance, and assimilation that we find in other Irish poets visiting America, Liddy's poetry often evinces a spirit of acceptance, love and praise, even at its most subversive. The ghost of Joyce is always hovering, but in matters of poetic tone Liddy's mature verse reads more like that of later Kavanagh. It was Kavanagh who inspired him to infuse his poetry with "[the] sideways feeling of Eros, agape and gratitude."⁵² To Kavanagh's influence, Tobin has added the "kindred spirit" of Walt Whitman, whom Liddy discovered by way of the Beat poets and with whom he shares "the capacious, visionary yoking together of personal experience and the quotidian with primal and ultimately sacral energies."⁵³ At its best, Tobin writes, Liddy's later poetry presents a "marriage of Kavanagh's parochial affections and Whitman's democratic vision" (117). We find just such a "democratic vision" applied to a quintessential Midwestern scene in Liddy's "In a Bowling Alley" (1990). The poem begins with the quizzical affection reminiscent of late Kavanagh:

These people are bowling, these people are living. I watch
them "bowl," the snob I am saying "how pathetic." But in all
actuality these people don't care if you've read the latest
Kerouac novel, they don't care if you wear polyester, they

⁵¹ For most of the last thirty years of his life, Liddy was able to split time between the two countries, spending the academic year in the US and summers in Ireland. He taught in a number of American locales, impressively wide spread throughout the country. The last two decades of his life were spent in Milwaukee. See Arkins, *A Critical Study*

⁵² Arkins, "From McDaid's to Milwaukee" 335.

⁵³ Tobin, "Starting from Wexford" 116. See also Andrew M. McLean, "'Breathing In': Liddy, the Irish and American Poet" *An Sionnach* 1.1 (2005) 91-92.

don't care if you don't drink imported beers. They're here to
be with "people." (Whether these people are like them or
completely opposite them.) They are enjoying life,
regardless of what people think of them. Pure pleasure.
(CP 231)

In the patrons of the bowling alley, Liddy sees a version of his own ideal crowd in the
café or the pub, where he can indulge in his secular trinity of "conversation, unusual
people, a casual life."⁵⁴ The generous and accepting spirit of the bowlers – their
conspicuous lack of pretense is, as we have seen, an important quality for Liddy –
disarms his initial snobbery and allows him to be an observer of the American demos,
like Whitman or Ginsberg. He witnesses the bowlers transfigured by their democratic
spirit:

I see fat old women—who haven't laughed since their
honeymoon—laughing, I see studly old men whom no one
(female) has given a second glance to—being studly. I see
young sexy women—being crude and unsexy—yet being
their sexiest. People are themselves. Genuine [...]
(CP 231)

However unlikely a site of transfiguration, Liddy presents the bowling alley as a kind of
church whose Mass, in keeping with the popular Irish Catholic proverb, represents "the
life of the world." Together, these "people" achieve themselves in becoming most what
they are.⁵⁵ As if to stress the near religious nature of his witness, Liddy concludes with a

⁵⁴ Liddy, *Blue Mountain* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1968) 23.

⁵⁵ Liddy recognizes a virtue in things clearly resolved into themselves as a result of their contact with others. In "Blue Mountain," for instance, Liddy spells out this virtue in a short poem reminiscent of Wallace Stevens:

Blue mountains are of themselves blue mountains
And white clouds are of themselves white clouds
And there is a blue mountain, Croghan Kinsella,
And around it there are often white clouds.

Whether all things are accurately themselves
Or modifications of each other I do not know
But clear mornings from my bathroom window

vision of Madonna and child, at once comic and profound, that marries the “quotidian” and “sacral energies” that Tobin refers to above and has elsewhere offered as evidence of Liddy’s “humanistic sublime”:⁵⁶

I would like to bring up one type of person I fail to mention
out of pure ecstasy, the pregnant bowler—bowler with one
in the oven. I feel as though when this “very very very
young bowler” is born he would be able to bowl on his own.

Think of it—every time his mother approaches the line she
thinks: “knees bend, head steady relaxed grasp on the
ball—Step, step, step release (ball)—elbow straight—
follow through.” As this mother “bowls” the infant also
bowls. The mother and young one are connected, they
should be feeling the same thing. If only that young
young bowler could remember the technique he could be
truly happy his whole life.

(CP 232)

The strength of Liddy’s mature free verse achievement – a meeting of conversational Irish humor and a demotic American off-handedness – is on full display in these lines. Felt, too, is Liddy’s observation that the only relevant response to life is “laughter which fraternizes inwardly with tragedy.”⁵⁷ Rather than providing a distraction, the poem’s comic dimension opens a path into its more serious matters. Its final lines contemplate no less than the possibility of perfect happiness. Liddy imagines that if the infant were to inherit his mother’s bowling technique through some process of fetal memory or osmosis then “he could be/Truly happy his whole life.” His gift would allow him to bypass struggle, toil, and disappointment (at least as it pertains to bowling). Liddy’s confession

I see white clouds and a blue mountain.

Blue Mountain 17.

⁵⁶ Tobin, “‘Figures in the Set’: James Liddy and the Sublime” *An Sionnach* 1.1 (2005) 56–65. See also Stanley, “Beyond the Sublime” 100.

⁵⁷ Liddy, *This Was Arena* 7.

that he almost “fail[s] to mention” the pregnant bowler out of “pure ecstasy” might be read as a feeling of *transport* (as I imagine Tobin might read it) but perhaps also in more conventionally Catholic terms, i.e., as a moment of genuine religious suffering. The absurdity of Liddy’s hypothetical merely points to the imperfection of the world as he knows it. Though “the mother and young one are connected” at the moment of Liddy’s observing, it will be impossible for her to pass on perfect understanding of her technique to her child. On the contrary, their relationship will soon be defined less by connection than by disconnection.

“In the Bowling Alley” provides a succinct analogy for Liddy’s career as an Irish artist abroad in the late twentieth century. His need, once great, to follow the narratives of exile and return bequeathed by an earlier generation of Irish writers or the psychosexual desire to return to the “first social force of Mammy and friends” gives way to an acceptance, however bittersweet, of the true nature of the exile’s condition. He accepts the reality and perhaps necessity of separation in forging a unique “local” voice, a “joint townland sound” informed by inclusion rather than exclusion and comprised of all the many ports of the poet.

Chapter 3

IN EXTREMIS: SEAMUS HEANEY'S AMERICAN VISION

*"Everywhere being nowhere
who can prove
one place more than another?"*

— Seamus Heaney, "Birthplace"¹

In the introduction, I noted that Jahan Ramazani has drafted Seamus Heaney's poetry into his paradigm of a transnational poetics. Where many earlier critics saw a bounded parochialism (often referred to as "rootedness"), Ramazani finds that "the imaginative topography of Heaney's poetry is an intercultural space, a layered geography," and as such it constitutes a "transnational sedimentation of the Irish ground."² While there is perhaps something wishful in Ramazani's argument,³ Heaney's own appraisal of his poetry of place has evolved as if to accommodate newer, multicultural and transnational readings of his work. In a 1978 radio essay for BBC 4, for instance, Heaney delivered the following remarks about his childhood home of Mossbawn:

¹ Seamus Heaney, "Birthplace" *Station Island* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985) 35. Hereafter, all passages quoted from *Station Island* will be parenthetically cited with the abbreviation *SI*.

² Ramazani, "A Transnational Poetics" 346. See Introduction, pp. 5–7.

³ See, for instance, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews chapter on Heaney and Paul Muldoon in *Writing Home* in which Kennedy-Andrews reaffirms Heaney's position as a "rooted" poet, but attempts to save his poetry from John Lucas's dismissive phrase "regressive ruralism," "Seamus Heaney and the Possibilities of Poetry" *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Andrews (New York: St. Martin's, 1992) 124. For a welcome reorientation of these issues, see Richard Rankin Russell's "Seamus Heaney's Regionalism" *Twentieth Century Literature* 54.1 (Spring 2008) 47–74.

I would begin with the Greek word *omphalos*, meaning the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world, and repeat it, *omphalos, omphalos, omphalos*, until its blunt and falling music becomes the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door. It is County Derry in the early 1940s. The American bombers groan towards the aerodrome at Toomebridge, the American troops manoeuvre in the fields along the road, *but all of that great historical action does not disturb the rhythms of the yard...* Women came and went, came rattling between empty enamel buckets, went evenly away, weighed down by silent water...⁴

Nearly two decades later he reflected on that same place and the same period of time. He writes of his family:

[I]n suspension between the archaic and the modern, we were as susceptible and impressionable as the drinking water that stood in a bucket in our scullery: every time a passing train made the earth shake, the surface of that water used to ripple delicately, concentrically, and in utter silence.⁵

The memories laid out in these passages do not necessarily contradict one another, but they do characterize differently Mossbawn's connection to the world beyond the local demesne. The omphalotic Mossbawn of the first passage is providential and self-sustaining but isolated, defined by the rhythms of the rural people coming and going from the communal water pump. The Mossbawn of the second passage, in contrast, is "susceptible" and "impressionable"; Heaney imagines the water in the scullery bucket as a sensitive instrument dutifully, if soundlessly, registering signals from a greater world in motion. The first place is centered, bounded, originating; the second "suspended between the archaic and the modern." The question arises of how we should account for the differences, however subtle, in Heaney's two presentations of Mossbawn. And, moreover, if these differences indicate a changing attitude toward figurations of place in his poetry

⁴ Heaney, "Mossbawn" *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971–2001* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002) 3, italics mine.

⁵ Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995) 4–5. Steven Matthews in *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) has argued persuasively that Heaney conceives his role as poet as an embodiment of such a sensitivity and balance as well, one whose personal identity and public role as poet might be viewed as a reconciliation of various political, historical, cultural, aesthetic oppositions (166–67).

and prose or if they simply indicate an effort to align his work with emerging critical paradigms.

The first description of Mossbawn exists within the notion of “rootedness” that dominated discussions of his and fellow Northern Irish poets’ work prior to the 1980s. By remaining faithful to the offices and rhythms of the local plot, the rural community strengthened its identity with the land and its legitimacy in claiming the land as its own. The second description relies more on a newer discourse separating *place* from *space* that was developed and popularized by cultural geographers in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews has offered the following distinction between place and space in the Northern Irish context:

Space and place are regulators of our being in the world. Geographically, place is differentiated from space: space is abstract, featureless, indefinite; place is lived space, and carries connotations of familiarity, stability, attachment, nostalgia and homeliness. Place is, first of all, constructed materially, through processes of interconnection and interdependence. However, the meaning of place is an imaginative project involving the production of images and the creation identities which epitomize the culture of a particular place.⁷

In *Crediting Poetry*, we find Heaney willing to acknowledge the interconnectedness and interdependence of his childhood home, having realized that the stability and isolation of the omphalotic Mossbawn is only an “imaginative project” rather than a historical reality. No doubt influenced by his time spent in academic circles, Heaney has steadily repositioned his poetry of place within the purview of cultural geography, to the point that he has appropriated the term “imaginative geography” when discussing locations and

⁶ See, for instance, Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Arnold, 1977) and Doreen Massey *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) and *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).

⁷ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland, 1968–2008* (Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2008) 1.

dislocations in his work. The term “imaginative geography” implies that a fidelity to precise and accurate observance of place is not a reportorial or memorializing end in itself but a means to a particular kind of “visionary” mapping of place, a way to make the imaginary manifest in the real and, in doing so, to question the distinction between the two states. Heaney’s mapping is defined less by a cartographer’s zeal than by “a shaping spirit at work” as one critical study has put it, “creat[ing] imaginative spaces that resonate with actual places.”⁸

Heaney is still regularly identified both inside and outside of Ireland as a *rooted* poet (a term with a complicated and weighted history in Northern Irish poetry), but his poetry also addresses a specific kind of *rootlessness* that finds many “elsewheres” within appreciations of the local and parochial. Following the poet’s migrations, Ireland becomes less *terra firma* than *terra in motus*. His retelling of St. Brendan’s story in “The Disappearing Island” from *The Haw Lantern* (1987) illustrates the paradox of rootedness and rootlessness in the Irish experience of place:

Once we had gathered driftwood, made a hearth
And hung our cauldron in its firmament,
The island broke beneath us like a wave.

The land sustaining us seemed to hold firm
Only when we embraced it *in extremis*.
All I believe that happened there was vision.⁹

Only when Brendan and his crew understand the island to be a mobile and mutable place (i.e., place redefined as space) do they achieve stability. Any attempt to adorn the island with the relics of a permanent home (comprised in the powerful symbolism of the hearth)

⁸ Catherine Malloy and Phyllis Carey, “Introduction” *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*, eds. Catherine Malloy and Phyllis Carey (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996) 14.

⁹ Heaney, “The Disappearing Island” *The Haw Lantern* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987) 50.

is certain to fail. Thus, Heaney manages to communicate both meanings of the Latin phrase *in extremis*: Brendan and his crew must embrace the land “at point of death” while at the same time the poet must look at place “from its farthest reaches.” In either case, the result is a new way of seeing that Heaney identifies in the poem as “vision.” It is this particular approach to vision and its relationship to Heaney’s poetry of return that I will address in this chapter.¹⁰

The story of Brendan and the whale is an oft-cited myth for Irish writers who have traveled west across the Atlantic.¹¹ And while most tend to treat the whale island as a metaphor for the experience of place in North America,¹² it is characteristic of Heaney’s mature poems of place that his telling of the Brendan myth considers the island equally as Ireland or America or any locale across the sea. Heaney’s poems about American places and spaces, though relatively few, help us to chart Heaney’s remapping

¹⁰ Speaking with Catherine Malloy, Heaney also identifies the disappearing island as a cognate site of “fullness and emptiness” in his poetry: “I’m much devoted to the idea of a space that is both full and empty, like a disappearing island or the Lough Derg space or Station Island, which is both an empty repetition and a resource – the idea of fullness and emptiness,” Malloy and Carey 15.

¹¹ The most influential and pervasive Irish myth in the context of the otherworld voyage is the journey of St. Brendan, a sixth-century Irish abbot, around the western islands in search of the Isle of the Blessed. Although the eighth-century Latin source for the tale, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, makes clear that the specifics of Brendan’s journey were intended to be ecclesiastical and allegorical reflections on monastic life, the later popular tradition conflated Brendan’s voyage with the possible “discovery” of various places in the New World, including, most importantly, North America. This tradition was not only sustained by the popularity of Celticism in the nineteenth century, but became a touchstone of Irish cultural history beyond Ireland. As the poet Louis MacNeice wrote in an introduction to *Varieties of Parable*, “America...for people in the British Isles is a legend...it is easy to identify with St Brandon [sic] and the others in their adventures of the western sea...such a voyage, like any form of quest, has an immemorial place in legend,” qtd. in John Stallworthy *Louis MacNeice* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) 241. The Brendan myth again became a source of cultural focus in the 1960s with the publication of Geoffrey Ashe’s popular but purely speculative potboiler *Land to the West: St. Brendan’s Voyage to America* (New York: Collins, 1962) and again in the late 1970s with the publication of Tim Severin’s travelogue *Brendan Voyage* (1978; New York: Random House, 2000) in which Severin sailed successfully from western Ireland to Newfoundland and back in an accurate replica of a sixth-century *currach*. Severin’s book reinvigorated interest in the possibility of Brendan’s journey to America at a time when a new Irish poetry was achieving greater popularity with American audience.

¹² See, for instance, my discussion of Greg Delanty’s “America” and Eamonn Wall’s *immrama* in the conclusion, pp. 197–205.

of place as he moves away from an antithetical vision of competing spatial claims in poems such as “Bogland” and “In an Airport Coach.” Later poems such as “Westering” and “Remembering Malibu” – like the disappearing island – are sites of migration and witness for Heaney, providing what he calls the “migrant solitude” necessary for a visionary observance of place.¹³ Thus, Heaney’s frank remark to Carol Tell in a 1993 interview – “I don’t think America is part of my imaginative geography”¹⁴ – is misleading. Heaney’s interactions with American places – places experienced *in extremis* – establish the necessary migrant condition from which he can map an imaginative geography of Ireland that “resonates with actual places” both within and outside of his memory. Again, his image of the water in the scullery bucket in *Crediting Poetry* is instructive because it warns against reading his poems as isolated utterances. It asks us to listen for the far off echoes in their local silences and to look for the presences in their supposed absences.

II. Of Bogs, Prairies, and Wastes

In a lecture given in 1977 and later collected as “The Sense of Place,” Heaney lays out a basic reading of his own uses of place:

I think there are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways which may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious. In the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension...¹⁵

¹³ Heaney, “The Wanderer” *Opened Ground* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998) 86.

¹⁴ Carol Tell, “Found, Happy, and Away from Home: Seamus Heaney’s Westering” *Part-Time Exiles: Contemporary Irish Poets and Their American Migrations* (Bethesda, MD: Academica Press, LLC, 2001) 31.

¹⁵ Heaney, “The Sense of Place” *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1980* (London: Faber, 1980) 131.

Though we should never confuse Heaney's poems for arguments, "Bogland," his first poem to address an American landscape, follows the rhetorical logic of the passage above. It contrasts a "quintessential" feature of Irish landscape – the bog – with its American counterpart – the prairie – as representative of antithetical states of mind: the Irish introverted and the American extroverted.¹⁶ "Bogland" was originally published in the BBC weekly *The Listener* in November 1967 and was composed two years before Heaney's first trip to the US in early 1969.¹⁷ It addresses the American prairie in theoretical rather than experiential terms, drawing on ideas received from studying American literature and internalizing the vision of an expansionist American "frontier" propagated by American (and British) postwar popular culture. "Bogland" also predates Heaney's discovery of P.V. Glob's influential archeological study *The Bog People*, which introduced him to the striking photographs of Iron Age fertility cult victims preserved in the bogs of Northern Europe.¹⁸ Glob's book provided Heaney with the image of the bog as a symbolic site of ceremonial murder that he used to address sectarian violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s.¹⁹ As we find it in "Bogland," however, the Irish bog is something different than in its later manifestations. Instead of a site of "neighborly treachery, vengeance, and destruction," the bog is "instructive and

¹⁶ Michael Allen, "The Parish and the Dream: Heaney and America, 1969-1987" *Southern Review* 31.3 (Summer 1995) 729.

¹⁷ Heaney gave "Bogland" pride of place as the concluding poem of his second collection *Door into the Dark* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969). Hereafter, *Door into the Dark* will be abbreviated as *DD*.

¹⁸ See P.V. Glob, *The Bog People: Iron Age Man Preserved* (1969; London, Faber & Faber, 2011).

¹⁹ See, for instance, "The Tollund Man" *WO* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), hereafter, abbreviated as *WO*; and "Bog Queen," "The Grauballe Man," "Punishment," "Strange Fruit," and "Kinship" in *North* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975). See also Ciaran Carson's scathing review of *North* and Heaney's bog poems in which he calls Heaney's "the laureate of violence," "Escaped from the Massacre" *Honest Ulsterman* 50 (Winter 1975) 183.

benevolent.”²⁰ The poem’s visual inspiration comes in part from a painting titled *Boglands*, one of the Gortahork sequence of landscape paintings of Donegal created by Heaney’s friend Terry Flanagan.²¹ Yet “Bogland” is as much the result of an inner vision as an outward one. In the essay “Feeling into Words” Heaney recalls that the opening line of “Bogland” came to him fully formed – the line “drifted into my head at bedtime, and loosened a fall of images” – and that he composed it “on the wing.”²² It grew out of an awareness of the frontier as reflective of a national state of mind in mid-century America. He recalls:

At that time, I was teaching modern literature in Queen’s University, Belfast, and had been reading about the frontier and the west as an important myth in the American consciousness, so I set up – or rather, laid down – the bog as an answering Irish myth. (54–55).

In this “answering Irish myth” Heaney recognized not merely a subject for a poem but a new and clearer purpose for his poetry, a purpose discovered via “new coordinates” and introduced in terms of a new spatial geography.²³ Alan Shapiro, among others, has argued that “Bogland” is an even more important statement of poetic intent than “Digging,” which opens Heaney’s first full collection *Death of a Naturalist* (1966).²⁴ Though “Digging” marks Heaney’s discovery of a voice – and through that voice a vocation –

²⁰ Thomas C. Foster, *Seamus Heaney* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989) 31–32; Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998) 39

²¹ It is this “T.P. Flanagan” to whom “Bogland” is dedicated and not the American-Irish scholar Thomas Flanagan as is sometimes supposed. “Bogland” first appeared three years before Heaney was introduced to Thomas Flanagan in Berkeley.

²² Heaney, “Feeling into Words” *Preoccupations* 54.

²³ Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interview with Seamus Heaney* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008) 90.

²⁴ Alan Shapiro, “Crossed Pieties” *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney*, ed. Robert F. Garrett (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1995) 20. See also Bernard O’Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994) 52–55.

Shapiro writes that “Bogland” provides Heaney with a unity of place and perception – “an implied equation of landscape and mind” – that functions as the objective correlative for Irish history (21). Moreover, it announces Heaney’s willingness to participate in the debates over the nature of the Irish experience of place and its effect on the Irish mind.²⁵

“We have no prairies,” “Bogland” begins:

To slice a big sun at evening –
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.

(DD 41–42)

²⁵ For an overview of the contentious debate concerning an essential Irish identity or Irish mind, see Richard Kearney, “Introduction” *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions*, ed. Richard Kearney (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1985); and Declan Kiberd *Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995) 286–304.

It is noteworthy that Heaney should “manufacture” the prairie/bog opposition within the text of the poem.²⁶ This opposition begins the poem awkwardly, as Neil Corcoran points out, with “a negative definition of Irish geographical experience.” Yet, as we see in other poems concerning American places and/or spaces, Heaney’s rhetorical technique of “negative definition” is a trope strongly associated with American locales – even imagined ones. The bog itself is a negative definition of land, or rather, land that “miss[es] its last definition.” Not only is it not the prairie but it is also, in a sense, not quite land at all. The poem counters the understood American historical and geographical narrative of expanding frontiers and replaces this expansion westward with a search downward and inward into the “bottomless” bog. By reorienting the spatial coordinates associated with discovery, Heaney contrasts vertical and horizontal axes and creates what Magdalena Kay calls “paradigms for different epistemologies.”²⁷ The American way of knowing moves along the horizon, turning its back on what it passes, while the Irish way of knowing digs into the past.

While Corcoran and others read Heaney’s invocation of the prairie as simply a handy pivot from which to launch a new theory of Irish landscape, Michael Allen argues that by addressing American landscape rhetorically “Bogland” initiates a deeper geographical conversation that continues to negotiate the American frontier throughout the poem’s seven stanzas.²⁸ Each of the treasures that the bog yields up has its

²⁶ Ronald Tamplin, *Seamus Heaney* (Milton Keynes: Open UP, 1989) 8; Neil Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) 62.

²⁷ Magdalena Kay, “Belonging as Mastery: Selfhood and Otherness in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney” *New Hibernia Review* 14.1 (Spring 2010) 80.

²⁸ Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* 62; Elmer Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: All the Realms of Whisper* (London: Macmillan, 1988) 34; James Simmons, “The Trouble with Seamus” *Seamus Heaney*, ed. Elmer Andrews (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992) 48; and Allen 729.

counterpart in, if not exactly the prairie, then in the popular mythos of the American frontier. Allen writes:

[The poem's] rudimentary plot follows the American settlers westward, with parallels to mid-Ireland at every point. "*Our* unfenced country" (my emphasis) is the bog; instead of the buffalo, "we" have "the Great Irish Elk"; instead of Nevada gold, "Butter sunk under" the bog is "recovered." Finally, "waterlogged trunks/Of great firs" are dug up: "-logged" in its context hints at "logging," and the geographic logic of the poem might point to California redwood. (729)

I find Allen's reading compelling, not least because it corresponds to how the poem was written. Yet his conclusion that Heaney "surreptitiously hankers" after a western trail seems unfounded (730). The tone is never outright contentious or dismissive of the American prairie, but it is no stretch to think that Heaney prefers Irish "pioneering" to its American counterpart. The former resists the expansive instincts of the colonial experience of space. In this regard "Bogland" goes beyond a light-hearted exchange with "an important myth in the American consciousness" and initiates a more serious critique of spatial politics.

The nature of "Bogland's" spatial critique is made clearer when we look at two poems that informed its composition. Both John Hewitt and Theodore Roethke were poet-mentors who were much on Heaney's mind in 1967. Hewitt's *Collected Poems: 1932-1967*, which Heaney reviewed while guest editing *Threshold*, was being prepared for publication with the help of John Montague.²⁹ Hewitt's importance had peaked in the 1940s, but his reputation was being rehabilitated in the 1960s as he became a figurehead for the emerging Protestant left in Belfast. Writers such as James Simmons, Gerald Dawe, and Michael and Edna Longley celebrated Hewitt as a socialist *bete noire* of the Unionist

²⁹ Montague also organized a much-publicized reading tour with Hewitt in Northern Ireland in 1972-73. Billed as "The Planter and the Gael," the readings were an effort to promote Catholic and Protestant unity and cooperation. See, for instance, Timothy Kearney, "Beyond the Planter and the Gael: An Interview with John Hewitt and John Montague on Northern Poetry and the Troubles" *Crane Bag* 4.2 (1980/81) 85-92.

government and an agitator for a robust “regionalist” rhetoric of Ulster solidarity among “planters” and “gaels” that might overcome violent loyalist/nationalist disputes resurfacing.³⁰ Heaney’s encouraging review of the *Collected Poems* in *Threshold* somewhat made up for the otherwise negative or indifferent critical response to the collection. Moreover, it lent legitimacy to Hewitt as a poet of the older Protestant tradition whom both non-Ulster Unionist Protestant and Catholic poets could embrace.³¹

Yet as much as Hewitt’s avowed Ulster “regionalism” might have appealed to Heaney’s parochialism, the composer of “Bogland” was still a “slightly aggravated Catholic male” as he admitted to Seamus Deane a decade later.³² And one of Hewitt’s early poems “Ireland” (1932) derides the folkways of turf cutting in the home county bogs:

We Irish pride ourselves as patriots
and tell the beadroll of the valiant ones
since Clontarf’s sunset saw the Norseman broken...
Aye, and before that too we had our heroes:
but they were mighty fighters and victorious.
The later men got nothing but defeat,
hard transatlantic sidewalks or the scaffold...

We Irish, vainer than tense Lucifer,
are yet content with half-a-dozen turf,
and cry out our adoration for a bog,
rejoicing in the rain that never ceases,
and happy to stride over the sterile acres,
or stony hills that scarcely feed a sheep.
But we are fools, I say, are ignorant fools
to waste the spirit’s warmth in this cold air,

³⁰ See McDonald, *Mistaken Identities* 20–40; Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* 21–52; Gerald Dawe and Edna Longley eds., *Across a Roaring Hill: The Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1985); and Sarah Ferris, *Poet John Hewitt and the Criticism of Northern Irish Protestant Writing* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellon Press, 2002).

³¹ Heaney, “The Poetry of John Hewitt” *Threshold* 3 (Summer 1969) 73–77.

³² Seamus Deane, “Unhappy and at Home” *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies, 1977-1981* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1981) 66–72.

to spend our wit and love and poetry
on half-a-dozen peat and a black bog.

We are not native here or anywhere.
We were the keltic wave that broke over Europe,
and ran up this bleak beach among these stones:
but when the tide ebbed, were left stranded here
in crevices, and ledge-protected pools
that have grown saltier with the drying up
of the great common flow that kept us sweet
with fresh cold draughts from deep down in the ocean.

So we are bitter, and are dying out
in terrible harshness in this lonely place,
and what we think is love for usual rock,
or old affection for the customary ledge,
is but forgotten longing for the sea
that cries far out and calls us to partake
in his great tidal movements round the earth.³³

Hewitt's lament about the sterility of the Irish landscape ("the sterile acres") and the bitterness of its inhabitants ("So we are bitter") influenced, or at the very least anticipates, the vocabulary of self-criticism developed by Northern Irish Protestant writers during the Troubles. Discussing Tom Paulin and Derek Mahon, for example, George Watson notices a trend in Protestant writers that accounts for the tone of Hewitt's earlier poem:

The Protestant poet, lacking access to the dynamism of nationalist history, or entrée to a racial landscape...sees his own culture as oppressively unredeemable and is forced back on a loveless repetition – admittedly powerfully expressed – of clichés about the sterilities and narrowness of the Calvinist statelet...Tom Paulin's "Desertmartin" enacts an inferiority complex which has both historical and aesthetic aspects. These harsh asperities on the soured, bitter culture of twigs, bird-shit and Bibles of the North is – though it has its truth – a partial truth... this vision of the North is a mythological construction...³⁴

³³ John Hewitt, *Collected Poems: 1932–1967* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968) 11. Hewitt's allusion to the Battle of Clontarf repeats a revisionist myth perpetuated by Irish nationalists. Brian Boru's Munster forces were fighting against a confederation of Norsemen in league with the Gaelic King of Leinster Máel Morda. Boru's own forces were swelled with foot soldiers and mariners from Norse settlements in Limerick and Cork, the era of Norse raiders having been over for nearly a century. See Séan Duffy, "Ireland, c.1000-c.1100" *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland c.500–c.1100*, ed. Pauline Stafford (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 285–302.

³⁴ George Watson, "The Narrow Ground: Northern Poets and the Northern Ireland Crisis" *Irish Writers and Society at Large*, ed. M. Sekine (Bucks: Colin Smythe, 1985) 217–219.

We might read “Bogland” therefore as both an “answer” to an American myth of place and a challenge to a Protestant spatial narrative of self-doubt. Contra Hewitt, Heaney does spend “wit and love and poetry/on...a black bog” and celebrates the fecundity of the same landscape that the older poet has declared sterile and unproductive. Heaney rescues the act of turf cutting from Hewitt’s defeatist rhetoric and holds it up as a positive expression of a pioneering “keltic” spirit rather than a sad inversion of it. The ceaseless rain does not make for “sterile acres” but primes the preservative qualities of the bog. The turf cutters’ movement downwards and inwards, showing that every layer has been camped on before, refutes Hewitt’s assertion that “[w]e are not native here or anywhere.”³⁵ It is not difficult to see Hewitt’s confident assertion of “We Irish” giving Heaney the courage to also adopt the folksier though no less presumptuous “we” in speaking for the Irish in “Bogland.”

Closer to the surface of “Bogland” than Hewitt’s “Ireland” is Roethke’s “In Praise of Prairie,”³⁶ which memorializes Ralph Waldo Emerson’s dictum that the “indigenous territory [of America]...conspires with the spirit to emancipate us.”³⁷ Roethke not only

³⁵ McDonald, *Mistaken Identities* 21.

³⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Writings*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1992) 35. Rachel Buxton in *Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 2004) has wondered whether William Cullen Bryant’s “The Prairies” was also in the back of Heaney’s mind during the poem’s composition, though it is unclear whether Heaney would have known this oddly visionary historical poem. Even if he had, Bryant’s willingness to wonder about the bones and artifacts of vanished cultures buried beneath his horse’s hooves would seem to upset the geological distinction that Heaney attempts to make in “Bogland” and thus he might well have chosen to ignore it. Bryant’s poem, unlike Roethke’s, clearly acknowledges that the ground below him has been “camped on before.” The second movement of Bryant’s poem begins:

As o'er the verdant waste I guide my steed,
Among the high rank grass that sweeps his sides
The hollow beating of his footstep seems
A sacrilegious sound. I think of those
Upon whose rest he tramples. Are they here-
The dead of other days?- and did the dust
Of these fair solitudes once stir with life

offers the prairie as the definitive landscape of the American character, he also suggests that the prairie is an ideal landscape for the poet, where “geographic expanse and the self’s creative topography merge and define the poet in the open world.”³⁸ Roethke was much in Heaney’s mind during the period of “Bogland’s” composition. He was the American poet to whom Heaney was most often compared during the early years of his career.³⁹ Karl Miller asked Heaney to review a posthumous edition of Roethke’s *Collected Poems* for *The Listener* in 1968. In his review, Heaney considered carefully the extent of Roethke’s influence on his own and other late twentieth century poetry. Though he admired Roethke’s near-religious worship of the natural world – calling his nature poems “canticles to the earth” – Heaney found that Roethke’s attempts at the more “traditional artefact[s]” of form gave the feeling that “the archetypal properties are being manipulated a bit arbitrarily, that the staccato syntax is for effect rather than effective.” “The stanzaic poems,” Heaney concludes, “always sound as if they are *attempting* something.”⁴⁰ “Bogland” might be read as a poetic exchange occurring on at least two levels between Roethke and Heaney. At the level of mythopoesis, Heaney endeavors to build an equivalent (and perhaps superior) “emancipated” poetic to Roethke’s – a “transcendence,” to use Emerson’s language – within a landscape where, ironically, “the eye concedes/to encroaching horizon.” At the level of technique, Roethke’s difficulty in achieving a suitable formal prosody challenges Heaney’s developing skill with form.

And burn with passion?

(quoted in Buxton 27)

³⁸ Peter Balakian, *Theodore Roethke’s Far Fields: the Evolution of His Work* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989) 28.

³⁹ See, for instance, John Unterecker’s review of *Death of a Naturalist* in the *The New York Times* (March 26, 1967).

⁴⁰ Heaney, “Canticles to the Earth” *Preoccupations* 193 (emphasis mine).

To understand the depth of the exchange at work between the two poems, I will here quote “In Praise of Prairie” in full:

The elm tree is our highest mountain peak;
A five-foot drop a valley, so to speak.

A man’s head is an eminence upon
A field of barley spread against the sun.

Horizons have no strangeness to the eye.
Our feet are sometimes level with the sky,

When we are walking on a treeless plain,
With ankles bruised from stubble of the grain.

The fields stretch out in long, unbroken rows.
We walk aware of what is far and close.

Here distance is familiar as a friend.
The feud we kept with space comes to an end.⁴¹

In contrast to Heaney’s lithe free verse quatrains in “Bogland,” Roethke’s couplets stumble and grind against a controlling rhyme.⁴² The heroic couplets suggest a grand vision of the prairie’s importance, but an uncertain marriage of form and function frustrates the lofty pitch of the poem. Roethke’s insistence on closed, masculine couplets – intended, I imagine, to suggest the “long, unbroken rows” of grain – makes the poem grasp unnaturally at concluding rhymes. Moreover, the iamb/trochee pairing that opens the first two couplets creates an undulating movement that immediately undermines the “level” plain praised in Roethke’s imagery. Everywhere the poet fights a more natural mode of expression, as is obvious in the aside that closes the opening couplet – “so to speak” – which almost apologizes for rounding out the line.

⁴¹ Theodore Roethke, “In Praise of Prairie” *Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961) 13.

⁴² Shapiro credits “Bogland” with being Heaney’s “first fully achieved free verse poem” (20).

Moving from the technical exchange back to the rhetorical exchange between the two poems, Heaney's bog contrasts Roethke's prairie in the bog's essential *softness* – "...*bog/meaning soft, /the fall of windless rain*" as Heaney muses in "Kinship" (*North* 34). The bog's supple, yielding nature suggests not merely sexual possibility (as in so many of Heaney's early landscape poems) but the processes of memory itself. "I began to get an idea of the bog as the memory of the landscape," Heaney writes of "Bogland," "or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it."⁴³ Like ideal memory, the bog is able to preserve some things whole – such as butter or the skeleton of the extinct Irish Elk – because its fluidity is also its continuity.⁴⁴ By contrast, Roethke praises a landscape which seems to have no memory at all, in which the past has been put to rest by distance and expansion. He writes that horizons "have no strangeness to the eye," distance is "familiar as a friend," and "the feud...kept with space comes to an end." Irish space in fact requires an *unending feud* with the ground – one where a submerging present struggles with a re-emerging past. This feud produces treasures, however, instead of violence (at least as yet).

Reading "Bogland" as an answer to "In Praise of Prairie," we can see how Heaney might find Roethke's celebration of wide vistas and vast distances troubling. In the short, dense poem "Travel" from *Wintering Out*, for instance, he writes with Roethke's prairie in mind that, "[he] who reads into distances reads/beyond us, our sleeping children/and the dust settling in scorched grass" (78). The prospect of long, unobstructed views is dehumanizing and dangerous, as suggested by the "dust settling in

⁴³ Heaney, *Preoccupations* 54, italics mine.

⁴⁴ See Tamplin 27.

scorched grass.” For a poet of Heaney’s local commitments, to become enchanted with distance is to suffer from a kind of blindness. In this respect, Heaney responds to the suggestive pull of the prairie’s two possible Latin cognates: the *pratum* “meadow” and the *praeterea* “beyond this.” The unimpeded sight lines of the prairie ask the eye to look “beyond this,” whereas the bog offers a way into the “unfenced country” below.⁴⁵

Heaney’s bog has a supernatural as well as a super-historical quality to it, a quality that Heaney explores more fully in later poems, such as when he contemplates consecrating the Tollund Man’s bog at Aarhus as “sacred ground” (*WO* 47–48). The bog is a haunted and spiritualized place watched over by monstrous spirits (“the cyclops’ eye/Of a tarn”) and capable of devouring others (“the Great Irish Elk”). The American prairie, by contrast, is a tame, secular ground – *enlightened*, as it were, by the eye of a “big sun” but without meaningful historical dimensions. Prior to his first visit to the U.S., Heaney envisions the American landscape as a kind of clean stage, a space of un-encroached upon horizons, where the dropping and rising of a curtain (“slic[ing] a big sun at evening”) marks the passage of time. As several critics have noted, Heaney makes the broad distinction between a landscape that invites the human eye westward horizontally, as the prairie does, and a landscape that invites the eye downward vertically,

⁴⁵ Geographer E. Estyn Evans (a colleague of Heaney’s at Queen’s University, Belfast) writes in *The Personality of Ireland: Habitat, Heritage and History* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1981):

The landscape (of southeast Ulster) has a charming intimacy. Roads winding their way through bushy hollows among the little hills bring constantly changing views, but horizons are always near and the vision restricted. One might think of the moulded drumlins as moulding, in turn, the outlook of the farmers who dwell among them. Much of the drumlin country is Orange country. For reasons known to history, the most fertile parts of Ulster were occupied by Protestant planters in the seventeenth century. The deep drumlin soils, previously utilized mainly for grazing, responded to the labour of a Protestant people who saw virtue in hard work (88).

as the bog does.⁴⁶ But just as important as the change of perspective is with whom the agency of seeing resides. Roethke gives an eye to the prairie's observer ("A man's head is an eminence upon/A field of barley spread beneath the sun"), while Heaney gives an eye to the land itself (the tarn's "cyclops' eye" as well as the wet ground's "sights of the sun"). The ground of the prairie is unopened and unyielding; those who walk on it are "bruised" from the "stubble of the grain." Moreover, the horizon is sharp and firm enough to "slice" the sun rather than absorb it, as the crusting bog does, like "kind, black butter." In such a rendering, the American prairie lacks the pliancy and malleability necessary for memory; it is a mere stage for history rather than an acting participant or faithful custodian like the bog.⁴⁷ The unfolding present – not the past – is the prairie's primary subject.

"Bogland" distinguishes Heaney's idea of a "quintessential" Irish place from Roethke's expanding American prairies and Hewitt's sterile bogs. By doing so, he invites a conflation of these two alternative places into a single hybrid space that is indistinguishable from both Hewitt's "regional" landscape and Roethke's "nationalist" landscape. Just such a conflation of American and Protestant Irish place can be found in a

⁴⁶ As Dillon Johnston describes it, "['Bogland'] summons Irish poetry from its typical bardic peregrinations to a vertical quest," *Irish Poetry After Joyce* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985) 142.

⁴⁷ Heaney's characterization of the prairie looks forward to his future colleague Gary Snyder's own environmentally and religiously charged critique of American poetry of place: "In the Judeo-Christian world-view men are seen working out their ultimate destinies with planet earth as the stage for drama – trees and animals mere props, nature a vast supply depot," *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974) 103.

poem that Heaney published after his first visit to the US in the early spring of 1969.⁴⁸ “In an Airport Coach” appeared in the *Honest Ulsterman* in May of that year, but has never appeared in any of Heaney’s subsequent collections and remains overlooked by scholars, even by those who have written on the subject of Heaney and America. Given the poem’s flaws, Heaney’s decision not to collect it and scholars’ reluctance to discuss it are unsurprising. Both its syntactical structure and its formal organization (modeled on the Iberian sextilla stanza) are strained and present few memorable images or turns of phrase. Still, “In an Airport Coach” finds Heaney in the rare position of expressing a strong disliking for a place:

The mouths of tunnels
Fanged with icicles,
Toll-gates spiking
The roads, we entered the grey
Badlands of New Jersey.
I remember the spring

Seed-beds covered
With soot, manured
Black on black:
In this steel-fenced rink
Of fallout and waste stink,
The chemical muck

Ridged, the tainted snow
Packed like a garden row—
Winter tempered earth
And air to a barren
Anti-sun.
Un-joy, dearth

Ghosted the dumps, drains,
Feed-pipes and power-lines
Linked to Manhattan.
Behind us we presume
That placid, phantom

⁴⁸ The professional purpose of the trip was to give a reading to a literary society in Richmond, Virginia, though Heaney and his wife Marie appear to have also spent some time visiting relatives and friends in New York. See O’Driscoll xxviii.

Pile-up of a town.

And in the subway station
The rushing businessman
Muttering through his stare.
The siren's wail.
A bum on the Bowery, pale
And blank as a soothsayer.⁴⁹

As seen through a bus window, America first appears in Heaney's poetry as a nightmarish postindustrial wasteland: its architecture is monstrous, its lands poisoned, its citizens haunted and deranged. The tunnels that lead the poet away from Manhattan ("That placid, phantom/Pile-up of a town") have the mouths of beasts, "fanged with icicles."⁵⁰ The "seed beds" that skirt the road are choked by "soot," "fallout," "waste stink," "chemical muck," and "tainted snow." The earth is incapable of bringing forth life, it can not express those qualities – warmth, joy, redemption, the promise of renewal – that Heaney associates with the life force. By characterizing New Jersey and Manhattan as the "Badlands" and the "Bowery," respectively, Heaney travesties both frontier and farmland.⁵¹ The poem's third stanza emphasizes the differences between a foreign place and Heaney's rural demesne, as winter creates from "earth" and "air" an "Anti-sun" that propagates "Un-joy." The Bowery bum, "pale and blank," may be "a soothsayer" but his wisdom is imparted through silence, a contrast with the businessmen's pointless "muttering."

⁴⁹ Heaney, "In an Airport Coach" *Honest Ulsterman* 13 (May 1969) 16.

⁵⁰ The purpose that the icicles serve here stands in contrast to the way Heaney later uses them in the poem "North," where they are emblems of clear and sober vision, *North* 10.

⁵¹ The "Bowery" is believed to be an anglicization of *bourwerij*, an older Dutch word for "farmland." Sanna Feirstein *Naming New York* (New York: NYU Press, 2001).

Heaney characterizes his first experience of American place in terms that correspond to the Protestant critique of Belfast as sterile, cold, gaudy, haunted, and poisoned by an obsession with profit. Louis MacNeice's memorable couplet about Belfast from *Autumn Journal* – "A city built upon mud; /A culture built upon profit"⁵² – was echoed by Heaney's Protestant contemporaries, including Edna Longley's piquant summation of Belfast as "Cokestown-across-the-water"⁵³ and Derek Mahon's lament that "industrialism doesn't produce fruits...the fruits of industrialism are ruination and waste, ugliness."⁵⁴

In its dreariness, "In an Airport Coach" offers a stark contrast to the poems collected into *Door into the Dark* the very same year. Heaney ignores similar industrial wastes in rural Ireland and Europe in favor of places that, as Michael Parker writes, "celebrate the fertility of the human and animal world" and commemorate the creative

⁵² Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber & Faber, 1966) 133.

⁵³ Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) 86.

⁵⁴ Derek Mahon, "An interview with Derek Mahon" *Poetry Ireland* 14 (Autumn 1985) 13. Heaney's decision to publish "In an Airport Coach" in James Simmons' *Honest Ulsterman* is telling as well. Advertised as "the monthly handbook for a revolution" the *Honest Ulsterman* took an editorial line critical of both Ulster unionist and Catholic nationalist politics in Northern Ireland. While Heaney was a willing contributor of essays and poems to the earlier numbers, by 1969 he had grown frustrated with Simmons' direction. As he told Denis O'Driscoll:

There was a lot of issue-based writing in the *Honest Ulsterman* from the start; but...I could never take it too seriously. It had the 'plague on both your houses' line, and by 1969 that old faults-on-both-sides stuff was wearing thin. My nationalist grudge was too strong. Simmons would eventually blame me for not scolding my own side, presumably implying that his castigation of aspects of Northern Ireland Protestant/Unionist culture was the example to be followed. But politically speaking, there was just a hell of a lot more to castigate about the Unionist side. I never felt any weight in the *Ulsterman* proceedings. (109)

Heaney has admitted to submitting inferior work to the *Honest Ulsterman* and one wonders, given his decision to use a Protestant critique of urban space in Northern Ireland to address America, if he intended "In an Airport Coach" as a rebuke to the publication's audience.

powers of the rural landscape.⁵⁵ We might compare “In an Airport Coach,” for instance, with “Night Drive,” another poem in which the poet looks out at a foreign country from a window in motion:

The smells of ordinariness
Were new on the night drive through France:
Rain and hay and woods on the air
Made warm draughts in the open car.

Signposts whitened relentlessly
Montreuil, Abbéville, Beauvais
Were promised, promised, came and went,
Each place granting its name’s fulfillment.

A combine groaning its way late
Bled seeds across its work-light.
A forest fire smouldered out.
One by one small cafés shut.

I thought of you continuously
A thousand miles south where Italy
Laid its loin to France on the darkened sphere.
Your ordinariness was renewed there.
(DD 22)

The darkness and dampness of “Night Drive’s” setting only emphasizes the sexual promise and fulfillment of the spring. The “ordinariness” of the season’s routines – as opposed to the *disorder* in New York and New Jersey – is celebrated and enjoyed anew. “Night Drive” breaks free from the enjambment and the consonantal mish-mash of “In an Airport Coach,” allowing an airier four-stress line to breathe in the night air of “rain” and “hay” and “woods.” To read “In an Airport Coach” alongside “Night Drive” is to look at antithetical landscapes of hell and paradise.

⁵⁵ Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: the Making of a Poet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993) 81. See also Jonathan Allison, “Acts of Union: Seamus Heaney’s Tropes of Sex and Marriage” *Eire-Ireland* 27.4 (1992) 106–11.

If “In an Airport Coach” co-opts American place into critique of Protestant capitalist culture in Northern Ireland, then the poet is purging his feelings of disgust and revulsion with Belfast by transferring them to a safely foreign place. He has managed, if only for a while, to disentangle sexual procreation from industrial decay by disassociating them into two oppositional landscapes. The poem’s status as an uncollected work – existing somewhat outside the Heaney canon – mirrors this process of displacement and purgation.

Tellingly, “In an Airport Coach” represents the last of Heaney’s published poems to focus solely on an American landscape until an enigmatic sonnet “In Iowa” appeared in the *New Yorker* in 2005. In the intervening years, however, Heaney develops a method of addressing American place that adopts the rhetorical language of space: it is abstract, featureless, indefinite. And yet Heaney’s interactions with American place read as space, when it is kept at an elusive and imaginative distance, have yielded poems that conform to the idea of “vision” as described in “The Disappearing Island.” Rather than trying to apply the powers of home to this new place (which produced a failed poem in “In an Airport Coach”), Heaney instead holds America *in extremis*. This allows him to turn to Ireland with new focus, a process I call “imaginative return.” He moves away from an either/or approach to representing place and embraces a poetic that involves intertwining one place with another.

III. Imaginative Return in The California Poems

In the autumn of 1970, Heaney accepted a guest lectureship at the University of California at Berkeley and moved his young family to Northern California for a year.

Heaney has spoken of the importance of California in “reorienting” his thinking.⁵⁶ It compelled him not only to reimagine his daily routine, but to reimagine his place within the context of Irish poetry, particularly in meeting Irish writers and scholars such as Conor Cruise O’Brien, Maire Mhac an tSaoi, and Brian Moore in addition to Lillian Hellman, Jessica Mitford, Leonard Michaels, and Czeslaw Milosz. His friendship with American historian Thomas Flanagan was particularly consequential, and he learned much about his own culture’s literature and history from Flanagan. Heaney credits Flanagan with helping him to disengage from “the English terminals” of his school education so that he could establish “new coordinates.” “It’s no exaggeration to say that [Flanagan] reoriented my thinking,” Heaney recalls, “I was starting to see my own situation as a ‘Northern poet’ more in relation to the wound and the work of Ireland as a whole.”⁵⁷ The potato digger in “Gifts of Rain,” – “a man wading lost fields...//...hooped to where he planted” (*WO* 23) – is a mask for Heaney himself, as he began composing the following lines in his Berkeley office:

I cock my ear
at an absence—
in the shared calling of blood

arrives my need
for antediluvian lore.
Soft voices of the dead
are whispering by the shore

that I would question
(and for my children’s sake)
about crops rotted, river mud
glazing the baked clay floor.

⁵⁶ As Heaney told O’Driscoll: “I occasionally drove out with Marie and the kids to Marin county for breakfast, to Sam’s Café, a hamburger joint in Tiburon. California champagne and hamburgers, for God’s sake, at eight o’clock in the morning, and Dad back on campus for work at nine. Unimaginable around Queen’s” (137).

⁵⁷ O’Driscoll 125, 142–43.

The “absence” here is the distance from Ireland, which grants Heaney the silence needed to mark the presence of both “the shared calling of the blood” and the “[s]oft voices of the dead.”⁵⁸ “Gifts of Rain” alludes to a heavy rain that flooded the banks of the Moyola river in the 1920s, but this rain can also be understood as the deluge of Irish texts – “antediluvian lore” – that Flanagan introduced to Heaney. Such a reorientation was not merely intellectual; Heaney claims that these “new coordinates” convinced him to leave Belfast for the Republic of Ireland the year after returning from California.

Given the timing and location of his teaching appointment, it is tempting to look to Heaney’s time in Berkeley for seeds of a political protest that informed the tight-lipped verse of *Wintering Out* and *North*. Several critics have attempted to connect his California period with new formal directions in his verse. Clair Wills, for instance, sees Heaney’s adoption of the “skinny stanza” as an implicit message that the “traditional lyric [had proved] inadequate to a new social and political reality.”⁵⁹ But just as Heaney was already at work on the skinny stanza before his trip west, the story of Heaney’s political awakening in the countercultural revolution of Berkeley ignores Heaney’s active involvement in the cause of civil rights in Northern Ireland before embarking for America.⁶⁰ Though his sojourn in California did not necessarily radicalize him, Michael Parker points out that the atmosphere of Berkeley did offer Heaney a fresh “source of

⁵⁸ For a longer discussion of Heaney’s interest in the paradox of absence/presence see Parker, *The Making of a Poet* 83–85; and Stan Smith’s response to Parker in *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005) 109–114.

⁵⁹ Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 20.

⁶⁰ For a longer discussion of Heaney’s formal evolution during this period, see O’Donoghue 52–55.

analogues through which... [to] address the painful native text.”⁶¹ From his position in Berkeley, Heaney began to know the limitations of the student protest movement and differentiate it from the violent reality of daily life in Belfast and Derry. "While Berkeley shouts, Belfast burns," he wrote in *The Listener* in December 1970, "...in Belfast the unproductive blood continues to be spilled and the heraldic oppositions hold.”⁶² Still, spending time in the company of poets like Robert Duncan, Robert Bly and Gary Snyder, who “reject[ed] the intellectual, ironical, sociological idiom of poetry,” encouraged Heaney to seek out mythological themes and to strive for a new “softness” in his approach.⁶³ It was within this context of “ideological candor and trust” that the writer of “Bogland” and “In an Airport Coach” met the modern American west. The dreams of “the Wild West” nurtured by childhood radio programs and films dissolved in favor of space age California. But rather than turn his poet’s eye to the landscapes and cityscapes that he and his family encountered in California, Heaney’s next collection featured only a single poem that addressed his time in California directly, a spare and bewildering memory piece called “Westering (in California)”:

I sit beneath Rand McNally’s
 ‘Official Map of the Moon’—
 The color of frogskin,
 Its enlarged pores held

Open and one called
 ‘Pitiscus’ at eye level—
 Recalling the last night
 In Donegal, my shadow

Neat upon the whitewash

⁶¹ Michael Parker, “Gleanings, Leavings: Irish and American Influences on Seamus Heaney’s *Wintering Out*, 1972” *New Hibernia Review* 2.3 (Autumn 1998) 16.

⁶² Heaney, “Views” *The Listener* (31 December 1970) 903.

⁶³ Quoted in Tell 39, 41.

From her bony shine,
The cobbles of the yard
Lit pale as eggs.

Summer had been a free fall
Ending there,
The empty amphitheatre
Of the west. Good Friday

We had started out
Past shopblinds drawn on the afternoon,
Cars stilled outside still churches,
Bikes tilting to a wall;

We drove by,
A dwindling interruption,
As clappers smacked
On a bare altar

And congregations bent
To the studded crucifix.
What nails dropped out that hour?
Roads unreeled, unreeled

Falling light as casts
Laid down
On shining waters.
Under the moon's stigmata

Six thousand miles away,
I imagine untroubled dust,
A loosening gravity,
Christ weighing by his hands.
(WO 79)

“Westerling” complicates the standard dualities of the colonial Irish geography – east and west, north and south – with the new cardinal points of the “vertical quest” first suggested in “Bogland.” Whereas in “Bogland,” Sidney Burris notes, the “organizing metaphor resists heavenly ascensions” (the “unfenced country/Is bog” whose “pioneers keep striking/Inwards and downwards”), in “Westerling” the unfenced country encourages the notion of heavenly ascensions.⁶⁴ The “unfenced country” is the moon, a fresh American

⁶⁴ Burris continues “...what rises in [“Bogland”] rises from a ‘bottomless’ pit to the lowest surface of the earth,” *The Poetry of Resistance* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1990) 81.

frontier opening up overhead. Moon gazing accounts for the cool “lunar” surface of the poem, which seems almost untouched by the terrible news of resuming sectarian strife in Northern Ireland. At first it is unclear whether this poem shares with other poems in *Wintering Out* an aggregate vision of “a world beyond redemption” or whether, six thousand miles away from its epicenter, the tremors of that violence fail to register.⁶⁵ The speaker nevertheless conflates the cold and remote surface of the moon with an emotional impression of his journey west to America, and in doing so moves from contemplating a map of the moon to mapping a distinct memory of Ireland. The poem’s initial journey is, as Tell points out, an “eastering” rather than a “westering.”⁶⁶

Along the lines of an eastern/western divide, the poem puts forward two distinct images of the moon. At the outset, the map of the moon hanging in Heaney’s campus office appears as a province of the modern scientific, rational west: a territory measured, charted, and ready for colonization. Recalling Roethke’s “In Praise of Prairies,” Heaney encounters this new frontier at “eye level.” The moon’s large eye, Pitiscus, calls back to both the “big sun” and “cyclops eye” of “Bogland.” While it is the new frontier of American exploration and expansion, the speaker’s recollection of Donegal restores the moon to its mythical persona of Diana, casting shadows “upon the whitewash from her bony shine.” The journey west from Donegal to California accounts for the moon’s transformation from a goddess of sorts into another mapped territory, drawn and dissected like the frog that its color suggests. At the outset, we might believe that we are in much the same territory as in “Bogland,” where the colonial instincts of American spatial politics contrast with the communal folkways of an “authentic” Irish West. The

⁶⁵ Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* 80

⁶⁶ Tell 35.

movement of the poem, however, shows the speaker to be conflicted about returning to Ireland, even by way of memory.

As Heaney begins the initial trip west on Good Friday, the rural congregations are busy with their observances of the Stations of the Cross – “bent/To the studded crucifix” – and recreate Christ’s ordeal and suffering. The religious pilgrims who will become the emotional centerpiece of Heaney’s long dream vision “Station Island” are rendered faceless and silent in this earlier poem. We sense that the journey has already made the traveler an outsider to the country around him and a stranger to its rituals; he passes through a static countryside of “shopblinds drawn on the afternoon,” “cars stilled outside still churches,” and “bikes tilting to a wall.” In contrast to these concrete images of shutting up and shutting out, Heaney’s trip takes place in an alternate realm of illumination and transformation: he sees the roads “unreel, unreel//Falling light as casts/Laid down/On shining waters.” The repetition of the word “unreel” marries the action of unraveling with the “unreal” flight into fantasy that the trip provides. While “clappers smack/On a bare altar” in reverence, the speaker loses himself in reverie. All this leads Allen to call the poem a dramatization of “the dropping away of Irish Catholic heritage of suffering and repression.”⁶⁷ Thinking along the same lines, Kennedy-Andrews applauds Heaney’s “new-found ability to free himself from the bonds of orthodoxy.”⁶⁸

Corcoran argues that “Westering” and other poems that feature a protagonist-as-driver allow Heaney to incorporate the industrial or mechanical reality of the modern world into his rural *weltanschauung*, and we have seen this process at work in “Night

⁶⁷ Allen 730.

⁶⁸ Elmer Andrews, “The Spirit’s Protest” *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Andrews (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992) 80.

Drive” and a more disfigured form in “In an Airport Coach.”⁶⁹ It is likely that Heaney borrowed the image from John Montague’s *The Rough Field*, which Heaney saw throughout its composition in the 1960s. He was pleased with Montague’s concluding image of a car journey out of the ““finally lost dream of man at home in a rural setting.””⁷⁰ In both Montague and Heaney, the automobile becomes a symbol of escape from rural religion and the pastoral temptations of Irish verse. Yet “Westering” worries that such ecstasies of freedom are short-lived. As Heaney’s officemate in Berkeley Czeslaw Milosz observed: “The abstract city and the abstract theatre of nature, something one drives past, are the American metaphor.”⁷¹ The speaker in “Westering” resists “Americanizing” Irish landscape by trying to record images of the particular in the towns that he passes but acquiesces to the enchantment of the open road ahead, which leads finally to an “empty amphitheatre of the West.” The phrase is an interesting recalibration of Milosz’s comment, one that seems to complete Heaney’s act of separation. Despite the ecstasy of the drive, the driver is as little in control of the forces that move him as the congregants who follow the Stations of the Cross. “Summer had been a free fall/Ending there,” Heaney says of his last night in Donegal. The drive west proceeds with the inevitability of gravity.⁷²

⁶⁹ Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* 66.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1992) 10.

⁷¹ Czeslaw Milosz, *Native Realm* (London: Penguin Books, 1968) 28.

⁷² Something of the poem’s unorthodox California cool is also captured in the poem’s original title, “Easy Rider,” under which it appeared in Seamus Deane and Derek Mahon’s short-lived periodical *Atlantis* in 1971. Heaney trades on the popular American film’s celebration of the freedom of the open highway, as Heaney is already living out an American fantasy in the west of Ireland. His decision to retitle the poem “Westering” for publication in *WO* refocuses attention on the inevitable movements of the sun and moon westward across the sky, and on the coast of California as the end point for the inexorable pull of historical migration. With respect to the latter definition of westering, it is probable that Heaney, who taught

Though the car trip on Good Friday puts Heaney at odds with the faithful in their churches, Tell notes that the poem's obvious allusion to John Donne's "Good Friday, 1613 Riding Westward" indicates a similar interest in the spiritual reformation of the individual.⁷³ Like Donne's traveler, Heaney finds that his distance from home helps him "examine, redefine, and ultimately embrace that which he had originally sought to escape" (35–6). A problem with Tell's reading is that it requires the final image of "Christ weighing by his hands" to represent Heaney's ultimate reconciliation with his Catholic faith. Donne's goal in "Riding Westward" is not escape from religion, but reconciliation and the purging of a wanting spirit. Heaney's metaphysics in the image of the moon Christ are not so neatly worked out. It is unclear what his final vision advances or accomplishes. Corcoran decides that the final image underscores the speaker's "lonely unconnectedness," and Kennedy-Andrews sees the "earth-bound rituals of deliverance" taking place "within a larger context of cosmic emptiness."⁷⁴ Yet both verdicts strike me as unsatisfying.

American literature at Queens University, Belfast in the 1960s, had in mind John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* (1937; New York: Penguin Books, 1994). At the conclusion of "The Gift," Jody Tiflin's grandfather speaks of his movement west across the plains to the California coast:

It wasn't Indians that were important, nor adventures, nor even getting out here. It was a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast. And I was the head. It was westering and westering. Every man wanted something for himself, but the big beast that was all of them wanted only westering....But it wasn't getting here that mattered, it was movement and westering. We carried life out here and set it down the way those ants carry eggs. And I was the leader. The westering was as big as God, and the slow steps that made the movement piled up and piled up until the continent was crossed. Then we came down to the sea, and it was done. (94)

Looking up at "Rand McNally's/ 'Official Map of the Moon'" in 1971, Heaney understands that the westering impulse – "as big as God" – has been rekindled with the American moon landing.

⁷³ Tell 35.

⁷⁴ Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* 74; Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* 80.

To understand the puzzling final image of “Westering” we should return to Heaney’s nascent belief that the loss of moorings is a prerequisite to vision, an obsession later explored in poems such as “The Disappearing Island” and the confrontation between Hercules and Antaeus that wends its way through the poems in *North*.⁷⁵ We can be sure that the poem’s resolution is related to the notion of “loosening gravity,” the weightlessness of the moon, and “Christ weighing by his hands.” The imagistic impulse to bring the figure of Christ together with the metaphor of balance or weighing goes to the heart of what has become Heaney’s standard apologia for poetry: it tries to bring balance to a human condition plagued by imbalance. Earlier, I introduced the issue of balance and reconciliation by citing Heaney’s Nobel lecture *Crediting Poetry*, but we should look to another address, his inaugural lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry titled “The Redress of Poetry,” to understand how balance relates to Heaney’s vestigial Christian impulses. His theory of “redress” confronts the question of what “present use” poetry is to the larger society. With a nod to Plato, Heaney insists that, working at a certain remove from events, poetry can yet serve to put things right, to “redress whatever is wrong in the prevailing conditions.”⁷⁶ Balance enters the essay pertaining to the image of the scales that the poet can recalibrate and set to balance. Heaney borrows this metaphor from Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*, from which he quotes the following important passage:

If we know in what way society is unbalanced, we must do what we can to add weight to the lighter scale...we must have formed a conception of equilibrium and be ever ready to change sides like justice, that fugitive from the camp of conquerors. (3)

⁷⁵ Tell believes this myth to be vital to Heaney’s approach to places both at home and abroad, 46.

⁷⁶ Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995) 1.

Weil's image of the "fugitive from the camp of conquerors" appeals to Heaney, who in "Exposure" refers to himself as "...neither internee nor informer...a wood-kerne/Escaped from the massacre" (*North* 68). Yet he also recognizes a sympathetic soul at work in the Christian mysticism of Weil's philosophy. "Clearly," he writes, "[Weil's philosophy] corresponds to deep structures of thought and feeling derived from centuries of Christian teaching and from Christ's paradoxical identification with the plight of the wretched."⁷⁷ Here, Heaney misrepresents what Weil believes to be Christ's "countervailing gesture." For Weil, the countervailing gesture is Christ's crucifixion, death, and resurrection. In other words, it is Christ's act rather than his sympathy for the wretched that is the relevant exemplum. Desmond Fennell notes that Weil

recommends, as a role of social virtue, that we should resist the weight of worldly power pressing on us to conform to it, and instead through our weight, in a literary sense or otherwise, onto the weaker side of the scales of power, *even if this means involving ourselves in evil*.⁷⁸

Fennell claims that Heaney intentionally misreads Weil in order to "[veer] back towards the non-interventionist and symbolic social relationship," which has "always been at the core of his own poetic" (43). Set against Weil's vision of a reinvigorated Christian soldier, then, Fennell finds in "The Redress of Poetry" a more remote and monastic vision of the poet's vocation:

Heaney seems to me to envisage the poet's beneficent social action on the analogy of the monk in an enclosed religious order, who, Catholics believe, helps to atone for the world's evil – to assist Christ in the world's redemption – by his detachment from the world, his chastity, and above all his life of meditation and prayer. Heaney's repeated injunction that the poet must reflect the affairs of the contemporary world in his poetry – but in his own way and without intervening – corresponds to the monk's promise, much

⁷⁷ Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* 3.

⁷⁸ Desmond Fennell, *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing: Why Seamus Heaney is No. 1* (Dublin: ELO Publications, 1991) 43

prized by the faithful when they receive it, that he will “remember” or “include” their worldly concerns and “intentions” in his prayers. (43)

Returning to the final stanza of “Westering” with this exchange in mind, we find Heaney contemplating his responsibilities to his troubled native island from a distant outpost. He has gained a certain degree of freedom from the religious strictures of Ireland, but the freedom offers only a fleeting moment of vision, one which suggests monastic contemplation of Christ’s sacrifice rather than reveals a course of action:

Under the moon’s stigmata

Six thousand miles away,
I imagine untroubled dust,
A loosening gravity,
Christ weighing by his hands.

Six thousand miles from Ireland, sitting beneath a map of the moon in California, Heaney seems to mull over the meaning of his physical detachment from Ireland, wondering whether it also signifies an emotional detachment. But whether separation confers on him a transcendent freedom or convicts him of an abdication of responsibilities, Heaney has moved the Irish question away from dialectics of local place, history, and even conventional religion and transformed it into a symbolic act of vision.⁷⁹

Fennell’s characterization of Heaney as a secular monk is a helpful starting point to explore his most important poem of imaginative return, “Remembering Malibu.” Composed a decade after “Westering,” “Remembering Malibu” recalls an encounter

⁷⁹ Helen Vendler writes of Heaney’s collection *Seeing Things*, “the transcendent and the real become defined as the obverse and reverse of a single perception. Just as an angel’s world would seem miraculous to us, so our world would seem miraculous to a heavenly person – it would, for him, represent the wholly other, the imagined, the hitherto-inconceivable” (*Seamus Heaney* 136). We might see Heaney’s contradictory feelings of intimacy and estrangement from Ireland resolving into an image that communicates both the “transcendent and the real.”

Heaney had in California in 1971. It first appeared as the centerpiece of a Christmas pamphlet in 1981 sent only to friends, accompanied by a pen and ink drawing by T.P. Flanagan, but was later collected into the first section of *Station Island* (1985) among other poems that, in John Hildebidle's words, deal "with dangerous but necessary retrospect."⁸⁰ In thirteen irregular couplets "Remembering Malibu" manages to relocate questions of place and space, rootedness and rootlessness, to the coast of southern California.⁸¹ More so than even "Westering," "Remembering Malibu" searches a foreign space for signs of spiritual or aesthetic solace:

The Pacific at your door was wider and colder
than my notion of the Pacific

and that was perfect, for I would have rotted
beside the luke-warm ocean I imagined.

Yet no way was its cold ascetic
as our monk-fished, snowed-into Atlantic;

no beehived hut for you
on the abstract sands of Malibu—

it was early Mondrian and his dunes
misting toward the ideal forms

though wind and sea neighed loud
as wind and sea noise amplified.

I was there in the flesh
where I'd imagined I might be

and underwent the bluster of the day;
but why would it not come home to me?

Atlantic storms have flensed the cells
on the Great Skellig, the steps cut in the rock

⁸⁰ John Hildebidle, "A Decade of Seamus Heaney's Poetry" *Critical Essays on Seamus Heaney*, ed. Robert F. Garrett (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1995) 50.

⁸¹ Eugene O'Brien has suggested that "the notion of a 'further shore' ... inhabits much of Heaney's writing. It embodies the desire to find a different route to a different destination, a destination that offers new possibilities," *Seamus Heaney: Creating Irelands of the Mind* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2005) 116.

I never climbed
between the graveyard and the boatslip

are welted solid to my instep.
But to rear and kick and cast that shoe—

beside that other western sea
far from the Skelligs, and far, far

from the suck of puddled, wintry ground,
our footsteps fill with blowing sand.
(SI 19)

Unlike the more naïve speaker of "Bogland," the wiser speaker of "Remembering Malibu" begins the poem by addressing his misconceptions about an American landscape and considering the poetic possibilities of this new place. But a memory of Ireland intervenes. No matter how "perfect" the frigid and fierce Pacific is, Heaney wastes little time in contrasting its "bluster" with the Atlantic coast of western Ireland. While the Pacific of the first four lines is wide and cold – not "luke-warm" as he has imagined – and its sands "abstract," the Atlantic coast's first rendering is blunt and vivid, foreshadowing a fuller account to come later in the poem. The Atlantic is "monk-fished" and "snowed-into," suggesting a vibrant ecosystem of harvest and replenishment against the merely "cold" Pacific. Indeed, we need only look to Heaney's language to discover that the center of his imaginative geography remains affixed in Ireland. His descriptive drive languishes in the first two-thirds of the poem before building momentum in the final five couplets. Absent from the poem's middle couplets are Heaney's crackling, plosive verbs and precise, descriptive nouns. Instead, simple being verbs dominate, and the action verbs – "rotted," "imagined," "misting," "neighed," "amplified," "underwent" – paint only a vague picture in comparison to the robust verbs of the final couplets – "flensed," "cut," "climbed," "welled," "rear," "kick," "cast," "suck," and "filled." The spare, unadorned

verse seems poised to fade into the empty white space that surrounds the couplets, underscoring the poet's lament that the landscape refuses to "come home to him."

The question Heaney poses at line 16 – "but why would it not come home to me?" – is the hinge upon which the poem's fundamental problem swings. For readers and critics who wonder why Heaney has not produced poems about the inviting American landscape, "Remembering Malibu" shows a poet equally bewildered in discovering the limits of his descriptive powers. For all the wind and the sea's bluster, the Pacific calls nothing forth from the poet's store of images. The "amplified" wind and sea noise are wasted sound and fury, signifying nothing in this reified "empty amphitheatre of the west." Sounding more like Derek Mahon than the poet of "North," Heaney relies on allusions to Modernist art ("early Mondrian and his dunes") and Neo-Platonic philosophy ("misting toward the ideal forms") to negotiate this liminal space.

Heaney's failure (if it is a failure) to commune with this American place is an aesthetic one rather than a historical or political one. The bluster of the Malibu coast, though it may recall the "secular/powers of the Atlantic thundering" in the poem "North," nevertheless fails to encourage him to "lie down/in the word-hoard"; nor does it constitute a place where Heaney might feel comfortable exploring his uprootedness (*North* 10–11). Malibu is instead a space to which Heaney feels no innate connection. Malibu is real but it seems to lie beyond the imaginative project of place: as in a travel brochure, the Pacific is "at your door" and the sand forms into the endless dunes suggested by Mondrian's *Duinlandschap*.

Sitting in opposition to the "abstract sands of Malibu," the "beehived hut" in line 7 provides face and form to Heaney's inevitable eastward yearnings. The image refers to

the ruins of an early Christian monastic order preserved on Skellig Michael, a small, rocky island off the Southwest coast of Kerry. The huts call to mind Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innisfree" in which the poet longs for rural retreat among the "hive[s] for the honey bee" in the "bee-loud glade."⁸² But unlike Yeats's arcadian Lake Isle, Heaney envisions a fiercer asceticism. He channels the ghosts of Skellig Michael who survive in "flensed cells" with rock "welted to [their] instep," pioneers both punished and beatified for their choice of an inhospitable outpost. The comparison of the two landscapes is not a simple function of matching one memory against another. As Heaney makes clear in lines oddly reminiscent of Philip Larkin's more playful "I Remember, I Remember,"⁸³ he admits to having "never climbed between the graveyard and the boatslip" of the Great Skellig. Although Heaney argues for the aesthetic and ascetic primacy of the Skelligs, he has never physically been there.⁸⁴ The islands are a landscape built from preconception, and

⁸² William Butler Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" *Collected Poems* 38.

⁸³ Larkin quips:

By now I've got the whole place clearly charted.
 Our garden, first: where I did not invent
 Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,
 And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.
 And here we have that splendid family

I never ran to when I got depressed,
 The boys all biceps and the girls all chest,
 Their comic Ford, their farm where I could be
 'Really myself'. I'll show you, come to that,
 The bracken where I never trembling sat.

Collected Poems (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) 68.

⁸⁴ Tell points out Heaney's bizarre position succinctly: "The poet having never climbed the Skelligs, feels more at home in a place he is neither from (technically) nor has ever visited than in California, where he actually is" (35). See also John Montague's poem "A Footnote on Monasticism: Dingle Peninsula" *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1991) 13–14.

so a poem that begins by exposing one unreliable preconception of place ends by celebrating another.

Ben Howard describes the structure of "Remembering Malibu" as an "imagining within a memory," and Heaney obscures the boundaries between the two cognitive functions. Heaney describes the Skelligs of his imagination with the clarity and force of vivid recollection, while he renders Malibu vague, as if summoned up out of the ether.⁸⁵ As the poem's final couplet illustrates, Heaney's impressions of the American landscape remain almost unchanged from those in "Bogland." "The suck of puddle, wintry ground" is somehow less ominous in his estimation than "footsteps filled with blowing sand."

Both "Westering" and "Remembering Malibu" employ a poetic strategy of "lifting away" that Peter McDonald considers the defining shift in Heaney's poetry through the 1980s, that of removing the familiar and the known to a new and remote *non-place* of experience under the auspices of imagination, as in the crucifix relocated to the surface of the moon in "Westering." Kennedy-Andrews recognizes the same tendency as central to an understanding of Heaney's poetic purposes. "The tension between soaring away from the contingent world and remaining firmly rooted in it," he explains, "underlies all Heaney's work."⁸⁶ Heaney explored this tension in an essay delivered to the yearly Kavanagh conference in 1985, promoting a new reading of Patrick Kavanagh's

⁸⁵ Like the specter of James Joyce in "Station Island," Brian Moore is the daimonic Irish-writer-in-exile presiding over "Remembering Malibu." Moore, to whom the poem is dedicated and in whose Malibu home the poem originates, left Belfast in the early 1960s to become a Canadian citizen and later a permanent resident of California. As Heaney's silent interlocutor, Moore challenges Heaney to understand his voluntary self-exile in a place so utterly alien and indefinable to a native of Northern Ireland. Moore is the natural counterpart to the ascetic monks keeping their offices on Skellig Michael. In a 1992 newspaper feature for the *Los Angeles Times*, Moore told Tom Christie what he might have told Heaney years earlier: "Europeans have no idea how extraordinary this place is...this is really wild, spectacular country; fantastic, it's not like Europe at all...the feeling of great space here and the fact that California is absolutely beautiful." See "An Irishman in Malibu" *Los Angeles Times Magazine* March 1, 1992.

⁸⁶ Andrews, "The Spirits Protest" 210.

poems of place and their imaginative associations. Beginning with a story from his own childhood about a chestnut sapling dear to him as a young boy, Heaney expounds upon the symbolic possibility of the tree:

it was not so much a matter of attaching oneself to a living symbol of being rooted in the native ground; it was more a matter of preparing to be uprooted, to be spirited away into some transparent yet indigenous afterlife. The new place was all idea, if you like; it was generated out of my experience of the old place but it was not a topographical location. It was and remains an imagined realm, even if it can be located at an earthly spot, *a placeless heaven rather than a heavenly place*.⁸⁷

Despite its premise, the essay reconsiders an aesthetic approach to rural Irish place that Heaney shares with Kavanagh, and he uses Kavanagh's poetry as a template to ponder the shifting dynamics of place, space, and return in his own poetry. The anecdote of the sapling suggests that Heaney is primarily concerned with his own narrative of artistic and philosophical growth. Consider the following passage:

...all of the 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...The horizons of the little fields and hills, whether they are gloomy or constricting or radiant and enhancing, are sensed as the horizons of consciousness...He knows that the Monaghan world is not the whole world, yet it is the only one for him, the one which he embosses solidly and intimately into the words of poems. We might say that Kavanagh is pervious to this world's spirit more than it is pervious to his spirit. (147).

We can replace the word "Monaghan" above with the word "Mossbawn" without misrepresenting Heaney's early verse or prose pieces – those that treat Mossbawn as the "centre of the world" much as Kavanagh's Monaghan is "the definitive locus of the given world." Recall that "Bogland" argues that the "encroaching horizon" surrounding the bog also delimits just such a "horizon of consciousness." When Heaney turns to

⁸⁷ Heaney, "The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh" *Finders Keepers* 146-147. For an excellent recent discussion of Heaney's essay on Kavanagh, see Shane Alcobia-Murphy, *Governing the Tongue in Northern Ireland: The Place of Art/the Art of Place* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005) 135-36.

characterizing Kavanagh's later work, therefore, he is speaking of a new approach to place in his own poetry and prose:

When [Kavanagh] writes about places [in his later poems], they are luminous spaces within his mind. They have been evacuated of their status as background, as documentary geography, and exist instead as transfigured images, sites where the mind projects its own force. In this later poetry, place is included within the horizon of Kavanagh's mind rather than the other way around. The country he visits is inside himself. (148)

As Heaney's poetry evolves throughout the 1980s and 1990s, during his time at Harvard, the Ireland to which he returns is inside himself as well — the placeless heaven rather than the heavenly place. "Westering," with its images of flight and luminosity, promises a shift of this nature and "Remembering Malibu" allows us to witness an imaginative return to an imagined place, one that begins from a frustrated experience of a real place.

Here, as elsewhere in his prose, Heaney tries to define a characteristic *doubleness* at work in the Irish experience of place, a quality that Richard Kearney has recognized as "the distinguishing mark of...the Irish mind."⁸⁸ The goal of the writer writing within this culture is to "live in two places at one time" and "to acknowledge the claims of two contradictory truths at the one time" – i.e., to relinquish the Manichean *either/or* and "[prefer] instead the more generous and realistic approach *both/and*" (22). Heaney's attempt to resolve the tension between place as "lived, illiterate and unconscious" on the one hand and "learned, literate and conscious" on the other – an attempt, in other words, to account for place as "both/and" rather than "here and not there" – creates a new visionary description of place that exists chiefly in the geography of the poet's mind.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Heaney, *Migrations: The Irish at Home and Abroad*, ed. Richard Kearney (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1990) 22.

IV. Vision and Apparition

In the 2000s, Heaney steadily reduced his responsibilities with Harvard and cut back his travel schedule. He retired to a full-time residence at Glanmore in 2006. His first two collections of that decade, *Electric Light* (2001) and *District and Circle* (2006), return to the rural world of his Mossbawn childhood. In closing my discussion of Heaney and return, therefore, I will return to Mossbawn as well – the omphalotic plot that Heaney conceives as both bounded and boundless, isolated and interconnected, full and empty.

“Montana,” from *Electric Light*, has been all but ignored in critical discussions of Heaney’s more recent poetry, perhaps because it stands apart from the main thematic interest of the collection, which Eugene O’Brien has described as “a fusion and interaction of Irish and European culture.”⁸⁹ Despite appearing in a collection called “Electric Light” and containing “a bright path” at its heart, “Montana” is a poem that remains, like its mysterious protagonist, in “the cool arch of the shade.” Memory, in this poem, is not illumination but uncertain, and perhaps misunderstood, suggestion. The child and his quiet interlocutor acknowledge, but never quite understand, important lines of connection between them. “Montana” is set in rural Co. Derry in the 1940s and is concerned with the romantic figure of a farm hand named John Dologhan:

The stable door was open, the upper half,
When I looked back. I was five years old
And Dologhan stood watching me go off,
John Dologhan, the best milker ever

To come about the place. He sang
"The Rose of Mooncoin" with his head to the cow's side.
He would spin his table knife and when the blade
Stopped with its point towards me, a bright path

Opened between us like a recognition

⁸⁹ O’Brien 172.

That made no sense, like my memory of him standing
Behind the half door, holding up the winkers.
Even then he was like an apparition,

A rambler from the Free State and a gambler,
All eyes as the pennies rose and slowed
On Sunday mornings under Butler's Bridge
And downed themselves into that tight-bunched crowd

Of the pitch-and-toss school. Sunlight on far lines,
On the creosoted sleepers and hot stones.
And Dologhan, who'd worked in Montana once,
With the whole day off, in the cool shade of the arch.⁹⁰

The title of the poem is not arbitrary, as Dologhan's time spent in Montana is the telling detail of his story: the detail that opens "the bright path" between hand and child "like a recognition." Dologhan is both familiar and exotic, a man who works seamlessly within the rhythms and settings of rural Irish life and yet is also an "apparition" who has appeared from somewhere else: not only from Montana but from the Free State as well. To the young Heaney, both places – Montana and the Republic – inspire his imagination because they are outside his purview: the Republic due to partition and Montana due to its impossible distance from the child's farm. Montana, moreover, has the air of the hypothetical about it, and Dologhan's association with this foreign place accounts for his spectral quality. He has a particular literary quality as well – a picaresque character out of poem and song. Heaney's description of Dologhan as "[a] rambler...and a gambler" echoes the well-known folk song "Ragged but Right."

⁹⁰ Heaney, "Montana" *Electric Light* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001) 14. Like the man it memorializes, "Montana" moves with an ease and elegance that masks its greater complexity. It is a fine example of what Jason David Hall in *Seamus Heaney's Rhythmic Contract* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) calls Heaney's "notional" stanza organization (Although it is written in free verse quatrains, each quatrain still contains one (more or less) regular iambic line that points to a rhythmic orientation. Moreover, each quatrain contains one terminal consonant pairing of slant rhyme (i.e., *half/off*, *side/blade*; *recognition/apparition*; *slowed/crowd*; *lines/stones*). The lines paired by this consonance are different in each quatrain, however, further unsettling even this subtle gesture towards formality.

Of course, Montana's other-where-ness fits Heaney's intention to capture a child's imagining of the world beyond his experience and reaffirms his love for place names that immediately suggest geography and topography. We get the sense that Montana encapsulates the alternating awe and dread that the child associates with Dologhan. "Montana" is therefore a powerful foil for "home," for what is known and knowable in the world, which Heaney spells out in terms of local dimensions as well: "Sunday mornings under Butler's Bridge," "that tight bunched crowd/Of the pitch-and-toss school," "Sunlight on far lines," and so forth. By contrast, Montana lurks in the world of darkness and remove, set apart from other subjects in *Electric Light* that Heaney showers with the clear light of memory.

But my interest in the poem lies in Heaney's special connection with Dologhan. In an otherwise excellent essay on the manifestation of vocation in Heaney's poems, John Boly misidentifies Dologhan as one of Heaney's "father-as-mentor" figures, a character whose labor is distinguished from Heaney's:

The great paradox is that the poet's father-as-mentor offers such a complete antithesis to his son's calling. Terse to the point of being curt, forever at work, deeply private, and deliberately distant from public events, the father possesses none of the linguistic subtlety, patient reflection, tonal nuance, and broad sense of social responsibility that define his son's poetic practices.⁹¹

While some of the above applies superficially to Dologhan, the overall character does not. Not only does Dologhan take full advantage of his leisure time on Sundays under the bridge, he can transform his labor into an artistic, leisurely enterprise. The picture Heaney paints of Dologhan's milking – with his head nestled to the animal's side, singing a nineteenth-century Irish ballad – suggests an act closer to art or love than drudgery.

⁹¹ John Boly, "Beloved Mentors: Seamus Heaney's Poems of Vocation" *Genre* 38 (Spring/Summer 2005) 169.

Indeed, it is Dologhan's freedom from his work, or, to put it more precisely, the freedom he seems to enjoy both at work and at leisure, that the poem captures. Work and leisure converge in Dologhan and in this way he becomes a sympathetic rather than an antithetical version of Heaney himself – who since "Digging" has suggested that the work of writing has the look and shape of leisure.

The "recognition/That ma[kes] no sense" is that the lives of farm hand and child are connected by what Heaney calls elsewhere a "migrant solitude." Dologhan's migrations abroad – his exile – have not rendered him completely alien to the rural environment. Indeed, as I suggest above, he is defined by a brilliance of adaptation. If Dologhan is like an apparition, however, it is because he is a figure of vision, one who has been transfigured by his leaving and his return. American place is essential to Heaney's creation and identification of vision and his construction of an "Ireland of the mind" in his poetry after 1971. Addressing American place *in extremis* his poems can safely return to Ireland, to Mossbawn, back to the *omphalos* of the community water pump as surely as the eels in the poem "Beyond Sargasso" heed the "insinuating pull" of their "orbit" in returning to Lough Neagh or the bog holes of Toner's Bog fill up with "Atlantic seepage."⁹²

⁹² Heaney, "Beyond Sargasso" *Opened Ground* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1998) 30; "Boagland" *DD* 42.

Chapter 4

FAILURE TO RETURN IN EAVAN BOLAND'S *THE LOST LAND*

*"Outside the window
winter earth*

*discovers its horizon
as I cradle mine"*

— Eavan Boland, "Partings"¹

If not for Seamus Heaney winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996, it would be easy to argue that Eavan Boland was the most important Irish poet of the 1990s. The decade began with her friend Mary Robinson elected as Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland, the first woman to hold the position. To honor her friend Robinson chose to conclude her inaugural address by reading from Boland's poem "The Singers," in which Boland writes of the *sean-nós* singers, "finding a voice where they found a vision" (*NCP* 203). In 1992, Boland spoke up for many when she chastised the *Field Day* editors' decision to exclude all but a few women from their mammoth anthology of Irish writing. Her campaign led to two subsequent *Field Day* volumes devoted to the writing of Irish women. In 1994, she became the latest in a line of her peers to receive widespread recognition and acclaim in the United States in winning both the Lannan Award for Poetry and the Irish American Literature Award for her collection *In a Time of Violence* (1994). The next year she relocated from Dublin to California after accepting a full-time

¹ Eavan Boland, "Partings" *New Collected Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008) 96. Hereafter, I will use the abbreviation *NCP* for poems quoted from this volume.

faculty position with Stanford University and began the divided life of the contemporary Irish writer – spending the school year teaching in America and her breaks in Ireland.

Boland's move to the U.S. seems to have rekindled her interest in the problems of self-representation vis-à-vis a poetics of Irish place, and near the end of the decade she published *The Lost Land* (1998), which addresses these issues in light of a life split between California and Dublin.² Boland organized *The Lost Land* into two poetic sequences. The first sequence, "Colony," addresses Ireland as a political and historical site of dispossession, albeit by focusing on so-called "daughters of colony": the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of the British colonial class who were forced to leave Ireland after the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the creation of the Free State.³ Boland carries over this identification into the second sequence, "The Lost Land," where their particular narrative of dispossession – expelled from the only home they have ever

² In general, *The Lost Land* was praised by critics in the U.S. See, for instance, Tom Clark, "Subversive Histories" *American Poetry Review* 28.5 (1999) 7–10; Kate Daniels "Ireland's Best" *Southern Review* 35.2 (1999) 387–402; Henry Taylor "Land of the Poets" *Boston Globe* 13 December 1998; Michael Thurston "Eavan Boland and W. S. Merwin" *Yale Review* 87.3 (1999) 167; and Richard Tillinghast "Poetry Chronicle" *Hudson Review* 52.3 (1999) 507–516. It received more mixed reviews in Ireland and England. See, for instance, Jan Montefiore "Dried in Irish Field" *Times Literary Supplement* 5045 (1999) 23; Katie Conboy "Lays of the Land" *Poetry Ireland Review* 60 (1999) 96–99; and Peter McDonald "Extreme Prejudice" *Metre* 6 (Summer 1999) 87–89. Of chief concern for these Irish and English critics was Boland's return to familiar poetic territory, which longtime readers found full of weak and awkward restatements of images and tropes that she had expressed earlier with more force and creativity. Reflecting on Irish and English reactions, Carol Tell has found them persuasive. She invokes John Gardiner's term "neurotic repetition" to diagnosis *The Lost Land* as a rehashing of "the same central questions... without coming to new understandings or conclusions" (143–4). McDonald took this criticism a step further, sensing in the "Colony" sequence a shallow willingness to trade on "Irishness" to win over an American audience while also adopting the vocabulary of postcolonial critique in order to align herself with the academic vogue. McDonald writes, "the poet casts about for those culturally and academically approved 'themes' which will make her sound as if she is saying something very important indeed.... *The Lost Land* provides a near-perfect example of the perils of writing poems about Ireland and its history, especially when the poet is given to an exaggerated sense of the significance of her own experience" (87–88).

³ Because these poems seem to center on the port of Dún Laoghaire (called Kingstown at that time), it is probable that Boland has in mind the official clearing of the military barracks between February and March of 1922.

known, yet a home that is “not theirs” – helps Boland make sense of her own emotional confusion in California. As she admits in one poem,

I also am a daughter of colony.
I share their broken speech, their other-where-ness.
(“Daughters of Colony” *NCP* 248)

Because much of *The Lost Land* was composed in California, Boland does, in a straightforward way, share in the women’s “other-where-ness.” But she also emphasizes a personal dispossession that goes beyond mere homesickness. As “The Lost Land” sequence unfolds we find that Boland’s separation from the physical site of Ireland is far less important to her than the separation from her two daughters – Sarah and Frances – who are now “grown up and far away” (“The Lost Land” *NCP* 260). The poet realizes that it is through her two daughters that she has come to accept, understand, and even appreciate her Irishness. Separated from them, she has been left, like the “daughters of colony,” with little sense of how to address, much less redress, this sudden loss of identity.

Boland has never shied from using “exile” to describe her own experience and that of other women, but the term does not appear even once in *The Lost Land*. The poems insist instead on a loss of a sure sense of return. They worry about a separation that is not simply conditional or provisional, as we might expect given Boland’s situation as a “part-time exile,” but a total, irreversible break with what had become the category of “home” in her poems. In the collection’s opening poem, Boland, like John Montague in *The Rough Field*, identifies with Ainnrias Mac Marcuis, the abandoned bard of the O’Neill’s, whom she imagines wandering the road between “Youghal and Cahirmoyle” practicing “a dead art in a dying land” (*NCP* 245). Half way through “My Country in

Darkness,” Boland asks the reader not to consider this loss of identity and purpose too lightly:

Reader of poems, lover of poetry –
in case you thought this was a gentle art,
follow this man on a moonless night
to the wretched bed he will have to make:

The Gaelic world stretches out under a hawthorn tree
and burns in the rain. This is its home,
its last frail shelter. All of it –
Limerick, the Wild Geese and what went before –
falters into cadence before he sleeps:

He shuts his eyes. Darkness falls on it.
(NCP 245)

Boland writes “My Country in Darkness” at a moment of relative peace and prosperity in Ireland, and her comments in interviews during the mid and late 90s reveal a distinct optimism about her native country.⁴ The lament that her “country” has fallen into “darkness,” therefore, makes little sense as a reflection on contemporary politics. Rather, as with Heaney and Patrick Kavanagh, the Ireland that Boland addresses in *The Lost Land* is chiefly an “Ireland of the mind” – a symbolic entity informed by Ireland’s historical patterns but more attuned to the personal struggles of the poet to find a workable subjectivity in the poem.

The Lost Land’s melancholic tone – its grief and heaviness – is understandable if we recognize that Boland uses “land” or “place” as a metaphor for her maternal relationship with her daughters. “Boland’s sense of ‘Irishness’,” as one critic has written, “is only rooted in her role as a mother looking after her children.”⁵ This lost relationship

⁴ See, for instance, Rebekah Presson, “Visionary Claim: An Interview with Eavan Boland” *New Letters* 61.2 (1995) 116–129; Margaret Mills Harper, “Eavan Boland: An Interview” *Five Points* 1.2 (1997) 87–105; and Jody Allen Randolph, “A Backward Look: An Interview with Eavan Boland” *PN Review* 20.1 (2000) 43–48.

is in fact the lost land of the title. *The Lost Land* reconnects Boland to her complex vision of a home and motherhood first developed fully in *Night Feed* (1982). In that collection, home is not represented by any essential Irish place but by a set of relationships, both familial and imaginary, that are formed and codified within the rooms of a suburban house. Many of the poems in *The Lost Land* call back to the hopes and anxieties first put forward in these rooms and then measure them against the place and position where the poet now finds herself. Just as *Night Feed* is the first of Boland's collections to register the full presence of Boland's daughters, *The Lost Land* is the first to bear the weight of their absence. While Boland may physically return to Ireland, to Dublin, to her old suburb of Dundrum, she cannot return to her role as mother, upon which she has built a positive sense of her Irishness. The poems' various frustrated and failed attempts to return to Ireland are a heuristic for the impossibility of return a to motherhood.

II. Journeys and Maps

Before narrowing my focus to *The Lost Land*, I will explore Boland's unique approach to the poetry of place over the course of her career. In *After Joyce and Yeats*, Neil Corcoran observes that "[m]uch modern Irish Poetry is...before it is anything else, a cartography of natural piety."⁶ We can distinguish Boland from her peers to the extent that her poems fall outside of Corcoran's observation. While she has written vividly and sometimes movingly of natural landscapes, she is not a "nature poet," as that term is usually understood. Her perspective on nature has remained that of a suburban Dubliner:

⁵ Pilar Villar-Argaiz, *Eavan Boland's Evolution as an Irish Woman Poet: An Outsider in an Outsider's Culture* (Ceredigion, UK: Mellon Press, 2007) 256.

⁶ Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 70.

hills and mountains appear framed by windows and the seasons are marked by the changes to garden hedges and backyard fruiting trees. Her poetry is, at best, ambivalent about expressions of piety in relation to the natural world. Often enough her work suspects something sinister lurking in Irish “poetry of place,” and she has voiced her trouble with poets who “use [their] words to prove a place and know that proof w[ill] become an article of faith to others.”⁷

Boland has stated recently that she considers herself an “Irish” poet because a poet needs a “point of origin,”⁸ but her work exhibits an obsession with complicating and resisting narratives of origination in the context of Irish nation and place. Like Montague she is beset by questions of origin and occupancy, but like Padraic Fiacc she takes little solace in precolonial lyric traditions, a fact further complicated by her sense of a masculinist bardic order in Gaelic poetry.⁹ Since her first major collection, *New Territory* (1967), Boland has mounted a critique of cartography as a means to express her dissatisfaction with the literary politics of origin and native place.¹⁰ In an essay published in *Literary Review* in 2000, Boland offers a genesis story for her obsession with maps and mapping that also explains her alternative poetry of place:

There were no maps in our house when I was growing up, none that I remember. At least not in the obvious places where I saw them in other houses – on walls, framed, or as pages open on a table. If there were, I have no image of them.¹¹

⁷ Boland, “Becoming an Irish Poet” *A Journey with Two Maps* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011) 49.

⁸ Trina Vargo, “Irish Poet Eavan Boland Talks with Trina Vargo” (Part I) (US-Ireland Alliance Spotlight, 2011) 3:17.

⁹ See Pilar Villar-Argaiz, “Recording the Unpoetic: Eavan Boland’s Silences” *Irish University Review* 37.2 (Autumn/Winter 2007) 473

¹⁰ It is arguably the single most important through-line uniting her earliest writings with her most recent, from *New Territory* (1967) to *A Journey with Two Maps* (2011).

¹¹ Boland, “A Question” *Literary Review* 44.1 (2000) 23–24.

It is instructive to contrast Boland's account above with Heaney's description of Mossbawn in *Crediting Poetry*.¹² While Heaney's memory stresses the interconnectedness of his isolated childhood demesne with the wider world, Boland here emphasizes an essential disconnectedness informing her early life. Maps may have appeared in the houses of other families, in other rooms, but the young Boland remains without a cartography of her own.¹³ Her memoirs are full of similar vignettes that present her at a distance from Ireland. Given her migrant childhood, it is not unreasonable to think that Boland's strongest sense of Ireland might be as *terra in absentia*. Her father, Frederick Boland, was a leading Irish diplomat in the Costello government and moved his family first to London when Boland was five, and then to New York, before sending her back to Ireland at the age of thirteen to complete her schooling.¹⁴

For an intelligent and ostracized Irish child in London and New York, maps might have provided a source of comfort and fixity: a way of remaining connected to a country of origin that existed across the channel or across the Atlantic ocean. Instead, they become powerful symbols of exclusion. Remembering a linen map of the Roman empire hanging in an English classroom, Boland recalls wanting to "trace...the weave of my

¹² See Chapter 3, pp. 114–116.

¹³ Catherine Kilcoyne cautions against reading passages such as this as reliable autobiography. She identifies a strain of "strategic memory" at work in Boland's essays. When discussing her past in the context of her poetry, the poems themselves seem to create the past of the poet in order to justify their existence in the present. The give-away in this quotation is the hedging sentence: "If there were, I have no image of them." My intention in using Boland's autobiographical essays is not to treat them as reliable autobiography or artistic criticism, but to explore how she has tried to position her poetic self and her work in the public mind. See Kilcoyne, "Eavan Boland and Strategic Memory" *Nordic Irish Studies* 6 (2007) 89–102.

¹⁴ Frederick Boland was himself partly educated in the United States at Harvard University and the University of North Carolina. He served as the newly-minted Republic's first ambassador to the Court at St. James from 1950–56 and then its first ambassador to the United Nations, beginning in 1956. Boland's mother was the portrait painter Frances Kelly. See Jody Allen-Rudolph, ed. *Eavan Boland: A Critical Companion* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007) xix–xx.

country. /To trace the names/I was close to forgetting/Wicklow. Kilruddery. Dublin.” The child then asks:

where exactly
was my old house?
Its brass One and Seven.
Its flight of granite steps.

Its lilac tree whose scent
stayed under your fingernails
for days.

(“In Which the Ancient History I Learn is Not my Own,” *NCP* 224)

The child’s desire to inscribe the strong physical impressions of the first house that she remembers on the imperial map – its brass numbers, its granite steps, the scent of the lilac tree in the yard – is presented ironically. The older poet reflecting back knows that these distinctly individual ways of knowing place have not been erased from the child’s memory, but the map as an authoritative text of place can exclude or alter the language, symbolism, and iconography that the child relies on to represent these memories. The cartographer’s art, because it is necessarily impersonal and abstract, is pernicious. Maps imply the superiority of scientific accuracy in representation and disguise their rhetorical strategies in representing place as objective truth.

In “That the Science of Cartography is Limited,” the poem that inspires Boland’s essay quoted above, she argues against fetishizing maps because they are hostile to individual memory and the particularities of the lived life. “That the Science...” memorializes a morning’s walk down one of the hundreds of “famine roads” constructed up hillsides in the western counties of Ireland during 1847. Such roads were built to no destination and no purpose save offering starving Irish peasants labor for which they

could receive official compensation from the British colonial administrators.¹⁵ A map “line” tracing a famine road cannot speak to this historical cruelty and remains unequal to Boland’s demands for accountability. The poem concludes:

...when I take down
the map of this island, it is never so
I can say here is
the masterful, the apt rendering of

the spherical as flat, nor
an ingenious design which persuades a curve
into a plane,
but to tell myself again that

the line which says woodland and cries hunger
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress,

will not be there.

(NCP 204–5)

Boland’s rejection of cartography – and the paternalistic and colonizing power implicit in the cartographer’s measuring, charting, and abstracting land – introduces us to her wider suspicions of representation. Her conscious break with the traditional formal strategies of the English lyric is an understandable consequence, but she goes farther in rejecting *prima facie* Irish symbols, many popularized by the writings of Celtic revivalists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As one critic has described the problem facing Irish poets writing in English:

The English language is for these writers, the only “language of the possible,” but, as it stands in opposition to “the real” (the reality conveyed in the native language), the English language is an “index of hypocrisy [and] moral vacuity.”¹⁶

¹⁵ For a history of the famine roads and other public works projects during the Great Famine, see Cecil Woodham-Smith’s indispensable *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845–1849* (1962; New York: Penguin, 1992) and Ciarán Ó Murchadha’s more recent collection of primary sources, *The Great Famine: Ireland’s Agony 1845–1852* (New York: Continuum International, 2011) 67–88.

¹⁶ Villar-Argaiz, “Reading the Unpoetic” 473. Quotations from Seamus Deane, “Dumbness and Eloquence: A Note on English as We Write it in Ireland” *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Clare Carrol and Patricia King (Cork: Cork UP, 2003) 118.

In “Imago,” a poem from the “Colony” sequence in *The Lost Land*, Boland exposes – and then repudiates – what she considers to be hypocritical and vacuous metaphors that have lingered on in Irish literature:

Head of a woman. Half-life of a nation.
Coarsely-cut blackthorn walking stick.
Old Tara brooch.
And bog oak.
A harp and a wolfhound on an ash tray.

All my childhood
I took you for the truth.

I see you now for what you are.

My ruthless images. My simulacra.
Anti-art; a foul skill
traded by history
to show a colony

the way to make pain a souvenir.
(NCP 249)

Jeanette Riley notes in the lines above how Boland, from the vantage of California, “indicts the images and signs by which she has come to know her nation, recognizing that the images and signs exist merely as copies of stories, legends, and myths from the past.”¹⁷ Here Boland adopts a rhetorical strategy of negation to reject familiar cultural markers of Irish landscape and literature: the blackthorn, bog oak, harp, wolfhound, etc. These “ruthless images” are colonial signifiers that extend rather than unsettle the English language’s colonial coding of Irish space.

“Imago” evokes a number of Boland’s earlier poems of repudiation, such as “Writing in a Time of Violence” or “Mise Eire,” which worry that the artificial aspects of the English language – its adherence to classical rhetorical modes that support figurative

¹⁷ Jeanette E. Riley, “Eavan Boland’s *The Lost Land*: Altering the Cartography of the Irish Poem” *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 35.2 (Fall 2009) 62.

In “Writing in a Time of Violence,” for instance, she fears that the rhetorical arts are only the “[o]ld indices and agents of persuasion” that hide their true intentions “where the dear vowels/*Irish Ireland ours* are/ absorbed into autumn air” and “words such as *hate*/and *territory*...are waiting under/beautiful speech. To strike” (NCP 212). Here both language and place interact as systems of control. Recalling a college essay assignment on the “Art of Rhetoric,” Boland recognizes:

The misleading representations of Ireland in literature and song cause Boland to lose her country once again; this time as an aspiring poet living in Ireland. She returns to this theme with more conviction in “Mise Eire,” where she dramatizes her rejection of the conventional Irish lyric as a refusal of return:

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the small farm,
the scalded memory,
the songs
that bandage up the history,
the words that make a rhythm of the crime

where time is time past.
A palsy of regrets.
No. I won't go back.¹⁸

By refusing to “go back” in “Mise Eire” and other poems, Boland must instead finding a new grounding for her poetic identity derived from a new paradigm of poetic expression.

It is easy to recognize Boland's rejection of cartography, symbolism, and lyric as a joint feminist and postcolonial critique of linguistic representations of place as patria and nation.¹⁹ Thomas Foster asserts that Boland's “sense of women's history as an unmapped territory” as well as a marked “absence of community” in her life is a fundamental source of “vitality” in her work. Precisely because lives of Irish women have been relegated to “poetic obscurity,” he writes,

[Boland] is able to discover and map an undiscovered country: her work exhibits a freshness and vitality because of the largely unexplored terrain she covers, because of those personal histories whose loss she mourns.²⁰

¹⁸ NCP 128. For a short but insightful reading of “Mise Eire,” see Pilar Villar-Argaiz, *Eavan Boland: A Postcolonial Reading* 125–6.

¹⁹ The literature on this topic is substantial, but see, in particular, Sarah Fulford, *Gendered Spaces in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Peter Lang, 2002); Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora, 2004); and Catriona Clutterbuck, “Eavan Boland and the Politics of Authority in Irish Poetry” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 35 (2005) 72–90.

²⁰ Thomas C. Foster, “In from the Margin: Eavan Boland's ‘Outside History’ Sequence” *Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Some Male Perspectives*, ed. Alexander G. Gonzalez (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999) 8–9.

Boland herself has not characterized this historical position as quite so fortunate, but she does acknowledge “certain advantages” to the position of “marginality” within a proscribed poetic tradition. “Marginality,” she writes,

allows the writer clear eyes and a quick critical sense. Above all, the years of marginality suggest to such a writer – and I am speaking of myself now – the real potential for subversion. I wanted to relocate myself within the Irish poetic tradition.²¹

We can date Boland’s project of “relocation” to the mid 1970s, around the time that she discovered Adrienne Rich.²² Sarah Maguire writes that the “unflinching radicalism” of Rich’s important essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1971) “unsettled” Boland but also inspired her to become involved in nascent discourses concerning Irish nationalism and gender.²³ Her critique of the nationalist rhetoric of Irish poetry – a rhetoric that framed the achievement of the Irish nation in terms of a feminine iconography – has proven particularly lasting. In her seminal essay “Outside History,” Boland argues that familiar figures such as Yeats’ Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the *Sean Bhean Bocht*, and the young *Spéirbhean* from the *aisling* poems tended to trap women within

²¹ Boland, *Object Lessons* 147.

²² For a recent reflection on the influence of Adrienne Rich written by Boland herself, see “Adrienne Rich” *A Journey with Two Maps* 121–28.

²³ Sarah Maguire, “Dilemmas and Developments: Eavan Boland Re-Examined” *Feminist Review* 62 (Summer 1999) 60. Boland’s commitment to exposing and protesting the marginalized position of Irish women and women writers vis-à-vis the Irish literary tradition has earned her praise over the last three decades from fellow poets such as Paula Meehan, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, and Medbh MacGuckian and from prominent feminist critics such as Patricia Haberstroh and Ann Owens Weekes. See Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, “Woman, Artist and Image in *Night Feed*” *Irish University Review* 23.1 (1993) 67-74; Ann Owens Weekes, “‘An Origin Like Water’: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and the Modernist Critique of Irish Literature” *Irishness and (Post)Modernism*. Ed. John S. Rickland. (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1994) 159-176.

symbolic representations of nation.²⁴ While these mythically figured women appeared to be powerful symbols of resistance to colonial rule, their power was in fact quite limited, reduced to suffering eloquently at the hands of the colonizing forces or else hectoring the young men of Ireland to their aid. Boland argues that the nationalist rhetoric of gender, one grounded deeply in popular literature and song, ensured a proscribed subjectivity for real Irish women, manufacturing women as “object, not subject.”²⁵ Thus, notions of Irish womanhood were enclosed within the aspiration for an Irish nation, which “efface[d] the material existence of real, suffering, complex women.”²⁶ “Irish poems,” Boland writes

simplified women most at the point of intersection between womanhood and Irishness. The farther the Irish poem drew away from the idea of Ireland, the more real and persuasive became the images of women. Once the pendulum swung back, the simplifications started again.²⁷

Accordingly, Irish women found themselves “doubly colonized” – first by the colonizer, then by the colonized themselves – leading ultimately to an inescapable “silence.”²⁸

Boland argues that Irish women writers had trouble confronting this tradition to find an effective means of self-representation.²⁹ She therefore understood her opportunity and mission as a poet and critic to “write back in” the pasts of Irish women and to set a different example for women poets coming after her.

²⁴ Boland, “Outside History” in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and Poet in Our Time* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) 136. “Outside History” originally appeared in Ireland and England as “A Kind of Scar.”

²⁵ Boland, *Object Lessons* 184.

²⁶ Elizabeth Bulter Cullingford, “Yeats and Gender,” in Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) 171.

²⁷ Boland, “Outside History” 136.

²⁸ Riley 65.

²⁹ See, for instance, Boland’s criticism of the political poetry of Lady Jane Frances Elgee Wilde (“Speranza”), “Becoming An Irish Poet,” *A Journey with Two Maps* 45–60.

As a whole, Boland's project is motivated by a need to reimagine, if not redefine, women's subjectivity within the Irish poem.³⁰ She is thought to have achieved this most effectively in her poems of historical recovery – poems and sequences such as “Outside History” (1990) and “Writing in a Time of Violence” (1994) where Boland assumes the vatic role of the visionary witness who retrieves and records women's forgotten experience. In practice, however, these poems employ structural repetition, usually ending with a lament that poetry is, by its very nature as a linguistic enterprise, incapable of bringing the truth of their experience to light.³¹ Boland in fact articulates this self-defeating project in “The Journey” (1987), the first and probably most important of her poems of historical recovery. The Greek poet Sappho appears to Boland in a dream vision and charges her with her new mission of “remembrance” and “love.” Following Sappho down into a dim underworld, Boland descends into a suburban purgatory:

...down we went again, again down
until we came to a sudden rest
beside a river in what seemed to be
an oppressive suburb of the dawn.

My eyes got slowly used to the bad light.
At first I saw shadows, only shadows.
Then I could make out women and children

³⁰ The literature on this subject is extensive, but see Patricia L. Hagen and Thomas W. Zelman, *Eavan Boland and the History of the Ordinary* (Dublin: Maunsel & Co., 2004); Veronica House, “‘Words We Can Grow Old and Die In’: Earth Mother and Aging Mother in Eavan Boland's Poetry” *The Body and Desire in Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Irene Gilsenan Nordin (Dublin: Irish Academica, 2006) 103–122; Anne Fogarty, *Eavan: Revising Memory* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2007); and Pilar Villar-Argaiz, *Eavan Boland's Evolution as an Irish Woman Poet: An Outsider in an Outsider's Culture* (Ceredigion, UK: Mellon Press, 2007).

³¹ A number of critics have defended Boland's reliance on small and oft-repeated store of images as a means to “vision.” Ana Garcia-Garcia sees its value in an emerging epistemology, “sequence and repetition [allow] a deeper meaning to emerge. They...bring a sense of belonging, of sustenance of a life revealed, and not restrained, by ritual and patterning,” “Living the Space: The Personal and Coded Experience in Eavan Boland's Poetry” *Literature, Space, Gender*, eds. Sonia Villegas-Lopez and Beatriz Dominguez-Garcia (Andalucia: Universidad de Huelva, 2004) 128. Catriona Clutterbuck, on the other hand, sees it as a radical alternative to the lyric poem's reliance on prosody: “[I]mitation of material becomes the source of its own visionary capacity as Boland associates ‘metrical units’ in poetic form with the conversion of the sense of insignificance in the everyday quotidian repetitions of daily life to a sense of their revelatory potential” (74).

and, in the way they were, the grace of love.

Sappho cautions Boland against defining these women by their appearances or the work that they undertake and asks that she see their stories as linked to her own:

‘But these are women who went out like you
when the dusk became a dark sweet with leaves,
recovering the day, stooping, picking up
teddy bears and rag dolls and tricycles and buckets –

‘love’s archaeology....’

I stood fixed. I could not reach or speak to them.
Between us was the melancholy river,
the dream water, the narcotic crossing
and they had passed over it, its cold persuasions.

I whispered, ‘let me be
let me at least be their witness,’ but she said
‘what you have seen is beyond speech,
beyond song, only not beyond love;

‘remember it, you will remember it’
...so you will know forever
the silences in which are our beginnings

Having received Sappho’s charge, Boland wakes to find herself again in her suburban study, within earshot of her sleeping children:

...the wind shifted and the window clasp
opened, banged and I woke up to find
the poetry books stacked higgledy piggledy,
my skirt spread out where I had laid it –

nothing was changed; nothing was more clear
but it was wet and the year was late.
The rain was grief in arrears; my children
slept the last dark out safely and I wept.

Sappho pointedly discourages Boland from acting as “witness,” but that is precisely the role that she adopts in later sequences, including the “Colony” sequence from *The Lost Land*. The major set pieces of “Colony” adhere to the protocol of vision and the imagery established in “The Journey.” Notice, for example, the imagery in the opening stanzas of

“The Colonists,” which imagines the daughters of colony decamping from the British garrison near Kingstown:

I am ready to go home
Through an autumn evening.

Suddenly,
Without any warning, I can see them.

They form slowly out of the twilight.
Their faces. Arms. Greatcoats. And tears.

They are holding maps.
But the pages are made of failing daylight.
Their tears, made of dusk, fall across the names.

To suggest the fragmentary nature of her vision, Boland relies on a synecdoche of body parts: faces, arms, greatcoats, tears. From here, the colonists pass over the melancholic Liffey river, which unleashes a Lethean power of forgetfulness. When they finally fade from view, the poem turns to Boland’s responsibility as witness:

And the truth is I never saw them.
And if I had I would have driven home
through an ordinary evening, knowing
that not one street name or sign or neighborhood

could be trusted
to the safe-keeping
of the making and unmaking of a people.

And have entered a house I might never
find again, and have written down –
as I do now –

their human pain. Their ghostly weeping.

The settings of the poems of *The Lost Land*, while various, nearly all return at some point to this Lethean dream space. As foreground, these poems remain vague, as if Boland feels neither entitled to build out the environment of her vision, nor to inhabit the possibilities of those whose loss to history she mourns. At most, she provides limited detail and ample sympathy. Yet treated as background, as historical antecedent to her

own experience as woman, wife, mother, and poet, they introduce a productive tension into Boland's poems. And it is this tension that makes the "The Lost Land" sequence the richer and more suggestive of the collection's two sequences.

III. Ireland. Absence. Daughter.

Rose Atfield has suggested that where Boland cannot overcome historical gaps, she has tried instead to "embod[y] the gaps and vacancies by reconstructing *her* story in history."³² The title poem and centerpiece of *The Lost Land* is an example of this embodiment, as it incorporates the historical interests of the "Colony" sequence into a confessional love poem. "The Lost Land" begins with a spare assertion of first principles before arriving at an image of the poet's exilic predicament:

I have two daughters.
They are all I ever wanted from the earth.
Or almost all.
I also wanted one piece of ground.
One city trapped by hills. One urban river.
An island in its element.
So I could say *mine*. *My own*.
And mean it.
Now they are grown up and far away
And memory itself
has become an emigrant,
wandering in a place
where love dissembles itself in landscape.
Where the hills
are the colors of a child's eyes,

³² Rose Atfield, "Postcolonialism in the Poetry and Essays of Eavan Boland" *Women: A Cultural Review* 8.2 (1997) 177.

where my children are distances, horizons.

At night,
on the edge of sleep,
I can see the shore of Dublin Bay,
its rocky sweep and its granite pier.

Is this, I say
how they must have seen it,
backing out on a mailboat at twilight,

shadows falling
on everything they had to leave?
And would love forever?
And then

I imagine myself
at the landward rail of that boat
searching for the last sight of a hand.

I see myself
on the underworld side of that water,
the darkness coming in fast, saying
all the names I know for a lost land.

*Ireland. Absence. Daughter.*³³

Boland claims that her desire for “one piece of ground” to call “[m]y own” has been longstanding want, but earlier poems reject place understood in just such terms – as “owned” land, ground, sod, etc. Inasmuch as Boland describes the “piece of ground” she wants as bounded it is particularly out of step with tendency of Boland’s work in the

³³ NCP 260–1. Coming from a poet who is routinely described as having done away with poetic form, “The Lost Land” is a compelling example of how formal strategies still obtain in Boland’s poetry. The poem’s transition from clipped, declarative sentences and open couplets into an alternating stanzaic pattern emphasizes its transition from statement to representation. The change occurs when Boland acknowledges the essential fact of separation that inspires the poem: her daughters’ position as “grown up and far away.” When, at line 10, “memory” “become[s] an emigrant/wandering” the poem morphs into a pseudo-ballad to discuss a subject fit for the ballad – separation and longing. The ballad form is rendered strophically rather than linearly: its alternating quatrains and tercets replacing an alternating four and three stress line. Boland’s nod towards the ballad manages both to reference and escape that form. This evasion is capped by the poem’s concluding triplet, which rather than a trimeter line or a tercet stanza, resolves into the three words Boland “know[s] for a lost land”: “*Ireland. Absence. Daughter.*”

1980s and early 1990s.³⁴ In “The Lost Land” she yearns not for place read as inclusive space but for “[o]ne city trapped by hills. One urban river./One island in its element.” In the lines that follow, she begins to deconstruct this want, suggesting that her longing for “one piece of ground” is, in fact, an alternative expression of the same longing for her daughters. She writes that a new kind of memory has transferred love from relationship to landscape, but this landscape is a proxy for her children:

And memory itself
has become an emigrant,
wandering in a place
where love dissembles itself in landscape.

Where the hills
are the colors of a child’s eyes,
where my children are distances, horizons.

The notion of a landscape of memory delimited by “horizons” echoes Heaney’s reading of Patrick Kavanagh’s Monaghan poems. Here again is the relevant passage:

...all of the 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...The horizons of the little fields and hills, whether they are gloomy or constricting or radiant and enhancing, are sensed as the horizons of consciousness...He knows that the Monaghan world is not the whole world, yet it is the only one for him, the one which he embosses solidly and intimately into the words of poems.

“The Lost Land” indicates that Boland has built a poetic geography out of a relationship with persons rather than a place. Her conflation of daughter and land thus allows Boland to identify with the daughters of colony who must leave Dublin by an evening mailboat:

³⁴ Julia Kristeva’s work on disruptive semiotics is sometimes invoked to explain the more obvious or puzzling contradictions in Boland’s poetry. Here is Pilar Villar-Argaiz arguing from Kristeva’s “Revolution in Poetic Language”:

Kristeva’s main thesis is that, in poetry, the semiotic surpasses its boundaries and disrupts the symbolic order, the poet is able to articulate what is usually unspoken. It is here that Kristeva locates resistance to the conventional (and symbolic) patriarchal culture through which we experience the world. According to this critic, one of the ways by which these marginal and repressed aspects of language surface in poetry is by subversion, which implies the presence of an unfixed, volatile, and subversive writing subject, which Kristeva calls “the subject in process.” This writer subverts the symbolic by means of “contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences, and absences.” (474)

Is this, I say
how they must have seen it,
...
shadows falling
on everything they had to leave?
And would love forever?

The feeling of separation gives way to panic, which she imagines as drowning in “the underside world of that water, /the darkness coming in fast.”

The three names Boland gives for “a lost land” – “Ireland,” “absence,” and “daughter” – show how her identification with a native place has evolved over time. In her earliest memories, like those retrieved in “In Which the Ancient History...,” the native place is an idea of “Ireland.” Ireland is soon replaced by two types of “absence”: the first when Boland is separated from her “old house” as a child, and the second when she, as an aspiring poet in Dublin, rejects the ideological rhetoric of Ireland as patria and nation. In the last stage, which Boland agonizes over losing here, she satisfies the emotional need for place with maternal responsibility for the care and protection of her daughters. To lose her motherhood is, at this point, to lose her “country.”

The logic of this conflation appears years earlier “After a Childhood Away from Ireland” (1982). Boland, as a new mother, recalls her first return to Ireland at fourteen:

One summer
we slipped in at dawn
on plum-coloured waters
in the sloppy quiet

The engines
of the ship stopped.
There was an eerie
drawing near,

a noiseless coming head on
of red roofs, walls,
dogs, barley stooks.
Then we were there.

Cobh.
Coming home.
I had heard of this:
the ground the emigrants

Resistless, weeping
Laid their cheeks to,
Put their lips to kiss.
Love is also memory.

I only stared.
What I had lost
Was not land
But the habit of land:

whether of out of
or settling back on,
or being
defined by.

I climb
to your nursery.
I stand listening
to the dissonances

of the summer's day ending.
I bend to kiss you.
Your cheeks
Are brick pink.

(NCP 100-01)

Note how Ireland is revealed to the teenage Boland. Her first glimpse of Ireland is the top-down formation of houses: the roofs of the buildings, followed by the walls, and only then the “barley stooks” of the Irish landscape. The young woman is versed in the mythology of Cobh – “I had heard of this: /the ground the emigrants...put their lips to kiss” – but she does not participate in this dramatic performance of return (“I only stared”). In a later essay, Boland explains her paralysis in Cobh as arising from an absence of language:

Language. At first this was what I lacked. Not just the historic speech of the country. I lacked that too, but so did others. This was a deeper loss; I returned to find that my vocabulary of belonging was missing. The street names, the meeting names – it was not just that I did not know them. It was something more. I had never known them. I had lost

not only a place but the past that goes with it, the clues from which to construct a present self.³⁵

In the context of this explanation, Boland's decision to conclude the poem with her ascent to her child's nursery implies that her role as mother has given her a language of place – "daughter" – just as surely as an image of place. Her daughter's "brick pink" cheeks serve as her personal port of return home. This is "ground" that she is willing to kiss.

Boland reinforces the connection between her daughters, language, and country in the long, parataxical "Anna Liffey," in which she imagines herself as a "woman in a doorway/Wearing the colours that go with red hair." In an early passage reminiscent of Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," the birth of Boland's children is precipitated by her "country" "[taking] hold of her":

I came here in a cold winter.

I had no children. No country.
I did not know the name for my own life.

My country took hold of me.
My children were born.

I walked out in a summer dusk
To call them in.

One name. Then the other one.
The beautiful vowels sounding out home.
(NCP 231–32)

The sentiment, like a refrain, returns, but altered so that motherhood initiates nationhood, and nationhood is imagined as a suburban house:

When I came here
I had neither
Children nor country.

³⁵ Boland, *Object Lessons* 55–56. Villar-Argaiz diagnoses Boland in this passage with "linguistic displacement" or "deterritorialization," "Recording the Unpoetic" 472

The trees were arms.
The hills were dreams.

I was free
To imagine a spirit
In the blues and greens,
The hills and fogs
Of a small city,

My children were born.
My country took hold of me.
A vision in a brick house.
Is it only love
That makes a place?

I feel it change.
My children are
Growing up, getting older.
My country holds on
To its own pain.

(NCP 234-35)

While Boland finally confronts the repercussions of her conflation of motherhood, language, and country in “The Lost Land,” earlier poems like “After a Childhood...” and “Anna Liffey” anticipate the dangers of her doing so.

Boland’s situation of loss in “The Lost Land” seems to have been caused by her commitment to writing the “private” domestic poem in Ireland as a public, political poem.³⁶ In “Outside History,” Boland argues that the poetry of the quotidian – the domestic interior – where the knowledge of the Irish women, whether poets or not, was most likely to be concentrated and authoritative, had been overlooked by the prevailing literary culture or consigned to minor importance because it did not address public political matters. “As someone drawn to the domestic poem,” Boland observes,

I only slowly became aware of the shadow hanging over it. Gradually I realized it had been designated a lesser genre; almost a subgenre. In fact, in the nineteenth century the

³⁶ See Jody Allen-Randolph “Private Worlds, Public Realities: Eavan Boland’s Poetry 1967–1990” *Irish University Review* 23.1 (1993). Also Boland, “The Woman Poet in a National Tradition” *Studies* 76.302 (1987) 148–158.

domestic poem was a code for something a poetess was likely to write. A short, soft lyric of unearned sentiment. The four stress, eight-beat line of an obedient music. These suspicions lingered well into the twentieth century... Worse still, the domestic poem was connected with a corrupt feeling as well as with women poets. Neither association was a benefit... I was an Irish woman poet in a bardic culture. The political poem and the public one had been twined together in Ireland since the nineteenth century. There was little dialogue with the domestic. My growing belief – that there was a distance between history and the past in Ireland – was strengthened by that disconnect. History was the official version; the past was an archive of silences.³⁷

Though Boland first attempted a public domestic poem in “The Suburban Woman” sequence from *The War Horse* (1975), finding a suitable poetic vocabulary for domestic political poem became the sole object of her next two companion collections *In Her Own Image* (1980) and *Night Feed* (1982).

The organizing conceit of *In Her Own Image* is a frank account of the physical and sexual processes of the female body, and the speakers tend to feel like exiles within their own bodies. In poems with titles such as “Anorexic” “Mastectomy” “Menses,” and “Exhibitionist,” Boland objectifies the female body in order to deconstruct received notions of femininity, domestic responsibility, and the subjects “proper” to poetry. In “Tirade for the Mimic Muse,” a poem that anticipates the later strains of “Imago,” Boland resents how domestic labor is sentimentalized and idealized. Boland scolds the “mimic Muse” of Irish poetry for prostituting art while ignoring the oppressive realities of domestic life in Ireland:

How you fled
The kitchen screw and the rack of labour,
The wash thumbed and the dish cracked,
The scream of beaten women,
The crime of babies battered,
The hubbub and shriek of daily grief
That seeks asylum behind suburb walls –
A world you could have sheltered in your skirts –

³⁷ Boland, “Domestic Violence: An Argument in Ten Parts” *American Poetry Review* 36.2 (March/April 2007) 34.

And well I know and how I see it now,
The way you latched your belt and itched your hem
And shook it off like dirt.
(NCP 71–2)

She then scolds herself for continuing for so long to practice an imitative poetry in which she tried to merely reflect the “candle stink...the yellow balm” of the Revival’s debased aesthetic:

And I who mazed my way to womanhood
Through all your halls of mirrors, making faces,
To think I waited on your trashy whim!
Hoping your lamp and flash,
Your glass, might show
This world I needed nothing else to know
But love and again love and again love.
In a nappy stink, by a soaking wash
Among stacked dishes
Your glass cracked...
(NCP 72)

Sylvia Kelly writes that “Tirade...” and other poems in *In Her Own Image* adopt the voice of the “woman destroyer,” a voice women poets often feel the need to suppress.³⁸

Kelly cites Alicia Ostriker’s explication of Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”:

At the opposite pole from the creatrix is the destroyer, a figure women’s poetry has been inhibited from exploring in the past by the need to identify femininity with morality. When they traffic in the demonic, women poets have produced some of the most highly charged images.³⁹

If in *In Her Own Image* Boland denounces an oppressive vision of feminine self and domestic place, then in *Night Feed* she embraces her motherhood as a creative locus. Accordingly, “Domestic Interior,” the volume’s first poem, opens with the image of a pregnant woman:

³⁸ Sylvia Kelly, “The Silent Cage and Female Creativity in *In Her Own Image*” *Irish University Review* 23.1 (1993) 52.

³⁹ Alicia Ostriker, “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythology” *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press, 1986) 321.

The woman is as round
as the new ring
ambering her finger.
The mirror weds her.
She has long since been bedded.
(NCP 91)

The mirror, a grotesque agent of narcissism and repression in “Tirade for Mimic Muse,” is now an agent of unity and fecundity in “Domestic Interior.” Yet this mirror, too, may deceive. The woman in the poem is the demur wife in Jan Van Eyck’s painting *The Arnolfini Wedding*. Boland finds the wife both inspiring and troubling. For all her communication of happiness and fidelity, she remains a static visual icon, “interred in her joy.” She is a placid, stable surface, but contains unrevealed depths. Turning to address her own husband, Boland conflates his gaze with that of the painter’s eye reflected in the convex mirror. She reasons:

The convex of your eye
that is so loving, bright
and constant yet shows
only this woman in her varnishes,
who won’t improve in the light.

Boland worries that even within her husband’s loving gaze she might become an object of that love and no longer one of its creators. Such a love, like the portrait, would remain impervious to movement and change, both forces that Boland finds vital in stitching together the pattern of a domestic life. She concludes

But there’s a way of life
that is its own witness:
Put the kettle on, shut the blind.
Home is a sleeping child,
an open mind

and our effects,
shrugged and settled
in the sort of light
jugs and kettles
grow important by.

“Home,” in this rendering, is not simply a collection of tangible, familiar things arranged by a painterly eye, but these things arranged within a cosmos of relationships and perspectives, a space where Boland’s family and its “effects” are negotiated by “an open mind.” The negotiation itself can become an independent and sentient being: “a way of life/that is its own witness.” In *Night Feed*, Boland becomes a kind of romanticist of the domestic scene, what Peter Kupillas has called an “indoor nature poet,” as all the elements of the room work in concert with the poet’s open mind in a reciprocal process of revelation.⁴⁰ “Domestic Interior” suggests that “jugs and kettles” are not important in-and-of themselves but grow more important when revealed by the “sort of light” found in a house once the blinds have been drawn. They are, unlike Van Eyck’s icons, able to be fundamentally changed by the light.⁴¹

Writing about the function of domestic spaces in Boland’s poetry, Ana Rosa Garcia-Garcia charts the development of a “jugs and kettles” poetics that honors and incorporates the overlooked experience, i.e., the “redrafting” of women’s experience that Riley refers to above. “[The] continuous absence in poetry of a tangible, every day female reality,” Garcia-Garcia writes, “moves Boland to commit herself to becoming the voice that will bring this world to light. Boland feels the compromise to give voice to

⁴⁰ Kupillas, “Bringing It All Back Home: Unity and Meaning in Eavan Boland’s ‘Domestic Interior’ Sequence” *Contemporary Irish Women Poets: Some Male Perspectives*, ed. Alexander G. Gonzalez (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999) 17.

⁴¹ Throughout Boland’s poetry, light acts as a tremendously important qualifier. It always marks a particular way of seeing and projects both imaginative and ethical dimensions. Thus, in “In a Bad Light” the poor lighting the emigrant Irish seamstresses must work long hours in becomes shorthand for both Boland’s limited capacity to see into their lives as well as the poor quality of their working conditions (NCP 207). More importantly, light reinforces Boland’s spatial geography, emphasizing the liminality of her settings—at the edge of a city, in front of windows, on coastlines, at tree-breaks—is the fading twilight or emerging daybreak that lend color and texture to these settings and the artifacts. As she writes in “The Women,” “This is the hour I love: the in-between, /neither here-nor-there hour of evening” (NCP 141).

those silent places, in order to create her own literary ‘home’.”⁴² Garcia-Garcia’s distinction between Boland’s creation of a “literary home” and her actual house speaks to the uneasy relationship between *house* as a physical structure and *home* as an emotional and linguistic structure that obtains throughout her poetry. We need only look again at the poems from *In Her Own Image* or to an earlier poem “Suburban Woman” to locate the source of that uneasiness. Whatever her joys, the suburban woman is “courtesan to the lethal/rapine of routine [that] the room invites...” (*NCP* 64). Suburban houses are as likely to be sites of repression as they are sites from which women can draw creative and emotional strength. Thinking along these lines, Villar-Argaiz has called “home” in Boland’s poetry no more than “a provisional feeling,” one with only tentative associations with the “house,” which by itself confers neither “security” nor “happiness” but remains merely a “physical place...[a] building where one lives”⁴³

Night Feed, the strongest precursor to *The Lost Land*, comes the closest to collapsing the distinction between house and home, and this is because it adds the image of the sleeping child to the cosmology of Boland’s house and draws on that relationship as a source of poetic language. Consequently, the nursery and the writer’s study emerge as coordinate sites of a native place. At times, the two rooms seem to occupy the same mental space, as in the prayerful poem “Hymn”:

Here is the star
of my nativity:
a nursery lamp
in a suburban window.
(*NCP* 95)

⁴² Garcia-Garcia 126.

⁴³ Pilar Villar-Argaiz, *The Poetry of Eavan Boland: A Postcolonial Reading* (Dublin: Maunsel and Co., 2008) 252.

But among these celestial objects, Boland's infant daughters become elements of the early spring – waking buds, wriggling earthworms, seedlings – suggesting that the nursery is like an interior garden with Boland in charge of its care. Her responsibility engrafts to her a “mother tongue” as she writes in “Muse Mother”:

if I could only decline her –
lost noun
out of context,
stray figure of speech –
from this rainy street

again to her roots,
she might teach me
a new language:

to be a sybil
able to sing past
in pure syllables,
limning hymns sung
to belly wheat or woman –

able to speak at last
my mother tongue.

(NCP 103)

For all its imagery of emergent life, *Night Feed*'s overwhelming obsession is with the daughters' eventual absence from the poet's life. Thus, in “Before Spring,” the promising sounds of the young season also contains the note – the “undersong” – of the inevitable season's end:

That hard-blowing
wind outside
has a sound
of spring.

It won't be long.
No, it won't be long.
There is a melancholy
in the undersong:

Sweet child
asleep in your cot,
little seed-head,

there is time yet.
(NCP 93–4)

Similarly, in “Endings,” as “a child/shifts in a cot,” Boland admits that “[no] matter what happens now/I’ll never fill one again.” Moved by this realization to the window where dawn is breaking, she concludes:

If I lean
I can see
What it is the branches end in:

The leaf.
The reach.
The blossom.
The abandon.

(NCP 97)

The motif of painting comes back in “Fruit on a Straight-Side Tray,” but the subject is no longer Boland’s relationship with her husband but her increasing anxiety about being absent from her daughters. She argues that the still life painter’s concentration on the arrangement of objects disguises his more sinister meaning because “the true subject” of the still life “is the space between them” in which “the study of these ovals” masks:

the study of absences, the science of relationships
in which the abstraction is made actual: such as
fruit on a straight sided tray; a homely arrangement.

This is the geometry of the visible, physical tryst
between substances, disguising for awhile the equation
that kills: you are my child and between us are

spaces. Distances. Growing to infinities.

(NCP 97–8)

Despite the intimate history shared by the bodies of mother and child, the space that separates them now, like that which separates the objects in the still life, is insuperable and thus gives over to infinities. Haberstroh comments further:

The repose of the fruit provides the artist with not only an “assembly of possibilities,” but also “a deliberate collection of cross-purposes.” Boland [compares] this “arrangement” to

that between mother and child and imagines both as compensation for the “equation that kills.”⁴⁴

“Fruit on a Straight-Sided Tray” anticipates the separation panic of “The Lost Land” most clearly. The poem’s concluding line – “spaces. Distances, Growing to infinities.” – is echoed in Boland’s later repetition of “all the names I know for a lost land:/ *Ireland. Absence, Daughter.*”

Boland revisits these domestic spaces with grief in the poem “Daughter” from *The Lost Land*. The infertility worried at in “Endings” resounds with finality:

Already
stars are tugging at
their fibrous roots.

In February
they will fall and shine
from the roadsides
in their yellow hundreds.

My first child
Was conceived in this season.
If I wanted a child now
I could not have one.

(NCP 263)

Back in Dublin for the summer, Boland oversees the cutting down of the poplar tree in her yard, her infant daughters’ alter ego in *Night Feed*:

I go out to the garden
to touch the hurt wood spirits.
The injured summers.

Out of one of them a child runs.
Her skin printed with leaf shadow.

And will not look at me.

(NCP 264)

In California, Boland has lost her “mother tongue” and propositions a new “muse” of language, irony. She writes in “The Necessity of Irony”:

⁴⁴ Haberstroh, “Woman, Artist and Image in *Night Feed*” *Irish University Review* 23.1 (1993) 74.

I turned around.
 She was gone.
 Grown. No longer ready
 to come with me, whenever
 a dry Sunday
 held out its promises
 of small histories. Endings.
 [...]

Spirit of irony,
 my caustic author
 of the past, of memory –
 and of its pain, which returns
 hurts, stings – reproach me now,
 remind me
 that I was in those rooms,
 with my child,
 with my back turned to her,
 searching – oh irony! –
 for beautiful things.

(NCP 273–74)

Boland's choice to wed domestic motherhood to the Irish political poem in the collection *Night Feed* and after has been the subject of much critical discussion, particularly because of Boland's implied comparison in "After a Childhood..." of her daughter's flesh to the ground of Ireland. Carol Tell finds such a comparison "disconcerting" given Boland's disdain for Irish nationalist rhetoric of earlier generation that objectified Irish women by making them emblematic of nation. "By using her daughter to symbolize home," Tell observes, "the daughter becomes the new representation of Ireland as woman, still objectified in poetry."⁴⁵ By making her daughters represent an idea in her poems, Boland cannot help but objectify them, much as she worries about her own objectification in "Domestic Interior." Clair Wills and Gerardine Meaney complain that Boland's domestic poems offer no radical challenge to objectified representations of Irish womanhood. Wills has argued that Boland's

⁴⁵ Tell 137.

projection of herself as an Irish everywoman in the guise of *mother/poet* constitutes “a privatization of myth” rather than a wholesale break with myth.⁴⁶ In her view, Boland merely posits a different idealized and objectified femininity in place of the gendered “motherland” trope that she denounces in “Outside History.” What emerges from her privatized myth, according to Meaney, is “a metaphoric construction of the relation between womanhood and nation that tends to keep each in place as a homogenous and self-contained entity.”⁴⁷ Having established homogeneity and self-containment, Boland’s poems accept an uncomplicated Irish national identity within an unified and enclosed Irish tradition.⁴⁸

Considering these critiques, Andrew Auge sees Boland as presenting the woman’s body as the true site of the exilic in Irish literature. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s essays on maternity in which the mother’s body becomes the site of the “split subject,” Auge finds

[t]hroughout Boland’s poetry, a profoundly lyric sensibility intersects with an exilic sense of displacement, generating verse in which intimacy and estrangement are frequently conjoined. Ironically, this is nowhere more evident than in Boland’s poetic reflections on maternity, the supposed locus of her essentialism.⁴⁹

According to Auge’s argument, through the notion of the “split subject,” Boland can tie uncertainties about nationality and language to uncertainties about femininity.

Like many works of Irish poetry before it, *The Lost Land* is less concerned with exile as a problem of politics than as a problem of metaphor and poetics. If “Ireland” has

⁴⁶ Clair Wills, “Contemporary Irish Women Poets: The Privatization of Myth” *Diverse Voices: Essays on Twentieth Century Women Writers in English*, ed. H.D. Jump (London: Harvest Wheatsheaf, 1991). See, also, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 61.

⁴⁷ Gerardine Meaney, “Myth, History, and the Politics of Subjectivity: Eavan Boland and Irish Women’s Writing” *Women: A Cultural Review* 4.2 (1993) 137.

⁴⁸ Edna Longley, *From Cathleen to Anorexia: The Breakdown of Irelands* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1990) 16.

⁴⁹ Andrew J. Auge, “Fracture and Wound: Eavan Boland’s Poetry of Nationality” *New Hibernia Review* 8.2 (Summer 2004) 122.

become a word and idea synonymous with “daughter,” then any physical or emotional separation from daughter leaves the “Irish poet” without a point of origin for her poems, without a mental place for them to grow and without a language to cultivate them. The through-line that connects the daughters of colony with Boland is the sudden and irrecoverable loss of that native place, figured as silence and the impossibility of return.

CONCLUSION

THE “NEW IRISH” EXILES

My dissertation has argued that the generation of poets who came of age during the malaise era of the 1950s and 1960s, those who helped return Irish poetry to its place of international prominence, reframed the modernist problem of exile as a problem of return. I have suggested also that emerging critical paradigms – such as transnational, transatlantic, and Irish diaspora studies – have brought with them a finely-tuned vocabulary to discuss literature in the age of global movement that will continue to erode the monolithic category of exile.

In closing, however, I wish to look at a few poems from a small group of younger Irish poets living in the U.S. who have made a modest attempt to reclaim the idea of exile as a viable way to speak of their experience. If we read these poets in isolation from the critical dialogue surrounding Irish literature for the past half century, we might assume that exile has remained a central concern in Irish writing. Poet and critic Eamonn Wall, who serves as the unofficial ombudsman for this group, has dubbed his generation of emigrants the “new Irish”:

I belong to that generation of Irish people, born in the 1950s and 1960s, who got Irish immigration rolling again. We left Ireland en masse—our exact numbers are in dispute—and...can be located in every pocket of the Earth. In the United States we are referred to as the New Irish. I commute between exile and Ireland, but it is an expensive business. I often wish I were another person; if that were the case, I wouldn't always have to be saving up my money to go “home,” and neglecting all the other fascinating parts of the world.¹

¹ Eamonn Wall, *From the Sin-e Café* 3.

In ascribing his generation's emigration to the economic downturn in Ireland in the late 1970s and 80s, Wall implicitly connects his choices with those made by several generations of economic emigrants from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. Except for Paul Muldoon, the "new Irish" have not come to the United States at the behest of prominent universities and lucrative lectureships, and in contrast to many writers of the generation before theirs, they tend to think of themselves as permanent residents – Wall is an American citizen – and have built whatever reputation they have as writers and critics while in the United States.

In moving between playfulness and the frustration, the tone of Wall's passage captures something of the muted attitude of the new Irish toward their dislocation. Wall displays an ease with the word "exile," but does not fail to recognize the justice in Dermot Bolger's witticism that "Irish writers no longer go into exile, they simply commute."² Rather, he acknowledges his spot in a wide and indefinable middle ground. Unlike some earlier generations of Irish immigrants, Wall's decision to emigrate is not inspired by the dire political situation in Ireland. In fact, there is no distinctly Northern voice, one shaped by Northern Ireland's Troubles, among the New Irish poets. America has simply offered them, on the whole, a better opportunity to pursue their craft of teaching and writing. Wall calls this opportunity both a "curse and a safety net" that brings with it an "undefined degree of dissatisfaction" (3). The relative ease or difficulty, depending on how he thinks of it, with which he can return home only complicates this dissatisfaction and complicates the attitudes that attend both cultural commuter and exile alike. Ireland is the home that they visit, and America is a place where they live as

² Quoted in Wall, *From the Sin-e Café* 3.

visitors. An unavoidable feature of their lives everywhere is the feeling of impermanence – the provisionality or conditionality of all places.

In *American Wake* (1995), Greg Delanty, who novelist Colum McCann has dubbed “the poet laureate of the Irish-in-America,” responds to the feeling of impermanence by conceiving of America as the mythical “fifth province” of Ireland. Historically connected to the ancient high kingdom of Meath, the fifth province has come to denote in later Irish literature “a no-man’s land, a neutral ground, where things can detach themselves from all partisan and prejudiced connection.”³ Delanty seizes on the estranging effect of a snowbound Vermont winter to go looking for evidence of legendary tribes of ancient Celts thought to have settled and thrived in pre-Columbian New England.⁴ The journey allows Delanty to consider his Irishness in broader terms, far removed from the immediate flashpoints of local Irish politics and historical grievances. Unlike Heaney in “Remembering Malibu,” however, no strong vision of Ireland emerges to comfort him. The poet is left instead to wonder at the vast landscape. In a poem titled “America” he writes:

I’m buffaloed
by this landscape
without voice
or memory.

Perhaps it powwows
with surviving Abenaki
the way Iveragh or Beara
parleys with us.

Yet I can’t help but feel

³ Mark Patrick Hederman, “Poetry and the Fifth Province” *The Crane Bag* 9.1 (1985) 110.

⁴ Fintan O’Toole has argued that Irish poets in America often identify with Native American tribes in order to unburden themselves of Irish identity and enjoy a freer sense of self, *The Lie of the Land* (New York: Verso, 1997) 30.

like one of Brendan's crew,
oblivious to the nature
of the fishy shore

they settled
before the whale
beneath their feet
surged to life.⁵

Although the terms of the “parley” between observer and observed are lost, Delanty concludes by identifying America with the enormous whale upon which Brendan and his crew are said to have landed. The American landscape is large and elemental, but also mobile and alive, capable of shifting beneath the poet's feet. Such epoch-making ground swells appear again in Delanty's epistolary poem to Australian émigré Louis de Paor:

somewhere around Dunquin
you said that Pangaea

split there first & America
drifted away from Kerry
& anyone standing on the crack
got torn in two slowly.

.....

As we traverse our landscapes,
whether city, prairie,
bush or bog, we are
walkabout Aborigine.

We can't identify where
exactly we are from day to day,
but if we hold to songlines
we shouldn't go astray.
(*AW* 15–6)

Delanty depends on these frail “songlines” – shared narratives and motifs of Irish culture – to keep some part of him whole and connected to the place of his birth while the globe splits apart and the Irish are sent out like “walkabout Aborigine.” But the opening poem

⁵ Greg Delanty, “America” *American Wake* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1995) 18. Hereafter, *American Wake* will be indicated by the abbreviation *AW*.

of *American Wake*, “The Fifth Province,” holds out dim hope for the long-term efficacy of the “songlines,” as two Irish expats admit to the vanishing Irishness of even their subconscious:

Meeting in a café, we shun the cliché of a pub.
Your sometime Jackeen accent is decaffeinated
like our coffee, insisting you’re still a Dub.
You kid about being half and halfed.
The people populating your dreams are now
American, though the country they’re set in
is always the Ireland within a soft Dublin.

In the country of sleep the voiceless citizens
trapped in my regime of dreams are Irish,
but they’re all the unlikely green denizens
of an island that’s as mysterious
as the volcano, bird or sheep islands
that Brendan with his homesick crew,
bound for the Promised Land, bumped into.

Last night I combed sleep’s shore for its name.
A familiar adze-crowned man appeared
waving his crook’s question mark, nursing a flame
on a hill and impatiently declaring in weird
pidgin Irish that the fifth province is
not Meath or the Hy Brasil of the mind.
It is this island where all exiles naturally land.

“The Fifth Province” indicates that Delanty’s poems have gone searching the wilds of the winter New England in vain, as all there is to find is the great silence and the greater isolation of the exile’s island.

As *American Wake* shows, a distinguishing feature of the New Irish poetry is a renewed willingness to embrace many of the symbols, themes, and myths consciously avoided or studiously deconstructed by an earlier generation. These cultural markers are proffered as badges of identity, yes, but they also inspire the poets to interact in creative and surprising ways with their adopted home. Consider, for instance, how Matthew

Sweeney draws on a longstanding Irish poetic tradition to reimagine American desert as a kind of overcooked Irish West. Sweeney writes:

He put Donegal in the oven
Cooked it a while, and got Arizona
And he siphoned all that rain
And the troublesome Atlantic
Into waterholes in the desert
And the Colorado River.
A few tons of gelignite
Moved the hills together
To make the Grand Canyon
And he stretched all the toads
To make Gila monsters,
and bought a few steamboats,
and buried gold in the hills.
The Indians were difficult
but he advertised abroad,
then the Mexican ambassador
signed the Treaty of Guadalupe
all over again, and a Derry
stared at Sligo over a void.⁶

The geological and cultural history of an American landscape is filtered through the poet's experience of Irish geography and history. The psychological and political chasms of Ireland – figured as Derry and Sligo staring at each other “over a void” – find an objective correlative in the physical chasms of the American desert and a historical analogy in the Mexican-American border conflict. Such a poem represents a type of Irish-American *dinnsheanchas*, a mythology of place that takes into account a new global reality of movement. When travel between one place and another can seem almost instantaneous, certain distinctions between places collapse more easily. Place need no longer be rendered as a single environment or topography, but can be presented meaningfully as hybrid space, constitutive of two or more distinct places with each aspect refreshing and revealing the other. “Donegal, Arizona” furthers Heaney's simple

⁶ Matthew Sweeney, “Donegal, Arizona” *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. Wes Davis (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2010) 714.

parallelism in “Bogland” and opens up America to the Irish idiom and Ireland to the American, bringing background and foreground into equal focus. By approaching American place within the context of the Irish experience, Sweeney creates a hybrid place with a correspondingly hybrid history. The result is a poem that not only “transnationalizes the local,” in Ramazani’s terms, but, more to the point, localizes the transnational.

We find Wall achieving something similar in the hallucinatory “Blues for Rory” from his 2000 collection *The Crosses*. He imagines a teenage version of himself hitchhiking his way through a region called “the Slaney Co. Wexford Mississippi Delta” to attend a concert in Dublin. Wall grafts place names associated with the Great Migration of blacks from the American South to the industrial centers of the Midwest to the names of towns in Ireland that stretch between Co. Wexford and Dublin. These compound place names endow the everyday and the familiar with the Southern exotic, a fit dichotomy to prepare the young Wall for his encounter with Irish blues guitarist, Rory Gallagher. The poet begins:

From Slaney Co. Wexford Mississippi Delta
Rode the rails in flannel shirts, CIE beer in
Hands, in the smoking carriage by big muddy cities
Gorey/Chicago, Arklow/St. Louis, moving on mile
By mile marker by great rivers getting closer still
To hearing the legendary bluesman from Cork City
Play on his battered strat the blues, and sing I could’ve
Had religion but my little girl wouldn’t let me pray,
That kind of girl hard to come by in the Slaney
Co. Wexford Mississippi Delta though neither did
We pray too much being all prayed out since
Confirmation.⁷

Wall’s particular kinship with Gallagher – both boys from the south of Ireland whose artistic ambitions have taken them away from home – grows stronger as the bluesman

⁷ Wall, “Blues for Rory” *The Crosses* (Co. Clare, Ireland: Salmon, 2000) 3.

connects a foreign musical form to the realities of Irish experience. As Gallagher does musically, Wall uses the Delta and Mississippi River in this poem as a template for his journey away from Ireland and uses corresponding place names to evoke the uprooting of the provincial and familiar for the rootless freedom of the rails, the city, and whatever lies beyond. Historian Joseph P. Ward has written on the roots of the particular affinity of young Irish Catholics and southern blues music. “In one corner of...popular imagination,” Ward writes, “southerners always existed as outsiders, free spirits engaged in some kind of hedonistic struggle with restrictive codes of behavior and against the bonds of suffocating authority.”⁸ But, Ward explains, the blues appeals to the Irish sense of *rootedness* as well, as it promotes “a sense that southern music [is] literally well grounded, that it [is] linked to a particular place—often expressed in terms of a passionate veneration of the land itself—and that it exhibit[s] a laudable respect for its own traditions” (188–89).

As the poem moves forward into the poet’s present, we find that Wall has continued his migrant life, adapting to his new “prairie” home in Nebraska where he feels the “window breeze from the deep south wafting from the tree-lined street to tawny alley” (*Crosses* 4). The music still evokes the land of its birth, but Wall recognizes both a distance from and a closeness to his recollection. He lives a suburban life (ordering, as he tells us, Gallagher’s CDs from Amazon.com) with marks of both the urban (“the tawny alley”) and the rural (“the rusted trucks,” “the loose gravel”). The poet lives a comfortable enough life, but the world has dulled for him ever so slightly. “The world not so bright now for your absence, Rory Gallagher,” Wall laments:

⁸ See Joseph P. Ward, *Great Britain and the American South* (Oxford, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2009) 188.

...Can't believe it's true, I can't
Believe it's true. How we walked by the Grand
Canal in wet midnight winter air, lost looking for
Ranelagh, electrified and silenced by the wonder
Of it all, not caring if we ever made it home...
(*Crosses* 4)

In trying to recapture the moment of exhilaration he encountered so many years ago in Dublin, Wall cannot hide a note of sadness in the recollection. His home, which at that moment he betrays for the electricity of fresh, new knowledge; his home whose provinciality he tweaks in the lines: "County Wexford, hotbed of hurling/Home of strawberries, fields of barley and country music"; is the same home to which he has returned in poem after poem with the devotion and care of a reformed prodigal.

In his successive books of poetry and essays, Wall has catalogued his migrations from southeast Ireland to the Lower East Side of Manhattan to suburban Nebraska to the Black Hills of South Dakota, all the while donning the Janus mask of the Irish voyager: ever gazing backward at the familiar even as he looks forward into the unknown. Beginning with a number of poems in *Iron Mountain Road* (1997), Wall has toyed with the medieval Irish narrative genre of the *immram* (literally "a rowing about"). Though a sea-faring adventure, the *immram* focuses more on the Irish cohort's journey around the western ocean and their encounters along the way than the otherworld destination itself. Wall has produced a considerable body of poems that conflates western American highways with Irish waters to reflect the experience of a modern, secular Irishman living in the western United States. As Wall dutifully records his travels around the western plains, images of humble ships and mighty waters appear alongside rusted pickups and flattop highways. In a poem that echoes Heaney's dialogue with Theodore Roethke in "Bogland," Wall compares driving to Kearney, Nebraska with sailing into "the eye of a

once mighty sea.”⁹ So, too, in “Sandhills,” Wall walks the verges that “skirt/RT. 20 in Northwest Nebraska/through the dunes beyond the 14th fairway into the Irish Sea” (*IMR* 21).

The connection to the *immram* is expanded and deepened in a later poem, “Lough Arrow,” in which Wall recounts a trip that he and his brother made in imitation of Brendan’s journey by rowing a small currach “out for the islands across Lough Arrow” in Co. Sligo. While engaged in this quintessentially Irish activity, Wall’s mind thinks back to his first journeys deep into the American prairie where he had “drowned out the/smoky shores” of Ireland and “come into the West”:

Connected only by the blowing rain, this nation put at
a distance.

I remember for you my first journey westward. As the blue
car climbed

toward Ft. Morgan, the fields had begun to change from
tended corn

to wilder pasture of Colorado green. And my vision of my
parked car

as night falls, my porch light shorted out, distant thunder
barking over

far symmetrical suburbs where frontier life begins again,
children’s faces

pressed against the foggy panes. West. A narrow road to
a modest pier.

(*Crosses 5–6*)

The same image of graceful, watery westward travel returns again in “Wyoming” in which Wall imagines his traversing of Wyoming to be like “white crosses pushed out across a pond” (*IMR* 39).

⁹ Wall, “Driving to Kearney, Nebraska” *Iron Mountain Road* (Co. Clare: Salmon, 1997) 8. Hereafter, *Iron Mountain Road* will be indicated by the abbreviation *IMR*.

In “Four Stern Faces/South Dakota,” the poem that opens *Iron Mountain Road*, Wall compares navigating the winding mountain roads of Big Sky county to Brendan’s circuitous journey around the western ocean, connecting various strains in his adult life to find a meaningful pattern to his travels. The intrinsic importance of these stops becomes clearer as the poem progresses. South Dakota reminds him of the Dakota hotel in Manhattan where John Lennon was shot, and this simple act of association allows him to bridge the gap between “a bedsit in Donnybrook” and “the holy ground of the Lakota nation.” He writes:

When Lennon was dying I was typing
the forms to come to America: on this
journey through the Sandhills—Irish and
dunes without the sea—to the Black Hills
to wild flowers with names so gorgeous
I cannot bear to hear you say them...
Here the light is different, the evenings shorter, Gods are weeping.
(*IMR* 3–4)

Wall asserts that this ground is not without “voice” or “memory” as in Delanty’s “America”; rather, the American landscape emerges as a meeting point of many voices and many irrepressible memories, colluding to make any kind of escapism impossible:

And there’s no escape from caring or
From history; to lie on high plains,
prairie grasses, and Black Hills is to
be blown into their stories, drowned in
their summer rains. Just when I think I’ve
lost the Irish rings around the tree, I open
the door and find red clay stuck on the
tyres, the whole earth screaming, my children
breathing on the electric hairs above my collar.
(*IMR* 4)

Rather than search through a wispy past for traces of the American Celt, Wall’s poems document the progress of a modern Irish navigator in the lands to the West.

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Like the *immrama* that Wall draws from, the journey itself rather than the destination becomes the true subject matter of his poems – along with the various rites, rituals, and holy books that the processes of the journey uncover. As Wall and the other “new Irish” write another cultural narrative in the context of a new era of emigration from Ireland, we might note that the meanings that emerge would still be recognizable to a character such as Stephen Dedalus, who speaks of exile chiefly as a way to confront, “for the millionth time,” the “reality of experience.” Whether they conceive of their anxieties as occasioned by leaving or by the uncertainty of coming back, Irish poets continue to engage creatively with distance and dislocation, compelled by their separation to reassess the meaning of Ireland as a place and point of origin. Exile, in this context, is never a tired subject but a tireless one.

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