

**DOKTORI DISSZERTÁCIÓ**

**THE “IRISHNESS” OF CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETRY.  
PLACE, HISTORY AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY  
IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETRY WRITTEN  
IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“The time is coming fast, if it isn’t already here, when the question ‘Is So-and-So really an Irish writer?’ will clear a room in seconds.” (Mahon quoted by Haughton in Corcoran 1992, 87) Derek Mahon’s comment from 1974 indicates a sense of tiredness with questions concerning the nature of the Irishness of particular literary figures, yet the very fact that a prominent Irish poet felt the urge to respond to their presence suggests that such questions are present and asked. The question formulated in that particular form is indeed an unfortunate one since it seeks to establish the relation of a writer to a prescribed norm, which is neither wise nor desirable an approach. The reading and interpretation of literature is an intelligent affair which accepts the primacy of the work rather than that of preconceived ideas or even ideologies; criticism is supposed to begin with the text and draw conclusions after instead of employing texts to justify ideas and opinions formulated prior to and often independently of the literary work in discussion. What Mahon rebels against is the constraining frame of categories imposed on the essentially free artistic spirit, recalling the archetypal artist figure immortalised by Joyce.

A study under the title “The ‘Irishness’ of Contemporary Irish Poetry” then appears a strange case in this way since it operates in the halo of a term dangerously related to what has just been designated constraining. The present study, however, takes a different course than what is rejected by Mahon’s opinion: it sets out to examine the components of a heritage which is given, therefore not the subject of such enquiries as Mahon proposes. The focus is on the relation of the chosen representative poets to territorial, historical and cultural aspects and elements of their heritage, with the assumption of their acceptance of Irishness as a condition of their existence and work: Irishness is the foundation on which these poetries are built and the components of this foundation form the present subject of scrutiny.

Contemporary Irish poetry written in the English language offers an exciting body of literature and one which is distinctive from other poetries written in the same language exactly for its Irish dimension. According to Dillon Johnston the technical aspect of this poetry is characterised by a Joycean dramatic poetry of subtle manipulations of tone (Johnston 53-73), which is accepted as a starting point for this investigation. The present project, however, concentrates on thematic considerations since the prominence of place, an entanglement with matters historical and an insistence on cultural particulars outline a special territory with distinct features which can be comfortably identified with a specific Irish

context and provide a sufficient descriptive framework for the chosen field of contemporary Irish poetry.

The term ‘contemporary’ requires some explanation since its scope is not immediately self-explanatory. In the context of this study contemporary refers to the second part of the twentieth century, beginning with the 1960s and lasting to the end of the century. Any such division of the continuous flow of time involves arbitrary lines of demarcation without the possibility of all-inclusiveness; however, the 1960s were a decade in the history of the island which may be seen as a convenient yet not too suspicious point of departure. The decade saw the beginnings of profound changes in the Republic of Ireland and the significant increase of internal tensions in Northern Ireland which finally led to an outburst of violence, thus in both parts of the island historical events signalled the arrival of a new era. Political and social changes always resonate in the cultural sphere too and in the case of both South and North the 1960s saw the emergence of significant major poetic voices partly parallel to and partly in the wake of the changes. The last forty years of the twentieth century then may be seen as a period characterised by a sufficient degree of consistency to set it apart from what went before it.

The adjective ‘Irish’ also needs some clarification despite its apparent simplicity – or exactly for that. A more thorough investigation of the constituents of the concept follows in the chapter ‘Varieties of Irishness’ yet the basics must be clarified at the outset. The principal problem of terminology arises from the double use of the term Ireland: this word can denote a spatial category of an island and a political one of a country, and there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two categories. There is an overlap yet this indicates the presence not only of certain common features but of differences too, and the latter produces divisions of various kinds. Rather than subscribing to ethnic or political dimensions the present study employs the term Irish to designate a cultural identity with its inherent plurality of reference. This allows for an all-Ireland perspective, the use of the spatial reference of the word Ireland rather than that of the political, to incorporate various groups identifying themselves and identified as Irish and insisting on their experience as representative of Irishness even when there are palpable differences among them in terms of certain aspects which occasionally amount even to oppositional points of view.

## 1.1. CONTEXTS

Modern Irish history offers an easily identifiable date as a basic reference point for an investigation of the contemporary scene. This date is that of the establishment of the Irish Free State and of Northern Ireland and this very date embodies a significant fact about the Irish context: it is considered both the beginning of independence and of partition at the same time. The date should not be blamed for creating divisions since those were already present before 1922; the raising of these divisions onto an official level, however, can be traced back to the Anglo-Irish Treaty signed in December 1921 and taking effect in the following January. The early years of the southern state were characterised by efforts to shake off the unfavourable heritage of the long colonial relationship with Britain and to revive a distinct Irish culture rooted in the language, Catholicism and a predominantly rural society. The principal mastermind of the ideology of a Gaelic Ireland was Eamon de Valera, who finally came to power in 1932, after his open dissatisfaction with the treaty, his participation in the failure of the Republican side in the Civil War and successive imprisonment. His ideal of the Irish state is concisely outlined in his radio broadcast on St. Patrick's Day in 1943:

That Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit; a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with sounds of industry, the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be the forums of the wisdom of serene old age. (de Valera quoted in Corcoran 1997, 59)

This was the vision but the reality had a less enchanting set of parameters: economic underdevelopment, heavy reliance on the British market in spite of the generally antagonistic relation towards the bigger island, the cultural and intellectual repression of the country by the special power of the Catholic Church codified even in articles of the constitution, wide-scale poverty, emigration and harsh censorship were the most salient features of the early decades of the newly independent southern state.

The decision of the leaders of the independent Ireland to remain neutral during the Second World War had far-reaching consequences for the people of the country. Though open conflict was kept away from its land, neutrality at the same time increased the isolation of the country, requiring an even greater degree of self-sufficiency which the country was hopeless to fulfil. The economy was basically stagnant and this had its cultural consequences too. Meanwhile the name Irish Free State was changed for Ireland in the new constitution of 1937 and the country was declared a republic in 1949, yet these did not significantly alter the course of life in the country. Changes came only after 1959 when de Valera was elected president and thus left the field of active politics for a rather symbolic position, ushering in a new period in several senses. The new prime minister, Sean Lemass, set about to (re)vitalise the economy by long term plans and a liberalisation of investment – foreign capital was attracted to the Republic, bringing about a general rise in living standards in the wake of economic development. The accession to the European Economic Community in 1973 (now European Union) meant a further step away from economic isolation from the world. Liberal economic policies, however, did not solve all the problems: unemployment, high taxes and a high debt still fostered emigration even in the 1980s, though with occasionally observable decrease in the numbers. The Irish economy has, however, shown a remarkable rate of development in recent years, turning the country into a model for others and even a destination for migration.

With the opening of the Republic towards the world not only foreign capital has been accepted and embraced. The internationalisation of the country is a consequence of the end of isolation: with the spectacular development of technology in general distances of various kinds are reduced, and massive floods of different influences reach the country. Tourism and the global media are the most effective initiators of change in this respect, yet what the country has to offer in these channels in the reverse direction is also a force in shaping the contemporary culture of the Republic. Opening is at once liberation and imprisonment thus it offers a richly suggestive dilemma for contemporary poets.

Northern Ireland was from the outset a place of often not so latent antagonism between the Protestant majority and the Catholic minority. The former held under firm Unionist leadership the province yet this was not an absolutely glorious regime. The often very spectacular curtailing of the rights of the minority caused tensions slowly brewing under the surface. The 1949 event of the Republic leaving the Commonwealth created a new situation for the Northern Catholics, prompting them to recognise that they had to make efforts to improve their condition within the province rather than wait for external intervention in the

form of a united Ireland. Not much changed though: negative discrimination against Catholics in housing and employment, gerrymandering and further grievances reached their peak in the 1960s. There was a change in policies towards a more democratic order when Terence O'Neill succeeded Lord Brookeborough as prime minister of Northern Ireland in 1963, these policies, however, were seen as not sufficient by the Catholics and far too generous by the Protestants, leading to further manifestations of sectarian conflict. The general civil unrest finally led to the forming of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in 1967 and to the more radical People's Democracy movement a year later, with protests led by both organisations and duly obstructed by the overwhelmingly Protestant-dominated police forces. Mass movements finally erupted into riots in 1969 and the 'Northern Irish Troubles' began, with the British Army assuming control of the streets of the province.

Despite the threatening as well as assuring presence of armed forces on the streets of Northern Irish towns and cities the situation became even worse as paramilitary activity began on both sides of the sectarian divide. Riots, internment without trial and further riots followed until in 1972 the Stormont parliament was suspended and direct rule from Westminster introduced. The 1970s continued in the spirit of terror: though 1972 was the year with the peak of sectarian assassinations (Coogan 444), casualty lists remained a longish and depressing reading until the end of the decade. The 1980s began with the Hunger Strikes but that was the decade of the increasing urge to find a solution to the conflict by way of negotiations. Violence did not cease, however: it was expanded to involve locations in the Republic as well as in Britain, which provided a rather meagre backdrop to the ongoing efforts to settle the situation and bring life back to at least some form of normalcy. The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 meant a step forward yet its assessment by Northern factions was, predictably, divergent: Unionists were "outraged by this unprecedented recognition of a legitimate southern interest" (Kiberd 575-6), whereas Nationalists were basically sceptical about the actual positive consequences of the agreement on their everyday life and they were also haunted by the unpleasant suggestion that "in the process Dublin had conferred legitimacy on the British interest in Northern Ireland." (Kiberd 576)

The 1990s saw more profound changes to life in Northern Ireland. The involvement of Sinn Féin in the negotiations greatly widened the scope of the represented population and it significantly contributed to the gradual cessation of violence. The historic IRA ceasefire announcement in the August of 1994 meant the tentative closing down of twenty-five years of civil war, and the joining of loyalist paramilitary forces in the process gave basis for general optimism for the course of the future. Negotiations continued, with occasional local initiatives

of violent action, but even these could not stand in the way of another milestone, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement which secures a closer relation between the Republic and Northern Ireland. The widespread embracing of the Agreement both South and North is duly regarded as a promise for a peaceful though by no means easy settlement of differences, and subsequent developments have proved the validity of this optimism despite occasional suspensions of the implementation of the Agreement.

The cultural atmosphere of the Republic was for a long time a rather constraining one. The cultural consequences of economic underdevelopment, attempted self-sufficiency and a not-so-splendid isolation of the Republic were predictable: cultural insularity and backwardness, a small audience and rare publishing possibilities made intellectual life a dreary field, and it was further darkened by the strong grip of the Catholic Church and the pervasive presence of censorship. It was among such rather hostile conditions that the literary field began to produce promising new talents, though not against a backdrop of total intellectual vacuum since the early part of the century also had its major figures, in and out of the country, depending on their response to the general conditions prevailing in the field of culture.

The cultural environment of Northern Ireland was repressive for reasons which have, in spite of all the difference, some similarities with the ones in the Republic. The Unionist domination of the province gave prominence to the Protestant majority in terms of culture too, and Protestantism, as it is observed by certain poets, emanates a generally restrictive atmosphere and thus appears hostile towards such imaginative enterprises as the writing of poetry. The economic repression experienced in the traditional branches of industry did not do too much good either to culture in the North, turning the place into something of a stagnant still water yet the beneficial consequences of the 1947 Education Act were felt from the 1960s onwards, injecting significant new energies into the intellectual life of the province.

The first part of the twentieth century was dominated by the presence of Yeats and his near monster-like reputation, generally more debilitating than inspiring, therefore something to be hostile towards, as the example of numerous younger poets of the period indicates. The most prominent of these figures was Austin Clarke, whose long antagonism with Yeats, motivated to a great extent by the lack of recognition by the old master, is the case in point. There were others who decided that emigration was the proper response to the narrowness of the space left by tyrannical institutions: the father figure of this group was Joyce, with Samuel Beckett as his most notable follower. The vivid figures of Patrick Kavanagh and Flann O'Brien (or Brian O'Nolan or Myles na gCopaleen) swam against the obstructing tide of

ensorship and reached only a rather small audience. The 1950s saw the appearance of a new generation of poets who had a wider circle of influences beyond the strictly home-made fashion: Richard Murphy, Thomas Kinsella and John Montague brought fresh energy to the predominantly conservative Irish poetic scene. Especially Kinsella and the Northern-reared Montague had a marked interest in international developments, and their poetry accordingly reflected new departures among their contemporaries. The setting up of private presses specialising on poetry offered emerging young talents a chance to get access to an audience, and the later establishment of Aosdána is an open, though highly government-motivated, recognition of the important status of poets and writers in the contemporary society of the Republic.

Though the restrictive cultural environment of the Republic did not emanate its unfavourable features towards the north, significant literary activity was scarce in Northern Ireland, for totally different reasons. Louis MacNeice lived in London and John Hewitt was not widely known – the place was basically a wasteland in terms of international significance predominantly due to the general pervasiveness of a strict Protestant ethos advocating work and prayer as the staple activities of the honest citizen. As Stewart Parker noted in accordance with this, “if making ‘works of fiction’ is not treated as an honest day’s work in western society at large, in Northern Ireland it’s scarcely countenanced as a furtive hobby” (Parker quoted in Corcoran 1997, 131). Despite the prevailing vacuum promising voices emerged in the 1960s, coinciding with the increasing tensions of the society; the appearance of talented young poets, however, had more to do with the favourable consequences of the 1947 Education Act which allowed decent secondary education to children from classes excluded from it earlier – as Frank Ormsby notes, the new poets were mainly “‘scholarship’ children” (Ormsby xv). The presence of Philip Hobsbaum in Belfast was a catalyst to literary activity as he provided a forum for the aspiring new intellectuals to test their writings in a friendly though by no means uncritical circle, paving their way to an audience and recognition. This circle won the designation ‘Belfast Group’ by critics and a subsequent ‘Ulster Renaissance’ entered the critical jargon – though both names have received rather dismissing treatment by participants themselves on later occasions. The wealth of poetic talent, however, is impossible to dismiss or deny: Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley are the principal figures associated with this ‘first wave’ of poets, with an equally impressive second one to follow a decade later with Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, Tom Paulin and Medbh McGuckian as the most forceful and significant figures.

The poets under scrutiny here are recruited from the circle of the established figures of a number of successive generations. This selection is motivated by several factors and reasons. The secure poetic achievement and generally acknowledged status of the chosen poets provides a fairly stable ground for identifying the 'Irish' dimension in their work, and they have long enough careers to have lived through the changes both South and North, which offers them the benefit of assessing the old and the new alike. They are engaged in an exploration of the new world rather than simply inheriting it and therefore perhaps taking it for granted, yet at the same time they are old enough to remember the earlier ideologies of both states and simultaneously the crumbling of those ideologies too, thus they possess a profound experience of their contemporary context.

The first generation of 'new' poets include Richard Murphy, Thomas Kinsella and John Montague. Though Murphy's Anglo-Irish origins with a West of Ireland birthplace and later residence there do not represent the usual background, his voice is still an important reminder of the complexity of the contemporary Irish scene. Kinsella and Montague were the first to widen the scope of influences on Irish poetry by explicitly referring to international models. Brendan Kennelly's County Kerry background provides him with a tradition in storytelling which he utilises even in his lyric poems, often adding a satirical touch to the material. A similar ironic approach characterises Paul Durcan as well in his assessments of the constituents of public life in the Republic. The poetry of Michael Hartnett, apart from its acknowledged status, is also a reminder of the language issue as his decision to write exclusively in Irish after long years of English proved to be an excursion only. Eavan Boland complements the male-dominated poetic tradition with the profound dimension of the woman. Though Matthew Sweeney is less frequently seen as a major contributor to Irish poetry, his familiarity with the West renders him an important figure.

John Montague's Northern upbringing establishes him as a new beginning as he comes first in the line of contemporary Northern poets. The major figures of the first wave of what is often referred to as the Ulster Renaissance do not require much introduction: Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and Derek Mahon, though by different itineraries, have all given new significance to Irish poetry. The succeeding generation is no less varied as Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, Tom Paulin and Medbh McGuckian also add important new elements to the already colourful body of contemporary Irish poetry by crossing postmodern tactics with traditional Irish storytelling or feminist considerations.

This gallery of poets is by no means a complete one nor is it an absolutely definitive and exclusive selection. There are a number of shared concerns in the works of these artists

which bring them together and their responses to certain situations set them up in exciting conversations with one another. Though artistic activities insist on an unquestionable foundation in freedom, there still are a number of well-discernible guidelines which function as marks in the present field of Irish poetry between which the game is played out, marks which take the role of points of references for outlining the contemporary experience of Irishness.

## 1.2. PRELIMINARIES

The categories of place, history and cultural community provide not only a comfortable framework for an analysis of contemporary Irish poetry in the English language but a multifariously interconnected net of references as well. The observable dimensions of space and time are explored separately and then are seen in their relation to each other in a specific context, that of cultural identity, in which their separation is no longer possible. Connections are manifold anyway: places exist in time, history always happens somewhere and thus it involves a spatial dimension too, communities are shaped by the place where they belong and the history which they inherit and preserve in a framework which can be termed culture. Separation is only possible for temporary purposes of investigation and even then the web of relations must be acknowledged.

As far as the category of place is concerned, the characteristic dimension is some kind of a permanent or suspended present. The historical dimension is subordinated to the spatial one, specific temporal markers are generally absent in several cases or, as they refer to a habitual present, are made irrelevant in others: though places obviously exist as places in time, time is suspended for the duration of the observation. There is an insistence on a number of at least seemingly unchanging features which provide a set of stills to contemplate, which makes the category of place a synonym for permanence. The variety involved in the scope of the concept of place also serves as a reminder of the notion of plurality as the single comprehensive term can embody a wide range of different meanings.

History foregrounds the temporal dimension thus whatever is contemplated is seen as a dependency of time. Places are involved in history too yet the temporal marker of them assumes the defining and determining position. Events and characters are outlined in a temporal context and that fiction which is called history is examined in terms of its practical significance. History, though inseparable from human presence unlike place, can also evoke

the idea of plurality since its human construction involves a broad range of variables to work with.

In the category of cultural continuity space and time become coordinates, thus it brings together the categories of place and history. Place and time become axes along which some sort of permanence is outlined in relation to the constituents of culture and identity – basically the field covered by the notion of Irishness. History is translated onto the field of space and places become filled with human content extending backwards into time, building up a heritage which belongs to a certain community – or as the case appears to be, to more communities. This heritage is carried and partly embodied by language, the English rather than the Irish Gaelic language in the contemporary Irish context.

As far as the category of place is concerned the variety of meanings compressed in the term is equivocally considered important. From the point of view of human presence place is divided into two broad fields, those of landscapes and human settlement. Landscapes, apart from and beyond their embodiment of beauty, intimate permanence and timelessness. In most cases the evocation of landscapes involves the presence of water, either in the form of the coast or of lakes. Coasts are frontiers embodying the clash between water and land, they are beginnings of one and endings of the other, thus there is a mutual reliance on the other for acts of self-definition. The coast is also a place of constant change observable in the movement of waves and the tide, and this change is at once a manifestation of permanence through the cyclical nature of these movements. Lakes, in accordance with their short-lived nature, tend to induce visions, brief intimations of nearly-transcendental experience, which echoes not so distant romantic roots. Though landscapes represent a world beyond human civilisation where man is only an observer, they simultaneously reinforce the importance and power of the imagination as it is the proper faculty of assessing the sight and actually making it a sight.

The world of human settlement is one which both shapes and is shaped by their inhabitants, and thus it offers a 'book' by which their population can be read and approached. The urban world has long provoked suspicions and hostilities which had their roots in Irish nationalist stances (cf. Lloyd 93). Cities are focal points of economic change and thus they render social extremes of wealth and deprivation side by side. In addition they present more explicit manifestations of corruptions and hypocrisies of public life than other places. The principal example is Dublin: more than any other place it reflects the rapidly changing world of the Republic. The old image of Dublin is replaced by a new one of a bustling city yet in no way less enchanting than before; though it offers on occasion special moments for

contemplating another aspect of the city, that of the city as home, yet such moments are rare and are noticed because of their very unusual nature. Similarly to Dublin, Belfast does not appear as the archetypal image of home, yet it is a place where people live and belong to. It is also a city of changes yet economic decline is followed not by a new beginning but by the outbreak of political violence. In spite of all the hostilities of the city it still provides moments of profound human significance through visions which prove that cities are not simply places where people live but places which they regard as their home.

The country has long been considered the proper Irish world but it is not idealised in the poetry. The country possesses a heavy historical heritage and the present world is often equally disillusioned despite the ideological conditioning of the early decades of the Republic. The country is still dominated by old conflicts, bigotries and hypocrisies, and it is often even less consoling a place than the urban world.

The border separating the two political units of the island is another frontier zone. It is a transitory zone which is human both in its origin and significance, and it is a place where normal categories and points of reference are destabilised. This region of in-between-ness embodies the dilemma of division as it offers no possible framework for its resolution, yet one of its functions is to provide instances of facing and experiencing the dilemma.

There are attempts to move beyond the usual divisions underlying Irish life. The region of the West is evoked in the halo of the desire for something which is still authentically Irish, stable and unquestioned, and which rises above traditional divisions. The accounts most often evade human presence and focus on the natural world which becomes a source of inspiration and regeneration; yet an acknowledgement of the alien nature of the region is also intimated, partly by the fact that most of the accounts are provided by visitors and not natives of the place.

All-encompassing perspectives are also possible as a number of poems indicate. Despite political division there are common elements present, and it is an important recognition that these involve not only the natural world. Categories of physical geography point beyond human control and thus they can provide common ground, yet there are ubiquitous elements even in the human world, which suggests the validity of all-Ireland perspectives.

The temporal dimension of history appears a challenging one since it is at once simpler and more complex than space. As movement in time is more restricted, the possibility of accessing the past is only available in imaginative exercises, and there is a marked preference for dwelling in the present. Old ideologies still cast a shadow on the past and it is

thus less central to contemporary poetry; those poems which still seek to address and access the past reveal deep-running hurts.

The present, by virtue of its contemporariness, offers a wider playground to charter. The relatively uneventful political history of the Republic does not stand still – economic and social changes provide much to contemplate, and the seemingly insignificant domain of everyday life offers close-up views on this history. North of the border history is more eventful as the triumvirate of conflict, violence and duress brings human communities under extreme stresses. Approaches to the conflict vary yet they all condemn violence, and express only a tentative hope that a solution can be found.

Personal lives provide a tangible aspect to history and a dimension which is possible to grasp and interpret on a personal scale. Such themes act as reminders of the fact that though history is a totalising discourse, its bulk is composed of individual lives which have their individual importance. Fathers and mothers are evoked, and together with them a past which is near and accessible and which makes palpable contact with the present. Such lives illustrate the close interrelation of the communal and the personal in the Irish context and which also act as solid points of reference for self-definition.

Contemporary history, especially the Northern conflict, draws highly idiosyncratic visions as well. There are ideas which are tested on events and there are attempts which voice different concerns, providing attempts of interpretation of the present, outlining the cherished ideal or subverting old divisions. Such imaginative approaches to history are highly ingenious exercises and on certain occasions they tend to be more revelatory than direct address would be.

The idea of cultural continuity brings together the previous major categories and blends them in a frame of cultural significance. Place and history address respective aspects of Irishness, and there is then an examination of particular elements of that cultural heritage. The possessors of the heritage, of the Irish experience are the communities inhabiting Ireland both South and North. Self-assessment is a healthy practice and poets focus on their own respective communities rather than on the other though occasionally they allow a glance across the divide. There are enlightened and enlightening cases of reconciliations which at the same time indicate the arbitrariness and artificiality of the division.

The carrier and partly the body of tradition is the language. The situation of Ireland is a rather special one since historical power relations brought about a switch from one language to another, with later attempts to re-energise and repossess the old language. The loss of Gaelic is addressed with the subsequent embarrassment of having to speak the language of the

former coloniser, yet there is the tacit approval of the benefits of the new language and the more explicit expression of the survival of the old even in the new language. This survival is deliberately fostered by acts of cultural repossession which most often takes the form of incorporating early Irish legends into contemporary poetry in the English language. These projects reflect a determination to utilise a tradition often considered lost and thus often mourned for – such exercises of repossession actually contribute to the preservation and even to the reactivation of the old tradition, and they also offer a special and distinctive trait to English.

There is a personal scale involved in such attempts to return to something earlier and repossess it. Private experience, in a specifically Irish context, becomes the target of some poets, and they construct their imaginative return journeys to face their relation with the tradition they emerge from, with the aim of using the experience as source of inspiration and creativity. This indicates the wish to take the tradition as it is and to regard it as their tradition, to build on it as a foundation of their being and artistic activity – to grasp what Irishness means in interpretable terms.

The categories of place, history and cultural continuity offer those points of reference along which an investigation can satisfactorily describe the Irishness of contemporary Irish poetry written in the English language. The geographical location is the same in a broad perspective: all these people are located on one island, confined to the same space and comfortably bordered off from others by the sea. There is a common history, though it is understood in different ways as a consequence of different points of view, yet the long-standing relation with Britain is a fact which cannot be altered by any interpretation. Common cultural elements abound; there obviously are varieties yet the almost uniform use of the English language and the self-definition carried out in that language against the British indicate a sense of belonging together. All these render the Irish experience possible to see as one broad stream which is not homogeneous but essentially plural in its basic nature, and this pluralism promises an exciting field for exploration.

## 2. VARIETIES OF IRISHNESS<sup>1</sup>

In section XVI of his *Autumn Journal* Louis MacNeice formulates the question “Why do we like being Irish?” (MacNeice 132). The answer immediately follows and it gives a hint of pride in the speaker of being of a place which can be differentiated from other ones by features easily seen as positive:

Partly because  
It gives a hold on the sentimental English  
As members of a world that never was,  
Baptised with fairy water;  
And partly because Ireland is small enough  
To be still thought of with a family feeling,  
And because the waves are rough  
That split her from a more commercial culture;  
And because one feels that here at least one can  
Do local work which is not at the world’s mercy  
And that on this tiny stage with luck a man  
Might see the end of one particular action. (MacNeice 132-133)

This vision of Ireland describes a place where the modern plights of alienation and the fragmentation of human experience seem to have been escaped because of the isolated location of the place, though its strategic spatial position between “England” and that “more commercial culture” could also provoke certain thoughts. The masterful arrestment of the local nature of the Irish experience shows the proficiency of the observer, even if he quickly deflates in the succeeding lines the concurrent expectations about this romantic world.

What is striking about this section from the point of view of the notion of ‘Irishness’ is the speaker’s treatment of Ireland as one and united, boasting of the manifestation of a uniform culture, in the broadest meaning of the term. Writing in the autumn of 1938 MacNeice was generous enough to dismiss the existence of a border which is the physical embodiment of the notion of partition, thus his “Ireland” is the whole island. This is all the

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<sup>1</sup> R.F. Foster employs the same chapter heading in his *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, yet his focus is the early seventeenth century scene; the identity of the title is thus only an accident

more peculiar if MacNeice's position is considered: an English-educated Belfast-born son of a Church of Ireland rector definitely does not classify as a typical Irishman whose sight should be obscured by a nostalgic concept of his 'homeland.' Yet partition was an actual experience and there are scattered suggestions of this in the section providing the double vision of Gaelic Ireland and the North, though the speaker never explicitly draws a line between these worlds; rather, he connects them by the simple conjunction 'and' which allows for the uncomfortable presence of ambivalence both in the speaker's account and in the reader's response. To this may be added MacNeice's often quoted stance from the poem "Snow" about the world being "Incorrigibly plural" (MacNeice 30) – in the local context of Ireland this would indicate a strangely double perspective on the oneness of the country with an internal variety of identities and communal attitudes.

The choice of MacNeice's passage to initiate a discussion of the concept of Irishness may appear strange at first look. Yet it is particularly MacNeice's complex background in relation to Ireland which can indicate a number of guidelines in an approach to contemporary Irish poetry written in the English language. Louis MacNeice was born in Belfast at a time when the Northern part of the island was not yet closed off from the Southern one by an actual border. Both his parents had ties to the West of Ireland but his father was a Church of Ireland rector, a Protestant in the North, therefore belonging to the majority of the local population, but of the minority in the overall view, and a part of the minority within the all-but-homogeneous Northern Protestant faction. His childhood years connect him to Carrickfergus but his formative education was conducted in England. This rather varied inheritance made MacNeice neither properly Irish nor English in his lifetime; after his death, however, his assessment has changed significantly from a minor English 1930s poet to a major Irish figure, indicating the recognition that MacNeice embodies the divisions inherent to Ireland and the resulting plurality of its cultural world.

## 2.1. DIVISIONS

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word 'Irishness' as "Irish quality or character" (OED CD-ROM), and in turn the reference of 'Irish' is "of, belonging to, or native to Ireland" as far as persons are concerned, and "of or pertaining to Ireland or its inhabitants" in relation to things (ibid). The word 'Irish' involves a geographical item, Ireland, in its definition yet this item poses a number of problems as far as the proper reference of the word

is concerned. The general geographical reference of the word 'Ireland' is an island, the second largest one of the British Isles, and as such it is easily described with the proper terminology of physical geography. The one-to-one correspondence between place and name, however, comes to an abrupt end in the moment when the domain of physical geography is left behind: from the point of view of human geography the name 'Ireland' involves a controversy as there are two political entities which include this name, Ireland (officially the Republic of Ireland) and Northern Ireland. The existence of two Irelands raises a number of problems concerning the nature of the concept of Irishness itself, pointing towards a rather broad scope of the term if it is to be meaningful.

The name of the twenty-six southern counties is Éire in the Irish, and the official English version of this is Ireland according to the 1937 Constitution (*Constitution*, Article 4). The 1948 Republic of Ireland Act declares that the state is a republic but this has not changed the general use of the term Ireland in the English language to refer to the Republic (*Facts* 36). The Republic is thus the country which enjoys an advantage in any tentative exercise of examining the question of 'Irishness' by virtue of the simplicity of the name: there is a designation of the political system of the country in the name but there are no other modifying items in it. The Republic is an autonomous political formation, an independent state with its own government and every criterion of sovereign statehood. Northern Ireland, on the other hand, is a part of a larger political unit, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As such it is one of the constituent states of a federal state and is therefore often referred to as a statelet (cf. Stewart xii) or a province, with the indication of several limitations on its statehood. The name of the place which defines it in relation to another Ireland is also an important marker of its somewhat peculiar status. Still, the insistence in the name Northern Ireland acts as a compulsion to examine the relevant aspects of culture north of the border as well for the construction of a concept of Irishness.

In a rather unusual manner, the question of ethnicity arises as a consequence of the existence of the two Irelands. The Republic is a simple case as the population is Irish without any further qualification, however complex the racial composition of this category historically may be. Northern Ireland cuts a more diverse picture since identifying the population as 'Northern Irish' as an ethnic designation does not work. The population is divided north of the border: a part of it defines itself as Irish and a part of it as not due to several historical factors. A salient example of the latter case is provided by the Ulster Unionist party MP John Taylor: "Much as I enjoy the Irish and admire many of their cultural pursuits, I have to remind them that we in Northern Ireland are not Irish" (Taylor quoted in McCall 89). Those who refuse to

be labelled Irish define themselves as British, and the presence of this category, though not unambiguous given the general umbrella-nature of the term, poses a problem in seeing the whole population of the island as a potentially homogeneous community from at least one respect. To this may be added the conviction of certain people, South and North alike, that there is the possibility of being *at once* Irish and British: John Hewitt<sup>2</sup> would be an adequate example, and Brendan Kennelly's general opinion about the Northern poet as "being both Irish and British" (Kennelly 1994, 61) has this idea as its central element – though it has to be admitted that such approaches are driven by cultural items rather than ethnical ones.

The first word which is almost instinctively connected with the word 'Irish,' based on the principal association of the word with the Republic, is 'Catholic,' indicating a close, almost inseparable, relationship operating between the national and the religious domains in the Irish context. According to Declan Kiberd this close relationship is necessitated by historical factors, most notably by that sense of guilt which the Irish of the later nineteenth century felt for the loss of the native language, which in turn prompted them to embrace Catholicism as "definitive of Irishness" (Kiberd 651). This close association between Irishness and Catholicism, however, pertains only to the Republic and with certain, though not very spectacular, limitations. The population of the Republic of Ireland is dominated by Catholicism in terms of religious affiliations, with more than 90 percent of the inhabitants declaring themselves the followers of this religion (*Facts* 21), which leaves indeed very little space for other religious groups, including atheists as well. Northern Ireland, however, cuts a more complex picture in terms of religious division: Presbyterians account for 21 percent, Church of Ireland for 18 percent and other Protestant groups give 11.5 percent of the overall population, while 38 percent declare themselves Catholic (*Facts* 90). There is thus a Protestant majority though it is far from being undivided along internal sectarian lines. To all these may be added those segments of the population, in both countries, which do not reveal their religious affiliations, whatever their reasons for this may be; still, they present their contribution to the religious picture.

The fact of religious diversity in terms of the whole island would not stand in the way of constructing a general concept of Irishness relevant to all inhabitants as religion rarely constitutes a decisive element in the question of national identity. In the case of the Republic,

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<sup>2</sup> Hewitt's words give a fairly precise sense of belonging: "I am an Ulsterman, of planter stock. I was born in the island of Ireland, so secondarily I'm an Irishman. I was born in the British archipelago and English is my native tongue, so I am British. The British archipelago consists of offshore islands to the continent of Europe, so I'm European. This is my hierarchy of values and so far as I am concerned, anyone who omits one step in that sequence of values is falsifying the situation." (Hewitt 6)

however, for a long time the Catholic Church enjoyed a privileged position codified even in the constitution of the state, which forges a strong relation between ethnic and religious categories. In Northern Ireland there is an alignment of religion with political conviction: the Protestant majority is principally associated with a Unionist political affiliation; as far as public affairs are concerned there is a Unionist dominance which is reflected in the political history of the place between 1921 and 1972. These close associations would support the role of religion in the concept of Irishness yet the basic duality corresponding roughly to the territorial division of the island and also the further division within the Northern Protestant majority blocks the way of such conceptualising.

The concept of Irishness paradoxically involves a language question as well. The logical relation would be a corresponding strong foundation in the Irish language yet Irish culture is marked by a deep presence of bilingualism, though of a very strange kind indeed. Contemporary Irish culture is rooted in two languages, the Irish Gaelic and the English. The former is an inherited language, the latter is an imposed one yet their stance is far from being unambiguous due to a number of historical reasons. The inherited Irish language is the first language rather by artificially nourished intentions: owing to British colonisation the native language of the Irish was suppressed and suffered a wide-scale decline in several aspects, from the number of its speakers to the general relation between language and the reality it intends to arrest, bringing about the painful actuality of linguistic dispossession. The English language, however, is not simply the imposed language of the coloniser: though its introduction in Ireland is inseparably linked with history and the question of power, English has become the principal medium of communication in both parts of the island, partly as a willed process even in factions of the Irish themselves (cf. Kiberd 650). The initial foreign nature of the language of the coloniser has been shed, and the accommodation of the language in the context of the Irish world has yielded masterful literary works besides its general use in the everyday dimension of life; in addition, the effectiveness of the English language in cultural resistance against the British should not be forgotten either.

There have been attempts to revitalise the Irish language: the nineteenth-century cultural aspirations of the national awakening were duly followed by official policies to restore the language to its status as the first language of the newly independent Irish state, yet several decades of experimentation and pressure have not been enough to bring back the Irish language as an up-to-date means of communication which could boast of being as versatile as the rival English. Generations have been brought up and educated in the 'alien' English and it has now acquired the position of being the inherited language of the majority of the

population without producing the least apparent unease about this. This fact creates a rather problematic context for the question of the Irish tradition as a consequence and it also indicates the difficulty of involving the category of the language as a valid one in the concept of Irishness, or to be precise, the validity of involving the Irish language as a constituting element of the concept.

The language issue, however, divides the intellectual field: there is often a sense of mourning for the Irish language and the old tradition through it yet there is equally an awareness of the limitations of a “dying language” (Kinsella 1996, 83) and of the definite advantages of English with its international claims for an audience beyond the rather narrow local one. The fact of the domination of English in everyday Irish life does not appear to be a tantalising problem for either of the two giants of twentieth-century Irish literary history: both William Butler Yeats and James Joyce accepted the given presence of the English language as their artistic medium without the least hesitation, finding indirect justification in spite of their historical context in their liberation of the Irish spirit through the English language. Several successors found English the proper channel for their activities; though Austin Clarke had a thorough knowledge of Irish, he wrote in English, while Patrick Kavanagh and Louis MacNeice never had a doubt about composing in the English language. Poetry has been written in the Irish language as well but its readership is severely limited and much of it enters the wider literary scene through translation into English. Contemporary poets are perhaps somewhat more self-conscious of the double-faced language issue: many of them engage in exercises of translating Irish-language poetry into English but at the same time produce their own poetry exclusively in the English language. Still, if the question of the language demands a place in the concept of Irishness, it is paradoxically rather the English than the Irish which can feature as an element in it.

Despite the existence of two separate political entities carrying the name Ireland and the questions concerning ethnicity, religion and language there is often an insistence on seeing the notion of ‘Irishness’ and the Irish experience as essentially one and undivided; this is easily seen in various anthologies addressing the task of representing contemporary Irish poetry: the forewords of such works as *The Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, edited by Thomas Kinsella or *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, edited by Derek Mahon and Peter Fallon, are telling examples of this stance. The ‘Irish tradition’ as a monolithic concept, however, requires certain care in handling, and it is not only a postmodern scepticism towards grand narratives that question marks are produced when a single tradition is mentioned but the

diversity of cultural experience which arises out of the multifariously divided world of the location which is described in physical geography as 'Ireland.'

## 2.2. PLURALITY

Norman Vance identifies three "historically and sociologically distinct modes of Irishness, each of which can lay claim to or periodically invent a specific cultural tradition." (Vance 8) These modes of Irishness are the "Celtic and usually Catholic Irish mode," "the English-descended, usually Protestant Irish" and the "Scots-descended Irish Presbyterians, largely confined to Ulster, sometimes called 'Scots-Irish'" (Vance 9); Edna Longley in a similar way speaks about "Catholic Ireland, Anglican Ireland, and Presbyterian Ireland" (E. Longley 1994, 130). These modes have existed in close interaction without complete fusion over the centuries and have shaped the context for any writer claiming the 'Irish' designation (cf. Vance 9). These different approaches to the definition of Irishness have given rise to three different ways of constructing an Irish tradition: the "moderate nationalist mode, incorporating both English-language and Gaelic writing, the non-nationalist, sometimes internationalist mode, chiefly concerned with Irish works in the English language, and the extreme Celtic nationalist mode, ostensibly concerned only with the Irish language though most of its propagandists have written partly in English." (ibid) There is no one-to-one correspondence between the modes of Irishness and the general Irish traditions (cf. ibid), which indicates the complexity of the notion of the 'Irish tradition' and the existence of different, and often conflicting, canons suggests the efficiency of a pluralistic approach to Irish writing.

The word "distinct" suggests division, an insistence on the essentially separate and isolated nature of these categories. Though the lack of complete fusion supports the separateness of these modes of Irishness and general Irish traditions, the fact that they have been in constant interaction with each other requires a different concept in handling the Irish experience in all its aspects. The concept of plurality admits difference and it celebrates the variety without attempting to organise its constituents into any hierarchy. It accepts the parallel existence of differing perceptions of reality and does not try to press these perceptions to correspond to existing power relations. It embodies a benevolently democratic approach towards the different varieties of culture, it acknowledges the equal status of all strains and does not label them in terms of superiority or inferiority of one in relation to another.

The historical origins of division and subsequent plurality are scattered over the centuries yet they are all connected with the long-standing relation between the Irish and the British. The repeated invasions and attempts at establishing control over the Irish by the 'English' led to far-reaching consequences though not all of these are easily interpreted. The assimilation of the Norman invaders shows the "seductive powers of Gaelic culture" (Kiberd 651), which is an instant of the reverse of the usual course of events in the relation of the Irish and the British. The loss of the Irish language, including the denial of the language by the Irish themselves, and the later attempts of reclaiming it complicate the issue of Irishness to a great extent, leading to a strong presence of Anglophobia among nationalists (cf. Kiberd 650). Similarly the embracing of religious elements in the process of national self-definition, especially that of Catholicism as an act of opposition to British Protestantism, and as a countermove, Protestantism by intellectual figures such as Yeats, have led to a rather complex image of Irishness. It is a further twist to recognise the complexity of the Northern picture with self-declared ethnic and religious differences. The picture thus is sophisticated and offers a far-reaching network of causes and effects, yet for an assessment of the contemporary scene certain points of reference are necessary to identify, however arbitrary they may appear.

From the point of view of contemporary Irish poetry written in the English language, the major historical events of the Irish context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seem to be the most important points of reference in relation to the concept of Irishness. The cultural and political dimensions of the struggle for independence from Britain are well known, and so is the watershed date of 1922. The date, however, is one that does not surrender easily to any comfortable interpretation as the concepts of independence and partition are inseparably linked in it. The double perspective is indicative of the doubling of 'Ireland' as well: the treaty bringing to life the Irish Free State at the same time establishes the separate world of Northern Ireland, remaining a part of the United Kingdom, thus inserting a political border into the body of the so far non-partitioned, though not undivided, island. The Government of Ireland Act in 1920 proposed the setting up of two separate parliaments in Ireland, one for the twenty-six southern counties and one for the six counties of the North. Partly in accordance with and partly in opposition to this, the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 granted self-government for the whole island, leaving the option for the parliament of the North to opt out of the Irish Free State jurisdiction which was promptly done (cf. McCall 36). Partition was thus made a part of the political reality of the island.

The moment of partition is one which cannot be left out of consideration when the question of Irishness is concerned. The existence of two distinct political entities involves

differences as some of the cornerstones of communal experience show significant alterations in the two countries. Among the early aspirations of the newly established Irish Free State was the act of self-definition which was done principally against Britain (cf. Foster 1989, 516). The initial dominion status was gradually exchanged for the position of an independent republic and this process was carried out in the framework of a peculiar post-colonial situation, with the former colony located on the same continent as the coloniser itself and sharing several common elements in terms of cultural and socio-economic systems. The constitution of the country incorporating the twenty-six southern counties of the island contained from early on articles which targeted the 'restoration' of the six northern counties to the southern ones, regarding the partition of the island as a temporary affair only and employing a thirty-two-county model of Ireland, albeit only in a tentative manner. Such claims, territorial as well as political, involve the underlying ideology of the oneness of the Irish experience and the belief in the existence of a single community inhabiting the island; the predominantly Irish Catholic population of the Republic of Ireland is easily seen as the proper soil for such an ideology and belief reflecting a nearly homogenous social context with a correspondingly coherent and uniform communal identity.

The concept of communal identity thus becomes a term which requires introduction at this point. The communal identity of the population of the Republic of Ireland could easily be described as Irish, with a correspondingly compiled list of its major constituents which can be traced back to the early twentieth-century Sinn Féin ideal: "Ireland is racially Celtic, linguistically Gaelic, religiously Catholic, politically Anglophobic and republican, organizationally antinomian, sociologically clannish, aesthetically zoomorphic, and socially gregarious and alcoholic." (Johnston 247) Apart from the ironic elements this ideal had its own appeal and power in shaping the actual communal identity of the people of the Republic. The changes initiated by the economic reforms from the 1960s onwards and the accession to the European Community slowly erode the monolithic approach, however, though they do not involve a radical revising of the importance of the traditional cultural constituents of the Southern Irish communal identity. Yet there are now studies which suggest that "there is a 'new' Irish cultural identity emerging in the South that is increasingly pluralist and heterogeneous." (McCall 87) Though there is a degree of scepticism observable in the account (cf. *ibid*), because of the increasing interaction between the Republic and the rest of the world via tourism and the media it is inevitable that a pluralizing tendency appears even in a traditionally isolated and insular world.

The position of Northern Ireland as a state within a larger state would in itself not present particular difficulties in approaching the matter of its communal identity. The peculiar context of its location, spatial as well as historical, however, produces a fairly problematic situation. The fact that spatially this political unit is located on an island with another state of generally hostile self-definition but it belongs to a more powerful larger unit which is situated on a neighbouring island creates the physical dimensions of a possible conflict. Historically the picture is even more complicated as the non-natural border of Northern Ireland was drawn with respect to the interest of one part of the population, that part which has several historical ties to the 'mainland' on the expense of the other part of the population, having equally strong historical antagonisms towards the 'mainland people.' There is a division of the population principally along ethnical lines and the very fact of this division makes questions of identity complex matters. To this may be added the generally problematic nature of the concept of 'nationality' in Northern Ireland – as nationalism is mainly associated with the Catholic section of the population, it is not embraced by Protestants as a principle in their identity; it is rather "in terms of citizenship and the modern state" (McCall 39) that they interpret their identity.

The sectarian division of the population of the North into Catholics and Protestants, basically corresponding to the political division into Irish Nationalists and Ulster Unionists, duplicates the division observable on the island but on a smaller scale and in the reverse order in comparison with the global scene. The case has been described as that of a "double minority" (Stewart 162), and this twofold division multiplies the possible constructions and interpretations of the concept of Irishness. Pre-partition Ireland was duly characterised by those modes of Irishness which Vance discusses, but the establishment of the two Irish states irredeemably separates the agents of such groups into different political situations, making the construction of a uniform concept of Irishness a difficult exercise. What is observable is a plurality of experience and a corresponding plurality of interpretation of that experience. The absolute Irish Catholic majority of the population of the Republic makes for a relatively uncomplicated affair. The Northern groups, however, are located at an angle to this experience: the Protestant majority, though also divided, definitely refuses to share the truth-claims of the inhabitants of the Republic and the Catholic minority experiences a different socio-political reality from that of their southern neighbours. In the latter case republican aspirations and Catholic beliefs may be shared but little more is common to these otherwise two distinct groups living in two different countries, which is also reflected in the Northern Nationalists' sceptical stance towards the South (cf. Kiberd 577).

In his treatment of communal identities in Northern Ireland Cathall McCall suggests a postmodern rather than a modern approach.<sup>3</sup> The modern approach is characterised by an “emphasis on objectivity and the establishment of a dominant socio-political truth by ‘the majority’” (McCall 3) in the framework of the “nation-state” (ibid). A satisfactory accommodation of the two basic communities, the northern Irish Nationalist and the Ulster Unionist communities, cannot be properly done in such a framework, as this fact is manifest in the chaotic political history of Northern Ireland in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A postmodern approach, however, would offer a meaningful perspective on these communities, accepting the fact that “it is possible for differing and even opposing beliefs to be equally valid.” (McCall 11) This is all the more necessary as the two communities “can present conflicting versions of fundamental concepts like history, justice and truth” (McCall 10). This acceptance of the possibility of multiple truths offers a helpful starting point not only in the context of Northern Ireland but with respect to the whole island as well – multiple truths exist all over the human world and Ireland, South and North alike should be no exception to this phenomenon.

Declan Kiberd comes to a similar conclusion in his study of modern Irish literature in relation to the plural nature of the Irish experience:

If the notion of “Ireland” seemed to some to have become problematic, that was only because the seamless garment once wrapped like a green flag around Cathleen ní Houlihan had given way to a quilt of many patches and colours, all beautiful, all distinct, yet all connected too. No one element should subordinate or assimilate the others: Irish or English, rural or urban, Gaelic or Anglo, each has its part in the pattern. (Kiberd 653)

This creates the outlines of an enriching sense of plurality with no order or hierarchy involved, constructed out of several constituents yet all these are seen as important and all are to be organised into a network of coordinated relations rather than into a fixed system of subordination.

Despite the clearly visible divisions, there are several attempts at voicing the deep-running belief of the oneness of the Irish experience, which could logically lay claims to be

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<sup>3</sup> McCall describes the Modern as characterised by the notions of Enlightenment, progress, the universality of knowledge and scientific methods (McCall 3-6), and the Postmodern is best seen as constituted by ‘institutionalised pluralism, variety, contingency and ambivalence’ (McCall 53)

the foundation of a uniform concept of Irishness. Rather than succumbing to the pressing and, to a certain extent, falsifying drive of homogenisation, a looser framework of the concept can be constructed out of shared elements, and this framework will acknowledge the existing differences as well at the same time. This involves the idea that the scope of the name Ireland is the whole island and the reference of the term Irish is predominantly cultural. This may appear an arbitrary decision but the chosen categories of place, history and cultural continuity justify the choice since it is along such lines that a description of the Irishness of contemporary Irish poetry written in the English language can be provided.

### 3. PLACE

Seamus Heaney's seminal discussion of the two senses of place in Ireland, one "lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious" (Heaney 1980, 131), marks the importance of the concept of place in contemporary Irish poetry. In one way or other places feature significantly in the work of several poets and often it is sufficient to glance at the titles of a given collection of poems to support the claim that Irish poetry is heavily tied to place. In the Irish experience of chaotic and tragic history physical locations acquire a particular significance – as Norman Vance suggests, the only permanent element on which the Irish tradition may be based is "topography and geographical location" (Vance 7), thus a poetry in need of stable and unquestionable reference points, and contemporary Irish poetry insists on fixed points of origin, makes a recourse to the category of place.

Place itself, by virtue of its broad field of meanings, incorporates a range of various spaces, open as well as enclosed ones. Place involves physical location regardless of human participation: the term covers various types of landscapes ranging from the usual categories of plains, hills and mountains to coastal areas generally emblematic of the meeting between different worlds, just as it refers to rural or urban areas of human settlement, with the proper significance of the human element in the concept. The multiple division of the category yields a plurality of meanings which are in turn explored in poems of various types, constructing an imaginary equivalent of the island both South and North, arresting the permanent and the changing elements alike, thus incorporating the inescapable category of history too, which then leads to the close knitting of space and time.

The immediate reference of place is to a country understood as landscape: the primacy of the physical landscape over human elements is due to the temporal dimension. Landscapes represent the unpopulated world both diachronically and synchronically: the former indicates the inevitably present temporality of history, the presence of the land before that of people, whereas the latter represents the notion of 'the other,' the alternative to the world of human settlement. In both instances landscapes tend to become metaphoric, offering escapes or alternatives to the world populated by human beings, evoking a realm which is independent of and is thus beyond human participation and control. The temporal implications are also rich since the seeming permanence of the otherwise ever-changing physical world complements the general human experience of existence in time: the timescale relevant to elements of the physical world is comparably greater than that which pertains to either individual or

communal human experience. The employment of landscapes thus provides a dimension intimating stability and permanence as opposed to the general transitoriness of the human world.

As far as landscapes are concerned, the land of Ireland is characterised by the dominance of low-lying plains, with upland areas scattered haphazardly over parts of the island, mainly in the south-western part, around Dublin and in the North. The plains are broken occasionally by hilly areas of glacial origin – these drumlins are reminders of the Pleistocene ice ages which significantly altered the face of the land, stripping off the soil together with the younger layers of rock covering the surface and leaving only the older layers on which generally poorer soils have formed. Among the heritages of the ice ages the considerable areas of peat bog deserve mentioning; this special form of inland water coupled with the marine climate of the island creates a unique world with haunting metaphoric dimensions bringing together images of water and fire, loss and preservation, place and history, thus charging the bog with a profound poetic potential which is duly utilised mainly by John Montague and even more significantly by Seamus Heaney.

Both the Republic and Northern Ireland are coastal countries – situated on an island both are bordered by a long and varied coastline. Coasts have a profound significance in the figurative realm as well as in the practical spheres of life: coastlines are the zone of conflict between the land and the sea, and at the same time the apropos of the age old dilemma whether the sea divides or rather connects places. The continuous interaction between land and water, their mutual act of defining the other and the very nature of this frontier zone make coastal areas a favourite subject for contemporary poetry due to the inherent figurative possibilities of these features. Ireland has both deep-water and shallow-water shorelines, scenes of erosion and accumulation respectively. Moreover, the general distribution of these two types of shorelines corresponds to the historically charged East-West division: deep-water shorelines are characteristic in the regions facing the Atlantic Ocean whereas shallow-water ones are to be found on the eastern part of the island, facing Britain. As a result the choice of location is a telling act on part of the poet, both in terms of the type as well as the exposure of the chosen place.

Beyond the domain of the physical world the island is home to the human construct of countries. Ireland, South and North alike, is a land of divisions and one of the age old divisions of the Irish context is the one between urban and rural, the city and the country. Historically the rural predominates as the Republic is a slowly urbanising country, and the North, despite the stronger presence of industrial patterns in comparison with the Republic, is

still a place marked by the existence of the rural-urban divide as a valid category. The rural was a strong constituent in the programme of the Revival, and in the wake of this, the founding ideologies of the Irish Free State were rooted in the rural world, seeing the potential origin of a new and independent Irish nation in the peaceful and uncorrupted world of the Irish countryside. Though the ideologies had their own fierce opponents from the very beginning, putting an emphasis on the depressing underdevelopment and poverty of the countryside, the strength of the rural was supported by the sheer weight of the non-urban population in the South.

The economic process of urbanisation, however, has been causing a shift in terms of social categories in the Republic. Urban growth is the immediate result, involving an increase in the population of urban settlements as well as in the percentage of urban population in general, which slowly but surely alters the image of the Republic of Ireland as a predominantly rural country: sixty percent of the population now lives in towns and cities (*Facts* 15). The growth of towns and cities in terms of size and population happens on the expense of rural areas, thus it causes rural depopulation, changing the age structure of the population of rural settlements and basically determining their course of development, which in most cases is total depopulation and subsequent extinction, causing the total disappearance of the old rural world.

The changing balance between urban and rural influences the imaginative associations of places, among other consequences. Urban growth goes together with the spread of an urban lifestyle, the extra population demands housing and work and this growth with the subsequent demands inevitably lead to unfavourable consequences too. Towns and cities are rarely represented with affection due to a number of historical factors some of which belong to the very recent history of economic growth: higher population density is easily translated into crowding and overcrowding, the larger population includes social strata which do not look neat in the spectrum due to their lack of home, work or observation of the law. The increasing demands of a larger population materialise in the dimension of the infrastructure, which is again a double-faced development: the expansion of urban settlements inevitably leads to the decline of districts as well as produces new ones, and the construction of new parts may happen on the expense of older quarters, though not always of the most depressed ones. Throughout Irish history towns and cities have often been associated with poverty and the shocking presence of crowds of beggars; in accordance with this feature, recent urban development and the influx of the rural population in the hope of better livelihood boost the number of economically handicapped people. The historical dimension suggests the

unfavourable presence of continuity in this respect: the presence of beggars, homeless people and criminals is not a new phenomenon; the proportions have perhaps been changed by the altered circumstances – or not, despite economic development and the subsequent general increase in living standards. This makes up for a rather unpleasant dimension for urban, especially city, life and it explains the considerably universal disaffection of poets towards cities as demonstrated most notably by Thomas Kinsella, Brendan Kennelly and Derek Mahon.

Country places are still generally seen as the true repositories of genuine Irish life. The long history of the favoured simplicity and humbleness of the rural experience still haunts recent poetry yet the modern world finds its channels of intrusion into this world too. With the accession of both the Republic and the North to the European Economic Community in 1973 (now the even further enlarged integration is called European Union) economic borders have been erased and the isolation imposed by geographical location has also disappeared in the wake of technological development – Ireland has been discovered by the tourist industry and this discovery transforms the face of the countryside. The tourist industry and rural depopulation decrease the degree of credibility of what is found in the country – the latter factor leads to the disappearance of genuinely rural patterns of life whereas the former revives these or preserves others artificially, with an eye on the consumer and the market. Other aspects of economic development also contribute to the decline of the old rural world and what comes in the wake of such changes is a more homogeneous and less particularly Irish world. This homogenisation of experience as part of the modern world has been noted by various poets, pointing out the inevitable loss in the process yet acknowledging the ambivalent nature of the old itself: the depraved and often binding and constricting past is *their* past in spite of all its harshness. The resulting tone is often elegiac, with the inherent paradox of the genre of the elegy itself that “memories falsify as they preserve” (Johnston 184); yet it is this personal ‘colouring’ which provides the possibility of recognising a distinct Irish experience of the rural, though perhaps belonging to a world which no longer exists apart from its memories.

The representation of place in poetry introduces certain technical considerations as well. Literature is a temporal art whereas place is a spatial category, thus the literary representation of such a concept as place involves necessary manoeuvres and transformations. Place, however, is not an isolated notion existing in three (or more, as it seems) dimensions: places exist in time as well, they are subject to the effects of the passing of time even if the changes brought about by time are not always observable or relevant. Landscapes appear

basically constant on the timescale governing human life; it is only in radical environments such as coasts that changes are possible to notice, and even then it happens in relation to some human element such as houses falling into the ocean as a result of erosion. Human settlements are those scenes where a humanly intelligible temporal dimension may be arrested – every generation in human civilisation is keen to preserve its mark on the place they inhabit<sup>4</sup>, thus it is the representation of such places, especially urban locations, which needs an intelligent technical solution for arresting both permanence and change. As a consequence the temporality of literature does not significantly alter the image of a landscape in a poem since the timescale of a poem is basically an infinitesimally small unit on the timescale of the natural world. What is observed to be still and unchanging will appear such in a poem too, and processes are easily rendered as minor narrative lines. The temporal dimension in relation to a landscape will be similar to that of the gaze of the observer attempting to come to terms with a full panorama, which also requires time to take in just as the poem is received in time. Places of human settlement offer a somewhat different context: they are the scenes of human life, and as human life unfolds in time, the human experience of a place also involves a temporal dimension – the literary representation endows such places with movement, which is basically the literary equivalent of life itself.

The category of place on one level can easily function as an analogue to the question of Irishness itself. The plurality of possible meanings supports a complex structure with various elements existing not only side by side in it but in a web of relations which may be termed interaction or often even conflict. The sum total of the elements provides the full picture, none of the constituents suffices in itself – each is important and valuable to construct the total vision yet each must be understood in its proper place, lifted out of its context for examination only and acknowledging its ties with the others.

### 3.1. LANDSCAPES

The unpopulated scenery not yet altered by human ingenuity, the natural world devoid of human participation has always exerted a haunting power over the imagination, and this is not any different in the case of Ireland either. Located on an island at the westernmost fringe of Europe Ireland is a place where the ideal landscape is still available, or is generally

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<sup>4</sup> The observation was made by dr Péter Pozder, Head of the Department of Geography at Eszterházy Károly College, Eger

conceived to be available – the island is seen, South and North alike, as a piece of nature in its untouched reality, with only occasional intrusions of human presence considered subordinate in such instances. Plains, rolling hills and haunting mountain scenery with the incomparable greens of the island offer much to contemplate yet most of these are ignored in contemporary poetry. Instead there is nearly always the presence of some form of water both in itself and in its relation to land, mainly in the form of coastal areas, but lakes and bogs also make their contribution, to suggest various implications of water itself: life, power beyond human control, and temporal suggestions of permanence and change simultaneously.

Among landscapes coastal areas bear a special importance due to their peculiar implications – their symbolic dimension is the constant field of battle between land and sea, communities shaping each other in their living together or side by side, depending on the perspective employed. Coasts are especially emblematic if the western coasts are considered since these deep-water shorelines, scenes of erosion, are at the same time the westernmost edges of Europe, and as such they signal not only the border of the country but that of the continent as well, with the suggestion of a cultural frontier too. Whatever happens in such places thus provides a richly suggestive poetic material, often leading to privileged moments of vision, which recalls Romantic antecedents.

### 3.1.1. SOUTH

At the beginning of Derek Mahon's "Beyond Howth Head," despite the title, the western coastal areas of Ireland are briefly evoked and a strange communion is described between the human and the natural world: the houses of the "declining west" "collapse" (Mahon 1999, 52) and fall into the sea, and there is no remedy for these "crumbling shores / of Europe" (ibid), both literal and metaphorical. Though it is a poem from the perspective of Howth, the region of Dublin, the opening of the poem focuses on the western coast with its spectacularly harsh reality becoming emblematic of the inevitability of change and collapse, and by evoking a distant western location it constructs an imaginary bridge between the eastern coast and western one. The physically limited space of an island is thus grasped imaginatively and the insistence on the sea's gaining ground on the expense of the land endows the place with a melancholic undercurrent.

The early poem "A Day Trip to Donegal" is similarly composed elsewhere and only recollects the scene which is a western location too. In the poem a powerful experience is

reconstructed in a telling location: Donegal is part of ancient Ulster but is not included in modern Northern Ireland. In spite of this, the northwest location of the place receives no extra attention from the speaker. The place, however, is still unlike any other as the hills and the sea have unique colours in the region – though the colours themselves are not unusual, green and grey respectively, their depth is distinctive; this is especially suggestive if the former is seen as emanating life, while the latter is rather thought to swallow it. Details of the landscape come to an end with this very short list of green hills and grey sea; the other items mentioned are only boats and the pier, giving the impression of an extremely simple context for life in that part of the world. The return journey is marked by the absence of that “gale-force wind” (Mahon 1999, 259) which defines the weather of the coast, and which perhaps keeps the memory vividly alive for the speaker: he is visited by dreams which reflect and echo the eroding power of the sea, threatening villages and harbours as well as the speaker’s own internal world – his final nightmare of being “alone far out at sea / without skill or reassurance” (ibid) indicates that the trip provides a lasting experience for him.

Though Mahon, unlike some other poets, does not consider the West a peculiar place with an outstanding significance, in the poem the location has a profound impression on the speaker, loading his dream with its own images. There is another Mahon poem in which another western location has a similarly lasting effect on the speaker of the poem. “Thinking of Inis Oírr in Cambridge, Mass.” presents the perfect picture petrified in the memory. The location possesses nearly magic powers as “Reflection in that final sky / Shames vision into simple sight; / Into pure sense, experience.” (Mahon 1999, 29) The scene is conjured in a dream which at the beginning does not make clear whether it is based on actual experience or a simple fantasy; the end of the poem, however, provides the missing piece of information in relation to the basis of the dream: “I clutch the memory still, and I / Have measured everything with it since.” (ibid) This closure would explain much of Mahon’s attitude to place, his oscillations and ambivalences, even perhaps his insistence on locations with unfavourable conditions: the location, an Aran destination, indicates a world in slow decline in spite of its generally acclaimed significance. That the speaker should find in this place an etalon is partly a surprise because of its declining nature – at the same time it indicates the still potent power of the place to yield a profound experience despite contrary expectations. Mahon’s favourite apocalyptic vision, however, finds a perfect soil in such a place.

The same region is evoked in Seamus Heaney’s early “Lovers on Aran” yet Heaney’s gaze is fixed upon another aspect of the place as the poem employs the old image of the relation between sea and land. The trademark Irish location is brought into a contact with

waves coming “from the Americas” (Heaney 1966, 34), thus an all-encompassing Atlantic dimension is evoked, with a corresponding mutual gesture on part of Aran too, as the island is seen embracing the sea. The weight of the vision is concentrated in the last stanza in which sea and land find themselves mutually complemented by the other, coming to a point of fulfilment in terms of the question of identity: “Did sea define the land or land the sea? / Each drew new meaning from the waves’ collision. / Sea broke on land to full identity.” (ibid)

The title would allow for a number of possible meanings in the poem. The generally human reference of lovers can turn the poem into a haunting parallel for love relationships with a strong emphasis on the mutual element. The translation of human terms onto the landscape, however, yields a more encompassing vision, liberating the poem from the constraints of pictorial representation and taking the title in a metaphorical way. Such a reading revises the relation between sea and land along the western coast of Ireland: erosion becomes an integral process of life, hinting at the inevitability of change administered by time and at an acceptance of this general pattern of mutability converging on physical destruction as the analogue of individual life.

The island of the title “Storm on the Island” is not specified beyond the fact that there are no trees on it and hay is equally missing – yet these features strongly suggest a western island. The place appears rather desolate yet it is not without human settlement, since the speaker offers details about homes built on rocks to withstand the hostilities of the weather. The absence of hay and trees is seen at first as a positive feature since the latter can be especially menacing “in a gale” (Heaney 1966, 38). The lack of trees, however, also means that there is “no natural shelter” (ibid), leaving the inhabitants exposed to the storm. The sea is equally an ambivalent presence – at first “You might think that the sea is company” (ibid) in a comfortable distance but in time of harsh weather it “spits like a tame cat / Turned savage.” (ibid) The principal agent of threat on all such occasions is the wind, bringing the human beings together to wait for its passing. This wind becomes Shelley’s invisible destroyer, and its transcendence opens a new dimension to the place: the wind is “empty air,” “a huge nothing that we fear.” (ibid) The visible elements, trees and the sea, would impose no such threat as the wind does – they are, at worst, double-faced, though the absence of the former creates a rather problematic situation as it facilitates the unchecked reign of the wind. The island is not depicted in another context, that of good weather, so the general impression of the place is a one-sided one, with the wind, an invisible and conventionally transcendent element, as the ultimate power ruling it.

“Postscript” suggests a destination for a drive in County Clare yet within that no precise location is identified. Rather than a journey with a terminal point, it turns out to be a drive-through exercise which the speaker encourages thus it attempts to provide an experience of the flux of life, similarly to the early “The Peninsula,” though that poem has a northern setting. The time is more specified, it is to be taken “In September or October, when the wind / And the light are working off each other” (Heaney 1996, 70). It is at such a time that a curious in-between-ness can be experienced:

the ocean on one side is wild  
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones  
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit  
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans (ibid)

The image is one of a dynamic equilibrium as the turbulent sea is contrasted with the slate-grey colour of the lake, yet this monochrome surface is disrupted by and broken up into the turbulence of the unrelaxing swans. The Yeatsian self-enclosed lake-with-swans image is turned into a representation of motion in stillness, an image at once static and dynamic, recalling Wordsworth’s Alpine waterfalls, and thus it intimates a near-transcendental experience. The difficulty of ‘taming’ this vision is also imparted by the speaker, indicating the irrelevance of human desire in such moments: “Useless to think you’ll park and capture it / More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there” (ibid) yet the spectator does not remain unaffected as “big soft buffetings” (ibid) hitting the car “catch the heart off guard and blow it open.” (ibid) Like Wordsworth’s spots of time, such moments are food for the imagination as well as they are the custodians of the youthful self, recalling the perception which was once available but is now only occasionally present.

In “Ballynahinch Lake” the Connemara location acquires a special significance on a Sunday morning for the near-vision that awaits the speaker’s company. There is a “captivating brightness” (Heaney 2000, 26) which makes them stop and which then enters the spectators “like a wedge knocked sweetly home / Into core timber.” (ibid) There is a “pair of waterbirds” (ibid) whose actions they can observe, becoming thus silent and secret participants in the intimate routines of the natural world. The effect of the experience lingers on as they get back into the car: there is a momentary suspension of the normal course of actions: “when she bent / To turn the key she only half-turned it / And spoke, as it were, directly to the windscreen.” (ibid) The words at first do not appear profound yet the

experience itself overwrites whatever might be said on the scene. This poem is yet another instance of the Heaney landscape which defies observation and the human wish to possess sight in an absolute manner: as the speaker indicates in “Postscript” as well, the landscape remains outside, an entity insisting on its separateness, which only partially allows its deciphering, thus the promise of the early poem “The Peninsula” comes to be frustrated – the mature Heaney revises the bold assertion of his youthful vision. The natural world, however, is endowed with a significant power though perhaps of a less consoling type: the vision is offered but the limitation of the imagination to fully grasp it is also demonstrated.

John Montague’s landscapes more explicitly involve the temporal dimension than other poets’ approaches. Montague’s frequent attempts to revitalise past experience in the form of returns endow places with a nearly tangible temporal feature: landscapes become indicators and reminders of change by their very permanence in comparison with the experience of the human observer. One instance of this is found in the poem “Bog Royal” which describes a stop on a northward journey at the Bog of Allen which in turn becomes the Irish landscape par excellence. The persona’s metaphor of ‘a sea of black peat / our land’s wet matrix” (Montague 1995, 136) erases divisions on the level of landscape, perhaps motivated partly by the central location of the place. The rainy weather, another ubiquitous element, gives way to sunlight after a time, and a near idyllic picture of “some reed-fringed island” (ibid) follows. But just as there is a shift between rain and sunshine, the once familiar world has been replaced by something modern, not necessarily alien but somewhat stranger in the context:

pyramids of turf stored  
under glistening polythene:  
chalk white power stations,  
cleaned swathes of bog,  
a carpet sucked clean! (ibid)

The historical heritage offered by the bog functions as a time machine and in a short time the persona is back in the mythical world of the “Great Forests / of Ireland” (ibid) and the “hoarse hunt- / -ing horn of the Fianna.” (ibid) The latter picture is magnified to a strangely active still, yet it is arrested in a late phase of its existence, when it is already in decline and giving way to something different, then new, now equally obsolete:

a marginal civilization  
shading to the sound  
of bells in monastic  
sites, above the still  
broadening Shannon,  
or sheltered on some lake-  
shore or wooded island:  
from Derg to Devenish,  
Loughs Gowna to Erne. (Montague, 1995 137)

The symbolic location of “Red Island” is made clear in the first line of the poem which is at once a separate unit: “Time could stop here.” (Montague 1995, 140) The cunning auxiliary liberates the poem in time, doing just what it asserts, merging past with present, and the person’s reflexive consciousness capitalises on this opportunity. The routine actions out of time render anything else irrelevant, the memories attached to the place have enough power to compel the persona to “stretch in the grass” (Montague 1995, 141). As this is a near-idyllic place, “an immense stillness hangs / over Red Island” (ibid), yet this stillness acquires a less comforting dimension as the description continues: the stillness is over a “drowned land” (ibid), a “watery graveyard” (ibid) which is the scene of the death-struggle of a river on “its slow weed-choked way / to swell the Shannon.” (ibid) The pastoral image is disturbed and the utopistic promise of the first line is checked as the persona is reminded of the rift between the timeless and the temporal. Yet Montague does everything to bring the smaller river to a standstill, to reconcile the two; if only temporarily, he manages to arrest time and keep it solid for the spell of the poem, fulfilling the potential in its opening line.

Matthew Sweeney’s western coast possesses immense powers but of a different kind than those found in Mahon’s or Heaney’s poems. The rocky coast becomes what it actually is for those on water: a hazardous place with small traps which very quickly become sources of tragic events. The poem “Where Fishermen Can’t Swim” records a tragedy whose horror is increased by the speaker’s step-by-step technique of describing the situation. The setting is “the ice-age coast of Donegal” (Sweeney 2002, 28), a rocky and dangerous area, where a lobster-boat gets stuck because of an engine failure. A member of the crew, the youngest, leaps to a rock to give the boat a push, only to recognise that there is no way back to the boat. At first it is the problem of not being able to jump back; then the immobility of the boat

begins to darken the scene, especially that the engine would not start again. There is neither a rope nor a lifebelt to save him; there is, however, the radio to call for help. As in all classical tragedies a weak light appears to offer only a delaying of the catastrophe: a helicopter would arrive, but only an hour later. This is cruelly put into the proper perspective by the speaker's announcement of the tide, with high tide due to arrive in forty minutes, overflowing the rock. The closing juxtaposition locks all the humans present on the scene into a desperate situation: the lonely victim and the equally isolated crew will have to wait and watch, without being able to change anything, how the tide rises and swallows the stranded one.

The wild and rugged Donegal coastline thus becomes the scene of a horrific experience. The question of the speaker concerns the exact time when the recognition of the inevitable happens; yet the completing of the full picture is done in such a way as to obscure this moment. The situation reflects an old preoccupation on another level too: the tragedy of the young man is also a reminder of the fragility of the human being and a nearly Shakespearean indication of the powerlessness of man in the face of the forces of nature. Though technology provides a set of comforting devices, they are either unavailable in a crucial situation or too late to arrive to change anything. The "ice-age coast" then plays a fatal trick on these fishermen, taking its revenge on the exploiters of the sea and a rather hostile face of nature is shown.

Thomas Kinsella's "Ballydavid Pier", regarded as a "skewed 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'" (Jackson 38), is also set in a western coastal location, though a south-western one, with its attention turned toward the sea. The rising of the tide comfortably provides a structural pattern, yet the conclusion is anticlimax rather than culmination since the never-ceasing toil of the water calls the speaker's attention to "a bag of flesh, / Foetus of goat or sheep" (Kinsella 1996, 56) after meditating on the life-giving potential of the sea. In a highly self-conscious way the explicit offering of "Allegory" (Kinsella 1996, 57) is grabbed: the eternal movement of life is contrasted with this unintelligible failure, and the speaker delivers even an apostrophe to the grotesque form, recognising its stranded neither-life-nor-death status. In the distance bell-notes register the passing of time and the routines of life yet these apparently have nothing to do with the scene; events and actions of the human world are seen as repetitive and insignificant in the moment as the speaker is absorbed in his observation of the foetus, a strange instance of timeless reality amid reminders of a temporal world.

The shore thus becomes a place where visionary meetings may happen, though the situation itself embodies certain ambivalences. The speaker's contemplation of the constant work of the sea opens an extraordinary dimension as he prepares to receive the vision of the

forming of life in the water. His mission is cut short in a way when he notices the foetus, just to launch himself on a new course by integrating this new element into his pattern. The experience turns into an unexpected one as the recognition that the foetus has gone through neither birth nor death suspends that 'creature' in a timeless dimension, thus completing a vision in which a timeless form encounters the temporal world. Kinsella's fascination with the general pattern of individual existence (cf. Johnston 105-106) explains the tragic nature of such an encounter, and the conclusion of the poem is an interesting twist on the history of such visionary moments: the enlightening experience is essentially tragic. All this happens in an environment which itself is a frontier zone, with the speaker turning his back on the land and facing the sea, thus reversing the usual preferences.

"Song of the Night" begins its far-reaching itinerary in Philadelphia: there an atlas is opened and that transports the speaker to an Irish location with the agency of a memory. The second section of the poem bears the title "Carraroe," another western location, a place with the memory of an excursion there. There is a longish description of the shore and the water in its never-ceasing work of the waves and the tide, and an account of routine-like actions of an excursion such as tidying up after eating or staring at the ocean from the edge of it. The speaker's contemplation of the water leads to the recognition of the fact that the shore exists independently of human presence in a kind of timeless world, and that such an excursion is only a temporary intrusion into the life of the shore. The humanising intention is at work, however, as the constant sounds of the ocean become a new music, a song of the night, and the dark immediately comes to life:

The bay – every inlet – lifted  
and glittered toward us in articulated light.  
The land, a pitch-black stage  
of boulder shapes and scalps of heaped weed,  
inhaled. (Kinsella 1996, 216)

The landscape awakens and comes to life, and the poem subsequently evokes the spirit of Wordsworth and of the Romantic landscape, yet Kinsella's human figures do not appear as integral parts of nature, the dichotomy of nature and civilisation is maintained.

Legendary history underlines the sense of place in "The Route of the Táin." The poem traces the events of a car journey which intends to follow the legendary path of the Connacht army; the modern pilgrimage is undertaken to provide a real frame for the legends. Various

modern devices are employed to turn the experiment into a memorable experience yet their initial failure to find what they are searching for shatters the presumed superiority of the modern world. The frustration of the lack of concord between the landscape and the map reduces the human characters to the status of a beast ignorantly existing in the landscape, and this already makes the occasion a memorable one. Everything changes, however, in a moment as a fox runs out of the bracken and shows them the way, facilitating recognition: the concept of the beast of the earlier passage is heavily revised and the subsequent mental processes are elaborately detailed, culminating in the final enlightenment in which the ancient story becomes more than a story, with identifiable reference points in the actual landscape.

The section describing the sight is reminiscent of Wordsworth's Alpine accounts, especially the "gloomy pass" (Kinsella 1996, 125) is an element that would fit the earlier poet's diction. The modern figures restore something of their dignity by being able to read the sign and follow it; even if maps and books are inadequate, the ability of orientation is still possessed by the speaker and his company. The landscape in sunlight opens up the much awaited enormous panorama, and the picture again recalls the spirit of Wordsworth and through him Milton too – a remarkable perspective: "Before us / the route of the *Táin*" (ibid). The conclusion of the poem, however, leads towards a more sobering stance: as they contemplate the land, their gaze wanders "toward these hills that seemed to grow / darker as we drove nearer."(ibid) The northward itinerary of the Connacht army suggests the hills of the North, with the corresponding hint at the conflict, both the ancient and the modern one; on another level the idea of getting too close to the required destination blocks the proper observation of it, echoing something of Wordsworth's experience.

### 3.1.2. NORTH

Seamus Heaney's "The Peninsula" chooses a peculiar though basically unspecified location for its setting. The poem employs a confidential tone and suggests the outlines of the experience which can be gained while driving "For a day all round the peninsula" (Heaney 1990, 11), in a "land without marks so you will not arrive // But pass through" (ibid). From among the landmarks registered on the way only the 'ploughed field' (ibid) is reminiscent of human presence and activity, everything else belongs to uninhabited and undisturbed nature. The profound experience which such an outing may yield will enable the person to "decode all landscapes" (ibid) by the universal dimension embedded in the scene, "things founded clean on their own shapes, / Water and ground in their extremity." (ibid)

The peninsula is an instance of land intruding into water, thus a lengthening of the coastline and a similar widening of the zone of meeting between land and sea. As such it is a place where self-definition is achieved by the immediate presence of the other, with land and water each taking turns in defining the other rather than themselves. Still, the peninsula, and its more general context, the coast is one which does not exist in the form of a simple definition; it becomes meaningful only in the presence of opposites. At the same time the peninsula retains its character as intrusion into water in its physical reality, thus it displays a stubborn insistence on being a part of something not itself, moreover, something radically different – but difference only makes sense in a dialectic relationship, in the full presence of both sides.

The perspective of “The Peninsula” would paradoxically suggest permanence by its requirement of passing and the picture of the shore itself; landscapes, however, change their significance in time in the light of contemporary circumstances. Heaney’s fascination with places is constant, yet what he reads in them shifts with his broadening of vision and knowledge: thus a place heavily loaded with contemporary historical weight in moments of stress and danger turns into one of inspiration for totally different reasons in another. The recent poem “At Toomebridge” revisits the place in the vicinity of which the speaker’s earlier self has an unnerving experience, an encounter with armoured cars intruding into his world. The location is more specific in its reference than the earlier poem – the exact point is now Toomebridge, instead of the earlier rather vague road; the choice accordingly suggests a different symbolic undercurrent. The point is one where water from Lough Neagh finds outlet, the water thus moving from a lake to a stream; in addition, there is historical significance too. The natural, however, outweighs the historical: more space is devoted to the water pouring out of the lake, to “negative ions in the open air” (Heaney 2000, 3) and to “the fattened eel” (ibid) than to the former checkpoint and the hanging site of a rebel boy from the eighteenth century. The two domains, nature and history, are nevertheless reconciled in the final image of the eel, as the past tenses give way to the present with the time marker “As once before” (ibid). That the significance of the place is now fully associated with creation is proved by the image of the transfer of water from the still body of the lake into the movement of a stream and the “negative ions” which are “poetry” (ibid) to the speaker.

The natural scenery of the North means something else for Derek Mahon. The landscape becomes a reminder of the permanence of nature, its ability to reclaim areas brought into human activity, with the frequent suggestion of the insignificance of the human being. There is an acute awareness of the temporality of human life and there is also a doubt

about transcendental human effort, with the speaker subscribing to Beckettian patterns. The chosen places are often desolate locations, desolate because of the missing human element yet there is a wild beauty in his locations, a suggestion of elemental powers which are multifariously beyond human control and they do not necessarily need constant human presence for recognition, and which powers occasionally exert a haunting influence on the speaker exactly for their wild nature.

In “Rathlin” the island off the north coast of the North is chosen as the theme and the location of the poem. The island has a heavy historical heritage, an early seventeenth-century massacre of women and children as a power demonstration. Just as in other Mahon poems, however, the natural world reclaims the scene after the historical trauma, the “unnatural silence” (Mahon 1999, 107) is replaced by “A natural silence” interrupted only by the sound of birds. The “sanctuary” (ibid) of the island has not been disturbed for a long time, the speaker thus may justifiably feel as if they “were the first visitors” (ibid) there. Nature’s takeover has been complete, the small but existing human population of the island is not even mentioned as it is seen in the matrix of elsewhere: “Bombs doze in the housing estates / But here they are through with history.” (ibid)

Providing a frame for the poem, the “unspeakable violence” (ibid) is mentioned again, with the stark contrast between human presence and natural peace. The boat leaving the island is another instance of disturbing the silence, this time it is aided by the sound of a bird. The speaker leaves the place in a state of uncertainty “Whether the future lies before us or behind” (ibid). The pronoun is general enough to liberate its referent, and the question is one that similarly allows for a range of possible interpretations, especially in the light of the explicit reference to the brooding conflict of the North, with the implication of the past by the future, that journeys involve both origins and destinations, that across from the future lies the past, depending only on the direction of the movement. Given the historical significance of the location, temporal and spatial may also be collapsed into each other: what is left behind is at the same time the before of the temporal dimension. The troubled present would find hope in such a conflation but Mahon’s speakers are rarely that optimistic. The case is rather that in the general Mahonian view the question may also lose its significance – if nature is the beginning as well as the end then the future is before as well as behind, the only permanence (if there is such a thing) is that of nature.

The poem “The Sea in Winter” is built on the stark contrast between a Greek island and a rather dreary Northern coastal location. Against the richness of colour and the warm climate of the former the “draughty bungalow in Portstewart” (Mahon 1999, 115) has little to

offer, especially that the not too attractive physical conditions of “thin air” and “gale-force wind” (ibid) are coupled by “rednecks” and “gangs” (Mahon 1999, 116) making the location “No place for a gentleman” (ibid). Yet “there *is* that Hebridian sunset, // and a strange poetry of decay” (ibid) which turn this place into something distinct and charming in its own right, and it is in such a place that the mentioned “goddess” (ibid) can make sense, returning in the spring after the desolation of ‘long winter months’ (ibid). “The sea in winter” (ibid) can become the embodiment of the less glorious aspects of the human experience, “the something rotten in the state,” “the spite” (ibid) become tangible through the agency of “this infernal / backwater” (ibid). Yet it is in the face of such a presence that the frontier-like character of this northern location becomes manifest, demanding ‘heroism and cowardice / of living on the edge of space’ (Mahon 1999, 117). The vision inspired by the place shines brightly, projecting an ideal future as realisable but at once the location drags the dreamer back to the ground making him see things as they are – or not, as the case may be: ‘I who know nothing go to teach / while a new day crawls up the beach’ (ibid).

As if to further darken the northern world, “An Image from Beckett” evokes a northern landscape, with details so sparse that even Beckett would be proud of it. The bleak vision of the future only touches upon this location yet there is an uncharacteristically soothing element in its ‘description’: the “soft rush of its winds” (Mahon 1999, 41) is in fact the only particular detail of the place. This is in strong contrast with other Mahonian instances of northern winds – they generally are “gale-force winds,” better forgotten than to be exposed to them; here the winds are mellowed to a gentle sound and they appear rather friendly and pleasant than alien and threatening.

“Craigvara House” goes a step further and turns the landscape into something friendly despite its usual bleakness. The speaker’s self-imposed isolation is set in a northern coastal location, in a special time as “That was the year / of the black nights and clear / mornings” (Mahon 1999, 134) – in itself such a time marker should not be distinctive as nights *are* black and mornings tend to be clear, yet a metaphoric dimension readily opens as the purpose of the exile is clarified: the speaker intends to spend some time on his own, immersing himself in reading and writing. The backdrop is a peaceful and deserted place where “the wind made harpstrings on the sea” (ibid) and “the first / rain of winter burst / earthwards as if quenching a great thirst.” (ibid) The day is quiet and misty while the night turns less friendly, taking up the usual Mahonian attributes: the sea becomes rough and mist is replaced by rain. The speaker, however, finds delight in the location, enjoying what the weather offers as well as his frugal comfort: there is “no phone, no television, / nothing to break my concentration” (Mahon

1999, 135) and the weather keeps him indoors with his reading and writing. It is also in the context of the night that the place is located in history as well by a reference to the “interned” (ibid), with their lamps visible “over the water” (ibid).

The location now serves a positive and reassuring function. Despite its bleakness, or perhaps right because of it, the speaker finds the perfect environment to descend into himself. The roughness of the outside world induces a profound introspection, thus it facilitates discovery, reflected in “the new-won knowledge of my situation” (ibid) and in his fresh start to writing. Night-time contemplation and proper dreams bring inspiration and the image of a thrush “practising on a thorn bush / a new air picked up in Marrakesh” (Mahon 1999, 136) recalls romantic precedents for this artist-figure. There is a return of the speaker’s companion at the end, so the speaker’s revival is fully accomplished. Much of this process is facilitated by the landscape itself, with its particular features – another landscape would be unlikely to bring about the same regeneration.

### 3.2. THE URBAN WORLD

In one of his poems registering life in Belfast, “The Bomb Disposal,” Ciaran Carson declares “The city is a map of the city, / Its forbidden areas changing daily.”(Carson in Ormsby 265) In another poem, “Turn Again”, the persona is engaged in a desperate struggle against the background of the city: ‘I turn into / A side-street to try to throw off my shadow, and history is changed.’(Carson 1987, 7) The ideas associated with the city in these lines are seemingly incongruent with the concept of the city itself – the city is an actual location, consisting of three dimensions of space and one dimension of time, whereas the map is a two-dimensional rendering of the city, a fiction, and history is a process rendered in a discourse, a fiction in a way. Carson’s approach may be understood as an attempt to translate the dynamism of the city into the terms of art, a human(ising) activity just as cartography or historiography: maps embody the human intention of orientation by stabilising their referent in time and rendering their spatial dimensions on a tangible scale, and the writing of history serves the aim of a desperate struggle to anchor the uncontrollable flow of time to certain points of reference.

Literary renderings of cities bear an interesting relation to the cities themselves. The concept of the 'city in literature' in itself is seen as something peculiar as it requires a certain transformation of the city. As Burton Pike explains it,

The image of the city in a literary work occupies a peculiar position. Since its empirical referent is a physical object in space, the word-city is an inherently spatial image. But this unavoidable association with spatiality conflicts in modern literature with the dominating convention of time. Perhaps this explains why so many cities in contemporary literature are etherealised or disembodied, like Biely's St Petersburg, Musil's Vienna, or Eliot's London. This etherealisation reduces their spatial presence so that they appear as dependencies of time; they become images which reflect transitoriness rather than stable corporeal places. (Pike quoted in Kirkland 33-34)

The 'city in literature' interpreted in this way is a set of images defined in terms of time rather than space, and transitoriness is emphasised over stability. Real cities, however, also exist in time, and thus are dependencies of time, consequently the challenge in relation to a city is the representation of both stability *and* change. What Pike considers "reduction" should perhaps be better termed transmutation and employed as such: the transformation of the city takes the form of dissection with the very aim of removing the transitory elements and fronting some essential core that escapes mutability, with the attempt of constructing a "corporeal" place in language, whereas the temporal is best grasped in narratives, often by the paradoxical strategy of insisting on the routines of life which are at once temporary and permanent. "Etherealisation" and "disembodiment" would suggest the separation of the physical dimension from something mysterious and spirit-like and grabbing that rather than what is observable – this would dispose of the city itself and would in turn produce not so much a representation but an independent imaginary construct. Though the physical dimension is subject to mutability as a city never equals the simple totality of its buildings, this immediate physical world demands a place alongside that mysterious element which is fancifully identified as the 'spirit of the place.'

The approach to cities in contemporary Irish poetry involves both stability and change as their focal points. Physical details are evoked for accurate portraits of the places and minor stories contribute to the sketch of life in them. Slower but more profound change is also arrested in the context of contemporary historical processes and events, often considered through specific characters of the public sphere of life. The literary antecedent is offered by

Joyce – his Dublin could not be any more corporeal than it is, proving the possibility of representing the city as it is in the temporal world of literature.

As far as Irish cities represented in literature are concerned, Dublin takes precedent over any other place. Dublin has long been a written city, its literary renderings are numerous and frequent. The arch-artist of the city is certainly James Joyce yet more recent poetic visions are likewise present – Thomas Kinsella’s night-time version of Dublin would neatly fit the Joycean one if the temporal shift is taken into consideration. The more urban North, however, has failed to erect a counter-pole to the southern city: Belfast has not got anywhere close to Dublin in this respect. Writers for a long time were the “invisible exports” (E. Longley 1994, 87) of the city due to its basically hostile approach to literary activity. The predominantly economic focus of life in Belfast did not foster a cultural flourishing due mainly to the strictly Protestant ethos of a part of its population; it was only in the 1960s that significant literary activity began in the city, which marks the beginning of Belfast’s life in literature too.

There is a marked hostility observable on part of the poets addressing the urban world on either sides of the border though the tendency appears stronger in the South. David Lloyd suggests that this antagonism is due to the fact that cities, especially Dublin, are “sites of cultural hybridization as well as centres of imperial authority and capital domination” (Lloyd 93). Apart from the openly colonial context the general plight of the modern world of the city is also a factor to consider – it is not only the conditioned and inherited hostility towards the colonial authority that renders cities unpleasant places but the more universal tendency of dehumanisation observable in large urban settlements.

### 3.2.1. SOUTH:DUBLIN

The capital of Ireland plays a more than emblematic role in the poetry discussing Irish experience. The only metropolitan centre of the republic has about one quarter of the population of the country and is therefore a city of its own category in the hierarchy of settlements. Capitals always function as major political, administrative, economic and cultural centres and Dublin is no exception to this rule either. As a significant port it is easily accessible, as the leading population concentration it provides a diverse enough work force for various economic activities, which has considerably altered the image of the city in the last couple of decades. The one time backward colonial seat has become a bustling metropolis

with all the implied changes of the process. The economic growth of the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, has proved to be something far from exclusively positive. The demands for housing for an increasing population have led to reconstruction projects in the city – the spectacular springing up of housing estates is one certain sign of economic growth and the spread of suburbs proves the concurrent improvement of living standards in the process, at least for a certain segment of the population; such alterations necessarily lead to cultural consequences as well. Dublin has turned into a typical modern city, with all the ingredients of modern city life, involving not only the glamour of this but the less desirable elements as well – ample illustration of this is found in all fields of literary activity in the country, especially in such recent novels as those of Roddy Doyle.

Naturally Dublin has carved out a place for itself in the recent poetry of Ireland – though interestingly enough, the city is only addressed by those who count as inhabitants of it, as if visitors were forbidden, or at least reluctant, to access the experience of the modern city. The city definitely demands a reaction from those living in it, springing from the daily necessity of confrontation with and survival in it. As cities are human constructs, they tend to take on human faces and human attributes, often with the aim of charming and captivating people – and as such, they tend to escape human control, living a life of their own, leaving the poet with the task of penetrating the immediately visible face of the city for an understanding of its underlying essence. Dublin fosters such creative energies in the poets, though perhaps paradoxically or ironically, for scorning it rather than embracing the city. This is indicative of the critical spirit towards those processes and energies which have turned the city into what it is: the criticism of the city is at once the criticism of ideologies and of the historical processes initiated by the ideologies.

Thomas Kinsella is *the* Dublin poet – by birth and upbringing, by residence and, most important of all, by imaginatively locating himself in the city and of the city in a number of poems. Kinsella's earlier occupation as a civil servant offers him an insight into the dynamism of the transformation of the country and its capital city, therefore his poems provide an excellent guide to Dublin as it appears from the inside for a person with a grasp of what is actually happening to it. As a resident in the city his attachment is strong, yet this does not equal an uncritical stance, especially with his involvement in the economic resurgence of his place. With the passing of time the fallibility of the agents of change becomes manifest, leaving behind much bitterness and even more deprivation, yet Kinsella's confession that Dublin is his place (cf. Kinsella 1996, 283) marks his unchangeable rootedness in the city.

Kinsella's most comprehensive treatment of Dublin is contained in 'Nightwalker,' a poem composed in the 1960s, the decade of the opening of the Republic towards the global economy. The poem is the account of a late night walk in Dublin, offering a rather sinister view of the city as it is transfigured by moonlight yet remains essentially the same place: the modernising metropolis of a country desperate to attract foreign investment for growth, and thus slowly but surely growing alien for its inhabitants. The shadows of daylight items may grow threateningly bizarre in this time of the day but these shadows are still unable to make the speaker, a civil servant employed in the Department of Finance, forget about the administrative and economic function of the city. Interestingly enough what is depicted is not Dublin as a residence, a city translated into a web of streets with houses, but rather the city as an economic and a political unit: the abstract dimension dominates and the occasional cataloguing of detail comprises only familiar and typical items. Still, the many faces of the capital city are perhaps the most vividly caught in this piece among Kinsella's poems, with a strong element of criticism directed against contemporary politics as well, which is partly self-reflexive if Kinsella's status as a civil servant is considered and thus offers a perspective on *his* participation in the process of modernisation too.

The unnumbered opening lines prepare the reader for an excursion into a rather awkward world. An emphasis is placed on the speaker's awareness of the elements shaping human vision, the will groping for structure, the combat between "madness" and "reason" (Kinsella 1996, 76), the alternation of moments of insight with moments of blindness – the speaker thus comments on the poem that follows and this passage serves as partly an explanation and partly perhaps an excuse for the structural logic governing the process of composition, a logic which is rather unusual in the poetic tradition in which the poet is generally located. The first sentence of the first numbered section, "I only know things seem and are not good" (ibid) takes this self-reflexive introductory passage one step further into a world where traditional ideas of order are not only suspended but replaced by a more distressing set of assumptions about the world. The beginning of the walk thus unfolds in a darkness that is not purely literal. Windows hiding "pale entities" (ibid) and people working in the underground laboratory are associated with "Near Necropolis" (Kinsella 1996, 77), rendering the sleeping people even more passive and attributing the personnel in the laboratory magic powers, as they are "Embalmers" (ibid), preparing their clients for the Otherworld – yet the word "near" immediately introduces the tentativeness of these intentions.

The persona is reminded of his ties to the citizens and indicates the temporariness of his walk. The daily routine of middle-class city-dwellers is arrested through the least attractive details: the early morning scratching while going downstairs for tea, leaving the house, waiting at the station, all performed with the sole purpose of doing useful work for “our businesses and government” (ibid). The brief summing up of the economic principles of the Republic culminates in the image of the Dublin statue of liberty – “Robed in spattered iron she stands / At the harbour mouth, Productive Investment” (ibid), then memories of the civil servant follow, “Spirit shapes” (Kinsella 1996, 78) with a real dimension behind them – officials, ministers, people of power, most of them with a past, with a role in turning Ireland into an independent country, now engaged in the labour of turning her into a prosperous one or perhaps in reflecting on their own images, of what they have become. The allegorical story of the “Wedding Group” of “The Groom, the Best Man, the Fox” (ibid) concludes this section – apart from the actual references (cf. Jackson 46, footnote 2) the story functions perfectly as a general tale of betrayal of friends for power.

The second section of the poem opens with casual images of lamp, light and shadow, and thus returns speaker and reader to the point of departure, the walk at night as an actual exercise. A page of the day’s paper is glimpsed in the gutter, with the picture of a “new young minister” in “his hunting suit” (Kinsella 1996, 79). The obvious metaphoric evocation of the perishable nature of things is not yet played out by the speaker as he continues his walk and presents other details observed on his way – Victorian houses and “the tower” (Kinsella 1996, 80). The mysterious dark realm beyond the reach of the lamplight, however, is not lifeless – darkness, at least in that domain, does not equal the absence of life.

“Watcher in the tower, / Be with me now” (ibid) is the invocation to the spirit of the place and the ghost of Joyce now becomes a real and active participant of the poem. So far it has been implied by the method Kinsella takes in composing his poem, now there is an explicit calling upon Joyce to assist the poet in his attempt to grasp his vision. The subsequent details would not look out of place in “Circe” either as the mysterious creatures are evoked by the persona’s consciousness; the hauntingly Joycean description of a phantom horseman is followed by the excited exclamation of the speaker, “Father of Authors!” (ibid), to fully realise a dense pastiche-like paragraph with a cunning self-referential comment inserted towards the end of the passage: “Subjects will find the going hard but rewarding.” (Kinsella 1996, 81) The phantom vision recedes as “The soiled paper settles back in the gutter” (ibid), with its heading, “The New Ireland,” more than ironically suggestive. The thoughts of the speaker centre on the minister in his hunting suit, declaring him no worse than the former old

ones in the position. The picture comes alive in the mind of the persona, the hunt begins, and the metaphoric transfer of the scene onto the level of politics offers a link with the first part of the poem.

The foot of the tower is seen as a special place “where the darkness / Is complete.”(Kinsella 1996, 81) The peaceful harbour allows the speaker to become conscious of his physical state and the smell of his body plunges him into a memory of school years – Brother Burke and his harping on the usual anguish of the Irish, the consequences of being subjected to a strong colonising power. The speaker cannot share the nationalist zeal of his former instructor as it is shown by his comparison of the statue of the Blessed Virgin to “young Victoria” (Kinsella 1996, 82) and by the ironic comment on the sole achievement of the school, the abundance of civil servants for the country. The evocation of the legendary figure of Amergin provides a more elevated dimension yet this involves a more profound sense of loss as well: the persona’s quiet remark, “A dying language / Echoes across a century’s silence” (Kinsella 1996, 83), achieves more sympathy than the bombast rhetoric of the recalled Brother Burke. The quotidian, however, intrudes again as the speaker contemplates shadows of domestic life thrown against curtains in the Dublin night.

Finding the night-time Dublin short of further inspiration, the speaker fixes his gaze upon the Moon in the fourth section. The second stanza of this section offers a recollection with near-epic overtones (with an eye on Kinsella’s later poetry it foreshadows the technique of later sequences – his frequent reliance on early Irish myths and stories can be arrested in allusions and quotations of such narrative material) – the picture, though, is general enough to lead to a somewhat out-of-place didacticism in the third stanza. There is a teleological vision of history shining through these lines:

There are times it is all part of a meaningful drama  
Beginning in the grey mists of antiquity  
And reaching through the years to unknown goals  
In the consciousness of man, which makes it less gloomy. (ibid)

The picture once again dissolves into images of the night scene but the items are no longer man-made ones – natural elements existing independently of humans (with the exception of the “odour of lamplight” (ibid), heavily dependent on human ingenuity) are registered, but it is still the Moon which is the principal agent of creativity: there is even an apostrophe and an invocation addressed to it.

The transformation of the speaker seems complete in the last section; the short tercets of the passage support what the persona asserts in a figure: “I am an arrow / Piercing the void” (Kinsella 1996, 84). The journey ends in an embarrassing recognition, not significantly different from the conclusion of Joyce in his Dublin short stories and this section also echoes T. S. Eliot’s postwar doom. Modernisation brings about similar conditions of sterility as conflict does, and the rise of living standards and comforts do not automatically produce a culturally vibrant world. The last stanza of the poem forges a picture the ambiguous nature of which shows the feeling of the persona’s being totally lost – the casually naïve “I think” introduces a metaphor which in turn is explained in a language compressing conversational and a kind of discursive style, crowning the night-walk in the proper fashion:

I think this is the Sea of Disappointment.  
If I stoop down, and touch the edge, it has  
A human taste, of massed human wills. (ibid)

Kinsella’s night time Dublin is strangely devoid of people apart from the mysterious laboratory personnel and the recollected characters of daily civil life. The city thus comes into its own, waking to a ‘life’ beyond life, with occasionally bizarre details – of which the most bizarre is perhaps the lack of life itself. Kinsella’s persona basically becomes an alternative to Joyce’s wished-for reader as he is an ideal walker with an ideal insomnia, and the partially conditioned eyesight of a day-time civil servant is modified by the effects of fatigue in the wake of his sleeplessness. The city is regarded with suspicion, the persona does not subscribe to a belief in the benevolent direction of the growth of the place; rather, he (and Kinsella principally) assumes an antagonistic position to the official ideology of economic growth yielding a better life.

“Phoenix Park” deals with the story of moving from one place to another, and its fourth section provides a short assessment of the city of Dublin similar to that of “Nightwalker.” Dublin is “the umpteenth city of confusion” (Kinsella 1996, 92), with “Pale light” (ibid) over it, and out of the “faint multitudes” (ibid) “A murmur of soft, wicked laughter rises.” (ibid) The picture turns even darker as the city is seen as “A theatre for the quick articulate / The agonized genteel, their artful watchers” (Kinsella 1996, 93), with the speaker perhaps belonging to this last group. There is nothing elevating about Dublin; on the contrary, it is a place where “dead men, / Half-hindered by dead men, tear down dead beauty.” (ibid) If this is what greets the speaker on arrival, he needs to forge his own approach

to be able to handle all this: ‘Return by the mental ways we have ourselves / Established.’” (ibid) This recalls “Nightwalker” with its aloof speaker, contemplating and describing but not engaging, remaining always careful to keep enough distance between himself and what is observed, with commentaries reserved for an antagonistic position rather than a supporting one.

In the much later poem “One Fond Embrace” the meditative speaker involves also the city of Dublin in his reflection. The city has moved along the course of ‘development’ indicated in the earlier poems and it is now shown as a background to a resulting rigid social division into the two groups of the rich and the poor where development happens solely for the sake of making profit for a small group:

Invisible speculators, urinal architects,  
and the Corporation flourishing their documents  
in potent compliant dance

– planners of the wiped slate  
labouring painstaking over a bungled city  
to turn it into a zoo (Kinsella 1996, 284)

The contrast is made explicit in the juxtaposition of residential districts, with a “twinned experimental / concrete piss-tower for the underprivileged” (ibid) in one of them. The centre of the city does not fare any better: plans exist and function until the money runs out, what is left is an unfinished ‘memorial,’ inducing the speaker to an angry wish: “May their sewers blast under them!” (Kinsella 1996, 285) In spite of all its repulsive features the place is still one with a profound importance for the speaker: “I never want to be anywhere else” (Kinsella 1996, 283).

Kinsella’s renderings of Dublin reflect the stereoscopic vision of a person connected to the city by various ties yet retaining his critical faculties in spite of all attachment. In Kinsella’s voice the former civil servant, the poet, the translator of Gaelic poetry and the Dublin citizen meet and negotiate their different claims, thus the vision is a complex and challenging one. Limitations and shortcomings are not generously forgotten but the final verdict is a return to emotional categories and life-long attachment – that Kinsella considers Dublin his place is the confession of a rooted person.

Though a poet of rural origins in County Kerry, Brendan Kennelly has long been a Dublin resident. His keen eyes for perception grant him a familiarity with the details of modern metropolitan life and his accounts of Dublin give a vision of the city in which the least sympathetic aspects of modern Dublin are foregrounded and the finished picture is one that perfectly undermines any idealising attempt of the city. His attempt is radically different from that of Kinsella and his account does not involve self-reflexive or introspective elements but the city of his vision is also one dominated by the less attractive consequences of economic development and the concurrent rise of living standards. Though Kennelly is never explicit about his belonging to the city as a resident, there is a moment which approximates the confessional: the early Sunday morning walk of one particular poem opens up a city which he appears willing to embrace, yet not without a strain of ambiguity.

Kennelly's principal vision of Dublin is provided in the poem "Dublin: A Portrait." A comfortably distant perspective is immediately established by the first word of the poem, "There", which indicates the position of the persona as an observer detached from the scene. The deficient syntactic structure of the first sentence supports a panoramic technique of registering catalogue items – which items are supposed to be people of the city:

There the herds of eloquent phonies,  
Dark realities kept in the dark,  
Squalor stinking at many a corner,  
Poverty showing an iron hand;  
There the tinker sprawls on the pavement (Kennelly 1990, 123)

Proper syntactic order appears from the second sentence on and the comments on the various catalogued items become more elaborate. The whole city becomes a hotbed of gossip and rumour, church towers serve to block out the light rather than guide the human glance skywards and religious ritual is reduced to bargaining with God for getting on, indicating the complete conquest of the spiritual by economic forces. The only real effort is reserved for the sea which is engaged in the next to impossible struggle of cleansing the city of its human load and filth.

The 'items' of Kennelly's catalogue are people of different social positions yet the ironic distance reduces them to little more than vegetative beings. The listing begins with "the herds of eloquent phonies," accompanied by the tinker, the typical Irish element, and the lunatic, then a brief glance at the suburban world introduces the prosperous "dead men", just

to return to the other extreme, the “defeated,” who “Makes a drunken myth of deprivation” (ibid). None of the registered representatives of Dublin life acquires any sort of dignity, all of them merit only the contempt of the observer, pointing to the repulsive and impersonal nature of city life. ‘Communal value’ is dependent on social consensus which is not shared by the persona – the “eloquent phonies” are presumably fashionable in terms of city life, the “dead men” or “corpses” of the suburbs certainly are such creatures.

The unfavourable portraits of typical characters give way to more general and at once more impersonal elements: gossips and “Rumours of rumours” fill the city, further reducing the personal dimension of the picture, just to come to a nadir in the oxymoron of the “Holy frauds” who ‘Bargain with God that they may get on.’ (ibid) The all-conquering merchant mentality noted by Kinsella is made manifest without any sense of shame. The poem closes with the image of the sea in its never-ceasing conflict with the shore. Though the sea is engaged in the activity of ‘Washing the feet of the stricken city, / Trying to purge its human filth” (ibid), the religious associations of the words do not create the corresponding atmosphere, and the progressive aspect clearly marks the futility and impossibility of ever completing the otherwise noble enterprise.

The second part of the title of the poem, “A Portrait” indicates distance, the idea of recording details from an objective perspective – yet Kennelly’s persona cannot remain unengaged, even if it involves a rather obsessive exhortation of what he sees around himself. The repeated “There” points to a panoramic viewpoint but the picture is informed by the experience of the keen-eyed observer in close relation with what he is dealing with, a person with intimate and perhaps even immediate knowledge of these details. The technique of the poem reflects the ambivalence of the point of view of the persona – the imposition of rhymes on the material suggests the apparent order of life but it does not guarantee anything below the surface, as the lack of stanza patterns or further division of the poem into sections also indicates this.

Another Kennelly poem bears the emblematic title “The Celtic Twilight” – yet this title is followed by a demythologisation of a phrase with many literary resonances. Kennelly’s Celtic Twilight is what it primarily is, the late phase of the day in a ‘Celtic’ location, Dublin, the modern city. The usual associations of the phrase in the title are immediately blocked as the first line of the poem opens the description of the twilight scene with “decrepit whores” (Kennelly 1990, 119) and continues with corpses floating on the water of the Grand Canal. The corpses turn out to have been a dog and a cat, and the animal imagery is carried on as the women and men are seen as mutually intent on preying on one another. The prostitutes are

“scavengers” (ibid) yet the not-so-muted sympathy of the speaker sees them as victims or preys as well, with “Dublin’s Casanovas” to blame, without question, for their misery.

The second stanza focuses on one of these decrepit women and her desperation is portrayed. Demythologisation continues as echoes of Yeats haunt the poem – the shrill voice this time belongs to a prostitute who, having been cheated by a client, is “Preparing once again to cast an eye / On passing prospects.” (ibid) The image of the “infested waters” (ibid) returns with the floating carcasses, to provide a fitting scenery for these “lurid women and predatory men / Who must inflict but cannot share / Each other’s pain.” (ibid) The closing image of strangers locked into the same situation yet unable to recognise it casts a shadow over Dublin life and perpetuates the twilight – the project of deconstruction is complete, the Celtic twilight returns to the common language to repossess its literal meaning and shed the old metaphorical, just to take on new figurative ones which are this time less noble than the previous one.

“Clearing a Space” is a poem placed in the collection *A Time for Voices* right after the other two Dublin poems. The juxtaposition is certainly not unintentional as the poem contrasts with the former ones: it offers a somewhat Wordsworthian approach to the city as it is devoid of people, and by virtue of this the city is not itself, on the unusual occasion of a Sunday morning “about six o’clock” (Kennelly 1990, 124) which is sleeping time for most people. In the unusual time of observation the city takes on a different image, it wakes to a life of its own, an existence independent of and indifferent to its human population. “The river is talking to itself,” “The city turns to the mountains / And takes time to listen to the sea,” there is a “relaxed sky” (ibid) above. The buildings equally keep to their own counsel, the parks are allowed their due privacy.

Yet the city, however empty of people it is, does not lose its human dimension – as an endless reservoir of nurturing and sustaining energies it is a “friend” (ibid) of the observer. The ambiguity of the first line of the last stanza, “I make through that nakedness to stumble on my own” (Kennelly 1990, 125), suggests that the common feature of city and human being is that enigmatic “nakedness” which is discovered only when observed on a special occasion (and perhaps by an unusual observer too). The persona’s embracing of Dublin can occur only at such an hour, the true resemblance of the city to a man can, paradoxically, be understood only when the people are removed from it.

Though Paul Durcan’s poem “Going Home to Mayo, Winter 1949” is concerned primarily with the West of Ireland, the starting point of the indicated journey is Dublin. By virtue of functioning as the place to escape from Dublin is commented upon in a number of

lines in the poem – “the alien, foreign city of Dublin” (Durcan 1993, 34) is left behind in the first line, just to be addressed on return as “the daylight nightmare of Dublin City” (ibid). The city indeed casts a sobering sight to the returning travellers as suburban detached houses are quickly replaced by “blocks after blocks of so-called ‘new’ tenements” (ibid) and all these houses remind the speaker of the damnation of modern city life: the houses and blocks of flats are “crosses of loneliness” (Durcan 1993, 35) and gates solemnly parade as bells tolling the “mutual doom” (Durcan 1993, 34) of the inhabitants – of whom the speaker and his father happen to be two representatives. Durcan’s Dublin is thus closely related to the versions of Kinsella and Kennelly in terms of its generally unfavourable atmosphere, yet Durcan goes one step further than Kennelly and Kinsella as his version of the city becomes a reminder of the transitoriness of human life, of its inevitable progress forward in time towards a closure without any reference to redemption, and it also expresses the failure of the city to provide some sort of shelter, let alone home, in the temporary world of human existence.

Eavan Boland’s poem “The Huguenot Graveyard at the Heart of the City” introduces another, and comparably friendlier, aspect of Dublin City proper: apropos of the cemetery of refugees of religious persecution the city takes on the image of a safe harbour of tolerance. The abstract notion of religious persecution becomes a tangible practical term in the moment it receives a body in the form of an actual location. The sight of the cemetery “in the alcove of twilight” (Boland 1994, 31) is set against the backdrop of busy urban life, “Car exhausts and sirens” (ibid) and buses passing. The names on the graves often ring familiar, they “have eased into ours” (ibid) and their exile is modulated into something less explicitly alien as the persona acknowledges that “There is a flattery in being a destination. / There is a vanity in being the last resort.” (ibid) The story of the refugees follows: they fled from France to complete their course of life in Ireland, following their faith which banished them from their homes and now this “faith lies low with the lives it / dispossessed.” (ibid) They begin to appear strange and even exotic, the speaker considers what these refugees might have thought about Ireland, contemplating also their addition of sounds to Dublin speech, thus becoming a part of the spirit of the place. There are haunting images of the moment before their departure from their native land, which then lead the speaker to look at Dublin in a different light: the city “which is dear to us and particular” (Boland 1994, 32) was for these people “merely / the one witty step ahead of hate // which is all that they could keep. Or stay.” (ibid) The conclusion somewhat undermines the otherwise generous-looking image of Dublin in the context of receiving such victims of religious persecution: its status is not particular, it is not in fact a destination but a next step which in time proves to be the only one, so the city

acquires its privileged function only with hindsight, viewed from a later perspective. This notion perhaps explains why the title of the poem employs the preposition ‘at’ instead of the more usual ‘in.’

Boland’s Dublin, however, is not exclusively the busy urban world which still offers such places and instances of silent meditation as the Huguenot graveyard. Dublin also has suburbs, already noted by Kennelly, and such places require their representation too, especially if the point of view is a less usual one. “Suburban Woman” is set in such a modern frontier zone as the world of the suburbs, located at the meeting of city and country. The title immediately focuses on a rather unusual topic in Irish poetry, a suburban woman, representing a voice muted for several reasons. Partly in accordance with this sounding out of repression the poem is dominated by an imagery of conflict and fight: spousal disagreements become guerrilla fights, everyday routines are described as struggles, the evening moment of letting the blind down is the putting out of the white flag – all these create the image of a militant figure, the suburban woman of the title is thus one who is absorbed in a hard and long-lasting fight with the circumstances, as the frontier demands it. In the closing section the speaker explicitly allies herself to this woman figure, acknowledging the filter of writing between them.

The urban frontier is further explored in “Ode to Suburbia.” Despite the claims of the title, the elevated style and subject matter are absent from the poem; this is one way of indicating the quotidian and undignified world of the suburbs. “No magic here” (Boland 1989, 31) concludes the poem, after the often nerve-racking routines have been enumerated in an environment which is constricted and claustrophobic. Uniformity and physical proximity foster curiosity; this is also fuelled by the unexciting routines of one’s own life which leads them to seek for something interesting or at least unusual or different in someone else’s life.

What would normally be considered the sign of prosperity comes to be subverted, just as it happens in Kennelly’s world: the suburb, instead of signalling rising standards of living, is an “ugly sister” (Boland 1989, 30), a place where life is seen as a ‘blister’ (ibid) on the general dark, back gardens are claustrophobic and “varicose / With shrubs” (ibid), and windows have turned into “mirrors which again / And again show the same woman / Shriek at a child” and which “multiply” (ibid) the household chores among which not much difference is indicated between washing up and rearing a child. This is a world which destroys its inhabitants, principally the addressed female ones – women come to be distorted into shapeless masses of human flesh, in which state ‘human’ is only felt and understood through the physical pain experienced by them. This disillusioned and unmagical place, however, is

still capable of working miraculous transformations: this monotonous and self-annihilating routine yields changes and knowledge, a daily re-enactment of the general pattern of fall and salvation, of death and resurrection with something new added to it. The suburb thus recovers something of dignity, though not particularly because of its nature as location but by the fact that it is 'home', and home involves family, with the woman as its central force and source. This also implies, by a juxtaposition with the poem dealing with the Huguenot graveyard, that the source of regeneration and growth is the suburb rather than the centre of the city.

Dublin's old image as a city of beggars and poverty thus slowly changes yet what comes in the wake of the old is not enchanting for most of the poets either. Economic changes bring a general rise in the standards of living but they do not eliminate deprivation – in fact, they bring about new forms of it, proving that the idea of 'general' is a deceptive one. The inhabitants of Dublin may worry for a change as part of the internationalisation of the capital, which leads to a predictable decline of its 'Irish' character and to the flourishing of criminal activities but at the same time it turns Dublin into a favourite destination for international tourism, which in turn means further incomes and prosperity. Change is never unequivocal, especially not in the world of modern cities, yet this is perhaps to the benefit of Dublin's poets since it provides a rich material for contemplation and at the same time assigns them the task of formulating their own relation to the city, which in all cases involves the element of belonging.

### 3.2.2. NORTH

#### 3.2.2.1. BELFAST

Belfast has faced more radical and much more shocking catalysts for change beside economic development. The miniature version of Northern Ireland in terms of the division present in the city has led to a violent conflict between the two major factions of its population, stamping the seal of sectarian violence on the city in the historical perspective. Belfast, however, has lived through hard times and has shown its ability for often surprising regeneration, rising from the depression of traditional industries and street riots as a bustling centre of new economic activities. In spite of this the city appears in contemporary poetry predominantly as a set of stereotypical details of hostility.

The capital city of Northern Ireland is one of those places that immediately evoke associations of the ugly industrial city. The principal settlement of the North is the economic

stronghold of the province, its history reflects the general pattern of industrial development – the small village grew into a bustling industrial centre during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; its prosperity was based on the textile industry and shipbuilding, and these were those very branches which suffered the most in the depression of traditional industries in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to the decline of living standards for the huge industrial population of the city. Economic reconstruction has changed Belfast into a different kind of centre, with modern industries and a significant part of the work force employed in the tertiary sector, thus Belfast no longer fits the category of the ugly industrial city proper it tends to evoke in the mind of anyone hearing the name. As a capital city Belfast is also an administrative and a cultural centre, which certainly contributed to its significance as the principal scene of the Northern Irish Troubles. Infamous incidents colour the recent history of the city, and this builds towards an image of a dangerous and even hostile place, though much has changed since the grim decade of the 1970s. Yet another element is the less than favourable climate of the city – it seems as if even nature does not find, and perhaps does not want anyone to find, the location an attractive one. Belfast, however, has a power to surprise the visitor in several ways, principally by its economic and spiritual recovery of the 1990s.

The principal poetic image of Belfast as an impersonal industrial city is traced back to Louis MacNeice's poem of the same title, written at a time when Belfast was still buoyant with industrial activities. MacNeice's "Belfast" registers those landmarks of the city which are in close connection with the economic activities pursued in the place – these items are either parts of industrial sites or are the aspects of modern city life springing from the wealth created by that industry. Despite the prosperity arrested in the marble floors and glittering shop windows of the city, the predominant adjective describing items of Belfast life is "garish" (MacNeice 17). MacNeice's status as an in-between figure, neither Irish nor English, born in Belfast before the time of the partition but living in London, renders him a kind of tourist with an unusual tie to the place: his experience of Belfast is principally an aesthetic one, springing from the contemplation of visible elements of the city. Yet the status of the city as the birthplace of the poet is a factor that cannot be overlooked – not even by MacNeice himself, however much he dislikes the place, and this makes for an ambivalent relationship with Belfast.

Later poetic incarnations of the city build up a polemic with MacNeice's programmatic piece though their stance is of a less ambivalent character. A member of the same generation, John Hewitt had the same city to contemplate as MacNeice did yet their experience of the city is different – the fact that the Protestant Hewitt was a Belfast resident

for most of his life with friends from the “other” part of the population as well provides a more complex view of the city. There is no particular affection for the place in his accounts either nor is there the same kind of hostility that shines through MacNeice’s versions of Belfast.

Derek Mahon shares something of MacNeice’s ambivalence towards Belfast but for a different reason. Born in the city and brought up in a suburb of Belfast, Mahon chose early to leave the city and has not returned to it as a resident, only as a visitor on occasions. His Belfast is almost two distinct cities: the one he left behind and the one found on occasional visits. The difference may be due to the historical situation of the Northern Troubles as well as to the loss of touch with the place – the returns provide only a superficial knowledge of the city, missing that element of continuity which produces familiarity and perhaps even intimacy with the place, yet, like in the case of MacNeice, this status of a virtual outsider offers an easier position for observations, at least as far as immediately visible features are considered. The vision, due to this particular approach, manages to capture the most salient aspects of the city and it also reflects what Edna Longley considers the Protestant approach to Belfast (cf. E. Longley 1994, 90).

“Spring in Belfast” is the poem opening Mahon’s *Collected Poems*, and the placing of such a piece at the beginning of such a collection is perhaps emblematic: the implications of (re)birth or a (new) beginning in “spring” and the exact location of the experience reveal the tie received at birth. The poem is primarily concerned with the persona’s introspection yet the physical location definitely bears on his conscience. A sense of belonging is expressed in the opening lines: “Walking among my own this windy morning / In a tide of sunlight between shower and shower” (Mahon 1999, 13) is the occasion for the meditation on the persona’s place – and the opening quickly turns out to be a wish for belonging. The domination of the ubiquitous elements of wind and rain as the primary features of the climate of the city is surprisingly interrupted by the sunlight, paralleling the general Mahonian persona’s rare identification with an entity larger than himself. The walk in turn becomes an internal tour into the mysterious universe of belonging itself – the refusal to follow what seems to be the naturally simple way to salvation:

We could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill  
At the top of every street, for there it is,  
Eternally, if irrelevantly, visible – (ibid)

The concrete is replaced by pseudo-transcendental elements, the ‘humorous formulae, / The spurious mystery in the knowing nod’ (ibid), and this life unfolds in the framework of “Rehearsing our astute salvations under / The cold gaze of a sanctimonious God” (ibid).

The persona’s concluding reproach to himself remains on a tentative level as the self-imposed obligation of “One part of my mind must learn to know its place” (ibid) is mellowed into a set of less constraining principles:

The things that happen in the kitchen houses  
And echoing back streets of this desperate city  
Should engage more than my casual interest,  
Exact more interest than my casual pity. (ibid)

The setting of the “desperate city” sums up the persona’s general opinion about Belfast more than any lengthy description, and the shift from “must” to “should” indicates a certain degree of inertia characteristic of both the place and the speaker, supported by the repeated emphasis on the “casual” nature of interest and pity.

The city of Mahon is seen as a human construct which reflects one of the communities inhabiting it, that of the Protestants, conditioned by religious constraint and perhaps by the spirit of the place itself, the latter basically meaning a circular relationship between the city and people living there, forming it and being formed by it. The surprise sunshine and the hill, metaphoric as well as real, contrast significantly with the “kitchen houses” and “echoing back streets,” and the general picture hints at the persona’s preference for a more tangible concept of transcendence than the human construct of a religion which is not embraced by him yet which he cannot fully dispose of either.

The world of Mahon’s childhood suburb is captured in “Glengormley.” The poem gives an account of a fairly peaceful, and therefore to some extent boring, life in a world of “hedges” and “clothes-pegs” (Mahon 1999, 14). The persona’s reaction is ambivalent, the peaceful present has its advantages yet excludes nobility and heroism, life is reduced to comfortable but unexciting dimensions. The opening is already close to anticlimax:

Wonders are many and none is more wonderful than man  
Who has tamed the terrier, trimmed the hedge  
And grasped the principle of the watering can. (ibid)

The subsequent description of small gardens with washing lines tilts the picture towards a less ironic position but the second stanza retains the subversive tone discounting monsters and giants as no longer formidable enemies of modern suburban man, “A generation of such sense and charm” (ibid).

Yet all is not safe in this world either even after the elimination of physical danger: though “Only words hurt us now” (ibid), this is a threat to reckon with. Saints and heroes are extinct, the only remaining deviants are “the unreconciled” who “in their metaphysical pain, / Dangle from lamp-posts in the dawn rain” (ibid); their death, despite the fine grade of irony in “metaphysical,” actually involves a loss as “much dies with them.” (ibid) The persona comes to a point of self-reproach which in turn is only tentative:

I should rather praise  
A worldly time under this worldly sky –  
The terrier-taming, garden-watering days  
Those heroes pictured as they struggled through  
The quick noose of their finite being. By  
Necessity, if not choice, I live here too. (ibid)

Past heroism is seen with scepticism from the perspective of the achievement; there is a paradoxical relation between the wish for a more eventful life by those whose peaceful world is the product of the efforts of earlier people to build a safer world than theirs, thus questioning the very concept of heroism itself. The persona’s sour comment on his being also situated in this world, with ‘here’ being more a historical than a spatial category, indicates a general sense of unhappiness about the ‘dream’ of the earlier people.

Glengormley is not Belfast proper but a suburb of the city and thus a part of it, adding to the general concept of the city. Economic development and prosperity bring forth new residential areas on the outskirts of a city and these places subversively become emblematic of a way of life – the inhabitants work in the inner city and they return only in the evenings and on weekends, so the suburb is almost lifeless during much of the workday and is a gathering place for tired and exhausted people for the rest of the time. Mahon’s suburb is described with a finer and more subtle irony than Kennelly’s Dublin suburbs but both reflect this rather awkward dimension of the modern industrial (and even post-industrial) society.

The city returns in its ‘proper’ form in other poems. The unpleasant Belfast is captured in details almost stereotypical after the fashion of MacNeice: “the / dank churches, the empty

streets, / the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings” (Mahon 1999, 35), and what there is to remember is, perhaps, not something worth remembering:

Remember those awful parties  
In dreary Belfast flats,  
The rough sectarian banter  
In Lavery’s back bar,  
The boisterous take-aways  
And moonlight on wet slates? (Mahon 1999, 154)

These are accounts of the native eye with an intimate knowledge of the place. In a number of poems, however, the perspective involved is that of the visitor rather than the native. This has its inherent dangers for producing a superficial insight only, yet the fresh eye can more easily spot the most apparent features of the city. Belfast in the time of the Troubles becomes “a world of / Sirens, bin-lids / And bricked-up windows” (Mahon 1999, 65). Changes are easily noticed as the historical situation is different, and a return to the city involves an inevitable moment when the persona comes face to face with the consequence of leaving the city: that he is now a stranger in the place. “Afterlives” captures this moment of recognition – the returning persona finds a significantly altered city.

The first section of the poem has London for its setting. It is the place of departure, where the return is from, and the city “Rain-fresh in the morning light” (Mahon 1999, 58) offers an image of a new beginning through the double suggestion of cleansing and rebirth. The innocence of the morning leads the persona to reflect on the general belief in the ‘progress’ of mankind towards a supreme rule of the intellect: though there is bigotry, manipulation and violence,

... the faith does not die

That in our time these things  
Will amaze the literate children  
In their non-sectarian schools  
And the dark places be  
Ablaze with love and poetry  
When the power of good prevails. (ibid)

The idea of the “non-sectarian schools” shifts the poem out of its initial London setting and the rest of the idea quickly moves towards a utopian world. The persona, however, immediately corrects himself by questioning the validity of the equation between middle-class ideals and “divine wisdom” (ibid).

The second part of the poem is the section of going home which is introduced by the simple assertion “I am going home by sea / For the first time in years.” (Mahon 1999, 59) The scene aboard is almost idyllic, corresponding to the assumptions covered by the concept of “going home” – there is light music, a dreaming seagull and “The moon-splashed waves exult.” (ibid) The journey, however, must conclude in arrival and the situation changes swiftly: the trembling ship, the “grey lough” and the “naked bulb” (ibid) as the sole source of light in the dock drag the speaker back down to that reality which he expects to find on returning to Belfast. The only common element with London is the rain that greets the returning figure and the “city so changed / By five years of war” (ibid) proves a shocking experience driving the persona to a confession which is enigmatic as well as nearly commonplace:

But the hills are the same  
Grey-blue above Belfast.  
Perhaps if I'd stayed behind  
And lived it bomb by bomb  
I might have grown up at last  
And learnt what is meant by home. (ibid)

More questions are raised than answered by this concluding stanza. The all-too-familiar and therefore simple-looking concept of “home” is challenged by its rhyming pair “bomb,” casting the shadow of doubt over the persona’s proper understanding of the term. The source of the knowledge of home is also dubious: perhaps the bombs of the Troubles might have induced the progress to experience but “might” is a rather weak guarantee for this. The placing of stability beyond the city reflects the desperate wish of the persona to find continuity and permanence, and that these can be found only beyond the human world of the city suggests the futility of the enterprise of constructing a lasting home.

Mahon’s Belfast is a place which does not attract his persona yet he cannot escape the influence of the city. It is a place that induces self-scrutiny, it makes the persona face issues

evaded otherwise yet impossible to shake off in the immediate presence of the city. Belfast makes the persona consider his position, historical as well as personal, and makes him realise that there is a bond of belonging which cannot be severed in any possible way. Having been born in Belfast is a fact which cannot be altered and however unattractive the city is, Mahon's personas, similarly to their maker, cannot shed their origins.

Tom Paulin's Belfast upbringing is a source of a number of poems which throw a similar light on the city as already displayed. Though Paulin was born in England, his childhood was spent in Belfast, thus he has first-hand experiences of the place. With a more pronounced political conviction Paulin's portraits of Belfast show a greater degree of engagement though his account also contains a hint of surprise in retrospect as the confession "strange I lived there / And walked those streets" (Paulin 1993, 27) indicates. In terms of landmarks Paulin ventures only occasionally beyond the stereotypical but his focus on the spirit of the place emanating from its inhabitants and their history turns his poems into significant contributions to the general image of Belfast.

"Purity" sets out to find the proper form of literary representation for "a northern capital" (Paulin 1993, 21): "Perhaps a maritime pastoral" (ibid) would do it. The enigmatic-looking capital quickly becomes an easily identifiable location as the landmarks of Belfast are enumerated, offering a MacNeicean strain to the account. The place is contrasted with "the playful celebration / Of good manners on a green field" (ibid); the "bleached coast" (ibid) is indeed far from that other world, though there appears hope for a positive change since the "polities of love" (ibid) are present and "some of us believe in them." (ibid) Vision, however, is one world, reality is quite another: the closing stanza depicts the unmistakable sight of a "crowded troopship" (ibid) with polished boots shining even from a distance and there is that uniformity which is a defining characteristic of the army.

The purity of the title allows for many possible readings. The word may be taken to stand as a shorthand for Puritans, with the spirit of the place deriving from their ethos. This would explain the implied contrast with the celebratory green – in this image the suggestions of the South are unmistakable. "Purity" perhaps approximates that wished-for vision which the speaker sets out for at the beginning, the one that would suit this northern capital; this, however, is that perspective which facilitates the contrast with the elsewhere of another way of life. Yet another meaning is suggested by the polished boots of the army, though this is the least comforting one – the army is also possible to interpret as the agency which can bring about purification by force, which would also echo the hopes of the population of the North at the time of the beginning of the Troubles.

In “Under the Eyes” Belfast life is explored, a life with signs of not so latent conflict. Retribution, revenge and murder are among the principal ingredients of this world. The calculated nature of every gesture is arrested in the first stanza, and the speaker quotes someone else’s words: “‘Every favour, I must repay with interest, / Any slight against myself, the least slip, / Must be balanced out by an exact revenge.’” (Paulin 1993, 3) The location to house such a mercantile spirit has normal as well as awkward features in a strange communion: “The city is built on mud and wrath, / Its weather is predicted; its streetlamps / Light up in the glowering, crowded evenings.” (ibid) Forecasts and street illumination would pass for any place but the MacNeicean foundation of mud is coupled with a less tangible yet more persistent element. The brief spell of normalcy hinted at by the weather and the lamps is quickly dispelled as stolen time-switches from the latter are re-employed to detonate home-made bombs. The larger framework in which the city operates is ironically reduced to a means of exploitation. This ironic perspective is further strengthened by an evocation of “memory,” “A complete system / Nothing can surprise” (ibid). A list of abuses and aberrations follow, with the climactic scene “in a private house, a Judge / Shot in his hallway before his daughter / By a boy who shot his eyes as his hand tightened.” (ibid) That this situation is hardly unique is proved by the conclusion of Michael Longley’s “Wounds” which introduces a similar scene, though with a bus-conductor as its victim, achieving even more outrage because of this marked descent on the social ladder.

The poem “In the Lost Province” does not name the city but the details are again trademark ones in relation to Belfast. The perspective is that of remembrance, another place and another time. The “lost province” is evoked by pictures recollected from an earlier period, with a nearly surrealist image of “those brick canyons / Where Brookeborough unsheathes a sabre / Shouting ‘No Surrender’ from the back of a lorry.” (Paulin 1993, 27) Apart from this there is nothing to signal that the city should be unlike any other place, the summer evening and its remnant heat suggest an ordinary city with nothing particular to identify it. The second stanza returns to this ‘normal’ vision, a usual sky and the equally general talk of politics seem nothing extraordinary. The first question, however, destabilises this normalcy: “Is it too early or too late for change?” (ibid) The poem is no longer innocent after the vision of Brookeborough, and the temporary lulling of attention to conflict is interrupted by this question. The next statement does not significantly alter this situation of unease: “Certainly the province is most peaceful.” (ibid) Both the introductory “Certainly,” reminiscent of polite answers, and the unusual adjective “most” raise suspicions rather than provide solid points of reference. Yet the concluding question turns this statement into a solid foundation for a

contrast, introducing the possibility of irony as well: in such a world “Who would dream of necessity, the angers / Of Leviathan, or the years of judgement?” (ibid)

The fourteen lines of the poem recall the sonnet form, and the separation of the lines into an octave and sestet structure contributes to this idea. Yet the poem does not possess rhymes, thus the order of the sonnet is not created, and similarly unusually, the ‘sestet’ opens with an “And” instead of the more usual Petrarchan “but.” Such manoeuvres indicate the fragility of the situation described, the momentary peacefulness is endangered by faultlines not so much hidden and which may become active at any moment.

Sporadic references to Belfast may be found in the work of other poets as well. John Montague’s adult journey to his childhood home begins with a bus ride from Belfast, and as the bus leaves the city, the landmarks and features of Belfast are perceived. The present face of Belfast is one that reveals the forces moulding it and its markers are accordingly markers of time too. The “iron bleakness” (Montague 1995, 8) of Victoria Station recalls industrial prosperity, the “narrow huckster streets” (ibid) are also industrial in their origin yet less glorious in their associations than the station, or its name, rather. There is even more to see on the way: “a wilderness of cinemas and shops, / Victorian red-brick villas, framed with aerials, / Bushmill hoardings, Orange and Legion Halls.” (ibid) All these, however, fail to impress the speaker, a change for something other than urban and human is welcome: “A fringe of trees affords some ease at last / From this dour, despoiled inheritance” (ibid). The speaker concludes that Belfast is the home of “a culture where constraint is all” (ibid), and feels relieved that his destination is somewhere else, however bleak that location will turn out to be.

Michael Longley’s only reference to Belfast is in the poem “To Derek Mahon,” a fellow poet from the same city. The opening of the poem recalls the beginnings of the Troubles through the evocation of shared memories: there are “Two Sisyphuses” (M. Longley 1985, 82) caught in a city of conflict, out of place in several senses. Belfast is described in terms which have become usual, it is the “city of guns and long knives” (ibid) with “the stereophonic nightmare / Of the Shankill and the Falls” (ibid). The account does not venture any further than this, the focus of the poem is turned towards a western location, indicating that there is more to explore there than in such a conflict-ridden place. This is all the more significant as Longley has always been a Belfast resident, and he has made it clear that home

for him is the city<sup>5</sup>, yet he appears reluctant to provide his own vision of his native city, or even to contribute to the one already constructed by others.

The most honest and diligent, and therefore the most complete renderings of Belfast come from Ciaran Carson, a native and a resident of the city. Carson is the self-appointed chronicler and cartographer of the city, and the fact that he has lived in the city during hard times as well as more pleasant ones lends an authority to his accounts. Two sequences of short poems have earned the designation ‘Belfast Sonnets’; though the poems are not at all sonnets the name indicates the wish of the poet for some sort of order he tries to impose on both the raw and the poetic material, with the subsequent suggestion of failure in the light of the deficiency of the form. Rather than giving a static picture, these poems seek to register changes in the city and they reflect the desperate need of the poet to keep pace with the changes. The length of these poems is a part of the project as the rather short accounts give the impression of brief episodes captured from life in the city. A time lag is inescapable yet the poems, read as a sequence, give the impression of a constantly changing city, a kind of a report in which the still frames of individual poems read one after the other produce a film of the life of the city. This project is in many ways a postmodern one as Carson is creating the framework for the city he is writing while writing it, and though the focus is on change, there is a permanent frame of the city shining through the sequence: it is a city upset and torn by conflict but at the same time one which possesses the not at all commonplace designation of home.

In an early poem of Carson the city is seen as “a map of the city.” (Carson in Ormsby 265) “Turn Again,” the poem which opens both the two explicitly Belfast-centred collections of the poet, the earlier *The Irish for No* and the later *Belfast Confetti*, elaborates on this idea of collapsing the city into its rendering on paper as a map. The first part of the poem plays with the relation of the map to the city; the seemingly congruent relationship is challenged by the presence of “the bridge that was never built” (Carson 1987, 7) and of “the streets that never existed” (ibid); these ideas point toward the relation between map and city as symbolic rather than metaphoric. The second section of the poem explicitly links map and city – the observation “The linen backing is falling apart” (ibid) is valid in the context of both the economy of Belfast and the map of the city; and in the wake of it “the Falls Road hangs by a thread” (ibid) both in the situation of the city under siege and of the disintegrating map.

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<sup>5</sup> “Home is Belfast. Belfast is home. I love the place. The city, the hills around it, County Down, County Antrim. My home from home is in Mayo. But home is Belfast. It has nothing to do with literature.” (Longley quoted in McDonald 112)

In “Belfast Confetti” the city turns into a labyrinth. Burton Pike suggests that the labyrinth is the characteristic way of experiencing the city from the inside; the whole is observable only when it is a map (Pike quoted in Kirkland 42). This is indicative of the method of Carson: from the more distant perspective of earlier poems he descends into the city in order to follow the process of change. The map is replaced by what it represents, the names of streets come to be exchanged for buildings in the closer perspective. Carson’s accounts concentrate mainly on destruction and on inanimate elements rather than people, which suggests that the city is primarily a place for him; it is only in the Belfast section of the later collection that human figures come to populate the city, broadening the meaning of Belfast into a human habitation which functions as a place of life despite the hazards of the ongoing conflict.

Destruction, despite its principally negative meaning, can yield pleasantly surprising consequences. “Clearance” is one of those instances in which the destruction of one element of the city helps to reveal another: the Royal Avenue Hotel is pulled down and in the newly created gap a greengrocer’s shop is noticed. The doubt of the persona about the shop, ‘I’d never noticed until now. Or had I passed it yesterday” (Carson 1987, 32) echoes the idea of the relationship of city and labyrinth. Symbolically light appears with the demolition of the building, “Suddenly more sky / Than there used to be” (ibid), and this light, together with the breeze which “springs up from nowhere” (ibid) facilitates the consolatory revelation. In a disappearing and disintegrating city such a moment is of utmost significance as it indicates the possibility of the opposite of these processes and at the same time suggests a larger pattern of which destruction is a part yet not the only one.

The Belfast scene is haunted by an awkward figure with a notebook and broken glasses in “Linear B.” The man is in perpetual motion, and though the speaker observes this figure a not-so-strange parallel opens between them: they are both engaged in taking notes about what is going on before their eyes. On closer look the man’s notebook contains only punctuation marks which at first puzzle the speaker but he finds a possible meaning for them supposing that there is some method at work: “it was either nonsense, or a formula – for / Perpetual motion, the scaffolding of shopping lists, or the collapsing city.” (Carson 1987, 33)

“August 1969” recalls the time of the beginnings of the Troubles; the riot, however, is quickly balanced by “Singing, dancing on the streets” (Carson 1987, 35). The confetti awaiting the marching troops is not yet the trademark Belfast kind though it is not usual either: it is composed of “Charred receipts and bills-of-lading, contracts, dockets, pay-slips.”

(ibid) The seeds of conflict have already started budding, and in a short time they would explode on the scene but this moment is still embryonic, as the date suggests.

“Campaign” presents a painfully usual event in the life of the city, that of questioning and torture with the subsequent execution of the subject. The details of the man’s last moments on a waste-ground are juxtaposed with an earlier memory of the man working in a bar, “Drawing pints for strangers” (Carson 1987, 36), indicating that in the city such events may upset life in any moment. That no one is safe, especially not those who are desperate to maintain some sort of order, is shown in “Army.” The anxious course of the night patrol is described in short staccato-like sentences and phrases, giving the impression of jungle warfare, with the only, otherwise not insignificant difference, that the scene is a Western European city. The closing duck game is calculatedly ironic, suggesting that the necessary tactics of ambush is not a guarantee for a safe return to the barracks: “*Two ducks in front of a duck and two ducks / behind a duck, how many ducks? Five? No. Three. This is not the end.*” (Carson 1987, 38)

Despite such dangers, the constant transformation of the city offers moments of revelatory power, just as the one marked in “Clearance,” providing an instance of consolation and peace. Such experiences are possible but rare; they are nearly transcendent due to their rarity. The human imagination, however, can grasp and utilise such potentially rich moments. An instance of imaginative consolation occurs in the closing poem of the ‘Belfast Sonnets’ section in *The Irish for No*: in “Slate Street School” the childhood memory of falling snow evokes the image of purgatory: the snowflakes “are the countless souls of purgatory, whose numbers constantly diminish / And increase; each flake as it brushes to the ground is yet another soul released.” (Carson 1987, 46) The memory imaginatively transmutes the persona into a more potent character whose act may redeem the inhabitants of the city: “And I am the avenging Archangel, stooping over mills and factories and barracks. / I will bury the dark city of Belfast forever under snow: inches, feet, yards, chains, miles.” (ibid) The vision is at once consoling and disappointing; purgation implies a new beginning but only at the cost of the present life: the literal indication of the growing thickness of snow is a sad metaphorical suggestion of the enormous sacrifice awaiting the population of the city.

The middle section of the collection *Belfast Confetti* is composed of Carson’s second set of ‘sonnets’; the general planning, however, is different: the poems alternate with prose pieces. The prose texts explicitly read Belfast in the light of its constantly changing nature, and this change is examined in the light of the concept of language: the etymology of the name of the place and of several words related to the city or parts of it takes up the attention

of the poet, thus he resorts to prose and conducts his inquiries in a more conventional logical framework than that of the poems. The poems this time deal with people: episodes from the life of ordinary people of Belfast are outlined. The impression of these minor stories is almost that of a 'normal' city until each poem comes to a point where a small detail is mentioned, pulling the poem back into the world of Belfast proper, a city of conflict yet desperately trying to conduct a normal course of life. The plan of an ambush, a flying-jacket inherited from a father killed in it or distant sound of machine-gun fire drag the stories back into that city whose constant change was arrested (or attempted to have been arrested) in the 'sonnets' of the earlier volume in the dimension of the infrastructure of the city.

In "Gate" the quickened pace of life is shown in the change of one shop for another, with the speaker's surprise at finding it closing down only after a few months. Change is even more general as the wedding suit bought in the former shop on the same location is now used for funeral attendances. This lack of stability is observable in the local news as well: "Everything's a bit askew" (Carson 1990, 45), with news items themselves becoming unreliable in a land of quick transitions. Such transitions are greatly 'facilitated' by underground activities, just as it is outlined in "Bloody Hand." There are preparations for an attack in a bar and the directions are given to the agent, in an environment which cannot be considered safe: "Walls have ears: the shadows you throw are the shadows you try to throw off." (Carson 1990, 51) "Barfly" puts the potential action prepared for in "Bloody Hand" into practice: after a hint at sectarian pubs being situated at opposing ends of the city a close-up bar scene is offered, with people walking in and putting an end to the evening. The arriving gunmen "punctuate the lunchtime menu: there's confetti everywhere." (Carson 1990, 55) The demonstration is enough for the speaker to get going, choosing for his sign the hyphen as he moves from one place to another, with the suggestion that there is no full stop to a sentence of constant and continuous fleeing. "Night Out" seemingly provides a quiet evening outing, but the details of the place visited are already suggestive of life out of its normal course. The music inside the bar is suddenly complemented by another kind of 'music' from outside: there is the "broken rhythm / Of machine-gun fire" (Carson 1990, 77) penetrating the place. This time there is a sentence though, with punctuation, but of different types depending on the location itself but with the promise of a frame of the inside: "So the sentence of the night / Is punctuated through and through by rounds of drink, of bullets, of applause." (ibid)

The city of Belfast is represented in longer poems as well in the oeuvre of Carson. "The Irish for No" is prompted by the coming together of a trademark Unionist slogan and a translation exercise – the "*Ulster Says No*" (Carson 1987, 49) scribbling on a power-block

wall recalls an attempt of rendering the advertising slogan “*The Ulster Bank – the Bank / That Likes to Say Yes into Irish*” (ibid). The associations unfold against the backdrop of a city of graffiti and violence: the former induces the process whereas the latter renders the whole thing at best dubious in terms of significance: “What’s all this to the Belfast business-man who drilled / Thirteen holes in his head with a Black & Decker?” (Carson 1987, 50) The absurdity of this episode indicates the degree of moral disorder created by the everyday presence of violence: it is only a shocking episode which can grasp people’s attention since they are basically immune to atrocities as a result of being constantly exposed to them.

Belfast does not become a generally favourable place in Carson’s poems either, in spite of his fidelity to it or perhaps right for that. His different approach, however, engenders a vision of the city which has a more human, albeit not friendlier, dimension than in the work of his contemporaries. With his project of recording the changes he works against the temporal transformation of the city, repossessing life in the city as the life of the city and thus opens up the idea of the essential core to represent both static and dynamic aspects of the place. As he traces the ‘life’ of the inanimate elements of the city, he manages to bring back the temporal dimension to it, and in the treatment of episodes in the life of the inhabitants he reminds the reader of the nature of Belfast as a settlement, that is, a place of human habitation.

#### 3.2.2.2. (LONDON)DERRY

In Derek Mahon’s “Derry Morning” the first striking element is the reference to place, as the city is referred to by that name which is used by the Catholics. Such a gesture by a Protestant poet is certainly interesting – perhaps the motivation is an insistence on continuity, a historical dimension encompassing a wider time scale than the one which produces the double name of the same city. The particular location of the city destines it to be a frontier zone place and its recent history proves this beyond doubt. The choice of this city as a location is a telling instance in itself but the time lends it a new dimension, that of a new beginning.

The recent history of the place intrudes, in fact it cannot do anything else but intrude: when “the mist clears” (Mahon 1999, 108), the scars of recent conflict become visible. “Here it began, and here at last / It fades into the finite past / Or seems so.” (ibid) The historical fact of the beginning glides fluently on to the optimism of the possible end of the conflict in a

“strangely pastoral silence” (ibid) dominating the city in the morning. The third stanza captures this strange moment against the wider playground of history:

Hard to believe this tranquil place,  
Its desolation almost peace,  
Was recently a boom-town wild  
With expectation, each unscheduled  
Incident a measurable  
Tremor on the Richter Scale  
Of world events, each vibrant scene  
Translated to the drizzling screen. (ibid)

The promise of the morning, however, remains a promise, as the “change envisioned here” (ibid) features in a question. Tentative hope remains, though, as “Smoke from a thousand chimneys strain / One way” (ibid) – once again, the physical world provides an emblem of possible solution: whatever households or activities the chimneys belong to, their smoke conforms to one universal law of nature and goes one way, while “the fog / Of time receives the ideologue” (ibid), suggesting the temporary nature of human enterprise. The “Russian freighter bound for home” (ibid) leaving the city to its gloom is a haunting closure for the poem. The implications of the homebound Russian freighter suit well the gloomy city of the North; the possible desolation of Russian ports would not seriously disrupt the memory of this place.

Interestingly enough Derry/Londonderry does not receive the same amount and type of attention as Belfast. Due to its explicit manifestation of division the city is a dangerous topic and only Mahon ventures so far as to set his poem in this environment. His speaker is generous enough to provide a morning scene for the city with the possible parallel of a new beginning: in this perspective the city appears a place that strives to forget what happened there, or at least, if not to forget, but to return to normalcy, to become once again a city only and not so much a city in history.

### 3.3. THE COUNTRY

The world between the landscape and the urban dimension is the country, involving rural areas as well as small towns, and it also offers plenty of poetic material. The strong presence of the rural in the context of both the Republic and Northern Ireland makes a case: the Irish countryside, South or North, is a world to treat in its own terms. The country locations, however, do not conform easily to pre-formulated ideologies – the propagandistically intended associations are generally subverted by the places themselves. The Irish countryside is more entangled with the past than with a prospect of the future, the chosen places are often backward and full of deprivation, with harsh living conditions. The experience of decay is frequent, leading to a sense of disillusionment with the subsequent revision of the official ideologies; this is often represented against a backdrop of typically unpleasant Irish weather. The historical heritage, however, is potent in certain cases, with corresponding bursts of sunshine and general good weather, thus there are occasional intimations of another kind of reality.

#### 3.3.1. SOUTH

The Irish countryside offers memorials of an eventful past. Battlefields and buildings are easily found and contemplated in Thomas Kinsella's poems: ruins of a castle, Tara and ruins of a Big House are only a few among his items of country locations. Kinsella's country places are nearly always anchored to history, and they are not so much places for their own sakes but for their historical significance with a strong suggestion of transitoriness in the elegiac gaze of the poet. The historical dimension, however, provides a special infusion for the spirit of the place, loading it not only with memories but with life itself as the past shines through in special revelatory moments.

The poem "A Country Walk" proves that 'country' even in the Irish context means something broader than 'rural.' The itinerary of the poem begins in the countryside but leads to a town with an ever-broadening perspective encompassing the whole of modern Ireland. There is a tentative narrative line to facilitate a leisurely meditation on issues of history and change, uncovering the violence of the former and the all-too-human fallibility of the agents of it in the Irish context. There is a demythologising drive in the poem as well: it deconstructs the myth of the glorious fight for independence and it also subverts the Yeatsian heroes as

their names are resituated and recontextualised in a modern world, with markedly less nobility.

The speaker of the poem takes a walk by a river, following its course through the countryside and into a small town. The highly ingenious image of cattle “Churning land to liquid” (Kinsella 1996, 45) lightens the angry burden of the persona and the cold of the water of a well purifies his mind to prepare for his observations. The landmarks are diligently catalogued: a somewhat anachronistic-sounding aqueduct is the first one to be noticed; the ruins appear somewhat alien in the environment due to the principally Roman associations of the word. An asylum balances the sight, and the river soon reaches a town, with a barracks and a brewery as the first buildings. Before the town, however, a ford is recognised on the river with pregnant historical associations. As if the place itself emanated the spirit of conflict, bloodshed is traced back to ancient times: the accursed fight of brothers prepares for later atrocities – Normans, Cromwell’s army and a rebel in retaliation all left their marks on the spot. The entrance to the town is also marked by the sign of conflict: a cross made of concrete is situated in the ditch, as a memorial to “one who answered latest / the phantom hag” (ibid), a hero of the War of Independence, paradoxically killed by his own people in the subsequent Civil War. The speaker’s irony connects the site with the previous one of the ford and introduces the present-day practice of commemoration – the cross is honoured by the very killers of the man, just to be left alone again as they return to their casual chatting.

The centre of the town does not cut a more favourable picture either as the Market Square boasts of historical names yet in a dazzlingly different context: “MacDonagh and MacBride, / Merchants; Connolly’s Commercial Arms” (Kinsella 1996, 47). Yeats’s heroic society has been relegated to alliterating commercial brands, blending into the everyday: the names decorate shop windows and are devoid of any historical association and significance. The gaze of the speaker is merciless: the shopfronts are juxtaposed by a urinal, and the inescapable presence of the Church is registered too. The desolation of the place is made more emphatic by a passing car and by a “naked sycamore” (ibid), and the failing of the light covers up the whole scene in benevolent darkness. The conclusion of the poem returns to the image of the river, breaking into branches and reuniting again, locked up in its eternal toil of motion, and the nightfall followed by a new day with a surprising and ironic promise “Bringing sweet trade.” (Kinsella 1996, 48) – a similar conclusion is made as in his Dublin poems, which suggests that economic modernisation leaves its marks not only on the capital but on smaller settlements as well, whatever aspect of life is considered.

Though “King John’s Castle” opens with a negation, the significance of the castle is clearly asserted: ‘It held speechless under its cold a whole province of Meath.” (Kinsella 1996, 19) The opening denies the “epic” (ibid) nature of the castle, though it refers to structure and not nobility – the sheer force of the ‘brute bright plateau” (ibid) of the castle was enough for embodying the power of the king. The castle, however, is in ruins, its remains “Are a labyrinth in the medieval dark” (ibid), its former inhabitants keep company with other ghosts, the statue of the king “directs at the river a grey stare” (ibid), clad perhaps in the memory of its former glory. The inevitable progress towards total disappearance is suggested by the snapshot nature of the description, together with the hint that the memory of the place, despite physical decay, is still present and will be preserved by such people as the speaker, if perhaps for no other purpose than to remind audiences of the temporality of power.

An even more distant historical place is visited in “Tara”. The legendary location is duly enwrapped in mist, which makes its mythical appeal even more emphatic. The place is the site of a family outing, a profane picnic as it appears from the items collected by the children, thus reducing the historical aspect as much as it can be done. There is, in spite of all the profaneness, something extraordinary about the place: steps leave no trace and voices are “like light” (Kinsella 1996, 61). The much awaited magic finally makes its appearance; there is, however, something odd about it: it appears behind them, so logically it would pass unnoticed, yet the speaker records it, which suggests that he either saw it or simply it is his imagination at work, compelled by the spirit of the place to colour the account. Whatever the case is, there is a revelatory experience closing the poem: “a vast silver shield” (ibid) appears and then disappears and a ghost horse is seen tossing his neck “at ease, with a hint of harness.” (ibid) The place, then, retains the magic encoded in its name through this enigmatic vision, which appears as a consolation when contrasted with the changes redrawing the face of the country recorded in other poems of Kinsella.

The later “Tao and Unfitness at Inistiogue on the River Nore” recalls the memory of an excursion to a former Big House, thus a later historical period is visited. The village appears pleasant and lovely on its face but is declared “a bit sullen” (Kinsella 1996, 210) and is even compared to an English village. Old buildings and stonework provide material for contemplation, and there is a Protestant church with an accordingly stern woman driving the visitors out. This experience somewhat reduces the degree of pleasantness acquired otherwise, and houses an implicit comment on Protestants too. The real attraction, however, would be something else: yet Woodstock, the former aristocratic mansion is only ruins now – it is deserted and crumbling, with vegetation slowly but surely reclaiming the space. The former

glory of the building is gone, together with the spirit of its inhabitants; as if to punctuate this idea a brick falls to conclude the section on the panorama of the ruin.

The afternoon turns into evening and this section brings the history of the place alive: “Black and Tan ghosts” (Kinsella 1996, 212) make their tentative appearance, and the burning of the mansion by the local people is evoked. On the road they pass a small car packed with people; they appear mysterious enough to initiate a speculation. To conclude the day the speaker’s family return to the river to spend the last minutes on water. There is one more mystery left for them: a man passes them silently paddling and disappearing into the night. The figure in his soundless movements is reminiscent of those who burnt down the mansion, suggesting the inherence of such patterns and inclinations in the spirit of the place itself, offering yet another instance of the close entanglement of place and history, though the incomparably more peaceful present with the family context renders the night episode an instance of curiosity and a relative of the concluding vision in “Tara.”

Though Brendan Kennelly’s visions of Dublin are characterised by a strong sense of irony, nothing of this is observable in a poem dealing with the country. “Killybegs” is the record of a journey to the specified location. The description of the destination is framed by the landscape and the events of the journey there and back, with a strange approach as the speaker is involved in the journey but his presence is not indicated in the section dealing with the place itself. The first section is the journey there, it is composed of eight-line stanzas with cross rhymes, giving an ordered vision and a flowing narrative line. The almost ubiquitous elements of the Irish landscape, “the mountains and the bog” (Kennelly 1990, 22) are crossed in the journey, with the sight of a glacial lake and a river. The occasion is favoured by nature – the “always vanishing” (ibid) sunlight now accompanies the travellers, hinting at a profound change in that miniature universe: “There was a change of gods above us. Below, / All the fields dazzled in golden change.” (ibid) The comfortably progressing octaves are abruptly abandoned and tercets follow with mainly slant rhymes as the destination is reached. The technique is photographic rather than narrative in setting the scene, and a short episode of a gull preying on the catch is given. The central dynamic of the section is the opposition between peace and war, life and death: the fishermen at rest in the bar contrast with the “Piratical bands of seagulls” (ibid); the boats at anchor now hide the catch which was fish struggling for their lives just minutes earlier.

The journey away is clad in rain, which makes the speaker declare that “This is a land of loss.” (Kennelly 1990, 23) The lake and the river disappear, houses are not seen anywhere, the only thing that interrupts the monotony of the journey is the sight of an injured sheep

lying on the road. The helpless animal with its broken legs becomes a symbol of a hopeless struggle as “The black clouds hang from the mountain.” (ibid) The chosen country place, carefully situated in a wider context of the landscape, is a place emanating the spirit of decline rather than of anything else; though the tone of the poem is elegiac and lacks irony, the revisionist element is unmistakable, and a kind of Joycean paralysis-motif spread into the country is also possible to recognise in the closing section.

Michael Hartnett’s “A Small Farm” in a way carries Kennelly’s vision further towards a more sober and disheartening view by offering a close-up perspective on the country as a ‘source’: the poem somewhat reshapes the image of the Irish countryside, or rather of the idea of the rural. The confessional-looking poem offers a disillusioned perspective on the otherwise propagandistically coloured world of rural Ireland. A small farm, the officially acclaimed unit of post-independence Ireland yields a different ‘crop’ than the envisioned benevolence in spite of the communally favoured frugal conditions. “All the perversions of the soul / I learnt on a small farm” (Hartnett 1994,13) is the opening of the poem, and a comprehensive list follows, focusing mainly on aspects of life generally considered negative, such as how to harm neighbours, “how to hate” (ibid), and all these are set in a world of “tragedies, / minor but unhealing” (ibid) – “boggy land” (ibid), “venomous card games” (ibid) and the like. The speaker repeats his *non serviam* twice: ‘I was abandoned to their tragedies’ (ibid), to list them at first and to define himself against them afterwards, by deciding to keep them silent and submerged, with all the inherent danger of this.

The speaker’s “I learnt,” however, offers a double perspective. In one meaning it simply indicates the origin of experience, the place where such aspects of life were observable. In another, though, the fact of actually possessing this ‘practical’ knowledge can be included – this is recognised by the speaker, and his double assertion of putting himself beyond these ‘perversions’ serves to guide the reader towards the first hint. This, however, does not make rural Ireland a more enchanting place, the propaganda of rural idyll is clearly negated by a person who comes from that very world and finds it impossible to substitute his experience for an official ideology.

Matthew Sweeney’s poem “One Half of the Local Poet Show” comments on the state of culture in a provincial location in the Republic, providing a fitting complement to Hartnett’s version of the country. The frame is that of a reading tour by prominent Irish poets, “Two of Ireland’s best” (Sweeney 1992, 33) as the advertisement promises, and such an occasion certainly creates expectations. The tour provides opportunity for a lead-in by local aspirants and it is on one of them that the poem focuses. A man in a wheelchair (“one half of

the local poet spot” (ibid)) reads out something considered by the speaker “angry and bad / but impossible to forget” (ibid). The quoted lines more than live up to the description yet they simply serve as an illustration of the public state of culture: when the local figure leaves, half of the audience follows him, leaving the “big boys” (ibid) to “read to a near-empty room.” (ibid) Patrick Kavanagh would find the place a riddle in the context of his own terminology of parochial versus provincial<sup>6</sup> since it is provincial rather than parochial though features of the latter dominate. The local audience, or half of it, finds itself securely anchored in its own quarter, and they do not appear too much impressed by an elsewhere centre. The local ‘poet’ in a wheelchair conjures the ghost of Joyce but at the same time widens the scope of his vision: paralysis is both literal and metaphorical and it saturates life outside the capital as well; this view also contributes to the general pattern of revising the originally revivalist ideas concerning the uncorrupted nature of the culture of the country.

Derek Mahon’s choice of country locations is a rather peculiar one as he mainly opts for places signalling decay and desolation. The deserted and often rather decrepit reminders of former human habitation point to the general transitoriness of the human world in a Beckettian manner, reducing the significance of man along the way; yet at the same time they tacitly acknowledge the power of nature to reclaim what has been carved out from it by humans. This involvement of nature hints at the exclusive permanence of change and the human being only possesses the faculties to contemplate it, which in the final analysis is not a small gift either – a scene requires an observer to be regarded a scene.

The poem “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” lends significance to a place rarely considered worth even thinking about. The “disused shed” acquires the status of a special place where “a thought might grow” (Mahon 1999, 89), a phenomenon not too frequent in Mahon’s vision of the contemporary world. The somewhat vague reference to a location in the Republic claims kin with the exotic world of “Peruvian mines, worked out and abandoned” and “Indian compounds” (ibid), they are connected by the lack of practical significance and, in turn, by their discovery as potentially fertile imaginative environments. The more exact details of the shed are historically loaded, the ‘burnt-out hotel’ and the “civil war days” (ibid) provide the explanation,<sup>7</sup> in several senses, for the depraved condition of the ‘characters’ of the poem, the mushrooms crammed together in a claustrophobic environment.

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<sup>6</sup> “Parochialism and provincialism are opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own: he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis – towards which his eyes are turned – has to say ... The parochial mentality, on the other hand, is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish.” (Kavanagh quoted in Corcoran 1997, 63)

<sup>7</sup> The intertextual origins of the poem are partly hinted at in the dedication to J. G. Farrell whose novel *Troubles* provides the occasion (cf. Corcoran in Kennedy Andrews 233)

They become analogies to the “lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii” (Mahon 1999, 90), broadening the context of the poem to embrace and encompass human suffering caused by excessive violence. At the same time the mushrooms are emblematic of the repression experienced by various segments of the society of the independent Ireland as well – it is not very far-fetched to remember the censorship which kept those at bay who are usually the people in whose minds a “thought might grow.” What is also suggested by the image of the mushrooms in such an environment is the endurance of those kept under strict control – in spite of all the depressing lack of light and liberty, the spirit endures, the patient acceptance of the conditions does not destroy the possibility of a later better life; not even such excessive violence can claim full-scale victory over the subject race.

That the imagination survives and is reborn when the constrictions are raised is brilliantly exemplified by the intellectual life of the country, especially Irish literature could be cited as an example for this as it has grown out of the shadow of strict censorship. On a larger scale, the emblematic origin at the time of ‘civil war days’ suggests a wider possible context even within the Irish one – that despite the repressive measures of the early history of the newly independent South, the country emerges later as one of the modern success stories of European economic revival. The fact then that the Irish countryside hides such ‘treasures’ as this disused shed involves some optimism as far as the prospect of rebirth and regeneration is concerned, an optimism not frequently met in Mahon’s world.

In another Mahon poem, “A Garage in Co. Cork” the location is again a deserted country place, a memorial to the industrial world of the twentieth century, a garage abandoned and left to slow decay. The place is evoked in the matrix of other locations and times, a “roadside oasis” with a “mound / Of never-used cement” (Mahon 1999, 130); at first glance the building is as hollow and fake as a “frontier store-front in an old western” (ibid) but on closer scrutiny the “cracked panes reveal a dark / Interior echoing with the cries of children” (ibid). The place is deserted now but once it boasted of life, with the people now gone, hinting at the general Irish activity of emigration, but the memory is still alive: “Somebody somewhere thinks of this as home” (ibid). Time has moved on, nature reclaims what was once taken from her, and the place briefly becomes a reminder of the only permanence, that of change. The supernatural is evoked to resituate this picture: a god figure, after a night on the spot, changed an “old man and his wife” (Mahon 1999, 131) into petrol pumps – implying the eternity, though somewhat dubious eternity, of such man-made objects, revising the earlier indication of the endless power of nature as it overgrows the human construct. The resulting world is one in which nature reclaims everything but the eternal petrol pumps remain, forging

a new union, one of different constituents of different origins, existing side by side, if not in full harmony, at least not in active conflict.

The last stanza is a general comment, it may even seem out of context placed there. “We might be anywhere but are in one place only” (ibid) is true regardless of time and place, offering a general dimension of human existence, the necessity of choice (or of circumstance, in Mahon’s world) and the inescapable loss which it involves. Yet the line actually fits the context properly, as the uniqueness of any place is mentioned and the notion of belonging is indicated: it is the fact of belonging which gives the significance of a place. Similarly to “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford,” the location may not have anything distinct about it and still possess utmost importance – for someone, the observing imagination, which endows it with significance, or which recognises the inherent potential of the place and thus turns it into a place.

In “Kinsale” the almost extreme south location of the place serves as an explanation for its extraordinary weather – a place in the South with a southern exposure would stand in perfect contrast with the northern Portrush – Portstewart locations of other poems. The weather accordingly is markedly different – the usual, almost intimately known, rain “deep-delving, dark, deliberate you would say, / browsing on spire and bogland” (Mahon 1999, 167) is “a thing of the past” (ibid), belonging to another world. The weather is now clear and bright, “sky-blue slates are steaming in the sun” (ibid), the harbour is also fully alive with “yachts tinkling and dancing” (ibid). “Shining windows” (ibid) complement the picture to offer the logical opposition of the rain of the past with the sunshine of the future, with the present moment seen as a kind of hall leading into a brighter and thus happier world.

The poem cunningly translates some kind of optimism into the language of the external weather, the physical world thus becomes the analogue for the internal one. The stark opposition of the simple past with the simple present embraces this optimism on the level of the language itself, with the promise of a habit in the latter tense. The shift from the “spire and bogland” to “yachts” is also a telling instance of the past-future axis along which the movement is conducted. To this may be added the possible textual link to John Montague’s “A Lost Tradition” with its image of O’Hagan’s army moving towards Kinsale, a destination never to be reached – in Mahon’s poem the place embodies the once hoped-for new beginning, though only with an unbridgeable time-gap.

Seamus Heaney’s move to the Republic brought him into an everyday contact with the countryside: his first home there was an isolated cottage in County Wicklow. The move from urban Belfast to such a location is on one level a return for Heaney, evoking a potential

parallel with his upbringing in rural Northern Ireland: there is a second process of 'education' though this time for the adult poet and family man, with accordingly different responsibilities. The sequence "Glanmore Sonnets" captures country life as it is experienced by the poet and fuses its vision of the place with a self-conscious literary element; the location thus acquires a dimension not tackled by other poets.

The bringing together of rural near-idyll and language begins with the assertion of a basically unusual phenomenon, "The mildest February for twenty years" (Heaney 1979, 33), which implies a special occasion which the speaker's earlier life did not facilitate. The simple elements, often pleasures themselves, of secluded farm life are outlined in relation to the speaker's creative aspirations, and layers of the soil come to parallel layers of sense in language. The Wordsworthian evocation of "hiding places" (Heaney 1979, 34) turns Glanmore into a "hedge-school" (ibid) in the second poem, a place of slow learning where what is a potential elsewhere can become actual experience. The move to this location from Belfast after a childhood spent on a farm is like a return, and this is a tentative presence in the speaker's own 'growth of a poet's mind.' His hope is "to raise / a voice" (ibid) in an environment otherwise seen as usual and perhaps uninspiring for many; yet the speaker draws a parallel between verse and "the plough turned around," (ibid) hinting at the Latin origins of the word verse, as Neil Corcoran notes (Corcoran 1986, 144). The poetic inspiration offered by the location is explicit in the sound of birds at twilight: "It was all crepuscular and iambic." (Heaney 1979, 35) There is a catalogue of forms of animal life, a rich gallery of special moments after city life. The seclusion leads the speaker to the voicing of a potential parallel with the Wordsworths, just to be interrupted by his wife's reproach. The rebuke returns the speaker's attention to the outside world where the inanimate wind comes to be equalled with poetry, enclosing the poem in a framed structure, and it also rounds off the outlining of the basic territory of the Glanmore cottage.

After the image of Glanmore is securely established as an inspiring microcosm safely secluded from both the grand and trivial events of the outside world, the speaker descends into memories. Lulled by the peacefulness of the farm he recalls childhood beliefs and reflects on registers of vocabulary. The late-night weather forecast awakens the imagination as exotic locations are 'recited,' and this in turn leads the speaker to acknowledge the significance of his current location: he recognises that the place has become his home. This directs the sequence back to the present and the actual, with darker overtones than in the opening poems. The "Thunderlight" (Heaney 1979, 40), the rain and mysterious noises remind the speaker of the less pleasant elements of life yet the presence of his wife offers a consolation. The sight of

a rat outside embodies an actual threat for the peace of the family, and the speaker is sent to deal with it. This moment leads to the formulation of the first question: “Did we come to the wilderness for this” (Heaney 1979, 41) The embarrassment of having to face such trivial matters instead of his artistic freedom logically prompts the next question: “What is my apology for poetry?” (ibid) The explicit formulation of the dilemma concerning poetry’s position in everyday life is a cardinal point of the sequence yet in a cunning manner Heaney refrains from commenting on it. Instead he closes the sequence with a dream vision which brings together the speaker’s relation with his wife with famous earlier love stories. The dream is one of sleeping in “a moss of Donegal” (Heaney 1979, 42), exposed to the not too pleasant weather of the northwest. The closing image is that of their first night together, narrowing the focus of the poem to the intimacy of the family, thus the world of Glanmore is reinforced in its status as home for the speaker.

### 3.3.2. NORTH

Bleakness begins at home even for the wanderer: Derek Mahon’s “some generic, gull-pierced seaside town” (Mahon 1999, 224) is his default approach to the country places of his native province. An actual incarnation of the type is described in “North Wind: Portrush”: the poem depicts a coastal location which is a rather hostile place according to usual standards. The name Portrush refers to a small town, the place, however, is examined in its wider context, that of the northern coast, as the speaker concentrates on one element of the physical environment rather than on the man-made world of the town itself. The wind of “this benighted coast” (Mahon 1999, 100) is inescapable, like a “lear-spirit in agony” (ibid) locked into an eternal curse of haunting the place, blowing right ‘off the stars / And the existential, stark / Face of the cosmic dark.” (ibid) In a characteristically Mahonian way the rare instance of counterexample is quickly offered: there are moments of windless peace and silence too. The doubling of the perspective is maintained when the image of a ‘smaller ship’ (ibid) leaving the place after a night in the bay is introduced: questions referring to the place alternate with ones about the people on board, the former involving curiosity mixed with pity and the latter a feeling of desperate need for sympathy and understanding. In spite of the general hostility of the place life is present and follows a regular pattern, the inhabitants, the “wrapped-up bourgeoisie / Hardened by wind and sea” (Mahon 1999, 101) are accustomed to

this world and are a part of it. The place even encourages the cultivation of an illusion which in turn is equally quickly deflated:

Everything swept so clean  
By tempest, wind and rain!  
Elated, you might believe  
That this was the first day –  
A false sense of reprieve,  
For the climate is here to stay. (ibid)

The near-Eden-like idea of the “first morning” is cunningly brought together with the association of the “tempest” into a carefully planned scheme of purifying reconciliation but the physical category of the “climate” cuts short all such possibilities for an underlying pattern unless one is willing to accept the false face of the illusion. What is left is the general advice “So best prepare for the worst” (ibid), with an explicit exclusion of “Prospero and his people” who ‘never / Came to these stormy parts” (ibid) and with an equally explicit comment on the why: “Few do who have the choice” (ibid). The closure of the poem, however, involves yet another turn to make the picture finally a complete one: the wind, despite its crudeness and cruelty possesses a feature so often yearned for by others, that of permanence: “Yet, blasting the subtler arts, / That weird, plaintive voice / Sings now and for ever.” (ibid)

The poem is characterised by the ambivalent position of the speaker which is shown in the frequent use of contrasts. The description of the place is done in a predominantly metonymic way, it is conducted through its characteristic north wind, rendering this northern location with its northern exposure even less attractive. The speaker’s belonging to this by normal standards generally unpleasant and perhaps even hostile place, however, subverts the picture: attachment to the place, though not necessarily by choice but rather by circumstance, calls into question the very normality of these standards – this place is home for people, it is the place by which they measure everything else and as such, it is *their* normal standard. The counter current of the rare windless moments reminds the outsider of the presence of another possible type of weather on the location, while for the inhabitant such moments are as naturally part of the general pattern in the place as the more frequent wind itself. In addition the transcendent feature of permanence attributed to this particularly harsh wind leaves even less space for a simple assessment of the chosen location. What the poem thus exemplifies on

a more general level is the relativity of notions of normality and the subsequent impossibility of a singular, and therefore simplifying, approach to the subject.

As if to support the claim of complexity, another look at the same location is offered in “The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush.” The focus is somewhat different this time: man-made elements are foregrounded instead of the location itself, yet the place remains the same. The time is now specified, it is spring with all its associations of regeneration, rebirth and the beginning of the tourist season. The occasion is a peculiar one as “Today the place is as it might have been, / Gentle and almost hospitable.” (Mahon 1999, 97) The hotel doors are wide open after the winter attacks of the north wind and gulls flood the place as a sign of a new world, engaged in the activity of “window-shopping” (ibid). The speaker occupies an equally peaceful and integral part in the picture as he is sitting in a Chinese restaurant, with the proprietor standing in the door “as if the world were young” (ibid). The closing picture of the poem creates a subtle balance between the far and the near, longing and belonging through the figure of the restaurant owner as he is

Watching the first yacht hoist a sail  
– An ideogram on sea-cloud – and the light  
Of heaven upon the hills of Donegal;  
And whistles a little tune, dreaming of home. (ibid)

The Romantic antecedents are not far away – this poem recalls Wordsworth and his London as imagined on Westminster Bridge. Just as Wordsworth’s account is that of the morning rather than of the city, the location here features as a necessary element for the experience to take place: the benevolence of spring can be observed in contrast to the harshness of winter and its north wind. The corresponding internal rebirth of the proprietor also harks back to Wordsworth as the figure is physically there on the spot yet spiritually he is somewhere else. The evoking of home as the subject of a dream creates a distance between the location and the notion, reducing the actual place in significance, focusing on another place somewhere else.

The two poems provide an adequate approach to Mahon’s treatment of place in general as well. The neat balance of the two poems between the physical location and the man-made world planted on the same spot suggests the general dilemma of the Mahonian speaker: the dilemma of being in a place and still not being there, in the place but not of the place and yet still of the place to a certain extent. The dimension of rootedness and

situatedness is recognised but it is not embraced willingly, the critical distance is always allowed to intrude but it is always kept at bay by the awareness of the haunting dilemma of escape itself: that escape requires a place to escape from as well and not only a destination. This opens a dilemma which is especially valid in the case of Mahon: knowing the reasons for the felt necessity of escape indicates a rather intimate relation with the place, one that would eventually lead to the question of the point of escaping itself.

John Montague's *The Rough Field* opens with an untitled poem simply referred to by its first line. Though the beginning of the journey is in Belfast, the city is quickly left behind, with the adjoining sense of liberation from the constraining atmosphere of the "narrow huckster streets" (Montague 1995, 8). The countryside is already deep into history: the "Solid British towns" (ibid) lining up the road evoke a time beyond that of Belfast with its divisions, and the border of Tyrone recalls an almost obsolete world as it once marked the "End of the Pale, beginning of O'Neill" (ibid). This image is at once spatial and temporal, though the latter involves the bitter irony of being the beginning of centuries of troubles, as the end of the O'Neill rising ushered in the plantation proper of Ulster.

The persona does not venture that far back in time, however, as the twilight benevolently covers up this dimension as it simultaneously conceals the landscape. The private timescale takes over instead, the "gaunt farmhouse" (Montague 1995, 9) marks the persona's return to a less distant and therefore more tangible past – yet the recognition of "what seems still, though changing" (ibid) locks him into a paralysing situation. As night has replaced twilight, there is no opportunity for more observations, especially not for a perspective that would yield an enlightening vision; the landmarks still visible at such an hour are sufficient only to enlarge the sternness of this landscape:

No Wordsworthian dream enchants me here  
With glint of glacial corrie, totemic mountain,  
But merging low hills and gravel streams,  
Oozy blackness of bog-banks, tough upland grass;  
Rough Field in the Gaelic and rightly named (ibid)

Much of this is remembered rather than seen, yet the thorough knowledge of the place compensates for the lack of primary sensory experience. The "harsh landscape" (ibid) is home to a "gaunt farmhouse" (ibid) and in the ultimate contrast the urban hostility of Belfast at the outset gives way to the natural hostility of the destination. The self-conscious literary parallel,

or rather the lack of it, indicates the sobriety of the speaker; despite the fact that this destination is the place of his childhood home there is an honest declaration of the unattractiveness of the location.

Tom Paulin approaches the province of his upbringing with certain suspicions springing from his acute awareness of the division of the place. Paulin, however, does not surrender unconditionally to the invitations of the simple stereoscopic vision of the 'either/or' of the province – there is a pervasive critical spirit at work even when turning to his own broader sectarian context. The blind and ignorant knitting together of religion and politics has its own price as Paulin suggests, and such a union renders human life a series of mechanical routines with no imaginative dimensions. This is best exemplified in the poem "Desertmartin" which provides a somewhat impatient account of a place which counts as the stronghold of Northern Unionism. The speaker delivers his verdict in the opening line, calling the place "the dead centre of a faith" (Paulin 1983, 16). The allegiances of the place are clearly marked, it is the place of the Protestant community, and within that, of Presbyterians, yet this is a "dead centre," with observable degradation of life:

I see a plain  
Presbyterian grace sour, then harden,  
As a free strenuous spirit changes  
To a servile defiance that whines and shrieks  
For the bondage of the letter: (ibid)

The speaker makes it even more explicit in the next lines what happens if constraints outweigh the liberating power of belief:

Masculine Islam, the rule of the Just,  
Egyptian sand dunes and geometry,  
A theology of rifle-butts and executions:  
These are the places where the spirit dies. (Paulin 1983, 17)

These places may appear distant and to have no relation whatsoever with contemporary Europe but the speaker thinks otherwise as his perception yields an unconsoling result : "And now, in Desertmartin's sandy light, / I see a culture of twigs and bird-shit / Waving a gaudy flag it loves and curses." (ibid) The flag with the oppositional reactions of love and curse

epitomises that ambivalence which a faction of Ulster Presbyterians show: the wish to belong to but the at the same time suspicion and subsequent hostility towards Britain. Belonging is a useful tactics when the Republic is concerned, yet a feeling of betrayal motivates suspicion towards the British centre when the former threat is not a considerable factor. This ambivalence destabilises any point of reference and creates a world with shifting contours, with a corresponding effect on human life in such places.

Such perturbed lives are introduced in “Fivemiletown” and “Mount Stewart,” two poems referring to the same place, a town with two names. The two poems take similar approaches and courses to centre on their chosen locations, both employ the dimension of relationships, yet these are somewhat different in their nature according to the different associations of the two names for the same settlement. Interestingly enough the poem carrying the official name Mount Stewart suggests the coarse and crude relation, while the local demotic Fivemiletown involves a more sophisticated one, though not without ambiguities and questions – yet at least by means of strong emotions it rises above the purely mechanical world of the other poem.

At the outset of “Fivemiletown” there is a promise, “The release of putting off / who and where we’ve come from” (Paulin 1987, 15), in the frame of an encounter but the promise remains unfulfilled as the meeting does not take place. Instead a rather awkward relationship is outlined, a relationship in which one party is always absent or inadequately timed. The place against which the ‘story’ unfolds appears stagnant and provincial, with the speaker as a “gaberdine stranger” (Paulin 1987, 16). The inertia of the place seems to emanate the hindering energies for the love story: there is an “empty motorway” (Paulin 1987, 15), “A church and a creamery / the trope of villages / on the slow road to Enniskillen” (ibid) and a ‘guest-house’ (Paulin 1987, 16), otherwise the place is totally devoid of human presence. The speaker’s refuge on his sojourn is a “newish wood / above a small, still lough” (ibid) where he spends some time feeling rather out of place, “one of those buck eejits / that feels misunderstood.” (ibid) The incorporation of a natural scene shifts the emphasis from inertia to some form of peace yet a reminder of less consoling elements of reality is noticed when “an olive armoured car / nosed down the hill” (ibid). The speaker’s reaction reflects a recognition of his basically alien status: “no more than I could, it’d [the car] never fit / the manor house’s *porte cochère*” (ibid). This suggests some hitherto suspected yet not confirmed aspect of his tentative liaison – that it is, as much as the armoured car, a form of violation. The speaker’s confession of feeling “dwammy sick / at the fact of meeting you again” (Paulin 1987, 17) resituates the relation between them and he chooses to evade the meeting, leaving a note

instead. The conclusion thus calls into question the relation itself since a rendezvous would involve both parties in order to be called a rendezvous.

“Mount Stewart” is set in the same location yet the different name produces a different perspective. The speaker displays surprise at the origin of the placename, “That some military man / should have planted his own surname / on a few sloping fields” (Paulin 1987, 38) but the justified revenge is not belated either: “then had it rubbed out / by the local demotic” (ibid). The simile involved is once again in the context of love yet there is a not so latent sectarian element in it as well since escape from her ‘tribe’ is also included in the account. The “Mount” of the name is translated into the “Mount of Venus” (ibid) and the spirit of the place is quickly swallowed into the discourse of love – at first with elements of dignity, later reduced to the mechanics of intercourse only, with the location losing its significance: a relation of this kind might be played out “in a small town / in Ireland or someplace.” (Paulin 1987, 39)

Paradoxically the relation, apparently not utterly profound, is one that would challenge the general piety suggested by “Ireland” and “small town.” Yet this small town is somewhat different from the expected type: “the town had no centre” (ibid). On a practical level this means that the speaker is always uncertain as to what or whose surveillance he is under; in a more abstract dimension the lack of centre requires a different approach to reality – with no fixed points of reference everything comes to be destabilised, which perhaps could account for the crude reduction of love to quick intercourse with the prospect of a certainty, though of a very short duration indeed.

Paul Muldoon’s approach to place and the history preserved in the placename is amply demonstrated in his early poem “Clonfeacle.” Unlike Heaney, Muldoon’s approach is liberated of communal concerns despite the associations of the place with St Patrick and his incident of losing a tooth: this legend remains the secret of the speaker as he decides not to share this with his companion. The place is simply a location where something happened with tangible meaning for the speaker. St Patrick is evoked, he is the point of reference to which the placename is anchored but as old Irish placenames require translation to uncover the story they preserve, the speaker duly embarks on the course of this linguistic manoeuvre. The river’s constant work of erosion also becomes translation in his eyes, of “stone to silt” (Muldoon 1973, 14), and the murmur of the water modulates into preaching, linking it with Patrick, thus a historical chain is constructed, just to be broken up moments later. As the speaker’s companion turns towards him, she becomes analogous with the river: the river’s “tongue of water passing / Between teeth of stones” (ibid) finds its pair in the figure, “Your

tongue between your teeth.” (ibid) The invitation is readily accepted, the speaker at once abandons anything which is not private or is not for the moment: “I turn my back on the river / And Patrick, their sermons // Ending in the air.” (ibid)

Muldoon’s sense of place is thus private though the opening associations are connected with shared cultural items. The abstract notion of culture, however, renders the legend simply a story, with no immediate significance for the present-day figure whose attention is more focused on the presence of his beloved companion. That the placename comes to be preserved in a poem has its origin not in communal historical or linguistic concerns but in the privately important memory of a meeting, this is what has the power of making the place come alive for the speaker. The historical dimension is present in both communal and personal context, with the former sacred and the latter rather profane, and in the decision of the speaker the latter is considered weightier.

As if it were a different world altogether, Medbh McGuckian’s poem “Marconi’s Cottage” visits the northern coast in a strikingly different way than others do. It is indeed a different world for McGuckian since she merges a human construct with the landscape. The memory of a historic invention, that of communication by radio waves, endows the place with a peculiarly human significance yet the speaker’s eyes are driven not by a fascination with technology but rather by a purely personal delight in the location. The building is “Small and watchful as a lighthouse” (McGuckian 1991, 73), “Bitten and fostered by the sea / and by the British spring” (ibid). The “castle-thick walls” (ibid) contrast strikingly with the “door weaker than kisses” (ibid) to liberate the cottage from its purely physical existence to rise onto a different plane of life: “Maybe you are a god of sorts, / or a human star, lasting in spite of us” (ibid), and this leads to a subsequent wish on part of the speaker for some sort of permanence which the place seems to embody by itself: “let me have you for what we call / forever” (ibid). The sweep of the poem from contemplation through amazement to wish turns the location, landscape as well as building into a world with personal meaning, one which, similarly to Muldoon’s poem, forges its own associations with the place in spite of its historical significance.

#### 3.4. DIVISION PROPER: THE BORDER

The concept of the border in the Irish context is a heavily loaded one in many senses. The line separating the Republic from the North is a dividing line from the point of view of

political formations and also in terms of the 'official' versions of reality. The simple-looking political dimension is complicated by the specific location and origin of the line: as the interpretation of the act of partition itself is different on the two sides of the border, consequently the concept of the border is different as well. The temporary or permanent nature of the line has long divided the population of the island yet this division does not fully coincide with the geographical one. The different approaches to the temporal aspect of the political border are rooted in the different versions of reality: Republican aspirations regard it as only a temporary inconvenience in the way of a united Ireland whereas Unionist belief considers it as permanent and nearly sacred.

The notion of the border involves figurative possibilities as well. A line or zone separating two distinct unities can easily be broadened into an experience situated at the face of confrontation between two different worlds with the concurrent state of anxiety. Questions regarding the existence of the border by those living in its vicinity in a rural area indicate a different approach: the practical dimension very often makes no notice of the border since it does not seem to affect the life of these people – the political aspect of life is reduced to a virtually unnoticed magnitude when everyday practical matters are concerned such as health care or postal services. The experience that the border may be crossed unnoticed in several places on several occasions implies the arbitrariness of the category yet this very arbitrariness is the source of the fascination and anxiety which can be experienced in the border zone.

The laconic title of John Montague's poem "Border" offers no commentary on the category of the border; it simply employs the concept and turns it into a trope. The poem is a part of a longer sequence composed after the death of the poet's mother, and it captures the moment of border crossing, a part of the actual journey from the South to the North, with a generalising conclusion which opens the poem towards the figurative direction. The opening lines of the poem, "That wavering needle / pointing always North" (Montague 1995, 154), pursue a double purpose: on one level it is the simple rephrasing of a geographical fact which serves as the basis of orientation in space, on another it locates the persona in an inescapable relation with his place of birth, in a way also functioning as a means of orientation.

The crossing of the border between the Republic and the North is a familiar enough issue for the speaker. Childhood summer holidays are evoked and stand in stark contrast with the austere present, and the direction of the journey is also emblematic: memories preserve the routine of southward crossing, moving towards the light, whereas the present northward movement implies a colder and darker destination. The simple 'naturalness' of the crossing in childhood is replaced by an uneasy feeling in the present world – as the moment draws nearer

the persona's anxiety becomes palpable: "by the sand-bagged / barracks of Rosslea, Derrylin, / the route is different." (ibid) The journey is marked by a "half-bombed bridge" (ibid) and "potholed roads" (ibid) which lead to a world of alternating red and green post boxes, British patrols and *gardaí*, English and Irish signs "both bullet-pierced" (ibid) – these items indicate a world with alternative realities. The destination is reached in spite of all difficulties: the persona arrives in

that shadowy territory  
where motives fail, where  
love fights against death,  
good falters before evil. (ibid)

The actual destination is the North yet the final details are universal: in a state of anxiety such attributes fit any place, rendering certain aspects of actuality second-rate in terms of importance and foregrounding fundamental categories of existence in turn. The literal world gives in to the metaphorical in the private context of the poem, the border between the South and the North becomes a divide between mother and son with the tentative hope that frequent crossings may lead to a degree of familiarity and naturalness which would eliminate it – all this, however, is modified by the fact that the poem post-dates the death of the mother, therefore the actual crossing between the human beings is made impossible in the context of earthly life.

Though the border as a physical location is principally evoked for a figurative journey, the description works well on the literal level too. The details mentioned capture the atmosphere of the place as well as of the time; it is not only the border between the Republic and the North in a general dimension but the border at the time of the Troubles. The atrocities evoked by the landmarks render the concept of the border even more complex, turning the region into a real frontier zone with the suggestion that it is not only two different political formations which meet there but more profound divisions may be encountered in the face of which the political dimension will appear only secondary or even less in terms of importance.

In another poem, "Border Lake" the border is simply a point of reference in locating the scene. The poem begins with an almost banal statement of the relation between northward movement and a decline in temperature: "The farther North you travel, the colder it gets." (Montague 1995, 153) Still, the over-confidential personal pronoun insists on a possible figurative dimension, turning the climatic relation into a marker of the general hostility of life

in a certain location. The example offered is a ‘border county of which no one speaks’ (ibid), with its bleak capital town almost dead after the end of a fair; “The only beauty nearby is a small glacial lake / sheltering between drumlin moons of mountains” (ibid). The fact of locating beauty outside the human settlement depersonalises and dehumanises the place, and the glacial origin of the lake suggests cold beauty only. The only living beings glimpsed at are a ‘solitary pair of swans who haunt the lake’ (ibid), indicating the near-void quality of this world.

The nameless county is that of the poet, yet its namelessness raises a number of thoughts. It is either too trivial to identify the county by its proper geographical marker or it indicates the fate of the place: that it has been forgotten, as its location would suggest, by both sides of the border, thus it becomes the border proper, a land of no one, a purely symbolic place which can only be travelled through but not inhabited and possessed. Even the glacial landforms support this latter idea as the principal agent of the formation of the landscape, ice, did its work and withdrew to leave an altered world behind – the place has been marked and left to stand a memorial to earlier times.

A later sequence entitled “Border Sick Call” marks a return to the haunted world of the border. The poem gives an account of a ‘ōf a journey in winter along the Fermanagh- Donegal border” (Montague 1995, 345), according to the dedication, and of a special one indeed: the poet accompanies his physician brother on a sick call into a special territory, that of the border region. The rather harsh winter setting provides a chilling mood for the journey which is already a peculiar one due to the location; the short winter afternoon with its quickly receding light transforms the border region into an even more haunted and haunting place, a world forgotten by both countries, and the border becomes an apropos of the frontier between life and death while it loses its significance as a political category.

The departure ritual consists in waving goodbye to a ‘Customs Post that has twice / leaped into the air” (Montague 1995, 346), indicating a world where people have to accept “*the impossible as normal, / lunacy made local, / surrealism made risk.*” (ibid) The journey becomes a tough one in a short time as roads disappear under the snow, with only the doctor having a sense of direction, the persona is rendered a follower only in a world with “no tree, or standing stone, / only cold sun and moorland” (Montague 1995, 348). The scene opens a tentative parallel with Dante but it is a contrast which is emphasised:

*But no purgatorial journey  
reads stranger than this,*

*our Ulster border pilgrimage  
where demarcations disappear,  
landmarks, forms, and farms vanish  
into the ultimate coldness of an ice age. (ibid)*

Purgatorial fire is replaced by ice, another common alternative for apocalyptic images, and this sends into hibernation the usual antagonism implied by the Northern border region, which suggests the dislocation of the importance of the common divisions. The significance of the border is further reduced in the house of the first patient:

‘Border, did you say,  
how many miles to the border?  
Sure we don’t know where it starts  
or ends up here, except we’re lost  
unless the doctor or postman finds us. (Montague 1995, 350)

Despite the recent political turmoil the border region is not a place receiving special attention; the only ‘explorers’ of this world are the common figures of the doctor and the postman, both responsible, though in different ways, for keeping the border people alive.

The past glitters in the shallow light of nostalgia for a brief moment as the border is seen as an opportunity for making a living – out of smuggling cattle across the border, with the implication of the mythic cattle raids of ancient Ireland. The wartime prosperity, however, is gone and not even this “auld religious thing” (Montague 1995, 351), the present conflict, can revive it; yet the commentary of the patient cuts deeper than perhaps intended: “Have you ever noticed, cows have no religion?” (ibid) The secondary nature of otherwise definitive differences is amply demonstrated in this ironic remark, and the host’s generous offer of a “small prescription bottle of colourless poteen” (ibid) functions as the most telling proof of the only significant relation which is between people, without any further qualification – the poorest of the border poor rewards those “brave men” (ibid) who risked the winter journey.

The return from this location offers a minor epiphany for the speaker: he notices a small boat on the lake glimpsed at earlier. The drink initiates a confession from the doctor: he is the one to translate the border into an overtly figurative concept – “the real border is not between / countries, but between life and death” (Montague 1995, 353). The vivid memory of the first death witnessed by the doctor is recalled; though the section is in brackets it still

gives an accurate picture of that border crossing, and the story itself implies that there is a very thin line dividing life from death, especially in such quarters as the present location.

The visit ends in darkness, and the return to the main road appears as an escape from a strange world, “adrift from humankind” (Montague 1995, 357). With the physical border turned into metaphorical the persona formulates weighty questions of particular origin but of general significance: “Will a stubborn devotion suffice, / sustained by an ideal of service? / Will dogged goodwill solve anything?” (ibid) The desperate struggle against the inevitable takes on a special colouring in the border region, literal and metaphorical coalesce into each other and the zone of the line separating the two neighbouring countries becomes an actual location of the struggle of two more fundamental worlds, those of life and death. This struggle unfolds in any other location as well yet the poet’s choice of placing it in such a setting seems to deflate the category of the political border and makes it irrelevant on the level of the experience itself. The final question of the poem reinforces this idea: “The customs officials wave us past again. // But in what country have we been?” (ibid) The question is printed as a separate unit, its isolation reflecting the confusion of the speaker. The direction of the border crossing was not specified at the beginning of the poem either and this piece of information remains a secret at the end as well, building towards the idea that the sole function of the border is to function as a reminder of separation – of the two fundamental worlds and not that of people.

Seamus Heaney’s allegorical poem “From the frontier of Writing” is principally concerned with the concept of the frontier, yet the analogue the speaker employs is that of the border. The event of crossing the border in the time of conflict serves as the means of evoking the general state of anxiety which characterises creative writing as well. The first part of the poem provides several details about the process of being subjected to scrutiny – it is external scrutiny leading to the state of being “subjugated, yes, and obedient.” (Heaney 1987, 6) The second part collapses the literal into the figurative and merges images of such a scrutiny with those of writing, turning the political Troubles into troubles of the writer, and mentions that mysterious moment when “suddenly you’re through” (ibid) and process ends in a change of state. The poem is concerned with the crossing rather than with the location, and with the imaginary rather than the real. The actual border is only a point in space where the scrutiny happens, yet the possibility opens only with that particular image of the border. The physical is thus overwritten by the metaphorical at the moment of its employment, and the border crossing becomes a potent image for a different kind of stress, yet the very commonness of that action renders the experience of Heaney’s self-reflexive speaker a similarly usual one.

The crossing of the border facilitates a different experience for Paul Muldoon, an experience which can be simultaneously seen as profound and revelatory as well as trivial. “Good Friday, 1971. Driving Westward” is the record of a westward drive which necessarily involves the crossing of the border. The beginning of the journey is in Northern Ireland and its last mentioned point is Gaoth Dobhair in the Republic; the intended destination, if any, however, is not specified. The speaker races against the sun and appears to arrive at every place synchronously with it. The early morning hour finds the country in a half-asleep state, though the cattle are already out and lorries have delivered their loads; most people, however, are still caught between sleep and wake. The speaker acquires a companion as well, a girl picked up and given a lift “out of love” (Muldoon 1973, 23), and the border is crossed into the “grey flesh of Donegal” (Muldoon 1973, 24). As the road is tricky and winding, it is not difficult for the speaker to lose control of the car for a short time, and they hit something on the road. The meaning of this, however, is different for the two people: “she thought we hit something big / But I had seen nothing, perhaps a stick.” (ibid) In the rest of the poem, as in the day perhaps, this difference of opinion separates them.

The literary precedent for the poem, as Tim Kendall notes, is John Donne’s work “Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward” (cf. Kendall 29-30). The more secular present, however, significantly rewrites the poem, and there is a substantial presence of local colour too. The Good Friday evocation of the death of Christ is reduced to an accident even whose memory is recalled differently, and appears to be a fairly trivial one anyway. The girl’s behaviour, however, displays an extraordinary amount of sense of guilt, which is considered by Kendall a critique of religious guilt, regarding it as mainly pointless (Kendall 30). As the itinerary is a westward one, it involves the crossing of the border as well; there is not much change observable in either the landscape or the places, apart from the accident itself which happens in the ‘other’ country. This may as well suggest a dangerous place and something of such expectations is justified as the accident leads to a difference of opinion and the revelation of the girl’s sense of guilt with the ultimate verdict of the speaker, alongside the prospect of the impossibility of reconciliation.

The poem “The Boundary Commission” involves no journey; it evokes a strange place instead with an extraordinary dimension. The body in the title is only implicitly conjured, through its absurd decision to draw the border “Down the middle of the street” (Muldoon 2001, 80) of a village. The division separates “butcher and baker” into “different states” (ibid), providing not only a highly ridiculous situation but an unmanageable one at the same time, which creates an image at once surrealistic and absurd yet, unfortunately, not

exclusively imaginary. The border for a brief spell acquires actual dividing powers, it becomes a frontier for the occasion of the poem:

a shower of rain

Had stopped so clearly across Golightly's lane  
It might have been a wall of glass  
That had toppled over. (ibid)

This revelatory moment takes the character in the poem unawares, freezing him on the spot with a paralysing dilemma: "He stood there, for ages, / To wonder which side, if any, he should be on." (ibid)

The poem investigates the questions of division and belonging, with an eye on the rather arbitrary nature of such categories. The border in this case is a human construct, defined and decided by the boundary commission. Borders may be natural ones too though in most cases they have nothing to do with the physical environment – human decisions are superimposed on an indifferent landscape. The village, however, is a human construct alike; that the border ignores this is in itself an absurd phenomenon. The border is *there*, though, separating people of the same village into different states, and a situation of this kind immediately recalls Northern Ireland with its internal division and the whole island with the internal border on it too. In a divided world the acknowledgement of allegiances is (or at least seems) necessary, and the figure's hesitation suggests that taking sides is anything but a simple question, if it is a question at all.

### 3.5. BEYOND DIVISION

#### 3.5.1. THE WEST

The predominantly rural world of the West of Ireland functions as a special location in Irish literature and culture. The usual political division of the island into South and North is at once nullified by the concept of the West – though part of the Republic (the simple fact is that Northern Ireland is the north-eastern part of the Irish Isle), the West appears frequently in the poetry of the North as well often, though not always, with a deliberately post-divisionary

purpose, or at least generously forgetting about the fact that the West is part of the southern state.

The political division of South and North reflects an economic one as well, though it has become less dramatic due to the spectacular development of the Republic and the joining of the European Economic Community (now European Union) of both the Republic and the United Kingdom in 1973. The principal division reflecting difference in economic and cultural development is discernible in the context of the modern world of Europe along the East-West axis. East in the European environment means a time lag, a less developed world, whereas the West is the embodiment of the modern and the latest, it is generally the most highly developed part of the continent. In the Irish context, however, the situation is just the reverse of the general pattern: the East, located closer to the mainland of the United Kingdom, is the developed part, and the West, facing the Atlantic Ocean, is the backward region (and perhaps in many ways it is also the backyard as well). By its very nature of being isolated, coupled with its harsh physical conditions, the West is the place that has preserved the most of the world of the previous centuries and it is therefore seen as the 'authentic' Irish world. Traditions which survived in the West were idealised by the Romantic agenda of the Revival, and the counter-move to demythologise the very same traditions was also played out in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For the present poets the place becomes what it is: a repository of values from another world, a world that is a simple and old one where life is neither black nor white but a fine gradation of greys coalescing into one another – life as it is anywhere in the world, not worse or better but different, and this very difference is the basis of its inspiring powers. The natural dimension of the West is a hauntingly beautiful landscape which is at once hostile in many of its physical features – harsh climate and poor soils make life particularly difficult in the region. The beauty and the harshness combine to forge a sublime world, the sublime as real landscape, which is richly captured in the work of several contemporary Irish poets. The cultural dimension of the West offers an experience of traditional Irish life, in many ways a very distant one for modern poets. The distance can function as a finding of roots for some and the recognition of its essentially alien nature for others; such profound experiences single out the West for several poets as a region apart and independent of the internal divisions of the island.

The poet who has discovered a second home in the West is Michael Longley. His favourite County Mayo has featured significantly, together with other western locations, in his poetry from early times on, acting not principally as an escape but rather as an alternative to

his Belfast home. Though Mayo is a part of the Republic, Longley identifies it as the West, by which move he transcends the usual division of the island into South and North, attaching no significance to the border in the process, so much so that journeys to the place are never mentioned, it is only the destination that is focused upon.

Longley's long-standing concern with the West is first demonstrated in the poem "Leaving Inishmore." The location, one of the Aran islands, is the place to leave on the occasion; what is usually a destination elsewhere is the point of departure here, though it turns out to be the end of a holiday, so the leaving is in fact a return to the usual place of habitation for the speaker. The island is seen in the frequent associations of the western off-shore territory of Ireland – quiet alternation of "Rain and sunlight" (M. Longley 1985, 54), a place undisturbed by events outside it, it is peacefully locked into the natural cycle with nothing to endanger it. Apart from the change of seasons and the subsequent waves of visitors time is suspended, it is a world of "a perfect standstill" (ibid), nominated "the point of no return" (ibid) by the speaker to make it immune to change, to turn it into an enclave that serves as a refuge from the quotidian and the general pattern of mutability.

The first part of the poem "To Derek Mahon" is set in Belfast, as the point of departure for a memorable outing in the West. The nightmare of Belfast finds its antithesis in the peace of the West though the speaker is aware of their status as strangers in that land. The two Belfast-born Protestants find a place in the West at once exotic and alien, they are "Eavesdroppers on conversations / With a Jesus who spoke Irish" (M. Longley 1985, 82) Yet as time passes something alters, they recognise some ground on which they feel attached to this island location and perhaps the date is not insignificant in this change as "That was Good Friday years ago." (M. Longley 1985, 83) Despite the strangeness of the place it acquires a magic dimension to exert a haunting effect on the visitors; the simplicity of the old ways and the exoticism of the bilingual environment keep them momentary captives of the island, momentary only since the time comes when they have to leave.

The experience of the West in such circumstances leads to the transformation of the place into something profoundly important for Longley. The proper significance of the West is demonstrated in the short poem entitled "The West," which depicts an intensely private world where the major experience is facing oneself. The persona is either engaged in the activity of listening to the radio for "news from home" (M. Longley 1985, 94), or observes himself in a strangely duplicated form as he walks up to the cottage functioning as his "home from home" (ibid). The details of the cottage and the surrounding world imply a simple place with a rather frugal degree of comfort yet this is to the advantage of the persona as

introspection is facilitated and encouraged in such an environment. The place gives the impression that the passing of time has been suspended, the two activities are basically static and contemplative, opening a different dimension to life unimaginable in the city. This is the poem which then becomes Longley's milestone in his treatment of the West: the later poems return to this kind of destination, turning the speaker into a familiar face in the region, slowly shedding his visitor-image. The shift from "news from home" to "home from home" contributes to this 'rite of passage,' with the first "home" of the latter phrase receiving increasingly more emphasis.

"Carrigskeewaun" is a set of pictures from life in Longley's West, providing a kaleidoscopic account in five sections, each with its own title. The details captured are almost all natural ones, there are only few man-made elements mentioned. The opening sections evoke a place in which human presence is an intrusion. It is "ravens' territory" (M. Longley 1985, 96) with the corresponding relics of death and decay, the speaker is only a visitor there, standing still. His first movement disturbs the birds of the place and makes them fly away, only a swan decides to remain on the spot. Other human presences are discovered in the form of traces – "cattle tracks," "footprints of the children and my own" (ibid); these are memorials of the previous day found on the strand. The human construct of the "dry-stone wall" (M. Longley 1985, 97) leads the speaker to reflection and turf-smoke evokes the image of a home: "Steam from a kettle, a tablecloth and / A table she might have already set." (ibid) The closing image of the poem is that of a lake, having the power of mirroring the world around it and an even more extraordinary feature: "For a few minutes every evening / its surface seems tilted to receive / the sun perfectly." (ibid)

The world depicted in the poem is one out of time, dominated by representatives of nature, virtually excluding human civilisation. Though Carrigskeewaun is a reference to a human place, apart from the turf smoke the human presence associated with settlements is basically missing. That it is a world where time appears suspended is supported by the image of the "cattle tracks" and "footprints" on the strand – normally these would be erased by the water in its constant interaction with the shore. The suspension of time is not the only appearance in this place: the lake's mirroring of the "sheep and cattle that wander there" (ibid) creates a duplication, on the level of reflection, of reality, and the special power of the water surface "to receive / The sun perfectly" also "seems" to do this.

"In Mayo" provides details of life in a small town in the West, thus it complements the perspective of the previous poem. The approach, however, is a rather interesting one: the speaker's attitude reveals intimacy with the place yet he also offers a glance of himself from

the point of view of the natives of the place, thus his status as a stranger in the location is also expressed. The place is one which, as in other Longley poems about the West, seems to escape the passing of time – both the natural world and the human population are engaged in the routine of life lived in a place detached from the outside world, undisturbed by a wider context. The visitors, though feeling intimacy towards the place, remain essentially strangers, their movements are riddles for the local people, their actions are “episodes” (M. Longley 1985, 118) in the history of the place and sometimes even approximate miraculous dimensions such as “the mushrooms / That cluster where we happen to lie.” (ibid)

Life is easily imagined in such a location for the speaker as the generalising vision is outlined in section IV. From among times of the day “Dawns and dusks” (M. Longley 1985, 119) are pointed out, mysterious intersections of day and night, and there is an image of “swans / That fly home in twos, married for life” (ibid). This image has its own fine reverberations suggested by flying home and life-long marriage, and also enters into a relation with the solitary swan of “Carrigskeewaun” and the numerous flock of Yeats, and Heaney’s swan-covered lake is not alien here either.

“Landscape” is set in an unidentified location, the only point of reference is its proximity to the sea, yet the terms of the poem firmly associate it with the West. It is a place of high winds, a “place of dispersals” (M. Longley 1985, 126), where cloud shadows possess the power of clothing and unclothing the speaker and where the wind is more a destroyer than a preserver – it “fractures / Flight –feathers, insect wings / And rips thought to tatters” (ibid). Yet there are moments of insight, though they may be rare and short-lived: “For seconds, dawn or dusk, / The sun’s at an angle / To read inscriptions by” (ibid). The visionary moments are confined to the natural world, yet the closing image is a potent one concerning mediation: “A mouth drawn to a mouth / Digests the glass between / Me and my reflection.” (ibid)

Richard Murphy’s relation with the West is even more intimate due to biographical reasons: he was born in the West and lived there for a long time. His perspective accordingly is that of the inhabitant with a thorough knowledge of the place; whatever magic is there is considered an integral part of a known and lived environment, thus its observation is all the more significant in the way it happens since either proximity or familiarity could reduce its potential yet neither of them actually does it.

The telling name of a promontory in “Little Hunger” indicates a shoreline eroded by the sea. The speaker wants to find proper pink stone to construct his own house out of old ones, “roofless homes huddled by the sea” (Murphy 84). It is a strange mission to collect

items from abandoned and disintegrating houses to construct a new one out of them, and the idea of 'recycling' is reinforced by the speaker's assertion of his work being the "dismemberment" (ibid) of others, with the nearly paradoxical idea of a "fragment" bringing it all to completion, "To make it integral" (ibid).

Granite boulders prompt the question of the poem "Omey Island": what purpose left them stranded where they are, whether it was nature or man preparing the scene. The land contemplated is reminiscent of a stone quarry and thus the image of an abandoned place fits it well. Equally possible is the purely natural way of its formation, with the sea as its only agent. The last stanza tilts the balance towards the sea, its impersonal waves are fully ignorant of human purpose but at the same time generous enough to provide help: "the ocean / Explodes at the quarry-face of the shore / Without a notion of hearths, lintels, and tombstones" (Murphy 87) yet it has the power "to disgorge / Enough raw granite to face a whole new town." (ibid)

Eavan Boland's poem "On Holiday" has a destination in the West which is seen as a special place. The place evoked is Ballyvaughan, it is defined by "Peat and salt" (SP 84) yet water could easily be added, as the "sheets are damp" (Boland 1989, 85) and this creates the impression that this damp would penetrate to the bones. The old beliefs are no longer a practice, there is now no milk left on the windowsill against "the child-stealing spirits" (ibid). The peculiar situation of the speaker, however, recreates something of the old tradition: it is a holiday with a child, and a "superstition feast / of wheat biscuits, apples, / orange juice" (ibid) are left instead of the milk, just to be found eaten later. The 'revision' of the old tradition in a harmlessly mocking form means that something of that tradition is still preserved, therefore some form of continuity is established; this is reinforced by the context of a holiday with a child, suggesting the passing on of knowledge.

The concept of holiday also implies the idea of not belonging to a place. Michael Longley considers the West as his second home, thus he manages to get around the problem of belonging, whereas Richard Murphy *is* a person attached to the West. For others, however, the West becomes a reminder of the category of elsewhere apropos of their visits. Derek Mahon's poems with western locations emanate this strong sense of being alien to the West, yet he is not the only one to recognise the unbridgeable distance of not belonging to a place. Even family history may prove weak in the face of expectations during a visit to the place, as it is communicated by Paul Durcan's poem "Going Home to Mayo, Winter 1949": the West of Ireland does not turn automatically and magically into a real home for Durcan despite his family ties in that region. The poem has a title which marks its subject with Wordsworthian precision, locating the action in space and time as well. Journeys of the indicated type raise a

number of expectations in the reader, especially when the word home is explicitly featured, yet the division of the poem into two sections suggests something of the ambivalence of the concept itself in its mid-twentieth century Irish context.

The point of departure is “the alien, foreign city of Dublin” (Durcan 1993, 34) with the immediate aim of offering one part of the contrast to be elaborated in the poem, the place which is left behind in favour of another called “home.” The distancing of Dublin from the speaker along the axis of affection prepares for a peaceful arrival at a country place verging on the legendary and therefore something very close to essential human experience. The futile race with the moon on the way is easily forgotten as the destination is being approached, and the magic of the Irish countryside overwrites the quotidian memory of Dublin: “Each town we passed through was another milestone / And their names were magic passwords into eternity.” (ibid) The climax of the arrival is expressed in a language at once eloquent and profound, with the deeply human vision of father and son walking by the river talking to each other, “an unheard-of thing in the city” (ibid).

The vision, however, has its own cracks woven into it. “Life’s seemingly seamless garment” (ibid) opens up the ironic distance between the real and the apparent, the liberating environment is soon found alien too. The second section of the poem begins with a strong “But” (ibid) and the almost idyllic picture comes to an end: “But home was not home and the moon could be no more outflanked / Than the daylight nightmare of Dublin city” (ibid). The speaker leaves it unspecified, though, whether this recognition comes because of the inevitable temporariness of the visit or because of a general feeling of anxiety. The return to Dublin reawakens the “mutual doom” (ibid) of father and son, on another level, of one human being to another – the curse of modern city life expressed best by the commonplace alienation. All the landmarks of the city function as reminders of this isolation of one person from another, thus the speaker of the poem, in the final analysis, remains without a home by the end of the journey: neither the city nor the country can function as a place which embraces and sustains him in a context which would deserve the warm designation of home – the former is his present habitation and the latter preserves the family ties, so the conclusion of the poem is all the more uncomfortable. The West, then, for Durcan is just another place where he is reminded of the modern plight of not feeling at home anywhere, thus it is a universal enough place to be regarded beyond division of any kind.

### 3.5.2. ALL-IRELAND PERSPECTIVES

Seamus Heaney's "Bogland" is a poem which embraces an all-Ireland perspective and demonstrates the existence of a common element between South and North in which political and social divisions are rendered meaningless. The ubiquitous element of the Irish land is the peat bog, pointing beyond the usual divisions it has been seen as "the only possibility for resolution." (King 209) The bog is a mysterious place: beyond the haunting landscape created by the seemingly bottomless pools the bog is principally a form of inland water, taking in the excess precipitation and releasing it when it is oversaturated; this is paralleled by another preservative aspect of the bog – it preserves, and after a time returns, items falling into its pools. At the same time the peat bog is also a place of coal formation, reconciling the opposing notions of fire and water. The continuous growth of the bog linking space and time is yet another aspect which turns the motif into a potent image for the poet: with this motif Heaney not only finds a unique element in reconciling old divisions but manages to make a "congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness." (Heaney 1980, 54-55)

The poem opens with the declaration of an absence, yet the absence of one element is compensated for by the presence of another – the haunting world of the prairie is unknown in Ireland but there is an equally distinct Irish phenomenon, the bog. The assertion negates division: "Our unfenced country / Is bog" (Heaney 1990, 17) – the statement reinforces the arbitrariness of such human categories as the border: the island is surrounded by the sea and such borders are only recognised, and not defined, by human beings. On another level the word 'unfenced' suggests endlessness in the horizontal dimension, to be complemented by an explicit assertion of vertical endlessness at the end of the poem. The vertical dimension is focused upon in the major part of the poem: the continuous growth of the bog leads to the recognition of the temporal dimension of the bog – downward movement in space is backward movement in time, and the frequent discovery of items swallowed and later returned by the bog constructs a history and offers the vision of the bog as the "memory of the landscape" (Heaney 1980, 54). The findings in the bog turn attention to the finders themselves – "Our pioneers keep striking / Inwards and downwards" (Heaney 1990, 17), and among such pioneers the poet is one; his exploration complements that of the more usual pioneers, the turf-cutters, bringing the recognition that "Every layer they strip / Seems camped on before" (ibid). This correspondence between the layered structure of the bog and history allows the

poet to conduct his explorations on a wider scale and the resulting quest proves to be an endless one as “The wet centre is bottomless.” (Heaney 1990, 18)

A rather ironic vision of Ireland beyond divisions is provided in Paul Muldoon’s “Ireland.” Though the title could as well look simple in terms of its reference to the Republic, the situation described suggests a location anywhere on the island, regardless of its position South or North. The short poem is built around a simple image, a “Volkswagen is parked in the gap / But gently ticking over.” (Muldoon 2001, 82) The possible explanations quickly follow: “You wonder if it’s lovers / And not men hurrying back / Across two fields and a river.” (ibid) Different approaches to the poem mark either the strangeness of the openness of lovers in a constrained and shy culture or the not so unusual sight of men in hurry after an organised act of violence. In either case the implications are telling: though the private is not necessary to become public in the former case, it still is less shocking to imagine lovers as the characters of the scene. By taking it nearly for granted that there are men hurrying back to their cars across fields and rivers, a perverted (though for any reason) system of values is suggested, one which seems to have accepted the presence of such a dimension to everyday life as violence. This somewhat revises the old ‘peaceful’ image of Ireland and connects the place with the modern world, which suggests that Ireland is no longer immune to the general hostilities of the world or to change, as it was once indicated by MacNeice and then immediately refuted by him in the brief space of section XVI of *Autumn Journal*.

#### 4. HISTORY

In John Montague's piece "A Lost Tradition" the speaker of the poem declares "The whole landscape a manuscript / We had lost the skill to read" (Montague 1995, 33). The reference is to the close connection between the spatial and temporal dimensions of the Irish land: the early history of the country is encoded in the placenames of Ireland, supplementing the physical landscape with a mythic one. The old genre of the *dinnseanchas* forms an important part of the Irish literary heritage and serves as a kind of cultural memory for the natives: historical events, real or legendary, are preserved in the names of various places, and familiarity with the name keeps the memory of the event alive. The second line of the quotation, however, bears witness to another important fact concerning the Irish placenames: the state of linguistic dispossession in a colonial framework, encoding the later history of the country in the placenames too. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century rewriting of the Irish placenames, conducted in the form of translating or transliterating the Irish names into English ones, can be seen as one of the attempts of the British imperial machinery in assuming total control over the colonised population: severing the ties with the past is an effective measure in subduing the subject people. Given the generally harsh nature of Irish history, James Joyce's declaration about history being a nightmare (Joyce 42) is a logical enough standpoint.

Despite this nightmarish association history is one of those themes which feature significantly in much of contemporary Irish poetry. History, however, is a term with a wide range of meanings and components. Jerzy Jarniewicz offers a concise list of the most frequent understandings of the term, suggesting three major senses for it. The first takes time as its synonym, therefore incorporating more than the human world (Jarniewicz in Kennedy-Andrews 83). The second meaning considers history "a series of past events formed into a narrative" (Jarniewicz in Kennedy-Andrews 84), pertaining to the world of human civilisation. The third opinion is provided by Raymond Williams and regards history as a "powerful determining factor, synonymous with fate, the mechanism of relentless, inescapable continuity." (ibid) History, as employed in contemporary Irish poetry, is defined principally by the second idea yet there is a strong presence of the third concept as well, offering a rather broad field for investigation.

Poets of the contemporary scene, however, do not subscribe to such grand patterns of history as did their great forebears. Yeats's gyres and Joyce's Viconian vision belong to the past. There seems to be less space for such idiosyncratic approaches as both the Republic and

Northern Ireland offer fairly clear-cut versions of history. The nation-building ideology of the newly independent southern state was rooted in history, and as a result, as Edna Longley claims, the Republican point of view considers history as standing still (E. Longley 1987, 192). The Northern Unionist approach is not any more flexible either: James McLoughlin sees the origins of Ulster unionism in the seventeenth-century process of British state formation and maintains that “the original values and ideas which legitimised their presence in Ulster continue to have importance.” (McLoughlin 134) This fixation in an earlier period dismisses subsequent historical developments and as such it solidifies history itself into a rigid concept. Poets thus are compelled to revise prevailing ideologies and beliefs, and their enterprise is complicated by the postmodern scepticism towards totalising knowledge, which indeed leaves little room for grand and overarching theories.

History, even when limited to the human world, is a broad term which involves communal as well as personal dimensions and both of these are addressed in recent Irish poems. Rather than simple chronicle material it is the interpretation of communal historical events which becomes a source for poetry in the public domain and it is principally contemporary history which influences poets, opening up a political dimension in the poetry in several cases. The past also receives attention though to a lesser extent than would be expected: recent Irish poets seem to have managed to escape the menacing halo of a troubled history and turn their imaginative powers towards the present rather than the past. As far as the past is concerned, landmark events force their way into the poetry. Cromwell’s ‘adventure’, the Battle of Aughrim, the Famine, the Act of Union and the partition are those themes which feature in poems of the contemporary scene; all these historical events are sources of lasting grievances for at least a significant part of the population. Accounts of this heritage, however, are outweighed by the present, indicating a shift of concerns to the present from the earlier obsession with the past, getting down to, as Paul Muldoon suggests in one of his poems, “Something a little nearer home.” (Muldoon 2001, 41)

Though the Republic appears a country where history does not flood the everyday dimension of life with spectacular happenings, there still are plenty of opportunities to reflect on events or characters which affect the life of people on a wider scale. The socio-economic changes of the second part of the century, mainly globalisation and internationalisation, have challenged the orthodoxy of the founding ideologies of the state, and the overspill of violence from the North has also had its effects. The still water of the Republic is not so still in the final analysis: slow change is also change and minor events are also events, occasionally these may even escalate to the status of major outrage for poets.

Northern Ireland is a more potent world in terms of poetic response, as the product of partition has always embodied division. In the 1960s tensions escalated to violent conflict raging on for decades, with only tentative interruptions yet with a promising prospect provided by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. The roughly twenty-five-year span of conflict, often termed civil war and not without evidence, euphemistically referred to as the Northern Troubles have provided a sadly rich stock of poetic raw material. Intellectual response to exposure to violence is present in virtually all the major voices in the North, with idiosyncratic differences but with univocal antagonism. The reverberations of the Northern situation do not leave the South inert either; profound direct response is not particularly frequent from across the border but it is present; distance, however, alters certain aspects of the conflict and the responses accordingly tend to be more conditioned by preconceptions than by the actual situation.

The addressing of contemporary history, especially that of Northern Ireland, inevitably introduces the concept of violence; it is unavoidable in the context of the province torn by decades of civil unrest and sectarian paramilitary action. Though it is embarrassing and on occasion painful to face the fact of the inseparability of human history and violence, a glance at history suffices to prove the case by providing abundant evidence of this relation. Man's "homicidal nature" has been noted by various people (cf. Johnston 148, Girard in Malloy and Carey 91) and anthropological research concludes that violence "is endemic to human society, and there is no solution to this problem except for the answer that religion gives" (Girard quoted in Malloy and Carey 91), offering certain controlled processes for the release of violence. Whatever the origins of violence may be, the close connection with religion is an important aspect since the contemporary manifestation of conflict in the North unfolds along sectarian lines. The sectarian division of the Northern population provides ready channels for the outlet of violence, though these channels cannot be regarded as justified or accepted in a standard moral context. The peculiar endemic context of sectarian division, however, establishes its own discourse for the legitimation of this violence, bringing about a general sense of dehumanisation, and the psychology of the crowd, an entity in many ways inferior to the total of its individual elements, further dehumanises the participants of the conflict. The response of poets is the attempt to rehumanise this world, which is carried out in various ways and which yield predictable conclusions. Responses range from evasion through simple reportage and ironic approaches to mythologising tendencies yet the ultimate conclusion of rejecting violence is basically the same in each case. The fact that poets speak about violence

does not mean that they embrace it – recording does not equal approval, just as the writing of history would prove this.

The personal dimension of history also carves out a significant portion for itself in the poetry and this has its explanation in the principal significance of ancestry (cf. Parker 4). Fathers and mothers make their imaginary appearance in several poems, and their lives often reflect the close interconnectedness of the communal and the personal: individual stories are frequently shaped and even determined by the course of large-scale events in the history of the nation. This entanglement of different histories leads to the domination of father figures in the poetry on the expense of mothers, the latter appearing only in few cases: deep affection, rejection or a lack of proper understanding are the respective motivations for their presence. Fathers, on the other hand are evoked for their exemplary, or anti-exemplary, significance and are at the same time markers of the political climate of the places where they belong, thus their figures offer personalised complements to the general patterns and events of communal history.

Despite the general lack of comprehensive private theories of history, there have been attempts to employ more ambitious patterns by the poets to read the present in the light of the past. Such imaginative histories illustrate the testing of hypotheses against the present world of Ireland South and North alike. The most provocative instances are Heaney's bog-myth and Kennelly's Cromwell-reconstruction – both have received commentaries galore, of various types. Heaney's attempt of finding historical roots and contexts for the present conflict of the North proved to be an enlightening project for the poet himself, too, as the myth contains its own deconstruction in its pattern, indicating a flexible approach to history. Kennelly's *Cromwell*, deliberately focusing on a hate-figure and taboo in 'official' Irish history is now part of the school curricula, suggesting the imaginative appeal of Kennelly's construct. Kennelly even moved on to a similar project of subverting the figure of Judas, a more general hate-figure, introducing him to the present day world of the Republic, partly as a representative location in the modern Western world, and, much to the dismay of the audience, the character appears to fit the context and finds it a comfortable location. That Judas, a figure of the past, is not simply a figure of the past but a character with present relevance is one of the proofs for the belief that past and present are regarded closely interwoven.

The representation of history in literature poses less obvious challenges than that of place. The temporality of literature invites narrative and comfortably accommodates it. Lyric poetry, however, finds itself at an angle to narrative patterns thus an intersection of the lyric

and the epic is a frequent solution, especially when such sequences are concerned as Richard Murphy's *The Battle of Aghrim* or John Montague's *The Rough Field*. More conventional approaches involve the traditional dimension of the lyric and reflect on the individually significant reverberations of the historical event concerned.

#### 4.1. COMMUNAL HISTORY

##### 4.1.1. THE PAST

The Irish past generally provides plenty of moments to address yet contemporary poets appear reluctant to dwell in that past. The heavily ideological earlier phase of the history of the South certainly weakened the appeal of the past, and there is also a shift due to the profound changes in the economy which resound in the field of culture too, turning attention to the present instead of the past. Revisionist attempts to resituate the past distorted by the ideologies narrow the field of play left for the past yet at the same time they also widen it as the liberation from a set of ideological constraints allows for "fresh" approaches. Certain essential features of the past events do not alter yet their re-examination provides aspects which often prove to be more meaningful for the individual than their propagandistically manipulated communal dimensions.

Eavan Boland's poem "That the Science of Cartography is Limited" is built on an imagery which utilises the entanglement of place and history in the Irish context. The employment of the notion of cartography serves a number of distinct purposes: the dilemma of the relation between sphere and flat surface, apart from the immediate landscape-history relation, is also a common feminist trope to suggest another possible dimension to experience in general (O'Brien xx). In the present moment, however, the more conservative aspect is concentrated upon as Boland subverts the general consensus about the old correspondence between place and history.

The surface level of the poem addresses the old problem of the representation of the surface of the Earth on paper, hinting at the problems which hinder the process. The title indicates the inadequacy of cartography in this project and presents the limits of the exercise. The first proof is the lack of fragrances: immediate experience can provide fragrances but there is no method to transmit such stimuli to maps. A more profound dissatisfaction is introduced when the very nature of cartography is seen as dubious. This is embedded in a

memory of a walk: during an excursion in a forest the speaker's attention is called to a famine road. This opens up the historical dimension and the Great Famine is evoked through its worst year, 1847, when the solution of the Relief Committees to the problem of food was to give work to the starving population – they were to build roads. “Where they died, there the road ended // and ends still” (Boland 1994, 5), nature has overgrown such roads as the one contemplated by the speaker. As it is no longer visible and is not represented on maps, the road does not exist, erasing with itself the memory of historical trauma and numerous unrecorded lives. This prompts the speaker to voice the general inadequacy of cartography, namely that there is no “apt rendering of // the spherical as flat, nor / an ingenious design which persuades a curve / into a plane” (ibid). The actual cause why perfect maps do not exist has its origin in mathematics: the surface of a sphere cannot be represented in flat without distortions of some kind (plus one may add the problem that the shape of the Earth is not even a sphere but a shape which cannot be described even by mathematical formulae). The speaker, however, does not descend into the abstract for such an explanation; instead she brings together the impersonal fact with the deeply humane concern with the past to forge her position which has to be content with registering that

the line which says woodland and cries hunger  
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress  
and finds no horizon

will not be there. (ibid)

The poem is composed of sections of unequal length, reflecting the discontinuity observable in the historical dimension. The broken-looking one-line units seem to contain the cardinal pieces of information: the famine road, the link between the roads' end and the death of the builders and the absence of road and memory alike, not only for the community but for the speaker for whom the experience is a direct and immediate one.

“March 1847. By the First Post” is more explicitly concerned with the past as it offers an ‘actual’ time travel to the world of the Famine, with a strong hint at the practice of absenteeism, employing a speaker from the period signalled by the title. The account is provided by a young aristocratic lady stuck in Ireland, to her great dissatisfaction. The focus of her talk is this dissatisfaction: her preference is for an elsewhere as Ireland is visited by the Famine and is thus not only a boring place but a horrible one too: “picnics by the river”

(Boland 1994, 7), “outings to the opera” (ibid) and “teas / are over now for the time being.” (ibid) Though it is spring now with early flowers already present nothing turns the country into a pleasant place; on the contrary, if they venture out, there are horrible things to encounter such as “A woman lying / across the Kells Road with her baby – / in full view.” (ibid) This sight is magnified in the account into a tragedy proper, though apparently not due to the otherwise natural reason:

We had to go  
out of our way  
to get home & we were late  
& poor Mama was not herself all day. (ibid)

The genuine shock of the young speaker becomes forcefully ironic when it is considered from a closer perspective: the Famine and its horrors are mainly in the background and they do not become anything more until the end than spoken about – even then its significance consists only in making life unpleasant for the speaker and her “poor Mama.”

Seamus Heaney’s “For the Commander of the Eliza” revisits Ireland haunted by the Famine, but his approach is somewhat different from that of Boland. This dramatic monologue (cf. Corcoran 1986, 67) is spoken by the captain of a patrol ship which meets a boat full of starving Irish yet on their demand he refuses to give them food. He does this as part of his duty, and there is only mild outrage in the subsequent lines as the speaker reflects on the necessity to “exorcise” (Heaney 1966, 22) the ship of those “six bad smells” (ibid), the people in the boat, and as he reports all in the harbour to his superior. Bitter irony opens in the wake of the speaker’s account as he recalls the ultimate English authority’s reaction to the idea that famine victims should be relieved: “Let natives prosper by their own exertions; / Who could not swim might go ahead and sink.” (ibid)

Though the title of Paul Muldoon’s “The Frog” and the first two stanzas insist on a frog as the subject of the poem, the last stanza explicitly gives away the parablism drive behind it. “There is, surely, in this story / a moral for our times.” (Muldoon 2001, 120) The frog is simply examined and then put into a wider context, drawing on the historical account of Gerald of Wales in its belief that frogs are not native animals in Ireland (Kendall 94-95); frogs are generally understood to refer to the English, equally alien to Ireland. The time dimension, however, is manipulated: the medieval account is moved to a later century, to be associated with the Act of Union. The unhealthy union still has its after-effects, just as the wine image

would necessarily imply an after-taste as well – and the initial image of “rubble” (Muldoon 2001, 120) also has the potential suggestion of disorder, perhaps springing from conflicts with very old roots. The speaker’s final question concerns not only the possible moral but a tentative play with the idea of putting an end to the whole problem:

What if I put him to my head  
and squeezed it out of him,  
like the juice of freshly squeezed limes,  
or a lemon sorbet? (ibid)

The moral could perhaps be extracted, even if the English could not be removed from Ireland, yet the insistence on limes and lemon leave the situation unresolved, by their implication of a lingering sour taste – the Act of Union is a thing of the past yet the Northern situation still harks back to certain aspects of that union.

These poems all hark back to one particular historic moment, that of the Act of Union, as their ultimate point of reference. Muldoon’s poem is the only one that explicitly concerns that moment, yet the other pieces all centre around consequences whose origin can easily be traced back to the joining of Ireland to Britain. This, however, is not the only possible point of origin for poems dealing with the past: Ciaran Carson’s poem “The Brain of Edward Carson” turns on another significant historical period, the time of partition. The poem carries out an autopsy of one of the masterminds of partition and it is ironically targeted at the skull, paying little attention to any other part of the subject’s body. The imagery sets up a parallel with the disassembly of a statue as insistence on bronze items indicates. The ‘contents’ of the head are principal landmarks of the industrial North, and the steadfastness of the person finds an analogue in the hard and rigid items. With the opening up of the skull, however, more is uncovered: the mechanical structure evokes the “map of Ulster” (Carson 1993, 30), “hexagonal and intricate, tectonic” (ibid). Though “hexagonal” is supposed to stand for the shape, “hexa” unmistakably suggests the six counties too, which indeed embody a “tectonic” world, with active faultlines leading to “shifting plates” (ibid) which are desperately attempted to be held together “by laws Masonic” (ibid). The imagery begins to revert to fragments, which foreshadows the conclusion – the exercise ends in failure: “then disintegration intervened, the brain eluded them: Sphinxlike, catatonic.” (ibid) There is no rational understanding of it, the “catatonic” state refuses analysis, the mystery remains “Sphinxlike,” in perhaps more than one sense: it is there but disturbingly present, presenting

more questions than answers, and the figure of Edward Carson predates the present conflict thus his image projects the seeds of the conflict back into the past.

Richard Murphy's longer piece *The Battle of Aughrim*, commemorates an event rarely dealt with in historical accounts though in many ways its significance exceeds that of its principal 'rival,' the Battle of the Boyne. Murphy places an introductory note before the poem to outline the event itself and its immediate background. The sequence itself is divided into four sections entitled "Now," "Before," "During" and "After," and it employs a special tactic: shorter, basically lyric pieces make up the whole picture selecting emblematic instances to suggest an event at once noble and pathetic, one which proves to be a moment of historic significance.

The present scene of the battle is not distinguished by any special memorial apart from the death cairn of the commander of the Irish side, as it is indicated in the opening poem of the sequence. It is only the speaker who has memories of the importance of the site and his curiosity leads him on towards exploring what happened on the spot, an enquiry made more colourful by the present consequences of that past action. The poem "Legend", though claiming a long ancestry for the story line, provides the general overview of the battle: there are "Twenty thousand soldiers on each side, / Between them a morass / Of godly bigotry and pride of race" (Murphy 53), and these people are

Caught in a feud of absent kings  
Who used war like a basset table  
Gambling to settle verbal things,  
Decide if bread be God  
Or God a parable (ibid)

The sequence goes on to arrest small details of the conflict and there are telling accounts of both sides along the way. The culminating moment is the sudden decapitation of St. Ruth, French commander of the Irish side, by a cannon ball which event, coupled with the betrayal of Luttrell, almost immediately decides the outcome of the battle.

The moment of the commander's beheading is a recurring motif of the sequence. The sheer unlikely nature of such an event has a spell on any person yet the speaker's conviction of the hubris of the commander is unmistakable. Murphy's insistence on this motif is understandable as the outcome of the battle was "decisive in establishing Protestant rule over the whole of Ireland for the next two hundred years." (Murphy 42) Murphy focuses on the

defeated Irish side in the conflict, yet that defeated side also included Protestant elements. The suggestion then is a complex one since Protestants are involved in the story as both winners and losers, though with different national designations. The supremacy of Protestantism thus has its simultaneous sacrifice of a part of itself which becomes alien at the moment when the religious category is complemented by a national one: the birth of modern divisions is at once the death of the earlier ones.

#### 4.1.2. THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

##### 4.1.2.1. THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

At first glance the contemporary world of the Republic of Ireland does not appear a particularly exciting case from the point of view of contemporary history. It is a country on the western fringe of Europe, in relative isolation and its long-standing economic underdevelopment did not provide an exciting dimension to it. Apart from the location not much proved interesting for a long time – the only noteworthy aspect of the country in the contemporary historical perspective is its spectacular, at least in European terms, economic development which has turned the Republic into one of the favourite examples for comparison in the field of economic resurgence. Contemporary poetry portrays the effects of the development, voicing the general dilemma of its balance sheet – whether the benefits outweigh the losses and harms remains an unresolved problem. In the poetic visions there are public events which affect the life of the whole society, there are public figures portrayed, and there are several private but typical events which merit the attention of a wider social layer – these make up the repertoire of contemporary history in recent poetry.

Paul Durcan's "Ireland 1972" is an ironic short poem offering an imagistic account of a society ridden by traditional 'affections' – love and murderous hatred. The specific references to place and time in the title suggest Durcan's intention to produce something akin to a photograph though the approach employs a trick since the outlined conflict is familiar more in the North than in the Republic. Durcan, however, does not clarify whether his "Ireland" is an all-island formation or not – both cases would demonstrate rich suggestive powers in the brief space of the couplet.

The contemplated site is that of a cemetery with two resting places belonging to people close to the heart of the persona, a "beloved grandmother" and his "first love."

(Durcan 1993, 9) The irony of the scene lies in the juxtaposition of the two graves – whereas with the grandmother the fact that she is buried should come as no surprise but the expectations about one’s first love are rarely justified in seeing that person buried too. The generation gap renders the young(er) person’s death more tragic, especially that it was caused by violence. This way another juxtaposition is introduced, that of love and violence, and the suggestion is more than embarrassing since the former feeling ties together different generations while members of the same generation, and it has a significance that it is the young generation, are related to each other through violence and loss. Perhaps the chosen site of the cemetery is no accident either – it offers a comment on a society that appears to be obsessively focused on the past. The haunting presence of the dead here goes no further, at least not explicitly, than choice of location but it does not fail to call to mind Joyce and his vision of Dublin life of paralysis, yet this time it is magnified to spread over the enigmatically labelled world of “Ireland.”

Durcan’s reportage technique is replaced by a different one in the poem with the elegiac-sounding title “In Memory of Those Murdered in the Dublin Massacre, May 1974.” In spite of the title the poem does not present a lamentation for the victims of contemporary violence. Instead, a pastoral displaced and removed to an urban location is followed by a crudely ironic comment on the practice of modern guerilla warfare elevated unto the level of ‘freedom fight’ by the practitioners’ self-proclaimed dignity. The persona is situated in a bar at an early-morning hour when the near-empty bar is glazed by sunlight and the morning routine of cleaning the place wholly occupies the waitresses of the bar. The near-idyllic moment would be the perfect one for “the heroic freedom-fighter” (Durcan 1993, 30) and the irony is carried by the threefold repetition of the word heroes with different punctuation marks: “heroes – heroes? – heroes.” (ibid)

The second section of the poem turns the irony even more biting as the persona, about to leave the place, reflects on the old cleaning woman as a perfect target for a glorious action in the name of freedom: “She’d make a mighty fine explosion now, if you were to blow her up / An explosion of petals, of aeons, and the waitresses too, flying breasts and limbs” (ibid). The aim of such a move is provided by the last line of the poem, this would be done “For a free Ireland” (ibid). This conclusion makes it clear that contemporary political violence is totally meaningless – Dublin *is* the capital of the independent Republic of Ireland, and the question of a united Ireland appears to be one that will puzzle several generations to come. As the scene is Dublin the focus may be narrowed to the Republic itself, an independent country,

and political independence is perhaps the most a country can hope for since 'freedom' is a concept that is virtually impossible to reconcile with the category of a country.

"Making Love Outside Aras an Uachtaráin" descends entirely to the personal level yet it still involves the public aspect: the poem puts the memory of a youthful love into a different perspective by the location of its rendezvous – the presidential residence furnishes the background to the lovemaking of the couple. Though the gates are locked, the president is never entirely lost sight of – the persona's interest in what de Valera would have thought about a young couple indecently occupied in what was considered to be heretic by that monolithic ideology which dominated Ireland during de Valera's years in office. The persona revises the concept of patriotism – it is not impossible to be patriotic and to make love at the same time yet the approval of the president would be missing even in the persona's imaginative exercise. The president of the vision, though blind, turns into a hunter, "stalking down" (Durcan 1993, 41) the lovers, threatening them with an "ancient rifle" (ibid) and calling on them to stop their lovemaking.

The changing spirit of the times is reflected in the bravery of the couple to pursue their passions in such a strategically chosen location. That the world, and Ireland in it, too, has changed is suggested by the "ivory tower" (ibid) quality of the residence – and it is at once an indication of the prescriptive tactics of nation building that was the vision of de Valera. The imagined reaction of "levelling an ancient rifle" (ibid) at the lovers is also indicative of the old practice of violence out of which grew Irish independence and at the same time it insists on the 'old ways' despite the spirit of love which, among other aspects, brings together the two young lovers in an unmistakable context.

The verse-letter entitled "Sister Agnes Writes to Her beloved Mother" returns full sail to the public domain and it offers a satirical treatment of one of the hypocrisies of modern Ireland, the public example of the Catholic Church. The focus of Sister Agnes's account is the pregnancy of the "Rev. Mother" (Durcan 1993, 42) and the game of guessing who the "lucky father" (ibid) might be – the candidate is the "Retreat Director," a "lovely old Jesuit / With a rosy nose" (ibid). The rosy nose certainly indicates a diminishing of the assumed innocence of the figure, and his general character, "So shy and retiring" (ibid), amply launches the attack on the hypocrisy of the institution.

Naturally the propagandistic machinery is immediately at work as "Nobody is supposed to know anything" (ibid) and there are already preparations to remove the Rev. Mother and her child to be brought up in another convent. The ironic remark on the faultless "Jesuit pedigree" (ibid) of the infant somewhat lightens the weight of the event and at the

same time it further undermines the already shaken image of the Church. The other ironic comment on the blessing of the convent by God in the form of an infant “all of our making” (ibid) in a time of declining interest in the vocation serves to create a vision of the all-too-fallible nature of the clergy, which achieves just the opposite effect of what would be induced by the recognition that they are only people, too.

“The Divorce Referendum, Ireland, 1986” addresses one of the controversial issues of Irish life in an explicitly didactic way, and has in its focus the Catholic Church. Its point of view could be termed radical and reactionary as it stands in opposition with the ‘official’ one of the Church. The issue, the question of divorce, is more than controversial in the Irish context: given the power of the Catholic Church divorce does not, because it cannot, become a real question. In a country where legal separation is impossible to obtain the ‘sacredness’ of marriage could be easily demonstrated yet bad marriages become an untended wound and the hardliner attitude of the Church contributes to the disease. Discipline, in other words, does not yield the expected form of ultimate happiness, the resulting muted and suppressed disappointment on the long run undermines that very principle which attempts to keep it under control.

The occasion cited in the poem is that of a sermon in which all goes well until the point when ideology intrudes – the priest calls on the congregation to perform accordingly with the wish of the Hierarchy and thereby the logic is reversed when the teaching of the Church is seen as coming before the teaching of Christ, the latter only justifying the former rather than forming the basis of it. The speaker draws a parallel between Christ driving “the traders and stockbrokers” (Durcan 1993, 121) from the temple and the propaganda service of the priest, and he cannot but descend into outspoken didacticism: “I say unto you, preacher and orators of the Hierarchy, / Do not bring ideology into my house of prayer.” (Durcan 1993, 122) The second section balances the first one as the image of a small girl is evoked – she receives the host and the speaker formulates his wish for her: “May she have children of her own / And as many husbands as will praise her – / For what are husbands for, but to praise their wives?” (ibid) Love and praise do not equal strictly imposed doctrine and neither are awakened by it.

“Six Nuns Die in Covent Inferno” restores nobility to the Catholic Church through the agency of the deceased nuns yet such an occasion does not provide much optimism as the martyrs no longer embody the spirit of renewal or exemplariness, or at least not in their own lives. The journalistic title is a cover for a low-key personal account given by one of the victims of the fire destroying the convent. The narration is done in a past perspective, with

descriptive and confessional parts alternating with each other. Durcan provides a human portrait to complement the piece of news communicated in the title – he creates a character and allows her to speak, in opposition to the general media tactics of sensationalism on the expense of the victims themselves. This ‘imaginary portrait’ introduces another, and even perhaps unusual, perspective on the Church – unlike in other Durcan poems there is no negative criticism apart from the references to the primitive conditions regarding safety.

In the first part of the poem there is a description of the general routine of going to church. This involves the passing of “tableaus of punk girls and punk boys” (Durcan 1993, 112), figures more frequently associated with London than with the Irish capital. Her observation of these rebel figures comes to an unusual conclusion as she considers them more conventional than herself – despite all their efforts to differ and to shock they demonstrate a desperate need to cling to each other. As opposed to this general human need stands the nun, “the ultimate drop-out” (ibid), “the original punk” (ibid) with her “apocalyptic enthusiasm” (Durcan 1993, 113) and “other-worldly hubris” (ibid), choosing an “exotic loneliness” (ibid). To what extent this awareness of the somewhat anachronistic position of the old institution of the Church in a modern state is actually present in representatives of the Church itself is a question; whether Durcan portrays or invents this is not clarified.

The fire in the convent recalls an earlier experience, a visit to the beach once, and the vivid memory of the unusual event in the life of nuns comes to evanesce into the horrific death by fire providing the occasion of the poem. There is even a manipulated casualness about the meditation on quick death as the speaker was reading a book by Conor Cruise O’Brien, and the first thought in the fire is that the book will never be returned to its owner, and a commonplace musing on prices follows. Such a limbo of different registers of experience saves the poem from falling into melodrama and contributes to its effect of making the reader stop to think about the experience communicated. For Durcan the conventional elegy would not do since the subject treated is to be presented as it is and not by means of lifting it out of its context by idealisation – six nuns died in a fire in a building which was not properly (or, in fact, not at all) prepared for such a case of emergency.

The title word “inferno” creates its own resonances as the poem moves to its conclusion – apart from the fire it comes to suggest a dimension of the life of the nuns. The ambivalent attitude of the poet to the whole experience is reflected when he takes over the narration in the second section: after the melodramatic vision of Jesus being astonished by the faith of the nuns there is a haunting picture of the ghosts of the dead women giving a recital of the Agnus Dei. His account is not free of quasi-satirical injections but the words of the Agnus

Dei conclude the poem on a note in which no subversion is possible any longer; it is rather a note of lamentation which takes over – the exceptional is still an aspect of the Church but it is becoming exceptional itself.

Durcan also commemorates seemingly insignificant moments which at first look actually appear strange under the heading of communal history yet by their very typical nature they classify as emblematic of a whole social class, and often in turn of a whole social spectrum. In a country where little happens which could be declared historic such moments definitely gain significance and they often reveal more about the general state of affairs than would do elaborate historical narratives. Such an instance is provided in the poem “A Vision of Africa on the Coast of Kerry” the central experience of which is the ‘adventure’ of an eighty-year-old woman, recollected five years later. The secluded world of the Kerry coast, which has locked inside itself the woman, comes to be opened up for a brief spell when the woman is taken to hospital in Cork, which is the only time for her in her whole life to leave the Kerry place. It is in the city that she has the exotic sight of a black man, a literal once-in-a-lifetime occasion. That the experience is termed a “vision” reserves some imaginative power for the woman since she is not fully surprised at the fact that there *are* black people, yet that it should evoke the old and stereotypical image of ‘Africa’ as their only possible location suggests something of her essentially limited experience of the phenomena of the modern world.

The poem “The Haulier’s Wife Meets Jesus on the Road Near Moone” is narrated by the haulier’s wife herself, though the title indicates a reportage-like perspective. The woman, however, is given the chance to speak for herself and her account reflects a sense of liberation, corresponding to the occasion hinted at by the usual associations of the proper name in the title. The story is one of liberation, too, as the ‘respected’ public figure condescendingly offers his mistreated wife a free weekend which she comes to utilise in her own way, leaving the man in the blind about the actual happenings.

She opens her story by a precise location of her person – the reference to her physical dwelling place runs for six lines in a widening itinerary, recalling Stephen Dedalus yet not rising to such a height as her whereabouts do not go any further than County Tipperary. Details of personal life follow, her age and her pride of it, and her delight in contemplating her mature body in the mirror appears somewhat shocking when the Catholic spirit ruling Irish small towns is considered. Nevertheless, she does not show the slightest sense of shame at having such moments for herself and the excuse shortly follows: she is married to a “popular and wealthy man” (Durcan 1993, 87) who is at the same time “An alcoholic and a

county councillor” (Durcan 1993, 88), “By repute a sensitive man and he is / Except when he makes love to me” (ibid). He is aware of this limitation, though, which modifies slightly his character yet no real solution exists for the problem as divorce is not allowed and he is unlikely to change. As some sort of compensation he offers a free weekend “up in Dublin” (Durcan 1993, 89) for his wife, with a theatre evening, with the money granted by him, a generous offer indeed, especially when the husband’s figure is considered.

Her preparations equal that of a chance of a lifetime – choosing a play with her favourite actor, buying a new outfit though with no illusions of the actor seeing her in that particular dress, and she dresses up to become someone’s “femme fatale” (Durcan 1993, 90). Symbolically she gets lost driving to Dublin, and the first man she asks for directions offers to be her guide: “‘Follow me’ – he said – ‘my name is Jesus: / Have no fear of me – I am a travelling actor. / We’ll have a drink together in the nearby inn.’” (ibid) The modern Jesus offers no teaching, at least not in an explicit way, yet his whole personality becomes instructive of what a woman may want in a man. She is enchanted to such an extent that she invites him to spend the night with her yet his candid answer is only a promise “‘Our night will come’” (Durcan 1993, 91). Guilt accumulates in her only because of the “empty vacant seat in the Abbey” (ibid) and the scene culminates in a kiss just to be concluded in the same moment with only the promise echoing in her mind.

The broadly moving long lines relating the story of the meeting with Jesus are interrupted and the speaker returns to the short lines out of which the earlier sections of the poem were composed. In the concluding section the narrow and constrained family life of the character asserts itself once again – and once for all, too, as it is the last part of the poem and the original offer of the husband was for a single weekend. Naturally, the story of the meeting remains a secret yet the husband’s forced and hypocritical enquiry about the performance seems to absolve the woman from not telling the truth.

The poem raises a number of questions in the context of life in an Irish small town. The domestic relation of wife and husband demonstrates the recognition of its essentially constraining nature yet traditional hypocrisies and the lack of socially accepted solutions for such cases bind the couple into a rather sour standstill. The title already foreshadows an extraordinary occasion, hinting at the possibility of salvation through the name of Jesus – just to frustrate expectations as the name turns out to belong to a travelling actor. The modern saviour works illusions, which leaves his story on a tentative level – salvation is only temporary, with the illusion gone it is finished too. Yet the fact that it happens *is* significant since the domestic context of the woman’s life would hardly contribute such a moment.

Revelations are rare but stories hypocritically seen as ‘surprising’ and ‘immoral’ are not so: John Montague’s “Country Matters” presents a story not unusual in the country but often deliberately overlooked with the intention of erasing it, as if such things never happened. The case is that of a young and attractive woman giving in to temptations of physical love: in a rural environment, among general conditions of underdevelopment and with ignorance of contraception the future is foreseeable, it is only a matter of time when things turn serious. The story of the woman is framed by lightly didactic general comments: the commonly assumed ideology of “rural innocence” (Montague 1995, 214) is turned upside down by the revelation of the actual roots of marriage in such quarters where “the great middle- / Class morality does not prevail” (ibid). Though this comment is inserted only in brackets, the irony of “great” is difficult to overlook. The general dimension then is replaced by the tangible example: the schoolgirl already captures the attention of the other sex – boys are as yet harmless but “farmhands” (ibid) visiting her embody the potential danger. “Finally, / Of course, she gave in” (ibid). There is something painfully inevitable about that “Of course,” the moment is so predictable that one would be surprised to learn that it did not come.

Once the avalanche is underway the outcome is well-known: her ‘progress’ leads from being a “good thing” (Montague 1995, 215) at fourteen through premature pregnancy and subsequent secret abortion in England at sixteen to the status of ““A backstreet whore”” at eighteen. The ‘remarkable’ career comes to an end in a moment which is difficult to locate properly, whether it is climax or anticlimax: marriage with a “casual / Labourer from the same class as herself / For in the countryside even beauty / Cannot climb stairs.” (ibid) The ambiguous ending of the story, however, is not a conclusion, the rest remains untold (if there is anything left to be told); the speaker offers instead a hazily sentimental “early vision” (ibid) of the girl “when / Grace inhabited her slight form.” (ibid)

What the poem subverts is the very ideology of the Republic concerning the humbleness and frugality of its population, of the world of the countryside as the repository of a morality exceptional in the modern world. The understated title reduces personal degradation to simple “matters” yet this is deliberately in line with the subversive intentions of the poem. What official discourse terms “rural innocence” is ignorance proper in practice, with all its potential consequences – Montague’s repeated references to the lack of (proper) language for her experience reflects his belief that this situation is not incurable, even if the poet has to descend into the openly didactic to communicate his stance.

Brendan Kennelly's approach to the historical dimension of the present is dominated by his general tendency towards satire yet it occasionally incorporates a more balanced and serious assessment of contemporary matters. His Kerry origins and later transplantation to Dublin leaves him acquainted with various aspects of contemporary Irish matters, therefore he does not embrace the predominant ideologies of the 'modern Irish nation'; still on occasion his vision broadens into sympathy for the mastermind of such ideologies, as the imaginary de Valera monologue indicates, recognising the human dimension in the figure beyond the politically visible, and due to that perhaps mask-like, surface.

"De Valera at Ninety-Two" is a monologue spoken by one of the founding fathers of the Irish Free State and the later Republic, Eamon de Valera, who does not need a detailed introduction. Kennelly's choice to depict him at such an advanced age is not without ambivalent intentions: the speaker is old and blind, and is in the care of a woman. Strangely enough, the situation is not unpleasant for the speaker; on the contrary to expectations it is "a joy you might find hard to understand" (Kennelly 1990, 144) After an appreciation of the service of his wife the man reflects on public opinion concerning him. The character that is outlined is a peculiar one indeed, reflecting hard-edged logic, originating from de Valera's profession as a teacher of Mathematics for would-be teachers. In the retrospective analysis mathematical problems look more attractive than political ones as the former offer the "possibility of solution" (Kennelly 1990, 145). Turbulent times direct his attention to politics and he undertakes the job of "Making a nation" (ibid) which is seen as a "vicious business" (ibid). The question of whether he understood the process is raised but not answered; instead, the speaker confesses that he is "not a talker, but a listener." (ibid) His favourite activities of observation and remembering lead the storyline back to his native County Clare, to an instance of trouble: a tall man cannot be buried in an ordinary grave, so the neighbour's plot has to be opened too, leading to a conflict between the families, never to be reconciled. The train of thought then moves on to one of the old obsessions of the state founders, the language question. Language is seen as origins, and "Not to know such origins / Is not to know who you are / Or what you think you're saying." (ibid) There is an abrupt return to the present, the speaker's forgetfulness is mentioned yet it is curious how it is only the present which is partially lost through forgetting, and it is never the past which suffers. The old and blind man is locked into "a world of voices / And of silence" (Kennelly 1990, 146) and that of memories too – of days of glory and youth, with still much to expect.

The old speaker of the poem does not appear any distinct from people of the same age. The fact that he is one of the masterminds of Irish independence apparently influences the

judgement to be passed on him but the general image is that of a man who looks firm and convinced of the right and good of what he has done but on closer scrutiny he himself reveals moments of weakness in which basic questions remain unanswered. The fact that he knows his wife always “kept a secret place in her heart / For herself” (Kennelly 1990, 144) reveals at the outset the existence of such blanks in the picture, and when it comes to problems of utmost significance, the direction of his train of thought always changes. A man with his life-work partly in existence, partly behind him, he is reluctant to pass a judgement on himself – or perhaps the poet refrains from it.

De Valera’s citing of the scene of the burial of a tall man is emblematic in a number of senses. The conflict caused by the occasion reflects the general dimension of the conflicts of Ireland – neighbours, people and countries are locked into endless hostilities due to events which would require a minimum of flexibility and surrender to be settled, yet with their escalation the prospect of a peaceful settlement becomes nearly impossible. That the speaker of the poem himself is a tall man is another implication – in his case not the burial but his assessment is a matter of debate. The tall man image thus presents a country locked into eternal differences of opinion with the prospect that such a place is stimulating as well as exhausting since there seems to be no end to such antagonisms.

As if to prove this, “Points of View” offers an interesting contrast with the imaginary monologue of de Valera: it presents two opposing opinions about him by average Irish people. The Simple Past tense of the poem makes it clear that the man is no longer alive, his work is now finished and it remains to be assessed by the living. The cruelly ironic short piece quotes two neighbours’ opinions with a common element: both compare him to Christ, yet with different orientation. The first one emphasises the straightness and spiritual strength in praise, while the other finds fault with the different end of the two characters’ fate: “‘twas a great pity / he wasn’t crucified as young.” (Kennelly 1990, 146) The two opinions reinforce what the monologue mentions about the division of the people, exemplifying in itself the spirit of pluralism with contrasting and conflicting ideas about reality.

Kennelly’s vision extends to virtually anonymous and less spectacular figures of the contemporary scene too. *The Book of Judas* explores the concept of betrayal in various manifestations of it, taking as its leading character and major incarnation the figure of Judas, a generally acclaimed taboo in Irish culture (cf. Kennelly 1991, 9-12). Kennelly’s obsession with such characters, with the major precedent of Cromwell, leads him over dangerous ground since any such mission as revising the chosen character includes the revision of contemporary reality as well, thus it inevitably involves the subversion of established

ideologies and pieties. The contemporary scene is the field of exploration, with several aspects: the advance of consumer society and the consequent flooding of people's life by telecommunication are the principal guidelines along which the Republic of Ireland is depicted on the course of modernisation. The effects of this process on the spirit of Dublin are commemorated in other poems; Kennelly now focuses upon everyday routines and characters and provides a vast kaleidoscope of contemporary Irish society.

The modern version of the Irish citizen is introduced in "Eily Kilbride." The title refers to a child who is a product of the latest phase of development in Ireland, after the accession to the European Union. The setting is significantly not Dublin but Cork: though it is the second largest city of the Republic, it is not a true metropolitan centre, and its location on the south coast destines it a frontier between the urban and the rural, situating it closer than Dublin-based visions to what is generally understood as Irish country life. In spite of all this the young figure has no knowledge of traditional elements of life; his ignorance extends so far that he "went, once, into the countryside, / Saw a horse with a feeding bag over its head / And thought it was sniffing glue." (Kennelly 1991, 31) Fed with junk food and 'supported' by parents who "had no work to do" (ibid) he is the specimen of a world which does not have any distinctive element emanating from the location, suggesting that ignorance is universal and at the same time acknowledging that Ireland is not an exception either.

"Youngsters Today" is spoken by an elderly person with a 'healthy' Irish accent. His story is that of a friend who has been robbed of all his money in his own home when a couple of young girls visit them as "Legion o' Mary workers" (Kennelly 1991, 50) and they take whatever they find. The poem is framed by what these youngsters are capable of, with a rather bizarre idea at the end: "The youngsters today / Would steal a corpse outa the grave!" (ibid) Liberal economics, it appears, liberate morals as well, and though Ireland never lacked depravity, modernisation does not mean the elimination of unfavourable conditions, and there are always some people to capitalise on the credulity of others, whatever the founding visions of the country may have been.

"Lessons" deals with another face of reality as it revisits the old division of the population into Catholic and Protestant, thus the scope is broadened to involve the North as well. The teaching of the catechism in the two sects is easily translated into stereotypical metaphors. The last stanza, however, develops a different direction by suggesting the burning of the books, yet its result is not a possible opening (though a rather disheartening one) for reconciliation: "The ashes scatter and fall / On a hundred thousand rifles / In a bunker in Donegal." (Kennelly 1991, 81) "Scatter" suggests no erasure of the differences, and the final

'destination' of the ashes hint at the Republic's role in the Northern conflict – it is at least tacit approval of violent activity which the rifles indicate.

Michael Hartnett's poem "Death of an Irishwoman" records a basically trivial event, for many even a 'non-event,' in the life of Ireland. The 'heroine' is an average Irishwoman but she is described to perfection. The account has a subtle balance: the opening is a rather matter-of-fact summing up of her most prominent attributes; this is gradually but firmly replaced by a more sympathetic approach, culminating in what might as well appear a warm final embrace. The woman seems to have been a refugee from an earlier world: though "monotonous food" (Hartnett 47) is a common enough phenomenon in the rural world, her belief in a flat world and in 'púcas and darkfaced men" (ibid), coupled with "fierce pride" (ibid) give the image of an archetypal Irish woman of the past. Her fading is captured with more sympathy, though the observation that "she clenched her brittle hand / around a world / she could not understand" (ibid) is not far from diminishing the power of her pride, taking her figure several steps closer to Patrick Kavanagh's nearly immortal rural mother figure in *The Great Hunger*. The speaker's confessional "I loved her from the day she died" (ibid) is an ambivalent turning point: the affection may be simply inadequately timed, or could as well suggest the opposing emotional content for her as long as she was alive, becoming a dear figure only in her death. The summing up of what she imaginatively becomes in the eyes of the speaker takes usual categories: an evocation of rural Ireland, of a troubled history, of a language slowly becoming extinct. The last line, however, crowns the poem with a majestic image which restores the doubted innocence of the woman, erasing the ironic potential of the earlier lines: "She was a child's purse, full of useless things." (ibid)

Thomas Kinsella's comments on his contemporary world are embedded in poems which explore places, weaving together space and time. There are occasions, however, when he ventures to provide explicit commentary on the present state of affairs. This happens in the poem "One Fond Embrace," a meditative piece which registers the surrounding world of Dublin and gathers an imaginary company of people of great cultural importance in a vision of a dinner. At one point the speaker declares his historical privilege: "we were the generation also of privilege // to have seen the vitals of Empire tied off / in a knot of the cruel and comic." (Kinsella 1996, 291) With the foreign oppression gone, opinions are recognisably friendlier: "the English are a fine people / in their proper place." (ibid) The tentative alternative of a less hostile historical relationship brings images of civil war and of a surrealistic scene planted "West of the Shannon" (ibid) yet easily identified with the real North, coming to a conclusion in the stereotypical dual vision of Catholic and Protestant: the

former is “manageable” and “can twist on a threepenny bit” (Kinsella 1996, 292), whereas the latter is “more difficult,” “twisting in the other direction / and interested more in property” (ibid). The invocation involving the two factions is addressed to “our holy distracted Mother” (ibid) and has for its scope both groups, with no ultimate differentiation in the wish “guide us and save” (ibid), as the plural pronoun indicates. The final vision, perhaps against all odds, embraces the whole island then, which is a significant step since the peaceful and relatively eventless contemporary history of the Republic would be opened towards the troubled world of Northern Ireland, generously keeping silent about whatever consequences that may involve.

#### 4.1.2.2. NORTHERN IRELAND – THE TROUBLES

The easily visible faultlines of Northern Ireland represent a dangerous tectonic heritage with grievances and conflicts of various kinds. Since the establishment of the province antagonisms had been present, occasionally even overt manifestations occurred, yet the decisive moments came in the 1960s with the coincidence of various factors. The outbreak of widespread violence has reshaped the face of the North and has drawn virtually every social group into the conflict, making manifest faultlines within the dominating Protestant Unionist faction as well. The complex and intricate picture offers rich material for discussions of various types, and the old bardic association of poets singles them out, in the eyes of many, as the proper commentators of the conflict. This public expectation is not willingly embraced by the poets themselves yet their own imaginative interests and responsibilities compel most of them to approach the question of the contemporary political situation.

The ‘Troubles’ of Northern Ireland have certainly left many people, among them poets and writers as well, puzzled about the actual nature of the conflict. The violence is carried out along sectarian lines, with the ultimate divide apparently stretching between Catholic and Protestant. The weight of a sectarian conflict in a late twentieth-century Western European, moreover a ‘British,’ context is difficult to assess, as John Hewitt’s response, or perhaps lack of response, indicates in a poem entitled “Conversations in Hungary,” written in the August of 1969. On hearing the news of riots in the North both host and guest are at a loss:

Our friends at Balaton, at Budapest  
days later also, puzzled, queried why,

when the time's vibrant with technology,  
such violence should still be manifest  
between two factions, in religion's name. (Hewitt 36)

Hewitt's poem voices a dilemma which can baffle commentators and audiences alike as one which can be easily dismissed as trivial and therefore requiring no deep investigation. The conflict involves religious factions yet the sectarian division tends to correspond to the political one of Irish Nationalist and Ulster Unionist, further answering the deeper-running national divide of Irish and British. Northern Ireland appears to be the last standing battlefield where former coloniser and colonised still come face to face and continue their fight until the final defeat of one or the other. This seemingly simple picture, however, is complicated by a number of other factors such as economic development and repression, internal frictions and differences of opinion within the two major factions themselves and certain cultural issues which reject the simple binary opposition of Irish and British, envisioning a possible overlap of the two in the specific context of Northern Ireland. Manifestations of violence nevertheless make recourse to the old division between Catholic and Protestant, as if no other final point of reference operated.

Poetic assessments of the Northern Troubles take various courses to univocally reject violence. There are collections which explicitly involve the conflict – John Montague's *The Rough Field* and to an even greater extent Seamus Heaney's *North* make excursions to the dangerous ground of the present. More often, however, Northern poets employ a personal dimension: rather than focusing on events they involve the consequences translated into the field of everyday life. Oblique references abound and personal memories of family members participating in other conflicts are also evoked when the present is considered. The conclusion, whatever itinerary is embraced, is always identical: violence can never be excused as a legitimate way of 'solving' the conflict.

John Montague's poetry is frequently characterised by a particular political stance, which indicates the close interrelatedness of the personal and the communal. Montague's Northern republican family origins provide him with grievances which affect his poetic vision in turn – as he puts it, "What's in the poet's blood must speak through him" (Montague quoted in E. Longley 1987, 188). Montague's stance, however, is one that could equally be regarded as exemplary: though he cannot shed his Northern Catholic background, his general patience for the 'other side' suggests a humane concern deeper than any sectarian conditioning.

“A New Siege” resituates the historical landmark of the Siege of Derry (1689) by focusing on the Troubles-ridden city of the late twentieth century. The short and staccato-like lines plunge quickly downwards; the constraining narrowness of the lines is eased by the frequent use of enjambment, and the lack of punctuation creates several possibilities for different readings. The rushing movement also indicates the avalanche-like nature of the conflict with no recognisable element able to stop its course.

The kaleidoscopic structure of the poem brings together communal history, ancient and modern, with personal elements: legend, myth and popular belief meet sobering reality. It opens with the vision of the seventeenth-century city and the old siege, and it quickly switches over to the present image – James’s army is replaced by British troops patrolling the city. The latter picture has become emblematic of the North and the present view is contrasted with the nearly mythic city of “Columba’s Derry” (Montague 1995, 71): a brief historical catalogue helps to situate the city in a broader context than its recent one. Personal history also demands space in the account: this was the place to arrive for the four-year-old John Montague, thus it is the beginning of the ultimate family separation for the poet. Columba’s Derry is superseded by “London’s Derry” (ibid) – the profound changes brought about by colonisation are briefly marked: “a New Plantation / a new mythology” (ibid) and the regular Orange festivals. The historical dimension becomes static and the focus is on the present after this. The quick pictures of sectarian antagonism are complemented by a wider perspective, that of a universally restless world: the Berkeley, Berlin and Paris are evoked as “seismic waves / zigzagging through / a faulty world” (Montague 1995, 72) find their outlet in protests all over the western world. The perspective is narrowed with Northern Ireland becoming its focus, and the general landmarks of general protestation give way to the world of the province as seen from a minority viewpoint. There is a great deal of scepticism concerning the outcome of the present conflict as the penultimate section voices the eternal dialectic of the world:

Lines of loss  
    lines of energy  
always changing  
    always returning  
A TIDE LIFTS  
    THE RELIEF SHIP  
OFF THE MUD  
    OVER THE BOOM

the rough field  
    of the universe  
growing, changing  
    a net of energies  
crossing patterns  
    weaving towards  
a new order  
    a new anarchy  
always different  
    always the same (Montague 1995, 73)

The closing section leaves the poem basically inconclusive with images of the Foyle and “a flock of swans” (ibid) suggesting change but without the specifications of its direction. This is also an answer to the self-reflexive passage two sections earlier: “The emerging order/ of the poem invaded / by cries, protestations” (ibid) – the pressure of immediacy presents a danger for the artefact, anger and disappointment must be tamed and mediated before they can be integrated into an ordered articulation of opinion. The lack of conclusion in the poem is in line with this, and at the same time it is also the reflection of the time of the composition of the poem in the early stages of the Troubles.

“Northern Express,” dating from the mid 1980s, provides the account of a sadly usual ritual of the Troubles. A regular coach is stopped by armed men and the passengers are ordered to get off. The prospect of “sudden death” (Montague 1995, 163) brings together strangers in a matter of moments and they have to watch how the coach is set on fire. They are also ordered to “remove their boots, / the classic ritual before a mass execution” (ibid). This time, however, they are not executed but are told to march in the snow after the driver and can thus get away without much harm done, “their only casualty, thin socks worn through.” (ibid) The fierce and absurd logic of the conflict is amply demonstrated: the purpose of the act is the intimidation of the passengers and the destruction of the vehicle – yet no investigation is conducted about the passengers themselves, nothing is mentioned in relation to their sectarian affiliations. The armed figures are simply treated as shadows, “assistant shadow” and “chief shadow” (ibid), and the practical use of their action is neither mentioned nor commented on, though the last line of the poem carries overtones of irony finely suited to the situation.

Montague's rather tight-lipped assessments of other aspects and events of the Troubles create a similar impression of muted but discernible outrage. "Falls Funeral" commemorates the funeral of a child victim of the conflict; apart from the usual associations of funerals the person to be buried turns the event even more tragic. There is, however, some sort of hope finding its way into the poem: the funeral crowd is seen as "David's brethren / in the Land of Goliath" (Montague 1995, 277) – this, though, suggests a perpetual state of conflict as well as the prospect of some future change of fortune.

A later short sequence called "Civil Wars" is composed of pieces offering various glimpses at events in the history of the Northern conflict viewed from the perspective of hindsight. "Sands" is built on the pun of the identity of material in an hourglass and the name of the most famous hunger striker. The slow and painful death of the man is the subject of the "song" (Montague 2000, 76) yet this is only one part of the picture: "This is the sound of his death; / but, turn the hourglass, / also of his living on." (ibid) Immortality is achieved in the moment of death, thus the song flows on without a pause. "Weeds" provides a more general dimension to the conflict as it evokes the marches of the North – the imagery is that of flora and the human intention of controlling it by scything, yet the effort is seen as futile since everyone knows "full well that next Spring / the same dumb stubborn / roots will stir underground." (ibid) The most explicit reference to a more recent event in the history of the conflict is the core of the section: "A Response to Omagh" is apropos of the worst post-1994 atrocity, demanding numerous lives. The conclusion of the poem voices the disappointment of many: after the lulling promise of historic ceasefires there seems to be a return to violent ways, with the subsequent necessity of re-adjustment – "we learn to live inside ruin / like a second home" (Montague 2000, 77).

Seamus Heaney's response to the Troubles is a rather complex one, characterised by a variety of approaches and techniques. The volume *North* is generally understood as his most complex assessment of the Northern conflict, attempting to provide a comprehensive framework for the events of the late twentieth century in the matrix of earlier history, complemented and to a certain extent balanced by the personal history recorded in the second part of the volume. In the elegies of *Field Work* a fully personal perspective is employed; the conflict is now fully translated into the private sphere of life – when violence intrudes into the immediate world of the poet and the public approach has failed it is time to assume a new point of view. While the public poems of *North* are explicitly situated in the perspective associated with the Northern Catholic minority, the personal accounts are less intent on situating themselves in relation to the conflict. The elegies generally refrain from blame and

concentrate on the loss of relatives or friends; the poems are at once elegies and eulogies: they both mourn and celebrate those victims, drawing from their tragedy a source which expresses the belief in the reconciliatory nature of the aesthetic, in poetry as healing and perhaps there emerges a tentative hope that in spite of W. H. Auden's belief poetry can somehow make things happen – as it is later asserted by Paul Muldoon's MacNeice-figure in the long poem '7, Middagh Street' (cf. Muldoon 2001, 192).

Heaney's first steps in addressing the Northern conflict find outlet in poems centring on placenames in his environment. The savouring of an ancient heritage is consolatory and it also serves as a warning that there is an older local substratum which can only be usurped upon by any later development. The earlier "Anahorish" and "Broagh" both emanate a strong sense of their respective locals, and both intend to weave language and history together with physical space to suggest a near-organic unity which can only be severed by violence. Placenames broadened into a wider circle of cultural references in *North* which was devoted to a tentative address of the political situation of the North. Thus the public expectations that Heaney should say something about the conflict were partially fulfilled – yet only partially and far from being without disagreements as to what actually he was saying.

The collection in fact contains relatively few explicit references to the events of the conflict. Instead the two parts of the volume propose a balance between the communal and the personal as it formulates its vision about the North. The communal focus of the first part of the volume enlarges the context of the northern conflict as it attempts to widen the perspective to include various historical periods shaped by various peoples – Iron Age people of Danish bogs, Vikings, Normans and later English invaders all make their appearance. The second part is more generous in its inclusion of actual events from Heaney's own circle of experience yet these tend to be earlier memories or fairly general recent ones which find their significance in the personalised meaning they bear for the speaker.

The poems of *North* have received much critical attention to a great extent due to Heaney's position as a generally acclaimed voice. Some reviewers greeted the volume as offering a convincing perspective for the grievances of the Troubles, others dismissed the volume as propagandistic and one-sided; especially Ciaran Carson's opinion is considered as symptomatic as the outrage he voices is motivated mainly by the depressing situation rather than by the poems themselves (cf. Carson quoted in Allen 260). The fact that the poems were composed in the Republic allows for physical distance from the scene of the conflict and thus provides space for reflection. The design of separating the poems into two distinct groups, with the second part being adequately self-critical, suggests what should in itself be simple

and obvious, that the collection is one person's interpretation of the events and as such it is partly conditioned and partly informed by the personal history of that figure, that Heaney as a Northern Catholic cannot provide an absolutely neutral assessment of the events because such an approach is impossible for a person of that background.

One of the opening poems of *Field Work*, "The Toome Road" is a voicing of the speaker's outrage on finding his world intruded upon by external agents of violence. The early morning scene is abruptly overrun by "armoured cars / In convoy" (Heaney 1979, 15), which draws an angry question from the speaker: "How long were they approaching down my roads / As if they owned them?" (ibid) As the intruders are placed into the proper context of the morning in the rural world of the speaker, a strong sense of contrast develops. The country is asleep, and the predominantly agricultural landmarks are as yet devoid of life – the speaker's plight at such an hour is understandable: 'the bringer of bad news' (ibid) is never welcome, thus the dilemma remains. The invaders are briefly addressed as "charioteers" (ibid), opening a cross-historical perspective on Roman practices (cf. Corcoran 1986, 134) yet there is a not so latent determination in the closing lines: "O charioteers, above your dormant guns, / It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass, / The invisible, untoppled omphalos." (Heaney 1979, 15) The omphalos may be "vibrant" but it is "untoppled," suggesting another level with the possibility of conflict and invasion threatening the local world yet essentially not being able to destroy it. This lightens the burden of the speaker as well, his early outrage is modulated into perplexity at first and into a solid determination at last. The image of the invisible omphalos refers not only to the fact that memories and beliefs cannot be destroyed by external agents, but through this it also offers an analogy of resistance, a kind of Northern Catholic *non serviam*. Material elements of the country and the land may be raided on, captured and possessed but spirituality is a more difficult domain to conquer.

The scene is thus set to offer a closer-up perspective on the everyday presence of violence, dismissing the idea of a wider and perhaps somewhat ennobling framework. Heaney's subject is now violence in its actual manifestation which means death and loss, and thus it brings the alteration of life, virtually down to its most minute details. The three elegies of the volume complement and reconfigure Heaney's earlier approach with its mythicising tendency – the poet leaves behind his 'tower' to walk among his people.

"The Strand at Lough Beg" is subtitled "In Memory of Colum McCartney," paying tribute to a cousin of the poet (cf. Parker 160). The person in the focus of the poem was killed at a road block in the form of a usual atrocity of the Troubles, shot dead by paramilitaries of the other side. The poem turns the full-grown man into an innocent victim by evoking the

picture of the young boy driving cattle in the same location many years earlier and not turning him back into his recent self, while the speaker is engaged in the activity of cleansing as he prepares to wash the face of the victim.

The first section of the poem sets out to picture that final day of the man when he chose to drive “towards Newtownhamilton” (Heaney 1979, 17), taking the same road as the mythic Sweeney did long before him fleeing “before the bloodied heads, / Goat-beards and dogs’ eyes in a demon pack / Blazing out of the ground, snapping and squealing.” (ibid) The description reads chillingly up-to-date though it is made more punctual by references to a late twentieth-century world of technological ambushes, concluding in the starkly contrasting picture of “The lowland clays and waters of Lough Beg, / Church Island’s spire, its soft treeline of yew” (ibid), the natural element and home of the victim far away from which he was killed. The near pastoral setting and the spire would normally evoke the feeling of peace but it is a time ‘out of joint’ and world turned upside down which will render such sites into almost unreachable – and in the context of the dead person it is the case.

The setting remains in terms of place in the second part but the time is turned back: the boyhood self of the victim is evoked. The past was not without the sounds of guns either yet the duck shooters of the old world would not have anything else in common with the present arbitrators of violence. People are separated into two kinds, the shy ones and the loud ones, with the speaker and the victim put into the former. This image of innocence is carried over to the third and last section to frame an imaginary walk of the two figures, the last one for both of them though for different reasons. The landmarks of cattle “Up to their bellies in an early mist” (FW 18) and the lake “Like a dull blade with its edge / Honed bright” (ibid) do not yet suspect the tragedy they are to witness in a short time – the speaker’s sudden recognition of the stopping short of the sounds of his cousin’s feet signals the unalterable change in the scene. The speaker then kneels down to “gather up cold handfuls of the dew / To wash you, cousin” (ibid), and when the washing is done, “I lift you under the arms and lay you flat” (ibid). The scene is reminiscent of the *pieta* (cf. Parker 161) yet the modern version does not involve mother and son but relatives of a less close kinship, which indicates the loosening of ties between fellow human beings. The speaker’s final act of covering the body “With rushes that shoot green again” (Heaney 1979, 18) tentatively suggests a willed resurrection as well as the acknowledgement of the Christian pattern of life in a slightly displaced format – the dust is replaced by plants, hinting at an immanent power of regeneration.

“A Postcard from North Antrim” is similarly subtitled for the proper focus of the poem: the postcard is for a human being and not for the place indicated. Sean Armstrong, the

victim commemorated is evoked through the lonely waving figure of a postcard who is pictured on a bridge “slung / Dangerously out between / The cliff-top and the pillar rock.” (Heaney 1979, 19) The popular figure of the friend of the poet is recalled in his bohemian figure and even his death is described in a language that would have found no fault with the man: “your candid forehead stopped / A pointblank teatime bullet.” (ibid) For such a figure the speaker’s demand, “Get up from your blood on the floor” (Heaney 1979, 20) does not seem outrageous either. The memory of his singing is vividly captured but the poem strikes a note markedly more serious as it explores a dimension of the man concealed from most of his audience: the voice itself opens up a profound world as “It was independent, rattling, non-transcendent / Ulster” (ibid) with all the elements familiar for a person of Northern Catholic origins. The speaker has yet another distinctive memory in connection with the deceased person, the deeply personal one of the first embrace of his would-be wife, thus the postcard with the image of the bridge becomes all the more haunting as the poem concludes on this personal note.

“Casualty” is yet another elegiac memorial to one of the victims of the Northern Troubles but this time the victim remains nameless (only commentators trace his exact identity). As the title indicates, the poem is at once an elegy and the voicing of the dilemma of the victim status of the person to be commemorated: the simple fisherman was killed in a pub of the other sect blown up by his own people, despite having been warned to stay at home and away from public places. The question of the culpability of the character raises further questions of tribal allegations and the persona’s position embodies the dilemma as well as decides the issue in favour of the victim: by staying away from the funeral of the man the speaker commits the same offence against the tribe as the victim himself and thus partly absolves him, thus a self-reflexive assessment of Heaney’s own position is also included.

The first section of the poem evokes the image of the fisherman as a regular drinker almost at home in the pub, “A dole-kept breadwinner / But a natural for work.” (Heaney 1979, 21) The personal relation between the man and the speaker was perhaps beyond simple acquaintance as their conversations would turn even to poetry yet the speaker’s tactics of manoeuvring the talk back to territories familiar to the fisherman hint at a special form of tact operating between them. The pictures recalling the figure are abruptly replaced by the account of what actually happened to the man in a passage employing Yeatsian style as well as painfully ironic graffiti quotations. The second section briefly recalls the funeral of the victims of Bloody Sunday; the fisherman was killed in one of the bombings in the wake of that event, with the Catholics calling a curfew which was not observed by the man. The

victim is shown in a perspective of zooming in and out – the account of the funeral is followed by a close-up view of the final moment of the fisherman’s life, the moment of “Remorse fused with terror / In his still knowable face” (Heaney 1979, 22-23) and the explosion itself, then the picture opens up again to sketch a general outline of the lonely figure in desperate need of company, just to come down to a moment of a ghostly encounter:

How culpable was he  
That last night when he broke  
Our tribe’s complicity?  
‘Now you’re supposed to be  
An educated man,’  
I hear him say. ‘Puzzle me  
The right answer to that one.’ (Heaney 1979, 23)

The answer is implicitly given in the third section of the poem: the speaker refuses to attend the funeral ceremony of the man; instead he recalls an occasion when the fisherman took him out on his boat to share the experience of early morning work. The missing of the funeral thus is not only an act of breaking faith with the tribe but the demonstration of the speaker’s wish to preserve the memory of the man as a living person – the shared moment and the intimacy it builds between them stand as a real memorial rather than the sad occasion of a funeral inescapably and unalterably closing down what was once a life, the story of a human being. The concluding lines of the poem reinforce this wish of preservation as the speaker voices an apostrophe to the deceased man and asks him to return in the hope of further conversations.

The poem addresses the conflict of the present on a personal level, through the figure of an acquaintance. There are no mythic dimensions evoked: the Troubles are tangible events leading to the death of a person who has a face and a life and who is known to the speaker through personal memories. The title seemingly contrasts with the private dimension as the word “casualty” would suggest an impersonal journalistic account; it is, however, rather the presentation of the personal dilemma of the figure of the fisherman: logically he is to blame for what happened to him as warnings kept others at home, yet still he is a human being and the loss of a life, whatever the cause, is always painful. The ambivalence of his position is expressed time after time in the poem, yet the speaker’s stance is made unambiguous by the closing section.

Michael Longley's poetry involves less spectacular assessments but his horror at the events is unmistakable. Longley's Protestant background places him on the other side of the divide and there is a different approach accordingly: his sense of responsibility, coupled with his reluctance to descend into the overtly political, compels him to find means of imaginative parallels and cures. When even these fail Longley turns to the atrocities themselves and reports them with shocking accuracy, which also provides a psychological element: long-time exposure to violence tends to affect the threshold of people's empathy, demanding that they should be shocked and outraged in order to grasp what is being communicated to them.

"Wounds" is a response to the violence of the present in a characteristically personal way. The speaker is in need of authenticating experience in order to feel qualified to comment on contemporary violence and finds this in the figure of his father, a veteran of both world wars. The first part of the poem accordingly lays down the foundations on which the assessment of the present can be built. The father's figure is recalled through two pictures, one of war and one of peace. The former is a nearly absurd episode of the First World War when the Ulster troops face the enemy with battle cries strictly reserved for a later Northern Irish context – "Fuck the Pope! / 'No Surrender'" (M. Longley 1985, 86) and "'Give'em one for the Shankill!'" (ibid) The displaced cries are amply contrasted with the peace-time image of father and son, the grandfather and the father of the speaker respectively, as the son follows the father in the family business. The image of the dying father serves as the link between the recalled distant conflict and the present one: the old war wounds lead to the death of the father, thus he is seen as a late casualty, and his burial is complemented by the enumeration of recent victims of violence: "Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of / Bullets and Irish beer, their flies undone" (ibid) and the figure of a bus conductor, evoked by his uniform, who was shot in his home in front of his family members. The father, however, serves also as a contrast at the same time: while his wounds originate from the frontline of a war, the recent victims are all made to appear defenceless in their end, shot in the urinal of a pub or at home. The irrationality and the outrageousness of the present conflict are amply illustrated by the details of the bus-conductor's death: the peaceful domestic evening is disturbed and upset by a "shivering boy" (ibid) who hardly knows what he is doing and why, and his words spoken to the children and the freshly widowed wife, "'Sorry Missus'" (ibid), seem absurdly out of place.

The three sections of "Wreaths" deal with victims of the recent violence; each focuses on a certain figure. The first is a civil servant whose murder is almost casually described – he was shot while preparing breakfast. The bullet entering his skull, however, is accompanied by

the attention of the speaker and it is not only the physical destruction it makes which is registered but everything else that was lost with his death: “The books he had read, the music he could play.” (M. Longley 1985, 148) The police action of examining the house is closed with the clearing away of the body: “They rolled him up like a red carpet” (ibid) – the simile is at once a grotesque comment and a distant parallel with a mummy-figure, with the red carpet also suggesting the social prestige of the character. The grotesque direction culminates in the absolutely illogical revenge of the widow on the piano – the motif for the removal of the black keys is virtually impossible to explain, except for what Elmer Kennedy-Andrews terms as “an hysterical outburst of hopelessness and despair.” (Kennedy-Andrews in Peacock and Devine 86)

The second victim is a greengrocer, socially less prestigious yet with a more immediate everyday function. This man was killed while working, “Serving the death-dealers” (M. Longley 1985, 148). This time the name of the victim is also revealed as his shop was a busy one, strategically positioned to embody both an inter- and cross-sectarian station at which anyone could stop to buy gifts:

Astrologers or three wise men  
Who may shortly be setting out  
For a small house up the Shankill  
Or the Falls, should pause on their way  
To buy gifts at Jim Gibson’s shop,  
Dates and chestnuts and tangerines. (ibid)

This perspective has its own approach to the aberrations caused by violence: the old figures of the “three wise men” are transformed into enigmatic characters for other reasons – their destination is a sufficient guideline to infer their intentions; their wisdom is likewise different, consisting in the exact moment of certain people’s death. The list of items to be bought in the shop stands in marked contrast with this reconfigured world and offers the promise of some sort of order – the seeming casualty of the otherwise exotic items concludes the section on a note of defiance, though of a rather melancholic kind.

The third section descends one step further on the social ladder to commemorate murdered linen workers. There is a nearly surreal image about “Christ’s teeth” which “ascended with him into heaven” (M. Longley 1985, 149); this recalls the false teeth of the speaker’s father, which in turn brings the recent victims into focus:

When they massacred the ten linen workers  
There fell on the road beside them spectacles,  
Wallets, small change, and a set of dentures:  
Blood, food particles, the bread, the wine. (ibid)

The poem closes on a personal note when the father's figure returns: as an earlier victim of violence, his assessment may be corrected in the light of the more recent ones; his re-burial would involve the readjustment of his picture expressed through the restoration to him of his spectacles, pocket money and dentures.

Longley's response to the present conflict does not always involve the father's figure. The poem "On Slieve Gullion" contracts long stretches of history to set figures of various periods and different types of history side by side. Ancient cattle raid, rapparees and present figures people the landscape, with violence as a common element to bind them together. The place, then, is heavy with history and it does not lack a present dimension either: the figure of Robert Nairac, a victim of the present conflict who was associated with the British army (Kennedy-Andrews in Peacock and Devine 79) is evoked. The speaker is an observer on the scene who peeps "through a gap in the hazels" (M. Longley 1985, 198) and sees "A blackened face, the disembodied head / Of a mummer" (ibid) or "A paratrooper on reconnaissance" (ibid). That these should be one (cf. Kennedy-Andrews in Peacock and Devine 79, suggesting that both are Nairac) is supported by the simple pronoun "he" used to refer to the agent of the actions described. The man is seen in a partly surrealistic picture of climbing towards the top of Slieve Gullion. The speaker manages to find something common to himself and the man: they are "Both strangers here" (ibid). In one sense, as Kennedy-Andrews notes, this would suggest Longley's own English origins (Kennedy-Andrews in Peacock and Devine 79) but the subsequent lines point to a somewhat different allegiance – that of belonging to an altogether different world than that of the legendary dimension of the place. The time lag between mythic past and prosaic present is inevitable, and though a certain amount of mystery surrounds the disappearance of Nairac, this event lacks the nobleness of the ancient figures and their stories.

"The Ice-Cream Man" is basically a concise and matter-of-fact report of the murder of an "ice-cream man on the Lisburn Road" (M. Longley 1991, 49) framed by two lists. The first list is that of ice-cream varieties, with the hint of some kind of art to them: "You would rhyme off the flavours" (ibid). The lulling effect of the first lines is abruptly broken by the factual

reference to the murder. The speaker's way of commemorating the man's death is his contribution of a list of flower names to accompany the carnation brought to the spot of the murder. The powerful sweep of the "wild flowers of the Burren" (ibid) not only rounds off the structure of the poem but establishes an order, in spite of and beyond the murder, and the idea that the flowers of a western location should be listed opens up the suffocating world of conflict-torn Belfast and contrasts the punctuated temporality of the urban location with that of the cyclical permanence of the natural world. The tragic event cannot be overwritten yet the list of the Burren flowers shifts the attention to an alternative reality which in turn renders the event itself even more distressing since the consolation provided by the natural world further enhances the brutality of the human one.

Longley's response to the recent events of his native province involves a peculiar element rooted in his classical education. In a number of poems he embarks on a course of translation yet with a highly ingenious technique: freely translated sections from such classics as Homer, Ovid or Tibullus are woven together with his original lines to forge a unique textual world with numerous hints at a rich set of contexts one of which is the contemporary world, often involving a deliberate element of contrasts with the old one.

The poem "Peace" is subtitled *After Tibullus*, revealing both the origin and the technique of the poem. In a rather free translation Longley resituates and reinterprets the concept of peace against the background of various forms of violence. The vocabulary is accordingly updated and the context is an amalgam of the ancient original and the world of the 'translator,' late twentieth-century Northern Ireland. All forms of violence are rejected in favour of the multiple meanings of peace: whether it is political or domestic violence, it is incompatible with the presented ideal of life.

Right from the outset the modern world invades the ancient: "arms deal" (M. Longley 1985, 169) and "marketing" (ibid) form the bridge between distant periods. The old world of pastorals contrasts strongly with the one of modern weapons and there is no doubt concerning the preferences of the speaker: the next-to-innocent world of the past would embody worldly perfection, with violence, if necessary, left to others. A relaxed family life and undisturbed old age are the favoured circumstances, and until the latter comes, peace as a partner is desirable:

I would like peace to be my partner on the farm,  
Peace personified: oxen under the curved yoke;  
Compost for the vines, grape-juice turning into wine,

Vintage years handed down from father to son;  
Hoe and ploughshare gleaming, while in some dark corner  
Rust keeps the soldier's grisly weapons in their place;  
The labourer steering his wife and children home  
In a hay cart from the fields, a trifle sozzled. (M. Longley 1985, 170)

This life would exclude violence – if not, then the ideal suffers: domestic violence is perhaps even less acceptable than the political version is; the former is seen “A crime against nature.” (ibid) Some tentative form of conflict is acceptable but nothing should escalate into physical fight. The persona's simple rephrasing of peace is even more practically formulated: “As for me, I want a woman / To come and fondle my ears of wheat and let apples / Overflow between her breasts. I shall call her peace.” (M. Longley 1985, 171) The abstract notion is turned into a very concrete and palpable figure, as simple as can be, yet as unattainable as well since the basic tone of the poem is tentative – weapons exist and are utilised by human communities virtually everywhere, a lamentable fact but as yet an unalterable one too.

The poem emblematically entitled “The Butchers” is a rendering of Odysseus's revenge on the suitors and his disloyal personnel. The moment is a decisive one in the *Odyssey* as his slaughter of the suitors of his faithful Penelope basically ruining his home is at once justified yet horrible. The details are plentiful and rather shocking as the passage is one that follows the actual moments of the killing of the suitors – they are all dead and the moment of cleaning has come. Still, there are people to be punished: the “disloyal housemaids” (M. Longley 1991, 51), after contributing to the clearing away of the corpses and blood, get their punishment too. Their execution is vividly pictured and is followed by the details of the exact vengeance on the remains of Melanthios. The poem closes with the delivery of the souls of these figures to the otherworld by Hermes. The destination is in the west but the “bog-meadow full of bog asphodels” (ibid) suggests a northern marine climate area rather than the usual Greek images of the happy isles.

The poem is one long sentence, taking turns several times yet refusing to stop anywhere else but at the final punctuation mark. The almost never-ending sentence reflects the similarly endless-looking bloodshed closing the Homeric epic, and the placing of the poem at the end of a collection is emblematic – after all, the poem *is* concluded by a full stop. The destination evokes a parallel with Ireland, especially Northern Ireland in a time of conflict – the never-ceasing cycle of sectarian violence with revenge leading to revenge is a subsurface presence. The suggestion that violence can only be terminated by its full-scale

employment is an alarming one, and the title is similarly a telling instance of the poet's stance: the heroic note of Odysseus's whole enterprise is shaken and questioned in the light of this last action observed from the point of view of a person living in the everyday presence of violence, and yet at the same time it is upheld since Odysseus's revenge is generally considered justified whereas the present violence is less frequently seen so.

The much quoted poem "Ceasefire" also grows out from a classical source which is updated and imaginatively reoriented by the modern phrase of its title. The poem captures a moment of recognition which is essential in the reconciliation of any conflict. The recognition is that of the necessity to take the first step even if it involves a loss of a part of one's position. The old king understands that his wish to get back the body of his son has its price but he is willing to do what he has to: "I get down on my knees and do what must be done / And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son." (M. Longley 1996, 39) This recalls John Hewitt's account of cross-sectarian friendship: "You must give freedom if you would be free, / for only friendship matters in the end." (Hewitt 34) Though Longley's correlative is older in its origin and is partly an exercise of translation, the general dimension of the necessity of surrendering something of one's own position in a conflict carries a profound parallel to the occasion of the poem, the 1994 announcement of ceasefire in the paramilitary activities of the North.

With both sides hurt in a long-standing antagonism easy solutions are impossible to find – or perhaps, as Longley suggests, they are always available. It is just that first step which has to be taken and then the rest comes smoothly: Priam's gesture is rewarded by Achilles and the latter is not less embarrassed in the scene than the former. Respect, admiration and mutual understanding are facilitated by that first step of the old king and by giving up something of his dignity he retains his full humanity – this is perhaps the indication of solution not only in this particular context but in any context involving conflict.

Derek Mahon has been attacked for his reluctance to comment on the events of his native province. Mahon's poems indeed contain few elements which would function as reminders of a conflict going on – he usually refrains from any sort of involvement in the conflict. There are, however, sporadic references to atrocities of violence which fit well the present conflict yet are generic enough to stand for any place in a conflict-ridden modern world, and these moments equivocally suggest Mahon's condemnation of the Troubles. This approach indicates a generally broader perspective which rarely descends into the present and which deliberately and systematically ignores the everyday as it is governed by a metaphysics which has its focus elsewhere.

The poem “Rage for Order” opens with an image of a figure as nearly exotic as an endangered species: a poet in time of violence. The landmarks are the “scorched gable end” and “burnt-out / Buses” (Mahon 1999, 47) beyond which the figure is engaged in his activity of writing. Similarly, the speaker of “The Last of the Fire Kings” comes from “a world of / Sirens, bin-lids / And bricked-up windows” (Mahon 1999, 65). Though this figure is not a poet, the surroundings are equally threatening, and so is the tradition which is depicted in the poem yet the speaker’s choice of not becoming a part of the process outlined in it would propose a solution similar to that of Mahon himself when he refuses to subscribe to the necessity of commenting on the contemporary events. As if to underline this idea, Mahon’s most explicit reference to the Northern conflict is placed in “A Postcard from Berlin,” a poem dedicated to Paul Durcan. Atrocities have become regular news items and thus slowly lose their appeal in raising empathy: the news of “another hunger-strike, / A postman blasted off his bike” (Mahon 1990, 149) draw only “dismay” (ibid) from the reader.

In marked contrast with Mahon, Tom Paulin is generally considered an explicitly political poet, which opinion gives rise to basically automatic, and thus very often incorrect, responses to his poetry. Bernard O’Donoghue rightly argues against this constraining consideration of Paulin, pointing out the proper drives for the involving of politics in his poetry (cf. O’Donoghue in Corcoran 1992, 171-188).

Alluding to the Auden-MacNeice precedent, the poem “Thinking of Iceland” focuses on Northern Ireland and charts the territory in a broad everyday context with a special sociological interest (cf. O’Donoghue in Corcoran 1992, 175). Though its interest seemingly lies elsewhere, in the light of that different apparent focus the contours of the near are clearly visible. Iceland is simply “that island” (Paulin 1993, 5), and the place evokes the vision of another island, a less distant one – one place is thus made the matrix of another, the local Northern landmarks are projected onto the screen of Iceland, giving a forcedly exotic account of the otherwise well-known ground of home. The items of description reflect a rather bleak environment: “empty road” (ibid), “some wind-bent, / scrub trees” (ibid), “a bar / painted pink, some houses, / a petrol pump by a shop” (ibid). Life is nearly a surprise in such a place yet there are some people living there; human presence, however, does not modify the general impressions of “this sour outback.” (ibid) Though the double name of each place could offer an exciting dimension, life is frozen into predictable routines; change is scarce and even then it is dubious and its seriousness is questioned, both by the locals and the speaker. Pictures are the reminders of a past full of conflicts, pictures of an eviction and of Maud Gonne; the former is a faded one, the latter glimmers but its location “in the top corner” (Paulin 1993, 7)

almost removes it from the scene. The present bleakness is re-established by trivial elements, “Sour smell of porter, / clutter of hens in the yard” (ibid). The closing stanza, however, shocks the picture out of its inertia: images of different manifestations of violence dislocate the almost rigid approach to the place, and the final question refers to the initial one concerning the nature of this ‘outing’ as a possible escape from the original location, making it not so much an escape but rather an account with a less usual point of view which in turn yields more penetrating observations.

The short poem “Of Difference Does it Make” is concerned with a ‘historic’ moment of the Northern Irish parliament. The poem is prefaced by an italic section which outlines the context: it centres on the one single act in the entire history of the Stormont Parliament which was initiated by a non-Unionist member. The “Wild Birds Act / of nineteen-hundred-and-thirty-one” (Paulin 1983, 51) protects, among others, a “rare stint called the notawhit” (ibid) – ironically the sound the bird produces echoes a synonym of the Unionist slogans of “No Surrender!” and “Not an Inch!” Though the poem does not have an explicit reference to the conflict, the political significance of such an occasion is not to be underestimated. The sheer irony of the situation elevates the moment to the status of the historic: it testifies to that one single moment when a consensus is openly achieved between the opposing factions, yet it also has to be acknowledged that the focus of the act is a world which lies beyond politics.

Another historic moment, though of a totally different kind, is commented upon by “The Defenestration of Hillsborough.” A situation with virtually no way out is outlined – “the window ledge” (Paulin 1987, 54) leaves very little space indeed and “The door is locked on us” (ibid), thus the claustrophobia is nearly tangible. With a fine grain of irony the consequence of this is also sketched: “This means we have a choice: // either to jump or get pushed.” (ibid) The situation the poem alludes to is the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement signed in 1985 which caused bitter dissatisfaction among Protestants. The feeling of betrayal is echoed throughout the poem, and the initial scene of the locked room with only the window as the escape route duly reflects the speaker’s understanding of the communal reaction. The status of Northern Protestants is approached through the map of “the small nations of Europe” (ibid), suggesting a sense of marginalisation in which situation the notion of choice itself loses its nature as choice.

Written with the same occasion in mind yet offering a more personal scale for assessment, “An Ulster Unionist Walks the Streets of London” embodies the search of a person for his group of people with the aim of belonging and finding a larger and more encompassing unit for self-definition. The Ulster Unionist speaker is frustrated at the outset in

his own province, his 'home,' by having to wait for a "signed paper" (Paulin 1987, 42) delivered to him by a policeman. His outrage is not significantly mellowed by a change of location either: London appears equally strange, though for a different reason – at least the physical distance of the city from the province explains something of this. The main reason, however, is the 'company' the speaker is in, the London Irish. Though he shares something with them, as he is a "half-foreigner" (ibid) in London, the question he formulates indicates distance and reluctance to identify with them: "I wanted ask them – / what does it feel like / to be a child of that nation?" (ibid) The question is not asked; when overhearing the talk of these people he decides to return to the streets instead of the comforts of the pub: "I may go out that door/ and walk the streets / searching my own people." (Paulin 1987, 43)

The ambiguity of the conclusion is the result of the simple-looking but rather problematic concepts of "Irish" and "Ulster Unionist." The phrase "London Irish", against all odds, appears a relatively simple matter as both location and ethnic designation are given, and it is clear that a group of immigrants is referred to by the term. The "Ulster Unionist" of the title poses more of a problem as it is demonstrated by the poem: seemingly at home in his own province, he is subject to the humiliation of bureaucracy there but a transfer to the cherished centre does not prove any less unpleasant. The question referring to the Irish as "them" asserts his refusal to be taken as part of that nation but his option of searching for his own people does not look promising either: considering London as the setting for the quest for Ulster Unionists foreshadows the general failure of the enterprise. On another level it subverts the category and undermines its very basis, thus calling into question the idea of Ulster Unionism as well – a search conducted in London for a generally locally defined group of another location suggests only a sense of dislocation.

Roots of activities maintaining the present violence are sometimes found in seemingly innocent dimensions of life. In the early poem "Settlers" the focus is a part of the population of the North, the Ulster Scots, represented by a couple. They arrive as recent immigrants and "They begin to belong" (Paulin 1993, 3) to "a black city / Of gantries, mills and steeples." (ibid) The man of the couple has a strange experience of finding "the bonnet of a brown lorry" (ibid) warm in the morning yet he draws no conclusions from this and does not have any questions beyond a simple remark about the queerness of the noticed phenomenon. The explanation is provided at the end of the poem: the smuggling of weapons is responsible for that warmth and the guns accumulate "below the floors / Of sturdy kirks and tabernacles." (ibid)

Though the chosen ‘immigrants’ belong to a recent world of the North, the reference “settlers” immediately opens up a historical perspective. The intimations of paramilitary activity anchor the poem firmly in the present, yet the (fault)lines are easily traced backwards into the past as the Scottish origin of the newly arrived couple is made clear. Whether the night time activities are recognised or understood by the man is not clarified – his enigmatic “warm knowledge” (ibid) easily equals ignorance in one reading or a tentative form of understanding yet reluctance to get involved explicitly, in another. His position as the manager of a company and “an elder of the Kirk” (ibid), however, can as well suggest that he is the organiser of the project, and his apparent ignorance is only an undercover manoeuvre.

The poem “And Where Do You Stand on the National Question?” leads an excursion to more general aspects of the contemporary political scene of Northern Ireland. The relaxed environment of “Apple-blossom” (Paulin 1983, 67) frames an imagined interview, a self-reflexive exercise which locates Paulin among his contemporaries. The guest is imaginatively transformed into “the state’s intelligence” (ibid) whose mission is to question the speaker “for picking up a pen / and taking myself a shade seriously.” (ibid) The Presbyterian tradition is represented in unfavourable terms, its extreme figure of Ian Paisley embodying the principal danger – thus the general pattern of antagonism between Protestant and Catholic is overwritten by the internal threat of extremist Protestantism. The speaker’s reaction is muted as his attention is diverted by a “tiny mound of soil” (ibid) indicating a mole at work, with possible suggestions of the image in the context of the subject of the conversation. The speaker, sharing Paulin’s own ideal of eighteenth-century republicanism, utilises the mole image to refer to the underground current of 1798 ideas, denying the possibility of the continuity with the present, yet the proposed alternative draws a radical rejection:

‘I’ve heard  
Hewitt and Heaney trace us back  
to the Antrim weavers –  
I can’t come from *that*. (Paulin 1983, 68)

The questioner’s suggestion of the importance of local history for Northerners does not stir a fellow feeling in the speaker, his attention yet again wanders off, initiating a decisive revelation about the questioner: his basically Unionist stance, in turn, draws an exact confession from the speaker too:

“I want a form that’s classic and secular,  
the risen République,  
a new song for a new constitution –  
wouldn’t you rather have that  
than stay loose, baggy and British?[]” (ibid)

Such a viewpoint, however, does not necessarily mean the embracing of earlier republican traditions, especially that it is formulated as a question. The conversation then lapses into chat, with a new public figure evoked – his name, “Sir Peregrine Falkland” (Paulin 1983, 69) guarantees that his political competence is called into question (cf. Corcoran 1992, 183).

What the poem seeks to discover is the origin of that particular stance which belongs to the speaker. Paulin’s own conviction of a rather unusual form of Republicanism is certainly not easy to accommodate with the fairly constraining patterns of religious and political categories, yet this peculiar position is on one level the calling into question of the simplifying tendency inherent in bipolar divisions. In addition to disrupting the usual alignment of Protestantism with Unionist political beliefs, there is also the break with the British associations, and though the word ‘Irish’ never surfaces, it is implied by the refusal of British allegiances, yet the hostility towards certain figures indicates reservations on part of the speaker, too, as far as the simplified antagonism of either/or is concerned.

Paul Muldoon’s approach to the political reality of his native province is a more deliberately sophisticated, and at once a more elusive one. His general response is best explained by himself: “the trouble with this place is that if you don’t engage in it, you’re an ostrich (whatever ‘engage in it’ means). If you do engage in it ... you’re on the make, almost, cashing in.” (Muldoon quoted in Kendall 91) That Muldoon, as a consequence, even delights in subverting such concepts as history is shown in his short poem of that title: the opening line of the poem already provides the decisive step towards deconstructing the usual communal associations of the word: “When and where exactly did we first have sex?” (Muldoon 2001, 87) Such an approach subordinates the communal to the personal and private sphere, prompting a reconfiguration of the system of values and associations of the speaker.

Muldoon resorts to communal history in a number of poems in spite of this highly ingenious approach. The central figure of the poem “Why Brownlee Left” is perhaps the most well-known disappearing character of Muldoon. His disappearance leaves a whole world puzzled about its why and wherefore: a man with possessions and reason enough to be content is found missing and there seems to be no rational (or irrational, for that matter)

explanation for the event. Gossip runs quickly in the world from which he disappears: “By noon Brownlee was famous” (Muldoon 2001, 84); the mystery develops into legend, and life appears to stop too: the field remains incompletely ploughed, and his pair of horses still wait, “Shifting their weight from foot to / Foot, and gazing into the future” (ibid), implying the only temporary nature of the situation – at least in their understanding.

The form of the poem approximates a sonnet yet it does not properly become one: line lengths vary and rhymes go missing in the process. This indicates the stopping short of the imagination in the face of what happened: the mystery remains a mystery, it does not allow external control, and the form cannot be perfect since it cannot fully contain its material. In a way, then, the poem is also a comment on authorial omnipotence – the speaker apparently does not possess the key to Brownlee’s story, and even if the poet himself does, he does not lend this knowledge to his speaker. There is no commentary along easily identifiable lines and the speaker refrains from taking sides: there is only simple reportage with the required accuracy, perhaps even a hint at the exotic in the experience, but not more than that is offered.

Muldoon’s tour-de-force “The More a Man Has, The More a Man Wants” brings together a highly idiosyncratic version of a native American myth, an ingenious approach to a sequence of sonnets and modern terrorism which ingredient provides the link with the contemporary world of the North. The central figure is Gallogly, the target of the police as well as of an American Indian who is driven by a mission of revenge rooted in an almost obsolete family affair. Muldoon’s notorious insistence on the unreliability of narratives offers a number of situations in which these two characters appear to be identical; most of the times, however, the story ‘tracks down’ Gallogly’s movements. Among the events of the story there are instances of ambush, surveillance, attempted house arrest competing with terrorist practices of stealing vehicles and then disposing of them, changing ‘borrowed’ clothes at random, and there are some ‘casual’ victims on the way too: an off-duty UDR corporal, shot just as his service expired, and a local councillor, blown up in his own car. Authorial manoeuvres finally blur the end of the story, leaving audiences in doubt whether Gallogly and the Indian are identical, whether they (?) die in the final explosion or not. Apart from Muldoon’s usual tactics, this also suggests the pointlessness and unintelligibility of modern terrorism, with actions and reactions getting out of control and leading to chaos only. Meanwhile the language of the media is subverted in a partly ironic project – something is restored of the horror of events which slowly come to be accommodated as usual news items no longer exciting public outrage.

The title of the poem “Cuba” functions not as a reference to place but to history: the original title was “Cuba, 1962,” tying the poem to the moment of a historical crisis, the Cuban missile controversy (cf. Kendall 75-76). The moment of danger opens apocalyptic perspectives, which provides an opportunity for authorities of any kind a chance for a bolder utilisation of their power. The father is the first to rise in this context, more than reproaching his daughter for her “white muslin evening dress” (Muldoon 2001, 78) noticed when she “arrived home that morning” (ibid). The moment is ominous, “With the world at war, if not at an end.” (ibid) The ‘conversation’ turns to focus on the Americas, and as a result, not much hope is attributed to the future. The practical piece of advice for her is to go to confession – in a moment of crisis this is the most which can be done. The confession is an occasion for another authority to rise: the priest takes over from the father. The neutral opening of her confession takes a turn towards the repulsive as the priest appears more genuinely interested in the details of her sins than in his job of absolving her; his insistence on such a detail as whether her breasts were touched or not gives the basic impression at best of hypocrisy, and this would suggest a similar world to that which is described by Paul Durcan in the Republic.

Ciaran Carson’s Belfast poems also give an impression of the thick of contemporary history. Carson’s pieces intend to arrest the nameless dimension of the conflict, and instead of addressing landmark events he enumerates scenes and episodes which will make up the grand picture in future narratives of late twentieth-century Northern Irish history. With this approach Carson manages to contrast the everyday routines and attempts at living a ‘normal’ life in spite of the presence of violence with the constant intrusion of stressful situations caused by the conflict. This is partly an insistence on the presence of life and the principle of ‘life goes on,’ and partly a record of the frustrations caused by the impossibility of staying out of the conflict. The not always latent irony is the bitter acknowledging of Carson’s only possible weapon against the presence and power of the conflict.

The short poem “Apparat” introduces an event unfortunately not unusual in the North: a “robot bomb-disposal expert” (Carson 1993, 29) is driven to detonate a bomb. The details of the bomb, as to where it is or who it is intended for, are unknown, the attention is turned to the operation of the machine and the man controlling it. That such devices are operated is explained by the context of violence, and there is even the tacit acknowledgement that such moments are a part of everyday life: the movement of the machine finds an analogue in the casual example of a man “to be barbered” (ibid). The idea that the connection between man and machine is “Umbilical” (ibid) is rather perverted for an everyday context, yet in its Swiftian manner it is the proper parallel – it also proves that the proximity of violence affects

the general sense of empathy and thus it requires an outright shock to move people to fellow feelings.

“Romeo” does not focus on any particular event, rather, it concentrates on the presence of the division within the Northern society. The poem begins with a pun on Rome, an otherwise favourite parallel with the British, turning it quickly into Romeo, and suggests that such conflicts as there are have their origin in the past and take a long time to develop. The heritage is traced back to Romulus and Remus at first, then to Cain and Abel, and the contemporary reference to Protestants and Catholics signals one of the incarnations of basic human conflicts. The lesson of history is there to take, and the speaker’s list of quotation material for essays is in fact a rather longish and embarrassing one, coming down to “The Orange lily and the Shamrock green; shades of Capulet and Montague” (Carson 1996, 84). This last item possesses a double power: it introduces the recent Northern Irish scene by reference to a usual Irish Catholic name, and it turns the line back to the Italian story of lovers. The conclusion, however, is a rather ambiguous one: “It’s all a tangled tagliatelle linguini Veronese that I’m trying to unravel / From strands of DNA and language. Perhaps I need a spirit level.” (ibid) Whether a spirit level would do for the job is a question unanswered, but what precedes it offers some rather complex ideas in relation to Carson’s own beliefs propagated earlier. Reducing antagonisms to an instance of food could suggest the triviality of the matter, with all the embarrassing consequences of this very triviality. Yet food is also a daily necessity, thus the conflict is rendered a part of the daily routine, making it also inevitable and inescapable. Carson’s notorious accusation of Heaney as the “laureate of violence” in his review of *North* (Carson quoted in Kirkland 157) then visits back upon his own head, and the temporal distance between the two poets does not tilt favourably towards Carson.

The Northern conflict has been addressed from the perspective of the Republic too. Such instances are inspired by specific moments, and the comments are not necessarily blindly in line with Northern nationalist aspirations. The physical distance and the resulting lack of direct experience of the violence in an everyday context reduce the appeal of the conflict as a promising raw material, yet there are events which draw reactions from poets from across the border. Individual responses are different in such cases too since perspectives differ even within the Republic: Thomas Kinsella’s outrage reflects an easily identified nationalist stance whereas Paul Durcan’s wider vision finds condemnation a more evenly distributable reaction which can be extended to both sides involved in the conflict.

Thomas Kinsella's reaction to the Widgery Report, investigating the events of Bloody Sunday, finds outlet in the poem "Butcher's Dozen." The poem is uncharacteristically outspoken about politics and displays a strong engagement, with no intention on part of the speaker, and also the poet, to hide his basically Irish Catholic point of view. The magnitude of the event, however, justifies the outrage – humanitarian foundations are sufficient to prove the unacceptability of the violence of the police against unarmed protesters. The poem follows an allegorising drive, evoking the ghosts of the thirteen victims and letting them speak, with the intention of 'correcting' the 'inaccuracies' of the official project of absolution. There is a great deal of bitter irony employed in the account of the characters as this seems the only profitable tactics to highlight the absurdity of certain conclusions in the official report. The imposition of rhymes to form couplets is intended to check and contain the anger and outrage, yet the irony is strong enough to threaten the poem with bursting and it sometimes becomes melodrama as a result.

The characters involve a hooligan "Who lost his life for throwing stones" (Kinsella 1996, 137). He is the first to begin the gallery, and is quickly followed by three figures shot while trying to flee. The next victim is "soiled and white" (ibid) and a terrorist according to the report, a bomber with "Four pounds of nails and gelignite" (ibid) attached to his body. The doctor's investigation could not find anything but a more thorough scrutiny by a soldier 'produces' the evidence. The next three victims suffocated in an armoured car after "Careful bullets in the back / Stopped our terrorist attack" (Kinsella 1996, 138). A harsh and prophetic one emerges with the fundamental question of the poem concerning the nature of truth: "Does it need recourse to law / To tell ten thousand what they saw?" (ibid) The figure trusts the common sense of people for their judgement, and closes his part with a Chaucerian prophecy: "The truth will out, to your disgrace." (Kinsella 1996, 139) A joking spirit offers a less openly accusing approach yet the irony he employs cuts deeper perhaps than the honest outrage of the previous ghost – he lists the ingredients of the 'Irish stew' (ibid), taking stock of a troubled past, colonial dimensions, long-standing sectarian antagonisms and, perhaps not surprisingly, the present day people as well. The speaker finds the momentary silence a good occasion to make an attempt at explanation, to offer at least some soothing ideas such as the need to look forward rather than towards the past, yet his words ring hollow as they seem to lack conviction.

A phantom's appearance interrupts the speaker's monologue, evoking again pictures of violence. This man was killed by a trooper "on one knee" (ibid) which indicates the practice of aiming at a target. The harsh spirit returns with a speech which blames politics,

especially “Democracy” (Kinsella 1996, 140) which, despite its claims, leaves no space for everyone and is not willing to tolerate any kind of approach to represent different values. The protesters are the proof for this, though unfortunately no longer living ones. The harsh spirit closes his words with a curse, and the next ghost to speak joins this line: his curse concerns the colonial power which in its ignorance only builds up trouble and leaves only ruins behind it. The heritage is easily identified in the Protestants of the North who do not seem to have learnt anything from the mistakes and errors of the former conquerors. The effusion is followed by the words of the thirteenth ghost, who asks for patience in spite of all the circumstances. The English are not embraced either; on the contrary, they are explicitly identified with the origin of the conflict, and there is also the suggestion that England should perhaps concentrate on herself rather than insisting on the possession of the northern province. The weight of antagonism is reduced by the idea that conqueror and conquered inevitably mix, which can lead to interesting ideas; such a direction, however, is not explored in the poem. The fading of the last ghost is accompanied by the arrival of “Zephyr” (Kinsella 1996, 142), and then all the other ghosts leave the scene. The name of the wind is certainly an out-of-place one, though it harks back to an ancient tradition, with the hint of the heroic nature of the murdered victims. The speaker’s sentence “I stood like a ghost” (ibid) aligns him with the victims, and offers a nearly explicit instance of taking sides in the conflict – though he is an outsider, a person visiting the scene of a violent event, the appearance of the ghosts and their willingness to speak places the speaker into a confidential position. The closing image of the rain which “Could not refresh, only distil” (ibid) voices the sense of failure and of meaningless outrage which cannot alter anything.

Paul Durcan also reflects on the Northern conflict yet his approach differs from the general stance of people from the Republic. While Catholic grievances usually awaken the sympathy of the citizens of the Republic, Durcan’s vision embraces a more generally humanistic viewpoint in which the IRA and its activity deserve a rather harsh assessment. Durcan’s own family background equips him with an intimate knowledge of officially conditioned bigotry which enables him to recognise that otherwise simple fact that a conflict involves two sides and the unilateral shifting of responsibility onto one side does not absolve the other.

“The Murder of Harry Keyes” tells the story of bishops going on “an underwear strike” (Durcan 1990, 57) in the wake of a murder committed by “two intelligence officers of the IRA” (ibid). The murder is not given more attention than a passing remark, though it is repeated at the end of the poem, that it took place in front of the eyes of the victim’s

sweetheart. The focus is rather on the reaction – how the bishops decide “that deeds would speak more sincerely than words” (ibid), and they begin their mission of protest. They take up position outside IRA offices in “Londonderry and Belfast” (ibid) and greet the IRA officers with “Howdee” (ibid). The climax of the poem, paradoxically, is contained in lines which refrain from the bizarre account of the bishops’ strike: apart from the dense alliteration of the second line the language is as plain and matter-of-fact as it can be:

‘Howdee,’ the bishop whispered, ‘Howdee’,  
And in the damp, dark, dank silence of the street  
After twenty-one years the world’s press begins  
To take notice of something it has never noticed before. (Durcan 1990,  
57-58)

The style echoes the resignation that is often characteristic in the face of nearly endless and basically meaningless violence – the virtually inevitable presence of aggression puts everything into a hopeless perspective in which only sadness remains as a tolerable human response.

In “The Dublin-Belfast Railway Line” the target of the not at all muted outrage of the speaker is the IRA, or more precisely, “the heroic democrats of the IRA.” (Durcan 1990, 60) Their ‘award’ would be an uninterrupted six-month-long railway travel between Dublin and Belfast, up and down the line, with all the benefits of rail travel. This way they would get to know

Every landscape they have not deflowered,  
Every bridge they have not groped,  
Every wild hedgerow they have not  
Bugged a virgin under. (ibid)

Moreover, the inhabitants of the towns along the line would be required “to come out / At the stations and applaud our heroes / Go up and down the line.” (ibid) When the six months expire, their ultimate test would be an oath:

I want to hear each of them  
Swear an oath on a copy of *Mein Kampf*

To the unification of Ireland  
With or without trains,  
With or without passengers. (ibid)

Symbolically the Bible is replaced by *Mein Kampf*, suggesting the distortion of values under the weight of the self-proclaimed mission of the unification of Ireland which, as the last two lines indicate, is not an unequivocal desire of all people on the island. Yet the sacrosanctness of the vision of a united Ireland renders the citizen a disposable category, the ideology gains an existence superior to that of its makers.

## 4.2. PERSONAL HISTORY

### 4.2.1. FATHERS

As Michael Parker claims, “In the Irish psyche, ancestry is a potent force, steadying the individual, and shaping his or her sense of identity.” (Parker 4) Beyond the general or perhaps even commonplace nature of the second part of the sentence, the choice of the word “ancestry” is remarkable: it manages to compress almost infinitely broad contexts into the essentially personal aspect of the historical dimension expressed by the word. Twentieth-century Irish history, by virtue of its complicated nature, presses down heavily on the life of the individual, often turning private lives into the matrix of historical events, the “ancestry” of a single person thus easily widens into the context of communal historical affairs, leading to the conclusion of the inseparability of personal and communal dimensions in the life of the individual.

Father figures feature significantly in the work of several contemporary Irish poets. This general phenomenon suggests the importance of the historical dimension in the project of handling experience and it also indicates the necessary anchoring of the poetic persona in the comfortably narrow ground of familial relations. Fathers appear as exemplary characters for some poets and as tyrants for others, and in each case there are profound emotions involved in the relation between fathers and sons. The imperfection of such relations is acknowledged in certain cases yet filial respect is maintained even in strained situations, though such situations are usually seen from a retrospective point of view, through the filter of memory, when the father is no longer alive and can thus fully be possessed for interpretation by the surviving son.

#### 4.2.1.1. SEAMUS HEANEY: FARMER

Seamus Heaney treats his father's figure in a tight-lipped yet in many ways a revelatory manner. The father is a Northern Catholic farmer and a regular cattle-dealer – a person with many ties, literal as well as metaphorical, to the land itself. The humble social position is carried by a fitting human character, the father of Heaney as he is represented in poems is a silent expert of his profession, a person belonging to an older and more traditional world yet an excellent representative of that.

The early poem “Digging,” though essentially the poet's determination to pursue an intellectual career which is to be understood as in line with the earlier family occupations related to the soil, evokes the figure of the father – he is in fact the *apropos* of the poem. The sound of the father digging below the window of the room where the persona is engaged in the act of writing the poem recalls memories of a not so distant childhood, with the recollected young self of the speaker sharing the father's daily agricultural routine, and with one more generational shift into the past, the turf cutter grandfather is also made to appear. The praise for the father is tight-lipped but reflects an honestly deep respect for the elder family member, just as it is the case with the grandfather expressed amply by the confidential “old man” (Heaney 1966, 1) address of both of them.

“Follower” describes the father as an “expert” (Heaney 1966, 12) of his occupation. The poem recalls those moments when the young speaker followed him during ploughing, causing more trouble than being a help to the older man. The example of the father fills the boy with pride and the wish that he would do the same when he grows up too, “All I ever did was follow / In his broad shadow round the farm” (ibid), and this is the pattern that is supposed to continue in the future as well. The closing stanza, however, redirects the course of life and poem:

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,  
Yapping always. But today  
It is my father who keeps stumbling  
Behind me, and will not go away. (ibid)

The young boy's being a "nuisance" is over, the shift from Simple Past to Simple Present implies no continuity in this state. It is the father now who has become the follower, and the locking of this idea into the same stanza with the earlier "nuisance" presence of the boy indicates the change of the father's image in the eyes of the son.

"Ancestral Photograph" recalls another aspect of the father's life, that of his participation in cattle-fairs. Just as the passing of time renders the father's heroic expertise of agricultural work an elegiac experience, the poem's recording of the passing of the cattle-fairs posits the father as the inhabitant of a lost world. The photograph displays the father's uncle yet the focus quickly shifts unto the father's figure, with the speaker recollecting an episode twenty years earlier when he escorted the father to one of the fairs to witness the skills of his father in bargaining. The speaker's observation extends not only to the fairs but to the change in the father's figure when the fairs stop, closing down a period in the father's life as well as in the history of the rural farming class.

"The Harvest Bow" is a later revisiting the father through the image of a "frail device" (Heaney 1979, 58) and the father's mastery of preparing that object. The process of making the harvest bow comes to be seen as an artistic activity, in a certain way a complement to Heaney's early attempt of establishing his own place in the history of the family despite his radical break with the tradition of making a living out of the land. The medium of this art of the harvest bow is "wheat that does not rust / But brightens" (ibid), a 'material' more perishable than many others yet still possessing a mysterious vitality as it is at the same time a food crop, bringing about a rather complex union of art and life. The finished product is likewise a magic one as it is capable of evoking memories of past intimacy of father and son, wordless yet still profound and deeply moving. The general conclusion, *"the end of art is peace"* (ibid), answers Keats's urn in its tentative reconfiguration of the context of art not undisturbed by the ongoing conflict.

Though the father's figure does not receive more in terms of address than the pronoun "you," the very simplicity of this tells more than would be told by any lavish litany of praise. The magic of the harvest bow is the magic of its maker, the object gains its power from the father's expertise which is all the more significant if the hands that made it are seen as "Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks" (ibid).

Heaney's vision captures the figure of the father in his natural environment of farm life. Words are rarely uttered between father and son yet the relation merits the adjective 'intimate' as Heaney's portraits focus on details which require close communion to observe

and appreciate. In Heaney's world these seemingly trivial and insignificant moments can possess the power of preservation and they offer a lasting monument to his father's character.

#### 4.2.1.2. MICHAEL LONGLEY: SOLDIER

Michael Longley's father, though by profession a "commercial traveller and then professional charity fundraiser, who served in both World Wars" (Peacock and Devine xi), is commemorated in a number of poems which evoke a world of conflict rather than that of peace: almost exclusively the father's figure is treated in poems which recall his participation in the First World War. The father's participation in the war renders him an emblematic figure of what violence can do to people, whatever the historical context may be. The father was not only exposed to the direct experience of the clash of opposing forces but was wounded in the war, and these wounds were later blamed for his sufferings from cancer which finally cost his life, turning him into a "belated casualty" (M. Longley 1985, 86).

The figure of the soldier-father intertwines personal and public aspects in a rather explicit way. The public aspect is a distant First World War universe which perhaps allows Longley a comfortable objective correlative in addressing the contemporary resurgence of violence and liberates him from the obligations of the strict faithfulness to detail as well as from the pressures of taking sides in the conflict. On a more personal level the fact that Longley depicts his father against the background of the trenches suggests a somewhat troubled relationship between the poet and his father. No peaceful family circle is introduced, the father is removed into the hostile world of the war and his sole companions are fellow soldiers or easy women 'courted' after the end of the war.

Longley's first collection of poems, *No Continuing City*, dates from the time before the recent Troubles erupted yet it already addresses the father's figure in a poem entitled "In Memoriam." The project is that of commemoration through imaginative reconstruction; despite the formal indications of the title the poem descends into the familiar and informal, recalling such events from the life of the father which would normally look awkward in a poem of this kind.

The poem opens with an apostrophe, neither too formal nor informal, to re-vitalise the father and to turn him into a kind of book to be read by the speaker. This self-consciously established parallel with a book has its origin in the speaker's project of reconstructing the father's life in recollected words of the old man. The second stanza evokes Hamlet through

the phrase “in my mind’s eye” (M. Longley 1985, 48), as the ghostly sight of the trenches is conjured. The horrors of the war are briefly envisioned and the image of the father with “kilt, harmonica and gun” (ibid) floats before the speaker, with an ironic remark which readjusts the picture: the nineteen-year-old youngster “joined the London Scottish by mistake” (ibid) after taking the wrong queue, without the slightest idea about the global conflict. The crucial moment of the war is exclusively personal in its scope in the account: the young man is wounded by “shrapnel shards that sliced your [the father’s] testicle.” (ibid) This is the moment that potentially determines history, as such an injury could erase the future of the family, just as the “most unlikely son” (ibid) remarks; however, there is a miraculous preservation of the generative department of the man as the simile of the memory indicates: “As your voice now is locked inside my head, / I yet was held secure, waiting my turn.” (ibid)

“Finally, that lousy war was over” (M. Longley 1985, 49) and the new beginning is paradoxically marked by the father’s desperate grasping of the past before the war – the injury drives him to seek proof that he is still capable of carnal love. The ‘adventures’ in France are juxtaposed with the ‘afterlife’ of the wounds: “In my twentieth year your old wounds woke / As cancer.” (ibid) The events of the father’s life between the end of the war and his fatal illness are not considered, and the striking putting side by side of the past and present boldly creates a simple cause and effect relationship between the war injury and the final illness of the man. With the ‘rejuvenation’ of the war memorial a former companion is brought back into the household: “Death was a visitor who hung about, / Strewing the house with pills and bandages, / Till he chose to put your spirit out.” (ibid)

The father thus becomes a belated casualty of the war, and this bridging of past and present fetches from the lost world those occasional companions who served the wounded soldier’s eager craving for evidence of his physical fullness. The father’s death reunites him with these forgotten figures and the speaker witnesses their transformation from oblique “girls,” “Their souls again on hire,” into “lost wives as recreated brides” (ibid). These women come parading in front of the persona, they “Take shape before me, materialise” (ibid), as if they were part of, together with Death in the previous stanza, a mediaeval morality play, standing for perhaps the Seven Deadly Sins – this dimension can offer a tentative happy conclusion to the poem, suggesting the general optimism of the pattern of the morality tradition, with the central character always being rewarded by redemption and salvation.

The poem captures some aspects of the father figure which are at best ambivalent in their general assessment: a young man enlisting for the war in the wrong queue and the turbulent post-war ‘love life’ leave a somewhat strange impression of the man, especially in

the light of the fact that no other information is provided about him. Yet the speaker's affection is never questioned as the haunting imagery of war and passion indicates a closely sympathetic understanding of the father's situation. The form of the poem also contributes to this sense of coming to an understanding – from occasional rhymes to an elaborately constructed final stanza there is a progress through phases just like a mission in exploration, indicating the success of the imaginative construction of a memorial to the father promised or hoped for in the title of the poem.

“Wounds” also evokes the father though this time the occasion is different: the poem dates from the time when the Troubles were already underway and the father's situation as a “belated casualty” (M. Longley 1985, 86) renders him a companion to victims of contemporary violence. The closeness to a person suffering from the effects of violence enables Longley to forge a persona with an adequate perspective to address the present conflict: the father's figure lends authority to the poet to speak about the violence of the contemporary world.

The poem begins with two images recollected, strangely enough, by the son, from the “father's head” (ibid). One is the Protestant war-cry pair of “‘Fuck the Pope!’ / ‘No surrender!’” (ibid); these are uttered in a peculiar situation – this time the occasion of war would mean an adequate context yet the location of the Somme renders the utterances absurdly out of place. Fierce war-logic dictates the scream of a “boy about to die” (ibid) demanding that the others “‘Give'em one for the Shankill!’”(ibid); this is as much senseless in this place as the preceding cries, indicating the displacement of an internal conflict. The other image is a memory of the grandfather, the father's father, the “London-Scottish padre” (ibid), with the addition that “My father followed him for fifty years” (ibid), indicating a peaceful family context in sharp contrast to the first image. These recollected pictures are placed into a radically new light by the declaration of the father's status as the belated casualty of the old war and this transformation is the proper introduction to the contemporary reference of the poem as far as violence is concerned: the second part of the poem is an imaginary funeral in which side by side with the father are laid the recent victims of senseless conflict, each exacting outrage in his turn.

The title of the poem works on several levels and the introduction of the father's character serves the poet's purpose of seeking a position from which his comments have the authority of insight. The father is only one of the characters treated in the poem yet his relation to the speaker is the proper basis for a public utterance to be made in the context of the present conflict. The actual wounds of the father become the figurative wounds of the

son, the never healing inflammation of absence, and on a different level, the post-First World War partition of Ireland is the political “wound” which, just as with the poet’s father, after a time tear open and bring forth a deadly confrontation.

The third section of the poem “Wreaths” is “The Linen Workers.” The central image of the poem is “a set of dentures” (M. Longley 1985, 149), connecting the figure of the father with the recently massacred ten linen workers one of whom had false teeth. The father’s character is evoked in the context already established in earlier poems, he is the belated casualty of violence; this time it is the memory of his false teeth that conjure his figure and there are only superficial physical details of his person. Once again, the image of the father gives license to the persona to speak about violence in a public context. The poem’s opening image of “Christ’s teeth ascended with him into heaven” (ibid) serves the establishing the victim-status as well as that of a ‘normal’ state in which people and their teeth form an indivisible unit. The separation expressed in the idea of the false teeth suggests some form of violence done; it is implicit in the father’s figure but explicit in those of the workers as the list of their belongings indicates. The religious connotations of “the bread, the wine” (ibid) intimate the idea of redemption for the victims and the relatively peaceful picture of the persona’s preparing the spectacles, money and the false teeth for the father’s funeral close the poem on the note of tentative hope.

The father’s figure makes occasional reappearances in later collections of Longley as well, almost exclusively in the context of his participation in the war. A number of short poems in *The Weather in Japan* illustrate this use of the father image. “The Moustache” centres on the figure of Edward Thomas and the moustache he grew, just to lead to a parallel with the father, a commander of young soldiers who “shaved only once a week / And some not at all” (M. Longley 2000, 24). “The Choughs” starts from a different point yet arrives at the father all the same: the apropos is a group of birds seen above a cliff face. The claws of the birds “recall my father // Telling me how the raw recruits would clutch / Their ‘courting tackle’ under heavy fire.” (M. Longley 2000, 25) The picture of the soldiers trying to save their masculinity in turn recalls the father’s war injury already commemorated in “In Memoriam,” thus the concentration on such an image indicates a subtle manipulation of the poetic material.

The only poem that suggests a perhaps more personal perspective is “January 12, 1996.” This is a poem inspired by the birthday of the father yet as he is no longer alive, the occasion is a tentative one:

He would have been a hundred today, my father,  
So I write to him in the trenches and describe  
How he lifts with tongs from the brazier an ember  
And in its glow reads my words and sets them aside. (M. Longley 2000,

25)

The conditional form immediately sets the poem on a purely imaginary level. The subject of the persona's writing in his imaginary letter is a curiously implicating one: it is the father himself reading the son's words about what he is doing in that moment of reading the letter. This doubling of the imagined action indicates a wilful recreation of the father's figure and the belief in the power of words to embody reality as it is also reflected in the performative "I write" – the location and the time gap contrast strongly with the normal usage of the Present Simple Tense to produce that surrealistic atmosphere which is often characteristic of Longley's poetic world.

Longley's father remains, in spite of all the apparent familiarity, partly an enigmatic character. A person who ended up in the war by mistake and was seriously injured there awakens sympathy yet the speaker's account of the hasty and hectic love life of the father after the war is a reminder of the complexity of the character. Longley decides to remove the father, for most of the time, from the world of the family to put him in another place and time, thus his father figure, despite his original public occupation and his role as a father, becomes principally a memorial of a soldier.

#### 4.2.1.3. JOHN MONTAGUE: EXILE

John Montague's relation with his father is complicated by the interconnection of personal and public history. The father figure in this case is an exile, a Northern Republican from County Tyrone. The exile's choice is New York but the chosen time is the worst possible one, that of the Great Depression, leading the family from a "broken province" (Montague 1995, 41) to a "Brooklyn slum" (ibid). The destination is the birthplace of the poet, just to launch him into a world no less visited by troubles than the place left behind by the family – the economic difficulties separate family members from each other, the mother returns with the children to the North. The family is further scattered by the separation of the youngest son, the future poet himself, from the other children and the mother, by being sent to

the old home of the father to be reared by aunts. The family is reunited years later but by that time the children are already adults and the lost time cannot be recovered, though it comes to be partially redeemed in the poems dealing with the father (and with the mother as well).

The reconstruction of the father is at once a recreation and a repossession of the man; together with the attempt of coming to terms with the bitter experience of motherly rejection the poems may be understood as an act of compensation for the lack of a proper family circle in the formative years of the poet. The relation between father and son is uneasy at the beginning and the poet's progress from the inherited blood ties leads through tentative acquaintance to some kind of intimacy.

The 'journey' begins with a short poem in the "Home Again" section of *The Rough Field*; the title page of the section opens with a programmatic piece as far as the opening stance of father and son is concerned:

*Lost in our separate work  
We meet at dusk in a narrow lane.  
I press back against a tree  
To let him pass, but he brakes  
Against our double loneliness  
With: 'So you're home again.'* (Montague 1995, 7)

The short poem definitely reveals more than it asserts about the two adults who belong to the same family yet do not know how to respond to the other's presence. The setting is carefully chosen to embody this uneasy relation: it is a narrow lane in dusk, little light and physical proximity, which renders their meeting unavoidable. Though the son attempts to evade the encounter by pressing "back against a tree," the father's reaction is also seen as violent in his braking "Against" their "double loneliness." The subsequent act of the father is yet another instance of violence – "braking" turns into 'breaking' the silence, thus moving forward as opposed to the pressing back of the son. The father's words offer an ambivalent conclusion to this short piece as much depends on the meaning of "home" in the context of a scattered Northern Catholic family.

The section "The Fault" is dedicated to the memory of the father. The first poem of the section, "Stele for a Northern Republican" is intended as a memorial, though it is carved into words rather than perishable stone. In Hamlet-like manner the increasingly frequent visits of the ghost of the father induce the son to conduct a reconstruction of his father's story,

however limited his knowledge of that story might be. The father's Republican allegiances involved him "in / the holy war to restore our country" (Montague 1995, 40); despite the son's respectful stance the Republican rhetoric is swiftly overwritten by a more objective perspective to reveal the actual nature of this 'holiness' – the war involved missions "to smoke / an absentee's mansion, concoct / ambushes" (ibid). The conflict becomes tangible when an accident lands a wounded policeman on the kitchen floor of the family; the alibi is quickly provided for the father in his own words, throwing more light on the irrational nature of this war:

'Locals were rarely used for jobs:  
orders of the Dublin organizer,  
shot afterwards, by his own side.' (ibid)

The past, however, is not entirely forgotten despite the years intruding between the events and their recollection:

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. (ibid)

The suggestions of the passage are more than embarrassing as war and peace are juxtaposed in the images of "rusty guns" and "glen" and as agricultural work yields a different kind of crop than the usually expected one as it is old weapons that come to be unearthed. The idea of the new incarnation of these weapons as toys for children is no less troubling: the inherent violence of the Northern community is traced back to this 'education' of the children. The speaker accepts this as an explanation for the father's decision to leave the country:

... But what if  
you have no country to set before Christ,  
only a broken province? No parades,  
fierce medals, will mark Tyrone's re-birth,  
betrayed by both South and North;

so lie still, difficult old man,  
you were right to choose a Brooklyn slum  
rather than a half-life in this  
by-passed and dying place. (Montague 1995, 41)

The son's understanding of the father's choosing an economically desperate world instead of a politically unacceptable one restores something of the dignity of the Northern Republican: being a stranger in a foreign land is less of a humiliation than accepting the position of a stranger in a country that is only nominally his home.

"The Same Fault" offers a close-up perspective on both father and son, dispensing with the historical dimension, connecting them by a scar on the temple, a mark left for each by a car accident. The wound emblematically grows into a marker of the common features of "anger, impatience, / A stress born of violence" (Montague 1995, 42), appearing in moments of stress when the speaker is "angry, sick or tired" (ibid). "The same fault" (ibid) running through the family brings the geological association of displacement along a fracture and this provides a haunting image of the dispersed family of the Republican exile father.

The scar connecting father and son is enlarged into an image of communal history in "The Sound of a Wound" by replacing the literal wound with a figurative one of historical circumstance. The visit of the childhood home of both father and son tears open old wounds as the benevolent distance of space and time is reduced to nil, producing a kind of 'music,' brutal yet humane, thus producing a cunning self-reflexive comment on the nature of the kind of poetry that emerges from such a world as Catholic rural County Tyrone.

The enquiry of the opening stanza, "Who knows / the sound a wound makes?" (Montague 1995, 42) receives no answer; instead, imaginary music played on broken instruments is conjured to accompany the sound: "the torso of the fiddle / groans to / carry the tune" (ibid) to a "pastoral rhythm" (ibid) that is lost, similarly to the world which it once evoked, with its account in brackets to suggest that it has passed. The poem turns more self-consciously rhetorical as the speaker weighs his fatherly inheritance of a divided world of Celt and Saxon with a more than 'troubled' past. "I assert / a civilization died here" (ibid) is an *actual* experience for the persona, though the rest is not undisturbed as he feels that "it trembles / underfoot where I walk these / small, sad hills" (ibid). The father's figure appears as the source and origin of this feeling – the general Irish inheritance of cultural dispossession is complemented by the father's 'gift' of the reaction to it, the more particular Northern

Republican stance with its acute memories of colonial exploitation and the subsequent view of the province as a perpetual battlefield:

This bitterness  
I inherit from my father, the  
    swarm of blood  
to the brain, the vomit surge  
    of race hatred,  
the victim seeing the oppressor,  
    bold Jacobean  
planter, or gadget-laden marine,  
    who has scattered  
his household gods, used  
    his people  
as servants, flushed his women  
    like game. (Montague 1995, 43)

The particular context of Jacobean planters is widened into a general description of the colonial divide and the present perfect form in the account of the wrongs implies at once an emphasis on the unalterable present outcome of past events as well as the fact that the period is not yet closed down.

The father's presence in this poem is brief and tentative, he is only mentioned as the immediate origin of the general Northern Catholic feelings of dispossession and disinheritance. As if to balance the account, the next poem entitled "The Cage" is a return to personal history but in another form than in the first poem of the section. This time the scale is purely that of the family and the individual, the historical dimension is evoked only by oblique references to the father's being a "traditional Irishman" (Montague 1995, 43). The opening of the poem, "My father, the least happy / man I have known" (ibid), with its structural wedge between "happy" and "man," situates the father's figure in his underground work, this time purely literal, in Brooklyn, and the second stanza supplies the other regular element of the life of the man, that of drinking – with its destination in a kind of second home, "the only element / he felt at home in / any longer: brute oblivion." (ibid)

The lost Brooklyn alcoholic, however, is quickly restored in his forgotten nobility and dignity as work compels him to enact a daily resurrection required by the routine of work.

There is jump ahead in time as the fourth stanza opens a new perspective: the setting is changed and the return of the father to Ireland finally allows for a ‘normal’ family relation:

When he came back  
we walked together  
across fields of Garvaghey  
to see hawthorn on the summer  
hedges, as though  
he had never left; (Montague 1995, 44)

The intimacy of country walks by father and son is suggested just to be refuted shortly after as the account continues into the next stanza and the “as though” intrudes between the two men as an archetypal necessity in the wake of long-lasting absences:

But we  
did not smile in  
the shared complicity  
of a dream, for when  
weary Odysseus returns  
Telemachus should leave. (ibid)

The concluding stanza of the poem is an abrupt jump into the present, and the section is closed by a return to the ghost of the father:

Often as I descend  
into subway or underground  
I see his bald head behind  
the bars of the small booth;  
the mark of an old car  
accident beating on his  
ghostly forehead. (ibid)

The descent into the modern Hades recruits the ghost of the father and the occasion offers a complementary type of meeting between the father’s ghost and the son – in the first poem of

the section it is the ghost visiting the son, at the close it is the son searching out the father, which implies a wish for making up for the lost time between them. This marks a shift in their relation from the mutual early shyness of meeting again of the untitled short poem through the benevolent ignorance of “Stele” to the loving and understanding stance of “The Cage.”

John Montague’s quest for his father does not end in *The Rough Field*. The father’s figure returns in poems in the volume *The Dead Kingdom*, a collection of poems written on the occasion of the death of the mother of the poet. Montague’s aim is the reconstruction of the family circle but this time it is not so much a return as in the earlier connection but an imaginative, and in many ways imaginary, exercise of *making* it finally a circle.

“Intimacy” is a tracing of the formation of a close relation between mother and son, with the son acting as a kind of husband-substitute, taking the mother to the cinema to romances as “films about real life” (Montague 1995, 163) are not encouraged by the mother. The unspecified “some sad story of Brooklyn” (ibid) as a choice for a film quickly recalls a specific Brooklyn story of “Young love, then long separation.” (Montague 1995, 164) The picture of a belated family reunion is provided by the speaker:

After our drive across Ireland,  
my father stood in the kitchen,  
surrounded by his grown sons  
and the wife he had not seen  
for almost two decades, spirit  
glass in hand, singing ‘Slievenamon’  
or *Molly Bawn, why leave me pining*,  
his eyes straying in strangeness  
to where she sat, with folded  
hands, grey hair, aged face,  
*Alone, all alone by the wave*  
*washed strand*, still his *Molly Bawn*,  
wrought by time to a mournful crone. (ibid)

The family ‘idyll’ of both parents present in the company of grown children, the father with glass in hand singing for the family could look happy if it were not for those “almost two decades” intruding between them. The time spent away from the wife recalls the Odysseus-father figure of “The Cage” and the homecoming evokes the Tennysonian “aged wife” image

of Penelope – yet the persona goes even further by declaring the mother not only a figure of “grey hair, aged face” but a “mournful crone” as well. The unstoppable flow of time disrupts the family reunion six years later, taking the father’s figure away from the picture in a final and unalterable way, mother and son remain alone again in their ‘intimacy.’

“Molly Bawn” is the story of the mother up to the moment of emigration to Brooklyn. The father is evoked in the context of their courtship and wedding, and the Republican destiny of “Emigrating anywhere” building a “real lost generation,” with the mother following him “making sure to land in / good time for the Depression!” (Montague 1995, 165) The story thus is one of the tragicomic kind though in the reverse order – the happy beginning is followed by more sober events to culminate in the anticlimactic move of emigration to New York just before the economic collapse of the world. Some of the events of the years in America are recounted in “A Muddy Cup” – the most important events perhaps from the point of view of the poet, as this poem tells the story of his begetting. The muddy cup of the title becomes emblematic of the situation itself – the mother’s refusal to drink from it is at once a literal action and a metaphorical one of the rejection of the reduced life of the emigrant treated as not even existing. Her arrival in the New World is a surprise to everyone – the woman with two “grown sons” (Montague 1995, 166) is a riddle to the landlady of the father as he generously ‘forgot’ to let her know about the fact that he was married, and as the “Father staggers back” (ibid) to his lodgings her presence is an unexpected situation to face. The event escalates to a fight between them and the reconciliation brings forth a palpable result: they “made another child, // a third son who / beats out this song” (Montague 1995, 167). The last three stanzas of the poem turn on the mother’s return to Ireland with the children and the refusal of the smallest child, the poet to be reared in the family home – and this last ‘episode’ is mentioned in brackets to suggest the feeling of being a later and negligible addition to the family.

Even such unusual families have their own memories of holidays and feasts. “A Christmas Card” is a tableau of one of the few Christmases spent together by the whole family. The initial scene of “Christmas in Brooklyn” is peaceful as “A man plods along pulling / his three sons on a sleigh;” (Montague 1995, 168) the closing semicolon, however, indicates the temporary illusion of the situation – the later perspective on the scene provides the context for the experience and the context is that of a disappearing family: “soon his whole family / will vanish away.” (ibid) The simple inevitability of “will” would be enough to set this stanza apart from the rest of the poem and make for a separate and self-contained image, yet the speaker has other aims beside simple illustration. The next image is that of the

father alone, “trudging home through / this strange, cold city,” without work, “living off charity.” (ibid) The only home of the man is “brother John’s speakeasy” (ibid) yet the family does not suffer neglect as he “found time / to croon to your [his] last son” (ibid).

That Christmas remains a special one as the father found a job to end the miserable life on charity yet the shadow of drinking remains with the figure. “Not a model father” (ibid) is the verdict but the father’s words to the son, “I was only happy / when I was drunk” (ibid), reflect an awareness of this on part of the man himself. The son-speaker, however, finds a note to express his admiration of his father – though certainly not for this but the strength of the man to struggle on without his family:

Still, you soldiered on  
all those years alone in  
a Brooklyn boarding house  
without your family  
until the job was done;  
and then limped home. (ibid)

The poem offers an instance of communication between father and son yet the distance is not reduced easily. Proper intimacy is reached only after an experience in which the son uncovers himself in the context of a broadcast. “At Last” is the breakthrough, the stepping over into a world where the dreamed-of intimacy is no longer a dream but something possessed and tangible. The story is that of the homecoming of the father yet this time there are no epic overtones, the returning figure is a “small sad man with a hat” “carrying a roped suitcase” (Montague 1995, 169). The persona’s reaction is ambivalent: “something in me began to contract // but also to expand.” (ibid) The situation is one with no easy way out, the embarrassment of meeting a figure supposedly intimately familiar yet in reality as strange as anyone else leaves little space for manoeuvring and there is actually little of a family meeting in the scene:

We stood,  
his grown sons, seeking for words  
which under the clouding mist  
turn to clumsy, laughing gestures. (ibid)

The journey of the “small sad man” is not over with the meeting, they are to move on to the North. The crossing of Ireland functions as a prelude to the crossing over between father and son as there is a stop on their way “to hear a broadcast” of the poet (ibid). The really important event of the day is what comes after the recital as the initial strangeness of the experience gives way to something long hoped for:

Slowly our eyes managed recognition.  
‘Not bad,’ he said, and raised his glass:  
Father and son at ease, at last. (ibid)

“The Silver Flask” recounts an emblematic family moment, that of reunion at Christmas time after almost two decades. The poem is composed of images which appear static as most of the stanzas lack proper syntactic structures – instead of finite verb phrases non-finite forms dominate, lending a notebook-like appearance to the text. The occasion is a symbolic one, the family circle is restored in the context of a particular holiday suggesting a new beginning and, perhaps, the promise of salvation after such a long time of painful endurance.

The opening two lines, “Sweet, though short, our / hours as a family together” (Montague 1995, 169), make no room for illusions, the speaker is fully aware of the preciousness of the experience which lies principally in its shortness. The family members travel by car to Midnight Mass and the intimacy of the occasion, both of the mass and of the physical proximity in the car, creates a warm atmosphere. The father’s singing allows a reference to the emigration years as a former legend of a tenor in “dim bars of Brooklyn” (Montague 1995, 170) but the time scale is expanded even longer back to locate the father in “the valleys he had sprung from” (ibid), to indicate the moment of homecoming. In the church the unusual presence of the *whole* family extracts a rare reaction from the mother as she is sitting beside her husband “sad but proud, an unaccustomed / blush mantling her wan countenance.” (ibid)

The return journey is silent under the weight of the experience and it is in the family kitchen that the initial atmosphere is restored, and that atmosphere is an all but usual one:

The family circle briefly restored  
nearly twenty lonely years after  
that last Christmas in Brooklyn,

under the same tinsel of decorations  
so carefully hoarded by our mother  
in the cabin trunk of a Cunard liner. (ibid)

The mother's gesture of carefully saving the decorations of the last Christmas together finds its fulfilment in the recorded moment when the family is finally reunited. The past participle indicates the deficiency of this reunion, however, as the exact time reference is not included in its structure, as if the 'was,' 'is' or 'will be' has been lost together with those missing years of potential family happiness.

"Last Journey" is an enigmatic account of a train ride of father and son yet neither the time nor the destination is mentioned by the speaker. The two figures are first seen "on the windy platform" (Montague 1995, 171), before they get aboard the train. Then the train arrives, they take their seats and the journey begins. The only reference to the itinerary is a number of placenames "across this forgotten / Northern landscape." (ibid) The implication of the title and the subsequent 'story' is a journey in which the notion of destination is either too obvious or totally irrelevant, – as a "last journey" the emphasis is on the shared moment of the two characters and from this point of view the silence about the destination is an assertion of the wish to have no such point, and the subtitle '*I. M. James Montague*' suggests a journey with no end – perhaps in the context of *this* existence it has one but the father lives on in the poems and in that "same fault" inherited by the son.

A much later poem in another collection approaches the father from another perspective. "Sunny Jim" is a poem in invocation to the father, across that final divide between life and death, to evoke his spirit again in the hope of help for the poet's work. The distance in time is greater, the perspective is that of more profound reconciliation – the earlier poems have reconstructed the father's figure and reclaimed him for the son, and now the father is called upon as a long-time intimate relation. The wish of the poet is not simply a need for assistance but for another time together marked by that intimacy which is normally associated with the relation of father and son.

The apostrophe to the father, "Sweet Drunken father" (Montague 2000, 77), reflects a loving relationship and he is called on to supply his energies for a constructive purpose: "guide my pen finger; / forget your anger!" (ibid) The invocation is immediately followed by a memory of the aftermath of a "double hangover" (ibid) and the father's words about the legend of the meeting between Simon of Cyrene and Christ on the Via Dolorosa, with the burden of Christ becoming an analogy for the father's sufferings. The image of the father on

his “second last bed” (Montague 2000, 78) becomes one of a near miracle as a magic transformation, though not an unlikely one in the closeness of the final moment, reshapes the face of the old man:

All the ravages  
of those Brooklyn years –  
old nickel pusher,  
rough bar hunter –  
smoothed suddenly away  
to Dante’s bony visage. (ibid)

The fairly disillusioned phrases of “nickel pusher” and “bar hunter” suddenly give way to the noble comparison with Dante, in many ways an equally bitter man and a fit analogy for politically induced exile. The moment is the right one for the wish to be formulated even if there is no full harmony between the worlds of the two men:

Your faith I envy,  
  
Your fierce politics I decry.  
May we sing together  
someday, Sunny Jim,  
over what you might  
still call the final shoot-out:  
for me, saving your absence,  
a healing agreement. (ibid)

Reconciliation is finally completed, the father has fully been received into the son’s imaginative world of the family, and has reached that position of which a father is certainly proud – he is called for singing together, a leisurely situation to share with carefully chosen companions.

John Montague’s reconstruction of his father’s figure is a successful mission on many levels, both poetic and personal. The troubled figure of the post-Partition Northern Republican choosing exile and experiencing the scattering of his family by historical circumstance is definitely a fertile ground for exploration yet it is all but an easily

conquerable one. The interconnected fields of personal and communal history are faced with unusual courage yet the most challenging part of the journey is the descent into the internal world of the old man. The unbearable pain of the lost years, the eternal mystery of the what-could-have-happened-if situation lead to an often disillusioned but never disheartened stance – the hurt of absence is a wound that never heals but there is a determination to make a fresh start, to build a relationship while it is still possible. The position of the poet’s persona is a deeply humane one – it is characterised by the ability to forgive and love in spite of all those circumstances crowding between them, working for an intimacy as if to prove that this is something he has a right to possess – and by this move he turns his father finally into a father, restoring to him what history denied through impersonal circumstance.

#### 4.2.1.4. PAUL DURCAN: JUDGE

Paul Durcan’s father offers a different type of person to examine – the father was a High Court judge and thus a public figure with allegiances to the Fine Gael party. This explicitly provides moments of intersection between personal and communal history as the father’s association with the founding ideologies of the independent Irish state offers the possibility of collapsing the two histories into each other and reading one in terms of the other. Durcan reconstructs his father’s figure in a number of poems in the volume *Daddy Daddy*, which is a collection dedicated to the memory of the man. The fact that the poems date from a time when the father is no longer alive hints at certain solid codes governing the relation of the two people (or perhaps a more general father-son relation, the relation between two different generations). The poems work towards an honesty difficult to achieve as the memory of the father combats the fact of his death – yet it is perhaps this unalterable fact that helps Durcan to assess properly his relationship with his father.

The relationship, complicated by the public sphere of life, is one in which the father’s figure appears a tyrant yet there is also affection present in the son’s approach. The “bone-grinding monster” (Elliott in Kenneally 321) who is “threatening, peremptory, gloomy, parsimonius violent, moralistic, beastly, murderous, fascistic” (ibid) has another face too yet that is hidden for most of the time. The son’s account, however, does not fail to include those instances when the father demonstrates that other face, and despite all the tyranny and oppressiveness the choice of the title for the sequence, as well as for the full collection,

*Daddy, Daddy* indicates an eventually affectionate relationship. The complex and complicated nature of this relation turns the collection partly into an exercise of disentangling the strains binding father and son, thus the speaker's memorial pieces are at once self-scrutinising attempts at interpretation.

The first poem of the section dealing with the father is entitled "Ulysses." The title evokes various literary resonances, yet the ultimate one is the inescapable connection with Joyce – and as the poem progresses, it turns out to revolve around Joyce's seminal novel and the question of buying it by a decent Irish citizen. The father, a respected High Court judge, one of the pillars of Irish society is outraged at the perspective of acquiring a copy of the book condemned by "Even the most liberal-minded Jesuits" "As being blasphemous as well as pornographic." (Durcan 1990, 99) His decision to buy the book is certainly a great event in the light of this strict verdict on the book by the definitive authority on moral issues.

The conflict with the father is told in retrospect – the 18-year-old figure of the poet is hiding in the Tower of Joyce from his father, who, after a set of rows with the son and the wife, gives in to his wife's pressure and resolves to get a copy of the book. Earlier he stated his stance on the issue: "In the year of Our Lord nineteen hundred and sixty-three / I will not be an accessory to blasphemy." (Durcan 1990, 100) The resolution, however, comes through the decisive push towards action contrary to all expectations from such an immaculate person is not made clear. The victory of the son on the issue is almost complete but the book has to be wrapped in brown paper in order to hide its 'satanic' nature – ironically the wrapping paper "the night before had ferried bottles of vodka." (Durcan 1990, 101) The book lands on the father's bedside table and the bookmarker, "a fruitgum wrapper" (ibid), to make the profane meet the demonic, shows the progress of the reader of the book. A few weeks later the son gets to reading the novel but it remains a mystery until years later understanding dawns on him, changing his relation to his father too.

The 'courage' to face the immoral act of buying the novel and then reading it is comparable to Odysseus's bravery on his doomed homeward journey. The Odyssey of the father, driven very likely by curiosity, is thus one possible reading of the title. The experience opens a new chapter in the relation of father and son and this once again recalls the literary ancestry of Ulysses: the sense of arrival is suggested by the understanding of the book by the son – though the father's reaction to it is left somewhat ambivalent by the cunning employment of phrase: when reading the book, the son "found it as strange as my father / And as discordant." (ibid) The question arises naturally whether a book should be seen as 'satanic' if it brings about understanding between two people who have never found the proper way of

communication before reading it. If this is what ‘satanic’ or ‘immoral’ or “blasphemous” mean, then perhaps it would be expedient to reconsider the ‘moral’ or even ‘sacred’ ideology on which Irish life is based which ideology fails when it comes to confront reality as it is, “strange” and “discordant” as it may be. The poem on this level contributes tacitly to the cultic stance of the novel and of its writer too – the magic of a literary text of fiction is sufficient to alter actual relationships between flesh and blood people and it also manages to reveal aspects of reality hidden behind the mask of respectability and hypocrisy.

The deceptively neutral title of the poem “Fjord” does not reveal the tension that erupts only in the closing stanza. The stanzas leading up to the climactic moment simply explain the passion of the father for teaching. The example cited is a seemingly innocent word but the end of the train of thought is an image of Irish fjords hiding German U-boats during the war, in spite of the proclaimed political neutrality of the country. The reproach of the son to the father comes from this comment:

Look into your Irish heart, you will find a German U-boat,  
A periscope in the rain and a swastika in the sky.  
You were no more neutral, Daddy, than Ireland was,  
Proud and defiant to boast of the safe fjord. (Durcan 1990, 106)

The truth is emblematic of a wider circle of referents and points to one of those hypocritically muted elements of Irish history which do not lie neatly with the ideological basis of the state. Yet historical facts are difficult to erase or deny and any attempt to do so will discredit the ideology itself subjecting it to that kind of scrutiny which it seeks to evade by its very nature.

The poem entitled “Poem Not Beginning with a Line by Pindar” introduces an instance of outrage provoked by the father’s reaction to a question asked by the son. The complication of the story lies in its political context: the question is prompted by an act of violence, carried out by the IRA, on the expense of ten Protestant workers. The horrors of the case evoke Goya’s nightmare-like vision yet even the painter’s imagination appears poor compared to the ‘ingenuity’ of the terrorists. The son’s question is directed at the father’s judgement – and the father is not simply an elder with corresponding authority but “The President of the Circuit Court / Of the Republic of Ireland, / Appointed by the party of the Fine Gael” (Durcan 1990, 140), a representative of the law and of the official ideology of the state. The answer, then, is at once surprising and conventional: “Teach the Protestants a lesson” and “The law is the law and the law must take its course.” (ibid) This is provided

without the slightest sense of embarrassment on part of the father: he “Does not prevaricate as he gazes through me” (ibid).

The reply shocks the questioner to such an extent that only a deeply ironic reaction is possible: the nation-building ideology is termed fascism explicitly at first but the speaker checks himself and juxtaposes official diction with hard-grained reality. The party’s idealising image of itself simply contrasts with the vulgarity it embodies and the tight-lipped repetition of the judge-father’s words concludes the poem in a fitting fashion, offering these words as a no-comment attitude to a situation never wholly contemplated by those who formulate assessment over it.

The poem “Birthday Present” recounts the memory of the 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday of the speaker. The son, no longer a boy, is asked by the father to walk into town with him, without being told why exactly this should happen. The account of the walk is given in short and quick lines until the surprise of the father comes – they stop in front of a record shop and he is told to wait outside. Here the lines begin to lengthen lazily, and another character is introduced: a young Fine Gael politician, an “Irish-speaking economist” (Durcan 1990, 129), with details of his physical appearance and his label in party circles – the young man is known as Brian Boru. The speaker adds another element to this neutral picture which undermines the expected respectability of serious politicians:

I had seen him the night before  
At a party in Fitzwilliam Square.  
He had had another man lasso him to a chair  
And beat him up with a silk cravat,  
Chanting ‘Long Live Brian Boru’. (ibid)

This detail is as much out of concord with the serious image of a party politician as possible, especially that the scene suggests the element of perversity too, which is difficult to reconcile with the respectable Catholic code of behaviour expected from a person of this social standing.

The father returns from the shop with an LP record and hands it over to the speaker, “mumbling Happy Birthday” (ibid). When he learns about the son’s having seen the politician, his whole personality undergoes a spectacular change and an effusion of cordial phrases follows – about the young politician. When later the son expresses his joy over the present, the father asks him the question “Did you ever think of politics as a career?” (Durcan

1990, 130) The answer is a somewhat low-key “thank you for the birthday present,” (ibid) echoing the son’s disillusionment about the perhaps not so honest act of giving a present. The question of the father, growing out of the context of the episode of the meeting with the young politician, reveals the secret hope of making the son follow him and perhaps fulfil his wishes in finding a real heir in his son.

As if to deny the hope of the father in the previous poem, the son’s rebellion is depicted in “Stellar Manipulator.” Despite fatherly pressure to become a lawyer the speaker becomes “at the age of twenty-five / Stellar Manipulator / At the London Planetarium.” (Durcan 1990, 131) The physical distance is complemented by the mental one between a lawyer and a stellar manipulator to turn the speaker into the perfect black sheep of the family. That rebellions are never easy is proved by the various incarnations of the father’s power, the Director of the Planetarium, the father himself and the duty officer taking down the personal data of the speaker, as the speaker has been asked “to act as bailsman” (Durcan 1990, 132), naturally by the wish of the father. Yet the son defeats the father by going his own way and there is not much left for the elder person but to mumble laconically, when asked about it, the name of his son’s awkward profession of Stellar Manipulator.

“Antwerp, 1984” is a poem in retrospect, it vividly captures a moment of rare intimacy between father and son, a relationship most often described by the poet as strained and anachronistic. The recollection of a train journey in Belgium five years before the death of the father brings together two people in a strange way – mutual understanding is based on shared and intimated thoughts rather than on actual spoken words. The father’s laid back composure reveals some sort of vulnerability and it is the son who ‘does’ the confession – in the poem as well as in the actual action as recollected in the writing. Certainly the perspective colours, if not distorts, the memory of the actual journey (the paradox of elegies, cf. Johnston 196) – the impression is created that the absence of the father at the time of composing the poem allows the son to take liberties with the events and their interpretation, actions and the feelings motivating them.

The occasion is provided by the memory of a train journey at one point of which the two mutually catch each other’s glance reflected in the window as the son is gazing at a poplar tree outside. The two people are caught in the same wish simultaneously: “each of us / Yearning for what the other yearns: / To be a tree – that tree.” (Durcan 1990, 144) The rare moment of understanding is further illustrated by their way of exchange of favourite poems. This is followed by the son’s glimpse focusing on the father’s figure – the reflected image of a moment ago is replaced by the actual body in front of the observing eyes, and the

perspective comes to be broadened by the knowledge of the years to come in that moment – the years which have passed since that train journey, with the father already dead. The tree metaphor is elaborated on as the son promises to turn a part of the tree into a memorial for the father, a log with the intention of preserving the memory in a fitting manner. The old family name is recollected as the ‘proper name’ to be given to the memorial: ‘Mac Dhurcáin, / Son of the Melancholy One.’ (Durcan 1990, 145) The name comes alive in reflection:

As we approach the crossing of the Rhine  
No man could look more melancholy  
Than you – Melancholy Daddy.  
God took out a Stanley Knife,  
Slashed the canvas of life,  
Called it a carving of your face,  
Called it you. (Durcan 1990, 145-6)

The scene is closed with the picture of the son putting his hand on the quivering knee of the father as they are both engaged in the act of “gazing down into the wide river far below.” (Durcan 1990, 146) This closing image of father and son gazing into the river below them is symbolic on several levels: the rare moment of sharing the same activity is complemented by the association of river with change, the constant flow of time – with his knowledge of the last five years of the father, the son is contemplating in that moment the past and the future at the same time.

The poem “The Dream in a Peasant’s Bent Shoulders” captures a moment in the decline of the father’s life in which the speaker’s feelings approach pity towards the situation. The father is in the “seventy-bed ward” (Durcan 1990, 153), complaining about the disappearance of his pyjama bottoms. The ironic perspective is made clear when the speaker explains that the 28 years of unconditional service for the state are followed by an unexplained removal of the mentioned items of clothing. The wife is outside, crying for the husband, yet the fact that she is not with him indicates that theirs is perhaps not a fully perfect relationship. The ironic juxtaposition of the father’s fidelity to the State with whatever he could offer her makes this point:

You took Mother on one holiday only in twenty-eight years –  
A pilgrimage by coach to the home of Mussolini

And Clara Petachi near Lago di Como,  
A villa in the hills above Lago di Como. (ibid)

That it was a journey, referred to as a “pilgrimage,” to Mussolini’s home is indicative of the dubious nature of the ideologies governing post-Second World War Irish public life.

The ‘reward’ of the State, the taking away of the pyjama bottoms renders the whole issue of communal fidelity an absurd affair. What is left of the dignity of the retired judge is quickly evaporating under the circumstances. The situation produces a portrait of a human being who is at best a weak and broken man, characterised by features which look awkward considering the earlier life of the same person. Deterioration is almost complete as the father no longer hears the son, he only repeats his own desperate cry of “Hold my hand” (Durcan 1990, 154).

In the poem “Cot” the hospital bed, in a short and foreseeable time the would-be deathbed of the father, undergoes a transformation into a cot, and subsequently the father becomes the son for the brief duration of a vision. The prophet-figure of the matron initiates the vision as she announces that the time of the death of the father is to be expected within half an hour. Her indifference contrasts with the busily telephoning relatives of the persona. On entering the ward the persona finds the place altered by the transformation of the deathbed into a cot, as if the progress of life could be reversed or turned into a cycle – the father seen as a newborn son also suggests this, if not more than a momentary, dislocation of experience.

The motif that offers the basis for reducing the distance between dying man and newborn son is the helplessness of both characters: though for different reasons, both rely on the assistance of other humans for staying alive. Innocence is restored to the aged parent in the tenderness of the vision yet the next image undermines this idyllic moment: the old man is a “baby dinosaur / With an expiry date.” (Durcan 1990, 157-8) As the old man’s sleep is interrupted for a brief spell of consciousness there is time enough for him to wave goodbye to his wife, the persona’s mother, and the light goes out again as he goes back to sleep. The closing lines of the poem create an ambiguous termination as the identity of the speaker in these lines is not clarified: “Don’t fret son, / Don’t ever again fret yourself” (Durcan 1990, 158) can be a taking leave of the persona of his father as well as the reverse of this situation.

The first section is built of progressively shorter lines, which creates the shape of a downwardly narrowing passage, so the typographical layout of the poem, one narrowing paragraph and one paragraph consisting of short lines also imitates the decline depicted in the

poem, thus even the first glance at the poem suggests the direction it takes and it provides a foreseeable conclusion to the sequence of poems and to what they attempt to present.

Durcan's representation of his father takes a different course from that of the other poets. The public figure is partly viewed from a perspective in which the public dimension is also strongly considered and is found to be a significant force in the shaping of the character of the father, at least on the surface level. Durcan's speaker never fails to point out the hypocrisies of the father's stance, presenting a strong Freudian dimension to his treatment, yet there are also moments in which filial love and respect are expressed, hinting at affection operating between the two people. The final manoeuvre of approaching the last moments of the father's life from a perspective normally associated with beginnings suggests the speaker's wish for a new relation, a different and perhaps a more intimate one without any oppressive and conditioned public aspect, yet the finiteness of the father's life serves as a reminder that such a relation has only an imaginary dimension to exist.

#### 4.2.2. MOTHERS

In a striking manner, the presence of mother figures in recent Irish poetry is less frequent than that of fathers. Mothers make their appearances in poems which commemorate them when they are no longer alive; whatever the relation between the children and the mother, this is the default perspective, giving rise to a number of possible explanations. The unconditional love of the mother towards her son is a different relation than that of the father and it is one that is perhaps more easily handled in spite of all its mysterious nature. The less prominent place of women in Irish society and the subsequent problem of the mother as an example in a male-dominated world can also turn attention more towards the father. Some mothers, however, are represented and their figures offer an interesting complement to the father figures of private history.

##### 4.2.2.1. JOHN MONTAGUE: MOTHER AS ABSENCE

John Montague's family background includes a mother figure which cannot be regarded as a usual one. The troubled circumstances of exile and economic depression explain the mother's decision to send the children back from Brooklyn to the North yet they fail to provide sufficient proof for her decision to return to the two elder children but dispose of the

youngest one to paternal relatives. This “individual, but hardly unique, case of maternal rejection” (Johnston 199) is translated into a sequence of poems in search of the mother figure in the collection *The Dead Kingdom*. The most striking fact about these poems is that they were written after the mother’s death, from a perspective which is distant and final, producing an imaginative shaping or reshaping of her personality when she can no longer object to it. Probably tact and shyness both have their effect in this decision, and the poems fit well the ones on Montague’s father (in several cases the mother poems address his figure as well), and together they demonstrate the deeply human conviction of the poet regarding the necessity of forgiveness.

The first poem in which the mother makes her appearance is “Gravity.” She is the “forsaken mother” (Montague 1995, 162), an “exhausted woman” (ibid) in hospital whose figure is amply contrasted with that of the poet’s “child / growing in Evelyn’s womb” (ibid) – a life in eclipse is balanced by a life on the rise, and the image of the Moon’s “white disc / waxing and waning” (ibid) is the perfect emblem of this mysterious coincidence of the mother’s final illness and the nearing birth of a child. The scene has its own conflicts woven into it apart from this contrast: the “motherly concern” (ibid) is perhaps too late in the light of the family history, and the rather embarrassing situation of the mother’s enquiry about the previous wife of the poet, tactfully left out of consideration on his part, shows the general incongruence of her knowledge both in relation to him and to the world in general. The persona’s sympathy, however, corrects the picture as the mother’s “whole life dominated / by an antique code” (ibid) at once explains and excuses her ignorance.

“Intimacy” first centres on the figure of the mother as she receives some sort of compensation from her son, paradoxically from the rejected youngest one, for what has been missing from her life due to the family separation. It is the son who offers to take her on outings to the “Fintona’s first picturehouse” (Montague 1995, 163) and naturally the films chosen are romances, consumed in the “best seats, munching / soft centred chocolates” (ibid). The persona’s suggestion of “some sad story of Brooklyn” (ibid) is aborted as soon as it is raised as “films about real life” (ibid) are rejected by the mother. Melancholy takes over the perspective as the family reunion is recollected, the brief and late reunion after nearly twenty years of separation. The persona’s eyes are not clouded by a mythic fog, time has taken its toll and it is duly shown in the family circle of aged parents and grown sons. Another jump in time removes the father for once and all; though this is not the only change, certainly it is the most profound one. The appearance of the television as a household item, yet another change, adds a finely tuned elegiac hue to the picture: the cinema and thus the public are replaced by

the smaller scale and the personal, and mother and son, with no chance of the family circle ever coming to be full again are locked into an inevitably painful and finite intimacy.

“Molly Bawn” recounts the mother’s story until the moment of emigration, thus it comprises personal and public memories alike. The near-innocent “belle of Fintona’s / Cumann n mBann” (Montague 1995, 164) quickly becomes a “true Fenian” (ibid) as she happens to knock off the helmet of a policeman with her parasol. The episode functions as a sadly ironic instance of foreshadowing the bitter fruit of the conflict determining the later life of the North. The omens are numerous: the “honeymoon / in troubled Dublin” (ibid), the progress of her brothers from outlaws in the War of Independence to “officers in / the new Free State Army” (ibid) and their desertion soon after. The poem’s climax is a nadir in terms of life: emigration to join “the embittered diaspora of / dispossessed Northern Republicans” (ibid), a “real lost generation” (ibid), and this is all in the time of the Great Depression.

“A Muddy Cup” continues from where the previous poem let off, recounting the mother’s American history. Her arrival is told in an unusual technique: the Simple Past is broken by the Simple Present for a moment, the decisive standstill of the father’s return from the “speakeasy” (Montague 1995, 166) to find, and to confront, his wife with the children and the puzzled face of his landlady. Then the Simple Past takes over again and the bitter fight initiated by her turns into lovemaking, with the fruit of yet another child, the poet himself. The account of memories has only one more element, the return from America, and the painful tearing apart of the family is made complete by sending the ‘fruit’ “to be fostered / in Garvaghey, / seven miles away” (Montague 1995, 167). The distance, though by implication only a step for the seven-league boot, is enormous for the one to suffer and the poem concludes, indicating that Garvaghey is the old home of the father’s family, by leaving the afterthought of some sort of revenge as well as a defence mechanism against the consequences of an already sad journey.

The muddy cup of the title, “a muddy cup / she refused to drink” (Montague 1995, 166) is in fact a cup she finds difficult to handle. The metaphor is a rich and heavy one with a strong literal element in it: the circumstances of life in exile at such a time in such a place would offer little else than vessels of the kind. Yet the situation to face on arrival, a depressed slum with the husband’s ‘generous’ silence about his family, is something she does not find inviting yet has not much to do against – as the stake is survival, the cup is at least taken. The ultimate refusal comes later, with her decision to return to Ireland after the children are sent there, and with the separation of the youngest, the immediate reminder of the world of Depression-time Brooklyn, by sending him off to another household.

The next poem in which the mother's figure returns is "Northern Lights." This is a more than enigmatic account as its central event is her funeral, embedded in a description of the world in which she spent virtually her whole life yet the funeral itself receives little attention. The point of view oscillates between present and past, pictures of the day of the funeral alternate with memories and a general dimension to the "stranded community / haunted by old terrors" (Montague 1995, 178) which is "neither Irish, nor British" (ibid). The special nature of the poem is reflected in the title as well – the phenomenon of northern lights offers a strange form of illumination as it is a haunting play of electric particles which produce random forms against the night sky.

It is the poet's story in "A Flowering Absence" which complements the family picture before the final adjustments are made. The poem recounts the "primal hurt" (Montague 1995, 181) of being an "unwanted child" (ibid), and though it comes close to moments of self-pity, the central metaphor of the title saves it from melodrama. The situation of having a mother yet not having one in effect is detailed without mercy in the images of a life spent always elsewhere: a child "given away to be fostered / wherever charity could afford" (Montague 1995, 180), being nursed by others, often even poorer but having the means or not having their own children to take care of. This all unfolds against the backdrop of Brooklyn, a world of "young Puerto Rican hoods, / flash of blade, of bicycle chain" (Montague 1995, 181). The brief apostrophe to the mother is offered as an understanding yet no acceptance is implied; it is only the father's love which is tentatively remembered, the mother is excluded from this rather broken circle. The young child is shipped back to Ireland and his fever caught on the "big boat" (ibid) is almost like purgation: he finds a home in "an older country," a "previous century" (ibid) yet a place of restoration and of "natural love" (ibid). The hurt, however, does not disappear but only runs "underground" (ibid) to surface on another scale in the schoolroom: a boy without a family and with a foreign accent is the proper target for humiliation and an excellent negative example for the 'normal' children. The result is palpable: "Stammer, impediment, stutter" (Montague 1995, 182) tautologically increase the weight of multiple dispossession until the liberating powers of poetry are embraced "two stumbling decades" (ibid) later.

The closure is the poem "The Locket," which imaginatively resituates the son in the world of the mother. The mother's wish for a girl and the birth of a son instead, coupled with the lack of money, prove sufficient for the removal of the unwanted child yet all this comes to be buried quickly under the later developments: that the son, already grown up, begins to seek

out his mother's acquaintance and the forming of a belated yet profound relation between them. The fairy-tale dimension, however, is dispelled by the mother's words:

‘Don’t come again,’ you say roughly,  
‘I start to get fond of you, John,  
and then you are up and gone’;  
the harsh logic of a forlorn woman  
resigned to being alone. (Montague 1995, 183)

The final twist is provided by the last stanza: the image of a locket “with an old picture in it, / of a child in Brooklyn” (ibid) drags the poem down towards melodrama yet Montague's design of a sequence saves this concluding moment. The secret affection of the “forlorn woman” is only revealed when she is gone and this allows for a partial consolation for the speaker. The final revelation, however, establishes that intimacy which the speaker was so desperately trying to create: the locket image mutually saves them from total isolation and mother and son are ‘locked’ into a relationship which, given other circumstances, could have been the default one for a proper family.

#### 4.2.2.2. SEAMUS HEANEY: MOTHER AS PRESENCE

Seamus Heaney's sequence “Clearances” is a commemoration of his mother after her death. The starting point, similarly to Montague's sequence, is also elegiac, yet the relationship is different – it is a story of long-standing affection, often wordless but always certain, revealing a lived sense of intimacy rather than a retrospectively built web of fragile and even tentative beliefs. Heaney's mother is a fitting companion of his father in terms of her skills and her role as a mother is approached with the same kind of affection as the father yet the time lag is a telling instance of the difference between the two relationships.

The sequence begins with a dedication which reveals more than it sets out to do. The idea that “She taught me what her uncle once taught her” (Heaney 1987, 24) makes the mother's figure synonymous with continuity, and though she is no longer alive, her knowledge, similarly inherited from a relative, is the line that extends down to the present and towards the future. The art of breaking coal blocks is equally telling as coal implies heat, thus warmth and life, which are just the things to receive from a mother. The sound of this activity

evokes the phrase of facing the music, and this exercise prompts the speaker to voice his invocation to the deceased mother: “Teach me now to listen, / To strike it rich behind the linear black.” (ibid)

The poems begin with an evocation of distant past scenes, to come progressively closer to the present and to pick out moments which acquire special significance for the speaker in retrospect. The third poem captures a moment of intimacy between mother and son on a peculiar occasion: they remain at home to peel potatoes while “all the others were away at Mass” (Heaney 1987, 27). The activity locks them into mute communion, there are only “Little pleasant splashes” (ibid) with no words to complement such sounds. The sestet abruptly changes perspective to recall her dying moments with the priest at prayer and the others in pain; the speaker, instead of joining the others in the exercise of the wake, decides to recall this episode. The closing lines seek to turn that special moment into an infinite one despite its being absolutely closed and finished: “I remembered her head bent towards my head, / Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives – / Never closer the whole rest of our lives.” (ibid)

The intimacy which is recalled is immediately contrasted with the difference between mother and son that comes from his education. Her “Fear of affectation made her affect / Inadequacy whenever it came to / Pronouncing words ‘beyond her’.” (Heaney 1987, 28) Her shyness finds its adequate counterpart in his way of reverting to the old language of home, with “*naw* and *aye*” (ibid) and he would “decently relapse into the wrong / Grammar which kept us allied and at bay.” (ibid) The latter idea carries more weight than it first appears: it does not simply suggest the obstacle for their proper communication but it also involves a wider context, that of the long-standing plight of the lower classes which was somewhat relieved by the 1947 Education Act, one of whose beneficiaries was the poet himself.

The fifth poem of the sequence again provides an instance of intimacy as the fresh and dry sheets are folded by mother and son. The process is one in which they start from a distance and progressively get closer to each other physically, to come to a moment when they “end up hand to hand” (Heaney 1987, 29) – yet this “split second” (ibid) is a privileged one, it occurs “as if nothing had happened / For nothing had that had not always happened / Beforehand, day by day” (ibid). This ritual-like routine carries a great deal of dignity in this approach; the honesty of the speaker to clarify the general frugality of comfort underlying this idyllic-looking world further ennobles the situation rather than undermining it – the sheets are made out of “ripped-out flour sacks” (ibid), which dissolves the romantic aura surrounding

the experience but at the same time makes the moment even more memorable for its very simplicity.

Though their relation is described to have a “Sons and Lovers phase” (Heaney 1987, 30), the mother’s figure never appears obtrusive and dominating. The memory is that of the Easter holidays and their physical proximity in the church, “Elbow to elbow, glad to be kneeling next / To each other” (ibid), and though the suggestion of Easter involves sacrifice, they are still immersed in delight, caused by this closeness which may be seen as the festive complement of their everyday close relation.

The final moments of the mother’s life are recorded in the seventh poem. Moments of such extreme concentration lead to unusual actions, such as the husband flooding his dying wife with words, saying “more to her / Almost than in all their life together.” (Heaney 1987, 31) His zeal is a desperate last attempt and it is all rendered futile in the moment when “she was dead” (ibid). The moment is captured with great intensity and in a hauntingly beautiful way:

The space we stood around had been emptied  
Into us to keep, it penetrated  
Clearances that suddenly stood open.  
High cries were felled and a pure change happened. (ibid)

The transition from this world to that of perfecting memory is the “pure change,” this opens that space which is “Utterly empty, utterly a source” (Heaney 1987, 32), an end and a beginning at the same time, as the movement from the seventh to the eighth poem also indicates. This metaphoric space becomes a literal and actual one as the place of a chestnut tree is evoked: the chestnut tree was planted when the poet was born and it was cut down not long after. The tree then is only symbolically there, the once living tree has been transmuted into an ethereal one, existing only in memory now. The space it leaves behind when cut down remains empty, yet the vacancy is not understood as loss, it is rather a potential, “a bright nowhere, / A soul ramifying and forever / Silent, beyond silence listened for.” (ibid)

#### 4.2.2.3. DEREK MAHON: MOTHER EMBRACED AT LAST

Derek Mahon's sole poem addressing his mother figure is similarly one dating from after the mother's death. "A Bangor Requiem" conjures the woman through a catalogue of her belongings, elements of the furniture and decorations, to provide a picture of a person locked in a world of appearances yet with something genuine too – she was an expert of the everyday routines of the households and much more than that:

[...] and yet  
with your wise monkeys and 'Dresden' figurines,  
your junk chinoiserie and coy pastoral scenes,  
you too were an artist, a rage-for-order freak  
setting against a man's aesthetic of cars and golf  
your ornaments and other breakable stuff. (Mahon 1999, 260)

The panorama of her window included the sight of old monastic centres and her ideal of beauty launches the speaker on a course for a farther reaching meditation: his own childhood is recalled, in the framework of "the plain Protestant fatalism of home" (Mahon 1999, 261) with the nearly trademark elements of life in Belfast also recorded elsewhere in Mahon's poetry.

The speaker's course wanders back to the mother's figure, with a strange confessional direction: "Oh, I can love you now that you're dead and gone / to the many mansions in your mother's house" (ibid). Echoing the usual *post mortem* confession of other poets, the speaker reveals a sense of shyness as well – with a muted figure to listen the simplest emotions are less embarrassing to admit and display. In spite of the insistence on the distance between them the speaker identifies in himself the inheritance: it is "perhaps the incurable ache / of art" (ibid) which binds them together beyond all their differences, and such a common feature *is* a family tie.

#### 4.3. IMAGINATIVE HISTORIES : OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVES

The translation of historical experience into poetry is an exercise that involves imaginative tactics of various kinds. The postmodern approach to history as a grand narrative,

and thus a fiction, definitely helps the process of the rendering of historical material in literary environments yet there still is the decisive presence of an intelligence which is principally interested in the aesthetic dimension of such a material. Rather than historical accuracy and objectivity, human significance is focused upon as poets write poems; experience is presented rather than the meaning of that experience in specifically outlined contexts.

The Modernist period had its own consciousness of the embarrassment of having to confront a world that had never been addressed before. The new experience of the world and the lack of proper frames of reference for treating it in a comfortable way pushed the likes of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce to forge their own techniques of literary reconstruction of a chaotic and unintelligible world. The solution of these two artists was the “mythic method”, the employment of ancient myth for the aim of making sense of that “immense panorama of futility” (Eliot quoted in Williams 11) that the modern world appeared to be for the intelligent observer. The present, by virtue of its general nature, provides the same challenge for poets: the present by definition is never addressed prior to its presence. The Northern conflict, by no means without being foreshadowed by previous hostilities, is still a shocking phenomenon to interpret which duly demands certain tactics and manoeuvres to assess it.

Seamus Heaney resorts to the use of myth in his attempt of coming to terms with the Northern Irish ‘Troubles.’ The poems of the first half of the volume *North* aim to construct a specifically Northern European context for the contemporary events, incorporating various elements from a wide circle of historical sources. Iron Age people, Vikings, English colonisers and Irish natives populate this world of perpetual conflict – a world in which violence *is* an ingredient of life and this partially explains, though certainly does not excuse, the presence of it in the late twentieth-century world of Northern Ireland. The mythic element of the bog people is within this wider framework yet reaching beyond the scope of the volume – it is the religious cult of a Northern European fertility goddess, Nerthus, governing the life of the Iron Age inhabitants of the area that is now Denmark. The ritual of this cult is the annual sacrificing of one member of the community to the goddess in winter, in the framework of a sacral marriage with the goddess, in order to secure the coming of spring and thus continuity for the people. The sacrifice is ritualised killing and it is carried out in the name of a religion, which offers an imaginative parallel for Heaney with the late twentieth-century world of the North where the civil unrest also displays elements of religious dimension.

Heaney’s bog motif utilises the notion of the bog as the collective memory of the landscape (cf. Heaney 1980, 54-55). As he suggests in “Bogland,” the layers of the ever-

increasing bog are layers of history at the same time as they are physical locations, thus a downward journey into the bog is at once a journey backwards in time (cf. Heaney 1990, 17-18). As the layers are situated one above the other, the horizontal coordinate is identical, which suggests a potential parallel in itself. The finding of the bog people and their sacrificial fertility cult builds on this potential parallel, and the bog becomes an objective correlative for addressing the conflict of the present. The poems deal with human figures who are described next to perfection, which creates a humane perspective in which the presence of violence is definitely more shocking than in the dehumanised world of the media to which contemporary audiences are exposed. The poems thus manage to extract a response from the reader and the varied critical reactions indicate Heaney's success in articulating a personal vision of the history of his community.

Heaney's bog motif offers a concise narrative structure: the poems read together build up the pattern of rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. The sequence thus actually resembles a myth in the narrative meaning of the word as well, albeit Heaney's status as a contemporary poet leaves its mark on the product – the narrative concludes with the recognition of its inadequacy and it is deconstructed in the final stage. Postmodernism and honesty go hand in hand to assert the impossibility of endowing contemporary political violence with any form of dignity.

The poem that opens Heaney's mythic quest is "The Tollund Man." The poem dates from the early 1970s – the Troubles were already underway though the worst was yet to come, as perhaps many suspected but none explicitly stated. The three sections of the poem enact a complete religious experience: pilgrimage, invocation and personal sharing of the experience in the mood of devotion. The first section combines the speaker's assertion of a future pilgrimage to the 'shrine' of the Tollund Man in Aarhus with a description of the corpse done in the terms of the bog itself: the reconstruction of the body is achieved with the dark and watery imagery of the world of the bog, creating a haunting and essentially unpleasant picture. The function of the man as a victim of a ritual sacrifice is also explained, and his role as "bridegroom to the goddess" (Heaney 1990, 31) elevates him to a special position. The remains of the man earn the designation of "a saint's kept body" (ibid) in this way and the deliberate use of religious terms prepares for the second part in which the invocation is voiced.

The near-blasphemous nature of his exercise of elevating the Tollund Man onto the status of a saint continues and the speaker shows his awareness of the conflict between what he is doing and his belief yet this conflict appears only minor in the light of the one he is

aiming to resolve by his tentative invocation. The paramilitary atrocities cited quickly deter attention from the gap between the ‘pagan saint’ and the modern Christian speaker, and in this way this conflict is minimised – so much so that the third section of the poem reduces their distance to nil in the would-be tourist speaker’s sharing of something of the experience of the Iron Age victim as he was transported to the place of his execution. There certainly is a fair amount of forcing the analogy between a tourist and a sacrificial victim but the last stanza of the poem provides the justification for such a manoeuvre:

Out there in Jutland  
In the old man-killing parishes  
I will feel lost,  
Unhappy and at home. (Heaney 1990, 32)

The choice of “parish,” an explicitly Christian administrative concept to identify the territorial dimension of a distant pagan world constructs the basis for the speaker to conclude the poem with a picture which subverts the normal associations of the word “home” – “lost” and “unhappy” fit each other well but no comma intrudes between the latter word and the phrase “at home.”

“The Tollund Man” is only the beginning in Heaney’s imaginative journey into the world of the bog. The brief outing is followed by a more thorough investigation of the promise of the motif; several poems in *North* return to the world of the Iron Age, and as Heaney conducts his ‘digging’ project, the myth demonstrates a life of its own. The poems “Come to the Bower” and “Bog Queen” enact the awakening of the goddess from her long sleep – paralleling the rebirth of violence placed in a religious context in late twentieth-century Northern Ireland. While the former poem employs a figure engaged in the activity of uncovering the buried goddess, the latter poem presents a similar situation, perhaps even the same one, but from the perspective of the queen herself – the account of the excavation and the subsequent rising of the figure is narrated by the excavated character. The speaker’s interpretation of her act of being uncovered shows an active role in the process: “I rose from the dark” (Heaney 1975, 27). On the level of the imagery this corresponds to the sentence “And spring water / Starts to rise around her” (Heaney 1975, 24) in the preceding poem, “Come to the Bower”; on another level this moment does not only revive the motif but suggests a more explicit confrontation of the rites of sacrificial violence in accordance with the intensification of recent violence.

The closer scrutiny of another “bridegroom” yields a markedly different result in “The Grauballe Man” than the one encountered in “The Tollund Man.” The description of the body is done in similar terms as in the earlier poem and it is even carried further in its degree of accuracy but the shocking details of the neck and the head reveal the presence of violence: the Grauballe Man was brutally murdered even if it was done in the name of religion. The face of the man is “twisted” (Heaney 1975, 29) and his image is “perfected” (ibid) only for the persona of the poem – the bruised body remains at a remove from this state in its actuality. The end of the poem, however, modifies this imaginative project of perfecting the figure – the picture of the Grauballe Man is finally stored in the mind of the speaker “hung in the scales / with beauty and atrocity” (ibid), in a balanced account reminiscent of the sublime. The closure of the poem is an explicit reference to the execution methods of the IRA: the image of “the actual weight / of each hooded victim, / slashed and dumped” (ibid) anchors the poem firmly in the present-day context as well as in the past: the incorporation of the figure of the “Dying Gaul” (ibid), the Iron Age world and contemporary Northern Ireland are linked by the omnipresence of violence.

The poem represents Heaney’s first step towards a more objective approach to his motif. The religious vocabulary used in “The Tollund Man” is dispensed with, instead there are images of a foetus and a baby to suggest the innocence of the victim. The ritual context remains the same as it was in the earlier poem yet the speaker refuses to lose himself in the fascination of partaking in an instance of transcendence – the Grauballe Man is treated more as a human being than a cultic object and it is not transformed into a saint. There is no invocation and the disillusioned ending of the poem does not mention the concept of home yet the explicit linking of the Iron Age world with the contemporary one now explains the conclusion of the earlier poem.

The next poem of the sequence, “Punishment” has awakened numerous diverse critical responses because of its conclusion. The poem approaches a different kind of character than the ones addressed so far: the female figure is a common criminal from the point of view of the tribe, she is neither a goddess nor a ritually sacrificed victim. The young woman committed adultery, for which she was sentenced to death and executed. The speaker’s reaction combines sympathy with understanding – and these concepts are in a conflict with each other in this case as the sympathy is for the adulteress whereas the understanding refers to the punishment inflicted on her by the tribe, embodying the dilemma of rejecting as well as simultaneously accepting violence.

The pattern of the poem conforms to the general one of the bog poems: there is a description of the body first and then the speaker's response to the sight follows. The descriptive part is characterised by an oscillation of the speaker's position between a tentative identification with the experience of the woman and the mere witnessing of it. The shifts of perspective foreshadow Heaney's problematic response to the story of the woman, the reluctance (or perhaps inability) to take up one steady point of view for the description reflects the moral ambivalence inherent in the situation. The persona's addressing of the woman as "Little adulteress" (Heaney 1975, 30) and "My poor scapegoat" (Heaney 1975, 31) provides evidence for his sympathy for the victim, escalating to the pseudo-confession of "I almost love you" (ibid), just to be deflated by the muting of this sympathy by the pressure of the tribe: "but would have cast, I know, / the stones of silence." (ibid) The cunning solution of the persona is his choice of the peculiar position of the "artful voyeur" (ibid), which enables him to support both sides at the same time and to accept the dialectic of his ambivalent reactions. The reference to the contemporary "betraying sisters" (ibid) of the Iron Age victim establishes the imaginative parallel with the present and Heaney's speaker ends the poem on a note that complements the balanced concluding vision of the previous poem by translating the abstract terms of "beauty" and "atrocities" into the tangible categories of contemporary civil unrest: the speaker

... would connive  
in civilized outrage  
yet understand the exact  
and tribal, intimate revenge. (ibid)

The two climactic poems mark the only logical path for Heaney: invocation and religious intensity are balanced and gradually replaced by the actual weight of the violent actions whose memory is preserved together with and by the excavated bodies of the bog people. "Strange Fruit" is the poem in which this direction is made explicit: the broken sonnet form that Heaney employs in the poem is indicative of the wish of the poet for a neat and fitting framework yet the lack of rhymes and distortions of the iambic pentameter show the reluctance of the material to conform to the ordering drive. The poem begins with a similar description as the other poems in the sequence so far – the finding is introduced in an imagery of the bog itself. The nature of the "trove," however, is different from the earlier ones as it is only the severely damaged head of a young woman. The "leathery beauty" (Heaney 1975, 32)

of the figure is quickly forgotten as the close-up details are displayed: “Her broken nose is dark as a turf clod, / Her eyeholes blank as pools in the old workings.” (ibid) The sight is threatening rather than thrilling and the earlier associations of the sublime are exchanged for a confessional admittance of the futility and impossibility of the mythmaking tendency of the speaker:

Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible  
Beheaded girl, outstaring axe  
And beatification, outstaring  
What had begun to feel like reverence. (ibid)

The head of the woman is a mere document of the violence of the distant past without any hint at a religious context. The fact that the speaker of the poem addresses only the finding and there is no reference to any story behind it is a fitting complement to the technical solution of the poem: Heaney puts aside his almost trademark short lines for this poem and makes a go at the sonnet form. The ‘failure’ of the sonnet, however, is at once a technical means of the deconstruction of his myth: the “satisfactory imaginative parallels” (Heaney quoted in Morrison 93) break down after the careful and close scrutiny of the motif, leaving the only possible conclusion for the poem the horror of the moment of facing any kind of violence.

The poem leaves very little space for any further attempt at mythicising the world of the bog: Heaney’s conclusion to his bog sequence, “Kinship,” is a somewhat different kind of poem. It is a reconsideration of the parallel offered by the bog and it is also the occasion to say the final word in the context. The poem is kind of homecoming as well – the Irish “Bogland” is revisited after the imaginative excursions to the Danish ones. The six sections of the journey parallel the process of Heaney’s tentative myth-making in the bog sequence, reaching the same conclusion as he does in the preceding poem and going one step further in condemning the present.

The first section establishes a kinship between the persona and the “strangled victim” (Heaney 1975, 33) by the agency of “hieroglyphic / peat” (ibid), and there is a confessional tone employed throughout this part. The second section contrasts the reptile world of the “slime kingdoms” (Heaney 1975, 34) with the organism-like bog and the Gaelic roots of the word are juxtaposed by kennings reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon poetry. The associations of the bog turn it into a mysterious world capable of preservation as well as destruction – it is an

“embalmer” (ibid) as well as an “Insatiable bride” (ibid); the latter phrase is at once an explicit identification of the bog with the figure of the Earth Goddess (Nerthus in the Iron Age in the Danish bogs, Mother Ireland in the contemporary world of Ireland). In the last stanza of the section the bog becomes an analogue for the imagination of the persona as well, a “nesting ground” and the “outback of my mind” (Heaney 1975, 35) at the same time, making a reference to the mysteries of creative activity.

The discovery of a spade initiates a thrilling experience in the third section: the intercourse of spade and ground yields a potent motif for the poet. The persona’s act of sinking the spade into the ground, seen as an “obelisk” (ibid), is paralleled by the discovery of a “love-nest” (ibid) and the ancient cult of Nerthus, creating a unique moment for the persona: “I stand at the edge of centuries / facing a goddess.” (Heaney 1975, 36) The continuity of life in the world of the bog is the focus of the fourth section. There is a reference ‘backward’ to the poem “Bogland” through the evocation of the “centre,” and there is an answer to Yeats as well as “This centre holds” (ibid) unlike the Yeatsian one of “The Second Coming.” The continuous growth of the bog also means that life and death are closely intertwined, the bog is a “seedbed” as well as a “melting grave” (ibid), it is “a windfall composing / the floor it rots into.” (ibid) The soil, that mysterious element composed partially of the decomposing tissues of deceased living beings yet generating new life out of this debris, is the origin of the persona as well – he defines himself with the simile of a “weeping willow / inclined to / the appetites of gravity.” (Heaney 1975, 37) The image is a telling one in terms of the aspirations and their necessary frustration by the very conditions out of which they arise, and it also situates the poem within the larger framework of the collection itself by a parallel with the figure of Antaeus, evoked in the first and last poems of the first part of the volume.

Just to defy the “appetites of gravity,” the fifth section hints at the ancient cult again. The cart and the experience of riding it, beyond the personal reference (cf. Parker 140), carries suggestions of the fertility cult. The last section, however, deflates the mythic dimension without any hope of a possible recovery. The section opens with an apostrophe to Tacitus and the experience of the detached observer is seen as necessary in coming to terms with the raw facts of contemporary violence. The present day world is described in a manner that would not be out of place in the Roman times either:

Our mother ground  
is sour with the blood  
of her faithful,

they lie gargling  
in her sacred heart  
as the legions stare  
from the ramparts. (Heaney 1975, 38)

The rhetoric is deceptive enough to offer the possibility of application to both sides of the conflict, though the feminine association of the ground recalls the Republican ethos of Mother Ireland rather than the world of the Protestant planters. The observation that the legions are relegated to the status of the witness indicates the ‘troublesome’ aspect of the conflict – it is partly an internal affair that baffles the outsiders and it is partly the nature of modern military power demonstration to be present yet to remain at a remove from action.

Tacitus is not only addressed but invited as well – the situation calls for his expert eyes for interpretation. The persona ventures no further than an answer to Yeats’s tentative question in “Easter 1916” and asserts that “nothing will suffice” (ibid). The rest is the job of the experienced historian no longer intimidated by the proximity of violence:

Read the inhumed faces  
  
of casualty and victim;  
report us fairly,  
how we slaughter  
for the common good  
  
and shave the heads  
of the notorious,  
how the goddess swallows  
our love and terror. (Heaney 1975, 38-39)

The request of the persona is “report us fairly” and the choice of the word “report” shows Heaney’s final point of view regarding the past-present relation: the objective distance is the most that one can embrace, there is no dignified explanation for the violence, only the realities of power shape the face of the contemporary history of Northern Ireland. The account draws a parallel between the past and the present once again but without the earlier personal

involvement of the persona – it is pure and mere reporting now without the least colouring of the imagination.

The fact that Heaney deconstructs his myth in the final stage is indicative of his recognition of the inadequacy of the parallel between the past and the present. The Iron Age community with its violent fertility cult does not offer a satisfactory explanation for the presence of violence in the Northern Ireland of the second half of the twentieth century. The tentative imaginative relation between the two worlds crumbles when the historical distance separating them is grasped, leaving the present in the state of that “immense panorama of futility” which is perhaps a most potent parallel.

Tom Paulin’s ideal of a secular republic beyond sectarian division occupies an imaginary space only. Neither the South nor the North would willingly embrace such a construct yet Paulin’s belief is firm that no other peaceful solution is possible. His conviction has its roots in his pervasive sense of belief in the benevolent intention of the late eighteenth-century movement aiming to unite Catholics and Protestants which Paulin finds an adequate enough basis for a vision of a united Ireland which is potentially equally acceptable for any party with liberty as its all-pervasive element.

“The Book of Juniper” translates political ideas into the language of botany, or at least it partially does so. The juniper, in its different forms and habitations, becomes the leading image for Paulin’s ideal of liberty due to its resistant nature. Seeking for an answer to the old question of happy life the speaker turns the juniper into an “epic” (Paulin 1983, 23), ranging through various places and times. This “miniature epic / of the boreal forest” (ibid) wanders through “Austro-Hungaria” (ibid), a “Zen garden” (Paulin 1983, 25) and “Voronezh” (ibid) to end up “On a bruised coast” (ibid), with the speaker present on the spot, reflecting on the “green / springy resistance” (Paulin 1983, 26) of the plant which places it in contrast with “the warped polities of other trees / bent in the Atlantic wind” (ibid). The potential is unimaginable:

no one knows  
if nature allowed it  
to grow tall  
what proud grace  
the juniper tree might show (Paulin 1983, 26-27)

– and the short lines provide a graphic representation of the fact that it is only a potential which is not realised. As

On this coast  
it is the only  
tree of freedom  
to be found (Paulin 1983, 27),

the speaker experiences a vision of the extension of the French Revolution (cf. O’Donoghue in Corcoran 1992, 181), culminating in the only imagined and not yet (and perhaps never to be) realised image of

that sweet  
equal republic  
where the juniper  
talks to the oak,  
the thistle,  
the bandaged elm,  
and the jolly jolly chestnut. (Paulin 1983, 27)

This imaginary parliament of trees is Paulin’s ideal concept of the republic, democracy realised as it is outlined by idealist approaches, which, as ‘idealist’ suggests would find it difficult to be accommodated in the real world of conflict, impatience and inherited hostilities.

Paul Muldoon’s “Lunch with Pancho Villa” is an explicitly cunning and subversive poem dealing with an instance of history, or rather, an imaginary version of it. The poem pretends to record conversations with a revolutionary figure, “Pancho Villa.” The name deceptively recalls Francisco Villa, one of the liberators of Mexico, but Muldoon’s character is not identical with this historical person. Nevertheless, Pancho Villa is described as an extraordinary person with insight and knowledge, a “celebrated pamphleteer” (Muldoon 2001, 41). The speaker appears eager to learn but what he gets is more like a reproach than advice: his attention should be turned to the news, to what is happening around him. The speaker’s dissatisfaction is shown in his wish to pay another visit yet the details of this do not proceed further than the subversive nature of the location of the house: a “quiet suburban street” (ibid), with a front door opening “directly on to a backyard” (ibid). The speaker, with perhaps a

substantial smile on his face, admits that all this is only make believe, there is no Pancho Villa, and all the fancy titles of pamphlets come from his own imagination. In a surprising manner, however, a Pancho Villa-like figure closes the poem, voicing his unease about giving advice to a hot-headed youth “Who learned to write last winter – / One of those correspondence courses.” (Muldoon 2001, 42)

Muldoon’s tactics of building a context and then subverting it just to return to the original one offers an implicit comment on the public function of poetry. As a Northern poet, the common assumption is that he *has* to say something about the events on the news. His subversive technique, however, undermines the very idea of credibility as his ‘hero’ turns out to be fully made-up especially when the details are examined in a closer perspective: the “quiet suburban street” and the figure sipping his “untroubled Muscatel” (Muldoon 2001, 41) do not indicate anything revolutionary or the participation of the host in any such event either. The other aspect of self-reflexivity is also topical: the imaginary pamphleteer advises the speaker to write about something more than “stars and horses, pigs and trees” (ibid) – yet it is asserted at the end, though in the reverse order, that the young man will go on writing “About pigs and trees, stars and horses” (Muldoon 2001, 42) rather than about ‘the news’, which is very close to what Muldoon himself is doing in the volume.

Brendan Kennelly’s *Cromwell* embarks on a rather unusual course in its relation with the past. In a series of poems which are in turn visionary and in turn nightmarish, various figures appear to offer comments on the nature of hostilities in general and on the one between the Irish and the British in particular. Kennelly, however, does not stop at simple reportage but offers his highly ingenious ironic commentary on such views. In a notable example he translates an instance of general hostility into purely domestic-looking terms, then his vision broadens to include, as well as narrows to focus solely upon, the present, with the default opposition between the two sects. The resurgence of violence, unfortunately, supports this timeless approach, and the conclusion, beyond its biting irony, is one that is not far from the dimension of absurdity either.

“Gusto” provides the ironic summary of the relation between Catholic and Protestant which is a never-ending cycle of retaliation. What one side does to the other is exactly repaid: bombing the home, castration, burning down the recreation centre, cutting the tail of the dog and the final resting point of the conflict comes only when “The Protestant hanged the Catholic / The Catholic hanged the Protestant” (Kennelly 1987, 128). It is only with total destruction that the conflict can be eliminated – and indeed, the story does not come to an end, as there is an image of resurrection closing the poem:

As they dangled like dolls from the freshly-painted  
Protestant and Catholic gibbets  
They held hands in mid-air and sang  
With spiritual gusto, 'Onward, Christian Soldiers!' (ibid)

This final vision makes the irony underlying the poem complete and at once ridicules the whole conflict: in death the former enemies recognise their common basis and join forces as part of a more comprehensive frame and there is the suggestion that a further, and now a common, enemy will be found.

The prospect of afterlife is a remarkable element in both general and particular perspectives. Christian salvation is surely a comfort, especially for such figures as those in the poem. At the same time reconciliation is hinted at – or at least the sectarian division is not mentioned in the conclusion, which provides a slim degree of optimism as it is no longer considered relevant, which undermines the basis of the present validity of it. Kennelly's solution, however, involves a sour aftertaste too since it is only after the death of both figures that reconciliation is understood as possible.

## 5. CULTURAL CONTINUITY

MacNeice's question "Why do we like being Irish?" (MacNeice 132) could perhaps be rephrased to 'what do we mean by being Irish.' The answer to the original question provides a list of attractive and assuring cultural items which construct the image of a community if not unaffected but certainly unaltered by the advance of the modern age. Much time has passed since MacNeice's tentative enquiry and consequently much has changed too, the basic questions, however, are asked again since this is their nature to be employed regularly in the face of changes.

The question of tradition is certainly one which will arise in the context of culture and its very problematic nature is among the first recognitions when the Irish scene is considered. Norman Vance talks about modes of constructing an Irish tradition (cf. Vance 8), others, however, tend to subscribe to a more complex idea in relation to this question. Robert F. Garratt devotes a book-length study to the question of tradition and continuity in the context of twentieth-century Irish poetry. In the final analysis he identifies tradition as the problem baffling the poets of the first half of the century and continuity appearing problematic for the present day artists (cf. Garratt 259-261), with the conclusion that the present is governed by the tradition of discontinuity, the recognition of the "distance between poet and community" (Garratt 261). Garratt's argument, in turn, is undermined by Peter McDonald, who calls attention to the dangers of substituting seductive identity discourses for the reading of poems (cf. McDonald 4-5) – yet the poems themselves often legitimate questions of identity and tradition.

Among contemporary poets Thomas Kinsella is the one who has been the most explicit about the question of tradition in the context of Irish literature. Kinsella's point of departure is the linguistic situation of Ireland epitomised by the replacement of the originally native Irish language with the planted English, which also brought about the reshuffling of traditions:

... [I] look for the past in myself. An English poet would have an easier time of it... No matter what his preoccupations might be, he will find his forebears in English poetry; as inheritor of the parent language he is free to 'repatriate' a great American poet or a great Irish poet. As he looks backward, the line might begin with Yeats and T. S. Eliot and continue with Matthew Arnold and Wordsworth and Keats and Pope – and so on through the mainstream of a

tradition. An Irish poet will only have the first point in common with this. Or so I found in my own case, when I try to identify my forebears. (Kinsella quoted in Matthews 77)

The particular problem of the modern Irish poet is widened further into a general dilemma of the modern writer: “every writer in the modern world – since he can’t be in all the literary traditions at once – is the inheritor of a gapped, discontinuous, polyglot tradition.” (Kinsella quoted in Matthews 78) This widens the scope of the sense of alienation from the past and turns it into a general experience; this may act as a consolation for the Irish poet yet it does not automatically make the situation easier for him – he will have to forge his own line of tradition.

John Montague, of the same generation as Kinsella, comes to a similar conclusion in relation to the more complex nature of tradition in the modern world. Montague urges the recognition of international developments and the importance of an awareness of those, parallel to a possession of the knowledge of one’s own heritage. Montague’s own self-proclaimed influences involve prominent American figures as well as European or even Latin American poets to indicate the practical implementation of his belief, and the fact that his poetry is shaped by such concerns proves its status as a new departure. The Irish lineage of Montague’s poetry is a more complicated issue as he explains it, reflecting on his early years as a poet:

...Brooklyn-born, Tyrone-reared, Dublin-educated, constituted a tangle, a turmoil of contradictory allegiance it would take a lifetime to unravel. And the chaos within contrasted the false calm without: Ireland, both North and South, then seemed to me a ‘fen of stagnant waters’. And there was no tradition for someone of my background to work in; except for the ahistorical genius of Kavanagh just across the border, there had not been a poet of Ulster Catholic background since the Gaelic poets of the eighteenth century. So when I describe myself as ‘the missing link of Ulster poetry’ I am not only joking, for, hard as it may be to understand today, there was no Northern dimension to Irish literature then ... (Montague quoted in Corcoran 1992, 15-16)

Thomas Kinsella’s solution to the question of tradition is a unique one in many ways. Kinsella’s notion of the Irish tradition is one that incorporates both the idea of oneness and of duality at the same time. In his understanding there is one Irish tradition but it exists in two

languages – it is a “dual tradition” which incorporates the earlier Gaelic one as well as the later Anglo-Irish (cf. Kinsella 1995, 4-5). The dual tradition accommodates the shift from one language to another, broadening the scope of the notion of literary tradition itself – it is assigned not to a language but to a group of people bound together by various cultural factors, among them by linguistic dispossession. The consequence of the dual tradition is a palpable problem for the poet: the Gaelic part of his heritage is alienated from him by its medium whereas the other part is a constant reminder of power relations and the imposed and thus foreign nature of the English language. Kinsella’s own poetry is a demonstration of his belief in the dual tradition: its medium is English but it is enriched by allusions to earlier works in the Gaelic, thus making his ancient heritage an integral and active part of his poetry and simultaneously of contemporary Irish poetry as well.

As part of the problem of tradition the question of poetic fathers has shown an interesting course as it has moved away from Yeats towards Joyce as the ultimate figure behind contemporary poetry. The most notable proponent of this idea is Dillon Johnston whose *Irish Poetry after Joyce* argues for the presence of Joyce and his treatment of tone behind much contemporary Irish poetry: it is rather a Joycean dramatic poetry with a variety of voices than Yeatsian lyric with its single voice (cf. Johnston xx). Yeats’s presence, however, is one that cannot be left out of consideration since his contribution to the lyric is one that still haunts poets, most frequently perhaps on the level of allusion. As far as Joyce’s presence is concerned, Paul Durcan’s lines clearly illustrate his nearly cultic significance: “I have not ‘met’ God, I have not ‘read’ / David Gascoyne, James Joyce, or Patrick Kavanagh: / I believe in them.” (Durcan 1993, 7)

One of the difficulties of approaching the question of tradition is the presence of division on the level of communities. Both South and North the division of the population into Catholics and Protestants appears the most salient pattern of establishing communities. There obviously are differences between the communities in the two parts of the island, yet the approach is something similar in each case, justifying a simplification of the complex division into a simple bipolar pattern: the “other” is regarded in the light of conditioned ideas and stereotypes with suspicions more than often an ingredient, while the observation of one’s own side tends to reveal a healthy and acute sense of criticism which does not refrain from exposing the limitations and bigotries of the given community. Especially Northern Protestants seem eager in their harsh critical exercises towards their own community, suggesting the presence of several faultlines even within the community itself.

Among the fundamental constituents of any tradition the language bears a special importance. Though Thomas Kinsella rightly argues for the existence of a dual tradition and the necessity of representing works written in the Irish as well as those in English for a full picture of the Irish tradition, the choice of most of the contemporary poets to use English as their exclusive medium indicates the weight of that language in contemporary Irish culture. The 'Irish variety' of the English language is no longer a foreign language; it has been the first language of several generations, thus it has acquired its own Irish dimension. The Irish language has suffered wide-scale decline, yet there still is a reluctance to abandon that language since it carries a distinctive heritage which is not available in any other way in its entirety. Though it is increasingly difficult to come into possession of that specific heritage which is preserved in Irish, the effort is made time after time, and it provides a special tinge to the poetry.

Contemporary Irish poetry includes instances of returns to and repossessions of various cultural elements of the past. Such instances may be seen as the conscious and deliberate assertion of the existence of a distinct tradition and of the wish to come into possession of it. Thomas Kinsella and John Montague resort to the recycling of literary antecedents such as legends and myths, elsewhere Montague attempts to re-enter the world of his upbringing, and Seamus Heaney embarks on a mission of imaginative artistic communions with influential figures of the past. These poets all recognise the potential power of the past and are simultaneously aware of an elegiac halo that surrounds much of that past. This recognition, however, does not necessarily limit the focus of the poetry: Kinsella can enrich the English medium of his poetry with a specific heritage, Montague's failed returns eventually yield an insight into the working of the imagination, and Heaney gains new inspiration from an assessment of the past. The most telling case is that of Brendan Kennelly: his poem "My Dark Fathers" displays an acceptance and embracing of what is available as a heritage, being fully aware of its qualities, not glorifying it yet refusing to be overwhelmed by a feeling of tragic paralysis which should bind the contemporary poet into a constant pose of mourning and complaint.

Though the history of Ireland offers a rich stock of tragic events, it is at the same time a source as it has shaped a culture that belongs to the people and it is only theirs. This culture feeds present creative activities and it is thus a heritage to be accepted, understood and utilised. These require a deep knowledge of that heritage, one that will necessarily acknowledge its tragic elements yet it simultaneously builds upon the richness and variety of its components and regards them as having lasting values. As John Montague observes, the

poet “is born into allegiances to particular areas or places and people, which he loves, sometimes against his will.” (Montague quoted in Kenneally 53)

## 5.1. COMMUNITIES

### 5.1.1. DIVISIONS

Northern Protestant poets do not seem to demonstrate any trouble in presenting their own communities in rather harsh terms. The often constraining mentality of certain Protestant groups is a fit target for critical observations, and though the Protestant community is further divided along internal sectarian lines, the criticism directed against particular subgroups often proves a commentary on the whole. It is important to note that the most ruthless critics of Northern Protestants are their own representatives yet these very representatives are no longer fully at one with their parent community as their critical views demonstrate a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with the prevalent ideologies governing the life of the community.

The Catholic community, dominant in the Republic and a minority in the North, is rarely addressed explicitly as a fit theme for poetry. Perhaps out of natural piety or under the pressure of the ‘special status’ of the Church Catholics do not often get into the focus; this is hardly a surprise in the context of the Republic where they make up the majority. This dominance, however, does not equal univocal unconditional acceptance and support – the critical spirit is alive even if it is the rarer case. The possessors of that critical spirit are members of the Catholic community too yet their sight is not clouded by a blind acceptance of dogmas and principles to which the modern world no longer conforms. Critical accounts often employ irony as a gentle yet highly effective weapon in pointing at and out the shortcomings and limitations of the way in which the Catholic community approaches life. Northern Catholics, however, represent another type of community since their life is complicated by rather open demonstrations of hostility on part of the dominant Protestant group. Such hostilities raise an awareness of the web that connects members in the community and thus there is a greater degree of sympathy in accounts dealing with these people.

Derek Mahon’s “Ecclesiastes” paints a portrait of one sect(ion) of the Northern population, that of the Protestants, by employing a synecdoche to identify the whole by one of its factions, the Puritans. The hypocrisy of the chosen people is exposed without mercy on part of the speaker. The background against which their lives unfold is briefly sketched in brackets to indicate that it is not more than a background, just as life itself is reduced to a

minimum level of comfort. Such a life does not include understanding and forgiveness; it indulges in a sacrificial pose of suffering exaggerated to a point of perversion. The speaker refuses to share this approach: “this is your / country, close one eye and be king” (Mahon 1999, 35). The closing image of a preacher standing “on a corner stiff / with rhetoric, promising nothing under the sun” (ibid) completes this rather bleak account of the majority of the Northern population and at the same time it provides an explanation for the speaker’s refusal to comply with this faction, admitting implicitly at the same time that this is his origin too.

In Tom Paulin’s “Desertmartin” the place and its inhabitants are locked into some form of permanence yet this is considered by the speaker more repressive than assuring. The depicted Protestant community is virtually devoid of life; what remains is the hardened core of their faith. A removal of anything else from life poses the question of what is left – and what is left does not seem to be impressive: the “dead centre of a faith” (Paulin 1983, 16) offers little promise. The speaker’s disillusionment is made complete in the closing lines when this “culture of twigs and bird-shit” (Paulin 1983, 17) is seen in its contradictory relations to a larger unit, represented by its flag, of which it is supposedly a part. Though the presence of such emotional reaction may even imply hope in the form of some life, the opposing poles of “loving” and “cursing” (ibid) only provide a sense of tired balance and subsequent inertia. Paulin’s observations have a specific perspective: Protestantism is made equal to Unionist political stance, which involves a reductive manoeuvre in terms of the approach to Protestant culture in general yet Paulin’s etalon of the spirit and ideologies of 1798 justifies his dismay at the present state.

Seamus Heaney’s early poem “Docker” takes a short stock of a Protestant figure, thus it is a representation of ‘the other.’ Though it is never explicitly declared that the figure is a Protestant, the details of his antagonism towards Catholicism are telling enough in this respect and his occupation in the shipyards is another indicator of his sectarian belongings. The figure is described in the terms of the shipyard; the place of his work seems formative enough to create his character and for the space of the poem he nearly becomes one with the giant machinery of the harbour. The first detail that suggests a possible political dimension is the fist: “That fist would drop a hammer on a Catholic – / Oh yes, that kind of thing could start again.” (Heaney 1966, 28) Heaney’s prophecy is bitter but accurate as the “could” of the poem came to be replaced by ‘did’ a few years after the publication of the poem.

The mechanical approach to the other locks the figure into a well-known set of stereotypes. Though there is a freshness in the imagery, the general squaring of life to well-

defined sections of “work and leisure” (ibid) echoes easily identifiable surface features of a simplified and controlled view of life. There is a somewhat subversive element, however, in the account: the figure is compared to a “Celtic cross” (ibid), thus the old alignments of Celtic and Catholic versus British and Protestant are disturbed and reconfigured.

Paradoxically, Paul Durcan’s poem “What is a Protestant, Daddy?” reveals more about the Catholics than the proposed focus on Protestants as it echoes the distortedly one-sided approach of Irish Catholicism to anything not itself and therefore improper. The cliché-ridden rhetoric of the discourse of ‘the other,’ however, is subverted by the poet when he creates his speaker – a grown man realising the bigotry of his official education turning him into “a proper little Irish Catholic boy” (Durcan 1993, 28). The subversion does not proceed to sympathy for the other but it is sufficient to produce a deeply ironic vision of sectarian prejudice which, as it is only natural, does not find foundation in verifiably facts. The description of Protestants (and there is no further division of this group) turns them eventually into “Martians” (ibid) – yet they are not only “light years more weird / Than zoological creatures” (ibid) but an endangered species on the verge of extinction which is deeply desired in the view of the official rhetoric. Irony is created by employing juxtapositions, setting the ‘proper’ Catholic example to contrast sharply with the ‘improper’ Protestant practice – the “gold-plated Cadillac” (Durcan 1993, 27) of the Pope is in contrast with the “small black cars” (ibid) of the Protestants, and the fact that Protestant “‘parsons’” (Durcan 1993, 28) may marry is seen “As unimaginable a state of affairs / As it would have been to imagine / A pope in a urinal” (ibid). The concluding recognition of the poem also contributes to this approach with its mannerist “Oh Yea, Oh Lord” (ibid) introductory phrase.

The question formulated in the title of the poem would suggest an answer given by the addressed person, the father, but the account nowhere indicates the simultaneous presence of an adult authority. What is present instead is the conditioned consciousness of the child recalled by the later liberated and enlightened adult, offering a comment on those responsible for the conditioning. Thus if any community is characterised in the poem, it is rather the Catholic majority of the Republic with its inbuilt and maintained bigotry which manages to subvert the opinion about ‘the other’ as the targeted Protestants appear considerably more friendly than intended by the conditioning.

John Montague’s approach to his own community bears a heavy burden of history, communal as well as personal. The scattered Northern Catholic family with the Republican exile father presents a difficult heritage to carry yet Montague’s attachment is firm and clear. In *The Rough Field* the poem “Crowd” portrays people who come together for Communion

and the account is done with reverence. “The crowds for Communion, heavy coat and black shawl, / Surge in thick waves, cattle thronged in a fair” (Montague 1995, 24) and they

wait patient

And prayerful and crowded, for each moment

Of silence, eyes closed, mouth raised

For the advent of the flesh-graced Word. (ibid)

The community is one with exemplary self-discipline yet at the same time their patient acceptance finds an analogue in cattle. The general elegiac tone of Montague is generously applied when he describes his own people and there is further emphasis provided by this particular choice of location and occasion. The patient submission of these people is demonstrated in another context as well: the next poem of the sequence, “After Mass” has a similar scene recalled when a politician gave a speech and “they listened to all / His plans with the same docility” (Montague 1995, 25).

Montague’s Catholics, however, are Northern Catholics, a community living under extreme conditions in certain times. The speaker’s sympathetic account embraces these people in their exposed being and captures an aspect of their faith that has a power of preservation even in hard times. Montague’s choice of replacing the usual sheep analogy of Christianity with the image of cattle is a telling instance from the point of view of his vision of his own people, suggesting a greater degree of patient acceptance of whatever life offers than would be the case with an actually autonomous community.

### 5.1.2. RECONCILIATIONS

Though sectarian conditioning works for the keeping apart of people and their sympathies from each other, genuine experience and open-minded approach yield their promising reward on occasions. The antecedent that proves the possibility of peaceful living together and of friendship is the figure of John Hewitt’s Catholic friend, commemorated in a number of poems. Hewitt’s concluding guide is not without a touch of selfishness yet it is deeply humane in its optimism: “You must give freedom if you would be free, / for only friendship matters in the end.” (Hewitt 34). The approach, interestingly enough, finds sympathy nearly exclusively with John Montague, whose peculiar background could perhaps

explain something of his stance. In spite of the inherited “bitterness” and “vomit surge / of race hatred” (Montague 1995, 43) his vision includes more profoundly humane elements which single him out to be the most tolerant contemporary figure, extending his understanding and even sympathy for the “other” side too.

Montague’s “The Errigal Road” records an experience which merits the adjective ‘strange’ in the most neutral approach, and even ‘exotic’ in a less subtle one. Two people, a Catholic and a Protestant take a walk in a Northern scenery, with the “old Protestant neighbour” (Montague 1995, 271) being the one more familiar with the terrain: he serves as a guide to the speaker, pointing at landmarks and explaining their histories. The poem takes a turn when perspectives open into a distant past well before Christianity and the subsequent sectarian division, and the neighbour’s remark is equally emblematic: “On a clear day you can see far into Monaghan” (ibid). The perspective of the hill, above the landscape so as to provide a wider panorama, is at once one with the potential of being beyond division – Monaghan as a part of Ulster but belonging to the Republic is nearly an exotic place, beyond the border and thus subject to various imaginary projections about it. The peacefulness of “a clear day” is strongly contrasted with a brief account of the “violence plaguing these parts” (ibid), turning, by implication, the world of Monaghan into the land of peace. Against a backdrop of helicopters and soldiers as everyday landmarks comes the contrast of old neighbours of different sectarian affiliation yet on nearly friendly terms:

At his lane’s end, he turns to face me.  
‘Tell them down South that old neighbours  
can still speak to each other around here’

& gives me his hand, but does not ask me in. (Montague 1995, 272)

The conclusion of the poem, however, offers a rather strange direction to the story as it envisions the future of the “small farms, fading back into forest” (ibid): nature overwrites the land as “Soon all our shared landscape will be effaced, / a quick stubble of pine recovering most.” (ibid) Such a process renders the human presence only temporary and, as such, nearly insignificant in the natural world, thus the conflict itself which the poem seeks to discredit is also of very limited importance.

The opening of the poem marks the end of the road in a churchyard. This is the first attempt of the poet to play down the significance of the division of the Northern population:

the churchyard is the ultimate earthly destination where divisions lose their meaning. The conversation between the old Protestant neighbour and the Catholic speaker is a step forward in reinforcing this idea, made explicit by the words of the neighbour and later by the phrase “our shared landscape.” The takeover of nature is somewhat at an angle to this but it supports the basically benevolent point of view of the speaker and it resituates the problem in a larger context: Protestant and Catholic are reconciled beyond division as humans and are made to stand in relation to the natural world represented by a pine forest. Nature expands, or rather it reclaims the area, on the expense of humans, and this advance returns the focus to an older and more profound ‘antagonism’ between nature and the human world – which is an antagonistic relation only from the point of view of the human being since man *is* a part of nature. The conclusion of the poem thus reinterprets the nature of the conflict between the sects with the suggestion that such divisions as exist in the human world do not bear significance in a larger context than the immediate sphere of religious affiliation.

“A Real Irishman” recounts a simple, and almost melodramatic, lesson of the possibility of cross-sectarian friendship. The childhood humiliation of a Protestant boy on St. Patrick’s Day is consoled by the speaker’s generous offer of his friendship as a matter more important than the question of religious affiliation. The gesture is returned “Decades later” (Montague 1995, 303) when the speaker ends up in a troubled situation with “two off-duty U.D.R.” (ibid): the voice from the background asserts “John Montague is my old friend and neighbour; / Lay a hand on him and you deal with Billy Davidson.” (ibid)

The imaginative situation is very simple yet still credible: to be called “not a real Irishman, / You’re a Protestant” (ibid) on St. Patrick’s Day is harsh enough a humiliation for a child largely ignorant of such categories. The comforting words of another ‘outsider,’ the “American” (ibid) find their way to the boy and the simple yet mysterious notion of friendship creates a strange link between the two boys, and the link is reactivated later in a similar though reversed case of emergency. Much of the poem resembles the fanciful wisdom of folktales yet this very naivety gives the poem the power it possesses, turning it into a credible instance of exemplary cross-sectarian relations.

## 5.2. LANGUAGE

The long-standing antagonistic relation between Ireland and Britain, among other consequences, is responsible for the strange state of bilingualism characteristic of modern

Ireland, both South and North. The imposition of the English language contributed to the decline of the Irish yet it has to be noted that the Irish were in many cases more than willing to shed their old language for the advantages and conveniences of the new one (Kiberd 650). The imposition of the new language went together with an attempt of cultural homogenisation, depriving the Irish not only of their language but of their full cultural heritage as well. One aspect of this project was the early nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey which renamed the Irish countryside either through translating the Irish placenames into English ones, or through transliterating them to approximate the original pronunciation using an English spelling.

Despite colonial intentions Irish placenames even in their ‘new’ form seek to preserve the past. Translated names, by virtue of translation itself, arrest something of the meaning of the original and though it may seem a reduction, it still contains a part of the heritage. Transliteration preserves another aspect, the pronunciation of the name – this may appear a very weak aspect yet the nature of language as sounds is not to be overlooked. Though fragmented and refracted, the cultural heritage shines through – and this may be mourned as well as celebrated: the loss is inevitable and this bears heavily on the consciousness of several poets yet advantages of the English language are generally taken for granted.

Placenames thus become emblematic of the general situation concerning the relation of the two languages. The Irish language may be cherished and mourned for yet its decline is inevitable due to various historical factors several of which have not disappeared yet. English may be imposed and alien yet it has become familiar to the degree of intimacy and has become the actual mother tongue of generations of Irish people, offering thus a wide enough audience even in the otherwise narrow Irish context. The language situation presents a dilemma with paralysing effects for the intellectual yet it is one that must be accepted as such since no solution exists for it.

Michael Hartnett’s short poem “Inchicore Haiku” masterfully sums up the dilemma of the contemporary Irish poet in relation to the question of the language. “My English dam bursts / and out stroll all my bastards. / Irish shakes its head.” (Hartnett 69) The antagonism of the two languages, their combat for the status of the language of poetry is given a special dimension by the history of Hartnett’s own poetic practice: a bilingual poet, he gave up his original activity of writing in English and turned exclusively towards Irish, just to be forced to recognise the futility of insisting on the latter language. As Declan Kiberd notes, Hartnett’s mission had the fruit that “he discovered that it may not be a question of a writer choosing a language, so much as a case of the language choosing to work out its characteristic genius

through a writer.” (Kiberd 588) Though his English poems, and his English with them, may be considered “bastards,” and his Irish may justly shake its head, the march of the former cannot be stopped. The personal experience of the poet lends authority to the speaker, and the phraseology he opts for embodies the dilemma itself: both “bastards” and “stroll” reflect the frustrated but doubtless understanding of the relation of the two languages.

Matthew Sweeney’s “The Eagle” suggests a possible counter-current to the usual English versus Irish relation in the choice of language for writing. Against all the charges brought against the Irish language, the poem reverses the general approach to the language question: the father’s figure choosing to write in Irish because English would not do is an open attack on the belief that the native Irish cannot compete with English. The topic decides in favour of the old language and it is the very modernity of English which renders it inadequate for the context: “the unexplained return / of the eagle to Donegal” (Sweeney 1992 10) cannot be treated in a language which is “too modern” (ibid), which is “good for plane-crashes, for unemployment” (ibid). The description consists of the past and the present, involves the coining of a new word, and includes “folklore / and folk-prophecy.” (ibid) It does not venture to say anything about the future, yet the aim is not that either – celebration and the historical dimension are targeted: “The research is new / and dodgy, but the praise / is as old as the eagle.” (ibid)

The poem, however, is cunning at the same time, since it involves the possibility of its own subversion. The end of the poem domesticates the opening irony and only traces remain but those are certainly there. The choice of the father is a rare one, so is the occasion: the English language may be too modern yet what it is capable of covering, plane-crashes and unemployment, are in fact more frequent constituents of the present than such a miraculous event as the return of the eagle. The Irish language certainly has a past yet practical wisdom favours the English. It is also of interest that the father is the one making the choice, thus the older generation is allied with the old language, which is basically a declaration of the time relation of the two languages as well which would subvert the optimism of the possibility of using the Irish instead of the English.

John Montague’s poem “A Lost Tradition” epitomises not only the relation between physical location and history in the Irish context but the principal focus of the poem is the dismal fate of the Irish language. The persona’s contemplation of a landscape coming alive as “shards of a lost tradition” (Montague 1995, 33) quickly becomes a catalogue of items all described in the English language: his native Garvaghey becomes the Rough Field in the first

step and the rest of the points of reference are also identified in the imposed language. The once historically-loaded landscape is slowly turning into something increasingly alien:

The whole landscape a manuscript  
We had lost the skill to read,  
A part of our past disinherited;  
But fumbled, like a blind man,  
Along the fingertips of instinct. (ibid)

The colonial heritage of linguistic dispossession, however, is balanced and corrected by a new development, that of state education: the Irish language is ‘revived’ as part of the school curriculum – at least on the level of the ideal(ogy). There is a fine grade of irony in the juxtaposition of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ Irish:

The last Gaelic speaker in the parish  
When I stammered my school Irish  
One Sunday after mass, crinkled  
A rusty litany of praise:  
*Tá an Ghaeilge againn arís...* (ibid)

The naïve optimism of the Irish phrase, “We have the Irish again” (ibid), is upheld for another half line in the next stanza; then the picture is quickly changed for a historical account of the failure of the O’Neill rising, an event followed by the Flight of the Earls, seen as the real beginnings of English colonisation in Ireland (cf. Vance 17). The cunning yet definitely sad choice of the word “last” indicates the practical failure of the attempt of encouraged revival in the context of a language, providing a more disappointed conclusion than the word ‘revival’ suggests in itself.

“A Grafted Tongue” enlarges the context from placenames to a full-scale view as it compresses several lifetimes into the space of a relatively short poem: it provides a close-up view of the suppression of the Irish language and its later artificial revival, thus it complements “A Lost Tradition.” Possession, dispossession and repossession follow each other in the life of succeeding generations with a repeated pattern: Irish children are forced to drop their native language and to speak English at school, losing contact slowly with their native culture – and the reverse of it is repeated later, though in a somewhat more moderate

way, with the Irish becoming a school subject for Irish-born yet English-speaking children. The method of teaching English reflects the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland as it is done with force, with each mistake severely punished by the master. The logic is clear: the Irish will become aliens in their own land, losing touch with their world and even with themselves as the “altered syllables / of your own name” (Montague 1995, 37) indicate. The process is seen as growing a second tongue, with all its implications:

To grow  
a second tongue, as  
harsh a humiliation  
as twice to be born. (ibid)

This unnatural condition is the fate of the Irish until independence changes the situation:

Decades later  
that child's grandchild's  
speech stumbles over lost  
syllables of an old order. (ibid)

The compulsory education of the Irish language for children born into the English language, however alien and imposed it may be, is also a way of growing a second tongue, and though the measures involved are less drastic, the resulting state of linguistic in-between-ness is similarly confusing. Syllables are “lost,” learning is “stumbling,” the prospect of proficiency and repossession is accordingly dubious, which is a sad recognition yet an inescapable one too.

Seamus Heaney's placename-poems illustrate one aspect of the operation of language in the specific context of Irish culture. The translated or Anglicised names, in spite of the attempt of the coloniser, still preserve something of the native culture yet their partially alien nature liberates them for the acquisition of new meanings. As language lives in the speech of succeeding generations, the new associations take their place side by side with the old ones, leading to the formation of a rich and peculiar stock of meaning. Beyond this dimension the placenames of Ireland also have the power of offering the sense of a “shared complicity” (Montague 1995, 44) for people of the same place: the unique sounds of a name are the common property of those who live there whatever community they happen to belong to yet

these sounds remain alien and difficult for others. This idea can also incorporate a seed of hope as it cuts across the otherwise rigid sectarian divide by pointing out the common element beyond all division.

“Anahorish” is on one level the tracing of how the renamed country takes on new meaning for the linguistically dispossessed. The original Irish “Anach fhiar uisce” (Parker 98) is partially preserved in the Anglicised version, though it is only the pronunciation which recalls the native. The tradition of the *dinnseanchas* is briefly recalled in the first line as the English meaning of the original Irish name is rendered as the “place of clear water” (Heaney 1990, 21), indicating the communal historical heritage of the name. The place then, however, is associated with childhood memories for the speaker and not with the ancient story preserved in the name, as a consequence of the renaming of the countryside. The name thus becomes “soft gradient / of consonant, vowel-meadow” (ibid), a sequence of sounds to be savoured and to take on a principally auditory dimension without the least indication of meaning apart from its reference to a physical location. The place in turn builds up its own associations and the “after-image of lamps / swung through the yards / on winter evenings” (ibid) is accommodated in an older cultural tradition as the “mound-dwellers” (ibid) are evoked.

The world that is lost through the renaming of the Irish countryside is slowly reclaimed as the new name comes to be possessed by the disinherited. The “first hill in the world” (ibid) exists before it is named and the child follows this sequence in his process of learning his world. The name is thus first associated with a place known from direct experience and its meaning is only recalled later, in translation from an obscure old language. In this form the name creates its own music, and when savoured and accepted it comes to be possessed by coming to life in the context of the old culture as well, acquiring meanings that link it with the previously lost world which is thus no longer beyond the reach of the disinherited and is therefore no longer lost.

“Broagh” is a placename-poem of a different kind. The lines of the poem bring together words of different origins – and these different origins emblematically correspond to the general division in Northern Ireland: the title word is Gaelic, “rigs” is Scots and “docken” is Anglo-Saxon (Parker 99). These three strains then converge in the imaginative universe of the poem towards the concept of the “ford,” a manageable section of the riverbed where crossing is possible. The idea of crossing involves a specific meaning in the Northern context yet it is only on the tentative level of the poem that a common element is found: the word “Broagh” itself, with its last sound, “that last / *gh* the strangers found / difficult to manage.”

(Heaney 1990, 25) That difficult guttural sound is endemic to the North, and the carefully articulated phrase of “the strangers” points towards a possible union beyond division, a point where division could become plurality with no hierarchy involved despite the historical sequence of the words in focus.

“A New Song” also harks back to placenames through personal memories. The narrative experience is somewhat reminiscent of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” a meeting with a girl from an exotic land, yet the exoticism of Heaney’s place derives not from physical distance but from a temporal dimension which is embodied by a placename. Derrygarve becomes “a lost potent musk” (Heaney 1990, 27) and the visual memory is immediately recollected – the river Moyola and its banks are recalled with a vividness that in turn evokes the “Vanished music, twilit water” (ibid) associated with the river. The river image presses the poem forward to the domain of language, with Heaney’s personal approach to the duality of Irish and English expressed in terms of vowels and consonants respectively (cf. Heaney quoted in Corcoran 1986, 85):

But now our river tongues must rise  
From licking deep in native haunts  
To flood, with vovelling embrace,  
Demesnes staked out in consonants. (Heaney 1990, 27)

The normal course of overwriting, however, is somewhat revised in the account: the “vovelling embrace” will (if the prediction in “must” is accepted) reconfigure relations as the “Demesnes staked out in consonants” are redefined by that embrace. The fact that language is a combination of *both* vowels and consonants is not questioned, thus the language dilemma is addressed from a different angle, and Heaney finds an unusual, but promising, potential in the interaction of the two languages, understanding it as intertwining rather than conflict.

Paul Durcan’s “The Persian Gulf” arrests a more tragic aspect of the language situation in modern Ireland. The poem draws a haunting picture of a nightmarish vision of fire eating up the building in which the speaker is situated. The train of associations is launched by the sight of the skylight, the only “escape route in the event of fire” (Durcan 1990, 110). The speaker is engaged in the exotic act of reciting the “Rosary in Irish” (ibid) – exotic as the language is no less strange to him than foreign languages are. The mind of the speaker wanders off easily – he dreams of the Persian Gulf and tries “To imagine what the skylight would look like / On fire” (ibid), without apparent success at first. Yet the enterprise yields

satisfaction as the vision of their “three-storey house going up in flames” (ibid) carries the thread of the narration away. They clamber up to the roof, the fire brigade invades the neighbouring streets and the moment of being rescued nears – just to collapse in the wake of the reaction of the father. The fireman receives the Irish sentence “We don’t speak English” and then he disappears, taking the rescue team with him, leaving the refugees “to burn to death speaking Irish.” (Durcan 1990, 111) The surrealistic picture of the ruins of the house “floating upstream” (ibid) in the Persian Gulf concludes the poem and this image leaves the poem suspended in an exotic world.

The exotic practice of reciting the Rosary in Irish turns out to be a fatal luxury in the vision of the speaker – the insistence of the father on a language virtually devoid of practical applicability is responsible for the perishing of the family. Though Durcan presents an experience in the form of a dream, the suggestions are easily decoded: a proud and defiant insistence on an outdated and impractical habit out of equally outdated and impractical hatred is not only absurd but outright destructive too.

Another aspect of the language issue is education, especially in the humanities since the medium decides much of the content of this. A switch from one language to another thus involves potentially far-reaching consequences and something similar is outlined in Eavan Boland’s “In Which the Ancient History I Learn is not My Own.” The poem explores the speaker’s school years in London with history lessons in the focus. The choice is definitely not without its profound reverberations: history is the foundation of cultural identity, and the spatial transfer of the speaker from her native place in Ireland to the foreign city of London indicates a dislocation in terms of her belonging. The history which is tackled, however, is something alien even in the medium of the English language since its focus is the world of ancient Greece, thus further dislocation is suggested which is at once a levelling of the previous one since it is equally alien to the native English of London.

The account begins with a map which is worn and faded, nevertheless the permanence of representation remains a fact. The map is that of Britain, and in a way the date, 1952, renders the decline of the map hauntingly accurate in terms of the Empire itself. The speaker recognises the growing distance between herself and her native Ireland, which is further emphasised by the noticing of the change of the colour of the Irish Sea: it has become the same hue as that of “the pale gaze / of a doll’s china eyes – / a stare without recognition or memory.” (Boland 1994, 28) The speaker prepares a countermove to balance the situation and to reduce the oppression of foreign education: she recounts memories of an “Ancient History Class” (Boland 1994, 29). The Roman Empire is evoked, with an unmistakeably inserted

reminder of the British Empire as the ultimate in terms of perfection, and the Delphic Oracle is mentioned with its alleged significance of being “*the exact centre / of the earth.*” (ibid) The meaning of history is at once reinterpreted, the speaker’s wish is to stand in front of the map and turn all her attention to Ireland, “To read out names / I was close to forgetting” (ibid), “To ask / where exactly / was my old house.” (Boland 1994, 30) The memory of the house is recalled in its brass number, the steps and the scent of a lilac tree, defining history in terms of details which may appear trivial but are ones which acquire meaning for the individual. This, though, is abruptly cut short by the voice of the teacher explaining to the pupils the difficulties of the journey to the oracle and the ambiguous prophecies which the ancients received there.

The title of the poem already raises a number of considerations in relation to the question of identity. Ancient history, by virtue of its distance from the present, can easily be seen as alien, especially in the light of population movements in the western world. Though Ireland may lay claims to a legendary history stretching back to ancient times, canonical history involves other political formations. Indeed, it would be ‘difficult’ to learn ancient history anywhere on the continent with a clear-cut line of continuity between past and present. On another level the speaker’s uprooting and, in spite of this, insistence on her Irish origins calls for an examination of the concept of history as well. This broadens the circle of those for whom ancient, or any other kind of, history does not provide practical knowledge or a tangible concept of the past. The pupil, though from the perspective of the adult recollecting self, understands the past only on a scale on which she possesses memories, thus her former house and patria are history and not the incomprehensible mass of data from a time scale that is beyond her grasp. This kind of education, however, serves another purpose: it builds up some sort of national consciousness, yet the speaker’s outsider position renders this a futile goal – she does not want to become what she is not. There is then a fine response to Yeats’s “Among School Children,” readjusting Yeats’s thoughts for the poem – “the old thought that life prepares for what never happens” (Jeffares 251): it is rather education that could, and perhaps should, stand instead of “life” in Boland’s approach.

In contrast to the general hostilities there is a rather peaceful reconciliation of two diverging traditions in Ciaran Carson’s “Second Language.” The poem makes no explicit conflict between the two languages, though perhaps the greater force of English is shown by its connection with writing, which in turn can also be seen as the second language referred to in the title. “Second Language” is an account of coming into the possession of a language, or rather, of acquiring another ‘native’ language after one is already in possession of the speaker.

The title imports autobiographical material into the poem by alluding to the fact that Carson himself was a native speaker of Irish before he acquired his English in the street, picking it up rather than learning it.

The poem opens with a surrealistic non-language system: the preverbal state is composed and constructed with the help of images and impressions of colours and shapes, and this state nearly blends into another, equally strange situation, that of an Irish-speaking child. In a weird way the possession of the Irish language seems to be linked with immersion in Latin, yet this does not work on the literal level; the exoticism of a no longer spoken language opens figurative parallels with the Irish dimension. Urban, mainly industrial noises hang like a curtain in the background of this strange process, and once the speaker's recollected self acquires a language, the experience becomes more encompassing, with objects now seen as "a hieroglyphic alphabet" (Carson 1993, 12). The 'revolutionary' change comes with a dawn: "I woke up, verbed and tensed with speaking English" (ibid). This moment opens yet other perspectives, "the as-yet morning, when no one's abroad" (ibid), which is a particular time of day with the potential of vision as well as an uncharted territory for individual exploration. English also brings writing, and what this may bring is as yet unknown and unpredictable: "What comes next is next, as no one knows the che sera of it." (Carson 1993, 13) The future-might-bring-anything idea is cunningly checked by a shift back into past tense, rendering the experience a dream in the last moment; however, it is at the same time the reinforcement of the narrative thread governing the poem: "I woke up blubbering and dumb with too much sleep. I rubbed my eyes and ears. / I closed my eyes again and flittingly, forgetfully, I glimpsed the noise of years." (ibid)

### 5.3. RETURNS AND REPOSSESSIONS

The question of tradition involves manoeuvres which help clarifying its elements or facilitate an immersion in it. Returns to the past bring about imaginary meetings with legendary heroes or significant representatives of certain traditions, and such figures can assume a present importance as they provide guiding or simply act as examples for contemporary poets. These returns are at once attempts to repossess the past which is distanced from the present not only by time but political history too – the switch from one language to another with the subsequent decline of the original native language poses a strong obstacle in the way of otherwise easy-looking imaginative exercises.

Returns usually involve distant periods of the past even if the distance itself can make such attempts problematic. The medium of the legendary history of Ireland is the Irish language yet this does not stand in the way of successful retrievals of the past. John Montague's wish in *The Rough Field* to return to the world of his upbringing and its self-confessed failure is an acute reminder that temporal distance itself is not decisive – the all-pervasive process of change in the present and a more intimate knowledge of the recent past pose a more immediate challenge for the honesty of the poet yet the failure brings recognition as well as it throws light on the operation of the human imagination and on the nature of modern change.

A significant part of Thomas Kinsella's poetic activity is the project of exploration directed towards his specifically Irish heritage – basically the tradition in which he works. When addressing the problem of tradition, Kinsella's plight is that of possessing a language originally not his own. The English language does not automatically mean the acquisition of a tradition as well: through English a tradition is available but it is alien, whereas the native Irish tradition is only accessible by a change of language, thus its utilisation involves an exercise of translation, which creates an observable discontinuity. Significant parts of Kinsella's poetic oeuvre, however, manage to prove that the heritage which is generally considered lost due to this shift from one language to another is not lost at all, moreover, that they provide a richly allusive addition to the English stock of references and connotations by importing distinctively Irish material into the universe of English-language poetry.

Kinsella's first project of employing early Irish literary material in his own poetry was the collection *Notes from the Land of the Dead*. The basically dramatic strategy and modernist techniques render private memories side by side and mixed with communal mythic elements, and they pursue a course of investigation with the aim of answering the basic questions of identity, who I am and where I come from, which is the question of tradition on the level of artistic activity.

The sequence, as it is incorporated in a somewhat revised version into *Collected Poems 1956-1994* under the heading *From the Land of the Dead*, begins with an exotic woman figure on her knees with her fingers reaching down into a river. Kinsella conflates the story of Genesis from *The Book of Invasions (Lebor Gabála Erenn)* with the woman figure to offer a vision of the four rivers of Paradise, making her the agent of the division of the one rivulet into four rivers running towards the four cardinal points. There is a jump forward in time as "Survivor" employs the figure of Fintan as its speaker: Fintan is also a borrowing from *The Book of Invasions*, he is the only human being surviving the first invasion of Ireland

and he is also a poet, left alone on the island with fifty women, choosing to escape them and spending the time of the Flood in a state of hibernation in a cave. The setting of the poem in a cave implies darkness and mystery, offering a potent parallel with the subconscious, yet it is not any cave: it is “High near the heart of the mountain” (Kinsella 1996, 114) and is a unique one as it “escaped the Deluge” (ibid) and “it will play some part on the Last Day.” (ibid) The description of the cave and note-like instances of a near-animal state of existence are followed by the story of the search for a new land. The neatly formed sentences of the journey are abruptly replaced by note-like phrases again as the landing provides a less pleasant situation of shrieking women and a mysterious illness: the parallels between Paradise and the newly found land, though numerous and significant, are quickly balanced by the differences – though Ireland is believed to have no beasts, it is not an idyllic place either: “Perpetual twilight. A last outpost in the gloom. / A land of the dead.” (Kinsella 1996, 115)

The tactics of including a short poem under the title “Endymion” links the sequence with Greek mythology, providing a more distant link with tradition, and at the same time making Fintan appear in a somewhat different light. “At the Crossroads” is set at a crucial point both spatially and temporally, thus it provides a rich metaphoric potential. The spot is haunted by the carcass of a dog and the memory of earlier hangings, and the time is “A night when the moon is full / and swims with evil through the trees” (Kinsella 1996, 117) – the full moon is the point when waxing gives way to waning. The poem closes with the image of hunger satisfied and the subsequent feeling of emptiness filling the rest of the cycle of hunger and satisfaction, “until hunger returns.” (Kinsella 1996, 118) The literal level of the cycle is that of hunger and satisfaction, the basic conflict of life in all its manifestations; on another level, though, the cycle evokes *The Book of Invasions*: the account of the various takings of Ireland offers a parallel story of dialectical forces in conflict, that of the land and the invaders. Fintan is the only survivor of the first legendary invasion of Ireland; the land ‘swallows’ the other invaders and hungers for the next conquerors – just to wait for others after them.

The rest of the sequence proceeds without explicit reliance on the mythic material; there are occasional cross references to the earlier pieces but the focus turns towards less specifically Irish influences. There are, however, hints at the world immediately and directly forming the poet’s consciousness – events and institutions of the present and the recent past provide a subtle system of links with the distant past, thus realising what Kinsella aims to produce, an exploration of the subconscious with a profound interest in the specifically Irish elements found there.

The later poem “Finistère” recounts the arrival of the Celts in Ireland, thus it continues Kinsella’s previous treatment of early Irish legendary histories. The story is narrated by Amergin, the first poet of Ireland. The hardships of the sea journey are described: the anxiety, the nightmares and dreams on the way and the relief at landing, though it is not without difficulties. The occasion of stepping ashore is a special one, requiring a due commemoration. The opening words of the Lord’s Prayer are certainly incongruent, and the subsequent “little laughter” (Kinsella 1996, 170) prepares the ground for the poet: the first poem of Ireland is recited, with clues to the mystery of poetic inspiration as well. All this is recollected as the bracketed interjections indicate, and this also explains why the end of the poem is not a conclusion – it ‘closes’ on a question and a remark in parentheses.

“The Oldest Place” takes up the thread of narration where the previous one let off, with a repetition of the shoreward movement, or rather, of the memory of it. Life in the newly invaded land is described, in the manner of a loose chronicle. The speaker carries memories from an earlier time too, embodying what appears to be the memory of the land: when he asserts that “The sickness and the dying began again” (Kinsella 1996, 172), he refers to one of the earlier invasions when a mysterious illness wiped out the population. This curious sickness which leads to the decline of the population is already familiar from *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, yet that is an earlier invasion, which creates a somewhat ambiguous situation for the poem. This is further increased when the speaker falls ill, alone, and a dream is recounted, with the final image of the disintegration of a human being – who is apparently the speaker himself.

Kinsella’s poetic quest for the roots of his Irishness thus comes to an interesting halt as he abandons the legendary material at that point. Perhaps the source story has its influence or Kinsella’s general belief in the gapped and discontinuous tradition makes him interrupt his quest, but his later poems take different directions in the poet’s overarching pattern of enquiry into his own psyche. The imaginative identification with Amergin is presented in the context of the first successful invasion, which on one level indicates that Kinsella has achieved what he wanted, the reaching of the shore is a moment of rest, the end of a journey, and as new life begins after settling down, the new direction in Kinsella’s poetry is also implied.

John Montague’s poems on themes of early Irish literature offer another approach to the same set of texts as used by Kinsella yet Montague does not build a theory around this heritage. His renderings are inspired pieces but they do not envision any such quest as do Kinsella’s and the pieces remain individual ones without being incorporated into such a sequence as it happens in Kinsella. Montague’s focus is on one particular figure, the survivor

Fintan, which suggests that even though the poems do not follow an elaborate pattern, they still address the question of tradition itself.

“The First Invasion of Ireland” is based on *The Book of Invasions*, and it describes the first settlers, the strangely composed company of fifty-one women and three men. The island “without serpent or claw” (Montague 1995, 209) is an ideal destination before the Flood: the closer perspective of the arrival is even more attractive as “A sweet confluence of waters, a trinity of rivers / Was their first resting place.” (ibid) The reassuring sense of unity suggested by “trinity” is quickly lost as a “division of damsels they did there” (ibid); yet something of this kind is expected to happen due to the composition of the company. The first casualties of the island are two men out of the three – they are exhausted by the company of women, and the third man, Fintan, chooses to escape as a necessary precondition for survival. The men are evoked as the first men “To sleep with women in Ireland” (ibid) yet this somewhat dubious glory is replaced by the picture of the company of women on a headland watching the water rise, with the inevitable conclusion wholly felt and known but not made explicit.

“Survivor” continues from where the other poem let off: it centres on Fintan, the only survivor among the first invaders, who escaped the Flood in a state of hibernation-like sleep in a cave undisturbed by the cataclysm. The first picture is that of the preparation, Fintan waiting against the wailing of women as he watches the flood rise. Then a miraculous transformation is indicated as his figure metamorphoses into that of a fish. The explanation for such a change is offered: “Nothing human would last” (Montague 1995, 321). The actual duration of this ‘adventure’ is quickly summed up, the “centuries” (ibid) are briefly mentioned and hastily passed over for the equally compressed representation of the reappearance of the solid earth after the flood. The Simple Past gives way to a tentative “Life might begin again” (ibid), which is concluded by the awakening of Fintan from his sleep: all his energy is compressed into the move which signals the new beginning as “He lunges upwards.” (ibid) The poem does not venture any further, the result of this final move is not introduced, the speaker decides to close the poem on this note of the potential, offering a number of possible conclusions to the story.

Fintan’s position as the only survivor of the invasion prompts a number of suggestions. The rather heavily one-sided composition of the settlers is further tilted towards women with the death of the two men, and Fintan’s choice of escape dooms the women to extinction, a fate he would logically share with them in his isolation, yet he is saved by that miraculous sleep in the cave. Fintan’s rejection of the fertility associated with women by choosing exile appears prophetic in the Irish context and is perhaps a move that resonates in a

profound way for Montague himself, being a son of an exile. Where Montague's ingenuity complements the original story of *The Book of Invasions* is Fintan's transformation into a fish-figure: this episode is not included in the legendary story, yet the motif of becoming one with his surroundings would also find echoes in the later rebel figures referred to as "Root eaters" by Kinsella (Kinsella 1996, 46) and the "wood-kerne" of Heaney (Heaney 1975, 67). The end of the story, in spite of the promise of a new beginning, is still dubious – one single man's future projects a foreseeable conclusion, and as *The Book of Invasions* indicates, a subsequent invasion would populate Ireland after Fintan's adventure. On another level, however, Fintan's survival involves the seed of hope as it comments on the fate of the Irish tradition, too: the legend, against the odds of linguistic dispossession, still finds its way into contemporary poetry.

Despite his hint at his own 'foreign' origins in the poem "On Slieve Gullion" (cf. M. Longley 1985, 198), Michael Longley also uses early Irish mythic material in some of his poems; Longley's interest, however, lies in the present relevance of the stories themselves. In the four sections of "Smoke in the Branches" legendary figures of Irish history make their appearance. All the characters are taken from stories which deal with trials of various kinds and the moments in which they are captured are stressful ones. Fergus, once the King of Ulster is caught in a nightmare and it is only a silent and therefore unheard scream he is capable of uttering; Muircertach is nearly blind with rage for the loss of his beloved woman, and the jester of Mar Fothartaig is an object of laughter not for his achievement but for his agony in dying.

The legendary history is quickly recognised as a potent emblem for the conflict of the present: "a battlefield slushy with brains" (M. Longley 1985, 197) taken from the Ulster cycle fits perfectly the late twentieth-century vista of the modern version of the same province; similarly, murderous intrigue and betrayal are general enough to be adjusted to a present world as well. That a Northern Protestant poet should turn to such mythic precedent could be regarded as a surprise yet the evoked material belongs to a period well before any sectarian division, therefore Irishness precedes religious affiliations in Longley's response, and at the same time it indicates the presence of conflict predating the all-encompassing sectarian one. Longley's return, then, is to a world that would appear familiar in a number of its constituents for any modern citizen of Ireland regardless of their sectarian stance.

Seamus Heaney's poem "Digging," besides its autobiographical significance, involves a more general dimension, that of tradition in the Irish context. The poem echoes the poet-persona's wish to align himself with his immediate ancestors, father and grandfather, in spite

of his different occupation. The farmer father and turf-cutter grandfather are easily seen in a relation of continuity as their physical work locks them into a close bond with the soil as both are engaged in a daily interaction with it using their iconic spades. The youngest generation, however, is entangled in mental work, grabbing a pen instead of a spade, though not succumbing to the common belief that it is a lighter tool than the old shared one. The drive to align himself with his ancestors and to establish the continuity in their occupations despite the obvious discontinuity is expressed in the metaphoric transformation of writing into a form of digging:

But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it. (Heaney 1966, 2)

Discontinuity and continuity are present simultaneously since the image of successive generations masterfully embodies both concepts.

Heaney's much later "Station Island" conducts a different sort of exploration as it offers the story of a pilgrimage with a destination which is the most well-known Irish site. His aim, however, is different from that of usual pilgrims: he arrives at Lough Derg not in the spirit of holy contemplation but as an artist with questions to answer, thus with the intention of widening his knowledge. His pilgrimage is accordingly different from the experience of others: his days are filled with the visionary appearance of various spirits, each with his own ideas and directions which finally converge and find their conclusion in an encouragement to trust his vision. Heaney's quest is one for a tradition too – the 'counsellors' he chooses create a gallery of people who can be seen as embodying a tradition which the speaker can consider as his own, and thus the quest itself may be understood as an attempt at a return to that tradition.

The Sunday beginning is disturbed by the sight of a man with a saw and the speaker immediately recognises Simon Sweeney, "an old Sabbath-breaker" (Heaney 1984, 61) – he is already dead yet his spirit returns to continue his usual practice of not observing the sacredness of Sunday. Sweeney's advice to the speaker is "Stay clear of all processions" (Heaney 1984, 63), foreshadowing the appearance and advice of Joyce, the last to appear among the evoked figures; though Sweeney has no theory of artistic creation, his simple

common sense points at the same direction as the prestigious literary father does. After Sweeney's withdrawal the contemplating speaker's peace is interrupted by the appearance of "an aggravated man" (Heaney 1984, 64) hurrying along the road – it is the figure of William Carleton, a Catholic turned Protestant, thus a remarkable figure from the point of view of Northern divisions. Carleton's first words voice a rather disheartening recognition: "O holy Jesus Christ, does nothing change?" (ibid) The explanation follows soon and the speaker's brief account of his upbringing indicates that contexts may change but hostilities and divisions are constant ingredients of life. Carleton's advice suggests a different approach yet the final focus is the same: "remember everything and keep your head" (Heaney 1984, 66).

The speaker meets a young priest in the communion who spent years in the tropics on missionary work and died there. Memories of the man as a student are recounted and this evokes an old world no longer easily understood. The words of the priest indicate this shift, the decline of a world in which religion was an unquestioned ingredient of daily life. The speaker's presence in the site puzzles the priest for this very reason – in a world from which "the god has, as they say, withdrawn" (Heaney 1984, 70), the speaker's participation in such an old ritual is basically unintelligible for the priest unless it happens because some very unnerving reason is the motivation: "Unless you are here taking the last look" (Heaney 1984, 71) – the last look at a disappearing world. There is a personal context suggested by Parker, that of the renunciation of faith in the Catholic Church (Parker 197), yet a more general context is also implied. As if to underline such a perspective, there is a sudden vision of the spot going bare, embedded in a memory of witnessing the death of a sick man.

The next section is composed of meetings with a different 'masters' as former teachers of Heaney make their appearance. Among them a strange presence is Patrick Kavanagh, who reproaches the speaker for following his footsteps and not getting any further than that. Kavanagh's figure, in spite of his words, cuts a rather friendly one in comparison to the next one: the spirit of a man appears who was murdered in the sectarian atrocities and the wound of the bullet through his head is visible, with the blood dried on his face and neck. He recounts the circumstances of his murder, a late night visit by two unmasked men tricking him to open his shop and then shooting him dead. The actual details of the murder are revealed in conversation, involving the speaker as well, and this raises earlier memories of the man, drawing a confession from the speaker: "Forgive the way I have lived indifferent – / forgive my timid circumspect involvement" (Heaney 1984, 80). This surprising honesty raises a similar mood in the spirit, yet the irony in his utterance is impossible to miss: "'Forgive / my eye,' he said, 'all that's above my head'." (ibid) Another victim of the Troubles is less

generous in his words: it is the cousin figure commemorated in the poem “The Strand at Lough Beg.” He reproaches the speaker for his evasive behaviour, and the speaker’s apology does not satisfy him as he accuses the poet of taking part in his murder by the aestheticisation of the murder: “you whitewashed ugliness and drew / the lovely blinds of the Purgatorio / and saccharined my death with morning dew.” (Heaney 1984, 83)

Yet another victim is evoked, a hunger striker; he gives a vivid account of his ‘life’ in prison, from the blanket days to the proceedings of the hunger strike which claimed his life. The status of the figure, however, is more ambivalent than those of the previous ones – his prison location places him at an angle to law and order, unlike the innocent victims conjured before. There is indeed some similarity in the account of the hunger striker with those of the bog bodies (cf. Parker 201). This works to a double purpose: it reconsiders Heaney’s earlier poetic tactics as well as grounds the figure in a more complex context than that of a ‘simple’ victim.

The experience has not gone undigested for the speaker: his education so far is concluded by a self-reproach following dreams of a polyp and a brass trumpet. The shaving mirror compels the speaker to an exercise of self-evaluation, marking a crucial point in his visionary pilgrimage: “I hate how quick I was to know my place. / I hate wher3e I was born, hate everything / That made me biddable and unforthcoming.” (Heaney 1984, 85) The moment is perhaps a bit overdone yet it throws light on the speaker’s recognition that in his response to the world around him conditioning and reflex action have sometimes taken the place of thinking and genuine open-mindedness. The assessment also functions as a preparation for the last phase of his pilgrimage, with a more humble approach and a greater willingness to receive what is offered.

The fresh energies of the morning perhaps contribute to the vision of a monk whose instruction “Read poems as prayers” (Heaney 1984, 89) translates poetry out of its sphere, yet acknowledges its subordination to some higher power and agency. The subsequent litany-like stanzas drag the speaker back into the usual mood of the pilgrimage, yet this section functions more like a preparation for the climactic last scene than to deter attention from the speaker’s wish for instruction. The last figure to make his appearance is the spirit of Joyce, who offers a hand for the speaker when he steps ashore. The literal gesture turns into a metaphorical one in the course of their conversation. Joyce’s directions are in line with his old obsessions of renouncing obligations by tyrannical agents such as nation, church and family, yet they are also informed by Heaney’s own dilemmas concerning the ethical aspects of remaining aloof from these. The pilgrimage becomes an emblem of such subjugations to external authorities,

and with the end of the pilgrimage it is time to break free of them too – “You’ve listened long enough. Now strike your note.” (Heaney 1984, 93) Joyce’s approach to the language issue is also instructive: he dismisses the nostalgia which characterises the linguistic situation in Ireland, asserting that “The English language / belongs to us.” (ibid) What was a certainty for Joyce in the first half of the twentieth century should not appear as a question at all in the second half; still it surfaces in the tentative intentions of Gaelic revivalists, which annoys the spirit:

You are raking at dead fires,  
  
a waste of time for somebody your age.  
That subject people stuff is a cod’s game,  
infantile, like your peasant pilgrimage. (ibid)

The advice in such a context is self-contained:

Keep at a tangent.  
When they make the circle wide, it’s time to swim  
  
out on your own and fill the element  
with signatures on your own frequency,  
echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements,  
  
elver-gleams in the dark of the whole ocean. (Heaney 1984, 93-94)

As if to continue and support the watery imagery, a shower closes the scene and the poem at the same time; the figure of Joyce moves off, and the cleansing water, coupled with the last piece of advice, completes the pilgrimage.

Though the imaginary Joyce declares Heaney’s pilgrimage “infantile,” it does have a use for the poet-speaker. Heaney’s wish for continuous regeneration and renewal on the level of poetic creation finds assurance in the voices and what he feels in relation to his earlier poetry comes to be justified in his reflexive ‘others.’ Heaney’s return then is one that functions both as a summing up as well as a new beginning, yet the latter can only be carried

out if what has gone before is assessed and digested – the whole project is seen as a necessary precondition for creative work.

Brendan Kennelly's poem "My Dark Fathers" has for its starting point an even more advanced recognition of the necessity of accepting the past yet this can be understood as a rather surprising direction if its time of publication is concerned. A poem from the early 1960s, it regards the poet's tragic inheritance as a source of power and creativity rather than something to be ashamed about and to mourn for, and it is done with a remarkable sense of certainty. The poem offers a catalogue of sufferings from the past in the form of unspecified general events, though the references to the Famine are easily identified. The suffering *par excellence* comes to be seen as the general lot of the Munster people, yet the speaker does not exclude more vigorous moments of life either – dance and song also belong to that world, though even these are powerless in the face of such catastrophes as the Famine.

The poem basically circles around the motif of the famine. The opening stanza's meagre picture of couples tied to each other is further darkened by the "swelling gloom" (Kennelly 1990, 18), culminating in the image of the "child within the pit of doom" (ibid). Before the tragedy, however, the "sandy Kerry shore" (Kennelly 1990, 19) was home to the joyous activity of dancing, as the single woman figure indicates. Yet not even she can escape the sweep of "The awful absence moping through the land" (ibid) and the music is gone in the wake of the absence of those who used to sing. This is that heritage that is handed down to the speaker by his Kerry origins and this is the source to draw from:

Since every moment of the clock  
Accumulates to form a final name,  
Since I am come of Kerry clay and rock,  
I celebrate the darkness and the shame  
That could compel a man to turn his face  
Against the wall, withdrawn from light so strong  
And undeceiving, spancelled in a place  
Of unapplauding hands and broken song. (ibid)

What is only advice for Heaney is already certainty and actual guideline for Kennelly. There is no wish to return to anything, rather, it is an example of a successful accommodation of whatever is contained in the past: the past has been accepted and turned into an integral part of one's own consciousness. Even if it is tragic, it is that heritage which belongs to the

speaker and is thus the one to be embraced and utilised as the source of his present being, and it is a heritage which can be celebrated. The determination of the speaker to take this as his starting point indicates that he has accepted that past and intends to treat it in its own proper terms, and this establishes firmly what is considered tradition in the wake of T. S. Eliot's theory – this is that “historical sense” which “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (Eliot in Lodge 72).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The island giving home to the two political units of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is situated at the western periphery of Europe but is no longer an isolated place. Physical proximity and historical processes lock the two formations into an elaborate web of relations and the fact that both are members of the European Union further increases the close interrelatedness of the two parts of the island. The Irish experience, then, can be assessed properly only if the physical geographical reference of the word Ireland is considered as this is the concept that is broad enough to include the pluralism which is covered by the deceptively simple-looking word 'Irishness.'

Much (even most) of contemporary Irish poetry is written in the English language, which accounts for a peculiar situation for the poets. Through the medium of English the audience of Irish poetry is significantly wider than the small population of the island, and this poetry is also incorporated into a larger body of literature, that of poetry in the English language. The same medium, however, does not equal uniformity as contemporary Irish poetry written in the English language is set apart from other English-language poetries by a number of features which are specifically Irish. The technical aspect is that of tone (cf. Johnston 53-73), whereas the frequent themes of place, history and cultural components provide a net of distinctive features which set contemporary Irish poetry on its special course.

On the thematic level contemporary Irish poetry can be assessed by the examination of the categories of place, history and cultural continuity. These categories provide a framework in which the experience of Irishness can be approached and described. The categories can be examined in isolation from each other yet this separation is only temporary and arbitrarily proposed as they are intimately and intricately connected with one another. The interrelatedness of place and history finds its analogue in the relation of space and time as dimensions of the world inhabited by the human being, whereas cultural continuity brings together and unites the former two categories to embody what is covered by the general term identity.

The chosen categories imply a strong sense of post-colonial dimension to the Irish experience yet some care must be taken when approaching modern Ireland, South and North alike, from a post-colonial angle. Edna Longley rightly calls attention to the fact that the case of Ireland is "internal European colonisation" (E. Longley 1994, 30) and is thus different from post-colonial formations in the Third World. The history of power relations between Britain

and Ireland supports the possibility of a post-colonial approach yet the poetry of the period beginning with the 1960s and leading up to the end of the century shows preoccupations with more immediately practical dimensions and considerations such as recent economic development in a global context and its reverberations in other fields of life or deep-running sectarian conflict, though it must be admitted that such themes are coloured by the heritage of the colonial period.

The category of place involves diverse references due to the wide scope of the term. Human habitation defines the division of place into landscape and settlements, and the latter is subdivided into urban and rural locations. The urban world is dominated by cities on the expense of towns, and the rural is better replaced by the notion of the country since it can include farmhouses and villages as the proper representatives of the rural as well as country towns which would, however, normally qualify as urban locations. The political division of the island duplicates the representatives of the categories yet many similarities can be detected in the treatment of the categories both South and North of the border.

Landscapes exist prior to and next to human presence. The haunting beauty of the island in itself would prompt poetic reactions yet the sense of belonging there endows the landscape with special significance. The landscape is the world beyond human civilisation, a world where man is only a spectator and even an intruder on occasion, and this is the world which complements the human one due to its seeming permanence as opposed to the palpable temporality of man's enterprise. This permanence is real as well as illusory as the most frequently chosen locations are coastal areas which embody a duality of the static and the dynamic: the constant movement of waves is only apparent and it seems to be stationary over time, yet it is also in the world of the shore that change can be observed in the domain of landforms – the work of the sea is more easily noticed than the work of any other exogenetic force on any other landform. In addition to the coast lakes also catch the attention of observers – these short-lived geographical phenomena provide visionary moments in which nearly transcendental experiences are intimated.

The world of human habitation is not uniform as it is shared out between the major categories of urban and rural. The slow but definite shift from the latter towards the former is an indication of the modernisation reshaping the face of both South and North. The strength of the urban is all the more remarkable since the urban world, especially that of cities, was the target of hostile opinions due to their nature as cultural melting places which cause the loss of the stable sense of identity. The accounts of urban locations focus mainly on the capital cities and centre round the less glorious aspects of modern city life. The greater concentration of

population involves a wider social spectrum and this inevitably contains elements which are less favourable from the point of view of any ideology, which in a way manages to undermine the idea of the city as melting place – certain elements *are* excluded from assimilation. Dublin is a reminder of the double-faced nature of modernisation where the surface polish does not fully cover the survival of old miseries, and Belfast retains its depressing industrial landmarks well after the decline of those industries and the rejuvenation of the city. The tendency for dehumanisation is strong, and profound revelatory moments are rare and they occur in unexpected moments such as night or early morning or are intimated by the landscape beyond the city, though even destruction can yield occasions for discovery in a city ravaged by paramilitary activities.

The official ideology of the Republic singled out the Irish countryside as the source of regeneration and renewal yet the country has failed to live up to the expectations. Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* dissolved any romantic mist overhanging the humble contentment of state-induced pastoralism, and for poets brought up in a rural environment the observable gap between reality and ideology is not a simple illusion. The Irish country is most often described as a backward place in terms of economic development, and deprivation is a feature not only of that sphere of life: hypocrisies, prejudices and bigotries abound. The vision of the unspoilt nature of country people is subverted on several occasions and the suggestion is the clear interrelatedness of deprivation and ignorance which proves to be a highly dangerous combination. Though the country is a place of smaller populations the range and degree of hostilities do not look radically more constrained than in the urban world of cities.

As the island is divided into two political formations, the physical reminder of partition cannot be left out of consideration either. The border, an abstract notion as well as an observable location, possesses ready metaphoric and even symbolic dimensions. The border zone is a strange place of strange events and encounters with strange characters and the impression is that of another world altogether where normal categories come to be suspended. Interpretations of the border are different for different communities, with membership in the European Union further complicating the case, yet the inhabitants of the border zone often recognise an inherent element of absurdity both in the location and in the concept of the border; this absurdity amounts to total irrelevance in a number of cases as even the locals themselves do not know the exact whereabouts of the border.

Though the border, even in its reduced significance, serves as a marker of division, there are visions which point beyond it and regard the island in another perspective. The West of Ireland is that place where the political division loses its relevance since the simple

mentioning of the region evokes a world preceding partition and as such it negates the now traditional-looking political units. The West is the hinterland in several approaches, the place that is a reservoir of the genuine elements of Irishness – in the light of which it is certainly remarkable that most accounts of the West do not proceed further than the landscape and dismiss the human participation in the life of the region. Economic deprivation and backwardness would definitely not look neat as late twentieth-century ideals thus the elimination of most of the human presence is a sign of the revision of the concept of the genuine position of the West as a repository of traditional Irishness. The power of the landscape remains undiminished yet the distance separating this seemingly timeless world from the rather prosaic actual one is recognised in a number of accounts.

The political division comes to be dismissed in accounts other than those of the West too. Though historical and socio-economic changes may lead to different ways of development, the physical properties of the island show remarkable consistency throughout the whole area. This prompts the vision of Ireland as “Bogland,” overwriting and annihilating divisions in a generous account in which the horizontal is superseded by the vertical and the whole island becomes one undivided and indivisible unit. Complementing this vision there is the one of the ubiquity of certain social features, violence and liberation, proving the Yeatsian thesis of the “Great hatred, little room” (Yeats 217): despite all differences the two parts of Ireland are tied together by certain important common features.

The troubled past of Ireland both South and North, together with the recognition that the present is the would-be past, makes history one of the major themes in contemporary Irish poetry. The busy early part of the twentieth century was followed by less eventful decades until the 1960s when changes made the historical perspective an important one again. These changes were principally economic in the Republic and political in Northern Ireland, leading to massive social changes in the former case and violent conflict and basically civil war in the latter. Both parts of the island thus offered new phenomena to contemplate and the newly emerging generations of poets addressed those situations with fresh energies to produce a significant body of poetry focusing on the historical dimension of Irishness. Though accounts of the past are present, contemporary poets display a strong preference for the age of which they form a part and tend to depict aspects of the present rather than of the past.

The recent history of the Republic appears a less inspiring raw material as economic changes, though they lead to social and cultural ones as well, are rarely considered exciting topics to address. Patrick Kavanagh’s legitimisation of the local and insignificant in the poem “Epic,” however, can encourage the assessment of the not too spectacular contemporary

history of the South. The overspill of violence from the Northern conflict offers occasional moments for the expression of outrage and it also serves to remind the population of the Republic of the benefits of an uneventful present. In most cases poets focus on aspects of change, or the lack of it in spite of official propaganda, or they single out events which would draw the attention of the media as well due to their nature. The figure of Eamon de Valera makes his appearance on a number of occasions as the metonymic representative of the founding ideologies of the Republic which predominantly reflect *his* own ideals – just as the ideologies themselves, their mastermind draws contrary responses. The Catholic Church also receives substantial attention as in part a defender and propagandist of those ideologies which govern(ed) the life of the state, and the Church does not appear in an exclusively positive light. The institution embodies bigotries and hypocrisies as well as exemplary features, and the suggestion is unmistakable that the Church should leave the field of politics because its function is essentially something else than the practice of secular powers.

Northern Ireland is in many ways a more potent field for observations due to the inherent divisions of its society. The escalation of political and later paramilitary violence provides a rich stimulus yet the conflict involves a moral dimension which cannot be overlooked by poets. Moral considerations put a brake on the poets and some of them even refrain from commenting on the situation, yet the condemnation of violence, and of division as well, is a uniform approach even if the technical aspect of the responses shows several differences. Enquiries into the motivation of the violence are rare; it is rather events and even more their palpable consequences which are treated with the strong suggestion of the absurdity of the violence as it is capable only of destruction and does not promote the resolution of the conflict.

Among the responses to the conflict there are highly personal ones which successfully translate the abstract notion of violence into practically understood loss. The painfully wide scale of atrocities inevitably brings even the most detached into contact with the events through personal involvement. Relatives and friends are lost in the conflict or unknown casualties awaken imaginative parallels with relatives who had a close encounter with violence in other wars. The former case involves a strong elegiac impulse which has the danger of colouring the events through the haze of memory, whereas the latter offers an opportunity for the reassessment of the figure used for authenticating the poet's voice. The personal thus controls the communal and provides an interpretation of it in terms which are painfully intelligible on a practical scale.

Literary precedents can also help approaching the present dislocated by violence. Classical elements from Homeric epics provide analogies of stressful moments and their application to the present through the exercise of translation throws light on dimensions of the conflict not considered otherwise – the most notable instance is the parallel with the meeting between Priam and Achilles which concludes with the recognition that the solution of any conflict involves sacrifice yet there *is* always a solution, a solution which is at once tantalisingly difficult and embarrassingly simple. The classical world also offers a strong contrast by a celebratory vision of pastoral peace, and a free translation of this into the terms of the late twentieth-century is a profound and moving alternative to the bitter antagonisms of the present age.

Historical moments draw highly idiosyncratic responses in certain cases. A strong sense of betrayal can be the source not only of momentary bitterness but of deep-running anxieties as well: seemingly compromising political steps towards the solution of the age-old conflict of the major communities of the North prompt the recognition that the unquestioned stability of basic political concepts is in fact a highly arbitrary phenomenon. The unsatisfactory present thus evokes a vision of the ideal which points beyond the usual antagonisms and posits a solution which could be embraced perhaps by the significant majority yet the suggested ideal of a secular republic rising above sectarian divisions remains a strictly personal conviction as it rather evades the conflict than attempts to solve it.

That life goes on even in the proximity of violence is proven in a number of poems, though an acceptance of this as the “normal” case is never suggested. From a distance the presence of special police forces and instruments in the context of everyday life may appear exotic, yet this hints at the perversion of the general value system when it is too long exposed to duress. Such a situation makes the poet recognise that only openly grotesque ideas can reach people since the conditioning effect of exposure to violence has to be overwritten somehow.

Though the Northern conflict is generally considered an endemic one, this does not exclude the possibility of addressing it from the South. This perspective has its own inherent dangers as distance can interfere with the accuracy of the vision, and a tentative identification with the grievances of one particular community can also colour the response. Such interferences, however, do not necessarily occur; though certain historical situations justify a unilateral approach, in other cases moral outrage can extend even to the activities of the frequently victimised side.

History does not only consider communities but it has its smaller scale pertaining to personal lives as well. Personal stories complement the communal vision and provide tangible dimensions to history. It is through ancestry, and within that, through figures of fathers, that the past and the present are viewed from a personally meaningful perspective. Father and son relationships possess a psychological dimension as well but this does not overwhelm the treatment of the relation – apart from one notable instance fathers are not considered tyrannical monsters but flesh and blood people who possess exemplary features in the visions of their sons. Strangely enough, the tyrannical dimension is only added to a figure with a high social standing, whereas the humbler social position of farmers, merchants or exiled labourers seems to exclude this constituent, making tyranny a function of education rather than that of the lack of it. There is warmth and affection and there is always a willingness to embrace the father in spite of all previous harms done by the man.

The line of mothers is somewhat less prominent yet it is also present. The perspective of retrospect, the decision to commemorate the mother when she is no longer alive is an equivocal choice of poets turning to assess mothers. Perhaps this contributes to the generally benevolent accounts in which even the lasting wound of motherly rejection can be forgiven – though the lost time cannot be recovered it can be redeemed through the son's act of forgiveness. A posterior glance can also draw a confession which was evaded while the mother was alive, suggesting that absence has the power of overwriting any previous stance.

The modernist embarrassment of a chaotic present and the postmodernist belief in the nature of history as discourse lead to openly imaginative approaches to the contemporary conflict. An ancient fertility cult awakens a potential imaginative parallel with the sectarian-motivated violence of Northern Ireland just to conclude in the deconstruction of that very parallel as it could only be maintained by strong poetic interventions. The treatment of history as discourse and narrative can easily lead to deliberate exercises of subverting it – the general unreliability of narratives can be the foundation of this or the bigotries and prejudices encoded in official ideologies can also prove to be ambivalent and even absurd. The chosen objective correlatives share the conviction that the present is more easily, and perhaps more profoundly addressed with the help of less immediate tools, and the recognitions made in the process are more revelatory than any open treatment would provide.

Place and history, space and time come to be fused in the category of cultural continuity, the question of the constituents of tradition. The notion of Irishness is shared by communities whose respective experiences do not fully coincide though contain common elements beyond doubt. An assessment of these elements can both complement and reconnect

the temporarily separated accounts of place and history, and offer a synoptic vision on the issue of language and the cultural heritage carried by that language as well as address the question of the interaction of traditions in the light of the relation of the languages belonging to Ireland.

The image of the communities both about themselves and about the other forms an important part of the question of tradition. Northern Protestants more frequently engage in an exercise of self-assessment than treat Catholics. Such accounts display a pervasive sense of criticism and they mercilessly point out the less favourable aspects of their community. Catholics appear more reluctant to address their own community with the same critical zeal as Protestants do, yet there are examples which confess hypocrisies in an open manner. Communities in most cases are kept apart even in the poetic responses yet there are occasions when sectarian differences are deliberately discounted. Old acquaintances and friends from across the divide exemplify the possibility of meaningful human relations which are independent of tribal considerations – personal experience can overwrite conditioned and routine-like behaviour patterns.

As one of the foundations of any culture, language cannot be dismissed as an important theme of contemporary Irish poetry. Though the linguistic situation may be condemned and the decline of Gaelic mourned, the dominance of English is accepted as a feature of modern Irish culture. The most acute reminders of linguistic dispossession are the placenames of the island, and as they evoke the concept of colonialism, they are frequently in the foreground in the work of Northern Catholic poets. The general loss involved in the renaming of the countryside is contemplated in an elegiac mood, yet at the same time the preservation of the old in the new and the resulting new, rich and particular heritage are also acknowledged.

In the change from Gaelic to English as the principal means of communication not only the old language is threatened with extinction but the literary tradition belonging to that language is endangered by the prospect of neglect and oblivion. The quest for tradition is thus frustrated at an early stage as the change of language involves a dislocation of the tradition itself – the new language has its own tradition and cultural memories which are alien to the new environment, whereas the decline of the old language inevitably renders the earlier tradition an obsolete heritage which is only available through hard work. This linguistic ‘fall’ has a unique potential at the same time as it adds new and specifically Irish elements to the new language and its tradition, projecting the eventual coming into the possession of that language and tradition.

The rich tradition of early medieval Irish literature finds its way into the poetry of several contemporary artists in spite of the difficulty of access. The favourite source is *The Book of Invasions*, the account of the legendary takings of Ireland, with an explicit recovery of Fintan, the lone survivor of the first invasion and an ur-poet. Imaginative transformations are at work yet the character retains its principal feature, and his decision to escape from the company of women in favour of isolation turns out to be a crucial one from the point of view of his survival. Apart from its power as a narrative, the motif of Fintan's survival of the Flood is emblematic of the old tradition itself as it is preserved even in such a situation as that of linguistic dispossession.

Returns to the old tradition are conducted partly with an eye on the possible inspiration it provides. One particular instance of such a quest for assessment as well as new inspiration takes the form of a pilgrimage, which endows the project with a different dimension as a result of the religious associations of the word. The demanding routines of the pilgrimage lead to a number of hallucinatory visions which are either instructive or corrective – there is a simultaneous employment of backward- and forward-looking perspectives. The exercise ends with a remarkable evocation of the spirit of Joyce whose comment on the language issue reveals a degree of impatience with the stance that is still clad in mourning for the loss of Gaelic – there *is* a tradition of Irish literature in the English language as well with peculiar enough traits to set it apart from other parallel traditions employing the same language.

Once the authoritative voice pronounces the verdict, tradition is no longer a puzzling dilemma but a question with an answer to it. Another approach takes another course to come to a similar conclusion: whatever the Irish past may be like it *is* the Irish past – it is the heritage of the contemporary inhabitant of the Irish world and it is its foundation. Though recent economic and social changes tend to point towards a more uniform present, the bold assertion of the generous embracing of the past predates the observable globalising tendencies. It is basically a timeless demonstration of the willingness to identify with the tradition which is there, a determination to identify with what one is. It is both spontaneous and honest and is therefore something convincing; it is an assertion which actually proves that such questions as “Is So-and-So really an Irish writer” (Mahon quoted in Corcoran 1992, 87) are not only boring but irrelevant as well – the decision to write, with the inescapable awareness of the place, history and culture where one comes from, is an answer which does not require such a question.

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