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### *Abstract*

This thesis explores representations of home and domesticity in contemporary verse. Home-life and domestic scenes are significant in contemporary verse, not only because they are found in unprecedented abundance, but also because they are often taken as the principal subject of a poem, rather than as contextual setting. In short, in the post-war era, domestic experiences have proven to be rich and seemingly inexhaustible source of poetry. This is traceable primarily to an interest in 'experiences of ordinariness' exhibited by contemporary poets – an interest which is in no small part a product of the Movement aesthetic – and also to the surge in academic and imaginative explorations of the nature and quality of home-life during the postwar decades. A principal concern of this thesis will be with moments of epiphany or rarefication, when the domestic sphere loses its 'domestic' colouring as it mediates and is involved with deep emotional or intellectual experiences. The first chapter considers Hardy and Larkin. These poets, often paired together and seen as principal figures in the 'English line', are shown to be significant poets of the domestic sphere. The second chapter considers representations of the childhood home. Here the house is shown to be a 'formative' place, the ground for moral and intellectual growth. In the eyes of the child, the one who defamiliarises his or her surroundings *par excellence*, the house and its contents might become somewhat monumental, imbued with import unavailable to adults.

The third chapter considers poems of domestic love and marriage. It shows that these poems hinge on a combination of the mundane and homely with high emotion and feeling. This leads to a new type of love poetry: wry, often sardonic, with under-stated sentiment and affection.

The fourth chapter, which looks at political poems set at home, offers the most ambivalent account of domestic space. Home life might accrue negative regard when considered in relation to wars or political disturbance. On the other hand, domestic life is regarded positively as the desired end of war or civil unrest. An unmolested and normal home life is the fruit of peace.

The fifth chapter looks at domestic architecture in itself, considering the various ways that domestic interiority is presented in relation to the wider world. It explores various types of relationships between domestic interiority and the exteriority beyond, from poetry where the house is besieged by the external environment, to poems where the impulse is a movement from inside to outside.

The sixth chapter explores how domestic scenes and items are invoked in the work of mourning.

The thesis concludes with a chapter on poetic representations of hotels and hospitals, which may be regarded as ersatz homes, ghosted by the presence of the authentic home.

Aspects of Domesticity in Contemporary British, Irish  
and American Poetry

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PhD in English Studies  
Durham University  
2015

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### *Statement of Copyright*

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### *Introduction*

Paul Muldoon's poem 'The Loaf', collected in *Moy, Sand and Gravel*, takes inspiration from a domestic realisation. During renovation of his home in New Jersey, to where he had moved after emigrating from Northern Ireland in 1987, Muldoon noticed that the plaster in the walls of his centuries old house was stiffened with horse-hair, a construction technique used by Irish labourers (navvies) in the nineteenth century. This incidental detail becomes a means for Muldoon to connect with these other Irish immigrants, whose lives of hard manual labour contrast with Muldoon's suburban living. The poem begins with that moment of realisation and indirectly alludes to the comfortable home-life of the Muldoons.

When I put my finger to the hole they've cut for a dimmer  
 switch  
 in a wall of plaster stiffened with horsehair  
 it seems I've scratched a two-hundred-year-old itch...<sup>1</sup>

That it is a dimmer switch, rather than an ordinary light switch, is suggestive of the high-class construction of Muldoon's house. Yet, as Muldoon then puts ear, nose, eye and mouth to the hole which offers glimpses into the navvies' world, the poem does not descend into sentimentalism or romanticising; rather, characteristically, Muldoon pays tribute to the workers in mischievous fashion with a mock-serious refrain which, whilst evoking the workers' songs, creates an air of levity.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel* (London: Faber, 2002), 47.

What is particularly striking about this poem, and what is of interest to this thesis, is how its historical, cultural, political significance is bound up with the house. The poem's envisioning begins with a chance realisation as Muldoon walks around his house. This poem is, then, part of a wider trend in contemporary British and Irish poetry which finds objects of verse in casual domestic incidents. It is not the case that the domestic context proves to be merely a starting point for lyrical meditation, as is the case in Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' for instance; rather, it is involved throughout: each stanza begins with a new sensory-organ pressed to the dimmer-switch hole. This is perhaps indicative of how, given Muldoon's suburban comfort, his apprehension of the navvies' world is strained and partial. Nonetheless, the poem ends with a sense of achievement as Muldoon succeeds in putting his mouth to the hole and tastes the eponymous 'small loaf of bread' which an anonymous navvy had baked from whole seed. This loaf, a modest domestic comfort, crowns the visions of arduous toil and suffering of the navvies and is perhaps intended to evoke Muldoon's present domestic fortune. In which case, then, 'The Loaf' concludes with gratitude for domesticity, and builds on that cross-generational connection.

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This style of 'domestic poetry' was already well-established in British and Irish poetry by the time that 'The Loaf' was published in 2002. For several decades post-war poets had been poetising the house and domestic incidents in a way that was unusual for pre-war generations: not only did the first generations of post-war poets



take domesticity, in and of itself, as a subject of poetry, they also wrote about it prolifically. It is evident that by the mid-1970s, 'domestic poetry' was a recognisable subgenre in contemporary poetry. In 1976 Howard Sargeant edited an anthology of contemporary verse, *New Poems 1976-77*, which offered a cross-section of recent poetry and 'an opportunity of publication to young and little known poets.'<sup>2</sup> Many of those anthologised are 'rising stars' or already established writers such as D.J Enright, Peter Porter, Elizabeth Jennings, Fleur Adcock, Ted Hughes, Anne Stevenson and Andrew Motion (who became Poet Laureate in 1999). The broad thematic ordering of the anthology provides insight into the interests and concerns of contemporary poetry. For instance, one group of poems relating to the house shows that the home has emerged as a subject of verse. The way that the house is written about in these poems is typical of other 'house' poetry of the latter twentieth century. S.L Henderson Smith's tone of reverence and awe in going through the contents of the attic in 'The Attic' is representative of how many contemporary poems apprehend house and home:

The least frequented altar of the house

Eddy of quietness among the stars

Where albums brown with childhood's random dust

Peep out of pentecostal sheets all holy

Ghost-like in their flapping wings and far

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Sargeant, 'Introduction' in *New Poems 1976-77: A P.E.N Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Howard Sargeant (London: Hutchinson, 1976), 11.

Beyond the mundane trunks of journeyings;  
 I dare not go there often, hating tears  
 Yet I know I cannot throw away such things,  
 They are the Freud in me, like ripened pears  
 They bloom unbidden, hide them though you may;  
 Discarded trophies of the nursery  
 Inked-in with travel stains and lives  
 All that remains from locusts, simple joys,  
 The broken toys for which the attic is a chamber  
 Fit for the prophet when he comes, his name  
 I know not, only that at his departure  
 The rusted latch-key will be lost again  
 Not for the first time either, but this time, the last.<sup>3</sup>

Some phrases and words here seem injudicious or unsubtle, such as 'they are the Freud in me', or 'pentecostal sheets' and the purpose and nature of the prophet is frustratingly unexplained. Yet, the poem's overwriting is useful in identifying themes and motifs of 'house' poetry. The overt religious vocabulary ('altar', 'pentecostal', 'prophet') identifies the attic as a sacred, even holy, place. Altar (from Latin *altus* meaning 'high') is particularly appropriate as the attic is the highest point in the house. The sense of horizontal movement is furthered in the second line where

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<sup>3</sup> S.L Henderson Smith, *New Poems*, 91.

the attic is situated 'among the stars'.

As a space of meditation and reflection, Smith's attic evokes Gaston Bachelard's idea of the attic as a place of rationality (in contrast to the cellar, which is associated with irrationality). But of the mental capacities, the attic more obviously evokes memory: indeed, it is a storeroom of things from the past. The old, childhood items that are found in the attic are mnemonics which trace the development of the speaker-resident: 'They are the Freud in me'. Such direct connection between the house and its contents and the speaker's sense of identity and self is something that will be reiterated in many later 'house' poems, particularly those dealing with childhood. It is by virtue of this connection that the contents of the attic (the things which are of no use anymore) are preserved by the speaker-resident: if they have lost functional value, they have gained in sentimental and personal value.

Like Smith's poem, Heather Buck's poem from the same anthology considers the intimate connection between house and resident in 'Moving House'. The rooms that are left behind 'became worn to the shape / Of the lives that fitted them'.<sup>4</sup> Such is the connection between resident and house that when removals take place the house appears to die, 'Like a life that dies on a summer's afternoon, / The blood in the veins of the house / Is weakening now'. Other poems in the 'house' grouping look at the relationship between house and outside world, such as Roger Garfitt's 'Four Windows' or Frank Ormsby's 'Moving In':

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<sup>4</sup> Heather Buck, *New Poems*, 95.

The first act of love in a new house  
Is not private. Loving each other  
We are half aware of door and mirror.  
Our ecstasy includes the bedside chair,  
The air from the landing.

Streetlamp and elm utter leaves on walls  
As in no room ever. Theirs is the tongue  
Our tongues join in translating. Their message  
Is clear: tonight you cannot ignore  
The world at the window.

So we love in the knowledge of a city  
At a different angle. And sharing  
Our bed with furniture and tree we claim  
Their perspective, merging our lives here  
In their established frame.<sup>5</sup>

The poem begins with the couple and ends with a vision of the city, suggesting that one aspect of the house is the way that it provides an angle on the outside environment; that it cannot be a completely private and introverted place. So much

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 85.

is also suggested in the contiguity of bed, furniture and tree. In relation to the wider world, the house is the organising factor: the world is placed 'at the window', giving the couple dominion over it, an idea which receives support in the strong assertion that 'we claim' their perspective. If 'Moving In' looks at how a house might orientate our perspective, it features another motif that is important to much contemporary 'house' poetry: domestic love. Romance at home is unsurprisingly a mixture of prosaic and transcendental sentiments, as here where ecstasy combines with the homely bedside chair.

The house section of *New Poems* exhibits a notable diversity of poets: Ormsby is Northern Irish, Smith is English and two poets – Anne Stevenson and Zulfikar Ghose – are American. Such diversity implies that house and home emerged as a universal or common theme in contemporary poetry in English. This idea is borne out when we look at the work of the major poets of the contemporary period, such as Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Andrew Motion and Derek Walcott. In spite of the geographical and cultural differences between these poets, all share an interest in poeticising the house. We find that some, as in the given examples above, poeticise the house itself (Heaney's Mossbawn poems for instance) whereas others use it as a significant context (Andrew Motion's elegies).

To understand why the house has become a prominent object of poetry since the war, it is helpful to consider one, amongst the many, drifts and traditions of post-war poetry: the Movement and its legacy. That is not to say that the all poets considered in this thesis are significantly indebted to the Movement, or form a

distinct group themselves. This thesis is thematic in nature and although it loosely follows Movement contours, it is not my argument that 'domestic poetry' is exclusive to one particular group (in fact, in some of the radical 'alternative' poetry of the post-war period, such as Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, and in some of the work of the New Generation Poets, the domestic is crucially important).

Histories of British and Irish post-war poetry often begin with the Movement, a group of poets and writers who favoured a clear, empirical style of writing and who eschewed modernist formal experimentation in favour of traditional forms. At the heart of Movement poetry appeared to be Hardy's assumption that 'all we can try to do is write on the old themes in the old styles, but try to do a little better than those who went before us.'<sup>6</sup> Contemporary critics, however, often defined Movement poetry negatively; as Stephen Burt notes in his essay on the Movement 'it was easier, often, to say what they stood against'<sup>7</sup>; namely, romanticism and modernism. Such negative accounts of the group, we might argue, are reflective of the group's sceptical outlook.

In his seminal anthology *New Lines*, which helped establish the notion of the Movement, Robert Conquest suggests that scepticism is the definitive feature of the postwar poets: 'if one had briefly to distinguish this poetry of the fifties from its predecessors, the most important general point would be that it submits to no great

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1973), 131.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Burt, 'The Movement and the Mainstream' in *A Concise Companion to Post-War British and Irish Poetry*, ed. Nigel Alderman and C.D. Blanton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 34.

systems of theoretical constructs nor agglomerations of unconscious commands.’<sup>8</sup> If this meant rejecting intellectual trends that were fashionable at the time, such as Marxism or psychoanalysis, such scepticism (or detachment) was in itself reflective of a contemporary intellectual attitude. The generation which succeeded the war, and which had witnessed unprecedented destruction, was wary of totalising belief systems, old and new. Given Conquest’s language – ‘submits to no great systems’ – which anticipates Lyotard’s famous claim that postmodernism is ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’<sup>9</sup>, it is tempting to look at Movement verse through a postmodernist lens. Yet, whilst there may be congruence on this particular point, Movement poetry lacks the other constitutive features of postmodernism such as deconstructive or post-structuralist method. Indeed, Movement poetry’s reliance on traditional forms and clear language is suggestive of a structuralist outlook: the belief that order and systems exist. Neil Corcoran suggests that the logicity and clarity of Movement writing derives from a wish to return to order after the war: ‘syntax, measure and logic of statement were, in the Movement poem, almost an act of post-war reconstruction.’<sup>10</sup>

Critics have identified other points of connection between the tenets of the Movement aesthetic and contemporary society. In his essay ‘Philosophy and Literature in the 1950s’, Colin McGinn argues that the Movement’s clear style might

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Conquest, ‘Introduction’ in *New Lines: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Conquest (London: Macmillan, 1956), xiv.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv.

<sup>10</sup> Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Routledge, 1993), 83.

be related to the positivist tradition in England: 'Anglicized positivism could be said to constitute the philosophical temper of the times, even for non-specialists, and the Movement writers seem to share many of the values it espoused. We might, indeed, say that they instantiated a parallel movement naturally labelled *literary positivism*.'<sup>11</sup>

Another critic traces the Movement style to demographic and cultural changes in postwar Britain: 'Most clearly, the work of postwar poets responded to changes in British society and culture: the levelling of classes, the appearance of consensus politics, new forms of mass entertainment, the rise of service industries and consumerism [...] In poetry, the social revolution spawned a plain, direct, colloquial style which engaged with the new consumer and addressed the ordinary 'man''.<sup>12</sup>

This engagement with ordinariness, in terms of ordinary language and ordinary lives, attracted criticism, most notably from A. Alvarez in his anthology of postwar poetry, *New Poetry*. The essay which opens the collection, 'The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle', responds critically to Conquest's anthology *New Lines*. Postwar poetry, that championed by Conquest, shows that the poet 'is not a strange creature inspired: on the contrary, he is just like the man next door – in fact, he probably *is* the man next door.'<sup>13</sup> The poetry by the man next door is invariably humdrum. Alvarez finds in the speaker of Larkin's 'Church Going' an archetype of the Movement poet: 'this, in concentrated form, is the image of the post-war Welfare

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<sup>11</sup> Colin McGinn, 'Philosophy and Literature in the 1950s: The Rise of the "Ordinary Bloke"', *The Movement Reconsidered*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 131.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Childs, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London: Routledge, 1999), 124.

<sup>13</sup> A. Alvarez, 'The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle' in *The New Poetry*, ed. A. Alvarez (London: Penguin, 1962), 25.



State Englishman: shabby and not concerned with his appearance; poor – he has a bike, not a car; gauche but full of agnostic piety; underfed, underpaid, overtaxed, hopeless, bored, wry.’<sup>14</sup> The poetry from the man next-door is uncommitted, conservative, and modest; it perpetuates the idea that ‘life in England goes on much as it always has, give or take a few minor changes in the class system.’<sup>15</sup>

The animating concept of the Movement, Alvarez argues, is gentility, the belief that life is ‘always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions and habits more or less decent and more or less controllable; that God, in short, is more or less good.’<sup>16</sup> Ted Hughes makes similar criticism of his own generation for their inoffensive and genteel nature. He comments that male poets of the 50s wanted ‘to get back into civvies and get home to the wife and kids and for the rest of their lives not a thing was going to interfere with a nice cigarette and a nice view of the park.’<sup>17</sup> Ted Hughes is regarded positively in Alvarez’s essay. Alvarez suggests that Hughes’s poetry does not labour under the gentility principle. Hughes is attuned to the presence of violent and destructive forces; his poetic vision offers a world dominated by dark, primeval and unconscious forces. In Alvarez’s view, poetry of Hughes’s kind lays bare the real, dangerous dynamics at work in our lives and modern culture, which have been obscured by the genteel mentality:

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<sup>14</sup> Alvarez, ‘Beyond the Gentility Principle’, 24-25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), 202.

What, I suggest, has happened in the last half of the century is that we are gradually being made to realize that all our lives, even those of the most genteel and enislanded, are influenced profoundly by forces which have nothing to do with gentility, decency or politeness. Theologians would call these forces evil, psychologists, perhaps, libido. Either way, they are forces of disintegration which destroy the old standards of civilization. Their public faces are those of two world wars, of the concentration camps, of genocide, and the threat of nuclear war.<sup>18</sup>

A simple but effective rejoinder to Alvarez's thesis is offered by Stephen Regan: 'it is necessary to press the question: why should such ordinariness be construed as "negative"?'<sup>19</sup> Poetry about ordinary circumstances and events need not itself be ordinary or mundane. In fact, some of the most striking and memorable poetry of the contemporary era takes the quotidian world as its subject: being at home, casual encounters, taking public transport. Such poetry is perhaps inevitable, a logical development from literary history – which has left ordinariness largely unexplored – and from the cultural and intellectual developments in the later twentieth century.

For Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, the Movement aesthetic is seen to give way to a new 'spirit' which emerges with a new generation of poets in the late 60s. This new aesthetic, which remains unlabelled, is spear-headed by Irish poets ('so impressive is recent Northern Irish poetry [...] that it is not surprising to find

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<sup>18</sup> Alvarez, 'Beyond the Gentility Principle', 26.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 28.

discussions of English poetry so often have taken place in its shadow'<sup>20</sup>). Northern Irish poets, namely Heaney, Mahon and Longley, started writing in a Movement style, which they abandoned as their verse matured: 'The Movement virtues of commonsense, craftsmanship, and explication are evident in all these poets' early work, and it is only gradually that they have evolved a more symbolic and associative mode.'<sup>21</sup> The post-Movement British poetry is given to play, ambiguity and self-reflexivity; perhaps we might say, post-modern in contrast to the structuralist nature of movement verse:

The new spirit in British poetry began to make itself felt in Northern Ireland during the late 1960s and the early 70s; more recently, a number of gifted English poets, all under forty, have also emerged. Typically, they show greater imaginative freedom and linguistic daring than the previous poetic generation. Free from the constraints of immediate post-war life, and notwithstanding the threats to their own culture, they have developed a degree of ludic and literary self-consciousness reminiscent of the modernists. This is not imply that their work is frivolous or amoral. The point is rather that, as a way of making the familiar strange again, they have exchanged the received idea of the poet as

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<sup>20</sup> Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, 'Introduction', eds. Morrison and Motion, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1982), 16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

the-person-next-door, or knowing insider, for the attitude of the anthropologist or alien invader or remembering exile.<sup>22</sup>

If Morrison and Motion seek to make a distinction between the Movement and the succeeding generation of Northern Irish and English poets, Charles I. Armstrong finds points of continuation. Writing about contemporary Northern Irish poetry, Armstrong notes that the first generation of Troubles poets combined political verse with a focus on everyday life, which had a distinctly Movement flavour and origin, much to the chagrin of contemporary critics:

There is, on the one hand, the persistence of a Romantic or Symbolist desire to transgress or transcend the bounds of given experience, responding to a crisis of confidence in experience. On the other hand, though, one is simultaneously obligated by the exigencies of the quotidian: the everyday just won't go away.

For some readers, the way in which Northern Irish poets have responded to the gravitational pull of the everyday has been something of an embarrassment: it has been seen as a somewhat outdated relic of Larkin and his associates, something either to be berated or ignored as one eagerly homes in on the more easily-handled dimensions of textuality or political discourse.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Charles I. Armstrong, 'The Mundane and the Monstrous: Everyday Epiphanies in Northern Irish Poetry', *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry*, eds. Anne Karhio, Sean Crosson and Charles I. Armstrong (London: Palgrave, 2011), 114.

Armstrong does well to highlight an important and significant aspect of later contemporary poetry which has often been ignored by critics. The quotidian world in contemporary poetry has for too long been regarded as a background setting for poetry on traditional themes and motifs. Everyday life proves to be an invaluable resource for postwar poets, and is treated positively rather than becoming an object for grumbling and cynicism. Somewhat counter intuitively, the everyday is anything but hum-drum: often becoming the site of spiritual revelation. For instance, as Armstrong shows, everyday epiphanies litter Northern Irish poetry. These 'isolated moments of vision' take two forms, they 'either reveal the quintessence of the everyday, or more transcendently point beyond the routines and rituals of ordinary life.'<sup>24</sup> In our secularised and desacralized lives they offer moments of spiritual presence: 'such everyday epiphanies often take their bearings in a crisis concerning our perceptual access, or sense of belonging, to the world, promising a restoration of sacredness or immediacy in a demystified and objectified existence.'<sup>25</sup>

These epiphanies are quotidian in two senses of the word: firstly, from the fact that they occur in ordinary circumstances; at home, in the street, rather than the usual locus of epiphanic moments such as a sublime natural scene, and secondly, from the fact that some reveal a mystical or spiritual quality in the ordinary world, a sense of bliss or peace while working about the house for instance. The quality of everydayness, then, might either be elided or accentuated but in either instance it is

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 114.

integral to the nature of the epiphany. Armstrong begins his essay with Heaney who has 'pursued the idea of poetry as a revivifying of the everyday with obsessive single-mindedness.'<sup>26</sup> There is much to suggest that Heaney inherited this art from the Movement, namely Philip Larkin. From Heaney's essay 'In the Main of Light' it is clear that Heaney regarded Larkin as a poet who had a gift for writing about moments of transcendence and uplift. In fact, this essay proved influential for criticism which sought to argue that Larkin was in some senses a visionary poet and not merely a poet of lowered expectations. Transcendental moments, Heaney notes, are usually related in some manner with light, and have ordinary contexts, as in 'Deceptions' from *The Less Deceived* which 'depends upon a bright, still centre for its essential poetic power. The image of a window rises to take in the facts of grief, to hold them at bay and in focus.'<sup>27</sup>

Armstrong's argument is in agreement with Morrison's and Motion's introduction on the point of ordinariness; the critics do not dispute the persistence of the quotidian in later, post-movement generations of poets (even though for Morrison and Motion, Alvarez's man-next-door has been left behind). The fascination of postwar poets for the quotidian world is not just part of an exercise of 'defamiliarisation' for its own sake. As Armstrong notes, the quotidian world is the scene for moments of sacralisation and, in particular relation to Northern Irish poets, ordinariness might offer a rewarding counterbalance to the extra-ordinariness of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>27</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'In the Main of Light' in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan (London: Macmillan, 1997), 26.

recent history. For instance, the opening poem of *North*, 'Sunlight', which describes Heaney's childhood home Mossbawn, is a moment of light and peace in a collection which explores the connection between ancient and contemporary violence.

We might attribute also a desire for 'reconciliation' with ordinariness as part of the poetic fascination with the ordinary world. As it is, words such as 'ordinary', 'quotidian', 'mundane', 'familiar', 'everyday', all carry somewhat neutral to negative connotations in relation to experiences and events. In most contexts, to describe an event as 'ordinary' is at best an indifferent adjective, at worst, negative. It is not too far-fetched, I would argue, to suggest that a good deal of contemporary poetry encourages us to re-evaluate the value of ordinariness. This is a point made by Colin Falck: 'if poets will continue to accept ordinariness as the starting-point for their insights rather than lock-stock-and-barrel, as the necessary first word rather than the inescapable last, who can say what salvation of the human state they may not able to help us towards? The dead weight of what is now ordinariness may eventually be lifted, the luminous details set free from the mechanised and alienating banality by which they are at present obscured.'<sup>28</sup>

For those who live in the developed world, where wars usually take place elsewhere and do not interrupt the pace of life, where life is generally comfortable and more or less secure, a sense of ennui may arise. Ordinariness becomes conspicuous; life might become flavourless: neither remarkably bad nor remarkably good. It is the poet's job, Falck believes, to lift the weight of ordinariness, to show

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<sup>28</sup> Colin Falk, 'Poetry and Ordinariness', *New Review* 1 (1974): 37.

that day to day life might not lack import, beauty or 'luminous details'. Defamiliarisation, in this regard, has a philosophic as well as aesthetic goal – seeing ordinary things differently will lead to their revaluation and re-valorisation. To give a practical example for this theoretical exposition we might take Heaney's 'The Clothes Shrine':

It was a whole new sweetness  
In the early days to find  
Light white muslin blouses  
On a see-through nylon line  
Drip-drying in the bathroom  
Or a nylon slip in the shine  
Of its own electricity –  
As if St Brigid once more  
Had rigged up a ray of sun  
Like the one she'd strung on air  
To dry her own cloak on  
(Hard-pressed Brigid, so  
Unstoppably on the go) –  
The damp and slump and unfair  
Drag of the workaday  
Made light of and got through



As usual, brilliantly.<sup>29</sup>

The title, in describing clothes hanging in the bathroom as a 'shrine', defamiliarises the scene, giving it unexpected poignancy and import. The slight linguistic movement from 'clothes line' to 'clothes shrine' reflects the slight intellectual action from humdrum every-day life to a spiritualised apprehension of one's quotidian environment. The subtle and irregular rhymes, such as 'sun' and 'on' and 'more' and 'air', fit the sense of unassuming charm which animates the poem. St Brigid is a pertinent presence as most of her miracles were related to healing and domestic tasks. Additional puns allow Heaney to deliver the miracle of 'The Clothes Shrine' in a colloquial and down-to-earth manner: 'made light of' is idiomatic for made easy, but refers to electric light; similarly 'brilliantly' refers etymologically to shining. In so cloaking the 'miracle' in such demotic language, Heaney communicates how it was an ordinary experience, something usual.

'The Clothes Shrine' takes a domestic context, as do many other poems which feature similar moments of ordinary grace. The house is an ordinary place *par excellence* (Alvarez could not have found a better way of stressing the ordinariness of the contemporary poet than by describing him as the 'man-next-door'). It is associated with quiet and retirement from the public world and its activity. Indeed, the adjective 'homely' derived from the experience of life in the house is synonymous with 'plain' and 'unpretentious'. Yet, of course, the house is imbued

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<sup>29</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light* (London: Faber, 2001), 27.

with personal meaning and poignancy, so making it a natural subject for poetry. Of all places, it is the most personal, the most intimately connected with a person's identity and being. It is where habits, customs and traditions are learnt and passed down from generation to generation, as much a social place or space as it is individual.

## II

The house is the object of this study, and it represents a persistent and significant aspect of the ordinariness which has preoccupied contemporary verse. Whilst the house will be considered from the angle of ordinariness – i.e. how quotidian domestic life is poeticised – this study also aims to explore more generally what conceptions and judgements contemporary poets have of house and home. For this reason it is necessary to consider significant theoretical accounts of home space.

### **House and Selfhood**

Increasingly, the house has become the object of philosophical speculation with major studies occurring in the postwar era (evidencing a broader cultural and intellectual interest in the home). Early accounts of dwelling and habitation are offered by Emmanuel Levinas and Martin Heidegger. In his seminal essay, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', Heidegger developed his theory of being (Dasein) by arguing that 'human being consists in dwelling'.<sup>30</sup> 'Dwelling', as Heidegger defines it, is the

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<sup>30</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' in *Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger*, ed. David Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 351.

preserving and 'presencing' of the *fourfold* (earth, sky, divinities and mortals). Building is the product of dwelling as it is a means of gathering the fourfold ('the edifices guard the fourfold')<sup>31</sup>. Heidegger considered houses inessential to the issue of dwelling, and it is clear that he uses terms such as home and homelessness metaphorically.<sup>32</sup> 'Dwelling' is, at first, a psychological/ontological condition which man must learn. Although Heidegger is dismissive of considerations of houses in his essay, the work of Levinas and Otto Bollnow, which is indebted to Heidegger's theory of dwelling, offers profound insight into what we might call the ontological purpose of the house.

For Levinas, the definitive characteristic of a house or dwelling is its separation of its resident from anonymous nature, thus allowing for the resident to develop 'visibility' (which appears to equate with a sense of self):

the home does not implant the separated being in a ground to leave it in vegetable communication with the elements. It is set back from the anonymity of the earth, the air, the light, the forest, the road, the sea, the river [...] With the dwelling the separated being breaks with natural existence [...] circulating between visibility and invisibility, one is always bound for the interior of which one's home, one's corner, one's tent, one's cave. The primordial function of the home does not consist in orienting being by the architecture of the building and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 363.

in discovering a site, but in breaking the plenum of the element, in opening in it the utopia in which the 'I' recollects itself in dwelling at home with itself.<sup>33</sup>

However, this does not mean that a house breaks the relationship between the individual and nature. Rather, it is more accurate to say that it provides a vantage point on the natural world, and even affords some mastery over it:

The ecstatic and immediate enjoyment to which, aspired as it were by the uncertain abyss of the element, the I was able to give itself over, is adjourned and delayed in the home. But this suspension does not reduce to nothing the relationship of the I with elements. The dwelling remains in its own way open upon the element from which it separates. The ambiguity of distance, both removal and connection, is lifted by the window that makes possible a look that dominates, a look of him who escapes looks, the look that contemplates.<sup>34</sup>

Otto Bollnow's account of the house, offered in his paper 'Lived Space', argues that it has important physical and metaphysical functions. A house or habitation is, primarily, a means of securing man's existence: 'man, a fugitive on earth, gains a stay in so far as with his building, with the solid walls of his house, he roots himself tight to the ground.'<sup>35</sup> This literal rooting, a necessity to maintain man's physical well-being, allows for self-determination and independent agency: 'to *dwell* is not an

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<sup>33</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 156.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>35</sup> Otto Bollnow, 'Lived Space', *Philosophy Today* 5 (1961): 33.

activity like any other but a determination of man in which he realises his true essence. He needs a firm dwelling place if he is not to be dragged along helplessly by the stream of time.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, in an echo of Levinas, the house, as a secure and private space, allows for the development and fortification of selfhood: 'by means of its walls man carves out of universal space a special and to some extent private space and thus separates an *inner* space from an outer space [...] He needs the space of the house as an area protected and hidden, an area in which he can be relieved of continual anxious alertness, into which he can withdraw in order to return to himself.'<sup>37</sup>

Bollnow also argues that the house is a space of order in a chaotic world. It is like a temple because 'in every case the first step is to carve out of chaotic space a definite area set apart from the rest of the world as a holy precinct [...] So even today the house is in a deep sense an inviolable area of peace and this sharply differentiated from the outside world without peace.'<sup>38</sup> Yet, he goes further than this in arguing that the house is a world in itself:

To build a house is to found a cosmos in a chaos. Every house, as Eliade maintains [...] is a picture of the world as a whole, and therefore every house construction is the repetition of the creation of the world[...] Ultimately house

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 34.

building signifies a world creating, world sustaining activity which calls for sacred rites.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the most intricate and complex account of home space is found in Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1964). Bachelard shares with Levinas and Bollnow the idea that the house is fundamental to man's being and selfhood; however, this is not because it merely provides a locus for someone to gather himself together and confront the cosmos, so to speak (Bachelard's philosophy seems to take this point for granted). The house is significant as it facilitates man's imaginative capacity: 'every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room, or of a house.'<sup>40</sup>

### **House and Identity:**

While the house supports selfhood in providing a space for the 'I' to recollect itself, it is also integral to one's personal and public identities. Social status is primarily determined by one's profession and one's home. In fact, the latter is contingent on the former: a job with a high salary will allow someone to purchase an expensive house. A house, then, is the 'seal' of one's social status. In her account of house and home, Iris Marion Young notes how the commodified home has become a marker of social status: 'the size, style, and especially location of the house, along with its

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>40</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 136.

landscaping and furnishing, establish the individual's location in the social hierarchy. Everyone knows which are the better houses or apartments, better streets, better neighborhoods, better communities, and the aspiration for upward mobility is often expressed in the desire to move house from one neighbourhood or community to another.<sup>41</sup>

The house as a measure of social status is a minor concern of contemporary British poetry. It features most notably in Douglas Dunn's *Terry Street* and Tony Harrison's *School of Eloquence*, where the houses and residential areas are used to provide insight into the lives of the contemporary working-class. Of greater concern is the house as measure of personal identity. Contemporary poets explore the way in which the arrangement of a home and its material contents tell us about the home's inhabitants. This is most notable in elegiac verse where domestic items are the most personal and poignant reminders of the deceased. One of the properties of home, Young argues, is the arrangement of domestic items 'in a way that supports the body habits and routines of those who dwell there.'<sup>42</sup> A home, then, is a place which literally bears the impression of its inhabitant. The comfort one feels at home derives in part from it being a private place, free from the pressures of work and from the fact that it has been adapted to the resident's body and his everyday activities.

A challenge to the notion that home might be equated with identity and selfhood is found in contemporary feminist theorists who, as Margaret Davies notes,

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<sup>41</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1997), 142-143.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

have often taken a pejorative view of the home life, regarding it as a means of confining women and limiting their autonomy and agency. In the case of women, the house is not a place identifiable with the self, but where that self is confined:

The idea of 'home' has of course been deeply controversial for feminists. Feminism from the 1970s to the early 90s was especially critical of the idea of home. The private world of the home has often been seen as difficult or dangerous, or at the very least normatively and practically problematic. The physical home has rightly been seen as a primary site of oppression for many women and a place where inequality is reproduced – the home is where women are subjected to the many forms of private power of husbands and fathers and where women are expected to perform undervalued and repetitive tasks.<sup>43</sup>

Iris Marion Young challenges feminists who have a solely negative view of home, and who see it as a place where women are expected to confine themselves to the house and serve as selfless nurturers. She argues that the seemingly tedious and mundane tasks of home-making which have traditionally fallen to women such as furnishing and preserving items in the house, are a means of developing and maintaining identity: 'values of homemaking, however, underlie the affirmation of personal and cultural identity, which requires material expression in meaningful

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<sup>43</sup> Margaret Davies, 'Home and State: Reflections on Metaphor and Practice', *Feminists@Law* 3 (2013): 4.



objects arranged in space that must be preserved.’<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, home-making is in a way creative: ‘the activities of preservation give some enclosing fabric to this ever-changing subject by knitting together today and yesterday, integrating new events into the narrative of a life, the biography of a person, a family, a people.’<sup>45</sup> Young puts further emphasis on the idea that homemaking is about maintaining (even improvising) a narrative for individual and family:

Homemaking consists in preserving the things and their meaning as anchor to shifting personal and group identity. But the narratives of the history that brought us here are not fixed, and part of the creative and moral task of preservation is to reconstruct the connection of the past to the present in light of new events, relationships, and political understanding.<sup>46</sup>

The historical narrative that is provided by home-making and domestic items is evident in Hardy’s poem ‘Old Furniture’. Here the speaker contemplates household furniture and items and finds the presence of his ancestors around them:

I see the hands of the generations  
 That owned each shiny familiar thing  
 In play on its knobs and indentations,  
 And with its ancient fashioning

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<sup>44</sup> Young, *Intersecting Voices*, 156.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 154. This point is anticipated by Bachelard: ‘From one object in a room to another housewifely care weaves the ties that unite a very ancient past to a new epoch. The housewife awakens furniture that was asleep’. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 68.

Still dallying...<sup>47</sup>

Young derived her thesis on home as ground of identity from bell hooks's thesis on homeplace as a radical political ground. Hooks, in her article 'Homeplace: A Site of Resistance', argues that house and home may provide a space for the development and flourishing of an identity which is otherwise marginalised, maligned or suppressed in the public sphere. The house, then, becomes a politicised space: a space of resistance and refuge for a minority. Hooks uses the experiences of African Americans to outline this point:

Historically, African American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however, fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist.<sup>48</sup>

As women have been primarily the home-makers, the task of cultivating a home place which might work as a site of resistance falls to women: 'since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'Old Furniture' *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Irwin, (London: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994), 446.

<sup>48</sup> Bell Hooks, 'Homeplace: A Site of Resistance' in *Philosophy and the City: Classic to Contemporary Writings*, ed. Sharon M. Meagher, (Albany, N.Y: State of New York Press, 2008), 176.

oppression, of sexist domination.’<sup>49</sup> Hooks’s and Young’s thesis is borne out in contemporary poetry, particularly by post-colonial or ‘minority’ poets. In their work, the house is openly regarded as a formative place, where one’s identity is developed and preserved. For instance, Mossbawn is for Heaney the root and source of many of his values and beliefs.<sup>50</sup>

### **Crossing the threshold**

There is a point when the virtues of the house – the security, routine, familiarity, and sense of homeliness which it provides – become vices. Too much of life passed indoors at home is stultifying and leaves the desires for travel, adventure and experiences unsatisfied:

Though the house is an area of security and peace for man, he would pine away if he locked himself in his house to escape the dangers of the world outside; his house would soon become a prison. He must go out into the world to transact his business and to fulfil his role in life. Both security and danger belong to man, and consequently both areas of lived-space, as life develops in the tension between outer and inner space.<sup>51</sup>

The most significant instance of home-leaving in Western societies occurs in early adulthood when it is expected that young adults should ‘fly the nest’, which is to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>50</sup> Although we find in Heaney’s work many positive evocations in Mossbawn, it is important to note that his childhood home is also associated with the sectarian conflict in Ulster. As he notes in his essay ‘Belfast’, ‘in the syllables of my home I see a metaphor of the split culture of Ulster’. Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1980), 35.

<sup>51</sup> Bollnow, ‘Lived Space’, 34.

leave behind the comfort and security of the parental home, to pursue independent lives whether at university or in employment, eventually purchasing a permanent house of their own. That period between homes – the parental and settled home – when a young adult is living in temporary accommodation, moving from location to location, is considered necessary in the development of character, and answers to the sense of adventure and exploration.

Of course, the settled life in the second house, where one envisages permanent residency, need not mark an end to adventure and travel. Outdoors activities such as camping and hiking, or holidays abroad, are common ways in which the modern individual, comfortably ensconced in suburban life, might experience wildness and excitement. In fact, such is our desire for adventure that home life is always in tension with the wish to go beyond the confines of the house:

Another interesting aspect of homemaking lies in the tenuous friction between our desire to have a place, a home, or a ground, and our desire to go beyond these structures, to leave our home, to be free for travel, adventure, and the experience of wildness. This friction reflects a kind of estrangement within the existing confines of familiarity.<sup>52</sup>

### III

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<sup>52</sup> James Tuedio, 'Ambiguities in the Locus of Home: Exilic Life and the Space of Belonging,' in *Homes in Transformation: Dwelling, Moving, Belonging*, eds. Hanna Johansson and Kirsi Saarikangas (Helsinki: Finnish Literary Society, 2009). 321.

In choosing the motif of house and home as the subject of this study, this thesis breaks with the current critical trend which hinges discussion on over-arching and key themes such as identity, language, politics, and post-colonialism. Yet, I would argue that the new concerns of contemporary poetry, namely with ordinariness and domestic space, necessitates a new direction in criticism. There is some criticism which has studied ordinariness and the home in contemporary poetry, such as Adam Hanna's thesis *Northern Irish Poetry and Domestic Space*, which studies representations of home in Heaney, Mahon, Longley and McGuckian, but even this thesis is somewhat apologetic for its unconventional perspective, using it primarily as a means of gaining insight into the nature of Northern Ireland's politics.

To consider poetry of house and home, particularly of Troubles poets, with a primary focus on what that poetry reveals about familial relationships and the nature of domestic life, will shed new light on already established and canonical poets. That is not to say the analysis will be apolitical – indeed, it is arguable whether apolitical poetry and art is even possible – but that the thesis' principal focus will not be on how domestic verse relates with a wider political reality but on how domestic space and events are apprehended and poeticised.

Much like the topics of nature, religion and love, the house might be considered a 'stand-alone' topic; one which recurs with enough frequency and significance that it warrants particular study. So much is suggested by contemporary anthologies: the P.E.N anthology offers a selection of house poems from contemporary verse, whilst Andrew Motion's anthology *Here to Eternity* (2001) has a

section on home, alongside sections on town, land, work, love, self, travel, belief and space. Most of the poems in the house section are from the twentieth century, thus showing the relatively recent development of 'house' poetry. In his introduction, Motion notes that each section 'tells its own story'; the home section 'begins by celebrating safety, then moves on to explore threats of suffocation and decay.'<sup>53</sup> Such a narrative suggests the diversity and range of poetry about the house.

While the house provides a space for poets to probe ordinariness, it is my contention that such domestic poetry constructs the house as primarily a humanistic space, on an individual and social level. It is where the individual expresses himself most freely, where he finds himself most comfortable, the house and its things conforming to his body and habits. Also, it is where cultural, religious and familial traditions are communicated and inherited; where social activity might also find its freest expression – particularly for minority and oppressed groups.

That the house is, primarily, a human place is a very obvious point; what is less obvious is why contemporary poets have latched on to its humanistic potential. This is arguably relatable to the broader cultural and intellectual climate. With cultural and political trends towards anti-imperialism – promoting localism and regionalism instead – and with the waning of dominant religious and ideological meta-narratives (Christianity and Marxism among them) a 'humanistic' outlook takes sway, which lauds particular or idiosyncratic belief systems and human

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<sup>53</sup> Andrew Motion, 'Introduction' *Here to Eternity: An Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Andrew Motion (London: Faber, 2001), xxi – xxii.

agency more generally. What was once considered parochial or provincial is now regarded with new value and significance. This humanistic and relativistic attitude suggests that what is right or valuable is that which is most authentic or natural to a given person or society. So the house, perhaps the most 'authentic' place, receives unprecedented attention.

This is not to say that domestic poetry is of value only to the author, particularised to the point of irrelevancy for the reader. The particularised domestic experiences are often representative of a culture or geographical area. Heaney's Mossbawn poems, for instance, provide insight into rural life in Northern Ireland. Although this representative quality is significant, it is secondary to a consideration of domestic poetry as part of a poetics of ordinariness. Before biographical or cultural matters, this thesis will consider how poetry discovers or invests the domestic world with import, significance and poignancy.

Such a project will, of course, require close textual analysis. If much domestic poetry hinges on moments of sacralisation or epiphany, it is unsurprising that the lyric form predominates; often the lyric is performative (itself enacting the epiphany it relates). The spectrum of lyric forms is broad, encompassing free verse, traditional forms such as the sonnet, and rare or foreign forms such as the haiku. We find some lyric sequences (Muldoon's 'Hopewell Haiku', and Heaney's *Clearances* for example) which provide an album-like view of domestic experiences. Attention will also be given to the way that the form and structure of verse reflect the physical layout of the house. Arguably the sonnet proves to be a popular form as its square, compact

form might evoke the shape of a room.

The scope of this enquiry will include all forms of domestic space: houses, apartments, and holiday homes, although the house will prove to be the main focus. It will cover all aspects of the house: domestic items and furniture, the rooms of the house (such as bedroom, kitchen and attic) and events that take place there (such as domestic arguments, death and mourning). This thesis is not primarily an anthropological study, and is not interested in particularities regarding the form, construction or type of the house except where relevant or conspicuous. An appreciation of the poeticising of home in Douglas Dunn's 'Kaleidoscope', for instance, need not know the design or shape of Leslie's bedroom.

This thesis also goes against the main current of contemporary criticism in that it looks at writers from different nations and cultures. There is much critical discussion of how poetry develops within national traditions. Yet there is also much to suggest, particularly in regards to contemporary poetry, that there are links between poets of different nations as strong and as significant as those between poets of one nation. Heaney, for instance, cultivated friendships with the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott and the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz to the point that it is just as profitable to consider his work alongside those writers as it is to consider it within the context of Irish poetry. Poetry, of course, appeals to readers across boundaries – there are letters between Lowell and Bishop discussing Larkin – so to limit or confine discussion to national traditions might be to conceal or overlook important influences and connections with other traditions.



The chapters focus on themes rather than authors; yet within chapters the argument moves from author to author. So, for instance, the chapter on poems of domestic love and marriage moves from a consideration of Lowell's domestic love poetry, to Heaney's and Muldoon's. The thematic focus suits the comparative nature of this study to find and establish points of comparison and contrast across a diverse range of poets, while the authorial 'structuring' allows for consideration of poets in their own right, and helps form a better understanding of the individual work and poet. The one exception to this format is the first, introductory chapter on Larkin and Hardy. As these poets are regarded as significant precursors, even founders of the 'domestic tradition' in British and Irish poetry, it is necessary to give their work particular consideration. The chapters loosely follow the growth of the individual; moving from childhood in the second chapter to the period of middle-age in the third and fourth chapter, and then towards experiences of loss and death in the sixth chapter. Chapters open with poems that may be considered exemplary of contemporary domestic poetry before moving onto writing that offers alternative perspectives.

This thesis spans various generations of post-war poets, although focus is placed on post-Movement poetry. Writers from the earlier decades of the post-war era are considered as 'precursors'. The thesis is similarly expansive in terms of its geographical scope, looking at British, Irish, American and even Caribbean poets; although focus is predominantly on British and Irish writers. The greatest presence

in this thesis is Seamus Heaney. This is partly due to the range of his domestic poetry: Heaney wrote much of his poetry of childhood experiences, marital life, and death and mourning from a domestic vantage point. It is also due to the significant impact that Heaney has had on poets of the post-movement era. His influence is wide-spreading and one might contend that the popularity for writing domestic verse, particularly marital verse, is a product of Heaney's poetry. Alongside major writers such as Heaney, Muldoon, and Andrew Motion this thesis considers lesser known writers who offer significant domestic poems.

The thesis is divided into seven chapters, the first of which considers Hardy and Larkin. These poets, often paired together and seen as principal figures in the 'English line', are shown to be significant poets of the domestic sphere. Discussion of Hardy hinges on 'Old Furniture', 'The Self-Unseeing' and 'She Hears the Storm', making numerous links with Larkin and Heaney to show how Hardy foreshadows later domestic verse. Larkin's poetry, it is argued, displays a keen awareness of the paradoxes and contradictions of home which a later generation of poets will uncover: the possibility that it might be both a liberating and a confining place; that the homeliness of the home might be, depending on an individual's perspective, either stultifying or comforting.

The second chapter considers representations of the childhood home, that is, poems written from a child's perspective (such as Lowell's 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow') or poems in which the speaker reflects on the house where he spent a portion of his childhood. Here the house is shown to be a

'formative' place, the ground for moral and intellectual growth. In the eyes of the child, the one who defamiliarises his or her surroundings *par excellence*, the house and its contents might become somewhat monumental, imbued with import unavailable to adults. Poems of the childhood home contribute, then, to contemporary re-imaginings of the house as a significant, even wondrous place.

The third chapter considers poems of domestic love and marriage. I show that these poems hinge on a combination of the mundane and homely with high emotion and feeling. This leads to a new type of love poetry: wry, often sardonic, with understated sentiment and affection. Here, in contrast to other variations of domestic verse, homely feeling is embraced and serves as a token of stability and enduring love. Elements of wildness are often contained within the domestic mood, and impart at moments an element of thrill and excitement. In the work of Thom Gunn, domestic love poems serve to establish the normality of homosexual love.

The fourth chapter, which looks at political poems set at home, offers the most ambivalent account of domestic space. Home life might accrue negative regard when considered in relation to wars or political disturbance. It is often associated with inactivity and retreat, even cowardice, particularly by male poets who are conscious of the fact that traditionally men are expected to participate in conflict and political change. On the other hand, domestic life is regarded positively as the desired end of war or civil unrest. An unmolested and normal home life is the fruit of peace.

The fifth chapter looks at domestic architecture in itself, considering the various ways that domestic interiority is presented in relation to the wider world. It

explores various types of relationships between domestic interiority and the exteriority beyond, from poetry where the house is besieged by the external environment, to poems where the impulse is a movement from inside to outside. Informed by theoretical accounts of domestic space, this chapter will argue that for contemporary poets the house is intimately linked with psychological interiority (namely, subjectivity and rationality) and ontological security.

The sixth chapter, looking at domestic elegies, draws on significant elements of the house discussed in the previous chapters: namely the virtue of homeliness, the possibility of wonder and the sublime in the domestic sphere, the intimate relationship between house and self. The domestic elegy is where the house is unsurprisingly the most emotionally charged. Ordinary domestic items are put into the service of mourning, acquiring new import and value as tokens of the deceased. In other poems, the house of the deceased acquires new metaphysical dimensions. The preference for authenticity in mourning rather than tradition or ritual, accounts for the poets' domestic mourning.

The thesis concludes with a chapter on poetic representations of hotels and houses. This chapter points the way to further research by discussing other buildings and places which are particularly prominent in contemporary verse. Indeed, with the emergence of the house and home life as subjects of poetry, contemporary poets have also begun to poeticise modern spaces, such as hotels, hospitals, airports and other areas of public transport, including train stations and motorways. I focus on

hospitals and hotels as they function as ersatz homes, ghosted by the presence of the authentic home.

### *Chapter One: Hardy and Larkin*

In this chapter I will consider two poets, Thomas Hardy and Philip Larkin, who are thought to be constitutive of the 'English Line' of poetry in the twentieth century. The purpose is to show that in these seminal poets, whose influence ranges beyond England to Ireland, America and beyond, domesticity and the house are significant motifs in their own right. Indeed, in a significant number of poems, the house is the primary subject, as in 'Old Furniture' or 'Home is so Sad'. In contrast to major domestic poems of earlier centuries, such as 'Upon Appleton House' and other country house poems which use the domestic setting as a means of contemplating society as a whole, in these domestic poems we find emphasis placed on the particularity of domestic experience itself.

Jane Thomas, in her analysis of house and home in Hardy's poetry and novels, argues that the house has significant metaphysical import:

The nostalgia for a lost plenitude, a satisfaction of ontological yearning, is most poignantly expressed in the poetry and fiction through the trope of homes and homelessness, in particular the lost childhood home which functions as a powerful metaphor of desire or the 'want-to-be' for the adult self.<sup>54</sup>

Thomas's analysis is useful for linking house with identity and pointing out how the home, particularly the childhood home, is salubrious for the sense of self. In what follows, I will consider further examples of how the home might be salubrious for

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<sup>54</sup> Jane Thomas, *Thomas Hardy and Desire: Conceptions of the Self* (London: Palgrave, 2013), 15.

the individual: in terms of self, identity and security. I will seek, where pertinent, to make parallels with later poetry, particularly that of Heaney.

Hardy is a great poet of domesticity. His interest in human relationships often led him to meditate on homes and domestic items, as they often bear the mark of other people and other lives. In 'Old Furniture', for instance, domestic items reveal the presence of Hardy's ancestors:

I see the hands of the generations  
 That owned each shiny familiar thing  
 In play on its knobs and indentations,  
 And with its ancient fashioning  
 Still dallying.<sup>55</sup>

Here, as Lance Butler suggests, 'time...leaves its mark upon inanimate objects in a way that humanises them'<sup>56</sup>. They are humanised not only by past generations, but also in their mirroring of the speaker's subjective imagination. The bow 'receding, advancing' and the linden cinder that 'kindles to red at the flinty spark, / or goes out stark' visually represent the waxing and waning of imagined scenes, images and thoughts. The poem's form also imitates the workings of memory: the short and clipped four syllable line which concludes each stanza captures the swift receding or dissipation of memory.

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<sup>55</sup> Hardy, *The Collected Poems*, 446.

<sup>56</sup> Lance Butler, *Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 68.

Self-consciousness about the speaker's meditation on household objects opens and closes the poem. In the first stanza he implies that his meditation on heirlooms is possibly a personal predilection - 'I know not how it may be with others / who sit amid relics of householdry / That date from the days of their mothers' mothers' - and in the last stanza he admonishes himself for his daydreaming:

Well, well. It is best to be up and doing,  
 The world has no use for one today  
 Who eyes things thus - no aim pursuing!  
 He should not continue in this stay,  
 But sink away.

For contemporary poets the tension that exists here, between domesticity and 'the wider world', is increasingly resolved in favour of domesticity. That is to say, contemporary poets are less diffident than the speaker of 'Old Furniture' about subjectively meditating on domestic space and particular poignant moments in their domestic lives. However, in its sensitivity to a 'hidden' domestic world, 'Old Furniture' may be considered a seminal poem. Poems such as Larkin's 'Home is so Sad', which charts the history of a home's contents appear to owe much to this poem. Although the speaker yields to pragmatism, this is rendered negatively. The surface meaning of 'sink away' is to leave domesticity for work, but it also has undertones of what might be termed 'ontological fading'. The speaker implies, then, that in the external world of work, one's selfhood and being is dissipated and that it is in the



home that one's selfhood is fully realised.

For Hardy, the history of home and domestic items may be of personal and spiritual value. Home quite literally houses vestiges of treasured moments which endure throughout a lifetime. Nowhere is this more evident than in the short lyric, 'The Self-Unseeing', which recounts a visit Hardy made to his childhood home after his father's passing:

Here is the ancient floor,  
Footworn and hollowed and thin,  
Here was the former door  
Where the dead feet walked in.

She sat here in her chair,  
Smiling into the fire;  
He who played stood there,  
Bowing it higher and higher.

Childlike, I danced in a dream;  
Blessings emblazoned that day;  
Everything glowed with a gleam;  
Yet we were looking away!<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Hardy, *The Collected Poems*, 150.

As in 'Old Furniture', home is humanised. Although the scene is human and homely, it is given in the final stanza a distinctly transcendent quality. The ordinary and happy domestic scene is rich with spirituality and beauty. That is what the speaker discovers during his reflection on the past; in the actual moment the family could not perceive the transcendent aspect to that day. The metaphorical 'looking away' might refer to the family's inattentiveness to the significances and poignancy that may be found in domestic life<sup>58</sup>. Moments or instances of domestic bliss are taken for granted, are rarely fully appreciated or understood. For Hardy, what is transcendent is as concretely real as the home itself: the dream becomes almost a physical place; blessings are 'emblazoned' as if they were physical decoration, and spiritual presence is depicted as an encompassing light.

'The Self-Unseeing' anticipates some of Heaney's poems which present a Vermeer-like domestic tableau. 'Sunlight', for instance, depicts Aunt Mary's work in Mossbawn, Heaney's childhood home: 'Now she dusts the board / with a goose's wing, / now sits, broad-lapped, / with whitened nails.'<sup>59</sup> Heaney's poem, like Hardy's also seamlessly reifies abstracts into the scene: 'And here is love / like a tinsmith's scoop / sunk past its gleam / in the meal bin'. In Heaney's elegiac *Clearances* sequence, which presents various domestic scenes involving Heaney's

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<sup>58</sup> 'The 'Self-Unseeing' of the title includes in its compass the smiling woman and the violin-playing man, enfolded with the child in this brief moment of domestic harmony, all of whom 'unsee', in the sense of looking away from or failing to take note of its 'gleam' of significance at the time'. Thomas, *Thomas Hardy and Desire*, 20.

<sup>59</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber, 1998), 93.

mother, we find a benedictory light, similar to the transcendental glow of 'The Self-Unseeing': 'they sit down in the shining room together'<sup>60</sup>.

'The House of Hospitalities', like 'The Self-Unseeing', depicts an instance of return and imaginative reconstruction. Here the speaker, back in his former home, recalls the neighbourly Christmases passed there, and contrasts those sociable times with the present lack of community and festivity:

Now no Christmas brings in neighbours,

And the New Year comes unlit;

Where we sang the mole now labours,

And spiders knit.<sup>61</sup>

Repossession by creatures and animals – spiders, mole, worm – underscores the want of human company. Without human presence, a house is not a home. In contrast to the above poems, the effect of time in 'The House of Hospitalities' is not humanising, but destructive: 'the worm has bored the viol...rust eaten out the dial'. The house decays, like a body, without the animation of celebrants.

Home here is valued for its capacity to transmit and perpetuate tradition; it is a space of fraternity and the transmission of tradition. In the concluding stanza, the speaker tells us that all is not lost with this house, that one may still perceive the past inhabitants:

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 308

<sup>61</sup> Hardy, *The Collected Poems*, 184.

Yet at midnight if here walking,  
 When the moon sheets wall and tree,  
 I see forms of old time talking,  
 Who smile on me.

Here the inhabitants have become transcendent figures; the description of them as 'forms' gives them an unearthly quality, as if they were spirits, and they become representations of a way of life or era, the 'old time'. Their smiling on the speaker is symbolic of his fidelity to the ways and customs of the past.

Home as social space is also a subject of Heaney's poetry. In 'Mid-Term Break' friends and relations gather in Mossbawn to pay their condolences after news of Christopher Heaney's death, and in his most recent collection *Human Chain* Heaney, describing a sociable wake, alludes to Hardy's poem:

The corpse house then a house of hospitalities  
 Right through the small hours, the ongoing card game  
 Interrupted constantly by rounds  
 Of cigarettes on plates, biscuits, cups of tea.<sup>62</sup>

The sociability here takes on the quality of ritual and it is indeed for Heaney something to be learnt and continued, even a rite of passage; he was an 'apt pupil in

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<sup>62</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Route 110', *Human Chain* (London: Faber, 2012), 54.

their night school’.

As Michael O’Neill notes, ‘Hardy’s poetry broods on the “long perspectives” to which Larkin tells us that we are not suited’<sup>63</sup>. In his poetry of home those long perspectives, rather than stretching into the future and envisioning the loss wrought by time (as in ‘During Wind and Rain’), stretch into the deep past. Hardy’s homes, as the above poems show, are dynastic: they harbour the presence of ancestors and former tenants. Yet, only certain ‘poetic’ persons have the ability to reach this hidden history and, in contrast to the forward-looking long perspectives, Hardy’s retrospective long-perspectives are often salubrious and cheering. A couple of poems, ‘A House with a History’ and ‘The House of Silence’, contrast the poet/seer’s view of a home and the superficial perspective of others. In the former, the home’s present residents fail to observe the lives of the home’s history: ‘mere freshlings are they, blank of brow, / Who read not how / Its prime had passed before’<sup>64</sup>. In the latter, the speaker addresses and corrects a ‘child’ who calls the eponymous house a ‘quiet place’. If that child had the ‘visioning power of souls who dare / To pierce the material screen’, he would see that ‘Figures dance to a mind with sight / And music and laughter like floods of light / Make all the precincts gleam’<sup>65</sup>. The description of the hidden life in that house becomes increasingly rarefied, to the point that the house appears as a portal through time:

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<sup>63</sup> Michael O’Neill, *Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry*, eds. Michael O’Neill and Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 17.

<sup>64</sup> Hardy, *The Collected Poems*, 595.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

'It is a poet's bower,  
 Through which there pass, in fleet arrays,  
 Long teams of all the years and days,  
 Of joys and sorrows, of earth and heaven,  
 That meet mankind in its ages seven,  
 An aion in an hour.'

This Shelleyan vision provides the longest perspective so far. The house is almost unrecognisable as a lived space where there was music and laughter, seeming to be an analogy or emblem for the poet's mind which channels innumerable experiences. Yet, despite this, and although the speaker presents it as a singular place, it bears resemblances to the poems above. They share the notion of domestic space and items yielding, disproportionately, broad perspectives of time and emotional experiences (cleverly, the vowel sounds in 'aion' are almost contained in 'hour') and the imagistic association of homely celebration and light evokes 'The Self Unseeing'.

'Night in the Old Home' similarly gleans the unsaid off the palpable home. The speaker, troubled by thoughts of the future, 'Life's bare pathway looms like a desert track to me'<sup>66</sup>, is comforted by the ghosts of perished people who tell him to embrace the present: 'Enjoy, suffer, wait: spread the table here freely like us, / And, satisfied, placid, unfretting, watch Time away beamingly'. The poem's wisdom and images are conventional, but it is valuable for the way it combines the two 'long

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 244.

perspectives': future bleakness and the uplifting presence of antecedents.

Hardy's poetry values homeliness. Even the 'transcendent' elements in his poetry do not vitiate or obscure any homely sentiment; in fact, as 'The Self Unseeing' and 'The House of Hospitalities' show, they strengthen and underscore that sentiment. In 'She Hears the Storm' Hardy appears to make homeliness a natural law; that is to say, the security and protection we find at home is also present in nature. The poem describes a widow's reflections during a storm: formerly, such a storm would have been a cause for worrying about her husband's safety as he returns home, but now that he has passed away, no fears exist as Earth has guaranteed his safety: 'He has won that storm tight roof of hers / Which Earth grants all her kind'<sup>67</sup>. This remarkable metaphor flies in the face of conventional representations of the grave, by presenting it as something that is cosy and homely. The religious vocabulary 'won', 'grant', is ordinarily used when discussing a supernatural or transcendent reward, such as paradise. Hardy, then, makes the 'homely' comfort of the grave a supreme achievement. Hardy was not especially seduced by supernatural realms: In 'He Prefers Her Earthly' from his elegiac sequence for Emma, 'Poems of 1912-13', he is not consoled with the thought that Emma has 'changed to a firmament-riding earthless essence'<sup>68</sup>, as he would rather her to keep her familiar shape: 'I would not have you thus and there, / But still would grieve on, missing you, still feature / You as the one you were'. The widow of

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>68</sup> Hardy, *The Collected Poems*, 257.

'She Hears the Storm' imagines her husband in familiar surroundings, even as she is conscious of his passing. As Jahan Ramazani points out, the two figures mirror each other: 'enwombed, enclosed, insulated, she resembles her husband'<sup>69</sup>. Ramazani evokes the virtue of the widow's home in 'Storm': the maternal protection it provides against the unknown.

However, to be enclosed at home is, in 'Shut Out That Moon', entirely negative. It is a place of disillusionment and hopelessness. After a failed love, the speaker imprisons himself at home, withdrawing from the beauty and sublimity in life, which is entwined with that love and which is metonymically represented by the moon:

Within the common lamp-lit room  
 Prison my eyes and thought;  
 Let dingy details crudely loom.  
 Mechanic speech be wrought:  
 Too fragrant was Life's early bloom,  
 Too tart the fruit it brought!<sup>70</sup>

The domestic lamplight – set in contrast to moonlight – symbolises the quotidian reality to which the speaker has now dedicated himself. It might also be considered

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<sup>69</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 35.

<sup>70</sup> Hardy, *The Collected Poems*, 194.



to be the light of cynical maturity, while moonlight represents youthful romanticism. This interplay between domesticity and sublimity, youth and age, is found in Larkin's 'Sad Steps'. Here, also, the speaker from a domestic vantage point gazes at the moon, and links it with youth:

One shivers slightly, looking up there.  
 The hardness and the brightness and the plain  
 Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare  
  
 Is a reminder of the strength and pain  
 Of being young; that it can't come again,  
 But is for others undiminished somewhere.<sup>71</sup>

In both poems, domesticity is associated with numbness or absence of feeling. This is made explicit in Hardy's poem, with the speaker imprisoning himself at home in order to forget the love and expectations of the past. In Larkin's poem, it is implicit in the shiver, which suggests that for the speaker returning to bed, the romantic sentiments evoked by and embodied in the moon are now foreign to him. The bathetic rhyming of 'groping to bed after a piss' and 'the rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness' sets up the contrast between domestic mundaneness and the moon's sublimity.

'Shut Out That Moon' is an important poem. It is representative of Hardy's

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<sup>71</sup> Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Archie Burnett (London: Faber, 2012), 89.

pessimism and his troubled love life. But its depiction of home as a place of asceticism and emotional numbness is, as we know, largely contradicted by his other domestic poems. Hardy could find great poignancy in the items and events of the domestic sphere. His elegiac tribute to his pet cat, 'Last Words to a Dumb Friend', may serve as an example of his sensitivity to matters of the hearth. For other poets, such a topic may be an occasion for humour. Catullus in 'Passer Mortuus Est', written on the passing of Lesbia's sparrow, bathetically and mischievously invokes a host of lofty mourners. We cannot, however, doubt the sincerity of Hardy's elegy. The catalectic trochaic tetrameter in couplets (used later in Auden's celebrated elegy 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats') finds dignity and poignancy in the domestic, and seemingly slight, subject matter:

From the chair whereon he sat  
Sweep his fur, nor wince thereat;  
Rake his little pathways out  
Mid the bushes roundabout;  
Smooth away his talons' mark  
From the claw-worn pine-tree bark,  
Where he climbed as dusk embrowned  
Waiting us who loitered round.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Hardy, *The Collected Poems*, 609.

Here, the couplets avoid bathos, and rather register a sense of sweet nostalgia. In the poem as a whole, there is no heroic elevation, straining to make something conventionally significant out of the cat's death, nor is it slighted by the verse. There is contentment with the simple and domestic value of the cat's company and memories of it: 'Housemate, I can think you still / Bounding to the window-sill'.

### **Philip Larkin**

Donald Davie, in his monograph tracing Hardy's influence on British poets, echoes the idea that Hardy is the most significant poetic forefather of Larkin's poetry:

I shall take it for granted that Philip Larkin is a very Hardy-esque poet; that Hardy has been indeed the determining influence in Larkin's career, once he had overcome his youthful infatuation with Yeats [...] Larkin it is true, has shown himself a poet of altogether narrower range – it is only a part of Hardy that is perpetuated by Larkin into the 1960s, but it is a central and important part<sup>73</sup>

Davie notes that the poets are similar in political outlook, and in their general pessimism. Furthermore, I would argue, they both share an interest in house and home as a means of understanding and developing the self. This elicits a plangent tone, in Larkin, as explorations into the home become a form of self-examination.

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<sup>73</sup> Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1973), 63.

As an example of Larkin's plangent domesticity we might take 'Home is so Sad':

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,  
 Shaped to the comfort of the last to go  
 As if to win them back. Instead, bereft  
 Of anyone to please, it withers so,  
 Having no heart to put aside the theft

And turn again to what it started as,  
 A joyous shot at how things ought to be,  
 Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:  
 Look at the pictures and the cutlery.  
 The music in the piano stool. That vase.<sup>74</sup>

The poem is written in a riddling, cryptic tone. It is ostensibly straightforward, in its simple paratactic constructs and generalising manner, as if explicating to the reader something fairly obvious and understandable – the simple rhymes seemingly complementing the obviousness of the matter at hand. Yet, it appears almost too pat and simplistic: 'sad' carries little emotional value, and the generalisations ('ought to be', 'how it was') paint only an abstract picture. It is only with the imperative 'look'

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<sup>74</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 54-55.

and the fragmented phrase 'that vase' that a sense of emotional urgency emerges. Yet, even then, it is not disclosed exactly what is the significance of vase, pictures and cutlery.

The inaccessibility of 'Home is so sad' is attributable to the essentially personal and subjective nature of the house. For Larkin, home is a museum of the self. His personification of home is a kind of self-dialogue: it is of course Larkin who has no heart to put aside the theft of years, and turn again to what he 'started as' while the imperative 'look' is an invitation to self-accusation rather than an invitation to blame something beyond the speaker's control.

It is this intensely personal and subjective aspect of the poem which makes it resistant to the kind of socially analytical reading offered by Nigel Alderman:

A museum to the speaker/poet who has left: home is no longer the parent's house [...] it is now an *English* museum in which there stands 'that vase' not only situating the relative class positions of the speaker and his parents, but also revealing the paradox of upward mobility.<sup>75</sup>

Generally, Larkin's poetry invites such historicist readings, but it appears that the pathos of 'Home is so Sad' is not the product of class politics, the condescending but affectionate gaze of a 'social superior' as he glances at his humble beginning. Rather it comes from the sense of failure and betrayal of the self; the recognition that one

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<sup>75</sup> Nigel Alderman, "The life with a hole in it': Philip Larkin and the Condition of England' *Textual Practice* 8 (1994): 280.

has not become what one 'ought to be'.

Like 'Home', 'Reference Back' is another example of domestic revisiting. Here, Larkin recalls time spent whilst visiting his mother in her home. Similarly, there is a plangent note as being at the childhood home is not only the context for recalling 'how things might have been' but is also, for an adult of thirty-one, tedious and frustrating.

*That was a pretty one, I heard you call*  
 From the unsatisfactory hall  
 To the unsatisfactory room where I  
 Played record after record, idly,  
 Wasting my time at home, that you  
 Looked so much forward to.<sup>76</sup>

In the second verse paragraph the adjective 'unsatisfactory' is applied directly to the speaker and his mother: 'your unsatisfactory age / to my unsatisfactory prime'; underscoring the idea that home is a reflection of the people who live in it. Yet, what is remarkable about this poem is its subtle modulation from that 'withering sadness'<sup>77</sup> and frustration into an understated epiphany. We imagine the thirty-year old Larkin receiving his mother's trite comment with contempt; taking it as a hopeless and transparent attempt to establish some form of connection between two

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<sup>76</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 67.

<sup>77</sup> Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin*, 110.

people alienated from each other. But as the second verse paragraph shows, that is not the case. He expands on her twee 'pretty' with his lyrical talent and represents it as a moment of mutual understanding:

*Oliver's Riverside Blues*, it was. And now  
 I shall, I suppose, always remember how  
 The flock of notes those antique negroes blew  
 Out of Chicago air into  
 A huge remembering pre-electric horn  
 The year after I was born  
 Three decades later made this sudden bridge  
 From your unsatisfactory age  
 To my unsatisfactory prime.

The music rarefies the domestic scene and allows for a moment of escapism in its evocation of Chicago blues. Indeed, this suggests that the connection between mother and son is only forged if their prosaic and unsatisfactory circumstances are obscured. The adjective 'sudden' captures how the moment is something unexpected and spontaneous, which gives way to the idea that it might disappear as quickly as it emerges. Indeed, by the third stanza, we return to a bleak account of reality, not dissimilar to that of 'Home is So Sad':

Truly, though our element is time,

We are not suited to the long perspectives  
Open at each instant of our lives.  
They link us to our losses: worse,  
They show us what we have as it once was,  
Blindingly undiminished, just as though  
By acting differently we could have kept it so.

Although both poems appear to lament unidentified failures, using vague language – ‘what’, ‘things’ – the context of the conclusion in ‘Reference Back’ suggests that the emotional bond between Larkin and Eva is counted as one of those ‘losses’. The dynamic of ‘Reference Back’ across its verse paragraphs, from mundane domesticity to gracious moment to long perspectives, suggests how the domestic experience is one punctuated by felicitous moments, but is in the main, a yearning for something else.

The dynamics and themes of ‘Reference Back’ are echoed in ‘Love Songs in Age’, in which a speaker recalls how music provided a momentary release from the mundane homely context, which was, however, to be defeated in the end by a sense of loss and failure. Here, an unnamed woman (possibly Larkin’s mother) stumbles across some old sheets of music and, playing them, references back to a time when they chimed with her youthful excitement and promised love:

And the unfailing sense of being young



Spread out like a spring-woken tree, wherein  
     That hidden freshness sung,  
 That certainty of time laid up in store  
 As when she played them first. But, even more,  
  
 The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love,  
     Broke out, to show  
 Its bright incipience sailing above,  
 Still promising to solve, and satisfy,  
 And set unchangeably in order. So  
     To pile them back, to cry,  
 Was hard, without lamely admitting how  
 It had not done so then, and could not now.<sup>78</sup>

The use of the present continuous 'still promising' shows that the records have the capacity to evoke love and happiness even when one is aware from experience that they are not likely to be realised. Indeed, whilst one's circumstances change, a record is changeless and so becomes a means of measuring, like the domestic items in 'Home is So Sad', the trajectory of one's life<sup>79</sup>. Yet, the records, over the course of the

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<sup>78</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 51-52.

<sup>79</sup> 'These things are a measure of how we live and what we have, and yet they cannot prevent or withhold a yearning for a deeper sense of fulfilment and achievement.' Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 110.

years, acquired various marks from the environment: 'One bleached from lying in a sunny place, / One marked in circles by a vase of water, / One mended, when a tidy fit had seized her'. These blemishes and marks symbolise the fact that the idealism of the songs and music has been sullied by domestic reality.

Much of the pathos of 'Love Songs' and 'Reference Back' derives from the image of Larkin's mother isolated at home, occasionally receiving visits from her unhappy and frustrated son. Yet, for Larkin, what would be considered an answer for such a situation – a partner with whom to share a home – is not something necessarily desirable. Due to his desire for autonomy he spent a lot of his life living alone. To share a home is to invite commitment, responsibility and expectation. In 'Self's the Man', for instance, Larkin satirises the familial commitments of a conventional home:

And when he finishes supper

Planning to have a read at the evening paper

*It's Put a screw in this wall –*

He has no time at all,

With the nipper to wheel round the houses

And the hall to paint in his old trousers

And that letter to her mother

Saying *Won't you come for the summer.*<sup>80</sup>

In 'Talking in Bed', which casts a sceptical eye on domestic intimacy and love, the tone is graver. Post coitus, a couple try to form a meaningful emotional connection:

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,  
Lying together there goes back so far,  
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.  
Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest  
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.  
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why  
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find  
Words at once true and kind,  
Or not untrue and not unkind.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 59.

<sup>81</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 61.

As Steve Clark observes, here intimacy is 'presented in terms of intrusion, unwanted obligation, a "distance" from the necessary privacy and preferred autonomy of "isolation"'.<sup>82</sup> That unwanted obligation is conveyed in the first line through the modal verb 'ought', which prepares the speaker's admission of his failure, and in the last stanza which is governed by an understood duty or requirement to find true and kind words.

If intimacy is shunned as an intrusion into personal privacy, it is also something taken up not for its value in itself, but in response to an indifferent world or as a means of not being alone. The couple care for each other because 'none of this cares for us' and their physical intimacy is described not positively but negatively: a 'unique distance from isolation'. The relationship of the environment is not merely one of pathetic fallacy, but one of causation: personal relationships are a reaction to wider, 'cosmic' indifference. It is this awareness of the negative basis of intimacy that gives the poem its disquieting effects. Negative strategies are drawn to the fore at the poem's conclusion, to show that to live 'negatively' is not easier than living 'positively'.

At the heart of the speaker's dilemma is the paradox that the negative foundation of his relationship – fear of the world's indifference – proves to undermine it as well. He cannot find words 'true and kind' for his partner, simply because reality is not true and kind: the care that they share is a weakly sustained

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<sup>82</sup> Steve Clark, "'Get Out As Early as You Can": Larkin's Sexual Politics' in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan (London: Macmillan, 1997), 98.

illusion. We should not then be too hasty to ascribe the speaker's struggle in 'Talking to Bed' solely to Larkin's predilection for isolation and autonomy.

'Talking in Bed' is anticipated by an uncollected poem, 'Disintegration', which more directly ascribes the failure of love and perturbation of domestic life to cosmic indifference:

Time running beneath the pillow wakes  
 Lovers entrained who in the name of love  
 Were promised the steeples and fanlights of a dream;  
 Joins the renters of each single room  
 Across the tables to observe a life  
 Dissolving in the acid of their sex...<sup>83</sup>

The ballad-like materialisation of an abstract concept, the sense of suburban disquiet and anonymous figures all testify to the influence of Auden. There are particular similarities with Auden's ballad, 'As I walked out one evening'. Here the vastness of time also impinges on the suburban world:

'The glacier knocks in the cupboard,  
 The desert sighs in the bed,  
 And the crack in the tea-cup opens  
 A lane to the land of the dead.'<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 106.

Yet, whereas for Auden the pressure of time exhorts fraternity – ‘you shall love your crooked neighbour / with your crooked heart’ – for Larkin’s domestic lovers and renters there is no response, only powerless witnessing of the inevitable: ‘daylight shows the streets still tangled up; / Time points the simian camera in the head / Upon confusion to be seen and seen’.

Poems such as ‘Talking’ and ‘Disintegration’ build associations between domesticity and powerlessness, as does ‘Aubade’, in which the speaker, at home, perceives the inescapable presence of death as dawn breaks: ‘In time the curtain-edges will grow light. / Till then I see what’s really always there: / Unresting death, a whole day nearer now’<sup>85</sup>. The ambiguity in the participle ‘unresting’ draws attention to the invasive quality of death which denies Larkin’s speaker moments of repose: as well as describing death’s unceasing ‘action’ it could also refer to death’s unsettling and perturbation of an individual’s life. Unrest is conspicuous in Larkin’s domestic figures: in ‘Aubade’ the speaker numbs himself into sleep; the sleep of the couple in ‘Disintegration’ is disturbed by time and in ‘Talking in Bed’ the ‘wind’s incomplete unrest’ mirrors and precipitates the speaker’s inner frustration. Such unrest is a sign of robbed autonomy: at home, in the place that should be most their own, most receptive to what they are, Larkin’s speakers discover that they are governed by, or preoccupied with, something other than themselves. ‘Aubade’ is emphatic in its

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<sup>84</sup> W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 2007), 135.

<sup>85</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 115.

assertion of death's control; death makes 'all thought impossible but how / and where and when I shall myself die'. This odd mixture of external and personal agency underscores the fact that the speaker is knowingly alienated from himself.

As the sun rises and the speaker's room becomes visible, so the presence of death is more pronounced:

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.

It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,

Have always known, know that we can't escape,

Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.

Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring

In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring

Intricate rented world begins to rouse.

The sky is white as clay, with no sun.

Work has to be done.

Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

The wardrobe and postmen similes capture the 'everydayness' of death; yet they also reiterate that death *is* 'everydayness', that the speaker's quotidian reality is monopolised by thoughts of death so that he sees it in the postmen's rounds or settled uncomfortably close in his bedroom (one critic has pointed out the similarity between wardrobe and coffin). In this regard, 'Aubade' draws on the conclusion of

'Reference' ('truly though our element is time'); however, whereas the latter recounts an instance of deep retrogressive looking, the former looks ahead.

Larkin's representations of home are shaped by the cultural climate of his era, one in which possessions and property were used as a means of establishing an individual's social status and character. The speaker of 'Mr Bleaney', for instance, uses Mr Bleaney's possessions and living circumstances to judge and assess the former tenant. Such a preoccupation with personal possessions, Stephen Regan points out, was not uncommon in post-war society:

anxiety about 'what one is' in relation to 'what one has' might seem overstated to later generations of readers, but it is certainly not unusual in the context of post-war social and cultural change. 'Mr Bleaney' was written in 1955 at that very point where 'austerity' was about to give way to 'affluence' [...] Like several poems in *The Whitsun Weddings*, 'Mr Bleaney' is an attempt to understand the self in relation to the values and beliefs of others.<sup>86</sup>

Mr Bleaney's lack of a home appears to impede the speaker's sympathy. In spite of knowing 'his habits' and vocation, the speaker returns to Bleaney's material lack 'no more to show / than one hired box' for his definitive assessment, as if there were more deducible about Bleaney from that one fact than from anything else the speaker knows. Furthermore, the opening sentence, 'This was Mr Bleaney's room', which comes immediately after the title 'Mr Bleaney', aims to strike a sense of

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<sup>86</sup> Regan, *Philip Larkin*, 109.



equivalency between Mr Bleaney's room and Bleaney himself.

The final two stanzas, then, do not necessarily register the speaker's attempt to understand Bleaney on a deeper level, as most critics assert. The conditional and 'I don't know' – taken often as instance of withheld judgement – may be read contemptuously, implying that Bleaney was possibly unaware or incapable of recognising his own poverty, whilst revealing the speaker's own disdain for the 'hired box'. His thoughts may be paraphrased so: 'Although I know that Bleaney warranted no better than this room, I'm not sure if he had the intelligence and insight to recognise that'. There is the implication, then, that Bleaney's lack of a home and possessions made him, in the speaker's estimation, deficient in some way.

If, in Larkin's context, a home is a means of defining or proving one's worth to society, it is also a stay against a deeper type of existential anxiety: the ability for self-determination. Images of waste and disorder impinge on Bleaney's room – 'whose window shows a strip of building land, / Tussocky, littered' and 'the frigid wind / tousling the clouds' – mirroring the unstructured and insecure nature of Bleaney's life. Without his own home, Bleaney is dependent on others, even if he establishes a well-worn routine. The passive phrases 'they moved him' and 'put him up' underscore Bleaney's diminished autonomy.

Home in Larkin's poetry, bearing in mind such poems as 'Self's the Man', 'Talking in Bed' and 'Mr Bleaney', is the site of a clash between two conflicting world-views: the liberal notion of man's self-determination – Larkin's cultural milieu pushed the idea that to have a home is a way of quite literally materialising one's self

– and an understated determinism which suggests that, whether alone or with a family, that self will never be realised or fulfilled as one wishes but will always be subject to large forces beyond one's control.

In the famous anti-epiphany of 'High Windows' this conflict appears to be resolved in favour of determinism and self-powerlessness:

And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:

The sun-comprehending glass,

And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows

Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.<sup>87</sup>

Although the location of the high windows is not named here, it is likely that this vista is based on the view from Pearson Park in Hull, which was Larkin's home for eighteen years. This moment takes added significance when seen in the context of the negative vistas which impinge on the domestic worlds in 'Talking in Bed' and 'Mr Bleaney', which belie any sense of autonomy and individual agency. Here, the vista is not eschewed but embraced; Larkin turns to what Steve Clark, borrowing a phrase from 'Ambulances', calls 'the solving emptiness'<sup>88</sup>, where the self is dissolved, and rejects the self-congratulating sexual and social liberalism of the contemporary

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<sup>87</sup> Larkin, *The Collected Poems*, 80.

<sup>88</sup> Clark, 'Larkin's Sexual Politics', 99.

era.

If post-war society witnessed the growth of more liberal attitudes towards sexuality, it also witnessed a boom in consumerism as a result of post-war affluence. Much of this consumerism was directed towards domestic items, as the home is where one materialises the self, in terms of one's social standing and one's personal characteristics. The commodified home, that is, the home as envisioned in marketing and advertising is an important aspect of Larkin's domestic poetry. In 'Here', Larkin glances at consumerism directed towards the household:

And residents from raw estates, brought down  
 The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,  
 Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires –  
 Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,  
 Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers –<sup>89</sup>

These lines describe what Marx would call 'false consciousness': what the residents take to be their innermost 'desires' are, in fact, the items marketed to them by the consumer industry. As if to underscore this point, they appear to move with zombie-like uniformity.

These 'desires' are mostly domestic, suggesting that post-war society is somewhat parochial and more importantly that it is self-absorbed and navel-gazing:

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<sup>89</sup> Larkin, *The Collected Poems*, 49.

it is all a means of improving an individual's social standing 'to keep up with the Joneses'. The speaker, however, does not share that false consciousness; his yearning transcends material concerns and is for something akin to the sublime experiences in Romantic poetry. Indeed, the transcendence of 'Here', as Regan notes, is predicated on, if negatively, the consumerism of contemporary society: 'we need to understand "transcendence" as a socially generated impulse: the response of the alienated intellectual to a changing post-war culture'<sup>90</sup>.

The valorisation of domestic life in post-war society is also the target of Larkin's satire in 'Essential Beauty'. The speaker of the poem, in a burlesque of Plato's theories of forms, suggests that advertisements depicting happy interior scenes belong to an ideal realm totally divorced from reality.

...High above the gutter

A silver knife sinks into golden butter,

A glass of milk stands in a meadow, and

Well-balanced families, in fine

Midsummer weather, owe their smiles, their cars,

Even their youth, to that small cube each hand

Stretches towards.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Regan, *Philip Larkin*, 105.

<sup>91</sup> Larkin, *The Collected Poems*, 69.

As in 'Here' we find that modern fantasies and desires revolve around the domestic sphere. The conspicuous verb 'owe' exposes the fact that such idealisations and visions of domestic bliss have a monetary and commercial basis. The great command that these advertisements of domestic contentment have over the modern imagination is reified in their imposing and surreal size; the milk surveying the meadow is like Stevens's jar in the wilderness, taking dominion everywhere. In this era, the homely domestic world is made into something sublime.<sup>92</sup>

In contrast to the commercialised and specious advertisements of 'Here' and 'Essential Beauty' is the tomb of the Earl of Arundel and his wife, which offers a moving domestic idealisation. Here, the stone monument presents a perfect vision of fidelity and intimacy – like the ads it presents an unattainable ideal – and scepticism is allowed to emerge at points. Ultimately, however, the integrity and endurance of the stone earl and countess expresses a kind of love, superior to the frustrated intimacy of the anonymous couple of 'Talking in Bed', and, as a personal monument, it is without the commercial predation of the advertisements. The couple

Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths

Of time. Snow fell, undated. Light

Each summer thronged the glass. A bright

Litter of birdcalls strewed the same

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<sup>92</sup> 'Like a Surrealist painting, the poem disturbs our sense of the everyday propriety of the objects it describes; defamiliarising the ordinary'. S.J Perry, "'So Unreal": The Unhomely Moment in the Poetry of Philip Larkin', *English Studies* 92 (2011): 437.

Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths

The endless altered people came...<sup>93</sup>

Their love has unordinary purity, not only because it is timeless ('they would not think to lie so long'), but also because it is totally self-involved – love for love's sake (this is symbolised through the couple's detachment from their environment). It is the kind of love that Donne celebrates in poems such as 'The Sun Rising' or 'Good Morrow'. The manner of the design is such that the earl and countess are not depicted in an extraordinary manner; in fact, they closely resemble a couple sleeping in bed. Such a 'domestic' impression was something intended. Although they are wearing 'their proper habits', a degree of homeliness is conveyed by the 'plainness of the pre-baroque' which 'hardly involves the eye' and that 'faint hint of the absurd – / The little dogs under their feet'; absurd, because it is an unexpected intrusion of the quotidian. Tomb and poem alike, then, are a moving tribute to domestic happiness.

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<sup>93</sup> Larkin, *The Collected Poems*, 72.

## *Chapter Two: The Childhood Home*

In her book on the house and its relationship with the self, Clare Marcus stresses the importance of location in the childhood period, and in retrospective memories of that period:

Childhood is that time when we begin to be conscious of the self [...] It is not surprising that many of us regard that time as an almost sacred period in our lives. Since it is difficult for the mind to grasp a time period in abstract, we tend to connect with it through memories of the *places* we inhabited. For most of us, a return in later life to a dwelling or landscape where we spent our childhood years can be a highly charged experience [...] We hold on to childhood memories of certain places as a kind of psychic anchor, reminding us of where we came from, of what we once were, or of how the physical environment perhaps nurtured us when family dynamics were strained or the context of our lives fraught with uncertainty. For each of us, it was in the environments of childhood that person we are began to take shape.<sup>1</sup>

Of all the places alluded to by Marcus, the house – it is fair to assume – is particularly influential and significant as there is spent much of a child's life. The home is, for the child, the place of primary interaction with his or her parents, and where – in later years – he or she imbibes familial or regional traditions and cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> Clare Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home* (Newburyport MA: Hays, 2007), 20.

Things and experiences at home are, for the child, often strange, exciting or curious. In contrast, then, to parents or adults, who might find the home to be a quotidian and confining place, the child finds the home to be remarkably 'un-quotidian', even grand or sublime (indeed, much that adults regard as uninteresting is fascinating and momentous for the child). However, when the child approaches adolescence, he might become frustrated with the home and eager to explore the wider world. In fact, even in earlier stages of childhood, children express a yearning for exploration in those games they play which imitate adventure narratives from films and books.

This chapter will study poetic representations of childhood domestic experiences, which include poems written from the child's perspective, and poems which reflect on such experiences in adulthood. The underlying theme is how the domestic environment fosters and develops subjectivity and selfhood. This may be through the behaviour and example of parents (especially, the mother) or relatives or, as with Heaney particularly, through the items and physical properties of the home itself. A key motif is how the physical labour of the parents provides a model for the cultural/intellectual work of the poet.

Of course, the home might not always be a salubrious place for the child. It might be the source of confusion and cryptic experiences, or may be an inhibitory place. Yet, the influence of these negative influences on the development of the self is not necessarily less than positive experiences. Rather, we find that the self might grow in opposition to that environment. A child raised in a household with a



domineering father might develop to favour play and irreverence.

I will begin this chapter with a discussion of Elizabeth Bishop's 'First Death in Nova Scotia' and 'Sestina', two poems which foreshadow much contemporary poetry which relates childhood domestic experiences. Childhood, as critics have noted, is a developing theme in Bishop's work; James McCorkle, for instance, remarks that 'childhood as thematic concern and as autobiographic agency informs many of Bishop's poems.'<sup>2</sup> In the two poems, which are both elegiac in subject matter, and set in a house, we are given examples of how the childhood perspective might make the domestic world quizzical and momentous.

'First Death in Nova Scotia', Bonnie Costello suggests, 'demonstrates both the force of iconic objects in the child's consciousness and the power of a childhood event to become an iconic memory'.<sup>3</sup> The poem, then, anticipates later poems of childhood domestic experiences which are similarly concerned with 'iconic' objects and moments. What is perhaps unique to Bishop's poem is the nature of the child's perspective, how Bishop represents memory. Whereas in other poems recalling childhood experiences, such as Lowell's 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow', an externalised voice is discernible, 'Bishop...reduces the externalised voice and schematises from within the event-memory so that the narrator's and the

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<sup>2</sup> James McCorkle, "'Flowing and Flown': Reveries of Childhood in Elizabeth Bishop's Poetry' in *Jarrell, Bishop, Lowell, & Co.: Middle Generation Poets in Context*, ed. Suzanne Ferguson (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 165.

<sup>3</sup> Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 194.

reader's identification with the child-beholder is complete.'<sup>4</sup> For Helen Vendler, tension arises in the poem as we witness the child-narrator's attempts to assimilate her cousin's death into the domestic context:

The constrained effort by all in the parlour to encompass Arthur's death in the domestic scene culminates in the child's effort to make a gestalt of parlor, coffin, corpse, chromographs, loon, Jack Frost, Maple Leaf Forever, and the lily. But the strain is too great for the child, who allows doubt and dismay to creep in...<sup>5</sup>

Other critics have taken a similar approach. I would argue, however, that the poem is less about the domestication of death, and more about the child's making strange of a sad, but ultimately ordinary, scene for the time: the laying out of a body before burial. What is unnerving is not death *per se* (or the child's grappling with the knowledge of death) but rather the child's strange and gothic distortions. There is something perturbing about comparing a coffin to a 'little frosted cake'<sup>6</sup> and the child to a doll 'he was all white, like a doll that hadn't been painted yet'. Of course, it takes an adult's knowledge of the reality of the situation to find the child's comparisons disquieting. Nonetheless, the child's imagination appears to tend towards the perverse. She finds the breast of the stuffed loon 'cold and caressable' and the loon's red glass eyes 'much to be desired'. 'First Death in Nova Scotia' depicts the radically 'undomestic' nature of the infantile imagination in which

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Vendler. 'Domestication, Domesticity and the Otherworldly', *World Literature Today* 51 (1997): 24.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983), 125.

everything has the possibility to become fantastical and desirable, even death.

Like 'First Death in Nova Scotia', 'Sestina' anticipates the tropes and themes of contemporary poems which relate childhood domestic experiences. For instance, the nurturing maternal presence, the combination of adult and adolescent perspectives and the disconcerting sense of the 'unheimlich', are found in Heaney's 'Mid-Term Break' and 'Sunlight', and in Muldoon's 'Ned Skinner' and 'Christmas 1945'. 'Sestina' hinges on the contrast between the homely context and the repressed grief - the commitment of Bishop's mother to a mental hospital. For Vendler, the domestic element of the poem cannot erase what is disconcerting or 'inscrutable':

For all the efforts of the grandmother, for all the silence of the child, for all the brave cheer of the Little Marvel Store, the house remains frozen, and the blank center stands for the definitive presence of the unnatural in the child's domestic experience – *especially* in the child's domestic experience. Of all the things that should not be inscrutable, one's house comes first. The fact that one's house always is inscrutable, that nothing *is* more enigmatic than the heart of the domestic scene, offers Bishop one of her recurrent subjects.<sup>7</sup>

Such a reading, Victoria Harrison argues, places too little stock in the poem's homely aspect which, for Harrison, serves as a means of redress:

The mother who perplexes the stove and almanac by challenging domestic order and who prompts the proliferating tears, can overpower neither the

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<sup>7</sup> Vendler. 'Domesticity and the Otherworldly', 23.

bonding of grandmother and granddaughter nor the activity of their emotions among the daily kitchen objects. Pressure-cooker-like, the poem's form repeatedly works the emotions potentially destructive of stable domesticity, and so accommodates them: with every turn of the prosodic pattern the poem confronts one more version of the pain threatening to break through and compensates with its own revision and return.<sup>8</sup>

The domestic/undomestic dichotomy correlates to another important contrast in the poem, that between the adult and adolescent perspectives (or innocence and experience). The tears which are the only token of grief in the first stanza are shed by the grandmother, who makes an effort to hide them. Clearly, the grandmother is conscious of the fact that she can disrupt the simple domestic order and her granddaughter's equally simple perspective. She thinks, as Anne Colwell notes, that loss is 'her exclusive burden.'<sup>9</sup> Yet the child has wisdom of her own, which allows her to manage the tears and grief. She has a positive imagination which her grandmother lacks. For instance, the grandmother perceives the September rain as 'beat[ing]' on the house whereas for the granddaughter the rain 'must dance on the house' and later, when the child has drawn the rigid house, – unbeknownst to the grandmother

the little moons fall down like tears

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<sup>8</sup> Victoria Harrison, *Elizabeth Bishop's Poetics of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 129.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Colwell, *Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 153.

from between the pages of the almanac  
 into the flower bed the child  
 has carefully placed in the front of the house.<sup>10</sup>

This is after the almanac and stove have told the child what the grandmother thinks only she knows; that the loss was fated: *'It was to be, says the Marvel Stove. / I know what I know, says the almanac'*. Aware of loss the child 'works' that loss into her drawing/art and so manages it – whereas her grandmother stagnates, dwelling on her grief. This leads to a poignant inversion in the envoi: now it is the child, drawing another 'inscrutable' house, who is privileged in knowledge. 'Sestina' is, then, a poem of coming into experience but this is not, as the adjective 'inscrutable' makes clear, an adult's experience – the burdensome loss which the grandmother bears for instance – but is somewhat esoteric, particular to the child herself. It is hard to conclude then, with Vendler, that the child senses the 'unnatural'<sup>11</sup> at the heart of home. Rather, at best, we can derive the vague understanding that the child has been moved deeply and has experienced an 'iconic' moment. At such a watershed moment is where other poems of domestic experience begin.

### **Seamus Heaney**

Heaney's 'Mid-Term Break', a poem about the day he learnt that his brother had died, recalls Bishop's poems in its depiction of a child's apprehension of death in a

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<sup>10</sup> Bishop, *Complete Poems*, 124.

<sup>11</sup> Vendler. 'Domesticity and the Otherworldly', 23.

domestic context. The poem's effectiveness lies in the moments of strangeness that an adolescent Heaney notes during the day that Christopher's body is returned home from the hospital, and his resistance to the foreignness that death brings into the domestic sphere. It begins with Heaney recalling his separation from the normal course of a school day: 'I sat all morning in the college sick bay / Counting bells knelling classes to a close. / At two o'clock our neighbours drove me home'<sup>12</sup>; to then meet his father on the porch 'crying' who 'had always taken funerals in his stride'. This break with the normal course of things is, as Stephen Regan points out, evident in the title as well: '[It] ruefully points beyond the usually happy associations of a break from school to the premature endings of a child's life and the rupture it causes in his family.'<sup>13</sup> The sense of strangeness is deepened when Heaney meets the mourners:

I was embarrassed  
 By old men standing up to shake my hand  
  
 And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble'.  
  
 Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,  
  
 Away at school...

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<sup>12</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Regan, 'Seamus Heaney and the Modern Irish Elegy' in *Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator*, ed. Ashby Crowder and Jason Hall (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 11.

With strangers in his own home, Heaney finds himself the subject of attention and a stranger to others. His self-consciousness is exacerbated by the deference and formality of the elders, who in normal circumstances would be the object of his courtesy and respect – in Irish idiom this specific social awkwardness is called ‘making strange’. The powerful portrait of the poet’s mother mourning continues to invert normality; ‘my mother held my hand / In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs’. As Helen Vendler notes, ‘the conflict between “angry” and “sighs”, and the violently suppressed tears stifled under “tearless” are all part of the power of the line.’<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, we may read the description as an ironic counterpoint to ‘my father crying’. As in the preceding poem ‘Follower’, the father’s masculinity crumbles yet, in this case, it is the mother not the speaker who assumes the lost composure and authority. Counter intuitively, with the arrival of Christopher’s body there is a waning of the strangeness that has characterised the poem so far:

At ten o’clock the ambulance arrived  
 With the corpse, stanced and bandaged by the nurses.

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops  
 And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him

For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

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<sup>14</sup> Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 31.

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,  
He lay in the four-foot box as in his cot.  
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four-foot box, a foot for every year.

The one point in the day that we would imagine to be the most disconcerting is in fact the most tranquil. Aside from a 'poppy bruise', Heaney is surprised to find his brother looking nearly normal – 'no gaudy scars'. The participle 'wearing' suggests that the bruise might easily be removed (so capturing the child's incomplete understanding) and perhaps even suggesting, in a Bishopesque moment, that the narrator finds the bruise somewhat attractive. In 'Mid-term Break' the domestic element overcomes the strangeness of death, and so intimates the preservation of childhood innocence.

'Mid-Term Break', to use Costello's term, relates an 'iconic' moment. Other poems of childhood domesticity relate what we might call 'formative' moments. These are moments which are edifying and reveal or introduce the child to certain enduring truths or experiences that lead to his or her growth and development. For Heaney, most of these formative experiences occurred in Mossbawn which, as Michael Parker notes, was influential in the development of Heaney's poetic character: 'the locations of his childhood prove to be almost as important to the later development of the poet as the human landscape. At the centre of his world was the



thatched farmhouse at Mossbawn, the family home until 1953, a place which he has transformed “into a country of the mind.”<sup>15</sup> As an example of Mossbawn facilitating the intellectual and spiritual development of a young Heaney, we might take this poem from *Squarings*:

And strike this scene in gold too, in relief,

So that a greedy eye cannot exhaust it:

Stable straw, Rembrandt-gleam and burnish

Where my father bends to a tea-chest packed with salt,

The hurricane lamp held up at eye level

In his bunched left fist, his right hand foraging

For the unbleeding, vivid-fleshed bacon,

Home-cured hocks pulled up into the light

For pondering a while and putting back.

That night I owned the piled grain of Egypt.

I watched the sentry's torchlight on the hoard.

I stood in the door, unseen and blazed upon.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996*, 370.

The present tense of the middle stanzas makes the action eternally present, as if the speaker came across an image in a gallery. The poem, as one commentator notes, provides a spiritual sustenance equal to the material sustenance it describes: 'The scene itself has been cured in the salt of carefully pondered poetry, so that it provides inexhaustible sustenance for a greedy eye.'<sup>17</sup> In the final line, the young Heaney becomes part of the epiphany and his position in the doorway and the light communicate the notion that he is in a transitional and revelatory moment.

What is most remarkable about this poem is the surrealistic metamorphoses of the final tercet. Its exaggeration of the Mossbawn cellar into an Ancient Egyptian grain silo captures the great impression that the cellar had on the child. To quote Corn again 'the child spectator feels something like religious assurance that there will be always food on the table, that famine (an old Irish theme) will be stayed with the biblical Egyptian grain.'<sup>18</sup> In other words, for the child-spectator, the cellar scene becomes a reification of an abstract – 'plenty'. The desire to cast and preserve the scene with a timeless Rembrandt gleam corresponds, then, to the feeling of inexhaustible abundance felt by an adolescent Heaney; that the scene *per se* was timeless.

Such a metamorphosis is found in Lowell's 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Wilson', which may prove to be an influence in this poem:

I wasn't a child at all—

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<sup>17</sup> Alfred Corn, *Atlas: Selected Essays 1989 – 2007* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 45.

<sup>18</sup> Corn, *Atlas: Selected Essays 1989 – 2007*, 45.

unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina  
 in the Golden House of Nero...<sup>19</sup>

This surreal metamorphosis has been the object of much critical debate. Vereen Bell interprets it as a token of madness.<sup>20</sup> Certainly it suggests dramatic corruption of the childish perspective that opens the poem. Yet, however the allusion may be interpreted it serves to contribute an element of grandeur and high-tragedy to the domestic portrait and to make the fall of the Winslow clan in some way 'archetypal' (perhaps of aristocratic politics and intrigue); in much the same way Heaney's biblical allusion casts the pantry scene as an archetype of plenty. Notably, both poems share the image of the child 'unseen' but 'all-seeing'; a detached and hidden observer. Uninvolved with action of the poem, for him the domestic spectacle is avidly devoured, and provides momentous emotional and intellectual stimulus.

Another poem, further on in *Squarings*, rehearses the idea that Mossbawn allowed an adolescent Heaney to apprehend primal truths:

I was four but I turned four hundred maybe  
 Encountering the ancient dampish feel  
 Of a clay floor. Maybe four thousand even.

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Bidart (London: Faber, 2003), 166.

<sup>20</sup> 'If we take the image of Agrippina seriously, it means not only that the child is threatened to the point of terror in this otherwise "Golden House" but that he himself is implicated in the sinister power that he fears. It means, too, that he fears himself insane in a setting of insanity, and that a hideous premature omniscience has fallen upon him like a curse.' Vereen M. Bell, *Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 55.

Anyhow, there it was. Milk poured for cats  
 In a rank puddle-place, splash-darkened mould  
 Around the terracotta water-crock.

Ground of being. Body's deep obedience  
 To all its shifting tenses. A half-door  
 Opening directly into starlight.

Out of that earth house I inherited  
 A stack of singular, cold memory-weights  
 To load me, hand and foot, in the scale of things.<sup>21</sup>

Mossbawn presents the young Heaney with two inheritances: the material and personal inheritance of his family and culture, and perhaps more importantly a 'metaphysical' inheritance. As a 'ground of being' and 'earth house', it fosters ontological awareness – 'body's deep obedience / To all its shifting tenses' – and a kind of ontological stability ('load me, hand and foot, in the scale of things'). With regards to its ancient feel and earthiness, it anticipates (or directs) the trajectory of the early verse.

In 'Sunlight' it is not only the farmhouse itself, but also its inhabitants who are

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<sup>21</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 384.

a salutary influence. Aunt Mary's humble domestic work is the source of a revelation of love for a young Heaney. As a tranquil and benedictory poem, 'Sunlight' offers a moment of lightness and peace before the darkness and moral turbidity of the bog poems. In the context of North, 'Sunlight' appears to be quasi-Edenic. The maternal presence encourages the view of Mossbawn as a beneficiary and nurturing place.

Critics have noted that the poem is the poetical equivalent of a Vermeer portrait. An ordinary domestic scene is given a sheen of timelessness. It is important to note, however, that it is not in any way spiritualised, in contrast to *Clearances*, where domestic scenes assume transcendent qualities (for instance the metaphysical clearances which appear in the mother's bedroom, or the anonymous light of sonnet II which fills the room). Such an interpenetration of domestic and transcendental realms bespeaks the need for consolation and the mourner's heightened state of mind. Conversely, the emotionally quiet 'Sunlight' is governed by a pattern of domestication. The sun stands like a 'griddle cooling / against a wall' and love is likened to a tinsmith's scoop:

And here is love  
 like a tinsmith's scoop  
 sunk past its gleam  
 in the meal bin.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 94.

What is remarkable about these lines is how they, metrically, accord with the tenor of the simile. The first three lines are written in a loose poetic metre composed of iambs and trochees; however, the final line has no poetical metre, and can only be read prosaically as two unstressed syllables followed by two stressed syllables. This does not sound 'off'. It is rather appropriate for the unassuming and 'prosaic' nature of the analogy, which is a final image of munificence, complementing the opening image of the pump bestowing its 'honeyed' water.

'Sunlight' depicts another formative Mossbawn experience: the child's recognition and experience of adult love. That deictic 'here' sounds a note of discovery and revelation. This discovery of fullness and love satisfies the expression of lack, which opens the poem 'there was a sunlit absence'. That the 'love like a tinsmith's scoop' is meant to correspond and fill that initial absence is suggested further in the repetition of syntax in the final two stanzas. In the penultimate stanza, the absence emerges once more: 'and here is a space, again' which is then followed with 'and here is love'. The scone rising to the 'tick of two clocks' – while serving as another token of beneficence – might also work as an analogy for the child's growing and developing mind.

Like 'Sunlight', 'Old Smoothing Iron' recalls maternal work in Mossbawn. Here however, there is a stronger focus on the domestic objects utilised in that work. In interview with Dennis O'Driscoll Heaney remarks that 'generally speaking, my poems come from things remembered, quite often from way back [...] sometimes the

thing has an aura and an invitation and some kind of blocked significance hanging around it.<sup>23</sup> The smoothing iron is to be enumerated as one of those remembered things with aura and invitation. It is an object of great curiosity for the younger Heaney:

Often I watched her lift it  
 from where its compact wedge  
 rode the back of the stove  
 like a tug at anchor.

and has an aura of latent power:

To test its heat she'd stare  
 and spit in its iron face  
 or hold it up next her cheek  
 to divine the stored danger.

The iron is approached with caution, even reverence while it remains, as 'iron face' suggests, in somewhat antagonistic opposition. Heaney's mother is cast in a quasi-priestly role as she attempts to manage the iron's danger; the staring, spitting and holding are all part of a well-established ritual. Heaney's sense of danger regarding

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<sup>23</sup> Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2008), 445.

the iron and his reverence for its power shows that, for the child, the domestic world is not the genteel and secure environment that it is for adults.

There is a diminishment in intensity in stanzas that follow, offering a description of the mother's ironing. It is characterised, like much female domestic work, as monotonous and unchallenging; 'instead of sharp, articulate male granite we have the 'dimpled angled elbow' and 'dumb lunge' of the woman ironing.'<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, that work speaks to the younger and older Heaney with a valuable moral:

To work, her dumb lunge says,

is to move a certain mass

through a certain distance,

is to pull your weight and feel

exact and equal to it.

Feel dragged upon. And buoyant.

Critics read these lines as an analogy for the work of the poet, suggesting that they 'point the way forward for Heaney in his endeavour to reconcile the conflicting pressures upon him as a poet. By accepting his duty to others he will merit release.'<sup>25</sup>

The moral also crystallizes the contrast between earthiness and airiness, a contrast

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<sup>24</sup> Parker, *Seamus Heaney*, 188.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.



which is definitive of Heaney's poetic career. Antaeon earthliness is regarded as the presiding spirit of the early poetry, whereas the later poetry is animated by Herculean airiness. Heaney, a highly self-aware poet, was conscious of the trajectory of his poetry. The sonnet 'Fosterling' articulates the movement from prosaic reality to airiness:

Heaviness of being. And poetry  
 Sluggish in the doldrums of what happens.  
 Me waiting until I was nearly fifty  
 To credit marvels. Like the tree-clock of tin cans  
 The tinkers made. So long for air to brighten,  
 Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten.<sup>26</sup>

'Old Smoothing Iron', from *Station Island*, a collection which falls between the Anataen and Herculean poles, foreshadows the later emphasis on release. Here, however, weightiness and gravity prove to be the ground for lightening.

Heaney's poetry of childhood domestic experiences shows that he shares with Wordsworth the view that the adolescent mind is receptive and sensitive to universal truths:

Yes, I remember, when the changeful earth,  
 And twice five seasons on my mind had stamped

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<sup>26</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 357.

The faces of the moving year, even then,  
 A child, I held unconscious intercourse,  
 With the eternal beauty, drinking in  
 A pure organic pleasure from the lines  
 Of curling mist, or from the level plain  
 Of waters coloured by the steady clouds.<sup>27</sup>

For the young Wordsworth, spiritual and moral development is provided by nature, whereas the young Heaney finds a similar, although more humanistic, form of edification in the domestic activity on Mossbawn farm. We know from *Death of a Naturalist*, that childhood experiences of nature were less than salubrious. Mossbawn, particularly its maternal figures, introduced Heaney to notions of duty and provided his first experiences of love and care.

Domestic scenes, unsurprisingly, assume sublime dimensions in the child's eyes. The parents and their work are romanticised and magnified. 'Follower' describes Heaney's early admiration of his father, Patrick, whose shoulders were 'globed like a full sail strung / Between the shafts and the furrow'<sup>28</sup>, when he ploughed. In 'Uncoupled', the mother's emptying of the ash-pan is imbued with stateliness and elegance by the children observing her:

Who is this coming to the ash-pit

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<sup>27</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), ed. J.C. Maxwell (London: Penguin, 1972), 66.

<sup>28</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 11.

Walking tall, as if in a procession,  
Bearing in front of her a slender pan  
  
Withdrawn just now from underneath  
The firebox, weighty, full to the brim  
With whitish dust and flakes still sparking hot  
  
That the wind is blowing into her apron bib,  
Into her mouth and eyes while she proceeds  
Unwavering, keeping her burden horizontal still,  
  
Hands in a tight, sore grip round the metal knob,  
Proceeds until we have lost sight of her  
Where the worn path turns behind the henhouse.<sup>29</sup>

We sense the children's hushed awe in the elevated diction and the almost cinematic exposition of her movement, which is suggestive of their keen attention. As in 'Smoothing Iron' the domestic scene is ritualised and mystified. The use of 'procession', 'worn' and 'proceeds' establishes the work as a kind of rite, while the image of ashes blowing into mouth and eyes has biblical resonances. This exaggerated or 'larger-than-life' characterisation hinges on the virtues articulated in

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<sup>29</sup> Heaney, *Human Chain*, 10.

the mother's movement: stoicism, balance and self-confidence. The children's intuition of these virtues impresses the image on their imaginations with a degree of gravitas, to the point that it loses any domestic colouring. We are only briefly conscious of the domestic context in the final line, with its reference to the homely henhouse, off-setting the industrial 'firebox' and 'ash-pit'. The poem, written as one long and deftly enjambed sentence, shows that Heaney has imbibed his mother's balance and control.<sup>30</sup>

Other domestic poems rely on contrasts and comparisons with Heaney's childhood in Mossbawn for their significance. 'Chairing Mary', from *District and Circle*, recalls the lifting of aunt Mary, who suffered from arthritis in later life, by Heaney's brothers, and here the poignancy of the moment derives from awareness of the care and love that aunt Mary once provided for Heaney:

Heavy, helpless, carefully manhandled

Upstairs every night in a wooden chair,

She sat all day as the sun sundialled

Window-splays across the quiet floor...

Her body heat had entered the braced timber

Two would take hold of, by weighted leg and back,

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<sup>30</sup> The influence and instruction provided by the work of Heaney's mother is most noticeably articulated in the prefatory poem to the sequence *Clearances*, written in her memory: 'She taught me what her uncle once taught her: / How easily the biggest coal block split / If you got the grain and hammer angled right'. Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 306

Tilting and hoisting the one on the lower step

Bearing the brunt, the one reversing up

Not averting eyes from her hurting bulk,

And not embarrassed, but never used to it.

I think of her warm brow we might have once

Bent to and kissed before we kissed it cold.<sup>31</sup>

As much as Heaney expresses sadness for his regrets and the aunt's infirmity, he is moved by such collective care. This is an early example of the communal human effort which becomes the principal motif of his final collection *Human Chain*. The assonance in 'Chairing Mary' gives the title a degree of musicality and encourages us not to view the activity as something unpleasant but, in its own way, rewarding and salutary. It is tempting to read the brothers' effort as a counterpart or return for the aunt's love so tenderly articulated in 'Sunlight'. In interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Heaney describes his visits to Mary in the period of her infirmity and acknowledges that those visits recalled his Mossbawn childhood: 'not a lot getting said or needing to be said. Just a deep, unpathetic stillness and wordlessness. A mixture of *lacrimae rerum* and *Deo gratias*. Something in me reverted to the child I'd been in Mossbawn. Something in her just remained constant, like the past gazing at you calmly.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber, 2006), 67.

<sup>32</sup> O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 171.

In 'The Butts' the contrast between Heaney's childhood domestic experience and later life is more pointed, as the poem sets the two periods in juxtaposition. As in 'Chairing Mary' we are given a scene of home-help, this time for Heaney's father, Patrick. His infirmity takes added poignancy from the recollection of his previous hardiness. The suits, which a young Heaney used to plunder for cigarette butts, reveal the nature of their owner and his vocation: 'a bit stand-offish'<sup>33</sup>, they represent his natural aloofness, while their material ('thornproof and blue serge') is appropriate for farming work. Their overpowering 'tonic unfreshness' appears to convey some of Patrick's earthy vigour. All this is juxtaposed with his now feeble figure:

And we must learn to reach well in beneath

Each meagre armpit

To lift and sponge him,

One on either side,

Feeling his lightness,

Having to dab and work

Closer than anybody liked

But having, for all that,

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<sup>33</sup> Heaney, *Human Chain*, 12.

To keep working.

As in 'Chairing Mary' the administering of home help is uncomfortable for all, but is borne out of a sense of duty. That moral idea 'to keep working' was learnt from childhood experiences, and is evidenced in the suits which hung in Patrick's wardrobe; the oxters-sweat (arm-pit) betokens Patrick's arduous labour on the farm. 'The Butts', then, charts the trajectory and influence of another 'formative' domestic experience – Patrick's unstinting labour and stoicism – whilst using recollections of the childhood home to measure the present.

If Patrick's suits represent their owner's character and trade, the cigarette butts which Heaney draws from them anticipate Patrick's eventual decline. Delving into the suits, an 'empty-handedness transpired':

Out of those layered stuffs

That surged and gave,

Out of the cold smooth pocket-lining

Nothing but chaff cocoons...

This derivation of insubstantiality from substantiality foreshadows the eventual weakness and physical decline of his father. To emphasise this point, the insubstantiality of the chaff cocoons is made synonymous with the 'paperiness' of

Patrick's aged body.

Mossbawn, for the young Heaney, was a ground for iconic and formative moments. Some were felt and known in the moment of infancy, whereas others, such as the discovery of chaff cocoons, are felt retrospectively. In all instances, however, we might say that such moments encouraged humanistic development, which is to say that they aided the growth of moral feeling in Heaney and set the course for his life and poetry.

### **Derek Walcott**

The image of the childhood home that we find in Heaney's work is reflected in Walcott's poetry. Here, also, the home is a ground for moral and cultural development. We might ascribe this to broad similarities in terms of Walcott's and Heaney's cultural and political contexts. Both poets belonged to a colonised people, and as such their language, and traditions were suppressed by the dominant colonial culture. The house, as bell hooks notes, is for such people an invaluable means of preserving and handing-down a particular way of life.

In chapter two of *Another Life*, a Wordsworthian poem on the growth of a poet's mind, Walcott gives us a detailed account of his childhood home as returns to it – although it is now under new tenancy – and recalls his mother's work on the Singer sewing-machine and the care she offered to him and his brother: 'You stitched us clothes from the nearest elements, / made shirts of rain and freshly ironed clouds, / then, singing your iron hymn, you riveted / your feet on Monday to the old



machine'.<sup>34</sup> If Alix was sequestered at home, at the same time she was in harmony with the natural world around her, and if her work was mechanical at times it was also organic (stitching clothes from the elements implies poverty, but also a natural way of living). Walcott and his brother were reared in a home which, in spite of its poverty, was far more integrated into the native land than the great colonial mansions. Furthermore, this weaving of elements of the island together is something that Walcott will imitate in his poetry.

In the following section the home is personified as Alix:

Old house, old woman, old room,  
 old planes, old buckling membranes of the womb,  
 translucent walls,  
 breathe through your timbers; gasp  
 arthritic, curling beams,  
 cough in old air  
 shining with motes, stair  
 polished and repolished by the hands of strangers,  
 die with defiance flecking your grey eyes,  
 motes of a sunlit air,  
 your timbers humming with constellations of carcinoma,  
 your bed frames glowing with radium,

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<sup>34</sup> Derek Walcott, *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Baugh (London: Faber, 2007), 58.

cold iron dilating the fever of your body,  
while the galvanised iron snaps in spasms of pain,  
but a house gives no outcry,  
it bears the depth of forest, of ocean and mother.  
Each consuming the other  
with memory and unuse.

Such personification underscores the motherly character of the home; however, there is no sense of maternal care, as in the previous section. Now, the house rather represents Alix in her weakness; when others need to care for her. The anaphoric, almost incantatory use of 'old' establishes the childhood home as a place of reverence and respect. Walcott's situation here mirrors the position of the speaker in 'Ruins of a Great House'. Revisiting the home he is aware of suffering, even injustice – intimated in the noun defiance – long hidden in the home, which is communicated to him. Yet, there is in both poems the awareness that the pain hidden in such homes cannot be measured.

Further on in the same section Walcott explores the significances of the discovered domestic items:

This radiance of sharing extends to the simplest objects,  
to a favourite hammer, a paintbrush, a toothless,  
gum-sunken old shoe,

to the brain of a childhood room, retarded,  
lobotomized of its furniture,  
stuttering its inventory of accidents:  
why this chair cracked,  
when did the tightened scream  
of that bedspring finally snap,  
when did that unsilvering mirror finally  
surrender her vanity,  
and, in turn, these objects assess us,  
that yellow paper flower with the eyes of a cat,  
that stain, familiar as warts or some birth mark,  
as the badge of some loved defect.

This passage develops the idea that the house has a deep and painful history which needs to be articulated, however imperfectly. Again, this stakes a claim of responsibility on the speaker. The revisiting becomes a process of self-revelation when the speaker feels that these objects 'assess us'. As in 'Home is so Sad', the objects here present an image of 'how things used to be'. Consciousness of this disparity leads to self-reflection, creating the impression that the objects themselves take measure of their returning tenant. In Walcott's case, the 'assessment' has a political aspect: has he betrayed the 'loved defects' of home for what is flawless, but foreign?

The personification of this section reaches its climax with the image of the home consumed by disease:

Skin wrinkles like paint,  
 the forearm of a balustrade freckles,  
 crows' feet radiate  
 from the shut eyes of windows ,  
 [...]
   
 but a pain so alive that  
 to touch every ledge of that house edges a scream  
 from the burning wires, the nerves  
 with their constellation of cancer,  
 the beams with their star-seed of lice,  
 pain shrinking every room,  
 pain shining in every womb.

As in Harrison's family sonnets, which we will look at shortly, the particular home is a metonym and emblem for a broader community: the pain discovered was suffered by Alix and other native citizens of St Lucia. Articulation of and redress for suffering is central to Walcott's poetics. Yet, there is a suggestion here that the pain is somewhat paradoxically the source of its own salve: Walcott finds potent energy latent in the house which will direct his own work.

In spite of the thoughts of hidden suffering and decay, Walcott ends his passage on his childhood home with a salubrious evocation of its harmony:

Finger each object, lift it  
 from its place, and it screams again  
 to be put down  
 in its ring of dust, like the marriage finger  
 frantic without its ring;  
 I can no more move you from your true alignment,  
 Mother, than we can move objects in paintings.

Your house sang softly of balance,  
 of the rightness of placed things.

Baugh's comment on this passage is insightful: 'the house is a measure by which all the versions of displacement and estrangement that are to come in the poem may be judged.'<sup>35</sup> Walcott's visit, then, is not only an opportunity for understanding the depth of suffering of others', but provides a certain degree of redress for the poet himself. The notion that the maternal childhood home is a domain of balance and what we might term 'ontological integrity' is developed later, to more significant effect, in *Omeros*.

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 94.

*Omeros* is an epic poem which charts the efforts of various St Lucians who seek healing for wounds wrought by colonialism. The poem explores equally the struggle of those who are related to the colonisers and those who descend from the colonised. Sergeant Major Plunkett who lives on the island, and his wife Maud must reconcile themselves to the history of British colonisation in St Lucia. The poem intimates that this colonial legacy is a hidden wound on the Sergeant's consciousness. Plunkett's counterpart is the minor character Philoctete, who is a descendant of native St Lucians. The legacy of colonialism is physically manifest as a wound on his shin. He is healed when he is bathed by Ma Kilman, a local obeah-woman, who had gathered a lost African root specifically for his recuperation:

An icy sweat

glazed his scalp, but he could feel the putrescent shin  
 drain in the seethe like sucked marrow, he felt it drag  
 the slime from his shame. She rammed him back to his place

as he tried climbing out with: "Not Yet!" With a rag  
 sogged in a basin of ice she rubbed his squeezed face  
 the way boys enjoy their mother's ritual rage,

and as he surrendered to her, the foul flower  
 on his shin whitened and puckered, the corolla

closed its thorns like the sea-egg.<sup>36</sup>

The element of black magic is insignificant in this process of healing. What recuperates Philoctete is the regression to childhood innocence [taken to be synonymous with Adamic consciousness] – a stage of undivided and unwounded consciousness. As in 'Another Life', integrity of being is overtly associated with a maternal-domestic presence. The domestic element is made conspicuous in the playfulness and the generalisation of 'the way boys enjoy', which brings the healing down to the everyday.

### **Tony Harrison**

Harrison's family home in Leeds exerts a strong influence on the development of the mature poet, just as the childhood homes of Heaney and Walcott. Like Mossbawn, Harrison's childhood home witnessed death and ageing. Yet, whereas for Heaney this seems to provide a ground for positive humanistic sentiment, for Harrison it appears to provide an exacting inheritance of grief and pathos. 'Study' depicts the unreconciled grief found in the room used for family deaths:

Best clock. Best carpet. Best three chairs.

For deaths, for Christmases, a houseless aunt,  
for those too old or sick to manage stairs.

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<sup>36</sup> Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (London: Faber, 1990), 247.

I try to whistle in it but I can't.

Uncle Joe came here to die. His gaping jaws  
 once plugged in to the power of his stammer  
 patterned the stuck plosive without pause  
 like a d-d-damascener's hammer.

Mi aunty's baby still. The dumbstruck mother.  
 The mirror, tortoise-shell-like celluloid  
 held to it, passed from one hand to another.  
 No babble, blubber, breath. The glass won't cloud.

The best clock's only wound for layings out  
 so the stillness isn't tapped at by its ticks.  
 The settee's shapeless underneath its shroud.

My mind moves upon silence and *Aeneid VI*.<sup>37</sup>

The staccato-like rhythm of the lines captures the unnerving quality of the room and also the notion of psychological shock or disturbance (the dumbstruck mother, for

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<sup>37</sup> Tony Harrison, *Collected Poems* (London: Viking, 2007), 125.



instance). As so often in the *School of Eloquence* sequence Harrison fragments the sonnet, shattering the conventional form of octave, sestet, and couplet. In 'Study' this underscores the pervasive sense of decay, decline and the impossibility of reconciliation. While the room's association with deaths in the family is a source of the speaker's disquiet, contributing to that disquiet is what we may call the room's ceremonial artificiality. Indeed, its strained and unnaturally polished appearance is where the speaker begins (the verb-less first line, broken up with two full-stops conveys its lifelessness), and he ends noting that the room isn't actually used; the settee is covered and the clock unwound. That study is where presumably a young Harrison most keenly felt the posed behaviour of adults, who were ordinarily candid and authentic.

Sonnet II in Heaney's *Clearances*, deals with a similar theme: the notion that the childhood home might be a stifling and austere place. In the still-life octave the speaker recounts the cloying atmosphere of Margaret Heaney's prim and proper home: 'polished linoleum shone there. Brass taps shone...Sandwich and teascone / were present and correct'.<sup>38</sup> This is tempered, however, in the sestet when father and daughter unite: 'they sit down in the shining room together'. Yet Harrison's poem, of course, lacks the warmth of familial gathering to personalise and humanise the room.

For Jem Poster, the possibility of escaping such an inhibiting domestic environment is suggested in the reference to the *Aeneid*: 'it's through the very act of engagement with literature (explicitly as a reader, implicitly as a writer) that the poet

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<sup>38</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 308.

transcends his oppressive environment; the metrical freedom of the line, unique in the poem, tellingly reinforces the guarded intimations of release from stifling domestic constraints.<sup>39</sup> It is important to note that the liberating qualities of literature, particularly Latin literature, were not always so clear to the young Harrison. 'Me Tarzan', for instance, recounts how Latin literature kept Harrison in doors when boys of his age were calling him to socialise: 'he shoves the frosted attic skylight, shouts: *Ah bloody can't ah've gorra Latin prose*'.<sup>40</sup>

However, Harrison's childhood home was not merely a delimiting place. As Poster notes, 'recognition of the recurrent suggestions that the poet's childhood home was in some sense inhibitory needs to be balanced by acknowledgement of Harrison's insistence on the idea of home as a source of nurture and protection.'<sup>41</sup> In 'Jumper', the mother's knitting provides comfort and reassurance during an air-raid: 'Bombs fell all that night until daybreak / but, not for a moment, did the knitting stop'.<sup>42</sup> Like the weaving of Walcott's mother, the knitting here will prove instructive to the later poet: 'just as the patterns of sound set up by his mother's clicking needles provide a bulwark against the terrifying bombs, so the rhythmic patterns of Harrison's poetry provide a partial protection against the tremors he experiences as he deliberately brings himself to confront the "fire[...] the darkness" of human

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<sup>39</sup> Jem Poster, 'Open to Experience: Structure and Exploration in Tony Harrison's Poetry', in *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, ed. Sandy Byrne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 87.

<sup>40</sup> Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 126.

<sup>41</sup> Poster, 'Open to Experience', 87.

<sup>42</sup> Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 177.

existence.<sup>43</sup>

Just as valuable as this rhythmic inheritance are the sentiments of love and care expressed by the mother for her son. Her knitting was a method of distracting him from the bombing around them: 'I know now why she made her scared child hold / the skeins she wound so calmly into balls'. Her consideration is shown further in the gift Harrison opens after her passing:

We open presents wrapped before she died.

With that same composure shown in that attack

she'd known the time to lay her wools aside –

the jumper I open's shop-bought, and is black.

The final thought of 'Jumper', then, is not the matter of composure (both mental composure and the composition of verse) which consumes the first twelve lines, but the issue of parental sympathy and understanding. Unlike Harrison's insecure and domineering father, Harrison's mother provides that education in empathy which will be the spur to her son's poetry.

As in Walcott's *Another Life*, the childhood home is associated with a tutelary maternal spirit. For both poets, then, the presence of strangers is seen as a violation, arousing oedipal sentiments. More importantly, this linking of home and mother

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<sup>43</sup> Poster, 'Open to Experience', 88.

confirms the idea of the childhood home as a 'womb'-like place: a formative site whose impact is disproportionate to the time spent in it. It is not just characterised, as a point of origin, departure or development, but is also intimately linked with the poet's being. It might have a spirit itself and is, quite literally, living space. In Harrison's poetry, this is nowhere more evident than in 'Clearing I', which describes from a dramatic present the removal of property from his Leeds home after the death of his parents:

The ambulance, the hearse, the auctioneers  
clear all the life of that loved house away.

The hard-earned treasures of some 50 years  
sized up as junk, and shifted in a day.

A stammerer died here and I believe  
this front room with such ghosts taught me my trade.

Now strangers chip the paintwork as they heave  
the spotless piano that was never played.

The fingerprints they leave mam won't wipe clean  
nor politely ask them first to wipe their boots,  
nor coax her trampled soil patch back to green  
after they've trodden down the pale spring shoots.

I'd hope my mother's spirit wouldn't chase  
 her scattered household, even if it could.  
 How could she bear it when she saw no face  
 stare back at her from that long polished wood?<sup>44</sup>

The poem hinges on the contrast between the strangers' impersonal and objective view and the family's personal and subjective view of the home. For the latter, it is almost a family member in its own right; it is 'loved' and the domestic possessions are viewed as full of 'life'. This sense of 'life' is furthered in the image of the 'long polished wood' reflecting the mother's face. The domestic furniture quite literally bears the image of its owner, while the mother's polishing – a token perhaps of the tedium of domestic life – is also suggestive of her reciprocal care. Indeed, Harrison's phrase 'long polished wood', like 'hard earned' is an adverbial adjective phrase that recalls the mother's diligent work, and makes of that work a property of the item itself. Like Hardy and Yeats, then, Harrison depicts the home as a haunt of ghosts which provide a tradition and trade for the speaker.<sup>45</sup>

### **Paul Muldoon**

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<sup>44</sup> Harrison, *Collected Poems*, 155.

<sup>45</sup> This poem evokes Marion Young's discussion of home-making in *Intersecting Voices*, where she argues that home-making, usually by women, allows for the preservation and cultivation of identity. The indifference of the removal men to the Harrison household and its contents is here construed as an affront to the family's identity and heritage.

Muldoon's poetry of childhood domestic experience, in spite of the similarity of his and Heaney's early lives, is in many respects radically different from Heaney's poetry on Mossbawn. 'Cheesecake', which describes a mother discovering images of herself amongst her son's pornography collection ('among those bodies her own body posed'<sup>46</sup>), shows that the childhood or family home is not necessarily, for Muldoon, a salubrious and nurturing environment. It is, rather, an unnerving place; the ground of oedipal feelings and domineering parents. 'Ned Skinner', which follows 'Cheesecake', depicts the childhood home as a place of boredom and nervously guarded innocence. A young boy is kept indoors on his uncle's farm by his aunt to prevent contact with the undesirable eponymous individual, who occasionally dresses pigs for the uncle:

Aunt Sarah would keep me in,  
 Taking me on her lap  
 Till it was over.  
 Ned Skinner wiped his knife  
 And rinsed his hands  
 In the barrel at the door-step.<sup>47</sup>

Tim Kendall is attentive to the importance of inside and outside in this poem: 'Ned Skinner is not allowed to sully the house's inner sanctum, getting no further than the

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<sup>46</sup> *Paul Muldoon: Poems 1968-1998* (London: Faber, 2001), 47.

<sup>47</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 47.

door-step and the scullery window; yet he possesses a mischievous vivacity far more attractive than the Aunt's stuffiness.<sup>48</sup> Yet, as important as the Aunt's protection of her nephew and the potentiality for lost innocence, is the Aunt's sequestration of herself in the house in an attempt to regain innocence. Ned's conversation makes it clear that she had an affair or sexual escapade with him: 'you weren't so shy in our young day. / You remember yon time in Archer's loff'. Her putting on of a new apron as Ned leaves is a gesture which symbolises restored purity and innocence, and the removal of what is sullied. Although Ned is denied access, we do not suspect he is defeated; so much is suggested by his happy-go-lucky attitude: 'God never slams one door / But another's lying open'.

Part of Ned's mischievousness and the instability that he brings derives from his ability to get the better of the home's paternal figure; he teases Sarah 'while my uncle was in the fields'. Fathers in Muldoon's early verse are seen by juvenile speakers as supreme authorities. In 'Duffy's Circus' the narrator observes that, with the arrival of the circus, 'God may as well have left Ireland / And gone up a tree', because '[m]y father had said so'<sup>49</sup>, and 'Cuba' is a comment on the domineering nature of both church and parental fathers.

The young boy's sequestration is, we feel, untenable. There is a point at which he must engage with figures such as a Ned Skinner. His objective and dispassionate account of Ned's visit exhibits a desire for experience which is truncated by his aunt.

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<sup>48</sup> Tim Kendall, *Paul Muldoon* (Brigend: Seren, 1996), 59.

<sup>49</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 66.

A possible token of his mistrust of her is found in the poem's qualifying conditional sentence: 'Ned Skinner was a 'barbaric yawp', / If you took Aunt Sarah at her word'.

Unlike Heaney's mother and his aunt, Muldoon's maternal figures are censorious and imposing. Rather than introducing a young Muldoon to the value of homely work or nurturing him with love, they tend to be snobbish and aloof, literate and sedentary. They are obvious caricatures of Muldoon's bookish mother, Brigid, who is 'variously portrayed as narrow-minded, religiose, and snobbish.'<sup>50</sup> 'Profumo' depicts Brigid peremptorily dismissing Muldoon's boyish romance with a girl she deems unworthy of him:

The spontaneously-combustible *News of the World*  
 under my mother's cushion  
 as she shifted from ham to snobbish ham;  
  
 'Haven't I told you, time and time again,  
 that you and she are chalk  
 and cheese? Away and read Masefield's "Cargoes".<sup>51</sup>

As Stephen Burt has noted, 'Profumo' sends up teenage anxieties: 'the discreditable secrets of the Profumo affair of 1963, with its call girls and shadowy high-class pimp, emphasize the relative innocence of the young Muldoon's secretive actions'.

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<sup>50</sup> Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 155.



Furthermore, 'Masefield's once-famous poem about nautical voyages, meanwhile, stands in mocking contrast to Muldoon's domestic troubles: "Cargoes" sets a "Quinquereme" of Nineveh from distant Ophir' against the humdrum, practical freight of England.' <sup>52</sup>

It is Brigid who directs the young Muldoon out of his 'humdrum' world; her command to read 'Cargoes' – whilst generating mocking contrast – may be to inspire aspirations of travel and visiting other 'richer' lands (it also represents respectable reading in contrast to the tabloid paper *News of the World*). In this context, the imperative 'away' is more than snobbish dismissal, and is rather an echo of that impulse to travel and flee which animated *Why Brownlee Left*. The mother, however, (rather like the 'horses...Shifting their weight from foot to / Foot'<sup>53</sup> in 'Why Brownlee Left', shifted from 'ham to snobbish ham' – suggestive of her own abortive attempts at escape). If then, as Burt argues 'this poem emphasizes the tentative, furtive attitudes of its youthful actors'<sup>54</sup>, it also discretely brings to light the tentativeness of the older generation. The mother's sense of her son's superiority and her commands are, possibly, the products of her own feeling of self-worth and her own unrealised aspirations. The fact that she 'slapped a month-long news embargo' on the name Profumo, but herself reads the salacious details of the Profumo affair in the *News of the World* paper, secretly hidden under her cushion, is less a token of hypocrisy and

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen Burt, 'Thirteen or Fourteen: Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Adolescence', in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays* ed. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>53</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 84.

<sup>54</sup> Burt, 'Thirteen or Fourteen', 13.

more an indication that she is projecting onto her son wishes which she knows that she herself cannot fulfil. Yet, she directs her son not to the present real world, with its Profumo affairs, but to an imaginative and romanticised world with a 'stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus, / Dipping through the tropics by the palm-green shores'.<sup>55</sup>

In Muldoon's childhood and family homes, the world beyond is never far away. In 'Ned Skinner', 'Cuba' and 'Profumo', it is conceived of as a threat to childhood innocence by the parents who patrol the borders of the home. In insisting on a separation between the 'uncorrupted' domestic sphere and the 'corrupted' world beyond, they establish an untenable division. At the heart of Muldoon's poetry there is a post-structuralist impetus: an alternately iconoclastic or ludic drive to transcend binaries and boundaries, and to create or discover connections between disparate cultures and beliefs. In the words of Neil Corcoran, Muldoon creates 'a poetry predicated on a kind of epistemological uncertainty and tolerance.'<sup>56</sup> 'Tolerance', epistemic or otherwise is, of course, not learnt from the parents in Muldoon's poetry. In contrast to Heaney's poetry, then, the childhood home is not an instructive 'ground of being', but rather a place to be rebelled against or transcended.

'Trance' from the drug-illuminated *Quoof*, expresses the notion that domestic

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<sup>55</sup> John Masefield, 'Cargoes', *Poems* (London: Heinemann, 1946), 906.

<sup>56</sup> Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940*, 209.

innocence will yield eventually to experience. Here, Muldoon's memory of Christmas Eve 1945 combines with drug hallucinations:

A wind out of Siberia  
 carries such voices as will carry  
 through the kitchen-

Someone mutters a flame from lichen  
 and eats the red-and-white Fly Agaric  
 while the others hunker in the dark,  
 taking it in turn  
 to drink his mind-expanding urine.

One by one their reindeer nuzzle in.<sup>57</sup>

Of this poem, Tim Kendall writes that it encompasses the 'rival perspectives of innocence and experience in a single vision' and this 'undoubtedly constitutes Muldoon's most significant advance on the cynical lyrics of *Why Brownlee Left*.'<sup>58</sup> As in the poems above, the limits of the home are controlled by a parent – 'my mother opens the scullery door / on Christmas Eve, 1954' – who also seems to express peremptoriness in her behaviour: 'my mother slams the door, / on her star-cluster of dregs, / and packs me off to bed'. The voices that enter the kitchen subtly undermine

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<sup>57</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 107.

<sup>58</sup> Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 101.

her domestic authority, suggesting that experience supersedes the 'artificial' innocence of the home. Like other Muldoon poems, 'Trance' ends with a suggestion that the domestic sphere is a place of stasis. The gift of 'a new rocking-horse / as yet unsteady on its legs' could as Kendall suggests 'hardly be more wonderful' given 'Muldoon's evident predilection for all things equine'<sup>59</sup>, however it recalls the other rocking horses from 'Why Brownlee Left' and is another example of 'illusory' or unprogressive movement.

By mischievously yoking the myth of Santa Claus with the Fly Agaric drug takers, 'Trance' leaves us with the impression that experience – or what's the same: the loss of innocence – is inevitable. As a poet of plurality, this movement into experience from childhood innocence is, for Muldoon, not only natural but something to be embraced. Indeed, the drug-taking in 'Trance' occupies the same moral plane as the Santa Claus myth; it is not presented as a moral 'falling-off' or degeneration and in the early collections, those who fail to come-of-age are the subject of satire and comedy, as Stephen Burt notes.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, all that is not to say that Muldoon does not value his childhood home. 'Quoof', for instance, which represents '*in extremis* the juxtaposition of childhood innocence and cosmopolitan sophistication'<sup>61</sup>, describes a rare but important moment of pietas to the home hearth:

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>60</sup> Burt, 'Thirteen or Fourteen', 14.

<sup>61</sup> Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 103.

How often have I carried our family word  
 for the hot water bottle  
 to a strange bed,  
 as my father would juggle a red-hot half-brick  
 in an old sock  
 to his childhood settle.  
 I have taken it into so many lovely heads  
 or laid it between us like a sword.

A hotel room in New York City  
 with a girl who spoke hardly any English,  
 my hand on her breast  
 like the smouldering one-off spoor of the yeti  
 or some other shy beast  
 that has yet to enter the language.<sup>62</sup>

It is unusual for an abstract concept or word to be 'carried'. By materialising the word 'quoo' Muldoon's choice of verb stresses the link between him and his father, who is remembered primarily as a manual labourer. Yet, it is a playful over-exaggeration; an overzealous attempt to unite the word, with hot-water bottle and the red-hot half-brick. Quoo is used defensively: by uniting the speaker with the

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<sup>62</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 112.

security of his childhood home, it is a means of controlling a strange metropolitan situation. Its function as a shibboleth or tribal marker is secondary to its function as a source of comfort. For an individual who presumably lives in America, the 'burdens of the tribe' weigh lightly, but are nevertheless a useful resource when in unfamiliar surroundings.

Conscious of Muldoon's analogical method, critics have interpreted 'Quoof' in various ways. Clair Wills insightfully suggests that it indicates 'above all the desire to create in poetry a private, intransitive world, to experience the world of poetry as a paradise, an Eden, untainted by the corruption of the real.'<sup>63</sup> We should not, however, overlook the literal meaning and particular context: the attempted romantic connection between a couple in bed. Like the couple in 'Talking in Bed', presumably the challenge is to find 'words at once true and kind, / Or not untrue and unkind'.<sup>64</sup> By bringing a lady into the domain of the childhood home with 'quoof', the speaker elides the complexities of an adult relationship.

Arguably, Muldoon's move to America has encouraged a sympathetic and nostalgic rather than a satiric or light-hearted perspective on his parents and childhood home. The American era has seen the publication of his only elegy to his mother, *Yarrow*, and poems such as 'Third Epistle to Timothy' and 'The Bangle', which offer profound renderings of Patrick's adult life and childhood.

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<sup>63</sup> Clair Wills, 'The lie of the land: language, imperialism and trade in Paul Muldoon's *Meeting the British*' in *The Chosen Ground: Essays in Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Bridgend: Seren, 1992), 189.

<sup>64</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 61.

'Homesickness', from *Moy Sand and Gravel*, is an affective depiction of a domestic scene; it is the closest Muldoon comes to the Heaney-esque domestic tableau. The scene memorialised, however, is not one of salubrious warmth as in 'Sunlight', but is one instead of melancholy and foreboding as the family receives news that Patrick is terminally ill. The title has numerous allusions: the painting 'Homesickness' by the surrealist painter René Magritte (on which the poem is based), Patrick's illness and Muldoon's feeling of homesickness in America. The refrain and clumsy repetition of words (as in the opening line, 'The lion stretched like a sandstone lion on the sandstone slab'<sup>65</sup>) keep the poem still as a tableau and further underscore the mood of equivocation.

The allusions to Magritte's painting 'Homesickness', where Patrick becomes the lion and Brigid the angel, allows for moments of surrealist humour, such as 'The lion still looks back to his raw / knuckle and sighs for the possibility that an ounce / of Walnut plug might shape up from the ash'. This is, however, secondary to its purpose of conveying the sense of confusion and displacement which was felt at that moment (Magritte's painting depicting a lion and angel on a bridge embodies the melancholy of those who know that real life is always something else). In typical Muldoonian fashion, the poem subverts the reader's expectations - the title leads us to expect a nostalgic depiction of a homely scene, however we find instead a scene riddled with doubt and yearning.

In contrast to the other poets I have discussed in this chapter, Muldoon's

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<sup>65</sup> Paul Muldoon, *Moy, Sand and Gravel* (London: Faber, 2002), 63.

childhood home, all in all, does not provide him with a 'positive' inheritance which guides the trajectory of his adult life. If the childhood home is not a place of sequestration it is, as with 'Homesickness', a ground of riddling and confusing experiences which the adult poet returns to, in an effort to understand them. In 'It Is What It Is', from *Horse Latitudes*, Muldoon uses his son's new toy with a piece missing as a metaphor for his own quest for meaning and coherence ('The plaything spread on the rug. / The fifty years I've spent trying to put it together'<sup>66</sup>) – thus suggesting that the childhood home was the site or origin of concerns which endured throughout his life. The thinking here is distinctly Freudian. The notion that children's 'playthings' might mediate larger psychological issues has its origins in Freud's explication of his grandson's 'fort/da' game. Like the 'fort/da' game, Muldoon's game appears to manage a mother's disappearance ('My Mother. Shipping out for good. For good this time').

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<sup>66</sup> Paul Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes* (London: Faber, 2006),



### *Chapter Three: Poetry of Domestic Love and Marriage*

Many of the contemporary era's most critically acclaimed poets have offered numerous poems which depict scenes of domestic love and marriage. Yet, these poems are often a far cry from the traditional love poem. Rather than being impassioned, romantic or sentimental, these poems are often wry, clear-eyed and homely. What elements there are of sublimity, transcendentalism and abstraction are often self-consciously anchored in the prosaic, domestic environment, as in Robert Lowell's 'Careless Night'. Yet, the domestic element is not always an obstacle to elevated feeling. In fact, it is often a token of loving and lasting commitment. Something as prosaic as a couple sitting at a dining table, (as in Douglas Dunn's 'Modern Love'), or sitting in the garden (Lowell's 'Last Summer in Milgate') might show a couple in a natural and comfortable relationship. In such poetry of domestic love and marriage, then, there is often a strong sense of authenticity. The focus is largely not on the emotional peaks or troughs of a relationship, but on the day-to-day matter and emotion of a relationship: that which appears, intuitively, to be less amenable to lyricism.

Of course, the house is not an unnatural or strange context for love and marriage poetry. Many love poems in the English and Western canon are set at home, such as Ovid's aubade in the first book of the *Amores* or John Donne's 'Good Morrow' and 'The Sun Rising'. Indeed, the aubade – a lyric poem lamenting the arrival of

dawn to separate two lovers – is predominantly set at home, in the lovers’ bed. However, in these poems the domestic context is either mostly elided, as in Ovid’s aubade, or assimilated to the high sentiment. In ‘The Good Morrow’ the couple’s profound mutual love magnifies their bedroom: ‘for love, all love of other sights controls, / And makes one little room an everywhere’<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, the bombastic speaker of ‘The Sun Rising’ – triumphant in his partner’s company – imagines their room as the world: ‘To warm the world, that’s done in warming us. / Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere; / This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere’<sup>2</sup>. In these canonical examples, in contrast to much of contemporary domestic love poetry, the bedroom is strikingly ‘undomestic’ and integrated into the soaring emotions of the speaker, rather than ‘grounding’ that feeling.

In his book on Heaney, Neil Corcoran notes that ‘[a]lthough the love poem is a staple of the lyric tradition, the “marriage poem” – that is, the poem celebrating a continued, fruitful, collaborative relationship – is not.’<sup>3</sup> That marriage has gradually emerged in the contemporary era as a compelling topic for lyric verse is, in large part, due to Seamus Heaney whose marriage poems of *Field Work* are, as Corcoran notes, a large achievement in the genre. Other notable writers of marriage poems, within Britain and Ireland, include Paul Muldoon, Andrew Motion and Douglas Dunn. Many of these poems are set within the home, as this is perhaps the ‘natural’ context for marriage: the place where the married couple are often together and often alone;

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<sup>1</sup> John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A.J. Smith, (London: Penguin, 1971), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber, 1998), 98.

and perhaps most importantly, a place that is definitively theirs.

In what follows, I will trace the various manifestations of domesticity in contemporary poems of domestic love and marriage. I will look at how domestic love might be the subject of light parody and satire, as something mundane or unexciting; how house and home might be, in a quasi-metaphysical manner, rarefied and abstracted. Yet, the underlying focus will be on the way that domesticity is used to generate a sense of 'authentic' and 'normal' love.

The poetry of Robert Lowell provides a valuable starting place; as Nick Halpern notes, Lowell wrote 'fresh and wonderful domestic poems about marriage' and 'became one of the foremost American poets of domesticity.'<sup>4</sup> Scenes of marriage and love form a large part of Lowell's domestic oeuvre. Indeed, his later collections *Notebook* and *The Dolphin* centre on his marriages with Elizabeth Hardwick and Caroline Blackwood inside and outside the home. Lowell's manner of writing about love and marriage within the home, I would argue, is not only a precursor to much contemporary American poetry in this vein, but also exerts a strong influence on and anticipates much British and Irish poetry.

Lowell's seminal collection *Life Studies* features two significant poems which offer scenes of domestic marriage: 'Man and Wife' and 'To speak of the Woe That is In Marriage'. The latter poem is a satirical account of a cheating husband and his weary wife, which does not have a direct biographical source, unlike the other

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<sup>4</sup> Nick Halpern, *Everyday and Prophetic: The Poetry of Lowell, Ammons, Merrill, and Rich* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 65.

poems in the collection. 'Man and Wife' offers a profound and vivid account of Lowell's recovery at home with his wife. The title appears to be an anomaly in the collection. *Life Studies* as a whole is concerned with personal experiences in Lowell's life and this is reflected in the titles which specify particular people or occasions, such as 'Commander Lowell 1888-1949' and 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow. 'Man and Wife' is, then, a surprisingly general and abstract title for a confessional poem. Quite obviously it asserts the prosaic fact that marriage is the primary or at least underlying subject of the poem; despite the drug-taking, drinking and mental illness, Lowell and his wife are a variation of man and wife. That marital bond is unsentimentally, in fact quite wearily, acknowledged. Of course, there is also a converse element of ironic self-mockery in the title: the couple's tumultuous marriage is a far cry from the idealised vision normally associated with the phrase 'man and wife'.

Opening with the couple in bed and the sun rising, the poem positions itself in the aubade genre:

Tamed by *Miltown*, we lie on Mother's bed;  
 the rising sun in war paint dyes us red;  
 in broad daylight her gilded bed-posts shine,  
 abandoned, almost Dionysian.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Lowell, 'Man and Wife', *Life Studies* (London: Faber, 1959), 95.

Like Ovid's aubade in *Amores* and Donne's 'Sun Rising', there is wit and hyperbole in the description of dawn. However, here it is the cynical wit of a troubled man in an entangled relationship, not the audacious humour of a boastful lover. Rather than challenge the sun as in 'The Sun Rising', it is they who are exposed by it. 'Dyes us red' is open to numerous interpretations, but amongst them must be the idea of being caught 'red-handed' – there is something accusatory about the action. Furthermore, the usual associations of red with passion are here converted into suggestions of anger and danger. What should be natural appears strikingly unnatural.

These lines, then, are pulled in contradictory directions. On the one hand, they attempt a tone of domestic levity as the speaker wakes with sunshine. On the other hand, there is here a sense of emotional intensity as dawn uncovers a painful and complicated reality. Nick Halpern notes the speaker's unnerved tone: it is 'ardent and at the same time scared. The domestic space is as small as the space of the bed, and the boundaries of that small space are being threatened. Already the bedposts are Dionysian. The husband, feeling that there is no *place* to escape, escapes back in time.'<sup>6</sup>

In fact, this 'undomesticating' is a general technique of *Life Studies* as a whole. Vereen Bell relates it to Lowell's 'destabilized metaphysical environment'. Bed-posts, magnolias and sunlit windows are some of those 'ordinary domesticated objects [which are] strangely undomesticated and made to seem sinister and significant in a

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<sup>6</sup> Halpern, 66.

way that the rational faculty would not apprehend – significant of something never named, but pervasive.<sup>7</sup>

In 'Man and Wife' it is Lowell's wife who restores normality and who 're-domesticates' the domestic world:

All night I've held your hand,  
 as if you had  
 a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad –  
 its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye –  
 and dragged me home alive... Oh my *Petite*,

Here, Elizabeth appears as the dominant and guiding figure with Lowell, beset by madness, appearing as the passive and weaker counterpart – this passage plays against the title which puts man in the primary position. There is conspicuous irony in the notion of being brought home, whilst already being at home. It is a measure of Lowell's extreme condition and his distance from the normal world, of Lowell's envelopment in the kingdom of the mad from which he is rescued by his wife.

Another recovery poem, 'Home After Three Months Away', also takes as its subject the division between Lowell's inner reality and external circumstance. Lowell, with his intensity of thought, feels dislocated in the ordinary and domestic realm: while shaving and playing with Harriet he addresses her affectionately,

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<sup>7</sup> M. Bell, *Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero*, 45.

'Dearest, I cannot loiter here / in lather like a polar bear'<sup>8</sup>. This is a charming couplet, playful for its half rhyme and the image of a polar bear, which must appeal to the childish fondness for animals. However it points also to Lowell's stark nihilism, as Vereen Bell, notes 'That "here" is really nowhere in Lowell's world, and the child, too, in some sense will not exist, since there is no pastoral place for her to inhabit in the landscape of her father's mind.'<sup>9</sup>

'Man and Wife' eschews the nihilistic ending of 'Home After Three Months Away', and that is surely contingent on Elizabeth who tempered Lowell's drinking excess when they first met ('your invective scorched the traditional South') and who now, mirroring that occasion, acts as a 'domesticating' factor, drawing her husband out of the kingdom of the mad. The poem is as, Marjorie Perloff, suggests an 'open-eyed realisation that marriage is torture but also salvation.'<sup>10</sup>

Whatever there is of crisis in the conclusion of 'Man and Wife', it is not existential, but marital: the strain and distance between a troubled husband and a long-suffering wife:

Now twelve years later, you turn your back.

Sleepless, you hold

your pillow to your hollows like a child,

your old-fashioned tirade –

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<sup>8</sup> Lowell, 'Home After Three Months Away', *Life Studies*, 90.

<sup>9</sup> Bell, 68.

<sup>10</sup> Marjorie G. Perloff, *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 93.

loving, rapid, merciless –

breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.

Mark Rudman suggests that the tone at the end is ‘deeply sorrowful and grave, like Brahms’ *Four Serious Songs*’.<sup>11</sup> If anything, however, the serious intensity of the opening has been diminished and replaced with the playful intensity of the couple’s domestic friction. No doubt, the warm caricature of the nagging wife, ceaselessly berating her husband, is playing behind these lines. Indeed the temporal references (‘twelve years later’, ‘old-fashioned’) normalise such tirades by suggesting that they are part of their homely routine and ritual. The poem has moved from Lowell’s ‘destabilized metaphysical environment’, where magnolias are murderous and the sun is in war paint, to something approaching a normal and recognisable domestic scene, which is like that of any other ‘man and wife’.

There are points of similarity between the scenes of domestic marital life in *The Dolphin*, Lowell’s final collection, and ‘Man and Wife’. Most significantly, both have an obvious biographical aspect. ‘Man and Wife’ depicts life with Elizabeth Hardwick and *The Dolphin* ‘revolves around the breakup with Elizabeth Hardwick and [Lowell’s] relationship with Caroline Blackwood.’<sup>12</sup> Yet, the poems in *The Dolphin* incline more to speculation and fantastical imaginings. In ‘Careless Night’, for instance, Lowell and his wife ‘dance out’ into the ‘diamond suburbia’ of the night,

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Rudman, *Robert Lowell: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 82.

<sup>12</sup> Rudman, 144.



and the Milgate poems ponder existential questions. This change in approach is relatable to the general style of *The Dolphin* in contrast with *Life Studies*. As Axelrod notes:

*The Dolphin* differs from *Life Studies* precisely in that it does not focus at all; it abstracts the world of facts and events into interior reverie. Thus the sharp-edged facticity of *Life Studies*...gives way to a verbal opacity...yet the abstraction of *The Dolphin* is perfectly suited to its purposes: not to photograph surfaces to enact the motions of the mind...not to use personal experience as cause for confession but as material for meditation.<sup>13</sup>

This style, at once casual and serious, at once fleeting and meditative is picked up by later poets. In fact to a certain degree, *The Dolphin* anticipates Heaney's Glanmore sequences. Both relate domestic and marital scenes in fluid, journal-like sonnets. Furthermore, the country houses, Milgate and Glanmore, are equivalent in their respective relationships to Heaney and Lowell. They are places of new beginnings. Milgate is where Lowell starts his life in England with a new wife: 'troubled in mind and spirit, Lowell needed once more to create himself and his art anew.'<sup>14</sup> Heaney's move to Glanmore was borne out of his wish to develop his poetic career and his need to step back from political pressures in Northern Ireland.

Unsurprisingly, a feeling of rejuvenation animates the sonnets; nowhere is this more marked in *The Dolphin*, than in 'Late Summer at Milgate':

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<sup>13</sup> Steven Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 215.

<sup>14</sup> Axelrod, 214.

A sweetish smell of shavings, wax and oil  
 blows through the redone bedroom newly aged;  
 the sun in heaven enflames a sanded floor.  
 Age is our reconciliation with dullness,  
 my varnish complaining, *I will never die.*  
 I still remember more things than I forgo:  
 once it was the equivalent of everlasting  
 to stay loyal to my other person loved –  
 in the fallen apple lurked a breath of spirits,  
 the uninhabitable granite shone  
 in Maine, each rock our common gravestone...  
 I sit with my staring wife, children...the dour Kent sky  
 a smudge of mushroom. In temperate years the grass  
 stays green through New Year –I, my wife, our children.<sup>15</sup>

Here, as Jonathan Raban notes, 'Lowell and the country house itself speak together in this poem. The old house is being rehabilitated, and Lowell too.'<sup>16</sup> A clear iambic rhythm, coupled with sibilance in the first three lines, underscores the notion of gaiety and rejuvenation. However, when Lowell's thoughts take a more melancholic

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<sup>15</sup> Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 689.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Raban, 'Notes', in *Robert Lowell's Poems: A Selection*, ed. Jonathan Raban (London: Faber, 1974), 186.

and pessimistic turn, the pentameter rhythm is unsettled. He turns the celebratory mood on its head with the thought that the present marks a dulling rather than a revivifying of life; domestic bliss is reimagined as domestic tedium. Yet, nonetheless, age has reconciled him to that dullness, possibly because it is too late now to fashion an alternative. Such ambivalence continues, even in a single phrase; as Raban notes the breath of spirits exuded by the apples 'is double edged: simultaneously the whisky-smell of bruised and rotten fruit, and the promise of life and knowledge'<sup>17</sup>. The final image leaves the family ambiguously poised. Are they sitting with anticipation and expectancy, or are they overtaken by lassitude? Is his wife's staring thoughtful or vacant? The thought of New Year and pastoral flourishing appears promising, yet this is contrasted with the dour sky which evokes dullness again. The falling syllable of 'children' ends the poem on a minor note.

The prosaic subject of marriage is the subject of 'Fall Weekend at Milgate', which also takes a domestic setting. Marriage, in this context, is a question of responsibility rather than romantic passion, and tedium is its flavour. The couple are presented with various domestic and familial duties, yet the use of the plural first person pronoun: 'we', 'our' and 'us' stresses the sense of common endeavour and the couple's togetherness.

Milgate kept standing for four centuries,  
 good landlord alternating with derelict.

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<sup>17</sup> Raban, 'Notes', 186.

Most fell between. We're landlords for the weekend,  
 and watch October go balmy. Midday heat  
 draws poison from the Jacobean brick,  
 and invites the wilderness to our doorstep:  
 moles, nettles, last Sunday's news, last summer's toys,  
 bread, cheeses, jars of honey, a felled elm  
 stacked like construction in the kitchen garden.  
 The warm day brings out wasps to share our luck,  
 suckers for sweets, pilots of evolution;  
 dozens drop in the beercans, clamber, buzz,  
 debating like us whether to stay and drown,  
 or, by losing legs and wings, take flight.<sup>18</sup>

That they are landlords for the weekend alludes to Adam and Eve's temporary custodianship of Eden. Their garden, however, filled with domestic litter and rubbish, is a parody of the pastoral Eden. By terming what is essentially weeds and mess a 'wilderness', Lowell evokes, by contrast, the tameness of domestic life. Their dilemma is not an issue of innocence or experience, but like the quandary facing the Edenic pair, it calls for a cooperative shaping of their destiny. Lowell and Caroline may either persist in the domestic bliss/dourness outlined in 'Late Summer', or make sacrifices and have a more liberated future.

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<sup>18</sup> Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 659-60.

Not all the domestic marriage poems are weighted with a sense of tedium. 'Careless Night' captures the feeling of levity and celebration following the birth of Lowell's son, although by morning domestic reality dawns. During the night, the domestic world is rarefied and abstracted. From the title we are made aware that such levity and transcendentalism is not the norm, that it is a contrast with day-to-day routine. One 'careless' night encourages us to think of the many nights of worry.

So country-alone, and O so very friendly,  
 our heaviness lifted from us by the night...  
 we dance out into its diamond suburbia,  
 and see the hill-crown's unrestricted lights –  
 all day these encroaching neighbours are out of sight.  
 Huge smudge sheep in burden becloud the grass,  
 they swell on moonlight and weigh two hundred pounds –  
 hulky as you in your white sheep-coat, as nervous to gallop...  
 The Christ-child's drifter shepherds have left this field,  
 gone that shepherd's breezy too predictable pipe.  
 Nothing's out of earshot in this daylong night;  
 nothing can be human without man.  
 What is worse than hearing the late-born child crying –  
 and each morning waking up glad we wake.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 692.

The temporal and homely scene is pulled into timelessness through Biblical allusion.<sup>20</sup> Lowell's use of rhyme (rare in *The Dolphin*) and exclamation 'O' underscore the celebratory tone at the arrival of his Christ-like son and supports the note of rarefication. That strange collocation 'diamond suburbia' self-consciously brings to the fore the idea of domesticity becoming something spectacular and wonderful. The epithet finds some ground in the succeeding image of 'unrestricted lights' which glimmer over the neighbourhood. Indeed, the couple's elation is linked with the obscuring of their domestic environment. By virtue of the lights, 'all day these encroaching neighbours are out of sight'.

A Heideggerean perspective on the poem might say that Lowell essentially desires something akin to self-dissolution: 'care' for things is, in Heidegger's philosophy, the definitive quality of humanness. Ironically, it is his son who makes conspicuous the impulse for 'care' – his crying needs assuagement. So what was the source of spirited detachment becomes the symbol of prosaic involvement in the world. Like 'Late Summer at Milgate', then, 'Careless Night' is ambiguous about life at Milgate. The sestet of the poem enacts a conventional turn: the rarefied feeling and mysticism of the octave is unravelled, and the couple are set, by the end, firmly within the 'real world', the world of 'Late Summer at Milgate' and 'Fall Weekend at Milgate'.

The fantastical and sublime quality of 'Careless Night' is continued in

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<sup>20</sup> 'The moonlit Kentish landscape blends into Bethlehem'. Raban, 186.

'Angling' which, for its lyricism and symbolism, is the poem of the domestic marriage poems which most closely approaches a conventional love poem. Any sense of pragmatism and domestic responsibility is dissipated and marriage is indistinguishable from youthful infatuation – the lover possessed, and seduced by the beloved:

Withdrawn to a third your size, and frowning doubts  
you stare in silence through the afterdinner,  
when wine takes our liberty and loosens tongues-  
fair-face, ball-eyes, profile of a child,  
except your eyelashes are always blacked,  
each hair colored and quickened like tying a fly.  
If a word amuses you, the room includes your voice,  
you are audible; none can catch you out,  
your flights are covered by a laughing croak –  
a flowered dress lost in the flowered wall.  
I am waiting like an angler with practice and courage;  
the time to cast is now, and the mouth open,  
the huge smile, head and shoulders of the dolphin-  
I am swallowed up alive... I am.

This sonnet moves in the opposite direction to 'Careless Night', which starts very much rarefied and concludes in the quotidian world. In the middle, Caroline appears elfin-like, deceptively and mischievously evading 'capture', making the dinner scene fairly surreal, particularly in the image of her 'lost in the flowered wall'. By the last four lines, all sense of real place is lost with the emergence of the dolphin/fishing simile. When Lowell is consumed and enchanted by Caroline, he is ironically then most alive, most himself, as conveyed by that ecstatic and emphatic ending, 'I am'.

In its mixture of casual observation and metaphor, and in its movement between the poles of domestic tedium and rhapsodic moments, *The Dolphin* is a clear precursor to work of Heaney, Motion and Dunn, which is attentive to the various shades and nuances in the experiences of domestic love and marriage.

### **Seamus Heaney**

Of Heaney's marriage poems, Neil Corcoran notes, 'he has written a poetry of ordinary domestic happiness, of the dailiness and continuity of married love, entirely lacking in either sentimentality or self-satisfaction'. The poems manage this, he adds, 'by not disguising the difficulties.'<sup>21</sup> As in the above poems, then, the many facets of domestic married life – from periods of turbidity to tedium and happiness – are acknowledged.

We might take 'Summer Home' as an example of Heaney not disguising the

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<sup>21</sup> Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* 98.



difficulties of marriage. The title, in drawing attention to the Heaney's holiday home, suggests that it is in some manner involved in or reflective of the domestic strife and is not merely a background to it (like Milgate in 'Late Summer in Milgate' which mirrors the mood and condition of Lowell and his wife). Indeed, Heaney from the outset finds an analogue for the sour relationship between himself and his wife in the infested floor of their summer home:

Was it wind off the dumps

Or something in heat

dogging us, the summer gone sour,  
a fouled nest incubating somewhere?

Whose fault, I wondered, inquisitor  
of the possessed air.

To realize suddenly,  
whip off the mat

that was larval, moving –  
and scald, scald, scald.

Here, as Michael Parker notes, ‘the homely recognisable stench of the “flax dam” has given place to something less near and more disturbing. Rhythm sound and imagery combine to evoke an oppressive atmosphere.’<sup>22</sup> However, we should not overlook the humorous tone: Heaney’s diction is colloquial and casual, so the grandiose self-epithet ‘inquisitor of the possessed air’, slant-rhymed with ‘sour’, is clearly tongue-in-cheek. Its exaggeration playfully mocks his reaction to the domestic crisis, which must inevitably appear as an over-reaction in retrospect. The discovery that the disruptive element was not wind off the dumps, but an infested floor – something quite literally under their feet – intimate that the cause of spousal strife is something much closer to home; something personal and overlooked.

The first section ends with a purging of the home and the second begins, in the present tense, with a kind of sanctification:

Bushing the door, my arms full  
of wild cherry and rhododendron,  
I hear her small lost weeping  
through the hall, that bells and hoarsens  
on my name, my name.

Heaney’s remarkable coinage ‘bushing’, given prominence at the beginning of the line, is a lyrical way of describing the prosaic and clumsy action of opening a front-

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<sup>22</sup> Parker, *Seamus Heaney*, 110-11.

door with an armful of flowers, and also intimates a necessary re-sanctification of the home. If the 'fault' was the infested floor, a garlanded house might prove conducive to marital harmony. The gulf between Heaney and wife is rendered 'architecturally' through the image of 'small lost weeping' coming through the hall, which anticipates the concluding image of love 'call[ing] tiny as a tuning fork': the former intimates that connection is barely made and the latter suggests that what is valuable and treasured is almost imperceptible but essential to domestic harmony.

Marking another change in tone, the third section opens with a smirking reference to the attempted erotic resolutions:

Oh we tented our wound all right

under the homely sheet

and lay as if the cold flat of a blade

had winded us.

More and more I postulate

thick healings, like now

as you bend in the shower

water lives down the tilting stoups of your breasts.

The return to a retrospective perspective finds that matter is diminished, which is quite typical of much domestic strife, where momentous arguments may be quickly resolved and forgotten. Again, Heaney's arch diction ('postulates') and lightness of tone, undercuts the gravity of the situation. Yet, what playfulness there is here is not for the reader but for Marie. As Heaney somewhat voyeuristically gazes at his wife in the shower, the reader feels that he is an unwitting voyeur of domestic intimacy.

The fifth section returns to the dramatic present, as the couple struggle to reconcile their differences:

My children weep out the hot foreign night.

We walk the floor, my foul mouth takes it out

On you and we lie stiff till dawn

Attends the pillow, and the maize, and vine

That holds its filling burden to the light.

Yesterday rocks sang when we tapped

Stalactites in the cave's old, dripping dark –

our love calls tiny as a tuning fork.

Neil Corcoran has observed that this final section is a 'kind of reverse aubade [...]' here the couple are wakeful after argument, and the dawn becomes, rather, an

alternative source of possible regeneration.<sup>23</sup> The reverse aubade underscores how powerless husband and wife have now become in the reconciliatory process. Their stiffness is the result of lost affection and emotion, but also of exhausted possibilities in argument, as now the couple reach a dead end; like the maize and vine, they wait for nourishment from a new day. At this strained point in his relationship, Heaney makes perhaps his most important discovery: that love is not something contingent on either partner in the relationship, but lives independently calling or singing to them at moments of crisis. Just as the firm stalactites are formed by gradual accumulation of droplets, so love made from an accretion of individual and insignificant moments achieves an enduring form. There is, then, the reassuring thought that their present troubles will be eclipsed by the context of the couple's personal and shared history. Like the summer home, marital trouble may be only seasonal.

Heaney's celebrated marriage poem 'The Skunk' is, like 'Summer Home', deeply involved with a foreign domestic context; in this instance, Heaney's temporary home in California. While the foreign context in the previous poem appears to turn things sour, here it becomes the source of a positive mystery. Sitting on his verandah, on the boundaries of the domestic and natural/wild worlds, Heaney receives exotic smells, such as 'eucalyptus', and an exotic guest:

Up, black, striped and damasked like the chasuble

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<sup>23</sup> Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 51-52.

At a funeral Mass, the skunk's tail  
 Paraded the skunk. Night after night  
 I expected her like a visitor.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly the skunk is an object of rapt fascination; the keen focus and description invested in four successive adjectives are not only an attempt to describe the skunk but to 'tame' it as well. The animalistic focus of the poem invites comparison with Lowell's 'Skunk Hour' and also the poetry of Ted Hughes. Keith Sagar argues that Heaney's skunk evokes Hughes's fox from 'The Thought Fox'.

In the early Hughes poem, the poet's outer world [...] is empty of value and almost of substance. The vision of the fox is hermetically sealed in the poem. Heaney has enough confidence in his outer reality to fuse the image of his animal-spirit visitor with a domestic sexuality that is not only intent and glamorous but ordinary and playful. The poem certainly celebrates both the skunk and the marriage, but above all the living moment in which the connection is made. This connection arises out of the fact that, when he sees the skunk, the poet is away from his wife.<sup>25</sup>

The fusing of 'animal-spirit visitor' with domestic sexuality, however, tempers the element of wildness in the poem.

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<sup>24</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Skunk', *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979), 48.

<sup>25</sup> Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, 'Hughes and Two Contemporaries: Peter Redgrove and Seamus Heaney' in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, ed. Keith Sagar (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 105.

It all came back to me last night, stirred  
 By the sootfall of your things at bedtime,  
 Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer  
 For the black plunge-line nightdress.

In this comic and domestic conclusion, the intensity developed in the preceding stanzas is dissipated – the casual and summarising ‘all’ seems to make light of the skunk’s visitations. The skunk has been thoroughly demythologised and lost some of the ‘skunkness’ of the first stanza. The poem, then, self-consciously dramatizes the movement to ‘gentility’, which Alvarez considered to be definitive of contemporary poetry – eschewal of elemental, animalistic forces in favour of the domestic and ordinary world. That lost vigour and mystery, however, is partially rediscovered in the domestic scene, as the dynamics of enticement and seduction in the first stanza re-emerge. In Corcoran’s words, the analogy turns ‘a faintly ridiculous human posture into an unconscious erotic invitation’.<sup>26</sup> As in Lowell’s ‘Angling’, the animalistic analogy (with dolphin and skunk) creates a sense of thrill between husband and wife in an ordinary homely setting.

In ‘The Skunk’ the element of wildness is mitigated and assimilated playfully into Heaney’s bedtime scene. It is an invigorating, rather than disruptive, element. In sonnet IX of *Glanmore Sonnets*, the ‘invasion of the domestic by external threat’<sup>27</sup> has

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<sup>26</sup> Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 68.

a graver and more serious meaning. It marks, perhaps, a watershed moment in the Heaney's marriage: the maturation and complication of their relationship. The poem's ambivalent tone, its domestic context, and its meditative melancholia generate a new type of love sonnet. As Vendler notes, Heaney 'embarks on his Shakespearean sonnet-portrait of wife and husband, redefining – with a gusto that quickly vanishes in self-doubt – the genre of the love-poem'<sup>28</sup>:

Outside the kitchen window a black rat  
 Sways on the briar like infected fruit:  
 'It looked me through, it stared me out, I'm not  
 Imagining things. Go you out to it.'  
 Did we come to the wilderness for this?  
 We have our burnished bay tree at the gate,  
 Classical, hung with the reek of silage  
 From the next farm, tart-leafed as inwit.  
 Blood on a pitch-fork, blood on chaff and hay,  
 Rats speared in the sweat and dust of threshing –  
 What is my apology for poetry?  
 The empty briar is swishing  
 When I come down, and beyond, inside, your face

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<sup>28</sup> Vendler, 68.



Haunts like a new moon glimpsed through tangled glass.<sup>29</sup>

The rat has literal and figurative facets like the skunk, at once mythologised and demythologised. Its presence looms ominously in the final lines, and is metonymically associated with the feeling of estrangement between husband and wife. The numerous prepositions, 'beyond', 'inside', 'through', emphasise the sense of separation, as does the obfuscation of 'tangled', which also alludes to the form of the glass. However, these lines point to a new mystery of romance and marriage, rather than domestic strife. The slow, spondaic and ponderous final line captures the wonderment, even enchantment, that comes over Heaney as he looks back at his wife. If he is looking horizontally, the simile suggests that he is at the same time gazing upwards. This marital revelation coincides with Heaney's new awareness of the actual conditions of life at Glanmore; that is, the disruption of the pastoral vision. In both instances, Heaney's innocuous expectations (about country life and marriage) are belied by a more complex and profound reality.

### **Paul Muldoon**

Muldoon's early lyrics take a highly satirical view of domestic married life, which appears to be merely a means of self-confinement. Muldoon's most forceful portrait of the restrictiveness and stasis of marriage is found in the sestet of 'Why Brownlee

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<sup>29</sup> Heaney, 'Glanmore Sonnets' *Field Work*, 41.

Left'. The poem comes in a collection filled with deserters and absentees, such as the eponymous Brownlee, who 'desire to abscond from their programmed lives'<sup>30</sup>:

By noon Brownlee was famous;  
 They had found all abandoned, with  
 The last rig unbroken, his pair of black  
 Horses, like man and wife,  
 Shifting their weight from foot to  
 Foot, and gazing into the future.<sup>31</sup>

In the words of Clair Wills: 'this final image is extraordinarily powerful; Brownlee's disappearance leaves the reader contemplating the nearly ploughed field and the horses neither completely still, nor making progress.'<sup>32</sup> It is a witty indictment of married life. Also a target here is the culture which instantiates and encourages this mode of life. The patronising and disapproving narrator appears to be obtuse and narrow-minded. He considers Brownlee's evasion a 'mystery' because he fails to see beyond the conventional codes of behaviour (by contrast, Brownlee's behaviour is easily explicable for the reader). The modal verb 'should' in 'For if a man should have been content / It was him', carries overtones of moral obligation (rather than just merely deductive logic). Similarly, 'man' is also not used as casually as we may

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<sup>30</sup> Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 68.

<sup>31</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 84.

<sup>32</sup> Clair Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), 77.

first think: while it is used in the idiomatic expression with a generalising effect, it draws to the fore Brownlee's masculinity (or manliness) with the implication that it is in some way lacking.

'Making the Move' reiterates the view of domestic married life as something which brings inertia and lassitude. The speaker is a man who is presumably clearing his possessions from his marital home after a divorce, and who is anticipating new and exciting endeavours. However, the speaker has been so thoroughly accustomed to domestic life that he has, as Stephen Burt notes, become infantilised: 'its couplets, with their deliberately obvious rhymes, mime the speaker's juvenile failures'.<sup>33</sup> The subjunctives of the final couplet, 'Were I embarking on that wine-dark sea / I would bring my bow along with me'<sup>34</sup>, suggest that he is not going to make the eponymous move. Perhaps, we wonder, he will try to resolve matters with his wife. He is then, a middle-class Brownlee who never fled, and who is now unable to flee.

The problem the speaker has is not want of imagination, but lack of experience and willpower. He mediates his life through books and literature – even the bow he bought is purchased through a catalogue – and can probably deal with metaphysical voids better than he can the emotional gulf between himself and his wife.

Yet, if the speaker is himself comfortable with the inertia of the domestic world, one senses that he is not quite the master of the place he imagines himself to

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<sup>33</sup> Burt, 'Thirteen or Fourteen: Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Adolescence', 14.

<sup>34</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 91.

be. The reference to Ulysses, which is used primarily to allude to his epic journey, also pertinently evokes Ulysses' return home and repossession of his house from his suitors in *The Odyssey*. What Ulysses thinks he owns, he does in fact own and reclaims from his domestic usurpers. The speaker of 'Making the Move' finds, by contrast, that what he thinks he owns, his books, are unloosed like stones (that is, repossessed by his wife). If the poem, then, makes comment on domestic lassitude, it also makes indirect comment on the topical issue of the renegotiated power positions of men and women at home; namely, that husbands no longer occupy the most authoritative position.

Reviewing Muldoon's eighth collection *Hay*, Stephen Burt notes a surprising development in Muldoon's poetic career: now Muldoon's best verse is his domestic verse:

Muldoon's latter-day strengths lie in precisely the territory readers of such work would never expect: the poet seems happy to be an American husband, a father, a Hopewell, N.J., homeowner. This newer Muldoon is the sort of *bourgeois* that the racy author of "Green Gown" wants to shock, but the *bourgeois* is now the better poet.<sup>35</sup>

One of the most striking things about Muldoon's domestic poetry in *Hay* is the verve, and fun which derive from its expansiveness. In contrast to the homes of the early poems (such as 'Ned Skinner', 'Cuba' 'Profumo') that are governed by strict

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<sup>35</sup> Stephen Burt, 'Review: Hay', review of *Hay* by Paul Muldoon, *Boston Review*, April 1, 1999, <http://www.bostonreview.net/poetry/stephen-burt-review-hay>.

maternal or paternal figures, Muldoon's familial home in America is shown to admit variety and adventure. For instance, in the marital poem 'The Mudroom', Muldoon embarks on a surreal journey with his wife through the eponymous room which combines aspects of Jean's and Muldoon's cultural backgrounds, while risking instability:

We followed the narrow track, my love, we followed the narrow  
 track through a valley in the Jura  
 to where the goats delight to tread upon the brink  
 of meaning. I carried my skating rink,  
 the folding one, plus  
 a pair of skates laced with convolvulus,  
 you a copy of the feminist Haggadah  
 from last year's Seder...<sup>36</sup>

The epic scale of 'The Mudroom', like the epic-scale *Ulysses*, produces a bathetic or deflationary effect when the domestic reality of the poem becomes clear:

I reached for the haggaday  
 or hasp over the half door of the mudroom  
 in which, by and by, I grasped the rim  
 not of quern or a chariot wheel but a wheel

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<sup>36</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 395.

of Morbier propped like the last reel  
 of *The Ten Commandments* or *The Robe*...

The simile here refers to epic biblical films, and ironically contrasts with Muldoon's faux-epic journey through his mudroom and into his garden. Yet, as the poem progresses, we realise that Muldoon's mud-room, by virtue of its 'transculturalism', has an impressive, even 'epic', variety and expansiveness. There Muldoon finds traditional Jewish items: matzo bread, an afikoman, gefilte fish, a ram's horn; canonical works of the ancients: Virgil's *Georgics*, Plato's *Dialogues*, and modern items related to contemporary popculture 'all manner of schmaltz and schlock from Abba to Ultravox' as well as things from his own Irish heritage: 'my da's boots so worn / it was hard to judge where the boots came to an end'. Muldoon's mud-room mixes the ancient with the contemporary, the high-brow with the low-brow, the Jewish with the Gentile; it is a domestic area which is somewhat paradoxically strange and exotic, and which alludes to places far beyond the home. As Clair Wills has observed, a mud-room itself connects domestic and non-domesticated spaces: 'A mud room is a kind of porch or cloakroom common in American houses, an area between the domestic interior of the house, and the outside world, including the wilderness beyond the yard.'<sup>37</sup>

As well as reflecting Muldoon's post-modern attitude towards culture, the mudroom provides insight into the Muldoons' marriage: it clearly involves much

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<sup>37</sup> Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon* 189.

sharing and mixing of cultures; but the light-heartedness of the poem and the chaotic manner of the journey suggests a distinctly unserious approach – in contrast with the approach of earlier generations – to the practicalities of a mixed religious marriage. Indeed, the jumbled disorder of the mudroom, where heirlooms are unceremoniously piled with modern tat, expresses the relative irreverence of Muldoon for his cultural inheritance, even as he feels himself defined and involved with it. Furthermore, despite the obvious irony and bathos of casting the journey through the mudroom as an epic narrative, the poem's form encourages us to understand the domestic married life as a kind of adventure. The combination of levity with sincerely felt affection is present also in 'The Train':

I've been trying, my darling, to explain  
 to myself how it is that some freight train  
 loaded with ballast so a track may rest  
 easier in its bed should be what's roused  
 us both from ours, tonight as every night,  
 despite its being miles off and despite  
 our custom of putting to the very  
 back of the mind all that's customary  
 and then, since it takes forever to pass

with its car after car of coal and gas  
 and salt and wheat and rails and railway ties,  
  
 how it seems determined to give the lie  
 to the notion, my darling,  
 that we, not it, might be the constant thing.<sup>38</sup>

The poem is primarily an unsentimental laudation of the couple's love. Here, Muldoon's use of the sonnet form draws on the form's association with romantic and love poetry. The couplet rhyme scheme appears strikingly simple and conservative when compared with the elaborate and experimental rhyme schemes we find in other Muldoon sonnets (such as 'Why Brownlee Left'). This suggests, in keeping with the general tone of the collection, that Muldoon is 'settling down' and it also implies a desire for directness and authenticity with his wife rather than obliquity and artificiality. Stephen Burt has paraphrased the meaning of the train in the context of Muldoon's marriage: 'this train *will* pass; Muldoon and his wife will pass (away) someday too. But the reminder of death includes a deep comfort: this husband will cease to be "constant" *only* in death, so that the last phrase whispers, also, 'til death do us part.'<sup>39</sup>

As with many of the poems in *Hay*, the warmth and tenderness of 'The Train'

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<sup>38</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 419.

<sup>39</sup> Burt, 'Review: Hay'. <http://www.bostonreview.net/poetry/stephen-burt-review-hay>.



derive from Muldoon's mock-seriousness and ironic playfulness. The techniques, which in his earlier collections were used for acerbic political satire and subversive ends, are now employed to express the everyday felicities of domestic and marital life (the epic parody of 'Making the Move' is used for different ends in 'The Mudroom', for instance). The scholarly mode of 'The Train' – incongruous with the poem's context – is clearly tongue-in-cheek. Its quasi-intellectual reasoning is secondary to its purpose as a joke between Muldoon and Jean about the fact that a train, which they don't normally notice, has woken them up and seems to take forever to pass. An unremarkable domestic experience, made light of, is the everyday matter that makes up the lasting bond between husband and wife.

The manner of address in Muldoon's domestic marital poems broadly resembles that of the Heaney and Lowell poems discussed above. Here also, the speaker addresses his wife who is invariably silent, mysterious, and the object of the speaker's imagination. However, what is characteristic of Muldoon is the spectacular course on which his imagination runs. Muldoon in 'The Throwback', for instance, is unsurprisingly far more esoteric and outlandish in his evocation of his wife, making Heaney's analogy of wife and skunk appear relatively cogent. The poem begins with a homely observation, underscored by simple and twee rhymes:

Even I can't help but notice, my sweet,  
 that when you tuck your chin  
 into your chest, as if folding a sheet

while holding a clothespin...<sup>40</sup>

which is then given an unexpected twist when Muldoon links Jean, in a surrealistic depiction of her psoriasis, to the Jewish queen Esther:

it's as if you're a throw-

back to the grandmother you never met,

the mother whom I sight

in this reddish patch of psoriasis

behind your ear that might

suddenly flare up into the helmet

she wore when she stood firm against Xerxes.

This startling movement from the innocuous and homely to the heroic and epic is, of course, familiar in Muldoon's poetry by now. Its effect here is to offer something like casual 'romanticisation'. Even when she is at her most sweet and harmless, twiddling her fingers on her little 'potbelly', Jean has the capacity to flare up into the heroic Esther. Of course, it is quite an imaginative stretch to see psoriasis merging

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<sup>40</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 441.

into Esther's helmet, but this is all part of Muldoon's playful spousal talk which the reader is permitted to 'drop in on'.

### **Andrew Motion**

Domestic marital poems seem to invite a 'middle-tone'; that is, a tone somewhere between conventional lyricism and conversational or prosaic speech. Corcoran's praise for Heaney's marriage poems centres on their conservatism; they don't stray too far into the territory of the conventional love lyric, they recognise that married love is quotidian and domestic. Such fidelity to the ordinariness of married life makes for poems of ordinary sentiment. That is, of course, not to say they are uninteresting or ordinary *per se*, but that their subject is the 'sentiment of ordinariness' or day-to-day life. Andrew Motion's 'On the Table' is a good example of poetry of the ordinariness of domestic marriage. Its language is casual and its subject matter quotidian: a tablecloth which reminds the speaker of his wife's summer dress. Even the poem's eroticism is tame – primarily a series of winking comments to the reader and addressee: 'I liked it a lot, whether you were inside it or not'. The poem's lyrical and romantic feeling is low-key though sincerely felt, as when the speaker reminisces about his wife's skin in the final line:

It's all a long time ago now, darling, a long time,  
but tonight just like our first night here I am  
with my head light in my hands and my glass full,  
staring at the big drowsy petals until they start to swim,

loving them but wishing to lift them aside, unbutton them,  
 tear them, even, if that's what it takes to get through  
 to the beautiful, moon-white, warm, wanting skin of you.<sup>41</sup>

The slow and alliterated last line is deftly and subtly set up, through forward momentum generated across the stanza by enjambment (the whole stanza is one long sentence). It takes added poignancy in the full couplet rhyme with 'through', after successive half-rhymes on 'm'. Furthermore, the 'w' alliteration gives the line a degree of elegance. The clichéd epithet 'moon-white' has renewed significance for emerging in a language and context so thoroughly ordinary and prosaic.

Like Heaney's marital verse in *Field Work*, the tone is intimate and conversational; the second person address (to the wife) is the primary mode of voice. Yet, the best of this type of poetry is relatable to the reader's experience. The reader does not feel as if he is lost in an obscure situation. Rather, the personal experience of the poem is shared or common, as in 'Summer Home', where the dynamics of argument and reconciliation are recognisable and familiar, even if the particular cause of argument is not. As another example of a poem which relates a common experience, we might take Motion's 'Your Postcard Came', which centres on the issue of a wife's illness, and the regret that he might have cared for her better. Although the poem is written in rhyming couplets, the rhythms of natural speech

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<sup>41</sup> Andrew Motion, 'On the Table', *Selected Poems: 1976-1997* (London: Faber, 1998), 141.

are maintained through frequent enjambment. Testifying to Larkin's influence is the coexistence of expletives ("that's shit"<sup>42</sup>) and subtly worked lyricism:

I looked back at the house and found your face  
inside the window like a silhouette in ice

And melting – skin becoming water and then air  
before I stretched to pull the apples near,

the apples swelling air and water in their new-made skin.

How am I? I shall tell you, then.

I'm wishing you were here and well, that's all.

Not thinking how I climbed while you were waiting for the  
fall.

The action here is reminiscent of sonnet ix from Heaney's *Glanmore* sequence. After clearing a briar, Heaney turns to see his wife through a window of Glanmore cottage: 'The empty briar is swishing / When I come down, and beyond, inside, your face / Haunts like a new moon glimpsed through tangled glass'. In both poems, catching sight of the wife through a window coincides with a feeling of separation. The

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<sup>42</sup> Motion, *Selected Poems*, 134.

similes exaggerate the obscurity of perspective ('silhouette', 'glimpsed', 'tangled glass') to underscore the metaphorical distance between the couples, but more importantly the speakers' feelings of failed understanding or sympathy. In addition, Motion's choice of the preposition 'inside' rather than the expected 'through', creates the impression that the wife is sealed away, and made inaccessible by the window (an idea developed in the simile).

The wife's cancer is represented as bringing about a kind of Edenic fall – fittingly 'fall' has typographically fallen away from the last line. The biblical allusion highlights the loss of ease, complacency and security in the couple's lives. Now, after the fall, the speaker is troubled by his past unwillingness to acknowledge that a 'fall' was coming. He criticises his past unwarranted complacency: 'What came over me? Do I suppose // we'll always have enough time left for that? That's shit?' If the speaker, complacent about his partner's illness, took to apple picking as a diversionary activity, he still cannot escape the reality of her condition. The chiasmic line, 'melting – skin becoming water and then air...the apples swelling air and water in their new-made skin', poignantly links apples and wife – the former, swelling with life and the latter, slowly declining.

Having recognised his unjustifiable casualness, the speaker is frustrated with the gentility that still defines his relationship with his wife (he changes 'better' in the ninth line to 'loved' – the former being 'too genteel'). The wife's postcard full of 'bright chatter' and ending with a polite enquiry – despite having undergone chemotherapy – is a product of genteel values, and provokes the speaker into an

excited monologue to break through such stoicism: 'How am *I*? How are *you* is what I want to know?'

The disruption or unsettling of domestic marital complacency and leisure is also the subject of 'These Days'. Here, the speaker's indulgent evenings with his wife are interrupted by a quasi-transcendental image, which has an energy and vigour at odds with the domestic scene. The speaker's sexual desire is couched in lassitude: '*Make it be soon, my eyes say / rolling up to the ceiling – / a relished, leisurely roll / which tells you as well / I want you*'<sup>43</sup>. The alliterated 'l' and 'r' and 'sh' consonantal sounds of the third line create a suitably languorous effect. The speaker's 'pining' for his wife is suspended by their cat lapping at milk in a shallow dish, which reveals:

a woman crossing a blue bridge

setting out on a journey,

perhaps, or coming back,

her parasol raised in salute,

her blue cross-hatched hat

tipped to deflect the wind,

and her eyes distinctly narrowed,

to blue expressionless flecks

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<sup>43</sup> Andrew Motion, 'These Days', *Dangerous Play: Poems 1974-1984* (London: Penguin, 1985), 56-57.

by a sudden onrush of light.

This conclusion, which comes from a cat's milk dish, is a good example of how contemporary poets can find sources for lyricism in the most unexpected places. The description of the woman owes something to Hardy; there may also be distant echoes of Keats as well. The image, like Keats's cold pastoral, does tease us out of thought: the lady's action is an eternally unresolvable mystery, while her 'expressionless flecks' increase her inscrutability. In addition, mirroring the temporal contrast between urn and speaker, her stasis contrasts with the speaker's mutability.

More obviously at work is the influence of Larkin. The final line – as surprising and intense as the light itself – evokes the conclusion of 'High Windows', which ends on a similarly unexpected and rarefied note. In his essay 'In the Main of Light', Heaney suggests that Larkin's visionary moments involving light, such as the one in 'High Windows', spring from an 'Elysian' mood. Light in these Elysian poems is 'honeyed by attachment to a dream world that will not be denied because it is at the foundation of the poet's sensibility'<sup>44</sup>. 'These Days' seems also to involve the Elysian mood: the final, rarefied image offers a vision detached from 'these days' with their circuits of drinking and sexual desire, but like all dream worlds, one that remains painfully unattainable. Motion's Elysian note, however, does not quite hit the pitch which Larkin achieves in a poem such as 'High Windows', where the

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<sup>44</sup> Heaney, 'The Main of Light', 29.



Elysian mood is all the more remarkable for the cynicism and sardonic tone from which it arises.

### **Douglas Dunn**

The marital lives of Douglas Dunn's *Terry Street* prove to be a striking contrast with those in the poems discussed so far. The residents of the eponymous street in *Terry Street* lead unfulfilled romantic lives. The sterility of marriage in these poems is far removed from the celebrations of marital life which we find in the poetry of Heaney, Muldoon and others. 'From the Night-Window', for instance, depicts with the surrealistic horror of a nightmare the events one night in Terry Street – 'Children cry in the close-packed houses, / A man rots in his snoring'; ending with an image of residents despairingly contemplating their marriages: 'the sleepless, smoking in the dark, / Making small red lights at their mouths, / Count the years of their marriages'.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, in 'Sunday Morning Among the Houses of Terry Street', the speaker tellingly notes that 'men leave their beds to wash and eat...Leaving in their beds their wives and fantasies'<sup>46</sup>, where the juxtaposition of wives and fantasies points to the gulf between the two. These poems are closer to Lowell's satiric account of marriage 'To Speak of the Woe That is in Marriage' or Larkin's 'Self's the Man'. Of course, the marital sterility of Terry Street is primarily a product of the street's poverty, which deadens the residents' emotional and private lives.

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<sup>45</sup> Douglas Dunn 'From the Night-Window', *Terry Street* (London: Faber, 1969), 22.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

Writing from a middle-class context, Dunn celebrates domestic marriage. For instance, the sonnet 'Modern Love' from *The Happier Life*, set in a rented house in a leafy suburban area, is content with the casual nature of domestic love and life, and is free from *Terry Street's* sardonicism:

It is summer, and we are in a house  
That is not ours, sitting at a table  
Enjoying minutes of a rented silence,  
The upstairs people gone. The pigeons lull  
To sleep the under-tens and invalids,  
The tree shakes out its shadows to the grass,  
The roses rove through the wilds of my neglect.  
Our lives flap, and we have no hope of better  
Happiness than this, not much to show for love  
Than how we are, or how this evening is,  
Unpeopled, silent, and where we are alive  
In a domestic love, seemingly alone,  
All other lives worn down to trees and sunlight,  
Looking forward to a visit from the cat.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Dunn, 'Modern Love', *New Selected Poems: 1964-2000* (London: Faber, 2003), 22.

The title is an allusion to George Meredith's avant-garde sonnet sequence *Modern Love*, which depicts the breakdown of a marriage. For Dunn, however, modern love is far from Meredith's domestic drama; it is humdrum, domestic and down-beat, but not necessarily unhappy. Dunn further alludes to Meredith stylistically, through the sonnet form, although he uses the Shakespearean rather than the sixteen-line Meredithian sonnet. He adapts the form to convey the 'domestic' nature of the couples' love. For instance, the couplet – rather than conventionally contribute a final twist or provide conclusive insight – is anti-climactic and strikes a suitably bathetic note. Such bathos, however, is not necessarily pejorative, but is faithful to the slow-pace of the day.<sup>48</sup>

What is perhaps most significant about this domestic scenario is how it underscores the sense of coupledness. The repeated use of 'we' insists on the unity of husband and wife, while the neighbours and other people recede into the background. Indeed, the coinage 'unpeopled' shows that one of the virtues of this domestic love is the couple's isolation. Here, then, are the dynamics of the classic aubade: domestic interiority separates the couple from the public world, sealing them off and making conspicuous their togetherness. In boldly suggesting that domesticity and modern love are synonymous, Dunn is drawn to an idea prevalent in contemporary poetry. His poem is in many ways representative or archetypal: the context is a middle-class home; there is no event or dispute; it maintains an even

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<sup>48</sup> For the poem's underscored inactivity we are also reminded of Lowell's 'Late Summer at Milgate'.

middle-tone, it inclines towards bathos rather than pathos; romantic sentiment is under-stated, and primarily there is a keen sense of ordinariness.

### **Thom Gunn**

The domestic love poetry of Thom Gunn makes for an interesting and significant contribution to the discussion. Here we find a resurrection of classical tropes of love poetry, such as the spiritual union of lovers, and consuming sexual passion, but there is also appreciation and desire for the assuredness of 'normal' domestic love. As Tom Sleight notes, 'just as Gunn puts a premium on sexual freedom, he evinces an equal need for domestic stability'<sup>49</sup>. As an example of a domestic love poem which evinces conventional love poetry, we may turn to 'Touch', where a couple in bed unite on physical and metaphysical planes:

You are already  
 asleep. I lower  
 myself in next to  
 you, my skin slightly  
 numb with the restraint  
 of habits, the patina of  
 self, the black frost  
 of outsideness, so that even

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<sup>49</sup> Tom Sleight, 'Thom Gunn's New Jerusalem', in *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*, ed. Joshua Weiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 245.

unclothed it is  
 a resilient chilly  
 hardness, a superficially  
 malleable, dead  
 rubbery texture.<sup>50</sup>

The language here ('resilient', 'patina' 'malleable'), which would equally as well describe an inanimate object, stresses the 'thingness' of the speaker. This is underscored by the substitution of the present tense copula, 'is', for the expected auxiliary verb 'has', so that the skin does not have the properties of hardness or a dead rubbery texture, but becomes those properties, paradoxically eliding the idea that it is human skin at all. The copula works a similar effect in the second stanza – 'you are a mound of bed clothes' – which again elides the human and focuses on the lifeless physicality. Whereas in other Gunn poems the speaker is unable to escape his posturing, and achieve intimacy due to the 'patina of self', the couple here gradually combine together:

Meanwhile and slowly  
 I feel a is it  
 my own warmth surfacing or  
 the ferment of your whole

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<sup>50</sup> Thom Gunn, 'Touch', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1994), 168.

body that in darkness beneath  
 the cover is stealing  
 bit by bit to break  
 down that chill.

Contact is silent, and chemical-like ('fermenting' 'breaking down'). Connection seems deterministic and inevitable, in the same way that osmosis is inevitable in certain circumstances. This instinctive, totally material and vigorous connection in bed transcends the coupling of the above poems, where the speakers' romantic lives are more playful. Nonetheless, despite the bare physicality of their unification, the speaker provides the necessary humanity for his partner who is seen waking from a nightmare, being the 'nearest human being to / hold on to in a / dreamed pogrom'. The partner may be Mike Kitay, who was Jewish and became Gunn's romantic interest while the two were at Cambridge. The nightmare marks the transition from the physicality of the last two stanzas to the dream world of the final stanza: 'What I now, loosened, sink into is an old big place':

continuous creation, dark  
 enclosing cocoon round  
 ourselves alone, dark  
 wide realm where we  
 walk with everyone.

Regarding these lines, Wilmer points out that 'continuous creation' is 'one of the modern theories of the universe: what is sometimes called the Steady State theory, now superseded...by the Big Bang'<sup>51</sup>. He then argues that this is an example of Gunn imitating Donne's habit of incorporating contemporary discoveries in alchemy and other sciences into his poetry. Developing the comparison, he notes particular inverse parallels with 'Good Morrow': night for morning, sleeping for waking. Perhaps also, we might argue, the concluding lines bear some resemblance to the middle stanza of 'Good Morrow':

And now good morrow to our waking souls,  
Which watch not one another out of fear  
For love all love of other sights controls  
And makes one little room an everywhere.<sup>52</sup>

Both poems develop the conceit of the lover's bedroom (more specifically the bed in 'Touch') of becoming an expansive all-encompassing realm. For Gunn, the notion of walking with everyone would have a political as well as metaphysical slant, suggesting the equality of heterosexual and homosexual love.

Although 'Touch' is intensely physical, it is clear that contact is not primarily

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<sup>51</sup> Clive Wilmer, 'Gunn, Shakespeare and the Elizabethans', in *At the Barriers: On the Poetry of Thom Gunn*, ed. Joshua Weiner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 53.

<sup>52</sup> Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, 60.

sexual. Similarly, in a later bedroom poem, 'The Hug', Gunn describes another intimate, but non-sexual scene with his partner, which also concludes with an affirmation of the couple's mutual love. In the first stanza Gunn, drunk during his partner's birthday, 'in one drunk stride' reaches a bed and crashes out asleep. The second stanza opens with his sudden awakening to his partner's presence:

I dozed, I slept. My sleep broke on a hug,

Suddenly, from behind,

In which the full lengths of our bodies pressed:

Your instep to my heel,

My shoulder-blades against your chest.

It was not sex, but I could feel

The whole strength of your body set,

Or braced, to mine,

And locking me to you

As if we were still twenty-two

When our grand passion had not yet

Become familial.

My quick sleep had deleted all

Of intervening time and place.

I only knew



The stay of your secure firm dry embrace.<sup>53</sup>

The meaning of the hug in these lines modulates – a transformation that is matched in the substitution of the Latinate ‘embrace’ for ‘hug’. Although the words are synonyms, there are important etymological differences between them. The noun form of ‘hug’ was used in the early seventeenth century as a wrestling hold. Yet the aggression latent in ‘hug’ and in the above lines (‘locking me to you’, ‘the whole strength of your body set’) is diminished by the sense of communion and peace encompassing the pair, and this is marked by the final transformation into ‘embrace’. The transformative moment is signified in the stanza: the abab rhymes of lines 3-6 register the interlocking of the two bodies, while the succeeding line ends on an unrhymed word, which acts as a line of division, separating the stanza into two units. The final, nearly regular iambic line with its familiar beats and length renders the new security that Gunn has found in this domestic coupling.

What has been achieved is the kind of absolute intimacy of ‘The Good Morrow’: by possessing his partner’s subjectivity – ‘I only knew’ – the lover becomes his world. The dryness of the totalising embrace marks, as Tom Sleight notes, the transition from ‘sexual to domestic love, from the physical joy of sex to the physical joy of being held by someone with whom life has been shared’. Only a gay man, Sleight goes on to suggest, would value this transformation: ‘Now, what heterosexual male poet would celebrate such a transition? Presumably, that poet would say how

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<sup>53</sup> Gunn, ‘The Hug’, *Collected Poems*, 407.

sexual attraction was attendant on the hug; or else the poet would lament the passing of such passion. But Gunn does neither – or if there is a touch of melancholy, it is balanced by an equal sense of triumph.’<sup>54</sup>

The heterodox nature of Gunn’s home life might be a reason for the profoundly intimate and celebratory feel of Gunn’s domestic love poems. As Sleigh also points out, Gunn’s home on Cole Street, San Francisco was ‘communitarian’: ‘he lived in a group house, with house-mates, in which each cooked dinner on assigned nights of the week’<sup>55</sup>. Clearly, then at home, Gunn had the opportunity of discovering a new partner, and so his domestic love poetry might be invigorated by the experience of new or different lovers. The lack of offspring provides for an experience of domestic life significantly different from that of a married heterosexual couple with children. For instance, in *The Dolphin* and Heaney’s ‘Summer Home’ children invariably induce a sense of responsibility and practical engagement with the world, whereas a domestic life consumed mostly between lovers is open towards the kind of metaphysical and self-involved explorations of love that we find in ‘Touch’.

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<sup>54</sup> Sleigh, 247.

<sup>55</sup> Sleigh, 245.

#### *Chapter Four: The Domestic Vantage Point*

In this chapter I will consider poems which meditate and reflect on politics in relation to a domestic context. This context may be a home which has itself witnessed conflict or is some way emblematic of conflict, such as Anne Frank's house or the great house in Walcott's 'Ruins of a Great House'. The major part of this chapter, however, will focus on poems which contrast conflict and political happenings with a detached domestic scene; a speaker at home reflecting on the Second World War or the Troubles, for example. These poems, I would argue, have particular value for the way in which they direct attention towards the speaker himself and exhibit moments of self-evaluation and self-consciousness. Particular attention, then, will be given to voice: how it registers the speaker's ambivalence about himself and his position towards present or past conflict.

The ambivalence is such that we find that the speaker is often emotionally over-wrought due to a sense of inactivity and disengagement. He appears to be consumed by self-reproach and guilt for his ease and seeming neglect of political causes. In the case of Heaney, for instance, this finds expression in quasi-surrealistic moments, where a badger might become the murdered dead of the Troubles, or mint leaves growing in the garden might become representatives of political prisoners. With regards to Andrew Motion, we find it expressed in admiration of those who serve and served in conflicts (such as Motion's father) and deference towards those who have suffered the consequence of war and persecution.

Underpinning this discussion will be a dual understanding of the home/domesticity. For the most part, the home is understood traditionally as a feminine space: an apolitical space of leisure and inactivity (hence sentiments of inadequacy and guilt on the part of the male speakers). Yet, significantly, at other times, the domestic and leisured lifestyle is valued for what it reflects of the human spirit, and is seen as the happy end of strife and conflict, when swords have been beaten into ploughshares.

A famous precursor to contemporary poems which take a domestic context but reflect on politics and conflict is Yeats's 'Meditations in Times of Civil War'. As we will find in later poems of the same genre, there is a degree of frustration expressed towards the speaker's domestic context. In section III 'My Table', Yeats finds that Sato's gift 'a changeless sword, / By pen and paper lies, / That it may moralise / My days out of their aimlessness.'<sup>1</sup> Of course, pen and paper symbolise poetry and art, but also more prosaically Yeats's domestic context which is here linked with aimlessness. Yeats's homes and dwelling places in 'Meditations in Times of Civil War', however, are not all associated with 'hum-drum' domesticity. In his perceptive reading of 'Meditations in Times of Civil War', Stan Smith argues that the domestic context is not solely associated with inactivity and isolation, but offers new political ground. Referring to section VI, which opens with an image of the bees' activity in the tower, he notes that such pastoral motifs, descending from classical

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<sup>1</sup> W.B Yeats, *W.B. Yeats: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 103.

literature, 'constitute an alternative discourse to the ancestral voices prophesying war'<sup>2</sup>:

The bees build in the crevices  
 Of loosening masonry, and there  
 The mother birds bring grubs and flies.  
 My wall is loosening; honey-bees.  
 Come build in the empty house of the stare.

Here the domestic activity of the bees and mother bird serves as an emblem of what has been lost in conflict. The imperative refrain 'Come build in the empty house of the stare' suggests that redress is found in the recovery of domestic spaces. Heaney quotes this passage in his Nobel Prize speech, noting that it balances tender-mindedness with thorough realism and stoicism: 'it is as tender-minded towards life itself as St Kevin was and tough-minded about what happens in and to life as Homer.'<sup>3</sup> The tender-mindedness to which Heaney alludes is Yeats's regard for the homely activity of mother bird and bees.

On the opposite spectrum to the humble empty-house of the stare, is Lady Ottoline's mansion at Garsington evoked in the first section of 'Meditations'. Here, also, is another example of salubrious domesticity: 'Surely among a rich man's

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<sup>2</sup> Stan Smith, *The Origins of Modernism: Eliot, Pound, Yeats and the Rhetorics of Renewal* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 160.

<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Crediting Poetry', *Opened Ground*, 464.

flowering lawns, / Amid the rustle of his planted hills, / Life overflows without  
 ambitious pains; / And rains down life until the basin spills'. However, such a house  
 is founded and built by 'some violent bitter man':

some powerful man

Called architect and artist in, that they,

Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone

The sweetness that all longed for night and day,

The gentleness none there had ever known.

'Meditations', then, begins and ends with the idea of violence and bitterness being  
 sublimated into 'sweetness', which is envisioned in both instances as a domestic  
 form of sweetness.

In MacNeice's 'Postscript to Iceland' is the idea that domesticity is a fleeting  
 refuge from wider political disturbances. The poem is written at the end of the 1930s,  
 when fright and alarm at Nazi and fascist gains was increasing rapidly in England.  
 The third stanza makes reference to the falling of Seville in Spain to Franco's army  
 during the Spanish Civil War and the Nazi-led Olympics. Suburban life here is  
 characterised as stagnation and disables any means of resistance or action:

Here in Hampstead I sit late

Nights which no one shares and wait

For the phone to ring or for

Unknown angels at the door;

Better were the northern skies

Than this desert in disguise –

Rugs and cushions and the long

Mirror which repeats the song.

For the litany of doubt

From these walls comes breathing out

Till the room becomes a pit

Humming with the fear of it

With the fear of loneliness

And uncommunicableness;

All the wires are cut, my friends

Live beyond the severed ends.<sup>4</sup>

The sense of domestic isolation is conveyed in the metaphor of a desert – a line which anticipates Auden's 'the desert sighs in the bed'<sup>5</sup>. What hope there is of salvation or rescue appears to be fantastical: the adjective 'unknown', for instance,

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<sup>4</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber, 2007), 98.

<sup>5</sup> W.H Auden, 'As I Walked Out One Evening', *Collected Poems*, 135.

shows that MacNiece does not know from where on the political spectrum or society the 'angels' will come. Furthermore, there is the suggestion here that the room and home cultivate a sense of paranoia, exaggerating the threat; as here, in such a place of inaction, anxiety and fear may assert themselves. Yet, there is some consolation in the possibility of theoretical and imaginative responses which may be pursued in the suburban environment:

Rows of books around me stand,  
 Fence me round on either hand;  
 Through that forest of dead words  
 I would hunt the living birds –

Great black birds that fly alone  
 Slowly through a land of stone,  
 And the gulls who weave a free  
 Quilt of rhythm on the sea.

There is ambiguity in the verb 'Fence' which might suggest protective shielding or confinement. As in the stanzas quoted above, a nature metaphor is used to describe the room. The bookshelf as forest and the room as desert are expressionistic metaphors, conveying the intensity of the home-based speaker's feelings at such a crucial historical juncture. 'Postscript to Iceland' is dedicated to Auden and bears



the influence of Auden's poetry, particularly in its sense of anonymous hostile forces on the border of the suburban world. In its dynamics of domestic speaker meditating on global politics and strife, the poem evokes Auden's 'Out on the lawn I lie bed'. In Auden's poem, however, the domestic world is not besieged and is a domain of leisure. Given Auden's radical and socialist political views, domestic pleasure is rendered, in spite of the personal happiness it brings, as an impediment to social justice. The poem is based on Auden's experience of *agape*, which occurred whilst relaxing with colleagues in the grounds of The Downs School in Malvern:

One fine summer night in June 1933, I was sitting on a lawn after dinner with three colleagues, two women and one man. We liked each other well enough but we were certainly not intimate friends, nor had any one of us had sexual interest in another. Incidentally, we had not drunk any alcohol. We were talking casually about everyday matters when, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, something happened. I felt myself invaded by a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine. For the first time in my life I knew exactly – because, thanks to the power, I was doing it – what it means to love one's neighbour as oneself. <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *A Reader's Guide to W.H. Auden*, ed. John Fuller (London: Faber, 1970), 99.

This private vision of *agape* ('Equal with colleagues in a ring / I sit on each calm evening / Enchanted as the flowers'<sup>7</sup>) is contrasted with knowledge of public injustice, violence and war:

And, gentle, do not care to know  
 Where Poland draws her eastern bow,  
 What violence is done;  
 Nor ask what doubtful act allows  
 Our freedom in this English house,  
 Our picnics in the sun.

The previous seven stanzas created the impression that the colleagues in a ring were self-sufficient, detached from the wider world, enjoying the 'tyrannies of love'. But this *agape* is in fact sponsored by some 'doubtful act'. In a subtle but powerful reversal, the condition of love is found to be a condition of injustice. The necessary social action to redress that doubtful act will dismantle the colleagues' domestic ease:

Soon, through dykes of our content  
 The crumpling flood will force a rent  
 And, taller than a tree,  
 Hold sudden death before our eyes  
 Whose river-dreams long hid the size

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<sup>7</sup> Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927 – 1939*, ed. Edward Mendelsohn (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 136.

And vigours of the sea.

The private and cultured world is here likened to a pleasant fantasy or dream which hides the disturbing and swelling social unrest. This stanza is emphatic in its assertion that social revolution will happen; the 'dykes of our content' will be crumpled. This leaves the speaker who is lying on the lawn, a member of a privileged class, with only one option in order to remain on the right side of history.

The loss of privilege and ease must be a sacrifice, or at least appear as such:

May these delights we dread to lose,  
 This privacy, need no excuse  
 But to that strength belong,  
 As through a child's rash happy cries  
 The drowned parental voices rise  
 In unlamenting song.

The negative adjective, 'unlamenting', draws attention to the other possible course of action: a pained resistance to revolution; a stubborn refusal to yield to the inevitable change. The conspicuousness of the negative prefix appears to suggest that there is reason for lament. A resolute ambivalence holds sway, as Michael O'Neill notes: 'It is less to any socialist "strength" that the poem pins its colours, for all its devastating critique of bourgeois individualism, than to an in-between state, one in which the

poet can hear the “rash” nature of future “happy cries” and expresses a latent fellow-feeling with the parental “drowned voices.”<sup>8</sup>

Ambivalence is the word that best describes the political and ‘war’ poetry of the writers considered here. Generally, these poets are ambivalent about their own standing when it is considered in relation to conflict and wider external realities; about how they should interpret their unmolested conditions of living: as a fortuitous blessing, or as ‘bourgeois individualism’, disconnected and uncommitted to a ‘worthier’ purpose. As in ‘Summer Night’, then, we find reflection on leisure and culture inextricably caught up with ethical considerations.

Where recent contemporary poetry differs from Auden’s poem is, perhaps, in the sense of historical momentousness. ‘Summer Night’ was written pre-second world war, at a point when war was unfolding on the continent and, furthermore, the poem ends with a vision of revolution (the poem, then, whilst ambivalent about how to apprehend the coming revolutionary moment is certain that it will come). By contrast, much post-war poetry lacks such a sense of momentousness – that the delights we dread to lose will have to be sacrificed in the pursuit of a greater end is far from certain. This might be due to postwar scepticism towards various ‘isms’, namely nationalism and socialism. The revolutionary fervour of the 30s Auden generation has not found its equal in succeeding decades. Furthermore, post-structuralist and postmodern thought encourages scepticism of narratives of progress and moral absolutism. Generally speaking, in much of domestic poetry of

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<sup>8</sup> O’Neill, *Twentieth Century British and Irish Poetry*, 104.

politics and war, a condition of introspection and self-reflection finds equal footing with, and is often even privileged over, ideological or political commitment.

For Andrew Motion, consideration of past conflicts, namely the world wars, – which guaranteed him the liberty and leisure he enjoys – inclines him towards romantic and deferential portrayals of soldiers and the victims of war (most recently in his Harry Patch sonnets). In the poetry which meditates on war and conflict from a domestic perspective, alongside the reverence and awe for combatants and witnesses, we find deprecation of the postwar sedentary lifestyle. In ‘Inside and Out’, for instance, which depicts a couple holidaying in France in areas which witnessed fighting during the First World War, the couple’s life is imperfect, unresolved, and ephemeral; whereas the community which endured the war is unified, transcendent, and enduring. It is likely that the poem takes inspiration from Motion’s B Litt research at Oxford into the life and poetry of the World War One poet Edward Thomas. One of the battlefields mentioned in the poem, Arras, is the site of Thomas’s death and the existential musings of the final verse paragraph echo the meditations on mortality and death in Thomas’s ‘Rain’.

The poem opens in Motion’s typically conversational manner, interpolating a casual snippet of conversation:

Two hundred miles from home I found  
 the one freezing room where you live,  
 and that, as you said, was *Nothing*,

*really. Not even my own. See this?*

*It's Madame Dussart's funeral gown,*

*filling a whole drawer. Supposing*

*I died first, of boredom, what then?*

Then nothing again. A vacant space

where no one would see the sunlight

mark time in dust towards your bed.<sup>9</sup>

The meaning of 'nothing' changes across the stanzas; slipping from its colloquial meaning of 'unimportant or negligible' to indicate a feeling of nihilism, concretely represented in the image of sunlight marking time with dust. Here, an assured and untroubled life shades into meaninglessness. The couple try to transcend themselves, to escape their 'absolute lives': 'as if we were ghosts of ourselves / we waited for darkness...And shadows we stayed, or tried to'. This draws out another meaning of 'inside and out', - beyond the description of the couple inside their room and the graves outside – relating to the issue of being inside or outside the self. Clearly, there is consonance between the two meanings. The couple who are physically inside are also existentially confined or trapped; the communities however, transcend mortality:

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<sup>9</sup> Motion, *Selected Poems*, 12.

They were complete societies, flickering  
 stones I knew by distant village names.  
 However I chose I remembered them,  
 all preserved no matter what deaths  
 succeeded them there, and us, who talking  
 each other to sleep at last heard only  
 their luminous silence we could not survive.

There is deliberate irony in the idea that the living couple cannot survive the luminous silence, when of course they in one sense of the word 'survive' the complete societies and the war. On one level it expresses the intense awareness of mortality which Motion has inherited from the wars; in every sense of the phrase Motion is a *postwar* poet. And, on another level, it pays homage to those soldiers and citizens by according them an almost Homeric reward; they endure not merely as an admonishment to future generations, but because the extra-ordinary course of their lives and time took them beyond the confines of mortality. Indeed, the strange and gnomic use of synaesthesia in the final line – 'luminous silence' – underscores the singular metaphysical plane of the 'societies.'

'Beginning the Move' takes a more light-hearted look at the differences between war and domesticity. It overtly and self-consciously juxtaposes middle-class domesticity with the realities of war in the form of veterans returning from the Falklands. The parallels made are intended to be ironic and humorous, such as the

difficulty of moving a fish tank and books when moving home, and the difficulty of moving wounded veterans: the 'aisles of loaded tea-chests' and the aisles on a plane. Such parallels underscore the distance between the speaker and the veterans, a distance that the speaker readily acknowledges as he tries to imagine them alighting from the plane, but manages only an accidentally parodic vision: 'on stretchers, / some hobbling, some with arms round friends, // like drunks helped towards bed, and one- / why did he look Chinese? – emerging at last/ in tears, with a pantomime stagger.'<sup>10</sup> Although the speaker fails to form any positive connection with the wounded, this failure may afford him and us the opportunity to relate to them negatively. The shortcomings of his imaginative and sympathetic capacities bespeak the gravity of what they have suffered and experienced. The fact that his comfortable middle class domestic situation is incommensurable with their lives is, ironically, the basis from which he and the reader can begin to understand war and the effects of war.

The theme of a civilian's incomprehension of armed conflict is expressed in 'Veteran' from *The Cinder Path* in relation to Motion's father who participated in action during the war. Deferentially, Motion expresses his inability to fathom what his father has experienced: – 'I look up at him, / and cannot estimate the harm / still beating in his head / but hidden in his words'.<sup>11</sup> The gesture of looking up here has symbolic import, intimating Motion's admiration of his father and his own feeling of

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<sup>10</sup> Motion, *Dangerous Play*, 48.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Motion, *The Cinder Path* (London: Faber, 2009), 50.



inferiority.

Motion then describes his father relating combat experiences in a vocabulary with overt military connotations. For instance, 'tour' plays on 'tour of duty', 'flashback' evokes a soldier's flashbacks from war, and 'flat-bottomed' describes the Higgins boats used on D-Day. Similarly, Motion unites his father's idiom 'hell-for-leather advance' with his own poeticism such as 'the ash-wreck of Berlin'. Here Motion deftly combines his art and the particularities of his father's experiences, creating a degree of harmony between the two which falls away towards the poem's end.

In contrast to the activity of wartime, the father's domestic and civilian life appears to be one of increasing negativity. Echoing the speaker of 'Dockery and Son' who complains that 'life is first boredom then fear'<sup>12</sup> Motion laments that 'dust has settled again / and fear, grief, boredom, pain / have found out how to fade/into the later life he made'. Nonetheless, his soldierly character is still discernible:

But I still look at him –  
 the way his eyes take aim  
 and hold the wood in focus  
 just in case anonymous  
 and slowly-swaying trees  
 might in fact be enemies

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<sup>12</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 66-67.

advancing...

The admiration in these and other lines is akin to the admiration that we find in Heaney's 'Digging', where the speaker admires the father's 'undomesticated' and masculine character. Whereas Patrick's hardy agricultural vocation places him firmly in the *masculine* outdoors, it is the combative spirit of Motion's father which ensures that he is never totally assimilated to the domestic sphere. As in 'Digging', consideration of the father's life leads to self-consciousness on the speaker's part for his own sedentary and domiciliary lifestyle. The poem's conclusion brings this self-consciousness to the fore:

I headed off for home,  
 while he still stare outside  
 and waits for the parade  
  
 of shadow-shapes to end,  
 his slightly lifted hand  
 either showing I should stay,  
 or pushing me away.

The last two lines carry overt symbolic meanings: to be asked to stay equates with paternal acceptance, to be pushed away equates with paternal rejection. Motion's ambivalence concerning his father's gesture – highlighted by the rhyming of 'stay' and 'away' – shows that he is unsure about his father's view of him and their relationship. Yet, this ambivalence on the symbolic level seems to be largely Motion's invention. It is unlikely that his father is pushing him away in the sense of rejection or disownment (he might be agreeing that he needs to go home). The sense of rejection that plays in the last line is an expression of the humility (even inadequacy) which Motion feels when he contrasts the trials and suffering borne by his father with the relative comfort of his own life.

'Anne Frank Huis', probably Motion's most famous poem, continues the themes and issues discussed so far. However, here, the speaker is not situated in his own or family home, but Anne Frank's former home in Amsterdam. Dark irony pervades the poem as the speaker can recognise the domestic comfort and lifestyle which Anne should have experienced (and which he experiences) but which was denied to her. Sadly, Motion's tone and intentions in this poem have been misunderstood. Michael Hulse criticises Motion for 'opportunism that is slightly obscene'<sup>13</sup> and similarly David Dabydeen accuses Motion of 'gentility' in his approach to Anne Frank's suffering and of using that suffering for aesthetic effect, thus repeating Alvarez's charge against Larkin: 'The quiet understatement of

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Hulse, "'I could have outlived myself there": The Poetry of Andrew Motion', *Critical Quarterly* 28, 3 (1986): 80.

Motion's response to human tragedy is as obscene as Conrad's heated, insistent rhetoric [...] both belong to a tradition of colonising the experience of others for the gratification of their own literary sensibilities.<sup>14</sup> Motion's understatement derives not from underestimation of the tragedy of Anne Frank's life or tactless navel-gazing, but from the ambiguous relationship that Motion and his coevals have with the legacy of the war. Entering Anne's room is an emotionally charged experience, as much for the sense of guilt it generates as for the understanding it provides into her life:

Even now, after twice her lifetime of grief  
 and anger in the very place, whoever comes  
 to climb these narrow stairs, discovers how  
 the bookcase slides aside, then walks through  
 shadow into sunlit rooms, can never help  
 but break her secrecy again. Just listening  
 is a kind of guilt: the Westerkirk repeats  
 itself outside, as if all time worked round  
 towards her fear, and made each stroke  
 die down on guarded streets...<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> David Dabydeen, 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today' in *The State of the Language*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Leonard Michaels (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Motion, *Selected Poems*, 16.

Every time someone visits Anne's room, they recreate her discovery by the gestapo. The implicit guilt that Motion feels in that line is compounded by the guilt that arises when he tries to imagine the reality of Anne's circumstance, which act seems too much to bear after seeing himself as the intruder. This small drama, played out over thresholds, is a microcosm of post-war European consciousness, which has struggled to move from a sense of implication with the persecutors (whether actively or passively) to sympathy with the victims. Once more, Motion appears self-conscious about his own inability to truly understand. His gentle imperative 'imagine it' – a positive formulation of the post-war imperative to 'never forget' – plays on the colloquial sense of the phrase: 'you will not be able to believe' or 'you will not be able to fully comprehend.'

Motion wants to come to terms with the isolation and fruitless hope that defined Anne's last years – 'three years of whispering and loneliness / and plotting, day by day, the Allied line / in Europe with a yellow chalk' – things which denied her a normal and ordinary life. The speaker affectingly juxtaposes Anne's last years with the ordinariness she hoped for and deserved:

What hope

she had for ordinary love and interest

survives her here, displayed above the bed

as pictures of her family; some actors;  
 fashions chosen by Princess Elizabeth.

'Ordinary' in this context becomes a political and moral concept, meaning: something given, expected or rightful; something that should not be hoped for. Stolen ordinariness, then, is part of the tragedy of Anne's life. With this thought in mind Motion concludes the poem. Anne, he knows, had one enduring wish

for chances

like my own: to leave as simply  
 as I do, and walk at ease  
 up dusty tree-lined avenues...

The emergence of the personal possessive noun and first person perspective relates Anne's experience to the speaker's. He becomes aware of the ordinariness of his own life and the basic freedoms he takes for granted. The visit, then, as it draws Motion closer to a life that needs to be remembered through the ages, brings to the fore that blessed ordinariness which is invisible until it is taken away.

The trope of a domestic world disturbed or shattered finds its deepest and darkest pitch in 'Anne Frank Huis' (it is no surprise that it appears as the final poem of the elegiac first section of *Selected Poems*). But here also is the home most charged with sacredness and the possibility of emotional development. The house has

become a site for humanistic pilgrimages. Generalising pronouns like ‘whoever’ and ‘those’ unite Motion with a broader group, as he makes his individual and personal visit. Our sense of the home’s and Anne’s enduring influence and power is underscored by the details which measure the time between her life and the present moment, such as ‘twice her lifetime of grief’ or Anne’s photo of Princess Elizabeth, who is now Queen. Motion’s actions become portentous due to the context. For instance, when he stoops to look at the photos, although he does so out of practicality to negotiate the home’s narrow architecture, it carries overtures of being him being humbled or paying reverence to what he finds, which is:

not only patience missing its reward,

but one enduring wish for chances

like my own: to leave as simply

as I do, and walk at ease

up dusty-tree lined avenues, or watch

a silent barge come clear of bridges

settling their reflections in the blue canal.

A melancholic peace holds sway at the end of the poem capturing Motion’s ambivalent emotions after visiting Anne’s house. Understanding, realisation and peace are suggested by the word ‘settling’ and the resumed equanimity of the water.

Bridges, in addition, evokes the connections built by Anne's house between generations and peoples. Yet the ubiquitous adjective in Motion's early verse, 'dusty', introduces thoughts of death and loss, while 'blue' is conventionally the colour of melancholy.

A surprising but significant parallel with 'Anne Frank Huis' is found in Walcott's 'Ruins of a Great House', a poem which traverses another home emblematic of oppression and injustice. Here Walcott reflects on the suffering of colonials and slaves who worked in the house. Movement around and through the great house, as with 'Anne Frank Huis', is cathartic and brings redress: Walcott overcomes his rage towards the great house and its history of suffering through sympathy 'all in compassion ends / so differently from what the heart arranged'<sup>16</sup> – while Motion comes to understand the torment of Anne's life, that is 'patience missing its reward' .

Both poets exploit the tension and contrast between the houses' reticence and the deep injustice they once housed: part of Walcott's rage comes from not quite knowing the extent of that injustice – 'ablaze with rage I thought, / Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake'. The thought of the lake still hiding a slave could be an allegory for the silence of persecutors and their descendants or the covering up of their crimes.

The most striking contrast in these poems, however, is that between the inhumane and positive human sentiment. Anne's hope for ordinary love and interest,

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<sup>16</sup> Walcott, *Selected Poems*, 8.



poignantly evinced by the pictures of family and some actors, evokes another trajectory her life could have taken. At the same time, there is a genuine note of sadness in Walcott's line 'deciduous beauty prospered and is gone', borne out of appreciation for what was achieved by the colonists, although their means were deplorable. Homes, even the highly-stylised and ostentatious great houses, reveal something of their residents and the residents' aspirations. This intimation of 'humanness' throws into relief the inhumanity and cruelty that is the history of 'Anne Frank Huis' and Walcott's great house, but it also proves to be the kernel from which humanistic sentiment can develop. Anne's wish for human ordinariness is a means of cross-generational identification as Motion, leaving the house, realises that he enjoys and takes for granted that ordinariness. Knowing that he cannot celebrate the decay of craftsmanship and civilisation, however ill-achieved, Walcott turns towards compassion. The fact that Walcott chooses to write his poetry in traditional forms shows that he has reconciled himself to the culture of colonists; the great house, we could say, has new occupants.

### **Seamus Heaney**

Heaney's writings on the political responsibility of poets are nuanced and complex. He often advocates politically minded poetry, whilst at the same time guarding poetry's personal and private function. For instance, he argues that it has public and private commitments: 'On the one hand poetry is secret and natural, on the other hand it must make its way in a world that is public and brutal. Here the explosions

literally rattle your window day and night, lives are shattered blandly or terribly, innocent men have been officially beaten and humiliated in internment camps – destructive elements of all kinds, which are even perhaps deeply exhilarating, are in the air.’<sup>17</sup> In this passage, the argument for poetry’s engagement with public events stems from the latter’s proximity to the private sphere: such engagement is inevitable, if tangential, as ‘secret’ poetry is pressed by wider public events. With explosions rattling windows, it would require a feat of extraordinary imaginative detachment (bordering on the perverse) to fashion a politically ignorant poetry.

In the essay ‘Place and Displacement’ (1984), Heaney expands on the political responsibilities of poetry, stressing the earlier point that the poet finds himself somewhere in-between his own private and ‘transcendental’ world and the activism and struggles around him:

[T]he 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 responsibility. Nobody is going to advocate an ivory tower address for the poet nor a holier-than-thou attitude. Yet ‘pure’ poetry is perfectly justifiable in earshot of the car bomb and it can imply a politics, depending on the nature of the poetry. A poetry of hermetic wit, of riddles and slips and self-mocking ironies, may appear culpably miniaturist or fastidious to the activist with his microphone at the street corner, and yet such poetry may be exercising in its inaudible way a

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<sup>17</sup> Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 34.

fierce disdain of the activist's 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.<sup>18</sup>

This passage is interesting for its subtle shifts in argument. At first Heaney appears confident in poetry's right to disengagement 'perfectly justifiable in earshot'; however he makes a series of concessions to reach, in the second paragraph, the view that the poet is 'negatively capable', equally affected by political as spiritual, or subjective reality.

In the Ellmann lectures at Emory University, Heaney suggests that the condition of being negatively capable or 'stretched between politics and transcendence' is particularly pertinent to the post-colonial poet, who is at a 'crossroads' where he feels the calling of his personal, aesthetic vision and advocacy for his community:

Irish poets, Polish poets, South African poets, West Indian poets (those in London as well as those in the Caribbean) and many others [...] have been

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<sup>18</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber, 2002), 118-119.

caught at a crossroads where the essentially aesthetic demand of their vocation encountered the different demand that their work participates in a general debate which preoccupies their societies. The topic of this debate typically concerns the political rights and cultural loyalties of different social or racial groups resulting from separate heritages.<sup>19</sup>

Most famously, Heaney entered this debate with his collection *North* which relates the sectarian violence of the Troubles to the deaths of Bog people, sacrificed to a fertility goddess. Neil Corcoran praised the volume for its capacity to speak on behalf of republican aspirations. The poems in *North* are 'necessary poems...articulat[ing] those elements of resentment and hostility at the bottom of the republican-nationalist psyche.'<sup>20</sup> Such is Heaney's tribal identification in this collection, that Ciaran Carson labelled him the 'laureate of violence'. Another commentator, however, suggests that *North* is an eschewal of serious commentary on political violence: 'Can there be any real doubt that he has largely avoided writing a great deal about political violence in Northern Ireland?... "Bog Queen" doesn't really pass muster as an investigation of modern Northern Ireland.'<sup>21</sup>

Heaney's own internal debate and ambivalence about the political responsibility of poetry, we might argue, is reflected in critical opinion which ranges from viewpoints which consider him to be a politically engaged poet to those which

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<sup>19</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 36-37.

<sup>20</sup> Neil Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 116.

<sup>21</sup> Robert McLiam Wilson, 'The Glittering Prize', *Fortnight*, November 1995, 6.

accuse of his rejection and betrayal of political causes. In the poetry which reflects on contemporary political strife from a private, domestic context we find Heaney's ambivalence about his own personal responsibility towards conflict poeticised and dramatized. In poems which look backwards at historical conflict, there is sombre reflection on present fortune and the inevitability of political awakening.

'Badgers' is perhaps exemplary of Heaney's political ambivalence. Here, at once, Heaney identifies with the young IRA militiaman, yet knows that that identification is with an alternative life, and feels duty and commitment to his real, present circumstances. The poem's opening verse-paragraph is casual in tone and there is nothing to suggest in 'soft-returning'<sup>22</sup> of the badger that there is a violent history to be unravelled. The following line, consisting of a stark noun phrase 'the murdered dead', then comes as a shock. Like other Heaney poems of this period, 'Badgers' swings violently from the genteel and domestic to the graphic. This is suggestive of the close proximity, particularly in Heaney's context, between gentility and violence: how the 'murdered dead' will inevitably impinge on the civilised world. As well as the victim, the badger stands for the murderer, 'some violent shattered boy / nosing out what got mislaid / between the cradle and the explosion'. There is a certain violence in the language here: the strong iambs in the 'excessive' epithet 'violent shattered' – one adjective would normally suffice – and in the perversion of the cliché 'cradle and the grave', which is far too homely and pat for the subject.

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<sup>22</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 158.

The life of the imagined terrorist takes added poignancy for its similarity with Heaney's beginnings. As Vendler notes, 'that life had begun on a farm not unlike Heaney's own...Neither the poet nor his alter ego...chose to follow the rural life to which they had been bred.'<sup>23</sup> This dramatic contrast between pastoral living and conflict – the word 'explosion' runs into 'evenings when windows stood open / and the compost smoked down the backs' – underscores the notion that something has been tragically 'mislaid', and that innocence has been irrevocably corrupted. Heaney's reflections eventually lead him to consider his own arbitrary good fortune:

How perilous is it to choose  
 not to love the life we're shown?  
 His sturdy dirty body  
 and interloping grovel.  
 The intelligence in his bone.  
 The unquestionable houseboy's shoulders  
 that could have been my own.

Heaney's rejection of violent resistance, in spite of his identification with the houseboy, appears somewhat unnerved. He wants to shake his head lamentingly at a life so corrupted, but must also justify his own inaction. The rhetorical question which tries to do so lacks conviction and persuasiveness for its syntactical

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<sup>23</sup> Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 91.

clumsiness. Furthermore, this question sets up an illusion of agency: choosing to love the life we're shown is the equivalent of accepting, passively, what we're shown. In short, it is not doing anything. Such 'unsureness' is, as we have noted, typical of poems which reflect on political conflict or war from a domestic vantage point.

Perhaps a more convincing defence of Heaney's detached and domestic life comes indirectly through the reference to 'houseboy's shoulders'. A houseboy is a male domestic worker who performs cleaning and personal chores, and is here referring to the houseboys of the colonial period. Heaney, then, in the final verse paragraph contrasts two types of domesticity: the domestic world of the houseboy in which he is a servant without autonomy or rights of ownership, and Heaney's own free and independent home life. Given this contrast, Heaney's domestic circumstances appear to be a kind of political achievement and a blessing not to be squandered.

'A Sofa in the Forties' is another poem which shadows and parallels disparate lives: the fortunate and misfortunate; survivors and victims. However, here, the contrast is not with the victims of contemporary conflict but with the victims of the holocaust. The poem sets in juxtaposition the Heaney children, on a sofa imagining that they are riding a train, and the child victims of the Holocaust who were 'transported' by train to concentration camps. As Neil Corcoran has pointed out, it is the word transported that establishes the parallel: 'the pun compacts the initial and the subsequent experience, the time of innocence or

ignorance and the time of full historical and political awareness.’<sup>24</sup> We are reminded of Andrew Motion’s ‘Anne Frank Huis’, which also finds much of its pathos in overshadowing a childhood-domestic scene – Anne’s pictures of family and actors and fashions – with the knowledge of subsequent atrocities. Such paralleling, as in ‘Badgers’, intimates a similarity between peoples of different fortunes (in other circumstances the Heaney children could have suffered the fate of Jewish children during the holocaust), again implicitly raising the issue of responsibility and duty.

The dark irony that is found at the poem’s end is present from the beginning; but we need to know the end of the poem (its hidden subject) to perceive that irony. The negative descriptions of the sofa such as, ‘inestimable’, ‘invisible’, and ‘unreachable’<sup>25</sup> depict a mind stretching towards the ineffable and unknowable: ‘between the jamb-wall and the bedroom door / Our speed and distance were inestimable’. Heaney’s homely childhood games exhibit the breadth of thinking which will be required to comprehend the atrocities and facts which historical awareness brings. Later, he will have to learn about ‘inestimable’ suffering and other ‘unreachable ones’. Yet as knowledge of the world outside enters the home via the wireless, in the form of history and language, the children also somewhat paradoxically enter ‘ignorance’. That is because both history and language delimit the imagination with either empirical ‘fact’ or regulations which require learning. Language, in the form of a

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<sup>24</sup> Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 192.

<sup>25</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 397.



radio-broadcast, is represented as an intellectual restraint: 'the sway of language and its furtherings // Swept and swayed in us like nets in water / Or the abstract, lonely curve of distant trains'.

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then, 'A Sofa in the Forties' is about the trading of innocence for experience (or ignorance for political awareness) it is also about the trading of imagination for 'reality', personal self-determination for the laws and facts of the outside world. This is also punningly compacted in the word 'transported', which might be used reflexively to refer to the flight of the children's imagination – transported by their fantasy of the train – or transported into political and historical knowledge, things beyond their control. Clearly, there is nostalgia for the insular domestic-childhood play – the first section is particularly exuberant. However, Heaney also understands that the entrance into history and ignorance is inevitable: just as the path of a train is predetermined. The movement into political responsibility and participation in the 'general debate' is, the poem suggests, fated.

If 'A Sofa in the Forties' implies that entry into political awareness is inescapable, 'Mint', from the same collection, recounts political ignorance; how one might ignore or be blind to present suffering and persecution. Here Heaney uses a neglected clump of 'small dusty nettles / growing wild at the gable of the house'<sup>26</sup> as a metaphor for neglected political prisoners:

Let the smells of mint go heady and defenceless

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<sup>26</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 396.

Like inmates liberated in that yard.

Like the disregarded ones we turned against

Because we'd failed them by our disregard.

Once again a 'domesticated' speaker admonishes himself for his indifference to and neglect of victims of conflict. The close proximity of the nettles/inmates to the home, much like the close proximity of the badger, serves to show that injustice happens quite literally in our 'back-yard', that it encroaches on our domestic ease and is our responsibility. As the verb 'disregard' suggests, the only action that need take place is one of looking or considering. 'Mint' is thus what Austin would call a performative work; in showing that regard, it fulfils the speaker's obligation.

As in 'Badgers', the emergence of political reality in an unlikely place, through unlikely metaphors (the badger, and mint leaves), is suggestive of the 'domesticated' speaker's over-fraught consciousness, his sensitive awareness to wider political events and injustices beyond his domestic sphere, even at the moment in which he seems most indifferent or detached. As well as 'Badgers', 'Mint' evokes Derek Mahon's 'A Disused Shed in Co Wexford' which animates a cluster of mushrooms in an abandoned shed with the voice of victims of the holocaust:

They are begging us, you see, in their worldless way,

To do something, to speak on their behalf

Or at least not 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 naïve labours have been in vain!'<sup>27</sup>

Here, responsibility is also loaded on a leisured observed, the man with the 'relaxed itinerary'. However, the anguished supplication is from the mouths of the victims, unlike the supplication of 'Mint' which is delivered by the speaker, so permitting the sceptical suggestion that the man with the light meter may silently pass on.

In 'The Settle Bed', from *Seeing Things*, it is an old inherited bed which is the unlikely bearer of historical and political significance and which is the object of Heaney's political anxiety. The bed evokes Heaney's native province, the 'sigh-life of Ulster, unwilling, unbeaten, // Protestant, Catholic, the Bible, the beads'.<sup>28</sup> Focusing on the settle bed's immovable physical presence (its 'un-get-roundable weight'), Heaney conveys the idea that the inheritance of Ulster is imposing, ineluctable, burdensome, but also grand and impressive. Accordingly, Corcoran finds that the bed's 'solidity and permanence [are] a matter of both admiring attachment and

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<sup>27</sup> Derek Mahon, *New Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2011), 82.

<sup>28</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 345.

sceptical disenchantment.’<sup>29</sup> The settle bed’s physical properties are materialised in the poem through the numerous adjectives, participles and participle phrases which, ‘as they accumulate, conjure an extraordinary vivid sense of the ‘in-placeness’ of the settle bed, of its actuality, its solidity’<sup>30</sup>. In addition, I would argue, such an accumulation might be a way of paying homage to the settle bed, and a way of venerating it:

Willed down, waited for, in place at last and for good.

Trunk-hasped, cart-heavy, painted an ignorant brown.

And pew-strait, bin-deep, standing four-square as an ark.

There is sense of momentousness about these spondaic lines, not only corresponding to the settle bed’s materiality and weight, but also the sense of awe it arouses in Heaney. Such purposeful overwriting recalls how someone or something of importance may be written about, in order to convey worth. Indeed, in his interview with Dennis O’Driscoll, Heaney suggests that the bed had more than domestic significance: ‘when you contemplated in its corner, you could have been Milosz contemplating the golden house of ‘is’’.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Heaney never slept in the bed, so it had a solely meditative function for him.

Like ‘A Sofa in the Forties’, which it precedes in *Opened Ground*, ‘The Settle

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<sup>29</sup> Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 171.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

<sup>31</sup> O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones*, 326.

'Bed' gives to a hefty piece of domestic furniture an unexpected political dimension. That it is home furniture – and a piece which occupies a central position in the home – that is reimagined, is suggestive of the intimate and personal connection that the speaker has with wider political and historical events. Just as the settle-bed is a family inheritance, so in a way is the history of Ulster. Whereas 'A Sofa' ends with the domestic world defamiliarised through the knowledge of Nazi death camps, and the children weighted with political responsibility and awareness, 'Settle Bed' offers a way, through a surrealistic vision, of managing one's given circumstances:

Imagine a dower of settle beds tumbled from heaven  
 Like some nonsensical vengeance come on the people,  
 Then learn from that harmless barrage that whatever is  
     given  
  
 Can always be reimagined...

Here, Heaney quite literally makes light of what was burdensome (and so keeps with the trend of alleviation which characterises the later verse). Yet, we are aware, as Corcoran notes that 'this remains an option only in the surreal world of imagination, not in any existing political actuality'<sup>32</sup> and furthermore, that Heaney's imagining is, correctly, a re-imagining, predicated on the original analogy of the

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<sup>32</sup> Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 172.

settle-bed as Ulster history. Heaney's response to the demand that the imagined Ulster-bed places on him – his way of conquering that weight – is to formulate another imaginative response, rather than seeing the bed in itself, free from the political and historical weight that he has attached to it. In this way, the domestic world is put at two removes in the poem. For the fraught consciousness, as we have noted, a simple domestic reality is impossible.

In *District and Circle*, Heaney's political focus includes matters that were making the headlines across the world in the first decade of the twentieth century, namely Islamic-extremist terrorism and the war on terror<sup>33</sup>. Here, in spite of the global rather than local import of the events, we find similar anxieties reconfigured, such as the privileged speaker's sense of sympathy and detachment for victims of war. In 'Out of Shot', for instance, the speaker self-consciously observes his response to news broadcast through television concerning the war in Iraq. This introspective sketch of feelings results in a seemingly emotionally detached poem. Nonetheless, the speaker experienced some kind of profound response to the news, even if it is just summarised as 'thinking shock'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the strong 'k' sounds in the successive rhyming of 'shock' with 'attack' and 'walk' reflects that 'shock'. Tellingly, however, the insurgent attack – mortar shells fired from a donkey-draw cart – is paralleled with Viking raids, 'Norse raids, night-dreads and that "fierce raiders" poem',

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<sup>33</sup> For further discussion of contemporary politics and *District and Circle* see: Michael Parker, 'Fallout from the thunder: poetry and politics in Seamus Heaney's *District and Circle*' *Irish Studies Review* 16 (2008): 369-384.

<sup>34</sup> Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber, 2006),

implying that the contemporaneous violence is equally distant from the speaker, equally an object of curiosity.

What unites the two disparate scenes is the element of pastoral: the Iraqi owner missing his donkey and the speaker 'inspecting his livestock':

the staggered walk

of a donkey on the TV news last night –

Loosed from a cart that had loosed five mortar shells

In the bazaar district, wandering out of shot

Lost to its owner, lost for its sunlit hills.

Here, although unsaid, we feel a bond of sympathy develop. As the emphatic 'loss' intimates, the natural condition is one of pastoral living, which the war and insurgency has totally destroyed. No doubt there's an element of gratitude in the tacit comparison. While the Iraqi has lost the little he has, the speaker has plenty and enjoys a secure, unmolested life with 'elbows lodged strut-firm / On the unseasonably warm / Top bar of a gate'.

Yet the owner is only a marginal consideration. The focus in the sestet is the donkey 'wandering out of shot', an example of an unwitting and ignored consequence of war. The surreal and Muldoon-like comedy of a 'staggering' donkey involved in a mortar attack, straying beyond the camera's focus – like an actor confusedly wandering off-stage – is suggestive of the absurdity at the heart of the

conflict. One imagines that the challenge for the speaker is to take what he sees on the TV at face-value; that is, to understand the literal and real consequences of what has happened, rather than himself becoming lost in its absurdist drama.

### **Paul Muldoon**

Paul Muldoon's poetry has been often admired for its resistance to political partiality. This derives from his rejection of narratives of identity. As Wills notes, 'his work can be read as a thorough-going rejection of the notion of stable or univocal origins which [...] are linked to a conservative politics, not only in nationalist, but also in neo-imperialist rhetoric.'<sup>35</sup> Heaney also famously commented on Muldoon's political slipperiness: 'His swerves away from any form of poker-faced solidarity with the political programs of the Northern Catholic minority (from which he hails) have kept him so much on his poetic toes that he has practically achieved the poetic equivalent of walking on air.'<sup>36</sup>

Such walking on air, we might ascribe less to any particular disagreement on Muldoon's part with the Republican or Catholic cause, than to post-structuralist scepticism which challenges all positions – both activist and suburban dweller come under fire. In 'Lunch with Pancho Villa', for instance, Muldoon undermines both the domestic man, adhering to a philosophy of bourgeois individualism, and his militant opponent. The poem opens with speech from the pamphleteer, the voice of

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<sup>35</sup> Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 194.

<sup>36</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'The Pre-natal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry', *The Georgia Review* 42 (1998), 479.



revolutionary action, who makes an unconvincing case in support of revolution: 'Look, son. Just look around you. / People are getting themselves killed'.<sup>37</sup> The curious mixture of agency in the final line, where the active combines with passive voice is a tenuous attempt by Pancho Villa to portray the deaths of these people as heroic. His case is not furthered by his comfortable domestic context: 'My celebrated pamphleteer...Would pour some untroubled Muscatel / And settle back in his cane chair'. 'Untroubled' is very obviously a transferred epithet, describing Pancho's easy circumstances – the implication being that he is, for the want of a better phrase, a champagne socialist.

However, for Clair Wills, Villa's position is not entirely rejected: 'while the poem seems to ridicule the idea of political and social "truthfulness", in the figure of the blinkered Pancho Villa, at the same time it raises the question in such a way that it cannot be entirely dismissed, for Muldoon is on both sides at once.' Another reason to suspect that Muldoon does not wholly reject poetic engagement is the fact that the Pancho Villa is, as we learn later, an invention of the speaker – a caricatured, and 'straw-man' version of a revolutionary. The imagined dialogue thus furnishes the speaker with a fabricated justification for inactivity. By the end of the poem, then, the object of satire has switched to the narrator himself whose confession confirms, ironically, Villa's opinion that he is self-involved and detached from reality. His cynical reference to a 'callow youth...rambling on, no doubt, / About pigs and trees, stars and horses', suggests disillusionment with his own pastoral poetic subject

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<sup>37</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 41.

matter. The narrator is characteristically 'domesticated' – dissatisfied with his present circumstances, yet unwilling to entertain alternatives.

'Gathering Mushrooms' from *Quoof* exhibits Muldoon's self-consciousness about his political 'swerves away' and his disconnection from the tradition in which he was raised, whilst acting somewhat as an argument for his detachment. Here, he suggests that militant activism, rather than expressing developed masculinity and a sense of responsibility towards the tribe, constitutes a regression towards a kind of infantilism.

As Clair Wills has noted, this final stanza transmutes the opening stanza which describes the Muldoon family gathering mushrooms: 'the mushrooms precipitate a drugged nightmare in which the constituents of his [Muldoon's] childhood memory become realigned as elements in a Republican song of struggle and sacrifice'<sup>38</sup>:

*Come back to us. However cold and raw, your feet  
were always meant  
to negotiate terms with bare cement.  
Beyond this concrete wall is a wall of concrete  
and barbed wire. Your only hope  
is to come back. If sing you must, let your song  
tell of treading your own dung,*

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<sup>38</sup> Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 98.

*let straw and dung give a spring to your step.*

*If we never live to see the day we leap*

*into our true domain,*

*lie down with us now and wrap*

*yourself in the soiled grey blanket of Irish rain*

*that will, one day, bleach itself white.*

*Lie down with us and wait.*<sup>39</sup>

Here 'the 'gold-black dragon' of farm manure takes on the colours of the Irish Republic as it transmutes into the 'green-gold dragon' of political nightmare; the wagonload of horse dung turns into the human faeces on the walls of the H Blocks; his mother's tablecloth becomes a grey blanket, symbol of the prisoners' resistance to government demands. This realignment draws out the idea that Muldoon may himself have been drawn into the Republican cause. As he notes in an unpublished essay, 'Chez Moy': 'My family would have had Nationalist or Republican leanings, of course, but we were firmly opposed to political violence. I've often considered how easily, though, I might have been caught up in the kinds of activities in which a number of my neighbours found themselves involved.'<sup>40</sup> Yet 'Gathering Mushrooms' does not agonise over this possibility; there is little in the way of sympathy or identification with the Republican voice. The poem contrasts with 'The Badger',

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<sup>39</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 106.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Muldoon, 'Chez Moy', unpublished, quoted in Claire Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 100.

where Heaney ponders deeply, and is troubled by, the possibility that his life may have taken a violent and tragic course. Contributing to Heaney's disquietude is the knowledge that many of the militant activists had a rural upbringing: violent conflict, he feels, is a grotesque aberration from the pastoral world and way of life. However, in 'Gathering Mushrooms' rural life and Republican activism are closely aligned: 'Muldoon suggests that the basic constituents of Northern Irish rural life can as easily (if not more easily) be turned to Republican as artistic condition.'<sup>41</sup> I would add alignment of the childhood memory with the Republican militant serves to undermine the nationalist rhetoric. It attributes to that rhetoric an element of puerility. Indeed, the action of lying down and wrapping oneself in a blanket comes across not only as a futile and passive response, but also as something infantile.

If Muldoon satirises the militant who rails against domestic indolence and bourgeois individualism, in his early poetry he also takes aim at 'domestic hysteria', what might be described as over-involvement in matters of conflict by those who are safe and removed from it. This is notably so in 'Cuba,' which is based on a local parish's over-reaction to the Cuban missile crisis. Muldoon has recalled that during the Cuban missile crisis the queue for the confessional in his local church was longer than ever.<sup>42</sup> The poem does not open with a confessional scene, but a father lambasting his daughter for arriving home late from a party:

My eldest sister arrived home that morning

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<sup>41</sup> Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon*, 100.

<sup>42</sup> Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 75.

In her white muslin evening dress.  
 'Who the hell do you think you are,  
 Running out to dances in next to nothing?  
 As though we hadn't enough bother  
 With the world at war, if not at an end.'  
 My father was pounding the breakfast-table.<sup>43</sup>

There is no exaggeration in the description of the conflict: nuclear apocalypse was a real threat. However, there is humour and ludicrous exaggeration in the equivalency suggested between the bother of May returning late and the 'bother' of the Cold War. This equivalency, whilst hyperbolically enlarging May's transgression, suggests also that the Cold War is a 'domestic' matter, engaging on a personal level the father and his family. Aggressively pounding the breakfast-table, he appears to be an arm-chair statesman. The second stanza furthers this strange equation between the political and domestic:

'Those Yankees were touch and go as it was –  
 If you'd heard Patton in Armagh –  
 But this Kennedy's nearly an Irishman  
 So he's not much better than ourselves.  
 And him with only to say the word.

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<sup>43</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 78.

If you've got anything on your mind

Maybe you should make your peace with God.

The father worries – reflecting on his own hot-headedness – that Kennedy in a rash moment will initiate conflict. The self-deprecating comment on the Irish also bespeaks a sense of pride and egoism (Kennedy is one of 'theirs' and shares their characteristics). This only confirms we imagine, for the father, his sense of the close proximity between the domestic and political spheres, and his own pertinence and insight into the international crisis.

### **Derek Mahon**

Derek Mahon has cultivated an image of the poet as outsider. As Bruce Stewart puts it: 'raised in Belfast and educated at Trinity College, Dublin, Mahon identified the true artist as an outsider, and with that stroke he repudiated the autochthonous version of Irish culture associated with the theme of "sense of place" soon to be expounded magisterially by Seamus Heaney.'<sup>44</sup> This is not borne out of apolitical intent on Mahon's part – a means of avoiding political consciousness – rather it permits him to attempt something like an objective voice on contemporary political developments, and to see what others don't see. The outsider is aware of political realities, and lives which are, for whatever reason, obscured or ignored. Indeed, Mahon is a poet who is distinctive for his almost instinctive and natural political

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<sup>44</sup> Bruce Stewart "'Solving Ambiguity": The Secular Mysticism of Derek Mahon', in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, (Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Limited, 2002), 58.

awareness in all circumstances. Luxury, comfort and ease do not exist in his work, except there is a story of poverty or oppression to be told elsewhere in the world. As an illustration of this point, we might turn to 'The Snow Party', which contrasts a Japanese social gathering with religious persecution and provides one of the most striking contrasts of domestic ease and external strife in contemporary literature. It is situated around the invitation of Basho, a seventeenth century traveller and poet, to a snow party. The poem's effectiveness lies in the disparity between the peace and stasis of the party, and the persecution underway simultaneously in other parts of the world:

Then everyone

Crowds to the window

To watch the falling snow.

Snow is falling on Nagoya

And farther south

On the tiles of Kyoto;

Eastward, beyond Irago,

It is falling

Like leaves on the cold sea.

Elsewhere they are burning

Witches and heretics

In the boiling squares,

Thousands have died since dawn

In the service

Of barbarous kings;

But there is silence

In the houses of Nagoya

And the hills of Ise.<sup>45</sup>

Of this poem Haughton writes, 'to some degree, the poem seems to articulate a brutal rebuke to the aesthetic, as it moves to situate the exquisite world of Basho's haikus in the larger world of political ideology and state violence.'<sup>46</sup> This is good, but it elides the fact of the poem's domestic context which is, arguably, the real target of rebuke. (In fact, to even say, in such a poem which is written in such an understated and insouciant manner, that the rebuke is 'brutal' seems to be over-stating the matter). The gentility of the party outlined in the opening two stanzas – 'there is a tinkling of china / And tea into china; / There are introductions' – is balanced and

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<sup>45</sup> Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, 62.

<sup>46</sup> Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 100.



contrasted with the violence later in the poem. Unlike the poems above, where an individual speaker is detached at home from wider political turmoil, here there is a group. We see how not only an individual but a group might be beguiled, and in the final stanza this is extended to other houses so we are left with a vision of wider silence and indifference.

Yet, while it is tempting to read the poem as a criticism of such domestic gentility and withdrawal, it is something that strictly the poem might not allow. As Haughton notes, 'the aesthetic and historical are not opposed here, but intimately and intricately intermeshed with the ambivalence of lyric itself.'<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the speaking voice seems to make little distinction between the two: the description of persecution is delivered in the same limpid manner as the description of the snow party. Furthermore, the adverb 'elsewhere' is almost dismissive and uncaring. The only sense of judgement is found in the adjective 'barbarous' and the 'but' of the final stanza, which acknowledges some element of contrast between the two scenes, although it may not append a moral judgement on the silence.

Unlike the attendants of the snow party, Mahon never glosses wider political disturbance with silence. He is a champion of the meditative domestic lyric, in which a narrator, from the comfort of his home, dwells on larger political issues and events, much as in Coleridge's conversation poems. We might put this down to the fact that Mahon found being at home, particularly during the night, conducive to creativity and meditation: 'Night thoughts are best, the ones that visit us / where we lie

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<sup>47</sup> Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, 100.

smoking between three and four'.<sup>48</sup> It is also a way of facilitating self-reflection and of situating the private, individual life within a larger, international context. This leads, as in 'The Snow Party', to absurdist juxtapositions of the silence and calm of the home and the violence 'elsewhere'. 'Harbour Lights', for instance, opens with thoughts of the Iraq war:

It's one more sedative evening in Co. Cork.  
 The house is quiet and the world is dark  
 while the Bush gang are doing it to Iraq.  
 The flesh is weary and I've read the books;  
 nothing but lies and nonsense on the box  
 whose light-dot vanishes with a short whine  
 leaving only a grey ghost in the machine.<sup>49</sup>

Here, the sprightly couplets coupled with the colloquial phrase 'doing it' give a degree of levity to the conflict. Yet, it is cynical levity – the speaker knows that what is reported through the box (the television) is misrepresentation and falsity, and that the war in Iraq – or perhaps invasion is a more accurate term – is really an example of state thuggery (hence the reference to gang). Here, then, the idea that the house might be a place of retreat or withdrawal is extended to include the idea that it may be a place of almost Orwellian propaganda – the T.V functioning as a mouthpiece for

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<sup>48</sup> Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, 195.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

Big Brother.

'Harbour Lights' describes life in Mahon's shared house in Kinsale, an historical port in Cork. In this poem, the presence of the harbour and sea directs Mahon's meditations ('for everything is water, the world a wave, / whole populations quietly on the move'). Similarly, in 'Insomnia', set in the same house, the coast directs Mahon's domestic musings. Put simply, the dock and sea – as places of voyage, departure and trade – are an emblem of the wider world beyond suburbia:

The bright insects  
of helicopters drop to the decks  
of gas rigs ten miles out in the heavy waves,  
their roaring rotors far from our quiet leaves,  
before midnight, and the ship that shone  
at dusk on the horizon  
has long since gone.<sup>50</sup>

'Quiet lives' is a much more intuitive collocation, yet Mahon's substitution for 'leaves' creates a closer rhyme with 'waves' and also serves to establish a sense of difference between the wild and violent nature of uninhabited places and the domesticated nature of residential areas. Indeed, in the following stanza, Mahon

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<sup>50</sup> Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, 294.

makes a point of the stasis and quietness, both of animal and human, in the domestic area:

Nothing stirs  
 in garden or silent house,  
 no night owl flies or none that we can hear;  
 not even the mild, traditional fieldmouse  
 runs nibbling, as you'd expect, under the stairs.  
 Boats knock and click at the pier,  
 Shrimps worship the stars.

Such peace and gentility is overtaken in the final stanza with an image of primal beginnings, inspired by knowledge of the sea and its depths: 'a soul screams / for sunken origins, for the obscure sea bed / and glowing depths, the alternative mud haven / we left behind'. Here, as so often in Mahon's poetry, genteel and domestic circumstances are qualified, even disturbed, by an awareness of momentous forces, whether natural or political, which operate beyond the individual's control.

That Mahon's interior worlds often lead onto surrounding political and natural realities might well derive from the geographical position of his house in Cork which overlooks a dock, and also to his keen awareness of the alternative realities, and variegation. However, there are points in Mahon's oeuvre where the domestic realm provides a welcome means of escape from larger political realities. In

'Sunday Morning' for instance, as Mahon and his wife wake in a London flat, Mahon reflects happily on their detachment from the world outside: 'I like the most / When, for an hour or two, the strife / And strain of the late bourgeois life, // Let up'<sup>51</sup>; and further on in 'Oil crises and vociferous crowds / Seem as far off as tiny clouds'. In 'Everything Is Going to Be All Right', however, domestic isolation borders on forced naivety:

How should I not be glad to contemplate  
 the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window  
 and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?

There will be dying, there will be dying,  
 but there is no need to go into that.

The lines flow from the hand unbidden  
 and the hidden source is the watchful heart;  
 the sun rises in spite of everything  
 and the far cities are beautiful and bright.

I lie here in a riot of sunlight  
 watching the day break and the clouds flying.

Everything is going to be all right.

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<sup>51</sup> Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, 104.

The opening rhetorical question strikes a note of uncertainty. The cause of that uncertainty, the knowledge of conflict and death – repeated to prove its inevitably – is quickly brushed under the carpet. His further attempts at melioration are unsure: the word ‘riot’, for instance, whilst intending to convey the intensity of the sunlight, points also towards what the speaker is perhaps trying to ignore (civil strife), and the final line appears to be offered more in hope than conviction. Indeed, the speaker’s perspective, looking through a dormer window which is set in the roof towards the sky, suggests a wilful intention to be amongst the clouds. Try as he might, this poem shows that Mahon can’t achieve the cool indifference of the snow party attendees.

### *Chapter Five: Domestic Architecture*

This chapter will consider the ways that contemporary poets write about domestic space, as a subject of poetry in its own right, with the aim of observing patterns or trends across the work of diverse poets. It will further the idea of domestic poetry as essentially 'humanistic', as the geographical and physical properties of the house are intimately linked with the human condition. For instance, some poems equate domestic interiority with psychological interiority or depict it as the ground of authentic being. This is not surprising, as the house, of all places, is the most personal and private; it is where we are disengaged from the public world and its conventions; where we are separated and protected from the natural elements and are free to express ourselves and behave as we wish. It is thus naturally correlated with our 'true' selves. Clare Marcus's book *House as a Mirror of Self* provides an in-depth study of the way the house reflects selfhood: 'Whether we are conscious of it or not, our home and its contents are very potent statements about who we are. In particular, they represent symbols of our ego-selves.'<sup>1</sup>

While the purpose of this chapter is to consider those poems which establish direct or indirect connections between selfhood and home and in what manner they do so, it also seeks to offer readings of particular poems in the light of the cultural understanding of the house as the place of the self. A complete appreciation of certain 'domestic poems', I would argue, must involve consideration of this

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<sup>1</sup> Clare Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self*, 12.

metaphysical aspect of the house, expounded by such theorists as Levinas and Bollnow. Reading the house as the domain of 'authentic being' in Frost's 'An Old Man's Winter Night', for instance, reveals the poem to be about not merely isolation or loneliness, but a more profound condition of alienation. Theorists link the house and domestic interiority with the self and individual because in one sense it materialises selfhood: the domestic possessions and the arrangement of a house delineate the resident or residents who live there. This we might consider to be the house's link with personality and character. It is also associated with selfhood, considered not as personality, but as psychological interiority: the home as contrasted with the impersonal public world and impersonal natural forces, might serve as a metaphor of the mind as a set against the impersonal outside world. Furthermore, the house is literally a place of thinking and meditation. As Otto Bollnow notes, even the most fundamental house, in providing safety from the elements, facilitates thought:

Outer space is the space of openness, of danger and abandonment. If that were the only space, then the existentialists would be correct and man would really be the eternally hunted fugitive. He needs the space of the house as an area protected and hidden, an area in which he can be relieved of continual anxious alertness, into which can withdraw in order to return to himself. To give man this space is the highest function of the house.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bollnow, 'Lived Space', 33.



Yet, the protective qualities of a house may not always be salubrious or desired. There is, as James Tuedio notes, a 'tenuous friction between our desire to have a place, a home or a ground, and our desire to go beyond these structures, to leave our home, to be free for travel, adventure and the experience of wildness.'<sup>3</sup> A sense of being overly domesticated and secure – cut off from the wider environment and pursuing a delimited life – leads some poets to strive for moments of release, when the domestic borders are dramatically transgressed.

In other instances, there is not such a striking movement across domestic boundaries; rather, we find healthy interchange between domestic interiority and the surrounding pastoral world. This poetry we might say strikes a compromise between interior and exterior, uniting the benefits of domesticity – namely, the existential security that it provides – with natural organic processes, which makes domestic space 'flourish'.

### **Precursors and Models**

In this section I will consider important modernist poems on house and home, which anticipate the work of later poets. These poems, I argue, relate selfhood with the house space, and establish ideas about domestic interiority which are significant to the discussion that follows.

Robert Frost was a great poet of home, and has attracted critical appraisal of his 'domestic work'. Robert Faggen, for instance, argues that Frost assumes the

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<sup>3</sup> James Tuedio, 'Thinking About Home: An Opening for Discovery in Philosophical Practice', in *Philosophy in Society*, ed. Henning Herrestad (Oslo: Unipub Forlag, 2002), 205.

conventional idea of the home as ground of being: 'In Frost's narrative domestic poems, "home" becomes a metaphor for locating and grounding the self, for finding origins, and for establishing, ultimately, what it means to be human.'<sup>4</sup> Richard Poirier explores domesticity and home in relation to outdoors: domestic spaces are characterised as safe and parochial spaces, to be transcended in the pursuit of 'extravagance'. This, he further argues, serves to analogise Frost's creative method: 'wandering beyond boundaries of a household or a field is, in Frost, often the enactment of any search for possibilities greater than those already domesticated. His many poems of walking are thus poems of "extravagance" in the most pedestrian sense whilst also being about the need, and advisability, of poetic "extravagance"'.<sup>5</sup>

As an illustration of extravagance, Richard Poirier cites the poem 'Good Hours'. Here, a speaker makes a conservative gesture to move beyond his suburban life. In addition, I would argue, the poem's presentation of the cottages which he leaves behind, offers further insight into Frost's philosophy of home:

I had for my winter evening walk –  
 No one at all with whom to talk,  
 But I had the cottages in a row  
 Up to their shining eyes in snow.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Faggen, *The Cambridge Introduction to Robert Frost* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 108.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Poirier, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 89.

And I thought I had the folk within:

I had the sound of a violin;

I had a glimpse through curtain laces

Of youthful forms and youthful faces.

I had such company outward bound.

I went till there were no cottages found.

I turned and repented, but coming back

I saw no window but that was black.

Over the snow my creaking feet

Disturbed the slumbering village street

Like profanation, by your leave,

At ten o'clock of a winter eve.<sup>6</sup>

The 'extra-vagance' of this poem is relatively narrow in scope: 'He walks beyond limits and then returns to them with a freedom that asks "leave" of others only in so easy a way as to indicate that his freedom is a consequence of his complete

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 102.

inwardness with the place and its people, a violation of neither.<sup>7</sup> The journey here is significant also for the fact that the speaker's interaction with the villagers is mediated at all points by the cottages, which are metonymically linked with their residents. This is most notable in the personification, 'shining eyes in snow'. The participle here is a transferred epithet, symbolising the speaker's acceptance by the village which he later transgresses.

When he returns to find that the windows are black, then, he not only describes the night-time scene in the village, but he senses the village's disapproval. That even the appearance of the residents' cottages seems to bear the mood of their inhabitants underscores and exaggerates the residents' parochialism. Whilst working as an allegory for Frost's poetic inclinations and his relationship to his audience, 'Good Hours' articulates the idea that homes and dwelling-places can quite literally bear the character of their residents. Outdoors in 'Good Hours' is associated with transgression and insecurity: despite the speaker's seeming boldness, throughout his walk he desires the company indoors. Indoors, by contrast, is characterised by homeliness and righteousness (significantly, 'profanation' literally means to be outside the temple). Such a dichotomy is found notably in the parable of the prodigal son, whose vagrancy is the period of his dissoluteness and whose entrance into his father's house symbolises his reacceptance and righteousness. The speaker's return to home and repentance, evokes the prodigal son's trajectory.

This dichotomy is also found in Hopkins's 'A Candle Indoors', which

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<sup>7</sup> Poirier, *Robert Frost*, 91.

dramatizes through the image of a man outside looking at a candle inside a home, the inability to take up faith: 'Some candle clear burns somewhere I come by. / I muse at how its being puts blissful back / With yellowy moisture mild night's blear-all black'.<sup>8</sup> Indoors is where the light of faith is found and, despite its homely context, that light has the ability to conquer the darkness. The idea of the candle light as the light of faith is telling: it makes the point that faith and belief is found in what is homely and humble. In the sestet, the poem moves from the literal home before the speaker to consider the speaker's inner 'home', his heart: 'Come you indoors, come home; your fading fire / Mend first and vital candle in close heart's vault / You there are master, do your own desire'. As Adrian Grafe notes 'While the first candle in the poem burns within the home of strangers, the second one, introduced in the sestet, burns within the poet's home: his heart, soul and inner world.'<sup>9</sup> The scene of the octave becomes, then, a metaphor of the idea of the sestet which is, as John O'Donohue puts it, 'the exile from true belonging'.<sup>10</sup> To be indoors, literally and metaphorically, the poem intimates is to find fulfillment and to realize one's authentic being.

In contrast to 'Good Hours' and 'Candle Indoors', Frost's 'An Old Man's Winter Night' depicts a situation of ontological disharmony between resident and home. Here the house is not a reflection of its owner's being, nor a ground of 'true

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<sup>8</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Philips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 144.

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Grafe, 'Hopkins and Home', *Connotations* 21 (2011): 64.

<sup>10</sup> John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our Hunger to Belong* (London: Bantam, 1998), 154.

belonging'. Rather there is a sentiment of disjunction between owner and house, a sense of 'out-of-placeness'. The poem plays, I would argue, on the accepted relationship between personal selfhood and house to express a condition of alienation.

At first the poem establishes a conventional opposition between home, and an unknown and intimidating outside – 'All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him'<sup>11</sup> – creating the impression that the old man is at least safe and secure in his house, against a pervasive and collective threat, as intimated by 'all' . However, by line eight there is a subtle turn in thought when we learn that the old man is alienated, and at a loss even at home:

What kept him from remembering what it was  
 That brought him to that creaking room was age.  
 He stood with barrels round him – at a loss.  
 And having scared the cellar under him  
 In clomping here, he scared it once again  
 In clomping off...

The anthropomorphising of non-human things is typical of Frost's style. It mimics the worldly conversational manner of New Englanders and has the effect of making homely that which might be unknowable, alien or disturbing. In this instance, the

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<sup>11</sup> Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, 108

narrator's anthropomorphising makes, in a casual manner, a quite profound point. The notion that the cellar might be scared by the old man intensifies the sense of isolation which is present from the opening lines, but also makes the subtler point that the old man is 'existentially displaced', that not only is he lonely and isolated, but he is figuratively not quite 'at home', even if he is literally there. This idea is captured in the third quoted line. The idiom 'at a loss' is effective here, because the old man is precisely in the place where one would expect him to be least 'at a loss', at home. Through such wry irony Frost depicts a man who is not only lonely, that is to say lacking companionship, but a man who is more profoundly existentially unsettled. His condition is such that he remains impenetrable to others, the narrator confesses a certain epistemic detachment from his subject: 'A light he was to no one but himself / Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what'.

In a significant perspectival shift, the conclusion of the poem moves from the particular character portrait of the old man, to a consideration of a general human condition: 'One aged man – one man – can't keep a house, / A farm, a countryside, or if he can, / It's thus he does it of a winter night'. In his analysis of these lines, Tim Kendall suggests that 'what had been a local and enclosed isolation suddenly seems like an inevitable part of the human condition, contaminating the landscape around.'<sup>12</sup> I would argue in addition that this progressive image (house, farm, countryside) is significant for its conventional suggestion that the home is the fundament of being or living. If one is 'out of place' or alienated there, it follows then

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<sup>12</sup> Tim Kendall, *The Art of Robert Frost* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2012), 189.

that one is not 'at home' elsewhere. Tellingly, in the draft version of the poem, Frost had 'can't fill a house'<sup>13</sup> which places emphasis on the man's physical isolation and loneliness – the fact of his physical smallness – whereas the verb 'keep', describing a metaphysical relationship, is suggestive of a metaphysical disjunction between man and house.

Auden's poem 'Thanksgiving for a Habitat' from his domestically inclined collection *About the House* moves beyond a consideration of domestic interiority in general, to offer insight into the function and value of particular rooms in the home: study, cellar, attic, bathroom, dining room and bedroom, establishing further correspondences between psychological and domestic landscapes.

Each section is written in a different metre or form (section four on the cellar, for instance, is written in Catullus' hendecasyllabic), to indicate perhaps the distinctness of each room. The tone and voice of the poem is typical of Auden's late verse; off-hand, humorous and conversational. But that is not to say that the poem is light-verse. It is, as Jay Parini notes, 'more serious and inclusive than it appears at first glance. It transcends the vividly realised particulars to articulate an ideal of civilized life. The meditations stress the practical functions of the rooms, but unpretentiously reach out from the functional to the larger social and spiritual concerns of mid-twentieth-century life, a time when the domestic sphere has increased in importance as the possibility of significant action in the public sphere

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Kendall, *The Art of Robert Frost*, 189.



have decreased.’<sup>14</sup>

In this anatomy of the home, we find that individual rooms appear to correspond to particular human characteristics. The analysis of the function and purpose of the rooms at Kirchstetten becomes, then, a means of reflection on the human condition. The first section ‘The Cave of Making’ associates the study, as the subtitle suggests, with creative and imaginative faculties. The physical properties of the room provide insight into the nature of the imagination:

For this and for all enclosures like it the archetype  
 is Weland’s Stithy, an antre  
 more private than a bedroom even, for neither lovers nor  
 maids are welcome, but without a  
 bedroom’s secrets: from the Olivetti Portable,  
 the dictionaries (the very  
 best money can buy), the heaps of paper, it is evident  
 what must go on. Devoid of  
 flowers and family photographs, all is subordinate  
 here to a function, designed to  
 discourage day-dreams – hence windows averted from plausible  
 videnda but admitting a light one  
 could mend a watch by – and to sharpen hearing: reached by an

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<sup>14</sup> Jay Parini, *The Columbia History of American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 524.

outside staircase, domestic  
 noises and odors, the vast background of natural  
 life are shut off. Here silence  
 is turned into objects.<sup>15</sup>

Like the imagination, the study is aloof from every-day and prosaic matter, and appears 'turned-in-on-itself', whilst its guarded privacy makes it an idiosyncratic space, just as the imagination serves a personal and individual vision. The creative function of the study is evident in the way that silence 'is turned into objects' which alludes to the fact that the imagination brings something forth from silence and nothingness (maybe Yeats's 'his mind moves upon silence' ghosts this line).

If the elevated study corresponds to the imagination, the cellar corresponds to the subconscious. As John Fuller has noted on 'Down There': 'We are close to *Urmutterfurcht* [...] but the journey here suggests less the familiar psychological quest into the maternal water-scooped limestone than a piece of controlled spiritual husbandry.'<sup>16</sup> Auden differentiates the cellar from other rooms in the home, as it is unassuming:

The rooms we talk and work in always look injured  
 When trunks are being packed, and when, without warning,  
 We drive up in the dark, unlock and switch lights on,

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<sup>15</sup> Auden, *Collected Poems*, 690.

<sup>16</sup> John Fuller, *W.H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber, 1998), 489

They seem put out: a cellar never takes umbrage;  
 It takes us as we are, explorers, homebodies,  
 Who seldom visit others when we don't need them.

'Tak[ing] us as we are' underscores the idea that the cellar corresponds to the subconscious: it is a room in which we express our non-sublimated and natural character. Poignantly, the language here foreshadows Larkin's 'Home is so Sad', which also personifies a home as responding to its owners' behaviour: 'Home is so sad. It says as it was left, / Shaped to the comfort of the last to go./As if to win them back'.<sup>17</sup> The anthropomorphising in both poems reflects how the home comes to bear and mirror the thoughts, expectations and values of its owner. Leaving the home, then, depicts a rift in selfhood: an older self (the home) is abandoned for a new identity and selfhood. It is the old selfhood which is presumably the injured look in 'Down There' and it is the older selfhood which confronts the speaker in 'Home is so Sad'.

Of all the rooms in the home, the bedroom is the room that is most widely poeticised or most amenable to poetry. It is the conventional setting of an *aubade* and much love poetry. In his poem on the bedroom, 'The Cave of Nakedness', Auden playfully denies that events in the bedroom can be the subject of expression: 'where there's a bed/be it a nun's restricted cot or an Emperor's / baldachined and nightly

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<sup>17</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 54-55.

re-damselled couch, there are no / effable data'. Matters of the bedroom are too private for divulgence: 'Lover's don't see their embraces / as a viable theme for debate, nor a monk his prayers'. The humorous disparity in comparing lascivious Emperor and chaste nun, and lovers and monk, develops the idea that the bedroom reveals a common humanity. That is the subject of the following lines:

bona fide architects know  
 that doors are not emphatic enough, and interpose,  
     as a march between two realms, so alien, so disjunct,  
 the no-man's-land of a stair. The switch from personage,  
     with a state number, a first and family name,  
 to the naked Adam or Eve, and vice versa,  
     should not be off-hand or abrupt: a stair retards it  
 to a solemn procession.

The nature of the bedroom appears to overlap with the nature of the cellar: both receive us in a more 'natural' condition. However, the latter takes us as we are; that is to say, it accepts our idiosyncrasies and individual peculiarities, whereas the former brings us to an Adamic condition, which is common to all, although obscured by our 'public' personage.

Auden's poem on the bedroom ends with a paean to its function as a 'replenishment of human purpose' after sleep:

audible here and there

in the half-dark, members of an avian orchestra

are already softly noodling, limbering up for

an overture at sunrise, their effort to express

in the old convention they inherit that joy in beginning

for which our species was created, and declare it

good. We may not be obliged – though it is mannerly – to bless

the Trinity that we are corporal contraptions,

but only a villain will omit to thank Our Lady or

her hen-wife, Dame Kind, as he, she, or both ensemble,

emerge from a private cavity to be re-born,

re-neighbored in the Country of Consideration.

In tone, these lines strike a slightly higher note, as the speaker combines with his colloquial register a sincerely-felt eulogy to waking. This is, however, an *aubade* of a different kind, celebrating not a couple's love but metaphysical renewal. The bedroom becomes a womb-like space, a place of rebirth, where an individual prepares for his or her entrance into a wider community. For the ever socially conscious Auden, the bedroom's privacy and Adamic nakedness can only be valued and celebrated if they serve a broader social end.

### **Indoors and outdoors**

The above poetry has explored, in manifold ways, connections between domestic and psychological interiority. Such poems work from the assumption that the house is, or is at least considered to be, the space of true and authentic being. It is also important to add that the house is also understood as inherently a domain of security and civilisation. Domestic space and domesticity are set in contradistinction to what is uncivilised, wild or dangerous; dwellings and residences are the fundamentals of order and civilisation. The view of home as a place of ease and civilisation finds its highest expression in the country-house poems of the seventeenth century. Deriving from a Latin tradition, these poems celebrated country-houses as a model of civilised life.

The country-house poem reached its height of popularity in the seventeenth century. In the modern and contemporary era, the types of homes and houses that appear in poetry are the residences of the middle and working class: apartments in apartment blocks, the two – four bedroom houses of suburbs, or rural farmhouses and cottages. This 'democratic' housing, unlike the country-house, might not commend human civilisation and achievement, but it does reflect and provide insight into the fundamental human condition. And this is the subject of many contemporary domestic poems.

The notions of home discussed above inform other modernist and contemporary poems on domestic space and architecture. Much of that poetry hinges on contrasts between domestic interior and exterior: the domain of selfhood and rationality, set against wild, ungovernable and impersonal natural forces. This is

for the most part a way of analogising man's relation to his wider world. A physically insignificant house, vulnerable to the elements, might symbolise the insignificance of man's being and his attempts at order.

However, some poems offer a rethinking of indoor/outdoor relations. Indoors, instead of being a place of security and stability might appear disordered, beset by the environment outdoors. Taking heed of the associations of domesticity with mental interiority, this turbulence suggests that the security of the mental world has collapsed. Furthermore, in recent history, the house in and of itself has come to be associated with the decline of a 'secure world', especially after WWII, which left many houses vacated and with people being lost from homes.

Louis MacNeice's late poem, 'House on a Cliff' (1952), with its striking juxtapositions of interior and exterior, is an early example of a poem rethinking indoors/outdoors relations – moving beyond ideas of secure indoors and unsafe outdoors. With a kind of pendulum movement the poem alternates between descriptions of indoors and descriptions of the environment outdoors: 'Indoors the tang of a tiny oil lamp. Outdoors / The winking signal on the waste of sea'.<sup>18</sup> Such repeated perspectival shifts create the impression that interior and exterior are pitted against each other. In the opening lines, the conventionally accepted insignificance of man in the greater scheme of things is suggested in the juxtaposition of the 'tiny lamp' (a symbol of human agency) and the 'waste of the sea'.

In the view of Terence Brown, the poem is an articulation of extreme

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<sup>18</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 516.

scepticism – and indeed geographically the house is an extreme and dangerous location. For Brown, it articulates MacNeice's early solipsism. The man in the house 'hears only the noise of the wind while the wind itself may be entirely unknown. Human consciousness is a man asleep in a house on a cliff, dreaming to himself while the wind rages outside.'<sup>19</sup> Brown, perhaps, puts too much stock in the integrity of the human consciousness here; as Peter McDonald notes, 'in these surroundings, the idea of the self is necessarily confused and contradictory.'<sup>20</sup> Rather than acting as a domain of security and coherence, the indoors environment proves oppressive: 'Indoors / The strong man pained to find his red blood cools, / While the blink clock grows louder, faster'. Such developing awareness of mortality and the indifference of time intimates a growing existential consciousness.

This irony that indoors is not a domain of security and integrity of being is furthered in the concluding stanza:

Indoors ancestral curse-cum-blessing. Outdoors  
 The empty bowl of heaven, the empty deep.  
 Indoors a purposeful man who talks at cross  
 Purposes, to himself, in broken sleep.

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<sup>19</sup> Terence Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), 62.

<sup>20</sup> Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 173.



Indoors is a blessing as it should provide a form of refuge against the elements, a curse because, precisely as a place of refuge, it separates man from the wider universe, even putting him in opposition to it, and so precipitates a form of existential crisis. The failure of the universe to respond to man's will and need is expressed in the striking image of the 'empty bowl of heaven'. Man's inner resources are, however, futile; they provide no recourse in an indifferent world. His purposefulness leads only to his bewilderment.

Like 'An Old Man's Winter Night', 'House on a Cliff' moves to a consideration of internal turmoil, of a home-bound man who is experiencing some form of psychological crisis. This is intimated through their disturbed domestic circumstances, their unease at home, which – bearing in mind the associations of domestic and psychological interiority – bespeaks a condition of self-alienation. The poem's final irony is that the man's sleep is broken not by the storm outside, but by himself.

'House on a Cliff' evokes Hughes's 'Wind' which also features contrasts between indifferent and destructive forces outdoors and a beset and fragile human world indoors. As Keith Sagar notes:

In 'Wind' this house is the insulated human world, the world of books, thoughts, human relationships, and a blazing fire creating a magic circle the beasts cannot enter. It contains all human bearings and assurances, yet is as tiny and flimsy as a ship in a storm, and has been 'far out at sea all night'. Wind,

sea, darkness and 'blade-light' are images of what it cannot contain or cope with. The wind dents the balls of his eyes, but is itself the lens of a mad eye. He is eyeball to eyeball with everything that we call sanity cannot cope with.<sup>21</sup>

In Hughes's poem, however, the human world inside the house retains its integrity. The inhabitants unite to resist the stormy wind which besieges them. The wind's effect is felt at the level of the poem's grammar, which is unpredictable and surprising, like the movement of the wind itself: 'wind wielded / Blade-light, luminous black and emerald, / Flexing like the lens of a mad eye', or densely wrought: 'floundering black astride and blinding wet'.<sup>22</sup>

Yet it is important to add that wind and home are not always oppositional. At one point, the wind 'plays' on the house to evince a shrill note: 'The house // Rang like some fine green goblet in the note / That any second would shatter it'. The conventional lyric poise of this line, poignantly contrasts with the unconventional lyricism earlier. The intensity of the wind draws out a congruously intense note from the house, intimating that stress and strain may be productive, and conducive to attainment of a new pitch, although it risks destruction (the creative potential of the wind is intimated earlier in the notion that 'the hills had new places'). Pursuing Sagar's line of thought, these lines imply that for the 'human world' to further itself, it must yield to those mad, primal forces and so put itself in the line of obliteration.

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<sup>21</sup> Sagar, *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, 287.

<sup>22</sup> Ted Hughes, *New Selected Poetry: 1957-1994* (London: Faber, 1995), 14.

The conclusion of the poem suggests the inevitability of the storm and wind's dominance over the rational intellect as represented by the home:

Now deep

In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip

Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,

Or each other. We watch the fire blazing,

And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,

Seeing the window tremble to come in,

Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons.

The inhabitants sit as if in anticipation of some apocalyptic moment; they feel the inadequacy of what they know and have learnt (book, thought) and their human society. Their only mode of action is one not far removed from inaction as suggested by the intransitive verbs (grip, sit on, seeing, hearing, watching, feeling) – a mere attentiveness to what is unfolding around them. The perennial theme of man's ultimate weakness in the scale of things once more emerges. If the verbs suggest a degree of powerlessness on behalf of the house's inhabitants, they outline the nature of domesticity: sedentary inaction ('sit on' acquires almost a tone of pointed resistance). The wind is antagonistic towards that, disturbing and troubling the stasis of the home, ready to put everything to flight. We feel that Hughes's sympathy

is with the wind, as he believed that mankind on the whole was indolent and lacked the fierce intent and efficiency we find evidenced in the natural world. Hughes's poem reaches a different conclusion from MacNeice's poem, despite the surface similarity between them. 'Wind' envisions an epochal change, stretching to the uttermost extent 'the horizons', which will inexorably sweep the house with it – suggesting a degree of fatalism about human achievement and that it is pitted in immediate and active resistance to what threatens it. By contrast, in 'House', although outdoors is equally inhospitable and dangerous ('the chill, the void, the siren'), it is not a direct or physical threat like the wind. The threat is rather epistemic: knowledge of the void and wind inevitably determines and conditions the man's being – 'Indoors the sound of the wind. Outdoors the wind.' The strong syntactical movement from indoors to outdoors intimates, then, not distinction between the two domains, but perhaps even their unnerving continuity.

The dynamics of the two poems are found also in Robert Lowell's poem 'Window' from the 'Redcliffe Square series', where Lowell and his partner observe a midnight storm from their London apartment. Here, also, we find the Hughesian association of interiority with decorum and sublimation and the storm/outside world with chaotic and irrational forces:

We open the curtains:

a square of white-faced houses swerving, foaming,  
the swagger of the world and chalk of London.

At each turn the houses wall the path of meeting,  
and yet we meet, stand taking in the storm.

Even in provincial capitals,  
storms will rarely enter a human house,  
the crude and homeless wet is windowed out.

We stand and hear the pummeling unpurged,  
almost uneducated by the world –  
the tops of the moving trees move helter skelter.<sup>23</sup>

Indoors, as in 'Wind' is static – as shown through the repeated verb 'stand' – while outdoors by contrast is characterised by chaotic motion. Here, the violence of the storm equates to a kind of purgation, which is needed by the couple indoors who want to be emotionally purged. Their interior space is all too human (the phrase 'human house' which is somewhat of a tautology underscores precisely this humanness of their domestic world), and requires the presence and intrusion of elemental forces. At present they can view the cathartic storm from the safety of their home but it is, as yet, to affect them.

In the extreme, stormy conditions of 'House on a Cliff' and 'Wind', whatever human qualities the house represents (selfhood, interiority, 'the insulated human world') are besieged by the outside world; however, more often than not, homes and residences are an exhibition of the 'strength' of human intellect and ingenuity (in

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<sup>23</sup> Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 646.

Lowell's poem, the fact that the somewhat pathetic storm 'crude and homeless' is peremptorily 'windowed out' is an exhibition of man's capacity to moderate and control his surroundings).

The settling and cultivation of land for habitation is the most fundamental way in which man exerts his dominion over the natural environment, necessarily involving a degree of violence over the outside world. That element of taming or controlling the natural world, in preparing habitation, was often ostentatiously evident in the renaissance estate. Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House' wittily critiques the tendency towards crude displays of man's strength over nature in the architecture of contemporary estates. He praises the construction of Appleton House for its agreement with man's interest and degree, and its eschewal of extravagancy:

Within this sober frame expect  
 Work of no Forrain Architect;  
 That unto Caves the Quarries drew,  
 And Forrests did to pastures hew;  
 Who of his great design in pain  
 Did for a model vault his brain,  
 Whose columns should so high be raised  
 To arch the brows that on them gazed.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, ed. George deF. Lord (London: Everyman, 1984), 61.

The construction of an estate by foreign architects is here represented as a species of intellectual posturing as the architect wracks his brain thinking of ways to demonstrate his originality and creativity, in order to achieve the wonder of his peers. Ominously, however, this intellectual pain seems to result in a form of 'natural pain', as the natural world is destroyed in the execution of the architect's extravagant plan. Yet, the criticism here is directed towards the *over-application* of intellect and creativity; the idea that the country estate is a token of man's intellectual control over his environment is implicitly endorsed.

The notion of the home as a ground for, and emblem of, human rationality which controls and orders the wider environment finds a distant echo in Anne Stevenson's 'A Summer Place'. At first the poem alludes to the classical idea of *otium* or leisure: the house, the narrator tells us, was bought by a lady for meditative pursuits:

The use she saw for it was not to be  
of use. A summer place. A lovely  
setting where fine minds could graze  
at leisure on long summer days  
and gather books from bushes, phrase by phrase.  
Work would be thought. A tractor bought for play  
would scare unnecessary ugly scrub away.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Collected Poems: 1955-1995* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 64.

These lines draw upon the tradition of 'country-house' poetry, such as Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House' or Yeats's 'Ancestral Houses,' which celebrate the refinement and cultivated lifestyle of grand-estates, although of course this is not an estate but a summer home. The Augustinian personification of an abstraction 'where fine minds could graze' evokes 'where slippered contemplation finds his ease' from 'Ancestral Houses'.<sup>26</sup>

As the poem progresses, the speaker explores the emblematic significance of the summer place – seeing the house not only as a place for thought, but viewing it also as an emblem of the ordering intellect which masters and resists the unformed wilderness around it ('a white gem set on a green silk glove'), much like Stevens's jar in 'Anecdote of a Jar'. However, the owner fears that the wilderness is fighting back, jealous of the house's neat structure:

As though she heard the house stir in its plaster,  
 stones depart unsteadily from walls,  
 the woods, unwatched, stretch out their roots like claws  
 and tear through careful fences, fiercer than saws.  
 Something alive lived under her mind-cropped pasture,  
 hated the house. Or worse, loved. Hungering after  
 its perfectly closed compactness.

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<sup>26</sup> Yeats, *W.B. Yeats: The Major Works*, 102.



If the home is synonymous with rationality, these lines analogise a process of mental disintegration: the ordering intellect subsumed by the growing wilderness around it. The dominion of disorder (or wildness) occurs when the controlling intellect flags: the woods are tellingly 'unwatched'. The orderliness of the house/intellect is conveyed in the adjective phrases 'careful fences' and 'perfectly closed compactness'. The final sentence leaves some ambiguity as to the impulse of the wild take over: 'Hungering after its perfectly closed compactness' suggests either it wishes to destroy such neatness or wishes to emulate it. In fact, the house's owner appeared to think that the house wanted to yield to the wilderness:

She dreamed or daydreamed what it might have come to,  
 the house itself, wanting the view  
 to take it, and the view's love gathering into  
 brambles, tendrils, trunks of maples, needing  
 her every window, entering, seeding.  
 Fear of attack kept her from sleeping,  
 kept her awake in her white room, pacing, weeping.

Although the verse-paragraph begins with the telling idea that the house wanted the view – symbolising perhaps the desire of the rational for the wild – it ends with the idea that the outside world seeks to attack the house which, given the house's

personal association with owner ('the house was half compounded of...half of her love'), is viewed not only as a threat to the ideas of order and rationality, but the owner's selfhood also.

There are some notable contemporary poems which depict a non-antagonistic relationship between home and its environs. These poems usually relinquish such metaphysical views of the home as the domain of intellect or selfhood – to be jealously guarded against attack – and are situated in pleasantly pastoral contexts where the environment is unthreatening. Here, the domestic interior is enriched by the pastoral presence. Such 'opening out' inaugurates a new mode of living. The home, so often characterised in popular culture as a confining and stultifying place, becomes an area of experiential variety, and is invested with the salubrious quality of the natural world. Amy Clampitt's 'Townhouse interior with cat' furnishes us with an example of a home enriched from outside:

Green-gold, the garden leans into the room,  
 the room leans out into the garden's  
 hanging intertwine of willow. Voluptuous  
 on canvas, arum lilies' folded cream  
 rises on its own green undertone. The walls  
 are primrose; needlepoint-upholstered  
 walnut and, underfoot, a Bokhara heirloom  
 bring in the woodwind resonance of autumn.

Mirrored among jungle blooms' curled crimson  
 and chartreuse, above the mantel, diva-throated  
 tuberoses, opening all the stops, deliver  
 Wagnerian arias of perfume.<sup>27</sup>

The woven syntax of these enjambed lines, dense with adjectives, reflects the townhouse's rich and exotic interior, perhaps even hinting at degree of wildness. Part of this passage's remarkable energy is generated through verbal phrases such as 'rises on its own', 'bring in the woodwind' and 'opening all the stops', which create a sense of movement in this essentially static scene. At the point that this passage reaches its imaginative climax, with the thought of 'Wagnerian arias of perfume', a seemingly mundane reality emerges:

The kettle

warbles in the kitchen; we take our teacups  
 downstairs to where the willow harbors,  
 improbably, a ring of mushrooms. Tulips  
 and rhododendrons have almost done blooming;  
 laced overhead, neighboring locust trees  
 discard their humid ivory.

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<sup>27</sup> Amy Clampitt, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1997), 199.

Yet, even the prosaic boiling of a kettle takes on a charming aspect as 'warbles' implies a degree of musicality. Might this line allude to description of the kettle in Bishop's 'Sestina': 'The iron kettle sings on the stove'?<sup>28</sup> In any case, the magic surrealism of 'Sestina' appears to play under the surface of this poem, in which plants and objects appear to be preternaturally animated and beneficent, such as the locust trees 'discard[ing] their humid ivory'. As in 'Sestina', the implication in this poem, is that one must have a sensitive/imaginative mind which is awakened to the magical possibilities of the domestic sphere. For the speaker her cat is the image and symbol of the mystical interchange between the domestic and natural worlds which runs throughout the poem:

But where's  
 the favourite with the green-gold headlamps?  
 She's perverse today; declines, called out  
 of hiding, to recall past tete-a-tetes  
 of sparring hand-to-paw; claws up a tree;  
 patrols a wall. We see her disappear  
 into her own devices. Cornered later  
 under the gateleg table, tail aloof,  
 she flirts, an eloquence of fur, but won't  
 be wooed or flattered. The look she gives

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<sup>28</sup> Bishop, *Complete Poems*, 123.

me, when she looks – the whole green-gold,  
 outdoor-indoor continuum condensed  
 to a reproachful pair of jewels – is wild  
 and scathingly severe.

The last four lines of 'Townhouse' drift from the whimsical tone of the preceding lines to a more profound tone, when the speaker recognises the cat's condensed energy (the word 'continuum', for instance, is conspicuously academic and grave). As a domesticated animal, the cat straddles the border of domesticity and wildness; the latter is felt in the jewel eyes and 'scathingly severe' look. The last line, curtailed, with strong alliteration ends the poem on an uneasy note.

Thom Gunn's 'Last Days at Teddington' opens in a way that is reminiscent of 'Townhouse interior with Cat'. Here, also, there is interchange between home and garden: 'The windows wide through day and night / Gave on the garden like a room. / The garden smell, green composite, / Flowed in and out a house in bloom'.<sup>29</sup> Whereas in Clampitt's poem, the pastoral element appeared to give the home a somewhat dizzying and magical richness, in Gunn's poem it imparts to the home nurturing and organic qualities. This is registered in the notion of the house being 'in bloom' and the pointed use of the word green – 'how green it was indoors' – which carries from the poetry of Andrew Marvell notions of wholesomeness and flourishing. Just as the natural world moves inwards, so the domestic world moves

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<sup>29</sup> Gunn, *Collected Poems*, 237.

outwards, as friends and family enjoy the garden in summer: 'How sociable the garden was. / We ate and talked in given light. / The children put their toys to grass / All the warm wakeful August night'. This felicitous blurring of boundaries between indoors and outdoors is, however, temporary – inspired by the levity of the final days at the Teddington home. When the residents leave, the normal state of affairs is resumed: 'When everything was moved away, / The house returned to board and shelf, / And smelt of hot dust through the day, / The garden fell back on itself'.

'All Night, Legs Pointed East', which follows 'Last Days at Teddington' in the *Collected Poems*, features also the motif of 'organic domesticity'. Here, an open window – alluded to in the second stanza, when 'an air moves in, I catch the damp plain smells' – facilitates the speaker's sense of his own organic being:

In stealth I fill and fill it out. At dawn

Like loosened soil that packs a grassy hill

I fill it wholly, here, hungry for leaf.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, in 'All Night, Legs Pointed East' the movement is predominately outwards, and the domestic element of the poem is diminished:

Tonight reminds me of my teens in spring –

Not sexual really, it's a plant's unrest

Or bird's expectancy, that enters full

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 238.

On its conditions, quick eye claw and wing

Submitting to its pulse, alert in the nest.

The speaker's identification with bird and plant underscores his notion of himself as an essentially natural, and untamed being. It is only by meditating on the natural world outside and finding personal continuity with it, that the speaker realises his true nature; that he is now like 'loosened soil that packs a grassy hill'. Indeed, there is such identification between speaker and natural world, interiority and exteriority, that there is little in the poem to suggest any distinction between them. The fact that the speaker is indoors is only suggested by intimation: firstly, that he is 'in bed' and secondly that an 'air moves in', suggesting an open window. Aside from this sparse description, the poem suggests that any 'domestic being', whatever that maybe, has been subsumed by the world outside.

Nature's ability to make domestic space salubrious and vivifying is the topic of Douglas Dunn's 'Birch Room', from his collection *Elegies*, written in memory of his Dunn's wife, Leslie. Given the elegiac context, organic processes take added significance here: the growth and flourishing in nature are suggestive of the resurrection or rebirth of the deceased. The title directs us towards consideration of the happy intermingling of domestic and natural domains, which is the poem's subject. The title is more suggestive than it initially appears. Of course we assume that it refers to a room with a view of birches, but the phrasing which has 'birch' as an adjective qualifying 'room' implies that the room is infused with the birches and

takes on their organic being. This birch room was on the second floor of the Dunn's family home, and was where Douglas and Leslie spent their summer evenings:

In summer, after dinner, we used to sit

Together in our second floor's green comfort,

Allowing nature and her modern inwit

Create a furnished dusk, a room like art.

"If only I could see our trees," she'd say,

Bed-bound up on our third floor's wintry height.

"Change round our things, if you should choose to stay."

I've left them as they were, in the leaf-light.<sup>31</sup>

As in 'Last Days at Teddington', domestic space turns green, which is to say it assumes nature's salubriousness. The regenerative power of the trees and the birch-room is implicit in Leslie's desire to return to that room, hoping it would prove meliorative. In not rearranging Leslie's possessions and furniture, Dunn betrays his wish to hold onto the past and the life they shared, and more importantly to keep her furniture in benedictory greenness. The felicitous consonantal and vowel sounds in 'leaf-light' imparts something of the pleasure of the birch-room's light.

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<sup>31</sup> Douglas Dunn, *Elegies* (London: Faber, 1985), 22.



### Architecture of Release

Amongst poems which take domestic space and architecture as their subject, there are poems which depict 'architectural release': that is to say, imaginative or literal movement beyond the confines of the house. This finds a precursor in Frost's poetic of extravagance: poetry of movement beyond household and home in search of something beyond the domestic. In these works, indoors is characterised as a secure and/or restricting place; outdoors, by contrast offers spiritual or social fulfilment but might be potentially dangerous. Thom Gunn's poem 'Talbot Road' offers an example of such architecture of release. To fully appreciate it, the poem must be set in the context of Gunn's earlier houses and rooms. The early verse features places and rooms of narrow confinement, such as the tank of 'In the Tank', the lighthouse of 'Round and Round' and the castle in 'Jack Straw's Castle'. The confinement of these poems, I would argue, is expressive of Gunn's sense that he was confined, even entrapped, by his homosexual identity. This of course relates to the common idea that a gay man who is not open about his homosexuality is 'closeted'. Such a relationship between domestic interior and psychological interiority is perhaps most obvious in the poem 'Nature of an Action'. Here, the laborious process of leaving one room for another analogises the process of making a decision:

Although the narrow corridor appears

So short, the journey took me twenty years.

Each gesture that my habit taught me fell  
 Down to the boards and made an obstacle.

I paused to watch the fly marks on a shelf,  
 And found the great obstruction of myself.<sup>32</sup>

As Stefanni Michelucci notes, the corridors in this poem symbolise 'those narrow spaces in which the self is forced to move...that boundary that separates thought and action, being and becoming.'<sup>33</sup> Developing Michelucci's point, the twenty years traversing the corridor might refer to the time taken to affirm an existential choice, to realise one's will. In Gunn's case, this might be the will to live a homosexual lifestyle. In an interview with Christopher Hennessy, when asked about the final line of the above quotation, Gunn elaborated on its personal significance:

I was much influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre. There's a lecture of his printed as a short book called *Existentialism is a Humanism*, and I was probably very influenced by that when I was writing this poem [The Nature of an Action] and similar poems in the mid- to late fifties. Being in the closet, as it were, I saw being homosexual as a deliberate choice. I don't think it's deliberate at all now [laughs]. It's got nothing to do with choice or the will, but I was being defiant

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<sup>32</sup> Gunn, *Collected Poems*, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Stefania Michelucci, *The Poetry of Thom Gunn: A Critical Study* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2009), 74.

about it. That really is the story of what I'm doing with the will, especially in my second book [*The Sense of Movement*].<sup>34</sup>

Rather than defiance, however, the poem has the act of will borne out of despair: 'my cause lay in the will, that opens straight / Upon an act for the most desperate.' Eventually, after '[groping] for a handle in the mind', the speaker 'that simple handle found' and entered in the other room, to find it identical to the room he left: 'much like the first, this room in which I went. / Only my being there is different'. The inscrutable rooms do not provide the reader any clue as to what the speaker achieved in his sojourn, perhaps because considered from an existential perspective it is irrelevant. It is enough, the poem finally suggests, in the affirmation of will, that being is 'different'.

If domestic confinement suggests mental frustration, homes which permit easy movement and access intimate a liberated form of mind. For instance, Gunn's residence in London during the 1960s – a spacious home with a balcony that looked onto the street below – is remembered fondly in 'Talbot Road' and is associated with the freedom of the decade.

#### The excellent room

where I slept, ate, read, and wrote,

had a high ceiling, on the borders

stucco roses were painted blue.

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<sup>34</sup> Interview published in *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets*, ed. Christopher Hennessy (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005),

You could step through the window  
 to a heavy balcony and even  
 (unless the drain was blocked)  
 sup there on hot evenings.  
 That's what I call complete access –  
 to air, to street, to friendship:  
 for, from it, I could see, blocks away,  
 the window where Tony, my old friend,  
 toiled at translation.<sup>35</sup>

The free verse, parenthetical interjections and colloquial diction give this passage and the poem as a whole an air of ease and casualness complementing the mood in London at the time. We are a world away from the metaphysical rooms, whose wooden metres often suggested mental and physical unease. The comfort and attractiveness of Gunn's apartment reside in its connection to spaces outside of the room, to real concrete spaces like 'the street' and, importantly, to abstract areas, such as 'friendship'. What, then, was important about the room was its potentiality for 'flow' across boundaries, its nature as an interconnected area. Such 'architectural' flow ties in with the wider social scene:

the street

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<sup>35</sup> Gunn, *Collected Poems*, 380.

built for burghers, another Belgravia  
 but eventually fallen  
 to labourers ('No Coloured or Irish  
 Need Apply') and then like the veins  
 of the true-born Englishman  
 filling with a promiscuous mix:  
 Pole, Italian, Irish, Jamaican,  
 rich jostling flow.

'Talbot Road' ends with an image of a young boy who, we are told in *My Life Up To Now*, stood out for Gunn as an 'emblem of the potential and excitement and sense of wonder that I found all about me in the London of that year.' The boy was 'staying with his grandmother in the house opposite' and 'every evening of that [final] week, he sat in his white shirt at the window'<sup>36</sup> looking down:

as if intently making out characters  
 from a live language he was still learning,  
 not a smile cracking his pink cheeks.  
 Gazing down  
 at the human traffic, of all nations,  
 the just and the unjust, who

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<sup>36</sup> Thom Gunn, 'My Life Up to Now', *The Occasions of Poetry: Essays in Criticism and Autobiography*, ed. Clive Wilmer (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 181.

were they, where were they going,  
 that fine public flow at the edge of which  
 he waited, poised, detached in wonder  
 and in no hurry  
 before he got ready one day  
 to climb down into its live current.

This passage acts as an ambivalent coda to the idea of flow. The repetition of 'live', in different definitions, stresses the fact that life is to be found on the street, and in the community rather than within the home. The boy's attraction to that 'fine public flow' mirrors Gunn's own social impulses; but the final line is ominous, 'live current' suggesting a somewhat dangerous energy. Even as Gunn looks forward to the boy's descent into the street and public, there is an implicit acknowledgement of the security and integrity found at home of not being 'released'. In juxtaposing and contrasting the anonymous street-crowd and the detached, realised individual at home, 'Talbot Road' accords with Walter Benjamin's notion that is in the home that one finds integrity of self: for Benjamin it is only in the private home that the 'de-realized individual creates a place for himself.'<sup>37</sup>

Other poems of 'domestic release' similarly depict continuity between the home and a wider, expansive, even overwhelming, world. In 'The Skylight', for

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<sup>37</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 155.

instance, Heaney experiences a moment of lightening and transcendence when looking through a skylight in his attic at the sky above. More so than in 'Talbot Road', the poem stresses the 'ontological security' provided by the house. The octave, describing Heaney's attic before the skylight, stresses the attic's cosiness:

You were one for skylights. I opposed  
 Cutting into the seasoned tongue-and-groove  
 Of pitch pine. I liked it low and closed,  
 Its claustrophobic, nest-up-in-the-roof  
 Effect. I liked the snuff-dry feeling,  
 The perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling.  
 Under there, it was all hutch and hatch.  
 The blue slates kept the heat like midnight thatch.<sup>38</sup>

Security and cosiness are rendered here through the rhyming couplet 'hatch/thatch', and through the alliteration of the 'h' sound in 'hutch', 'hatch' and 'heat' and the hyphenated phrases which yoke words together. By providing the effect of the nest, the closed roof provides what Gaston Bachelard calls 'confidence in the world':

When we examine a nest, we place ourselves at the origin of confidence in the world, we receive a beginning of confidence, an urge toward cosmic confidence.  
 Would a bird build its nest if it did not have its instinct for confidence in the

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<sup>38</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 350.

world?[...]Our house, apprehended in its dream potentiality, becomes a nest in the world, and we shall live there in complete confidence.<sup>39</sup>

'Cosmic confidence' would do well to describe the speaker's disposition in the octave. The nest-like effect of the attic, we might argue, equates to a feeling of ontological and existential security. There, Heaney experiences a form of primal protection and comfort. This corresponds with Heaney's comments on the Glanmore cottage in interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, where he praises the cottage's primitive character: 'Once I get down there, (Glanmore) it's as if I'm connected up to all the old terminals, and disconnected from every messaging device the executive and professional world has ever invented'. When his wife has a skylight put into the roof, Heaney loses his sense of comfort and womb-like security, but gains a revelation:

But when the slates came off, extravagant  
 Sky entered and held surprise wide open.  
 For days I felt like an inhabitant  
 Of that house where the man sick of palsy  
 Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,  
 Was healed, took up his bed and walked away.

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<sup>39</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 103.



The typographical break between octave and sestet is particularly poignant here, as it admits clear space just as the skylight admits the clear sky. This intrusion of the sky is, as Henry Hart notes, interpretable as being at once heavenly and prosaic: 'the sky enters like grace, and while Heaney suggests the dispensation is heavenly...he also suggests that he is simply seeing the same old sky and the same old light.'<sup>40</sup> Something of the surprise of revelation is conveyed in the first line, which has the adjective 'extravagant' boldly isolated and highlighted at the end of the line, set off by a late caesura. 'Extravagant' is a transferred epithet; describing the munificence of the sky, and also Heaney's discovery of extra-vagant being: that is, the impulse to eschew the domestic cosiness (literal and metaphorical) in order to transcend boundaries, an impulse akin to that which motivated the American transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau to live alone by Walden Pond.<sup>41</sup>

The direction of the gaze is, of course, important; it is upwards through the roof of the house to the heavens, which brings new spiritual relief to the unknowing 'domesticated' speaker. This contrasts with the direction of gaze and connection between inner and outer-worlds in 'Talbot Road'. Here the speaker, (and boy) moves horizontally, from balcony to street, where he is immersed in the happenings and cultural milieu of 1960s London. This brings not spiritual relief to the domestic-based speaker, but a kind of social or communal relief. 'Half-Landing' by Michael

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<sup>40</sup> Henry Hart, 'What is Heaney Seeing in *Seeing Things*?' *Colby Quarterly* 30 (1994): 39.

<sup>41</sup> "Extravagant' was a favourite word of another famous inner émigré, the New England Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau'. Elmer Andrews, 'The Spirits Protest', *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Andrews (London: Macmillan, 1992), 223.

O'Neill features the vertical movement of 'The Skylight', which also leads to a beneficent vista:

Pausing on the stairs, you see  
    through the window at the half-landing  
that the sky is now a stoic  
    blue the shade of a bruise.

A bruised heaven, drawing your eye  
    upwards in a self-mocking  
arc of transcendence...

    Cloudily, unmistakably,

something about you drops away  
    like a sack carried for so long  
you'd forgotten how heavy it was.

You tilt, as though from purgatory  
    towards a dream of release, until  
the next stair brings back roofs, dwellings.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Michael O'Neill, *Wheel* (Todmorden: Arc, 2008), 59.

Like 'The Skylight', 'The Half-Landing' is a sonnet and its volta marks the moment of release. However, in 'The Half-Landing' the transcendental moment is qualified: the sky/heaven does not have the same munificent quality as Heaney's sky; 'stoic' suggests something near the opposite of 'extravagant' – unresponsive, unyielding and distant<sup>43</sup>. The moment of transcendence is regarded sceptically: 'self-mocking' implies that the wished for transcendence cannot be totally realised, while the contradictory adverbs 'cloudily, unmistakably' capture the speaker's ambivalent apprehension of the 'dream of release'. Furthermore, unlike Heaney's poem, the couplet of 'The Half-Landing' enacts a turn back to the prosaic 'purgatory' of domesticity. Nonetheless, the religious vocabulary and allusions ('heaven', 'purgatory' and the sense of renewal and lightening), portray the nearly achieved release as grace or spiritual uplift. Such spiritual un-achievement is implicit in the title 'The Half-Landing', yet this also, in its own partiality, points to full achievement: the final or full landing. Similarly, the title 'The Skylight' operates at a poetical and domestic level. At a prosaically indicative level it points to the aspect of the house's architecture, which is the subject of the poem. However, we might not immediately think of the window in the roof of the home, but take 'sky' as an adjective modifying 'light' (much like 'sunlight' or 'moonlight') and so take 'light' to be the poem's subject (which is the case in the sestet). Indeed, the assonance of 'l' in 'sky' and 'light' gives the title a naturally poetical sound.

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<sup>43</sup> Both poems do, however, share a moment of unburdening: in the 'sins forgiven', and the 'something about you that drops away'.

We might find a precursor to such poems in 'High Windows,' which ends with a sudden and surprising vista of the sky:

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:

The sun-comprehending glass,

And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows

Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.<sup>44</sup>

The enjambment and caesurae give these lines a rolling effect which captures the endlessness of the sky. We might link it with Heaney's extravagant sky, but for the disconnection between perceiver and sky. Here, the glass which is elided in Heaney's poem is a conspicuous presence. In spite of this and the possible nihilism of the sky imagery, the vista – like the vistas of the previous poems – 'undomesticates' the speaker's world.

So far, the poetry discussed has considered the home from an anthropomorphic perspective. This might be through a 'metaphysical' or analogical method: establishing equivalence of domestic interiority and psychological interiority; or from the contemporary notion that a home instantiates the self. These poems have explored also how the architecture of the home bears on being: the home is at once reassuring (in the security it provides), a domain of *otium* and meditation or a confining space. Robert Minhinnick's 'The House' is an intriguing

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<sup>44</sup> Larkin, *The Collected Poems*, 80.

coda to such poems, taking a non-anthropocentric view of the home. The poem employs striking reversals of intuitive beliefs; chief amongst them is the notion that homes and houses are part of man's history. Rather, the poem intimates, man is part of the home's history. In the first stanza the speaker discovers that the house has a life of its own, independent of its residents. It resembles an intricate organism:

I lie across the rafters of the loft  
 Holding the torch. From the junction box  
 Wires twist into darkness, a crumbling  
 Skein of red and black under sackcloth  
 Of webs.<sup>45</sup>

In this anatomy of the loft there are some possible indirect allusions to human anatomy: the wires might resemble veins, and sack cloth, the skin. The speaker assumes a position analogous to a surgeon attempting to heal a patient. The work, however, proves to be beyond his capability: 'In the attic's heat I have cursed / This challenge, frustrated by / Electricity...And the silence/Of the house offers no clue'. This precipitates a feeling of antagonism between owner and home: the house, instead of being viewed as a possession of the speaker and subject to his control, is seen to resist the speaker and possess power of its own:

Myself against its fifty years,

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Minhinnick, 'The House', *Here To Eternity: An Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Andrew Motion (London: Faber, 2001), 44.

The solid rooms and gables of this redbrick

Terrace, I must establish my own

Permanence. For territory is not

Bought or sold but fought over: it is

The first instinct, the small, unremarkable

Warfare of our lives.

The house's sturdiness and longevity alert the speaker to his own weakness. Personal property, here, does not serve the owner or establish his presence, but becomes a testament to that owner's impermanence. This oppositional relationship is captured in a pun on the preposition 'against', which describes the literal relationship of the speaker's body to the house as he fixes the electricity and more pertinently, the 'metaphysical' conflict between house and speaker. In an unnerving conclusion, the speaker realises that the previous tenants did not own the house, but that the house owned them:

The torchbeam's yellow cylinder

Identifies the dust, shapes from life

That have served their time and been abandoned

By the house. And I stare, fascinated,

At the dead. The faces of those who once called

This house home. Like them, like this frail

Blade of light, the house has swallowed me.

The home imperiously outlives its owners: they are a footnote in its history. The speaker's dawning realisation that he and other owners 'serve' the home and that they are objects of its agency, bespeaks a chilling awareness of his own mortality and scepticism concerning post-Enlightenment notions of individual 'self-fashioning'. The house – commonly regarded as a material assertion of the self, a place where one may settle and (mistakenly) call 'home' – becomes in fact an embodiment of time or fate which swallows an individual, so that the house is, in the end, a testament to our own impermanence and insignificance. Like the previous owners, the speaker would have seen the home as part of his individual 'narrative'; however, he learns, it is greater than him.

### *Chapter Six: Domestic Elegy*

One of the most conspicuous developments in British and Irish elegy is the prevalence of the house and home. This has remained largely unremarked in critical accounts of the contemporary elegy, as critics have tended to focus on other key issues, such as gender or identity, and have given scant attention as to how the domestic context might be involved in the work of mourning. It is the purpose of this chapter to show that we can talk of a contemporary 'domestic' elegy – that is, an elegy whose work of mourning involves the house and home – alongside the more traditional notion of 'domestic elegy': an elegy for a spouse or other family member.

There are numerous reasons that the house has become so conspicuous in contemporary British and Irish elegy. The post-war era has witnessed the rise of 'domestic' poetry in general, especially from canonical or establishment male poets such as Seamus Heaney or Andrew Motion. In regards to the work of mourning, contemporary poets have exhibited a strong inclination to depart from, or reinvent, religious rites of mourning. To put it simply, there is a greater stress on authenticity and idiosyncrasy in mourning, and less recourse to the well-worn and impersonal rites. It is unsurprising, then, that the house, the most idiosyncratic of places, becomes the site of redress and mourning.

If the domestic context facilitates personal, as opposed to impersonal mourning, we find that conventions of classical/pastoral elegy are reinvented and transferred to the domestic domain. In his Freudian analysis of the English elegy,



Peter Sacks noted that the mourning subject often deflects his sexual power away from the lost and deceased individual, towards a metonymical object for that individual as a means of recovery. This is fulfilled, in the Ovidian account of Apollo and Daphne by the reeds. In the case of the domestic elegy, domestic objects serve as metonymical items – are the object of deflected desire – such as clothes, even the house itself. Furthermore, resurrection of the deceased which takes place in the natural world in the pastoral elegy, for example King returning as the ‘genius of the shore’<sup>1</sup> in ‘Lycidas’, occurs within the house in many contemporary elegies; notably the deceased ghosting the home, even undertaking homely tasks as in Andrew Motion’s ‘The House Through’. Whereas in conventional we find pathetic fallacy, the natural world confirming and mirroring the speaker’s grief, in the domestic elegy it is the contents of the home, along with a mood of unhomeliness which materialises and broadens the mourner’s psychological condition.

### **Precursors**

Wordsworth’s *Ruined Cottage* offers an early example of how domestic space and objects may be involved with grief. As Jonathan Wordsworth notes, ‘instead of *her* (Margaret’s) decline, it is the decline of the cottage and garden that is reported.’<sup>2</sup> The lines recounting the pedlar’s return to Margaret’s house are illustrative of how the house and garden bear her fate:

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<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *John Milton*, eds. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity: A Critical Study of Wordsworth’s Ruined Cottage* (London: Nelson, 1969), 102.

Her cottage in its outward look appeared  
As cheerful as before; in any shew  
Of neatness little changed, but that I thought  
The honeysuckle crowded round the door  
And from the wall hung down in heavier wreathes,  
And knots of worthless stone-crop started out  
Along the window's edge, and grew like weeds  
Against the lower panes. I turned aside  
And strolled into her garden. – It was changed:  
The unprofitable bindweed spread his bells  
From side to side and with unwieldy wreathes  
Had dragged the rose from its sustaining wall  
And bent it down to earth...<sup>3</sup>

On a literal level, this passage recounts what the pedlar later calls the 'sleepy hand of negligence': Margaret's inattentiveness towards her residence. But the lines are not only indicative or suggestive of Margaret's grief, they symbolise it also. The fact that on the surface and at a first glance the cottage appeared as cheerful as before suggests that Margaret's grief is not immediately evident in her appearance and behaviour, and that it is only with considered attention that one might discover tokens or signs of psychological suffering. Furthermore, the images of somewhat

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<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, 38-39.

cancerous overgrowth of honeysuckle, stone-crop and bindweed, serves as an objective correlative for grief, which grows rapidly and uncontrollably in the griever's mind. The symbolism reaches a head in the suggestive image of the rose 'dragged' from its 'sustaining wall' and 'bent' to earth, which is evocative of the debasement and degradation of Margaret's mind. The verbs 'dragged' and 'bent', which imply resistance from the rose, communicate the ineluctable force of grief.

Further on in the poem the peddler offers another depiction of the ruined cottage. Once more it conveys its owner's declining fortunes; now, however, turning to the domestic interior as well as the garden:

The windows they were dim, and her few books,  
 Which, one upon the other, heretofore  
 Had been piled up against the corner-panes  
 In seemly order, now with straggling leaves  
 Lay scattered here and there, open or shut  
 As they had chanced to fall [...]

Once again

I turned towards the garden gate and saw  
 More plainly still that poverty and grief  
 Were now come nearer to her: all was hard,  
 With weeds defaced and knots of withered grass;  
 No ridges there appeared of clear black mould,

No winter greenness; of herbs and flowers

It seemed the better part were gnawed away

Or trampled on the earth...

While the earlier passage emphasises uncontrollable overgrowth, this passage inclines to images of decay and absence. Indeed the anaphoric use of 'no' underscores what the cottage and its garden lack. This renders the other side of grief and mourning: not the proliferating and obsessive thoughts (the weeds of the first passage), but the overwhelming sense of loss and the knowledge of how things should or could be. Again, the verbs are highly suggestive of corresponding mental action; one of the definitions listed for 'gnaw', for instance, is to 'trouble or torment by constant annoyance, worry, vexation.'

The appearance of domestic items and space assuming elegiac significance is a notable feature of Lowell's *Life Studies*. In this collection, which pioneered the confessional mode, Lowell finds and generates meaning in the particularities of everyday life: snatches of dialogue or the clothes that someone was wearing, for instance. In the prose memoir which constitutes part two of *Life Studies*, Lowell measures his family's fortune in relation to inherited furniture from Mordechai Myers:

In the bleak Revere Street dining room, none of these pieces had at all that air of unhurried condescension that had been theirs behind the summery veils of

tissue paper in Cousin Cassie Julian-James's memorial volume. Here, table, highboy, chairs, and screen – mahogany, cherry, teak – looked nervous and disproportioned. They seemed to wince, touch elbows, shift from foot to foot...Colonel Myers' monumental Tibetan screen had been impiously shortened to fit it for a low Yankee ceiling. And now, rough and gawky, like some Hindu water buffalo killed in mid-rush but still alive with mad momentum, the screen hulked over us...and hid the pantry sink.<sup>4</sup>

The personification and animation of the furniture, which creates a sense of them having their own being, underscores the import and presence that such items have for the Lowell family. Furthermore, it indirectly gets to the heart of the family's condition: the air of 'unhurried condescension' once belonged to the Lowells and is now replaced with wincing and nervousness. In this regard, 91 Revere Street evokes the 'Ithaca' chapter of *Ulysses*, where the furniture is similarly personified, indirectly revealing the unpleasant truth of Molly's affair with Boylan: 'a squat stuffed easy chair with stout arms extended and back slanted to the rear which, repelled in recoil, had then upturned an irregular fringe of a rectangular rug and now displayed on its amply upholstered seat a centralised diffusing and diminishing discolouration.'<sup>5</sup> In both works, furniture is used to tackle obliquely what may be too painful to acknowledge directly.

The literal arrangement of the furniture evokes a sense of cultural decline: the

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<sup>4</sup> Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 147.

<sup>5</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: The Bodley Head, 1960), 829

furniture and inherited items are squashed together or shortened to fit in the smaller house. Lowell's adverb, 'impiously', used to describe the shortening of the Tibetan screen and suggestive of familial betrayal, accords with Iris Young's view that a family's identity and spirit are perpetuated through the careful and assiduous attention to significant domestic items: 'meaningful historical works that embody the particular spirit of a person or a people must be protected from the constant threat of elemental disorganization. They must be cleaned, dusted, repaired, restored...they must also be protected from the careless neglect caused by those who dwell among them.'<sup>6</sup> Lowell, then, is all too aware that the domestic circumstances of 91 Revere Street reflect not only decreased economic fortune, but a diminishment of the family spirit.

As in '91 Revere Street', the furniture in 'For Sale' is personified so as to communicate a sense of loss. The poem recounts the selling of Beverly Farms after the passing of Lowell's father:

Poor sheepish plaything,  
 organized with prodigal animosity,  
 lived in just a year –  
 my Father's cottage at Beverly Farms  
 was on the market the month he died.  
 Empty, open, intimate,

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<sup>6</sup> Young, *Intersecting Voices*, 153.

its town-house furniture  
had an on tiptoe air  
of waiting for the mover  
on the heels of the undertaker.  
Ready, afraid  
of living alone till eighty,  
Mother mooned in a window,  
as if she stayed on a train  
one stop past her destination.<sup>7</sup>

The irony in the thought that stately town-house furniture might develop the levity to have an 'on tiptoe air' captures the essence of grief: things are put to flight; that which was seemingly settled is now unsettled. The sense of movement is developed in the powerful closing image of Charlotte at a loss in Beverly Farms, with the home figured as a train in the final simile. This other type of movement articulates another face of grief: the sense that one is leaving a familiar, intended, or safe ground (the destination) for an unnerving and unexpected end.

'Father's Bedroom' also looks at domestic items and furniture left behind in the wake of Commander Lowell's passing. Here, however, there is no personification; Lowell merely describes the room as he finds it:

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<sup>7</sup> Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 178.

blue threads as thin  
 as pen-writing on the bedspread,  
 blue dots on the curtains,  
 a blue kimono,  
 Chinese sandals with blue plush straps.<sup>8</sup>

'Father's Bedroom' and 'For Sale' are often omitted from critical accounts. Lowell scholars have taken a dim view of the poems. For instance, Patrick Cosgrave argues that they labour under the empiricism of *Life Studies*: 'On the whole...these small, limited poems are the result of the doctrine of the significance of the object.'<sup>9</sup> Yet, with regard to 'Father's Bedroom', the baldly empirical style is powerful, even moving. Lowell's listing becomes an appalling sign of grief: the numb and mechanical behaviour of a mourner.

Larkin's tender elegy for his father 'An April Sunday Brings the Snow' – which he considered too personal for inclusion in the *Less Deceived* – anticipates in theme and style many contemporary elegies:

An April Sunday brings the snow,  
 Making the blossom on the plum trees green,  
 Not white. An hour or two, and it will go.  
 Strange that I spend that hour moving between

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Cosgrave, *The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell* (New York: Taplinger, 1972), 141.



Cupboard and cupboard, shifting the store  
 Of jam you made of fruit from these same trees:  
 Five loads – a hundred pounds or more –  
 More than enough for all next summer's teas,  
  
 Which now you will not sit and eat.  
 Behind the glass, under the cellophane,  
 Remains your final summer – sweet  
 And meaningless, and not to come again.<sup>10</sup>

The wistful tone and domestic context make for an intimate and moving elegy. Part of the tenderness of this lyric comes from the image of Sydney Larkin (who appears in Andrew Motion's biography of Larkin as a stern and unsentimental figure) engaged in such a homely activity as making jam. From this we understand why many contemporary elegists favour the context of the house: here we can remember someone in his or her most unguarded and natural manner.

What is remarkable about this poem is the way in which ordinary household items contribute to the plangent tone. The seemingly unlyrical 'cellophane' is deftly rhymed with the final word 'again', creating a lugubrious long vowel sound to end the poem. Furthermore, the equally unpoetical word 'cupboard' is repeated to create

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<sup>10</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 265.

a wistful trochaic metre.

Larkin's lingering on what Sydney has left behind anticipates those later elegies which find in the possessions of the deceased arbitrary and fortuitous memorials; particularly Tony Harrison's 'Book Ends', from *The School of Eloquence*, which also considers food left behind: an apple pie baked by Harrison's mother: 'Baked the day she suddenly dropped dead / we chew it slowly that last apple pie'.<sup>11</sup> The apple pie and jam are surprising but apt elegiac tokens; they have a personal and authentic connection with the deceased, unlike conventional consolatory items or rituals. That both tokens can be (or are being) consumed looks towards the end of grief: the act of eating and digestion, we might say, symbolises the work of mourning. Furthermore, their sweet taste, through synaesthesia, shows that what quite literally endures of the deceased is pleasant, that he or she lives on positively and harmlessly in the lives of his or her relatives.

### **Seamus Heaney**

In Heaney's 'Clearances', domestic memories rather than domestic items prove to be a powerful means of assuagement. For instance, in the third sonnet which recounts the death-bed scene of Heaney's mother, Heaney's memory of potato-peeling with his mother occurs to him at the moment and acts as an enduring form of consolation:

So while the parish priest at her bedside

Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying

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<sup>11</sup> Harrison, *The Collected Poems*, 137.

And some were responding and some crying  
 I remembered her head bent towards my head,  
 Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –  
 Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

For Stephen Regan, this sestet ‘completes the strange inversion of domestic and sacred rituals in the poem, so that potato peeling becomes religious and sacramental in its watery element, while the last rites of the Catholic Church take on the semblance of a domestic task.’<sup>12</sup> More obviously, the consolatory power of the potato peeling ‘ritual’ is also due to its personalisation and exclusivity; it is something that only mother and son share. On the other hand, Catholic rites are universal and impersonal, and by using the clichéd idiom ‘hammer and tongs’ to describe them, Heaney conveys his sense of their meaninglessness in the context of his mother’s death ( incidentally, the stressed ending of knives and lives, stands in positive contrast with the feminine endings of dying and crying). While there seems to be a loss of articulacy in the last rites – ‘hammer and tongs’ may suggest noisy incoherence – the dipping knives are ‘fluent’ – flowing and also articulate. A sense of this fluency is achieved in the poem’s metre as ‘our fluent dipping knives’ with its rhythmic iambs stands out in a sestet which is governed by loose iambic beats. Also metrically effective is ‘Little pleasant splashes’, vividly describing the potato peeling,

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen Regan, ‘Seamus Heaney and the Modern Irish Elegy’, *Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator*, ed. Ashby Crowder (London: Palgrave, 2007), 22.

with the trochaic rhythm complementing the simplicity of the work.

The inversions and paradoxes of this sestet – what is sacred turning domestic and what is domestic turning sacred – fittingly define the *Clearances* sequence in general: what prove to be most valuable to the grieving son are those things which are ordinarily considered ephemeral, mundane and unremarkable. This paradox is at the heart of his fifth sonnet, recalling other affectionate moments between mother and son:

The cool that came off sheets just off the line  
 Made me think the damp must still be in them  
 But when I took my corner of the linen  
 And pulled against her, first straight down the hem  
 And then diagonally, then flapped and shook  
 The fabric like a sail in a cross-wind,  
 They made a dried-out undulating thwack.  
 So we'd stretch and fold and end up hand to hand  
 For a split second as if nothing had happened  
 For nothing had that had not always happened  
 Beforehand, day by day, just touch and go,  
 Coming close again by holding back  
 In moves where I was X and she was O

Inscribed in sheets she'd sewn from ripped-out flour sacks.<sup>13</sup>

The convoluted middle lines wrestle with the seemingly contradictory idea that something special could happen every day; the tenth and eleventh lines acting almost as free indirect discourse as the Heaneys justify the pretence of acting as 'if nothing had happened'. Of course, something important and special did happen. Gathering the sheets has (inter)subjective value as another exclusive 'ritual' shared between two people only (so much so, that in the first seven lines the reader feels partly excluded). It takes death and the nostalgic-elegiac gaze to articulate the poignancy and value in the domestic task. The notion that the domestic might be poignant and beautiful is conveyed through the sonnet form. As Helen Vendler notes, the elegant form boldly puts the every-day work in the illustrious company of Petrarch and Milton's sonnets: 'Petrarch or Milton could hardly have imagined that this might be the octave of a sonnet. Yet the 'pretty' rhymes echo tradition.'<sup>14</sup>

Here, the house is valued for what it reminds the griever of the deceased, those cherished 'intersubjective' moments. This accords, we feel, with a humanistic approach to grief which is to celebrate such things as individuality, and personality rather than fall back on conventional religious rites. Indeed, the pointed contrast of religious and personal responses to death in sonnet seven of 'Clearances' suggests the supremacy of the humanistic approach and the irrelevancy of the religious. Yet,

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<sup>13</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 311.

<sup>14</sup> Helen Vendler, *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 185.

domestic elegies are not without their numinous elements; other poems of *Clearances* are distinctly spiritualised as the speaker awakens to new metaphysical realities.

In the sequence 'Squarings,' from *Seeing Things*, Heaney uses the house as an emblem and site of loss. In 'Lightenings I', 'the poet brilliantly abstracts – in the image of the many derelict roofless cottages found in Ireland – what it is to find oneself alone in the family house after the death of one's parents.'<sup>15</sup> The association of a derelict house with loss finds its origins of course in 'The Ruined Cottage'. In 'Lightenings I', however, while the ruination captures the sense of bereavement – 'Bare wallstead and a cold hearth rained into' – it also affords a sense of potentiality: 'unroofed scope. Knowledge-freshening wind.'<sup>16</sup> This unroofed scope evokes 'The Skylight' from the previous collection. In both works, Heaney finds that homeliness and security have been substituted for insecurity and 'scope' (with all that entails: opportunity, transcendence, freedom).

The home bereft of a parent is the subject of xxxiii in 'Squarings'. There is here also the sense of misery and desolation of the above poem: 'that morning tiles were harder, windows colder, / The raindrops on the pane more scourged, the grass / Barer to the sky, more wind-harrowed'.<sup>17</sup> Yet an element of consolation is found in the house itself, which stands as a memorial to Heaney's father:

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<sup>15</sup> Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 140.

<sup>16</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 358.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

The house that he had planned

'Plain, big, straight, ordinary, you know',

A paradigm of rigour and correction,

Rebuke to fanciness and shrine to limit,

Stood firmer than ever for its own idea

Like a printed X-ray for the X-rayed body.

The Latinate diction of these lines, which tend towards hyperbole, endows the house with a degree of grandeur, even sanctity, and contrasts with the unassuming description of the house by the father. As Heaney leaves the paternal home, 'walking out on what had been emptied out', there is a transformation of his perspective of it. Beyond its practical function, it assumes a metaphysical aspect: it 'houses' and embodies characteristics of Patrick Heaney himself, namely his asceticism and simplicity.

Heaney's final domestic elegy, in fact his final published elegy, is 'The Door was Open and the House was Dark', in memory of David Hammond, which channels grief through feelings of uncanny unhomeliness. The poem has a dream-like quality, which is established in the title and first line through the lilting pentameter of mainly monosyllabic words, and noun-adjective chiasmus. Indeed, Heaney has claimed that the poem was dreamt not written: 'The dream is just recorded in verse that rhymes. It was an extremely strange, haunting dream. One of

those dreams that marks, that you don't forget,'<sup>18</sup>. It is ambiguous, then, whether the dream-poem depicts Heaney approaching Hammond's real home, or whether this is merely a metaphorical home. In either case, but particularly so with the latter, the image of Heaney at the threshold of his friend's house is emblematic of what it is to lose someone:

The door was open and the house was dark  
 Wherefore I called his name, although I knew  
 The answer this time would be silence

Heaney calls, of course, in a vain attempt to restore or imagine things as they were. Often we find in contemporary elegies that the mourner does not turn to a spiritualised afterlife, 'the abode where the eternal are'<sup>19</sup>, as a means of redress, but seeks a restoration of homeliness. Here, however, rather than the responsive call which would show that the simple domestic reality has not been disrupted, Heaney is greeted only with silence, which generates a sense of the uncanny:

I felt, for the first time there and then, a stranger,  
 Intruder almost, wanting to take flight

Yet well aware that here there was no danger,

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Eimear Flanagan, Article on Seamus Heaney, *BBC News Northern Ireland*, 20 Sept 2010. Accessed December 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Percy Shelley, 'Adonais', *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 444.



Only withdrawal, a not unwelcoming

Emptiness, as in a midnight hangar

On an overgrown airfield in late summer.<sup>20</sup>

The de-familiarising of this familiar place is the source of discomfort and Heaney's sense that he is an intruder. The *unheimlich* is not a token of real or present danger but, as is the case here, the feeling itself can give rise to fear. This uncanny/unhomely feeling might be abstracted to represent the condition of the mourner in general. Often mourners feel that they have lost their place in the world; that the world and their environment, which were once so familiar, are now unnervingly strange.

The image of the mourner returning to the deceased's home finds a famous precedent in *In Memoriam*:

Dark house, by which once more I stand

Here in the long unlovely street,

Doors, where my heart was used to beat

So quickly, waiting for a hand,

A hand that can be clasp'd no more—

Behold me, for I cannot sleep,

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<sup>20</sup> Heaney, *Human Chain*, 82.

And like a guilty thing I creep  
 At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away  
 The noise of life begins again,  
 And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain  
 On the bald street breaks the blank day.<sup>21</sup>

Here, the house is also described as 'dark'. The adjective not only conveys the mood of mourning, but is suggestive of the obscurity that now envelops the home. A further parallel is found in the speakers' sense of transgression in returning ('a guilty thing' and 'intruder almost'), as both speakers indulgently wish to have things as they were. Yet, in Heaney's poem, there is the idea that he might enter the home once more: the emptiness is significantly 'not unwelcoming'. Given the associations of unhomeliness with grief, re-entering the home marks the beginning of redress. Once Heaney feels metaphorically at home without David – that is, to have adjusted to the lost homeliness – the work of mourning is done.

### **Douglas Dunn**

Many poems in Dunn's celebrated collection *Elegies*, written in memory of his wife Leslie, have a domestic context. We might relate this to Dunn's elegiac project, which

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<sup>21</sup> Alfred Tennyson, *The Major Works*, ed. Adam Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 208.

as Lyons notes, is centred on celebrating moments of the couple's love, their everyday happiness. Lyons contrasts *Elegies* with Hardy's poems for Emma, which are plagued by Hardy's sense of guilt. *Elegies* is an 'Ovidian...celebration of the altogether happier 'coupledom' of his relationship.'<sup>22</sup> Like Heaney's 'Clearances', personal and intersubjective experiences are the collection's subject. This collection, in its personal intimacy, raises questions about the role or situation of the reader. Clearly, the poetry is not performing a public function and the reader might feel that he or she is an unwitting voyeur. As Lyons puts it: 'what relation can he or she have to poetic recreations of personal experiences particularised to the point that we can be in no doubt that even the minutiae of detail belong to the lives, and only to the lives, of this particular poet and his wife.'<sup>23</sup> we might see the collection as an opening up of the private and domestic sphere; that is to say, Dunn envisages the reader not as an impersonal voyeur, but as a confidant, even friend.

'The Kaleidoscope', a sonnet, is characteristic of *Elegies*: Dunn recalls past domestic happiness and contrasts it with his present grief and loss. As in other domestic elegies, house and room, for their association with the deceased, become emotionally charged, quasi-sacrosanct, integral to the work of mourning:

To climb these stairs again bearing a tray,  
 Might be to find you pillowed with your books,  
 Your inventories listing gowns and frocks

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<sup>22</sup> J.M. Lyons, 'The Art of Grief: Douglas Dunn's *Elegies*', *English* 166 (1991): 49.

<sup>23</sup> Lyons, 'The Art of Grief', 47-48.

As if preparing for a holiday.  
 Or, turning from the landing, I might find  
 My presence watched through your kaleidoscope,  
 A symmetry of husbands, each redesigned  
 In lovely forms of foresight, prayer and hope.  
 I climb these stairs a dozen times a day  
 And, by that open door, wait, looking in  
 At where you died. My hands become a tray  
 Offering me, my flesh, my soul, my skin.  
 Grief wrongs us so. I stand, and wait, and cry  
 For the absurd forgiveness, not knowing why.<sup>24</sup>

The second person address creates an intimate tone; the reader feels himself, as Lyons notes, to be an intruder on a particularised experience. This sense of intrusion derives, in part, from the fact that the poem is set in the family home, their personal and private space. For Dunn, the house is the ground of mourning, where he grieves and seeks 'absurd forgiveness'.

Dunn's grief, and the period of Leslie's illness give a new aspect to ordinary domestic events. Climbing the stairs and looking in at Leslie's room becomes quasi-ritualistic, as Dunn 'waits' for something. It might also be seen as the mechanical action of the mourner, as he helplessly returns to the place of her death. Bearing the

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<sup>24</sup> Dunn, *Elegies*, 20.

tray, incidentally mentioned in the first line, also takes a new colouring. As Dunn freezes at the door of his wife's room, domestic service becomes the model for selfless sacrifice and generosity.

The idea of things taking a new aspect is, of course, alluded to in the title: the rotating tube of the kaleidoscope offers changing symmetrical patterns. In this poem, loss is the kaleidoscope. Through it, Leslie sees the many facets of her generous and caring husband: his foresight, prayer and hope. The image of the kaleidoscope as used by Dunn is an original conceit for the idea that suffering and loss bring out new or hidden aspects of one's character.

'Thirteen steps and the Thirteenth of March' concentrates on a similar subject to that of 'The Kaleidoscope': Leslie's final days at home and Dunn's domestic service. Here, the value of shared, spousal domestic moments is thrown into relief by experiences of the house as a formal place. At first, the poem recalls the visits paid by friends and relatives to Leslie and the couple's strained efforts at hosting: 'She sat up on her pillows, receiving guests. I brought them tea or sherry like a butler, / Up and down the thirteen steps from my pantry'.<sup>25</sup> The presence of guests creates a genteel atmosphere and generates a degree of artificiality or pretension, as suggested by the comparison with a butler. In such scenarios, everyone has a part to play; there is a protocol to follow. If the host is near obsequious, the guests offer platitudes and gifts with the intent of euphemising death:

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<sup>25</sup> Dunn, *Elegies*, 13.

More than one visitor came down, and said,  
 "Her room's so cheerful . She isn't afraid."  
 Even the cyclamen and lilies were listening,  
 Their trusty tributes holding off the real.

In contrast to such good-natured, but somewhat exhausting and stilted visits, Dunn sets his personal time with Leslie in the late night hours:

At night, I lay beside her in the unique hours.  
 There were mysteries in candle-shadows,  
 Birds, aeroplanes, the rabbits of our fingers,  
 The lovely, erotic flame of the candelight.

Sad? Yes. But it was beautiful also.

There was a stillness in the world. Time was out  
 Walking his dog by the low walls and privet.  
 There was anonymity in words and music.

With guests the house is a formal place, governed by accepted norms of behaviour ('Each day was duty by the clock'). By night there is the opposite of duty. The couple are at ease in each other's company, sharing cherished moments together. As so often in elegies, the domestic world here is not mundane, in the sense of boring or

routine. It is rather poignant, emotionally charged, even 'mysterious'.

If, as Tom Paulin says in his review of *Elegies*, Dunn sometimes sets grief in a context of 'agonised ordinariness'<sup>26</sup>, much of the assuagement of that grief comes through moments of rarefied ordinariness. In 'Reincarnations', Dunn's home is animated by the presence or spirit of Leslie. The poem plays on a conventional elegiac motif: the return of the deceased's spirit to the world, or to the local landscape. Milton's pastoral elegy 'Lycidas' ends with Lycidas becoming the 'Genius of the shore' who 'Shall be good / To all that wander in the perilous flood'. In 'Reincarnations', however, the new location of the deceased's spirit is the unassuming house:

She rustles in my study's palm;

She is the flower on the geranium.

Our little wooden train runs by itself

Along the windowsill, each puff-puff-puff

A breath of secret, sacred stuff.

I feel her goodness breathe, my Lady Christ.

Her treasured stories mourn her on their shelf,

In spirit-air, that watchful poltergeist.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Tom Paulin, 'Risks', *London Review of Books* 14 (1985): 23.

<sup>27</sup> Dunn, *Elegies*, 44.

The transcendental and mundane are self-consciously yoked together here – particularly in the rhyme of ‘sacred stuff’ with ‘puff-puff-puff’. If Dunn’s domestic elegies run the risk of being uncomfortably intimate for the reader, they also might risk bathos. Here, however, one suspects that any sense of bathos is intentional, as Dunn grounds conventional elegiac tropes, such as a ‘watchful poltergeist’ with the ‘real’ context of his life with Leslie.

The couple’s home after Leslie’s death is also the subject of ‘Home Again’, which at first depicts Dunn’s house bereft of her presence and then, as above, with the intimation of a ghost returning. The empty home is an image and representation of Dunn’s disturbed interior condition:

Autumnal aromatics, forgotten fruits  
 In the bowl of this late November night,  
 Chastise me as I put my suitcase down.  
 The bowl’s crystal shines and feels like frost,  
 And these have been the worst days of its life.<sup>28</sup>

Here Dunn, in an example of perspectival or intellectual sleight-of-hand, takes the literal rotting of fruit, which occurred during his absence from home, as an instance of pathetic fallacy: the domestic sphere sharing in his grief. Similarly, the literal coldness of the bowl is reimagined as partaking in Dunn’s emotional ‘frostiness’ as

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 51.



he grieves for his wife. The 'chastisement' and outburst of accusation that is imagined to be articulated by the fruit ("*pay for your negligence and disrespect*"), ostensibly directed towards Dunn's neglect of his home, is clearly a disguised means for Dunn to vent anger in the wake of Leslie's death.

Yet, as if to console her husband, Leslie's presence is felt in the home once more:

A spirit shivers in the appled air,  
 And I know whose it is. A floral light  
 Bleaches my eye with angelophanous  
 Secrets. They are more than remembering,  
 Larger than sentiment. I call her name,  
 And it is very strange and wonderful.

As in 'Reincarnations', Dunn perceives his wife's spirit in the house. In a way, then, things are as they were. 'Home Again' ends with the intimation that Dunn is once more metaphorically 'at home'. Here, as elsewhere, matters of the spirit are nested in and coloured by the domestic sphere.

### **Andrew Motion**

In the elegies of Heaney and Dunn, the house takes the pressure of, and is contorted by, the grieving mind in its need to lament and seek consolation. What was ordinarily overlooked, ignored or deemed insignificant – domestic items or events –

might now generate painful or soothing sentiments. In Freudian terms, it becomes the substitute object for deflected desire, and the home and its contents – which are often most intimately aligned with the deceased – are perhaps the most natural objects of desire. At the same time, these elegies set relatively modest terms of consolation. Dunn's elegies do not seek redress in thoughts of a spiritualised afterlife, such as the sweet societies of 'Lycidas', but in the restored domestic world. Where the trajectory of classical elegy is progressive, to heaven and a spiritual home, in the domestic elegy, we can posit, it is regressive or circular, to the house as it was. In Andrew Motion's elegies for his mother, who suffered a riding accident, there is a pronounced sense of grief as lost homeliness and they are magnetised towards thoughts of the restored home. For instance, in 'A Dying Race', which recounts the journeys Motion's father made to his wife in hospital, emotional disturbance is conveyed through a somewhat unnerving image of the childhood home:

The less I visit, the more  
 I think myself back to your house  
 I grew up in. The lane uncurled  
 through candle-lit chestnuts  
 discovers it standing four-square,  
 white-washed unnaturally clear,  
 as if it were shown me by lightning.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Motion, *The Pleasure Steamers* (London: Carcanet, 1978), 51.

The house's whitewashed and unnaturally clear façade makes it uncanny: at once recognisable and unrecognisable. Here, as in much of Motion's verse, the 'unhomely' feeling indicates that middle class security has been punctured. The contrast between the violent and powerful 'lightning' and the 'candle-lit chestnuts' further indicates that what ease of living there was, has been overtaken. Lightning hints, also, at a forthcoming emotional storm; that something is about to break and give release.

In the second stanza, emotional upset is further encoded in the appearance of home:

It's always the place I see,  
 not you. You're somewhere outside,  
 waving goodbye where I left you  
 a decade ago. I've even lost sight  
 of losing you now; all I can find  
 are the mossy steps you stood on –  
 a visible loneliness.

Moss in poetry has a fascinating connection with loneliness; Tennyson's 'Mariana', for instance, begins 'with blackest moss the flower-plots / Were thickly crusted, one

and all'.<sup>30</sup> By focusing on the uncanny (first stanza) or forlorn (second stanza) appearance of the childhood home, Motion suggests that grief is linked with a sense of domestic disturbance. Such reading of grief through the home also spares Motion a direct encounter with emotion; as he self-consciously points out in the above stanza, he cannot actually recall his father's face. 'A Dying Race' alerts us, then, as to how the house might prove a substitute object for deflected desire in the latter stages of mourning, but might in the earlier stages serve as a medium: at once connecting with, but also providing protective disconnection from, the objects of grief.

In a recent article, Iain Twiddy takes issue with the distinction made by contemporary critics of elegy between male and female domestic elegy. The male elegy, in the eyes of David Kennedy, Melissa Zieger and Celeste Schenk, is characterised by emotional suppression, renunciation of the dead and careerism, which contrasts with the writing of female elegists, which tends to assert the imminent presence of the dead and the unbroken emotional bond. Twiddy argues that such a characterisation, whilst containing an element of truth, does not tell the whole story of contemporary male elegy:

It would be unwise—and restricting—to suggest that male elegies are never burdened by internalised expectations of male behaviour, but equally it would

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<sup>30</sup> Tennyson, *The Major Works*, 11.

be wrong to suggest that those standards are historically constant and common to every male poet in his particular family dynamic, time and culture.<sup>31</sup>

To make his case, Twiddy turns towards the most 'masculine' form of elegy: an elegy written by a man for a man. Rather than renunciation or rupture as characteristic responses to the dead, Twiddy finds that 'where consolation is attained, and progress made away from the immediate pull of sorrow, it is an act of interiorisation, or continued deference that enables such a partial withdrawal.'<sup>32</sup> To further make the case that contemporary male elegies depart from the traditional code of masculine behaviour, and the oedipal framework outlined by Zieger, Schenk and Kennedy we might consider the male domestic elegy – where men elegise men from the female place par excellence, the house. As we have seen in the elegies above, the domestic context is conducive to remarkable intimacy and tenderness and, as Larkin's poem shows, this is no less the case when it comes to mourning a paternal figure. One might argue that the domestic context *feminizes* the male poet.

Beyond 'An April Sunday Brings the Snow', we could turn to Andrew Motion's sonnet sequence 'In Memory of Mervyn Dalley' as an example of the male domestic elegy. Mervyn Dalley was Motion's father-in-law. He was managing director of the Iraq Petroleum Company, and Motion's sequence – which acts as a compressed biography – pays tribute to his business and public profile. There is a

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<sup>31</sup> Iain Twiddy, 'Contemporary Male Elegy', *English Studies* 92 (2011): 664.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 677.

strong sense of deference on Motion's part towards his father-in-law: 'you are the one man I always had to live up to'.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, the sequence offers intimate, domestic insights which produce an image of the deceased that is strikingly different from his public persona. Indeed, Motion indicates that the private/domestic persona is the 'authentic' persona. In sonnet seven which describes a ghostly visitation of Mervyn Dalley to his house, 'as you were' is poignantly rhymed with 'at home here', to signify the close connection between home and selfhood. This sonnet goes on to relate Dalley's evening routine:

Look at you setting off now  
 on your evening round, wearing those weak –  
 kneed cords, that jersey with one elbow  
 out. The blob of blood on your cheek  
 is where you walked into an apple branch.  
 Never again. Tonight your head will go  
 clean through fruit and bark as you stretch  
 into the chicken shed for eggs, as you always do.<sup>34</sup>

This image of Mervyn clumsily shambling about his garden makes for a poignant contrast with the account of his ambitious career which took him all over the world. The scope of his life was once global, but in later life it was domestic; he once drew

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<sup>33</sup> Andrew Motion, *Public Property* (London: Faber, 2002), 76.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

on his intellectual and physical dexterity, but in later life he might clumsily walk into a branch; he once appeared smart in the uniform of the Royal Navy, but in later life he wore ill-fitting clothing. All this, however, is not to depict a sad decline; rather the domestic portrait conveys a touchingly soft and fallible image of the man. As in Larkin's elegy, the homely activity – fetching chicken eggs – shows the man occupying what would be considered a traditionally feminine role.

What is, however, most remarkable about these domestic elegies is their sensitivity to the relationship between domestic items and the deceased, particularly in regards as to how they reveal his nature and how they take on new significance after his death. The first sonnet, for instance, somewhat self-consciously depicts the transformation (or re-visioning) of ordinary domestic items and features, present with Dalley on his 'final afternoon'<sup>35</sup> (a newspaper, a glass of gin, a collar dove), into things which act as memorials for him and his self. In the octave Motion makes a point out of the ordinariness and insignificance of these final things: the gin is 'absolutely ordinary' the collar dove is one Mervyn had 'stopped paying attention to years back', the newspaper shows a 'plain page'. Yet, as the pluperfect tense tell us – 'what had been' – these things have changed in essence.

The volta marks and enacts transformation: after Mervyn's passing they  
 became the final proof of everything  
 you were and now could never be again –

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 73.

relics which stayed as you were carried off

all made astonishing by that...

'Relic' may express intent to present these things with a quasi-religious significance, and thus follow a trend of other domestic elegies which find a spiritual element to ordinary items. Alternatively, Motion may be using relics in a totally secular sense, merely 'things left behind' or, as he puts it, things 'which stayed'. Motion – through use of a passive construction in the last line – makes it clear that any significance these things have is not inherent in the items themselves, but is contingent on Mervyn's passing away.

In turning towards emerging natural life, the second sonnet is more conventional in its response to loss. As Stephen Regan has noted, the copper beech is a 'version of the traditional motif of nature partaking in the process of mourning.'<sup>36</sup> Yet, instead of embodying or personifying the family's grief in an instance of pathetic fallacy – like Tennyson's yew tree which, with its 'thousand years of gloom'<sup>37</sup>, is a fitting emblem for the poet's depression – the gloom of the beech is traded for new life: 'in a strange moment of inversion, the gloom of old leaves clinging to the tree is dispersed and the man's "last day" coincides with the waking of new leaves like eyes "without the gift of sight"'. The new leaves signify

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<sup>36</sup> Regan, *The Sonnet*, forthcoming.

<sup>37</sup> Tennyson, 'In Memoriam', *Poems*, 865.



'blindness in the face of what the future holds'<sup>38</sup>, but more generally the awakening evokes a common trope of classical elegy: the rebirth of a vegetation deity with which the deceased is associated<sup>39</sup>. What distinguishes Motion's use of nature, from the use of nature by classical elegists is his emphasis on particularity. It is not the natural environment *in general* which is involved with the work of mourning, but one specific tree. The breeze which works the process of regeneration is 'visible in no other trees'<sup>40</sup>, and finds only:

the copper beech  
 flourishing beneath your room  
 and, bustling through to its interior gloom,  
 hurried the whole thing inside out...

The gloom/room rhyme emphasises the link between the tree and Mervyn's residence. In this way, mourning is kept personal and intimate.

The wish for intimacy and particularity in mourning, and the neglect of conventional and religious tropes might, as I have noted, explain why many contemporary elegies take a domestic or homely setting. As I have further noted, home is popularly considered to be the place where we are most authentically ourselves. So an elegist – in an effort to preserve the memories of the deceased – will

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<sup>38</sup> Regan, *The Sonnet*, forthcoming.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 20.

<sup>40</sup> Motion, *Public Property*, 73.

naturally gravitate home. The final sonnet in the sequence is remarkable for its consciousness of this fact:

I went upstairs and saw where you had died:  
 the skeleton of your dismantled bed;  
 your Waugh and Wodehouse shelves; your snaps  
 of Liza and the children (that unfocused one  
 of me and Jani on your sofa, caught  
 half-drunk, and half-asleep, and all at sea).  
 Your last things and your first things gathered in.  
 The things which make a life then stay behind.<sup>41</sup>

There is something touchingly appropriate about the choice of authors – both a generational fondness for Waugh and Wodehouse and a reminder of comic drollery amidst sadness. In the context of Mervyn's passing, these unassumingly accumulated and miscellaneous items become enduring memorials. The tonal contrast between the informal parenthetical aside and the following biblical-sounding line registers the dual import now held by the room's contents: their ambivalent, or transitional status.

### **Paul Muldoon**

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<sup>41</sup> Motion, *Public Property*, 77.

If grief in the above elegies is rendered through feelings of unhomeliness set in contrast to feelings of homeliness, in Muldoon's domestic elegies that unhomeliness is more specifically the grotesque or absurd. If the poems discussed eschew consideration of physical death, Muldoon's elegies are magnetised to thoughts of the posthumous body. It appears, then, that mourning in Muldoon's domestic elegies is not the deflection of desire, or the recollection of salubrious memories, but rather an attempt by the middle-class suburban poet to come to terms with the 'reality' or literality of death - burial and the decomposition of the body . To this end, Muldoon employs his characteristic black humour.

The early elegy, 'The Coney', is organised around the movement from domestic life to an absurd/grotesque vision of death. At first the elegy seems to be in the mould of a Heaney poem for the son's deference towards his father and the father's practical manner: 'The scythe would dull / so much more quickly in my hands/than his'.<sup>42</sup> But Muldoon startlingly subverts this Heaneyesque laudation with a surrealistic metamorphosis as the whetstone that Muldoon was using to sharpen his scythe, 'entirely disappeared / and a lop-eared / coney was now curled inside the cap'. This leads to an unnerving conclusion, where the coney dives into a swimming pool in which he presumably dies:

The moment he hit the water

he lost his tattered

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<sup>42</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 152.

bathing-togs

to the swimming-pool's pack of dogs.

'Come in'; this flayed

coney would parade

and pirouette like honey on a spoon:

'Come on in, Paddy Muldoon.'

And although I have never learned to swim

I would willingly have followed him.

'The Coney' combines the quotidian and mundane with the gruesome. Such a combination may bespeak the effect of loss on the griever's world: a pleasant and cherished domestic world is contorted by the knowledge of death. Furthermore, the gruesome image of the flaying might be a sublimated allusion to the corpse's decomposition. The nature of the vision, hallucinatory and spontaneous, is perhaps indicative of how unnerving thoughts of death are suppressed and released by the subconscious. It is as if the poet is trying to return imaginatively to a warming memory of his father, but cannot help but envisage his dying.

The combination of the homely and grotesque is a feature of 'The Fox'. As in 'The Coney' Muldoon affectionately contrasts his unfamiliarity with rural life with his father's practical sensibility. Startled by the squawking of geese one night, Muldoon recalls that he looked out of his window and thought of his father who 'lay

/ three fields away / in Collegelands graveyard<sup>43</sup>, in ground 'so wet you weren't so much buried there as drowned'. This induces a haunting vision of the father in his death-repose:

I see your face  
 above its bib  
 pumped full of formaldehyde.

You seem engrossed,  
 as if I'd come on you  
 painstakingly writing your name  
 with a carpenter's pencil

on the lid  
 of a mushroom-box.

You're saying, *Go back to bed.*

*It's only yon dog-fox.*

The shift to the present continuous tense in the fourth stanza stresses the endurance of the image or memory of the father. It is an image which combines the domestic and familiar with the grotesque, providing room for a particularly gothic joke:

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 166.

'engrossed' – while referring to the father's painstaking writing – through its etymological root of 'bulky, or swelling' refers back to the image of face 'pumped full of formaldehyde'. Likewise, the comfort that is brought from the verb 'lay', which suggests 'both an emotional and physical proximity'<sup>44</sup>, is undercut by the black humour in the idea of the body not buried but 'drowned'.

If the poem contrasts Patrick alive and dead, the other principal contrast is between Muldoon's educated and domestic sensibility, and his father's rural vocation. Muldoon evokes his father's illiteracy, but in the end Patrick recovers his authority through his sound advice derived from his knowledge of the land. His words, like much else in the poem, are at once familiar and ghostly.

'Oscar' features the dynamic of 'The Fox': at home in bed, Muldoon is awakened and then receives a vision of his parents in their burial plot:

Be that as it may, I'm awakened by the moans

not of the wind

nor the wood-demons

but Oscar MacOscair, as we call the hound

who's wangled himself

into our bed: 'Why?' 'Why not?'

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<sup>44</sup> Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 135.

He lies between us like an ancient quooft  
with a snout of perished gutta –  
percha, and whines at something on the roof.

I'm suddenly mesmerised  
by what I saw only today: a pair of high heels  
abandoned on the road to Amherst.

And I've taken off, over the towns of Keady

And Aughnacloy and Caledon –

*Et in Arcadia ego* –

to a grave lit by acetylene  
in which, though she preceded him  
by a good ten years, my mother's skeleton

has managed to worm  
its way back on top of the old man's,  
and she once again has him under her thumb.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 328-329.

Like 'The Fox', the poem oddly blends domestic and gothic thoughts, in the image of the mother's skeleton managing to 'worm' its way on top of her husband's. The verb 'worm' contains in itself the homely and gruesome by at once alluding to the mother's household dominance, her ability to put Patrick 'under her thumb', and her body's decomposition. On one level this mixing of sentiment appears to express the speaker's desire for a lost domestic life in the face of the unpleasant reality, or on another level it may be seen as a novel and post-modern way of dealing with death. Whereas traditional responses to grief seek for an afterlife, Muldoon's poetry offers ironic jokes.

Indeed, the speaker of 'Oscar' makes a point of his pragmatism. The opening negations – 'not of the wind', 'nor of the wood-demons' – respectively dismiss the forces of nature or any mystical presences, for the homely and bathetic: 'Oscar MacOscair'. Nonetheless, the speaker is mysteriously possessed by an image – 'I'm suddenly mesmerised' – and travels beyond his homely context, taking off 'over the towns of Keady / And Aughnacloy'. Kendall suggests that the high heels are a 'potent symbol for *The Annals of Chile*, a volume which yearns for and at times senses the continuing proximity of an elusive woman, whether she be Mary or the poet's mother.'<sup>46</sup> But also due to the sense of absence that they conjure, they obviously intimate death and propel the speaker to his mother's grave. 'Oscar', then, like Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* acknowledges the ubiquity of death even in a place, such as one's bed, where one might feel most secure from it.

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<sup>46</sup> Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, 222.



'The Soap-pig', an elegy for Michael Heffernan who was a colleague and friend of Muldoon, follows 'The Fox' in *Meeting the British*. Like other contemporary elegies, the poem memorialises the deceased through a personal, domestic item, an item that we would not normally consider to be the object of elegiac sentiment, such as the pots of jam in Larkin's elegy for his father. Yet, even taking into account this shift in elegiac sensibility towards the incidental and mundane, the fact that Muldoon's mind rests on the soap-pig is inescapably absurd. Indeed, Muldoon seems to acknowledge this himself, suggesting a degree of involuntary association between the bar of soap and Heffernan:

All I could think of  
 was his Christmas present  
 from what must have been 1975.  
 It squatted there on the wash-stand,  
 an amber, pig-shaped  
 bar of soap.<sup>47</sup>

In the final stanzas, however, we sense a degree of self-consciousness regarding the purpose and value of the soap-pig in relation to Heffernan. At first, Muldoon assumes a thoroughly literalist approach: 'It's a bar of soap'. However, the

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<sup>47</sup> Muldoon, *Poems 1968-1998*, 167.

seemingly conclusive clause, which comes at the end of the stanza, and which would ordinarily take a full-stop, runs into, and is qualified, by the next stanza:

now the soap-sliver  
 in a flowered dish  
 that I work each morning into a lather  
 with my father's wobbling-brush,  
 then reconcile to its pool of glop  
 on my mother's wash-stand's marble top.

Critics have interpreted the soap-pig's erosion in various ways. Jonathan Hufstader argues that it serves as an analogy for the 'final end...of Heffernan, of us all.'<sup>48</sup> While Matthew Campbell, however, argues that 'the object diminished over time, just as the memory of the lost one might. The soap-pig becomes a figure for a feeling, and figure and feeling become reduced the further they travel in time from their original intimacy.'<sup>49</sup> Yet, Campbell's point fails to take into account the fact that although the soap-pig is now a soap-sliver, it is recalled in its original form. To draw on an important word used in the poem, the soap-pig's *quidditas* – its 'soap-pigness' – is not contingent on its form (at present, of course, it is not in a pig shape), but on the speaker's memories of it as a soap-pig; similarly, Haffernan's *quidditas* lies not in his

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Hufstader, *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish Poetry and Social Violence* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 170.

<sup>49</sup> Matthew Campbell, 'Muldoon's Remains' in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 174.

physical and fragile body, but in the memories of Muldoon and others. Arguably, then, the elegy is, through the soap-pig bar of soap, trying to come to terms with the issue of how someone might live on, after the decay of the body. As in 'The Coney', unpalatable and unnerving thoughts are managed obliquely and through a somewhat outlandish medium.

### **Thom Gunn**

The house as a site of trauma is most striking in Gunn's elegies 'Enough' and 'The Gas Poker', from his final collection *Boss Cupid*. The act of returning to the deceased's home and room, and the revisualisation of the past, are not acts of positive memorialisation, but rather an attempt to come to terms or overcome the trauma of her death. For Freud, trauma is characterised by repetition-compulsion: the obsessive recreating or reimagining of a traumatic event. Freud regarded repetition-compulsion as an odd pattern of behaviour, as it contradicted the natural disposition for pleasure. The indulgence of such behaviour was explained, then, by the mastery of the trauma it afforded.

Both of Gunn's elegies take as their subject matter events or experiences which are commonly regarded as psychologically disturbing, if not traumatic. 'The Gas Poker' considers the suicide of Gunn's mother and how Gunn and his brother (both children at the time) reacted to it. 'Enough' focuses on the ascetic and lonely final years of an anonymous woman. The elegies are both products of repetition-compulsion: that is, fixation with trauma and the wish to master it. The pained,

anguished tone of 'Enough', as the speaker recreates the unhappy final years, accords with the idea that repetition-compulsion flies in the face of the pleasure principle.

From the outset, 'Enough' is emphatic in its sense that something difficult must be confronted. The use of deixis – 'here'<sup>50</sup> which is used five times in the poem – and the imperative 'look' creates the impression of self-forced confrontation with an uncomfortable reality. There is also a sense here of evidence being presented, as if Gunn is involved in self-accusation. The speaker, then, becomes himself the focus of vengeful anger, which Sacks notes as one of the conventions of the English elegy.<sup>51</sup>

The recreation of the mother's final years and the speaker's self-accusation seemingly reach such an unbearable pitch that he cuts the elegy short with 'Enough. Enough'. While it is intuitive to read the final 'enough', which gives the poem its title, as the exclamation of one who finds that the trauma exceeds his emotional capacity (equivalent then to 'stop, stop'), we might, alternatively, regard it as sign that the speaker has achieved what he wanted: the direct encounter with what was traumatic ('enough' then is equivalent to 'it is complete').

The 'site of trauma' is not specifically the woman's room, but her bed. Throughout the poem, Gunn empirically reads the bed to discern what he can about the woman. Its firmness is related to her own emotional toughness: 'she liked the padded firmness, as un giving / As she herself'. Similarly, he takes the groove in the

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<sup>50</sup> Thom Gunn, *Boss Cupid* (London: Faber, 2000), 31.

<sup>51</sup> Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 21.

bed as a sign of her stubbornness: 'She always kept to the one side of the bed, / And here her body's obstinate impress / Bore down the surface she curled nightly on'. In contrast, then, to many of the elegies above which reconfigure domestic space with emotion and spirituality, Gunn's elegiac account is brutally inductive, drawing conclusion from what he sees, which accords with the desire to confront the reality of the woman's life and death.

The significance of the bed, of course, derives from the fact that it presents the hidden but authentic reality which may have been concealed from Gunn. On the surface, the woman may have appeared to have lived a happy and healthy life, attending the gym 'three times weekly to keep fit'; yet, the private, domestic sphere tells a different story: 'here she lay sour, unneeding and unneeded'. It is not too much to say, then, that moving into the domestic sphere in 'Enough' correlates with a move into psychological interiority.

Whereas the revisiting in 'Enough' is literal, in 'The Gas-Poker' it is imaginative, as the speaker recalls his mother's final night. The opening incredulous self-questioning depicts a man trying to come to terms with something: 'forty-eight years ago /- Can it be forty-eight / Since then?'<sup>52</sup> Gunn struggles to believe that the suicide happened such a considerable amount of time ago, as the terrible event remains fresh and vivid in his mind – a characteristic of traumatic fixation. Gunn's mother took her life by blocking her bedroom door with a bureau and inhaling gas from the gas-poker:

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<sup>52</sup> Gunn, *Boss Cupid*, 10.

She had blocked the doorway so,  
To keep the children out.  
In her red dressing-gown  
She wrote notes, all night busy  
Pushing the things about,  
Thinking till she was dizzy,  
Before she had lain down.

Here, we have the sense of physical entrapment which features throughout Gunn's verse (and in 'Enough', also, 'like an aging rabbit / On stale straw, in its hutch') and which is invariably an analogy for psychic entrapment or existential limitation. Furthermore, the physical action reflects her mental condition: the mother's hectic rearrangement of her room captures the chaos in her mind. The poem's 'punchy' trimeter lines evoke the mother's intensity of thought and restlessness, while distant rhymes evoke her dizziness and disorientation.

Of all things in the mother's room, Gunn isolates the eponymous gas-poker, the instrument of suicide. This appears to be at the heart of his unresolved grief, the trauma which his mourning is trying to undo:

One image from the flow  
Sticks in the stubborn mind:  
A sort of backwards flute.

The poker that she held up  
 Breathed from the holes aligned  
 Into her mouth till, filled up  
 By its music, she was mute.

The transformation of the poker into a flute helps work through Gunn's grief in two ways. Firstly, and most obviously, it casts the suicide positively, as a kind of achievement, rather than as a loss or negation. It becomes an affirmation of existential will, the mother's final performance, and also alludes to the artistic talent Gunn inherited from her. On another level, we are aware that the metaphor *itself* – that is, the linguistic medium – is a means of working through grief. The gas-poker is clearly an obsession for Gunn, a metonym for the suicide. By 'poeticising' it, Gunn takes hold of it, and brings it under his control, and has it metaphorically in his grasp.

### **Derek Mahon**

Mahon's notable 'domestic' elegies take a different approach towards domesticity than that found in the poets above. The poets above uninhibitedly pore over domestic items and personal homely memories. In their elegiac work there is a magnifying of the home sphere. Nothing is too trivial to be imbued with sentimental value. Mahon, however, we might say queries the domestic. House and home fail to become the means for tender or sentimental evocation. Vast vistas of time and space

are brought to bear on Derek Mahon's domestic elegies, 'A Curious Ghost' and 'A Refusal to Mourn', with the effect of diminishing the domestic sphere. In 'A Bangor Requiem', one of Mahon's elegies for his mother, her domestic world is regarded dispassionately as merely a means of empirically reviewing the mother's life.

'A Refusal to Mourn', about the last years of an unnamed shipyard worker, depicts his home-life not as one of personal flourishing or as a ground for the expression of individuality, but as a life of loneliness and tedium:

All day there was silence  
 In the bright house. The clock  
 Ticked on the kitchen shelf,  
 Cinders moved in the grate,  
 And a warm briar gurgled  
 When the old man talked to himself,<sup>53</sup>

As Haughton notes, the poem evokes 'Mr Bleaney': 'the mute phenomena measure time and his minimal life, as Larkin's Mr Bleaney's room does.'<sup>54</sup> We might also think of Frost's 'An Old Man's Winter Night', bearing in mind the strong sense of isolation in both poems. This is domestic memorial in the meanest manner. Rather than a honeyed or sympathetic domestic portrait, we are given a cool, detached and objective account of how the deceased lived.

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<sup>53</sup> Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, 79.

<sup>54</sup> Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, 111-112.



This nonchalant tone receives some justification or explanation in the following 'telescoping' of human history. The shipyard worker belongs to just one of the many epochs of man, and eventually his possessions, and even the earth that he knew, will vanish:

And his boilers lie like tombs  
In the mud of the sea bed  
Till the next ice age comes  
And the earth he inherited  
Is gone like Neanderthal Man  
And no records remain.

Such a sweeping view of human history, with the awareness of the destruction of the human species with the next ice-age makes any sentimentalism for the shipyard worker's later domestic circumstances appear misplaced and naïve. The domestic elegy is consumed by two larger senses of loss: the loss of the generation of which the shipyard worker is a metonym and the loss of the humanity itself. All this, however, is not to suggest that the speaker does not value the individual shipyard worker, that the refusal to mourn derives from a sense of worthier losses. Rather, the poem's nihilism places the shipyard worker on a continuum of loss, where he is one instance of the general 'rule' of loss which defines human existence. Arguably, his isolated life and death in his 'small farmhouse' mirrors the destiny of the human

species in its totality, which is fated to an isolated demise on the 'third rock from the sun'. The refusal to mourn in this instance is perhaps, then, synonymous with an inability to meet the scope of mourning: envisaging in the particular passing, the general and total death.

In 'A Curious Ghost' it is not a sense of history but a sense of geography which impinges on the domestic sphere. The elegy for Mahon's father-in-law contrasts with most of the elegies looked at so far, as it does not look inwards to the home, but rather outwards. Mahon's father-in-law was a ship's captain, and his adventurous character is the focus of the elegy. The deceased's house, where the poem is set, is not used as a means of personal or intimate evocation, as in 'In Memory of Mervyn Dalley'. Rather, it is deprecatingly contrasted with the wider world of the captain's voyages.

The poem opens with a striking contrast of domesticity and a far-flung location, underscoring the captain's connection with the 'masculine' adventure: 'while your widow clatters water into a kettle / You lie at peace in your tropical grave'.<sup>55</sup> This causes some embarrassment on Mahon's part, as he reflects on his own unadventurous nature: 'Lost voyager, what would you think of me, / Husband of your fair daughter but impractical?' The clunky and inelegant impractical / kettle rhyme is in keeping with Mahon's self-reproach for his own impracticality. Considering Mahon's self-consciousness about his 'short-comings', the image on the mantelpiece is as much a supervisory and suspicious presence as it is a reminder of a

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<sup>55</sup> Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, 61.

lost relative: 'you stare from the mantelpiece, a curious ghost / In your peaked cap,  
as we sit down to tea'.

Yet, in the second verse-paragraph – which acts somewhat as a sestet in a sonnet – Mahon points to possible similarities rather than differences between himself and his father-in-law:

I think we would have had a lot in common –

Alcohol and the love of one woman

Certainly; but I failed the eyesight test

When I tried for the Merchant Navy,

And lapsed into this lyric lunacy.

When you lost your balance like Li Po

They found unfinished poems in your sea-chest.

The revelation that Mahon's father-in-law wrote poetry and committed suicide serves to complicate, and somewhat undermine, the portrait of a stoical sea-captain delivered in the previous verse-paragraph. Indeed, we now find the epithet 'curious' to be justified. We see him as a man who had to balance two different worlds, the practical life of the navy and his own rich inner life, which is metaphorically represented by the 'sea chest'. The euphemistic description of the suicide as a loss of balance portrays it as momentary lapse in the father-in-law's practical nature.

In light of the poem's ending, we see how the 'tropical grave' turns from

being an emblem of his adventurousness to an indication of the 'lostness' which he experienced. By playing on the phrase 'at sea' meaning 'confused' – 'A sea captain who died at sea, almost' – Mahon strikes associations between the captain's voyaging and his mental disorientation. In contrast to 'In Memory of Mervyn Dalley', where Dalley is shown to be comfortable voyaging or at home, the father-in-law in Mahon's poem appears to be settled neither at sea nor in the domestic sphere.

Commenting on 'A Bangor Requiem', Hugh Haughton notes that 'compared to Heaney's elegy for his mother in "Clearances", Mahon's poem is curiously impersonal.'<sup>56</sup> This we might attribute, in part, to the ways in which the two poets respectively poeticise the familial house. Whereas in 'Clearances', the house and homely memories are filled with spiritual immanence or are honeyed in the poet's mind, Mahon's approach to hearth is almost academic: 'Mahon takes us on a sociological tour of his mother's bungalow'<sup>57</sup> and 'its concern is not so much with grieving as with documenting the "junk chinoiserie and coy pastoral scenes" of the mother's Bangor bungalow.'<sup>58</sup>

In the poem's empirical perspective, Maisie Mahon's house proves valuable as it becomes a place of recognition for Mahon, where he discovers the intellectual and artistic connections between himself and his mother: 'you too were an artist, a rage-for-order freak / setting against a man's aesthetic of cars and golf / your

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<sup>56</sup> Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, 303.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen Regan, 'Irish Elegy After Yeats', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 593.

ornaments and other breakable stuff'.<sup>59</sup> Yet, overall, the elegy takes a dim view of domestic life. Mahon takes aim at it from various angles. Suburban life is one of artificiality (and not the positive artificiality of art) 'inactive since your husband died, your chief / concern the 'appearances' that ruled your life'; secondly, it is itself mundane and tedious: 'you knew the secret history of needlework, / bread-bin and laundry basket awash with light'. Furthermore, through an allusion to Plato's analogy of the cave, Mahon characterises the home as a place of delimited experience and knowledge: 'the figure in the *Republic* returns to the cave, / a Dutch interior where cloud shadows move'. Somewhat egoistically, the mother's home world is invested in value only through its relation to Mahon's poetic development. The poem's final passage, which depicts Mahon driving south into the Republic of Ireland, and relates what he sees, 'ranch houses, dusty palms, blue skies of the republic', lets the familial home, literally and metaphorically, fade into the distance.

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<sup>59</sup> Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, 226.

*Chapter Eight: Hotels and Hospitals*

*This is home really, a place of warmth and light,  
a house of artifice neither here nor there*

- Derek Mahon 'At the Shelbourne'<sup>1</sup>

If contemporary poetry has taken unprecedented interest in matters of the home, it has turned its attention to other home-like spaces, such as the hotel – a place of temporary residence. Temporary residence is inscribed in the word 'hotel', which derives from the late Latin *hospitale* meaning, 'guest house' or 'inn'. The hotel concerns this study because, as a quasi- or pseudo-home, it works as a point of contrast with one's authentic home, revealing the contemporary 'spectrum of living' of which the private, personal house is a part. Most notably, we find that the hotel offers a degree of freedom through the anonymity it provides, freedom not found at home where one is bound by familial or social obligations. D.J Vanlennep, in his essay on the hotel room, considers the freedom it provides:

It [the hotel room] teaches me a mode of existing which when I am at home I do not know or only barely know [...]. In this room for which I do not bear any responsibility, in that it does not indicate my past or my future, in that I merely

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<sup>1</sup> Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, 199.

appear in it as a number in an arbitrary series, I suddenly become freed of my obligations and traditions. I find myself transformed through the anonymity of the hotel room [...]. Here I am less directly determined socially in my actions than I am at home where I have to deal with my room as a room which is also for others, a room into which other members of the family have more or less a right to enter and to co-inhabit[...]And even though I do not behave differently than I do in my bedroom at home, my actions in my hotel have a freedom, a 'looseness', a 'being free from everything' which I do not find in this form at home.<sup>2</sup>

Concomitant, however, with this sense of freedom, is the possibility of what might be termed ontological instability. The futureless nature of hotel living, combined with the looseness identified by Vanlennep, can lead to aimless individuals, unsure of where they are going, or individuals lacking that wholeness of being which accompanies home life, where one is grounded in a familial and social network (the positive aspect of obligations and traditions), and where one has a space to construct a future life-narrative. The discussion which follows will hinge on this dual nature of the hotel (and hotel room): the positive potential for adventure and re-freshened perspectives, and the potential for the diminishment or fracturing of the self.

Alongside poems of hotel space, this essay will consider hospital poems. In many respects the hospital resembles the hotel: it is also a temporary residence

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<sup>2</sup> D.J. Van Lennep, 'The Hotel Room', *Phenomenological Psychology: The Dutch School*, ed. Joseph Kockelmans (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 213.

(hospital has the same etymological root in *hospitale*) and might also, particularly the mental hospital, become a quasi or pseudo home. Here, also, one suffers a strong sense of isolation, and relationships, in whatever form they take, are generally unsatisfactory or truncated. The hospital, of course, does not offer the same sense of adventure, but it might facilitate new perspectives and realisations. Furthermore, it is also a futureless space – namely because in the hospital one is ‘taken out of life’, literally and metaphorically – and so we find similar existential pressures exerted on one’s self and being. Most importantly, in the hospital, as in the hotel, the authentic home and its homeliness are ghostly presences.

The motifs and themes of ‘hotel poetry’ are anticipated in MacNeice’s ‘The Brandy Glass’. It is largely taken to be a poem about experience: it is a poem that does not simply ‘praise process and flux, but that tries to capture the quick of an experiential moment.’<sup>3</sup> Critics have paid little attention to the fact that it is an excellent evocation and portrait of the alienating quality of hotel space. Furthermore, I would argue that the poem’s attention to the experiential moment is borne from this context.

Only let it form within his hands once more –

The moment cradled like a brandy glass.

Sitting alone in the empty dining hall...

From the chandeliers the snow begins to fall

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<sup>3</sup> O’Neill, *Twentieth Century British and Irish Poetry*, 111.



Piling around carafes and table legs  
 And chokes the passage of the revolving door.  
 The last diner, like a ventriloquist's doll  
 Left by his master, gazes before him, begs:  
 'Only let it form within my hands once more.'<sup>4</sup>

The depiction of the diner alone in an empty dining hall bespeaks a condition of isolation, anticipating the line from Larkin that 'the dining room declares / A larger loneliness'<sup>5</sup> in 'Friday Night in the Grand Station Hotel' The surrealist image of snow falling and choking the hall is suggestive of the speaker's coldness, the chilliness of isolation, and more obviously the sense of desperation which overtakes him. Self-division and other kinds of ontological instability are associated with hotel-space and this is the case here: the simile of the ventriloquist's doll depicts the diner as pathetically inactive, incapable of personal agency. This correlates with his insistence on the 'moment': the loss of a sense of a life-narrative, and sense of active being, means that the experiential moment becomes the ultimate goal.

The first appearance of a hotel in Larkin's oeuvre comes in 'Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair', which is similarly attentive to the mood and atmosphere of the hotel. The poem is regarded as a transitional work as it foreshadows Larkin's mature style, governed by the influence of Hardy. For Janice

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<sup>4</sup> MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, 92.

<sup>5</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 80.

Rossen, it is the nature of revelation in 'Waiting for breakfast, while she brushed her hair' which connects the poem with Larkin's mature verse: 'in his later post-Yeatsian work, Larkin tends to stay inside buildings. His distinctive sense of spiritual revelation often occurs while he is indoors looking outside.'<sup>6</sup> Yet, it is not only the dynamic of the poem (looking outdoors from indoors) but its context which marks it out as precursor. In setting the poem in a hotel, Larkin chooses one of those modern, urban buildings – often regarded as non-places – which appear throughout his poetry, most notably in the final great poem 'The Building', set in a hospital.

The hotel is, at first, regarded as a bleak and unpromising environment; 'Drainpipes and fire-escape climbed up / Past rooms still burning their electric light: / I thought: Featureless morning, featureless night.'<sup>7</sup> Like other hotel tenants, the speaker appears to be possessed by apathy: after a 'featureless' romantic encounter, he has no future prospects and nothing offers itself from his surroundings. That adjective 'featureless' gets to the heart of the hotel experience: the hotel is what Larkin will later say of the hospital: 'ground curiously neutral'.<sup>8</sup>

Yet following this, the speaker receives a visitation from his muse and a salve for his apathy:

the lights burnt on,

Pin-points of undisturbed excitement; beyond the glass

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<sup>6</sup> Janice Rossen, *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

The colourless vial of day painlessly spilled  
 My world back after a year, my lost lost world  
 Like a cropping deer strayed near my path again,  
 Bewaring the mind's least clutch. Turning, I kissed her,  
 Easily for sheer joy tipping the balance to love.

Significantly, the return of inspiration and reconnection with the lost world is rendered through a pastoral simile of hunter and deer. The urban hotel context is either elided or hyperbolically transformed: the electric lights becoming 'pin-points of undisturbed excitement'. That the 'tender visiting' is depicted in a pastoral manner bespeaks Larkin's desire to overcome the sense of separation from nature which, as Janice Rossen notes, emerges after his 'conversion' to Hardy.

This moment of spirituality, however, is complicated: 'just as dramatically [...] the poem then proceeds to question its own "tender visiting", implying that such emotional excitement cannot be sustained, since it arises unexpectedly out of moments of loss and separation. There is a further suggestion that the inspiration afforded by this 'tender visiting' can be directed towards love or poetry but not both.'<sup>9</sup> This is evident in the closing question when the speaker addresses the muse: 'will you refuse to come till I have sent / Her terribly away, importantly live / Part invalid, party baby, and part saint?' By the end, the poem has moved from an apathetic view of a hotel yard, to dramatic questioning and self-reflexion. This might

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<sup>9</sup> Regan, *Philip Larkin*, 93.

be indicative of how a hotel room – a place where one is temporarily dislocated and out of one's normal course of life – may induce moments of clarity and insight.

'Friday Night in the Grand Station Hotel' is one of contemporary poetry's most widely known poems about hotel space. Here, the hotel is contrasted with home, and is so characterised as a distinctly unhomely place:

Light spreads darkly downwards from the high

Clusters of lights over empty chairs

That face each other, coloured differently.

Through open doors, the dining-room declares

A larger loneliness of knives and glass

And silence laid like carpet. A porter reads

And all the salesmen have gone back to Leeds,

Leaving full ashtrays in the Conference Room.

In shoeless corridors, the lights burn. How

Isolated, like a fort, it is –

The headed paper, made for writing home

(if home existed) letters of exile: *Now*

*Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages.*

Tom Paulin makes sense of the hotel's striking unhomeliness by linking it to a colonial outpost: 'the hotel is like a fort in some nameless colony or like a lighthouse above darkening waves. The poem displaces an English provincial city and makes its author momentarily into an exile. This bold deployment of *ostraneniye* which transforms the Victorian hotel into a place of mystery and danger is essentially colonial rather than European.'<sup>10</sup> Paulin is right in highlighting the mystery and danger of the hotel and in suggesting that the speaker is in some manner exiled, but arguably it is the hotel's association with an incipient and partially understood modernity, rather than its historical analogy, which proves to be the source of its mystery. Larkin's hotel appears to be what Marc Auge calls a 'non-place'. Non-places, Auge suggests, are a symptom of super-modernity: they are faceless spaces, beyond history, relations and notions of identity.<sup>11</sup> Thoughts of emptiness and absence in 'Friday Night' symbolically represent the impersonality of the hotel; at times they even become concretely real, as with 'silence laid like carpet' or 'shoeless corridors'. Furthermore, the paradox of light spreading darkly evokes the oppressiveness of the hotel, even as it accommodated. That home, then, to which the exiled speaker writes is an era extinguished by the modern sensibility; an era without non-places.

Vanlennep suggests that the hotel might be a ground for sentiments of

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<sup>10</sup> Tom Paulin, 'Into the Heart of Englishness', *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan (London: Macmillan, 1997), 173-4.

<sup>11</sup> 'If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place'. Marc Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 77-8.

freedom and adventure: 'the hotel room is the room of *adventure*, of whatever is still left of this in our twentieth century.'<sup>12</sup> One can feel this adventurous quality in Heaney's poem 'The Guttural Muse'. The poem relates a night when Heaney, from his hotel room, watched a crowd of young revellers leaving a disco. His desire to swim 'in touch with soft-mouthed life'<sup>13</sup> is inspired by the freedom of the hotel space, where our actions have 'a freedom, a 'looseness', a 'being free from everything', which 'I do not find in this form at home'. Sentiments of adventure and excitement are felt in the first verse paragraph:

Late summer, and at midnight  
 I smelt the heat of the day:  
 At my window over the hotel car park  
 I breathed the muddied night airs off the lake  
 And watched a young crowd leave the discotheque.

The time of the year and time of the day are associated with revelry, but at the same time they are suggestive of a narrowing window of opportunity for adventure; the summer is drawing to a close and dawn is approaching. The rest of the poem builds on this sense of 'lateness'. The phrase 'muddied night airs' whilst sensuous and rich, might like 'heat of the day' intimate something sordid.

If the hotel space generates sentiments of adventure, it is of course a distinctly

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<sup>12</sup> Van Lennep, 'The Hotel Room', 213-214.

<sup>13</sup> Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 162.

alien and impersonal space. In a hotel room, one often feels isolated. This in part accounts for Heaney's wish for company, and the comfort he finds in watching the young people outside his room:

Their voices rose up thick and comforting  
 As oily bubbles the feeding tench sent up  
 That evening at dusk – the slimy tench  
 Once called the 'doctor fish' because his slime  
 Was said to heal the wounds of fish that touched it.

Now the young crowd, instead of creating a scene of energy and excitement, provide familial warmth to Heaney alone in his hotel room. They recreate a sense of home in the unwarm environment of the hotel car-park. Such homeliness is here conveyed through the pastoral imagery of 'oily bubbles' and the 'feeding tench', which stands in contrast to the featureless 'hotel car park'.

Yet, of course, Heaney remains detached from that group and the poem ends with an image of him isolated but yearning to join them:

A girl in a white dress  
 Was being courted out among the cars:  
 As her voice swarmed and puddled into laughs  
 I felt like some old pike all badged with sores  
 Wanting to swim in touch with soft-mouthed life.

Heaney at this moment evokes the speaker in 'Sailing to Byzantium' who is similarly isolated from the young 'in one another's arms'. Whereas the speaker in Yeats's poem is resentful and spurns the celebration of sensuality to be gathered into the 'artifice of eternity'<sup>14</sup>, here, by contrast, the out-of-touch figure yearns for that 'soft-mouthed life'.

By the end of 'The Guttural Muse', Heaney cuts a pitiful and lonely figure. This is the case with the residents of the hotel in Douglass Dunn's 'In the Small Hotel'. This poem underscores the idea that hotel life represents a 'falling short' from normal living. The lives of the residents are diminished, incomplete and unfulfilled. They are unwanted and deceived: 'the cheated at their favourite separate tables, / Inactive thirds of tender adulteries'<sup>15</sup>. As in other poems on hotels, the lights of the hotel are foreboding or unwelcoming rather than illuminating: 'they stare into a light that is always evening'. This evening light suggests that the residents are in the twilight of their lives. In addition to this, the speaker implies that they have lost autonomy, or the will to action: 'They sit like chessmen / At their white round squares, waiting to be moved'. The passive construction here evokes the line from MacNeice's 'Brandy Glass': 'The last diner, like a ventriloquist's doll / Left by his master, gazes before him'. Hotels are places for aimless people, unsure of what they

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<sup>14</sup> Yeats, *W.B. Yeats: The Major Works*, 95.

<sup>15</sup> Dunn, *New Selected Poems*, 29.



want, those metaphorically paralysed in life. The cause of this is attributed to betrayal by others.

People we did not want our could not keep,  
 Someone did this to them, over and over  
 Wanting their unhappiness until it happened.

They are betrayed through adultery and infidelity, which are alluded to in the adverbial phrase 'over and over', recalling the earlier description of the residents as 'inactive thirds'. The 'cheated' retire to the hotel in search of fleeting and purchased romances:

Love comes trotting and stops to hold on a shoe.  
 To go away with her! To drive the limousine  
  
 With contraceptives in the glove compartment  
 Beside the chocolates and packaged orchid...

This passage is of course sardonic, particularly in its sarcastic description of the female partner, wooed with gifts no doubt purchased from a petrol station, as 'love'. The tragedy of the small hotel lies in the fact that the residents are terminally lonely and isolated, although they live and interact with others:

Remote and amatory, that style of life

In which no one offends or intrudes.

They might as well live in their wardrobes.

If the hotel is a dislocated space, conferring freedom from responsibility on its tenants, providing a ground for adventure, this might also make it a place of 'irrelevancy', housing people for whom no one feels responsible or concerned. Ironically, the isolation which they sought to escape in the wider world is confirmed and perpetuated in the small hotel.

If, as we have seen in previous chapters, the childhood home is a place of unified consciousness, hotels in Walcott's oeuvre are, by contrast, places associated with self-division or 'ontological instability'. We may argue that hotels are innately conducive to existential crises: as temporary or ersatz homes they throw into relief one's displacement. In poem XI from *Midsummer* the action of looking into a mirror in a motel bathroom is turned into a conceit exploring the speaker's sense of self-alienation: 'my double, tired of morning, closes the door / of the motel bathroom; then, wiping the steamed mirror, / refuses to acknowledge me staring back at him'.<sup>16</sup> By giving the mirror image the narrative voice and personality, Walcott suggests that the 'double' [the real person] is the diminished or inferior self. So much is implied in the image of the double shaving with 'dispassionate care / like a barber lathering a corpse'.

That the double refuses to recognise himself, rather than fails to recognise,

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<sup>16</sup> Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems: 1948 -1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 475.

intimates that shame or guilt is at the heart of the issue. Further on we learn that the speaker is experiencing post-coital guilt 'after the dolorous industries of sex'. Unlike the childhood home, which is governed by a sexless maternal presence, the motel was shared with a sexed and anonymous woman, who has now left: there are 'empty cupboards where her dresses / shone'. Haunting this motel, then, is the presence of a home of innocence, where the self was unfractured.

The sense of lost childhood innocence recurs in another hotel based poem (III) from the same collection:

At the Queen's Park hotel, with its white, high-ceilinged rooms,  
 I reenter my first local mirror. A skidding roach  
 in the porcelain basin slides from its path to Parnassus.  
 Every word I have written took the wrong approach.  
 I cannot connect these lines with the lines in my face.  
 The child who died in me has left his print on  
 the tangled bed linen, and it was his small voice  
 that whispered from the gargling throat of the basin.<sup>17</sup>

Once more, looking into a hotel mirror occasions a moment of angst as Walcott perceives that he is self-divided. Even the hotel's grandiosity and elegance cannot obscure the memory of childhood – a period of coherence and authenticity – which

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 471.

throws into relief the present feelings of self-betrayal and falsity.

In the 'Arkansas Testament', which probes the racial politics of the USA and life as a black American, sentiments of estrangement and self-division are imparted from and written into the motel in which Walcott stays. Lying on his bed, Walcott feels homesick for 'islands with fringed shores / like the mustard-gold coverlet'.<sup>18</sup> Unconvincingly, he tries imaginatively to incorporate into the impersonal room aspects of the West Indies – 'a roach crossed its oceanic / carpet with scurrying oars' – but the unwelcome reality is unignorable: 'I studied again how glare / dies on a wall'.<sup>19</sup>

The formalities of checking-in bring realisation of the multiplicity of selves, which develops across the stanzas that follow:

At the desk, crouched over Mr –  
 I had felt like changing my name  
 for one beat at the register.  
 Instead, I'd kept up the game  
 of pretending whoever I was,  
 or am, or will be, are the same.

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<sup>18</sup> Walcott, *Selected Poems*, 178.

<sup>19</sup> John Thieme reads these lines thus: 'the emptiness of the motel room becomes a metonym for the spiritual vacuity of the contemporary South'. John Thieme, *Derek Walcott* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999), 181.

Due to the fact that Walcott is out of place, because the motel is not his 'true' or native home, such existential thoughts arise: his identity is not a given fact or recognised, but must be proven. This, however, introduces an element of freedom – if he so wished Walcott could redefine himself.

Hotels are significant in Walcott's 2004 book-length poem, *The Prodigal*, which charts his travels around Europe and eventual return to St Lucia. Hotels in the poem are associated with self-imposed exile. But also for Walcott, staying at an opulent hotel, such as the one he stays at in Zermatt, marks his entrance into white European culture – the other half of his divided self:

He stood outside bright windows filled with music,  
 faint conversation through the mullioned panes  
 and crab-clenched chandeliers with pointed flames  
 above the animate and inanimate faces  
 of apparitions whose features matched their names,  
 all gentlemen with some big-buttressed dames,  
 a fiction in a fiction. The door could open,  
 he would be more than welcome.<sup>20</sup>

In the knowledge that he may enter if he wishes, Walcott poignantly lingers outside, hesitating before he commits to his other half. The hotel appears inviting, with

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<sup>20</sup> Walcott, *The Prodigal* (London: Faber, 2006), 11.

'bright windows filled with music', and sophisticated; however, as the passage progresses the narrator observes elements of unreality in the 'inanimate faces', 'apparitions' and the 'fiction' of hotel life. This conforms with theories of hotel space, which describe it as a place of unreality or an ersatz world. Despite the opulence and wealth of the hotel, the narrator senses hollowness at its core.

Hesitating further, Walcott eventually enters the hotel, seduced by the comfort it promises:

He turned his head  
 away this time, and walked back towards the road.  
 The scene was just like something he had read.  
 Something in boyhood, before he went abroad.  
 But cowardice called to him. He went back inside  
 secure and rigid in their printed places  
 all of the dancers in that frozen ballroom.

We might call this false comfort, as more is lost in the hotel than the comfort gained. The positive adjective 'secure' is qualified by the negative adjective 'rigid'. 'Frozen' underscores this idea of rigidity whilst alluding to the winter environment of the hotel. Through this adjective, then, Walcott says much about the hotel experience, where one is detached from reality – 'frozen' in a fantasy – which is, however,

lifeless and cold.

The paradoxical and ambivalent nature of the hotel is articulated and explored in Michael O'Neill's 'Adelphi Dreams'. On one level the Adelphi hotel is regarded as a welcome abode, and on another it is perceived as chillingly impersonal. The sense of security and relief found in the hotel is expressed in the opening stanza:

In at last, inside that flagged structure,  
 more liner than hotel, ready to slide  
 down Lime Street towards the Atlantic...<sup>21</sup>

The adverbial phrase 'in at last' conveys the speaker's relief at entering the hotel. He depicts its imposing form in the phrase 'flagged structure' and in the comparison with ship-liner. The notion that the hotel might be a ship about to set sail on the Atlantic is an allusion to its historical use as a major arrival and departure point for ocean liners during the early twentieth century, but it might also be suggestive of the sense of adventure which one feels in a hotel as discussed earlier.

Yet in the following stanzas the speaker finds himself undermined, even 'ontologically unsettled':

But the botch of my arrival – the woman

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<sup>21</sup> O'Neill, *Wheel*, 18.

at reception, unconvinced by my claim

to be myself, dispatching

proof-seeking faxes – said, or so I took

it to say, ‘You’re back in a city

where you don’t count and can’t belong

and never will.’

Whilst conveying the speaker’s sense that he does not fit in his home city, this passage reiterates the idea that the hotel is a distinctly impersonal space, which is all the more troubling for the fact that it offers itself as a personal domain. The speaker’s relief, as of a person finally returning home, is checked and undercut by the receptionist’s hostility, which brings to light the fact that neither the city nor the hotel is home. It is a place where he is not recognised, as the playful and literally nonsensical phrase ‘unconvinced by my claim / to be myself’ makes clear. In other instances, this might afford a pleasing and liberating sense of anonymity. Here it stresses the speaker’s isolation and dislocation.

Seemingly taking this all in his stride, the speaker then makes an overt contrast between the hotel room and his true home:



Good, too,

to take my flu to bed and not lift up  
a book or the phone, to beguile the wait

by tracing the steps that had led,  
year by year, from 'home' a few miles away  
to a soundproofed room, a room with a desk,

two chairs and a nip of despair...

Here the speaker plays on the irony that the childhood home is so close yet so far away. The awareness of home makes the description an impersonal and sterile hotel room particularly poignant, as does the euphemistic 'nip' which understates that despair.

Hearing the fire alarm sound, and finding no-one exiting the hotel ('The corridor was all tranced unconcern. / Not a soul materialised'), the speaker goes back to bed, careless of what might happen:

Ah well,

I thought, plumping the pillow, if one must  
return to ashes, why not here, quick flames

leaping higher than dreams of the sea.

Such playful nonchalance about one's being and fate we might ascribe to the 'detached' nature of the hotel room, which temporarily disconnects us from others and our present responsibilities. In his soundproofed room, unaware of any other souls the speaker experiences something like solipsism and has heightened existential awareness. Rather than precipitating any form of crisis, this appears to induce cool indifference.

## **Hospital**

Perhaps the earliest poetic account of hospital space is given in W E Henley's sequence 'In Hospital'. The work is based on Henley's time as a patient at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh from the summer of 1873 to the spring of 1875. As Edward Cohen has noted, the subject of the sequence is really the hospital, rather than Henley's subjective experience of illness: 'Henley's subject in this series was not so much himself as the hospital and the hospital experience.'<sup>22</sup> This is confirmed by Henley's process of composition: 'on a little desk affixed to his bed, he began to transform his hospital episode into poetry. In his sonnet portraits he selected a single principle – the nurse's "sly grey eyes", the surgeon's "rare, wise smile"...to capture each member of the hospital cast. In his sonnet sketches he chose grim details -

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<sup>22</sup> Edward H. Cohen, 'The Second Series of W.E Henley's Hospital Poems', *The Yale University Library Gazette* 78 (2004): 129.

“corridors and stairs of stone and iron” – to signify the reality of hospital life.’<sup>23</sup> The sequence foreshadows other poems of hospital space in several of its motifs: the alien and impersonal quality of the hospital, the patient’s disorientation and confusion, and the unhomeliness of the hospital ward.

In the earlier poems, the hospital building and its interior are most vividly realised. The first poem, ‘Enter Patient’, describes the hospital from the outside, and Henley’s first steps in its interior:

The morning mists still haunt the stony street;  
 The northern summer air is shrill and cold;  
 And lo, the Hospital, grey, quiet, old,  
 Where Life and Death like friendly chafferers meet.  
 Thro' the loud spaciousness and draughty gloom  
 A small, strange child – o aged yet so young! –  
 Her little arm besplinted and beslung,  
 Precedes me gravely to the waiting-room.  
 I limp behind, my confidence all gone.  
 The grey-haired soldier-porter waves me on,  
 And on I crawl, and still my spirits fail:  
 tragic meanness seems so to environ

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 129.

These corridors and stairs of stone and iron,  
Cold, naked, clean — half-workhouse and half jail.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly the hospital is a place which is unremittingly dispiriting. But its dispiriting quality is related to its manner of design and architecture, rather than its association with illness and death, as we might expect. It is clearly an unhomely space: intimidatingly large and totally impersonal, bearing no sign of humanity, which gives it a cold and hard air. This is keenly felt in the phrase 'cold, naked, clean': its asyndeton underscores the hospital's pragmatism, whilst the alliterative 'c' sound captures its harshness. This sonnet is also imbued with a sense of isolation, which patients may experience in hospital. Henley's relationship with the young injured girl and the soldier-porter is completely pragmatic: they direct him to where he needs to go, but he must bear his ailment on his own.

The unhomeliness of the hospital is further articulated in the poem 'Interior', where Henley takes another view of his surroundings: 'The gaunt brown walls / Look infinite in their decent meanness. / There is nothing of home in the noisy kettle, / The fulsome fire'. As in the poetry of hotel space, hospital poems are often underwritten by the absence of home. Henley's observation bespeaks clearly his yearning for home. This is not only a yearning domestic comfort, but the sense of settlement one has there. As they are, the patients are in a kind of 'no-man's land'; the hospital is an intermediary place connecting life with death: 'the patients yawn /

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<sup>24</sup> 'W.E.Henley's 'In Hospital', <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/henley/inhospital/contents.html>.

or lie as in training for shroud and coffin’.

Lowell’s *The Dolphin* provides portraits of the psychiatric institute in which Lowell was hospitalised during the months of July and August, 1970. The hospital, like the Royal Infirmary, is a chilling environment where the patient feels himself to be in a medial or limbo-like state. Lowell’s experience of hospitalisation is unnerving also due to the medication which he was required to take, as Axelrod notes: ‘The hospital sections represent the nadir of *The Dolphin* as sequence. Medicated and confused, Lowell is unfree, unable to perceive correctly, unable to imagine, out of his mind and his world.’<sup>25</sup> The first poem in the sequence, ‘Shoes’, draws to the fore the existential thoughts that arise in a hospital. On his ward, Lowell considers those who approach death, ‘the house of rest’<sup>26</sup>, reluctantly ‘buffooning, to-froing on the fringe of being, / one foot in life, and little right to that’, and embraces, however coldly, his own mortality:

I see two dirty white, punctured tennis-shoes,  
 empty and planted on the one-man path.  
 I have no doubt where they will go. They walk  
 the one life offered from the many chosen.

The tennis-shoes, worn and torn, are a metonym for the individual, perhaps even the muddied soul, on its path to its creator. Eventually they will follow the path towards

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<sup>25</sup> Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art*, 222.

<sup>26</sup> Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 650.

death. That mortality is envisioned through the unassuming and prosaic tennis-shoes underscores Lowell's sensitivity, at this period in his life and in this environment, towards his own death. We think of Larkin's 'Aubade' which reads death into the wardrobe.

The unhomeliness and disorientating nature of the institution (induced by medication) is portrayed in the sixth sonnet, 'Double Vision':

I tie a second necktie over the first:  
 no one is always waiting at the door,  
 and fills the window...sometimes a Burmese cat,  
 or maybe my Daughter on the shell of my glasses.  
 I turn and see persons, my pajama top  
 loose-knotted on the long thin neck of chair –  
*make yourself at home*. The cat walks out –  
 or does it? The room has filled with double-shadows,  
 sedation doubles everything I see....  
 You can't be here, and yet we try to talk;  
 Somebody else is facing in your face,  
 we haggle at cross-purposes an hour.  
 While we are talking, I am asking you,  
 "Where is Caroline?" And you *are* Caroline.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Lowell, *Collected Poems*, 652.

The sonnet opens with faux-normality but the absurd is present in the idea of 'no one' waiting at the door or tying a second necktie. In the institution it is possible to have merely the semblance of a normal life, but at the heart, life there is confused. The sense of unhomeliness is rendered conspicuous in the italicised interjection: despite the fact that Lowell tries to make himself at home in the hospital, he can never be at home there. Like the hotel, the hospital precipitates a feeling of existential uncertainty. This, of course, relates to the fact that they are both temporary and impersonal residences. Any impression of homeliness developed in hospital or hotel is inevitably an illusion. In certain moments, the reality breaks through that home is elsewhere, that hospital and hotel are essentially foreign spaces, and a sense of dislocation arises. In this sonnet, the perceptual confusion induced by the sedation symbolises the greater ontological confusion Lowell experienced during his hospitalisation: true reality was obscured from him, and he remained in a limbo-like state, unable to differentiate between illusion and reality, radically unsure of himself and his surroundings.

Derek Mahon's 'Dawn at St Patrick's', which describes his period of convalescence at a mental health hospital in Dublin, bears a degree of similarity to Lowell's 'Waking in the Blue', an autobiographical poem describing Lowell's stay at Mclean's psychiatric hospital. Both poems are written in a wry and candid manner, and indeed Mahon makes clear the connection between the two poems in his reference to the locked razors of Bowditch hall, mentioned in Lowell's poem. The

sense of unfamiliarity, strangeness and *unheimlich* of the hospital in 'Dawn at St Patrick's' is conveyed not through a grim and gloomy tone – as we find in Henley's poem – but rather through humorous observation:

We have remained upright –  
 though, to be frank, the Christmas dinner scene,  
 with grown men in their festive gear,  
 was a sobering sight.<sup>28</sup>

Playing on two senses of the word 'sobering', (something conducive to serious thoughts and, in the literal sense, recovering from intoxication) Mahon intimates that it is precisely this strangeness and unhomeliness of the hospital that facilitates recovery from substance addiction. A Christmas spent with motley crew of strangers dressed in festive gear would increase any patient's desire to recover and return to normality.

Sobering becomes the governing principle of the rest of the poem, as Mahon turns to reflect on his personal situation – on 'what brought me to my present state' – and then widens that to consider the general human condition:

Light and sane  
 I shall walk down to the train,  
 into that world whose sanity we know,

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<sup>28</sup> Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, 151.



like Swift, to be a fiction and a show.

The clouds part, the rain ceases, the sun

casts now upon everyone

its ancient shadow.

The philosophising here – that what we take for normality might be regarded as widely accepted insanity – is not particularly profound and would jar in any other of Mahon's poems. But here it is effective. Mahon is speaking at this point, not as a Mahon the poet, behind his 'sea-lit, fort-view desk', but as Mahon the man recovering in an asylum; in which case, such well-worn truths provide a means of reorientation, and restabilising the self<sup>29</sup>. Like the hotel in the hotel poems discussed above, 'Dawn at St Patrick's' shows that the hospital – another building which detaches an individual from the ordinary course of life – might provide a welcome space of reflection on one's own situation and one's environment. The hospital is interesting in terms of design and architecture. A new extension, which is the 'real hospital' is attached to the original eighteenth century architecture, which serves now as the administrative block. In contrast to the elegant and formal original architecture – 'Georgian windows shafting light and dust' – the extension is casual and calming:

But the real

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<sup>29</sup> Hugh Haughton aptly notes that '[it] is about a dawning sense of what it might be like to emerge from psychic dark'.

hospital is a cheerful  
 modern extension at the back  
 hung with restful reproductions of Klee, Dufy and Braque.  
 Television, Russian fiction, snooker with staff,  
 a snifter of Lucozade, a paragraph  
 of *Newsweek* or the *Daily Mail*  
 are my daily routine.

The hospital appears to be more like a youth hostel, and there appears to be an element of playful mockery in Mahon's description of it. The conspicuous adjectives 'cheerful' and 'restful' draw our attention to the effort spent in making the hospital a comfortable place and innocuous place. It is, perhaps, a little too innocuous. A snifter of whisky or wine is replaced with a snifter of Lucozade; that energy drink was probably the hardest substance Mahon was allowed. This sense of infantilising is continued in the scene of grown men dressed in their festive gear and stresses the sense of rehabilitation. The hospital/asylum is where patients are metaphorically reborn.

Thom Gunn's *The Man with the Night Sweats*, which eulogises friends who died from AIDS, features poems which depict chilling hospital scenes, where Gunn's friends slowly pass away on their wards. It differs from the above poems in that the 'hospital poems' are elegies and are written from the perspective of the visitor, not the patient. Here also a happy domestic world ghosts and contrasts with the hospital

environment. The scenes depicting Gunn helplessly observing the deterioration of a friend on a hospital bed are all the more affecting for the fact that they contrast with the numerous love poems of a couple in bed. As if to make the contrast unavoidable, Gunn opens the collection with one such poem, 'The Hug', which recounts Gunn's feeling of security when in bed and embracing his partner: 'I only knew / The stay of your secure firm dry embrace'.<sup>30</sup> What proves to be unsettling about the hospital environment for Gunn is its truncation of human and physical contact: the sense of isolation of both the patient and his friend. The act of Charlie Hinkle (himself suffering from AIDS) climbing into the hospital bed of a friend in 'Memory Unsettled' is ameliorative, and momentarily overcomes the impersonality imposed by the hospital space:

Once when you went to see  
 Another with a fever  
 In a like hospital bed,  
 With terrible hothouse cough  
 And terrible hothouse shiver  
 That soaked him and dried him,  
 And you perceived that he  
 Had to be comforted,

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<sup>30</sup> Gunn, *Collected Poems*, 407.

You climbed in there beside him  
 And hugged him plain in view,  
 Though you were sick enough,  
 And had your own fears too.<sup>31</sup>

Hinkle's bold act was an effort to domesticate the hospital environment: the conspicuous verb 'hugged' – which takes a metrical stress – recalls the collections opening poem, and its domestic love.

Hinkle's gesture is a token of humanity in a place which, in bringing people towards death, is literally dehumanising. In 'Still Life', which recounts Larry Hoyt's final days, Larry loses his personal and human characteristics:

I shall not soon forget  
 The greyish-yellow skin  
 To which the face had set:  
 Lids tight: nothing of his,  
 No tremor from within,  
 Played on the surface. <sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 479.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 470.

Allan Noseworthy, the subject of 'Lament', the longest poem in the collection, suffers a similar fate. The loss of an energetic personality and vigour accounts for much of the poem's lamentation: 'you improvised on your delight'<sup>33</sup> Gunn says, nostalgically recalling Allan's happy-go-lucky character. Yet, if the hospital is the ground for such a miserable decline, Gunn finds moments of redemption and fulfilment there – not found in the other hospital poems of the collection.

The first account of the hospital environment defines it as a place of lifelessness, or unwilled asceticism:

I'd never seen such rage in you before  
 As when they wheeled you through the swinging door.  
 For you knew, rightly, they conveyed from  
 Those normal pleasures of the sun's kingdom  
 The hedonistic body basks within  
 And takes for granted – summer on the skin,  
 Sleep without break, the moderate taste of tea  
 In a dry mouth.

Allan's anger at being taken into the hospital is not so much a consequence of thoughts or fear of death, as the knowledge that he is being detached from life. If broadly speaking the outside world is a space of activity, the hospital is one of

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<sup>33</sup> Gunn, *Collected Poems*, 465.

inactivity. The capacity to make existential choices and to sensually appreciate the world – so vital to Gunn and his friends – is taken from Allan. He is consigned to a kind of death-in-life, which comprises sensual poverty ('moderate taste of tea') and loss of agency ('sleep without break'). Being in hospital, Gunn suggests, is a death itself.

Indeed, Gunn later underscores this notion by putting Allan on a different ontological plane, that limbo-like state of the other poems:

You had gone on from me  
 As if your body sought out martyrdom  
 In the far Canada of a hospital room.  
 Once there, you entered fully the distress  
 And long pale rigours of the wilderness.

The hospital room is a 'far Canada', as there one feels as if one is a far-flung location, removed from the ordinary course of life. Gunn's metaphor also conveys the impression that the room is an overwhelming, unknown territory (which is continued later in thoughts of wilderness). It is, in a way, a kind of frontier, a space of metaphysical exploration.

Gunn suggests that part of Allan's struggle during hospitalisation is to establish his impersonal hospital room as a homely space, a space of living and life:

Grabbing at detail

To furnish this bare ledge toured by the gale,  
 On which you lay, bed restful as a knife,  
 You tried, tried hard, to make of it a life  
 Thick with the complicating circumstance  
 Your thoughts might fasten on.

If, as we have noted in earlier chapters, a homely space is one that reciprocates our self – taking an impression of it and then returning it back to us – then to make a space homely is to leave an imprint of oneself on that space. Allan's efforts to do so are undermined by the fact that to make any form of life in such circumstances is a challenging task, when there is the knowledge that at any moment that life might be taken.

Yet, by the end of the poem, it is not a fleeting sense of life but death which proves to be Alan's achievement: 'You made local arrangements to the bed / And pulled a pillow round beside your head. / And so you slept, and died, your skin gone grey, / Achieving your completeness, in a way'. These lines strike a curious balance between the homely and transcendental: as Alan yields to death this is rendered in a strikingly peaceful and prosaic manner. In accepting death, Alan felt at home in the alien hospital environment, and achieved the closure he was inevitably working towards. The need for achievement is worked into the poem's form. Heroic couplets are normally associated with narrative verse, rather than elegiac work. Here, their narrative momentum contributes to the idea of Allan's hospitalisation as a

'difficult, tedious, painful enterprise'.

The idea that a hospital might be a space for positive revelation finds its most striking expression in Patrick Kavanagh's 'The Hospital', which describes a hospital ward where Kavanagh was treated for lung cancer. Those qualities of the hospital which are commonly regarded as alienating, chill and impersonal, however, become the surprising object of Kavanagh's love. Yet this love is a product of the ward itself:

A year ago I fell in love with the functional ward  
 Of a chest hospital: square cubicles in a row  
 Plain concrete, wash basins – an art lover's woe,  
 Not counting how the fellow in the next bed snored.  
 But nothing whatever is by love debarred,  
 The common and banal her heat can know.  
 The corridor led to a stairway and below  
 Was the inexhaustible adventure of a gravelled yard.  
 This is what love does to things: the Rialto Bridge,  
 The main gate that was bent by a heavy lorry,  
 The seat at the back of a shed that was a suntrap.  
 Naming these things is the love-act and its pledge;  
 For we must record love's mystery without claptrap,  
 Snatch out of time the passionate transitory.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Penguin, 2005), 217.



The sonnet plays on the idea that the ward is a distinctly unlovable place, being functional and plain. Kavanagh's love for it then is all the more surprising and puzzling. In its celebration of the common and banal, the sonnet recalls MacNeice's 'Snow', which also finds inexhaustible adventure and variety in ordinary things. Such love might be attributed to the sense of mortality which arises on a hospital ward and which then causes Kavanagh to seize life. The love in 'The Hospital' is certainly the love of one who has quite literally received a new lease of life. Only he could find an 'inexhaustible adventure' in a gravelled yard.

The most considered poetic exploration of the hospital is probably Larkin's 'The Building'. The speaking voice portrays it as a quizzical and not fully comprehended place. Part of the hospital's mystery and unnerving quality derives, of course, from the fact that it is a bridge between life and death: a place where our deepest fears are realised and a place of what is ineffable and unknown. The speaker's awe and apprehension at the hospital building, then, is a transferred awe and apprehension of death.

The fact that the building is never named as a hospital, but is referred to only in the title as the building and through analogy to other buildings – such as a hotel or airport lounge - serves to establish a pervasive sense of mystery. Part of Larkin's strategy in employing a faux-naïve speaking voice is to re-present the hospital, so much euphemised, so that we grasp again the import of the place; so that we look

directly at the fear and suffering that it harbours. The imperative and deictic 'see' compels us to such a consideration:

For see how many floors it needs, how tall  
 It's grown by now, and how much money goes  
 In trying to correct it. See the time,  
 Half-past eleven on a working day,  
 And these picked out of it; see, as they climb  
 To their appointed levels, how their eyes  
 Go to each other, guessing...<sup>35</sup>

As in W.E Henley's poem, an element of unhomeliness contributes to the sense of unease in the hospital. In the second stanza, for instance, Larkin likens the waiting room to an airport lounge:

There are paperbacks, and tea at so much a cup,  
 Like an airport lounge, but those who tamely sit  
 On rows of steel chairs turning the ripped mags  
 Haven't come far. More like a local bus,  
 These outdoor clothes and half-filled shopping bags  
 And faces restless and resigned...

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<sup>35</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 85.

An airport lounge is another of those places which Marc Augé would term a 'non-place': a place which cannot be defined as 'relational, historical or concerned with identity.'<sup>36</sup> Larkin's simile stresses the impersonality of the waiting room, its pure functionality. At the same time it points to the fact that the patients will be going on a journey of sorts.

In such an impersonal space, the patients lose their identity, themselves becoming somewhat impersonal: 'Humans, caught / On ground curiously neutral, homes and names / Suddenly in abeyance'. Addressing the patients as humans draws to the fore the sense of human vulnerability and decline which pervades the poem: the physical failure of the human body which is the source of much worried metaphysical speculation. But it also draws to our attention the loss of personhood, which is here located in home and name.

If the hospital is curiously neutral, its other defining characteristic is its isolation from the ordinary course of life as indicated by the speaker's somewhat dramatic apostrophe:

O world,  
  
Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch  
  
Of any hand from here! And so, unreal,  
  
A touching dream to which we all are lulled  
  
But wake from separately.

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<sup>36</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places*, 77-8.

If the hospital is physically part of the world, it is set on a different ontological plane. It is where people wake from the dream of life to the ineluctable truth of one's own mortality. This is where the hospital provides a vital function: it removes the illusions we develop through the course of our lives: 'In it, conceits / And self-protecting ignorance congeal / To carry life, collapsing only when // Called to these corridors'. The hospital then, as Andrew Motion notes, offers a backhanded consolation: 'the hope, of course, is not that death will be everlastingly withheld [...] but that it will be kept temporarily at bay and that they will have time and suitable circumstances in which to prepare themselves to meet it.'<sup>37</sup> 'The Building' is a poem about the human condition: our eventual confrontation with our own mortality and so the poem is punctuated with generalising statements applicable to all people ('a touching dream to which we all are lulled'; 'all know they are going to die'). Yet, even as the poem acknowledges that all in the hospital share a common experience of death – 'this new thing held in common makes them quiet' – it also stresses that, unsettlingly, this experience is lived individually and in isolation. We wake from the dream 'separately'; patients are singled out and become the curiosity of other patients: 'their eyes / Go to each other, guessing; on the way / Someone's wheeled past, in washed-to-rags ward clothes: / They seem him, too.'

The hospital, as characterised in 'The Building', is the antonym of the house.

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<sup>37</sup> Andrew Motion, 'Philip Larkin and Symbolism' in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan (London: Macmillan, 1997), 34.

The house is for life; the hospital is for death. The house is a place of sociability; the hospital is an asocial and functional. The house is where we express and develop selfhood – the hospital is where individuality and identity disintegrate; it ‘dulls to distance all we are.’<sup>38</sup> Hotel and hospital, then, are those ersatz homes where the unified self, fostered in the original or authentic house, is either split or diminished.

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<sup>38</sup> Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, 64.

### *Conclusion*

Broadly speaking, the domestic poetry covered in this thesis is animated either by an impulse towards reification, even mystification, or by its counter-impulse: to let domestic scenes and items dwell in their quotidian domesticity. The former is most noticeable in domestic elegy and poetry of the childhood home. The pressure and processes of mourning – namely, the redirection of ‘deflected desire’ – and the seminal and formative years of childhood charge the domestic sphere with new import and significance, making it at times sacrosanct, as in Dunn’s elegies for his wife, or the site of metaphysical or abstract truths, as in Heaney’s Mossbawn poems. The impulse to dwell on the quotidian quality of domesticity is most striking in poetry of domestic love and marriage and domestic poetry which meditates on political or historical events. In the former, a quotidian domestic context serves to develop a sense of authentic love, and conveys the day-to-day feelings of a romantic relationship, rather than points of elevated passion which are traditionally the subject of love-poems. In the latter, day-to-day domesticity might be celebrated or deprecated: celebrated as it might be regarded as the happy end of political or social travails, and deprecated as, especially for the male poet, it highlights the poet’s privilege and a sometimes embarrassing disengagement from activism in the wider, public sphere.

Yet, this dichotomy does not accurately account for all the poems discussed. There are those poems which blend both impulses. Motion’s ‘Anne Frank Huis’, for

instance, whilst implicitly reflecting on the speaker's privilege, his own peaceable and ordinary domestic life which Anne was denied, and which she nonetheless attempted to simulate, also imbues the Dutch home with a kind of humanistic sacredness. It resembles a site of pilgrimage, where an individual experiences moral growth as he or she connects with Anne's tragic life. Larkin's elegy for his father, which gracefully lyricizes the father's left-over jam, stops short of any reification as Larkin refuses any notions of transcendental consolation. Instead, the kitchen in which the poem is set is cast in a sweetly-melancholic glow.

The chapters on poetry of domestic architecture and poetry of hotels and hospitals show that the house has associations with subjectivity, self-hood and 'ontological unity'. In many poems which contrast the natural environment with an interior scene, the domestic sphere is, implicitly or overtly, a correlative to individual or – as in Hughes's 'Wind' – collective subjectivity. The relationship between house and mind is not only analogical. The house, like any other building, influences the condition of being of its inhabitant(s). As a familiar and personal place, it imbues a sense of safety and is the source of comfort which, however, can quickly convert to a sense of limitation and confinement. In the poetry of hotels and hospitals, the psychological import of the house is felt obliquely. These ersatz and temporary 'homes' – which are associated with anonymity, freedom and self-division – point, by contrast, to the security and self-unity of the 'authentic' home.

The large part of the domestic poetry covered is reflective of, or a product of, humanistic thought which has grown and developed in the West in the post-war

decades. Humanism is reconstructed existentialism, notable for its privileging of self-fashioning and individualism and its mistrust of conventional religion and all that entails, such as doctrine, the numinous, and notions of afterlife. Explorations of the self are conspicuous in poems of the childhood home, which often trace personal characteristics, values and ideas of the adult poet to the formative family home. Such poetry departs from a Wordsworthian review of formative childhood years in that it is not predicated on an interest in something over and above the self – communion with nature, for instance – but is precisely a genealogy of the individual. Poetry of domestic love and marriage celebrates enduring and unassuming relationships, and depicts love not as something mysterious and inexplicable, but as the deep, and often hard-won, sympathy. Domestic poems that are preoccupied with political and historical events display the ‘humanistic’ consciousness; that is, a consciousness which registers and laments the injustice and suffering borne by others, yet is often ambivalent and unsure about its own relation to such injustice and suffering. It is in domestic elegies that the humanistic ethos is most prevalent. In regards to the work of mourning, contemporary poets have exhibited a strong inclination to depart from or reinvent religious rites of mourning. To put it simply, there is a greater stress on authenticity and idiosyncrasy in mourning, and less recourse to the well-worn and impersonal rites of religion or tradition. Furthermore, consolation in a heavenly afterlife is traded for nostalgia and imaginative evocations of the deceased. The house and its contents serve this humanistic method of mourning.



It is, however, possible to overstate the contemporary humanistic ethos as a source of domestic poetry. House and home will always be a natural object of poetry as, to draw on an ancient idiom attributed to Pliny the Elder, 'home is where the heart is'. The emotional significance of domestic items and domestic spaces is perhaps most famously illustrated in Penelope's trial of the marriage-bed in *The Odyssey*, in which Odysseus proves his identity to her by revealing the secret of its design: the bed is impossible to move as it is carved from an olive tree. It is not only constitutive of their relationship, insofar as it reunites them, but it is also symbolic and representative of that relationship as it is something exclusive to them, something that only they know and share. In fact, the former depends on the latter: it is as an 'inter-subjective' item between the two that the bridal-bed works to facilitate the reunion. Furthermore, as a firm and immovable item the bridal-bed acts as a literal metaphor of the firm and unchanging nature of the relationship between Odysseus and his wife.

The various 'aspects' of this thesis – love, childhood, politics, the relationship of interiority and exteriority, death and mourning – are fundamental to contemporary poetry of domesticity, but are by no means the only way into domestic poetry. We might consider a study organised around physical properties and rooms of the home (like Auden's 'Thanksgiving for a Habitat') – the attic, cellar, windows, thresholds and so-on. Bearing in mind such disparate poems as 'Ned Skinner', 'High Windows', 'Mr Bleaney', 'The Skylight' and sonnet IX of the Glanmore sequence, we might argue that looking through windows is associated

with literal and metaphorical broadening of scope which might, in certain instances, serve to undermine certain established beliefs and values. An account of alternative or experimental domestic poetry would also be valuable. Mahon's 'The Drawing Board' undermines the conventional approach to domesticity, which predicates the significance of house and home items on the resident, by speaking from the perspective of the drawing board and in making it dominant in the item-human relationship: 'You think I am your servant but you are wrong – / The service lies with you...I am here to receive your homage in dark silence.'<sup>1</sup>

As the final chapter shows the significance of domesticity and house in contemporary poetry extends beyond the four walls of the home. As a site of origin and beginning, the house is the means by which we comprehend all buildings and other places of residence. In the Western tradition the quality of home-life, 'homeliness', has become synonymous with various abstract concepts such as security, simplicity, comfort, familiarity and even peace. If notions of the house prove useful in understanding hotel and hospital, they also provide a way into those other spaces (and non-spaces) of modernity which contemporary poets increasingly choose as their subject: offices, motorways, the waiting lounges of train-stations and airports.

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<sup>1</sup> Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, 116.

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