The Peter Laver Memorial Lecture
"Place and Displacement": Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland (1985)

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To deliver this Pete Laver Memorial Lecture at the Wordsworth Summer Conference is an honour and a sad reminder of what Yeats called, in his elegy for Robert Gregory, "that discourtesy of death." The mixture of bewilderment and celebration which underlies Yeats's poem will be shred by all of you who knew Pete Laver, and some of its lines could fit into his epitaph: "all things the delighted eye now sees / Were loved by him;" "he had the intensity / To have published all to be a world's delight." Since arriving in Grasmere, I have been acutely aware of the absence of this poet, librarian, artist and free spirit, displaced so suddenly and prematurely from his place, but I am also happy to have been invited to speak this evening in his memory and to affirm his continuing presence in our affections.

In his introduction to Jung's psychology, Anthony Storr gives an account of a case that bears closely upon the situation of the poet in Northern Ireland or the poet anywhere else:

> Jung describes how some of his patients, faced with what appeared to be an insoluble conflict, solved it by 'outgrowing' it, by developing a 'new level of consciousness.' He writes: 'Some higher or wider interest appeared on the patient's horizon, and through this broadening of his outlook the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically on its own terms but faded out when faced with a new and stronger life urge.'
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> The attainment of this new level of psychological development includes a certain degree of . . . detachment from one's emotions. 'One certainly does feel the affect and is shaken and tormented by it, yet at the same time one is aware of a higher consciousness looking on which prevents one from becoming identical with the affect, a consciousness which regards the affect as an object, and can say "*I know* that I suffer".'

All this, Storr is the first to admit, is very general. No example is given by Jung of the "insoluble problem" which must be outgrown or resolved at a symbolic level but, in fact, Jung might have found in Wordsworth's *Prelude* a working model for that evolution of a higher consciousness in response to an apparently intolerable conflict. The last books of the poem worry and circle and ruminate in an effort to discover what had happened to him in the 1790s when a passion for liberty and human regeneration, embodied for Wordsworth in the fact of the French Revolution, came into conflict with other essential constituents of his being founded upon the land and love of England. When England declared war upon Revolutionary France, Wordsworth experienced a crisis of unanticipated intensity which he sought to allay first by addressing himself to the higher reality of Godwin's philosophy and, when that failed, by recourse to a renewed and deepened myth of nature and the human heart. But the crisis itself is described with dramatic and anecdotal power:

> I felt
> The ravage of this most unnatural strife
> In my own heart; there it lay like a weight,
> At enmity with all the tenderest springs
> Of my enjoyments. I, who with the breeze
> Had played, green leaf on the blessed tree
> Of my beloved country—nor had wished
> For happier fortune than to wither there—
> Now from my pleasant station was cut off,
> And tossed about in whirlwinds. I rejoiced,
> Yes, afterwards, truth painful to record,
> Exulted in the triumph of my soul
> When Englishmen by thousands were o'erthrown,
> Left without glory on the field, or driven,
> Brave hearts, to shameful flight. It was a grief—
> Grief call it not, 'twas any thing but that—
> A conflict of sensations without name,
> Of which he only who may love the sight
> Of a village steeple as I do can judge,
> When in the congregation, bending all
> To their great Father, prayers were offered up
> Or praises for our country's victories,
> And, 'mid the simple worshippers perchance
> I only, like an uninvited guest
> Whom no one owned, sate silent—shall I add,
> Fed on the day of vengeance yet to come!
> *The Prelude* (1805), Book X, 229-74

The good place where Wordsworth's nurture happened and to which his habitual feelings are most naturally attuned has become, for the revolutionary poet, the wrong place. Life, where he is situated, is not as he wants it to be. He is displaced from his own affections by a vision of the good that is located elsewhere. His political, utopian aspirations deracinate him from the beloved actuality of his surroundings so that his instinctive being and his appetitive intelligence are knocked out of alignment. He feels like a traitor among those he knows and loves. To be true to one part of himself, he must betray another part. The inner state of man is thus shaken and the shock waves in the consciousness reflect the upheavals in the surrounding world. Indeed, the whole passage is like a text book illustration of another of Jung's un-

derlying notions, namely, that the trauma of individual consciousness is likely to be an aspect of forces at work in the collective life, past or present, since, for Jung, Hamlet's exclamation "O my prophetic soul" has the force of a truism.

It is another truism, with us, that the achievement of a work of art is salutary in these circumstances, and we can easily see how the composition of *The Prelude* was, in itself, part of the symbolic resolution of a lived conflict. Wordsworth admits an inner dialogue between those powers and hopes which landed him at the impasse he describes. The poem is diagnostic, therapeutic and didactic all at once. It throws, in a prefiguration of modernist procedures, "the nerves, as 'twere, in patterns on a screen." It obeys the modern demand for psychological realism and while it often conducts its investigations in a diction that is ornate and elevated, it does go in fear of abstractions, concentrating instead upon the story of feelings and aspirations within an individual life, at a certain place and a certain time. Wordsworth's story is symptomatic of the historical moment, but it is not paraded as being representative: the pressure of the poem's occasion launches it beyond allegory and exemplum. Its principle of development and its structural and rhetorical life are to be found not in any designs he has upon a readership, not in self-exculpation or self-dramatisation, but in the autonomous habits of the poet's imagination. The "I" of the poem is at the eye of the storm within the "I" of the poet.

The extreme of this kind of writing was to come more than a hundred years later, in *The Waste Land*, another work where the expression of an acute personal predicament can be read as expression of the age, and one which enforced a new way of reading poetry. It taught us to divine the image for its cultural and psychological import, to ponder the allusion for its critical rather than its decorative weight, and to look for the poet's imaginative signature in the texture of the work, to listen in for the intrinsic poetry rather than look out for its explicit meaning. *The Waste Land*, we now know almost too patly, is the resolution at a symbolic level of conflicts within the consciousness of the poet, but we are free to read it as a refraction of pressures in the world of post-war Europe, because we have absorbed Jung's insights quite naturally into our way of thinking about art.

Like the disaffected Wordsworth, the Northern Irish writers I wish to discuss take the strain of being in two places at once, of needing to accommodate two opposing conditions of truthfulness simultaneously, and at times their procedures are every bit as cautious and oysterish as those of Eliot. They belong to a place that is patently riven between notions of belonging to other places. Each person in Ulster lives first in the Ulster of the actual present, and then in one or other Ulster of the mind. The Nationalist will wince at the Union Jack and "God Save the Queen" as tokens of his place in the world, he will withhold assent from the solidarities implicit in these emblems rather as Wordsworth withheld assent from the congregation's prayers for the success of the English armies. Yet, like Wordsworth among his patriotic neighbours, the northern Nationalist conducts his daily social life among Unionist neighbours for whom these emblems have pious and passionate force, and to whom his nationalist principles, his hankering for a different flag and different anthem, are as traitorous as Wordsworth's revolutionary sympathies. The fountainhead of the Unionist's myth springs in the Crown of England but he has to hold his own in the island of Ireland. The fountainhead of the Nationalist's myth lies in the idea of an integral Ireland, but he too lives in an exile from his ideal place. Yet, while he has to concede that he is a citizen of the partitioned British state, the Nationalist can hold to the physical fact of his presence upon the Irish island, just as the Unionist can affirm the reality of the political realm of the United Kingdom even as he recognizes the geographical fact that Ireland is his insular home.

The condition is chronic and quotidian and not necessarily terminal: It was fully at work in the collective life of Northern Ireland long before the present disruptions occurred. Indeed, it was more radically internalised within the Ulster personality in the years of quiet, and the typically reticent response of many Northern Irish writers to the violent conditions of the last fifteen years has much to do with this very internalization. Like other members of the population, the poets knew the score. Sectarian division, gerrymandering by the majority, discrimination in jobs and housing, all that was recognised as deplorable; and by the mid-sixties, I think it would be fair to say, that there was a nascent energy in younger sections of the population, Nationalist, Republican and Unionist, which promised some shift in the shape of things to come. I do not mean that the Establishment would easily or willingly have changed its ways, but with a more active and vocal Civil Rights movement at work and a less blatantly triumphalist generation of Unionist politicians emerging, an evolution towards a better, juster, internal balance might have been expected to begin.

I think that the writers of my generation saw their very emergence as writers as a part of the leaven. The fact that a literary action was afoot was in itself a new political condition, and the writers did not feel the need to address themselves to the specific questions of politics because they assumed that the subtleties and tolerances of their art were precisely what they had to contribute to the coarseness and intolerances of the public life. When Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, James Simmons, and myself were having our first books published, Paisley was already in full sectarian cry, and, indeed, Northern Ireland's cabinet ministers regularly massaged the atavisms and bigotries of Orangement on the Twelfth of July. Nothing needed to be exposed: rather, it seemed that conditions had to be outstripped, and it is probably true to say that the idea of poetry was itself that higher ideal to which the poets unconsciously had turned in order to survive in the demeaning conditions, demeaned by resentment in the case of the Nationalist, by embarrassment at least and guilt at best in the case of the Unionists. In fact, that passage from Jung

which I quoted earlier does fit the typical if not fully self-conscious position of the Ulster poet in the sixties: "One certainly does feel the affect and is shaken and tormented by it, yet at the same time one is aware of a higher consciousness looking on which prevents one from becoming identical with the affect . . . which regards the affect as an object."

In our case, we might apply Jung's term "the affect" to the particular exacerbations attendant on being a native of Northern Ireland, since this "affect" means a disturbance, a warp in the emotional glass which is in danger of narrowing the range of the mind's responses to the terms of the disturbance itself, refracting everything through the warp. Things had advanced when this "affect" was observed by a new consciousness that perceived it to be the result of different history, heritages, cultural identity, traditions, call it what you will. These words were at least an alibi from the surge of disruptive feelings which sprang too readily in the collective life, rebellious on the nationalist minority side, overbearing and punitive on the majority side, those unindividuated frictions of day-to-day social and political experience.

For a moment, the discovery and deployment of this language allowed us to talk of Planters and Gaels, rather than Protestants and Catholics, to speak of different heritages rather than launch accusations and suspicions at one another, to speak of history rather than the skullduggery of the local government. It was a palliative, true in its way, salutary in that it shifted the discourse into a more self-diagnosing frame of reference; but, as everyone including the poets knew, not true enough, another place where the mind could take shelter from the actual conditions. To locate the roots of one's identity in the ethnic and liturgical habits of one's group might be all very well, but for the group to confine the range of one's growth, to have one's sympathies determined and one's responses programmed by it was patently another form of entrapment. The only reliable release for the poet was the appeasement of the achieved poem. In that liberated moment, when the lyric discovers its buoyant completion, when the timeless formal pleasure comes to its fullness and exhaustion, in those moments of self-justification and self-obliteration the poet makes contact with the plane of consciousness where he is at once intensified in his being and detached from his predicaments. It is this deeper psychological compulsion which lies behind the typical concern of Northern Irish poets with style, with formal finish, with linguistic relish and play. They knew the truth of Yeats' affirmation that the "rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,/ The sentimentalist himself, while art/ Is but a vision of reality." In other words, both politically, topographically, and artistically, they knew their place, and it is no accident that Paul Muldoon's first pamphlet, published in Belfast in 1971, was called, in fact, *Knowing my Place*, a punning title which is at once humble and arrogant, slyly allusive to what was expected of the minority to which he belonged and genuinely in sympathy with the idea that everything had its place — art, love, politics, local affections, cultural heritage, and, for that matter, the place where a word doubles its meaning or where a line ends on the page.

That is the first point I want to emphasize: the profound relation here between poetic technique and historical situation. It is a superficial response to the work of Northern Irish poets to conceive of their lyric stances as evasions of the actual conditions. Their concern with poetry itself wears well when we place it beside the protest poetry of the sixties: the density of their verbal worlds has held up; the purely poetic force of the words is the guarantee of a commitment which need not apologise for not taking up the cudgels since it is raising a baton to attune discords which the cudgels are creating — to attune it within the pit of their own consciousness, of course, not in the arena of dustbin lids and shoot-to-kill operations.

The second point to insist on is that the idea of poetry as a symbolic resolution of opposing truths, the idea of the poem as having its existence in a realm separate from the discourse of politics, does not absolve it or the poet from political status. Nobody is going to advocate an ivory tower address for the poet nor a holier-than-thou attitude. "Pure" poetry is perfectly justifiable in earshot of the carbomb but it still implies a politics, depending on the nature of the poetry. A poetry of hermetic wit, of riddles and slips and self-mocking ironies, while it may appear culpably miniaturist or fastidious to the activist with his microphone at the street corner, may be exercising in its inaudible way a fierce disdain of the amplified message, or a distressed sympathy with it. But the reading of those political implications is in itself a political activity, separate from the processes that produced the poems, an extension or projection from the artistic endeavour which is not obliged to have any intention beyond its own proper completion.

The poet is stretched between politics and transcendence, and is often displaced from a confidence in a single position by his disposition to be affected by all positions, negatively rather than positively capable. This, and the complexity of the present conditions, may go some way to explain the large number of poems in which the Northern Irish writer views the world from a great spatial or temporal distance, the number of poems imagined from beyond the grave, from the perspective of mythological or historically remote characters: Derek Mahon's "An Image from Beckett" is an amplification of earlier soliloquys from the other side, by forgers, cowards, tramps, artists, all rehearsing their fates in a note both wry and plangent. This kind of poem culminates in the beautifully orchestrated "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford," where it is not just a single life that is given voice, but a whole Lethe full of doomed generations and tribes, whispering their unfulfillment and perplexed hopes in a trickle of masonry, pleading for a hearing in the great soft gestures of mushroom-growths that strain from the dark towards a guiding star of light in the keyhole:

A half century, without visitors, in the dark—
Poor preparation for the cracking lock
And creak of hinges. Magi, moonmen,
Powdery prisoners of the old regime,
Web-throated, stalked like triffids, racked by drought
And insomnia, only the ghost of a scream
At the flash-bulb firing squad we wake them with
Shows there is life yet in their feverish forms.
Grown beyond nature now, soft food for worms,
They lift frail heads in gravity and good faith.

They are begging us, you see, in their wordless way,
To do something, to speak on their behalf
Or at least not to close the door again.
Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!
'Save us, save us,' they seem to say,
'Let the god not abandon us
Who have come so far in darkness and in pain.
We too had our lives to live.
You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary,
Let not our naive labours have been in vain!'

This could be called visionary or symbolic: it is about the need to live and be known, the need for selfhood, recognition in the eye of God and the eye of the world, and its music is cello and homesick. A great sense of historical cycles, of injustice and catastrophe, looms at the back of the poem's mind. At its forefront is the pursuit of the logic of its own metaphors growing with the mushrooms in the shed of an old estate that had been abandoned by an Irish ascendancy family after independence. But what gives the poem its sorrow and insight is the long perspective, an intimacy with the clay-floored foetor of the shed kept in mind and in focus from a point of detached compassion, in another world of freedom, light and efficiency. To reduce the mushrooms' lives and appetites to counters for the frustrations and desolations of lives in Northern Ireland is, of course, one of those political readings which is perfectly applicable, but we recognize that this allegorical approach ties the poem too neatly into its place. The amplitude of its effects, its vault-filling resonance depends upon its displaced perspective. Those rooted helplessly in place plead with the capable uprooted visitor, be he poet or photographer, and it is in this pleading that we find the psychological as opposed to the political nub of the poem. Mahon, the poet of metropolitan allusion, of ironical and cultivated manners, is being shadowed by his unlived life among the familiar shades of Belfast. Do not turn your back on us, do not disdain our graceless stifled destiny, keep faith with your origins, do not desert, speak for us: the mushrooms are the voices of belonging, but they could not have been heard so compellingly if Mahon had not created the whispering gallery of absence not just by moving out of Ireland but by evolving out of solidarity into irony and compassion. And, needless to say, into solitude.

These poems of the voice from beyond are beamed back out of a condition of silence and Zen-like stillness, an eternity in love with the products of time. They tenderly evoke the great solace of the natural world and also the great wounds we make in it and ourselves. "Ovid in Tomis," for example, begins with a merry and ecologically indignant identification of the Roman poet with his alienated contemporary:

What coarse god
Was the gear-box in the rain
Beside the road?

What nereid the unsinkable
Hair conditioner
Knocking the icy rocks?

They stare me out
With the chaste gravity
And feral pride

Of noble savages
Set down
On an alien shore.

It is so long
Since my own transformation
Into a stone,

I often forget
That there was a time
Before my name

Was mud in the mouths
Of the Danube,
A dirty word in Rome.

Imagine Byron banished
To Botany Bay
Or Wilde to Dawson City

And you have some idea
How it is for me
On the shores of the Black Sea.

Baudelaire's albatross poet, inept upon the deck, mocked by the callous sailors, has nothing on this one, so self-aware and self-mocking, so posthumous to himself, so sceptical of the very effort of poetry that he can say:

I
Have exchanged belief
For documentation.)

The muse is somewhere
Else, not here
By this frozen lake —

Or, if here, then I am
Not poet enough
To make the connection

Are we truly alone
With our physics and myths,

The stars no more

Than glittering dust,
With no one there
To hear our choral odes?

If so, we can start
To ignore the silence
Of infinite space

And concentrate instead
On the infinity
Under our very noses —

The cry at the heart
Of the artichoke,
The gaiety of atoms.

Better to contemplate
The blank page
And leave it blank

Than modify
Its substance by
So much as a pen-stroke.

Woven of wood-nymphs,
It speaks volumes
No one will ever write.

I incline my head
To its candour
And weep for our exile.

Again, this escapes beyond dramatic monologue and disguised autobiography into contemplation on the nature of artistic satisfaction itself; by the end the poem is abjuring language in a language that offers us that deeply formal sensation of tensions resolved. The speaker laments his exile in such a way that we would not have him rehabilitated. The wound he suffers is to his and our advantage: the local conditions that lie at the roots of the poet's consciousness have been transposed into a symbol.

I do not want to reduce Derek Mahon's poems to this single theme of alienated distance, for his work also abounds in poems where the social voice is up and away on the back of Pegasus, cutting a dash through the usual life of back-kitchens and bar counters, but I would insist that I am not forcing his work to fit a thesis. It is present in all his books, this dominant mood of being on the outside (where one has laboured spiritually to arrive) only to end up looking back nostalgically at what one knows are well nigh intolerable conditions on the inside. The mood is to be found in a number of his best poems, which dwell upon the predicament of what he called in an early poem "the unreconciled in their metaphysical pain." These poems of the displaced consciousness are as rinsed of political and ethnic glamour as a haiku by Basho, but their purely poetic achievement is further enriched when we view them against the political and ethnic background of Mahon's origins.

We might say that in order for any place to be credible for Mahon, it has to be reimagined in the light of other places. In the language of *Star Trek*, it has to be beamed up so that it can be dependably beamed down. Thus, the civil beauty of Penshurst Place, the home of the Sidney family, is relished by Mahon in terms of the blandishments of Renaissance poetry, music, and manners, yet while his consciousness prizes and yearns for these arcadian harmonies, it is haunted by other more disturbing images. Sir Philip Sidney is one dream, all gilded valour and English patriotic aura, but another dream associated with Penshurst Place is Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, leader in the last Irish war against Elizabeth's armies. In this next poem the line, "The Spanish ships around Kinsale," refers to the Battle of Kinsale where Hugh O'Neill, arch-traitor in the eyes of the English, the Great O'Neill in the eyes of the Irish, was finally defeated; so that the courtliness which is evoked by the verse and symbolised by Penshurst Place is only one part of the poem's life. Its underlife, its shadow elsewhere, is the Ulster of hillforts, cattle-raids, and rain-sodden gallowglasses where Hugh O'Neill was born and to which, after eight years of being fostered at Penshurst Place in the care of Sir Henry Sidney, he returned. "Penshurst Place," then, focuses Mahon's sense of bilocation, culturally in love with the Surrey countryside where he was living with his family when this poem was written, but ethnically and politically entangled with the country of his first nurture.

The bright drop quivering on a thorn
In the rich silence after rain,
Lute music from the orchard aisles,
The paths ablaze with daffodils,
Intrigue and venery in the air
A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs,
The iron hand and the velvet glove —
Come live with me and be my love.

A pearl face, numinously bright,
Shining in silence of the night,
A muffle crash of smouldering logs,
Bad dreams of courtiers and of dogs,
The Spanish ships around Kinsale,
The screech owl and the nightingale,
The falcon and the turtle dove —
Come live with me and be my love.

Instances of this sort could be multiplied. In a poem about leaving Surrey to return to North Antrim, Mahon imagines himself turning into a tree in an English parkland, "as if I belonged here too"; but he is destined to identify with a very different native bush, a windswept thorn on a northern clifftop,

With nothing to recommend it
But its harsh tenacity
Between the blinding windows
And the forests of the sea,

As if its very existence
Were a reason to continue.

Crone, crow, scarecrow,
Its worn fingers scrabbling
At a torn sky, it stands
On the edge of everything
Like a burnt-out angel
Raising petitionary hands.

The petitioning hands of the tree, like the pleading throats of the mushrooms, insist that he identify with "everything that is the case," in his case this given landscape with all its threshing historical plights. But in a poem called "Tractatus," which takes off in its first line from a proposition of Wittgenstein's, Mahon insists on his freedom to invent his own case:

'The world is everything that is the case'
From the fly giving up in the coal-shed
To the Winged Victory of Samothrace
Give blame, praise, to the fumbling God
Who hides, shame-facèdly, His agèd face;
Whose light retires behind its veil of cloud.

The world, though, is also so much more —
Everything that is the case imaginatively.
Tacitus believed mariners could *hear*
The sun sinking into the western sea;
And who would question that titanic roar,
The stream rising wherever the edge may be?

This poem is not in itself as deeply imagined as others I could quote, but it does voice the Mahon approach in quite explicit terms. The imagined hiss and boil of the sun in the sea does not involve a denial of the cosmological facts of the matter; rather, it restores us to a pristine encounter with the cosmos. In a similar way, Mahon's displaced angle of vision is not a Nelson-like ploy to avoid seeing what he prefers not to see but a way of focussing afresh. For all his imaginative ubiquity, his poems enforce the truth he settles upon in the last stanza of a poem called, with stunning plainness, "A Garage in Co. Cork":

But we are in one place and one place only,
One of the milestones of earth-residence
Unique in each particular, the thinly
Peopled hinterland serenely tense —
Not in the hope of a resplendent future
But with a sure sense of its intrinsic nature.

E.M. Cioran has written: "Some peoples propose themselves as divine problems: can we believe in ourselves?" "Certainly not" Paul Muldoon answers, in the Irish context. But it is a negative delivered with a smile which suggests otherwise. In the world of Muldoon's poetry, the reader finds himself in the middle of that old story where the protagonist is faced with two informants, one who always tells the truth and one who always tells lies. The problem then is to formulate the question which will elicit an answer from either one that can be reliably decoded. To put it another way, Muldoon's poems do not offer us answers but keep us alive in the middle of the question. And the very question of whether or not this imaginative habit is to be related to his native place and its double-life is proposed, obliquely of course, in his short and typically enigmatic poem called "Blemish":

Were it indeed an accident of birth
That she looks on the gentle earth
And the seemingly gentle sky
Through one brown, and one blue eye.

Typically, the mood of this is neither indicative nor interrogative, but conditional. The understood complete sentence goes: "It would be a blemish, were it indeed . . . etc." but we cannot be *sure* that it is an accident of birth and hence a hereditary blemish. It might also be a gift of vision, a mark of divine favour, an astonishing boon of being able to see through things as they seem, like the seemingly gentle sky, to things as they are, whatever they are. The poem suggests, indirectly, that the imaginative gifts of Northern Irish writers should not be linked too sociologically to the blemished life of their country. It wanders in and out of the mind like an unremarked soothsayer who drops a remark that flowers with possibility after he has drifted off. And we are still left wondering when we find a character in Marquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude* with just the blemish that Muldoon describes here: so is this a literary allusion or an archetypal image? All three, Muldoon might well answer from behind the screen of his language.

Language is his resolving element, his quick-change gear, his vehicle for get-away. James Joyce, who could invest the very names of punctuation marks with historical riddles when he addressed his people as "Laities and gentes, fullstoppers and semi-colonials," the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake* who melted time and place into a plasm of rhythms and wordroots, puns and tunes, a slide-show of Freudian slips for the Jungian type-setter, this Joyce would recognize the verbal opportunism of Muldoon as a form of native kenning, a northern doubling, a kind of daedal fiddling to keep the home fires burning. For example, the protagonist of his recent long poem, "The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants," is a character called Gallogly. Gallogly's name is related to a previous Muldoon character called Golightly, and also to the Gallowglass warriors of Gaelic Ulster and to the Sioux braves of the Oglala tribe; and he appears in a tale as odd as any one of the Ingoldsby legends. By such verbal means Muldoon makes the stuff of Ulster news headlines — explosions, killings, American aid for the IRA, covert operations of all kinds — the stuff that dreams are made on. All these things which are so much taken for granted that they tend to be thrust to the back of the mind "in real life" are taken over by Muldoon as the elements of a violent and resourceful fantasy; and by this very relegation to "fiction" they achieve once again a

deadly and unnerving prominence. The old alibis of heritage, tradition, folklore, Planter, and Gael, and a whole literature and discourse posited on these distinctions (including poems by his contemporaries) are rifled for tropes and allusions until, within the fiction of the poem, they themselves are imputed with fictional status. By masquerading as a story that is as innocent of high seriousness as an Irish joke, Muldoon's "The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants" effects what the apostle of high seriousness sought from the serious artist, a criticism of life.

I realise that I am affirming rather than demonstrating all this, but the poem in question is too long to take up in any detail. Indeed, Muldoon's poetry works so much at a symbolic level, by means of parallels, implications, sleights of word, hints and hedgings, that even the shortest lyric may call forth pages of elucidation, or perhaps one should say collusion, elucidation being a word that would imply a meaning too simply and righteously produced from the hat of a poem that might just produce another meaning from up its sleeve.

The poet as conjuror, a dab hand at turning tables and spinning yarns, not above innuendo and not without punitive designs upon his audience. Yet the acerbity of Muldoon's intelligence is constantly sweetened by humour and by the natural rhythmic drift of his writing, and nowhere more so than in the self-cancelling narrative of "Lunch with Pancho Villa," a poem that addresses itself to the relations between "life" and "art" as experienced by a poet-protagonist during a certain "famous revolution" which occurs, to some extent, in "a back yard." The poet-narrator is accused by a "celebrated pamphleteer":

> 'Look, son. Just look around you.
> People are getting themselves killed
> Left, right and centre
> While you do what? Write rondeaux?
>
> There's more to living in this country
> Than stars, horses, pigs and trees,
> Not that you'd guess it from your poems.
> Do you ever listen to the news?

The poet's response to all this arises from a conviction not unlike Patrick Kavanagh's conviction that for a writer there is nothing as doomed as the important thing, no subject as negligible as the subject with the news headline status. His narrative is designed to make the words "famous" and "celebrated" ring hollow, yet the narrative itself ("All made up as I went along") turns out to be as unreliable as the adjectives:

> My celebrated pamphleteer!
> Of course, I gave it all away
> With those preposterous titles,
> *The Bloody Rose? The Dream and the Drums?*
> Or was I desperately wishing
> To have been their co-author,
> Or, at least, to own a first edition
> Of *The Boot Boys and Other Battles?*

The flicker of self-doubt in these last four lines gives back to the pamphleteer some of the credence which the whole poem takes away from him, and Muldoon very justly ends with a note of puzzlement, though not without a strong implicit endorsement of the idea that the proper concern of art is with the naming of things rather than with the espousal of causes:

> What should I say to this callow youth
> Who learned to write last winter —
> One of those correspondence courses —
> And who's coming to lunch to-day?
> He'll be rambling on, no doubt
> About pigs and trees, stars and horses.

If, in the Muldoon world, we are faced with the liar and truthteller, searching for the right question, in the poetry of Michael Longley, we are with lovers in the dark during a power-failure. It is at least a fiction of urban life that there is a recognizable rise in the birthrate after such a breakdown of services. The couples turn from home life to love life, the delights of touch and dream a natural compensation for the loss of the usual distractions. We recognize the pattern of behaviour as completely credible, the most obvious and delicious in the circumstances.

It is in the light of this parable of the dark that Longley's dominant erotic music is to be heard. Longley's poetry is often the poetry of direct amorous address, its dramatic voice the voice of indolent and occasionally deliquescent reverie, its subject the whole matter of sexual daydream. But even when the poem is ostensibly about landscape or seascape, about flora and fauna, mythological figures or musical instruments, the intonation of the verse is seductive, its melody allaying and cajoling, its typical mood one of tender insinuation and possibility.

Longley's poems count the phenomena of the natural world with the particular deliberate pleasure of a lover's finger wandering along the bumpy path of the vertebrae. The names for the parts of the body reappear constantly and even when it is not a body but a flower or a weed that is being touched upon, the contact between the world and the language is lipbrushing or stealthily caressing — as if the back of a hand that has gone to the floor to lift a napkin strayed against the warm limb of a neighbour. Here, almost at random, is a short sequence called "Botany":

> Duckweed
>
> Afloat on their own reflection
> With roots that reach only part of the way,

Will fall asleep at the end of the summer,
Draw in their skirts and sink to the bottom.

Foxglove

Though the corolla dangles upside down,
Nothing ever falls out, neither nectar
Nor loosening pollen grains: a thimble,
Stall for the little finger and the bee.

Dock

Its green flowers attract only the wind
But a red vein may irrigate the leaf
And blossom into blush or birthmark
Or a remedy for the nettle's sting.

Orchid

The tuber absorbs summer and winter,
Its own ugly shape, twisted arms and legs,
A recollection of the heart, one artery
Sprouting upwards to support a flower.

These verses are not Longley at his most enriched and effulgent, but for that very reason I test my contention against them and find it holds true. The direct sexual analogies are there in drawn skirts, blushes, and birthmarks; but the associations in corollas dangling, arteries sprouting upwards to support a flower, and little fingers in thimbles and fingerstalls make us feel like lowering our eyes in the presence of these specimens rather than spy upon their little organic arousals. Yet it is not simply the imagery and the submerged tissue of association that constitute the eroticism of the lines: it is the intent, close-up numbering and savouring of each tiny identifying mark, the cherishing and lingering name laid upon the thing itself.

All this is even more richly evident when we turn to Longley's more fully orchestrated writings; his last book, *The Echo Gate*, is full of opulent classical love poems, one of the best of which is "The Linen Industry." By now it is superfluous for me to spell out the connections between the private flax and linen of this poem and the public flax and linen which had been the basis of Belfast's industrial power and its intransigent male-fisted politics, both of which refused the feminine element symbolised by the land of Ireland itself. Again, it is superfluous to insist that Longley has in mind no political allegory of the sort I am drawing, but nevertheless a reading of the poem is possible which sees it as the internalization and affirmation of those feminine powers repressed by man's, and in particular the Ulsterman's, adaptation to conditions in the technological factory world:

Pulling up flax after the blue flowers have fallen
And laying our handfuls in the peaty water
To rot those grasses to the bone, or building stooks
That recall the skirts of an invisible dancer,

We become a part of the linen industry
And follow its processes to the grubby town
Where fields are compacted into window boxes
And there is little room among the big machines.

But even in our attic under the skylight
We make love on a bleach green, the whole meadow
Draped with material turning white in the sun
As though snow reluctant to melt were our attire.

What's passion but a battering of stubborn stalks,
Then a gentle combing out of fibres like hair
And weaving of these into christening robes,
Into garments for a marriage or a funeral?

Since it's like a bereavement once the labour's done
To find ourselves last workers in a dying trade,
Let flax be our matchmaker, our undertaker,
The provider of sheets for whatever the bed —

And be shy of your beasts in the presence of death,
Say that you look more beautiful in linen
Wearing white petticoats, the bow on your bodice
A butterfly attending the embroidered flowers.

That sense of history viewed from a great distance which we found in Mahon is in this poem too; and that rendering of the world down to a precipitate of language, typical of Muldoon, is also here, but more candidly, for Longley is more trusting of the first innocent blush of the word itself, its pristine phonetic body. Here Edward Thomas's English naming poems rather than Joyce's riddling Irish prose are the sponsoring presence from the literary tradition, a sponsorship with just as much political significance as we want to assign it.

To go back to the terms with which I began this lecture and to revise them slightly, we might say that Longley's poems are symbolic dissolutions. Like Faustus in his last hour wishing to be dispersed into the smallest creatures and phenomena in the face of the terror of death, Longley's imagination runs to hide in the multiple details of the natural world. Rapture is imaged by him as the escape of a flock of pigeons from their basket, and the old Elizabethan usage of death as a word for sexual climax comes into play too when we find Longley eroticizing even the dissolution of the body after death, in poems like "Obsequies" and "Oliver Plunket."

But I would end this consideration of the way the energies in Northern Ireland have been transposed or displayed in poetry, with Longley's poem "Self-heal," from a sequence called "Mayo Monologues." Mayo is, of course, in the west, not the north of Ireland, and again, Longley has no deliberate notion of writing a poem relevant to the Troubles — which is all the better for the poem as a symbolic event. "Self-heal" is the name of a flower and naming it appeases the character in the monologue, a woman who was sexually molested by a mongoloid neighbour, somebody stunted in body and spirit, whose reach out towards beauty and fulfillment brought the full brutal weight of his community's

prejudices down upon him; and that violence bred a new violence within himself.

> I wanted to teach him the names of flowers,
> Self-heal and centaury; on the long acre
> Where cattle never graze, bog asphodel.
> Could I love someone so gone in the head
> And, as they say, was I leading him on?
> He'd slept in the cot until he was twelve
> Because of his babyish ways, I suppose,
> Or the lack of a bed: hadn't his father
> Gambled away all but rushy pasture?
> His skull seemed to be hammered like a wedge
> Into his shoulders, and his back was hunched,
> Which gave him an almost scholarly air.
> But he couldn't remember the things I taught:
> Each name would hover above its flower
> Like a butterfly unable to alight.
> That day I pulled a cuckoo-pint apart
> To release the giddy insects from their cell.
> Gently he slipped his hand between my thighs.
> I wasn't frightened; and still I don't know why,
> But I ran from him in tears to tell them.
> I heard how every day for one whole week
> He was flogged with a blackthorn, then tethered
> In the hayfield. I might have been the cow
> Whose tail he would later dock with shears,
> And the ram tangled with barbed wire
> That he stoned to death the day they set him free.

As the feminine voice of this poem recounts her part in the violence which she is innocently a part of, she has become detached from her own suffering but has not excused herself from her place in the larger pattern. So she might be an analogue for the action of the poetic imagination as we have been considering it: by comprehending and expressing the violent reactions of the victim in relation to the violent mores of the community, by taking all this into herself and embalming it with flowers and memory, she turns a dirty deed into a vision of reality. And she reassures me that while I may have approached my subject, for the sake of ordering it, in a somewhat programmatic way, the programme is not radically at odds with the way the action of poetry proceeds. It too is a self-healing process, neither deliberately provocative nor culpably detached.

Wordsworth and Shakespeare (1985)

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In his own time, Wordsworth had a reputation for being antipathetic to Shakespeare. There could be no more symbolic starting point than the occasion recorded by both Leigh Hunt and Charles Cowden Clarke when Wordsworth criticised the repetition of the present participle in a line from *Henry V*, "The singing masons building roofs of gold" (I.ii.198): "This, he said, was a line which Milton would never have written. Mr. Keats thought, on the other hand, that the repetition was in harmony with the continued note of the singers, and that Shakespeare's negligence (if negligence it was) had instinctively felt the thing in the best manner" (Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* [1828], p. 260). Not only does this imply that Keats was sympathetic to Shakespeare, Wordsworth to Milton, but it also shows the two poets reconstituting their forbears in their own image. Wordsworth conceives of Milton as a meticulous poet, rejecting cacophonous or awkward lines as he sought to do himself by obsessively revising his own work; Keats's phrase for Shakespeare's manner of composition, "instinctively felt the thing in the best manner," could as well be Keats on himself in one of the letters.

Cowden Clarke in *Recollections of Writers* (1878) describes the incident, then generalises: "more than once it has been said that Wordsworth had not a genuine love of Shakespeare: that, when he could, he always accompanied a '*pro*' with his '*con*', and Atticus-like, would 'just hint a fault and hesitate dislike'" (p. 150). The balancing of beauties and faults, the belief that "even Shakespeare himself had his blind sides, his limitations,"[1] is indicative of an eighteenth century strain that runs through Wordsworth's criticism.

The idea that Wordsworth imagined himself to be in the line of Milton rather than Shakespeare is stated most forcefully by Hazlitt. "Milton is his great idol, and he sometimes dares to compare himself with him," he writes in the *Spirit of the Age*: "We do not think our author has any very cordial sympathy with Shakespear. How should he? Shakespear was the least of an egotist of any body in the world. He [Wordsworth] does not much relish the variety and scope of dramatic composition. 'He hates those interlocutions between Lucius and Caius'" (Howe, xi, 92). The last phrase is in quotation marks because Hazlitt believed that Wordsworth made such a remark at some time; he adverts to it on several occasions, using it as shorthand for Wordsworth's supposed anti-Shakespearean sentiments.[2] Hazlitt's argument turns on the opposition between Wordsworthian egotism and dramatic impersonality. If one thinks in the terms of the *Bi-*

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