The emerging order of the poem: a critical study of John Montague's poetry, 1958-1999

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A Critical Study of John Montague's Poetry, 1958-1999

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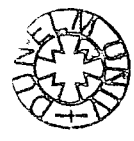

Lied und Gedicht und Bild sind anders als die anderen Dinge…
Sie *sind* nicht. Sie *werden* jedesmal wieder.
(Rainer Maria Rilke)

Abstract

This thesis explores the achievement of the contemporary Irish poet John Montague, concentrating on his major works published from the fifties to the nineties. Montague's themes comprise not only Ireland and history, but also love, family, environment, the power and limits of poetry, the addressing of death and boyhood memories. Through close analysis of single poems and main sequences, the study attends to aesthetic, intertextual, psychological, historical and biographical issues. Its particular emphasis is on how Montague's language opens up ways of considering such issues. My readings try, therefore, to re-enact the subtle becoming and shifting that take place in individual poems and in his work as a whole. In order to illuminate the processes at work in Montague's poetry, the chapters of the thesis are split into some that discuss themes and others that focus on volumes.

Chapter one shows how Montague's concern with poetry surfaces in his work. It draws on poems from various stages in his career; the thesis also returns in subsequent chapters to Montague's addressing of poetry. The second chapter outlines Montague's concern with exile and land in *Forms of Exile* and *Poisoned Lands*, and with family and love in *A Chosen Light* and *Tides*. Chapter three argues that Montague uses the journey as a structural device throughout *The Rough Field.* The fourth chapter concentrates on Montague's treatment of his family: the father in *The Rough Field, A Slow Dance* and *The Dead Kingdom* and the mother in *A Slow Dance* and *The Dead Kingdom,* which is read as the climax of Montague's return to family members. The fifth chapter analyses his main love-sequence, *The Great Cloak*, examines how his re-contextualisations of poems and use of pictorial illustration affect the reading of some love poems, and considers two love poems from *Smashing the Piano.* The sixth chapter demonstrates how Montague develops old and new themes in *Mount Eagle* and discusses how a net of crossings constitutes the collection's structural centre. The final chapter explores how in *Time in Armagh* Montague refines his transformation of autobiographical material into art. The analysis of *Border Sick Call* locates a concern with poetry itself in the late writing and brings out the sequence's shifting between the mysterious and familiar. "But in what country have we been?" is its final line, helping to define the general concern of the thesis, which is to explore the riches of the "country" mapped by Montague's poetry.

The research presented in this thesis is the original work of the author, unless stated otherwise. None of this work has been submitted for a degree in this or any other university.

Contents

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List of Abbreviations

1. Works by John Montague:

BSC	*Border Sick Call,* in *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1995): 345-57.
CL	*A Chosen Light* (London: MacGibbon, 1967).
CP	*Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1995).
DC	*Death of a Chieftain and Other Stories* (1964; Dublin: Wolfhound, 1998).
DK	*The Dead Kingdom* (Dublin: Dolmen; Dundonald: Blackstaff; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984).
FC	*The Figure in the Cave and Other Essays*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput, 1989).
FE	*Forms of Exile* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1958).
GC	*The Great Cloak* (Dublin: Dolmen; Oxford: Oxford UP; Winston-Salem: Wake Forest UP, 1978).
LP	*The Love Poems* (Toronto: Exile, 1992).
ME	*Mount Eagle* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1988).
PL61	*Poisoned Lands: and Other Poems* (London: MacGibbon, 1961).
PL77	*Poisoned Lands,* new ed. (Dublin: Dolmen; London: Oxford UP, 1977).
RF	*The Rough Field* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1972).
SD	*A Slow Dance* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1975).
SP	*Smashing the Piano* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1999).
T	*Tides* (1970; Dublin: Dolmen; Chicago: Swallow, 1978).
TA	*Time in Armagh* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1993).

2. Other Frequently Cited Works:

SI	*John Montague*, spec. issue of *Irish University Review* 19.1 (1989): 5-160.

Note on Texts and Citations

A note on citations from primary sources; if not stated otherwise, I quote from the poems as they occur in the respective volumes. *Border Sick Call* is quoted from John Montague's *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1995) 345-57. I give page-numbers, unless I refer to sections. I give titles of sections in single quotation marks. If I refer to an essay by John Montague that can be found in the essay-collection *The Figure in the Cave and Other Essays*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput, 1989), I quote from this book. Unless stated otherwise, translations are my own.

Preface

The aim of this thesis is to explore the achievement of the contemporary Irish poet John Montague, concentrating on major works published from the fifties to the nineties. These works are *Forms of Exile* (1958), *Poisoned Lands* (1961; 1977), *A Chosen Light* (1967), *Tides* (1970), *The Rough Field* (1972), *A Slow Dance* (1975), *The Great Cloak* (1978), *The Dead Kingdom* (1984), *Mount Eagle* (1988), *The Love Poems* (1992), *Time in Armagh* (1993) and *Border Sick Call* (1995). The study includes parts of Montague's most recent collection of poems, *Smashing the Piano* (1999).

In contrast to the sequence *The Rough Field* (1972) which has attracted and continues to attract critical attention, Montague's other sequences and collections have been the subject of analysis to a lesser extent. Many of his poems and their original contexts seem to get lost in anthologies. While no account of Montague can overlook *The Rough Field*, an investigation of Montague's other sequences sheds fresh light on his poetry. The volume *Collected Poems*, published in 1995, underlines the variety of themes and tones to be found in his *oeuvre*. Whereas critical debate has often focused on politico-historical matters, his foregrounding of poetry itself, his treatment of love and family, his environmental concerns, his reworking of boyhood, his addressing of existential questions and his placing of poems in sequences have not received the attention they deserve.

My key method will be close analysis of single poems and sequences. Such analysis will be attentive to aesthetic, intertextual, psychological, historical and biographical issues. Where the context demands, I shall draw on Montague's statements in interviews and autobiographical writings. "The emerging order of the poem", to borrow a phrase from *The Rough Field*, underlines the method chosen. My readings seek immersion in and slow emergence from the poetry. They try to re-enact the subtle becoming and shifting that takes place in individual poems and in the poet's work as a whole. Whilst offering prospective and retrospective comment, my discussion of his work is given in a fairly chronological order.

While finding interpretative significance in text and context, and valuing the sense-making roles of both author and reader, the present analysis is especially sympathetic to approaches that foreground the text. This attention to the text stems in part from my additional training in linguistics, my exposure to German "textimmanent" ["text-centred"] analysis,[1] and to the practice of close reading in Anglo-American criticism. However, the study does not assume that the poems have an autonomous existence, cut off from their author or historical circumstances, and, where appropriate, it draws on extra-poetic material.

In contrast to the reactions to his contemporary Seamus Heaney, the responses to Montague's writings over the last decades have been fewer and less detailed. We see an accumulation of studies on Montague in the seventies in the aftermath of the publication of *The Rough Field.* Frank Kersnowski's book-length study of 1975 focuses on works up to and including *The Rough Field.* Attentive to biographical issues, the book acknowledges Montague's innovative style and attempts to place him in a cosmopolitan sphere, whilst stressing his confrontation of Ireland.[2] Seán Lucy underlines *The Rough Field*'s emphasis on reconciliation and unity.[3] Thomas Dillon Redshaw regards consciousness as its main theme and sees "Becoming" as the sequence's abstract motif.[4] Edna Longley, whilst acknowledging the achievement of Montague's early work and the ambition of his task in *The Rough Field*, sees its synthesising vision as over-conscious.[5] Terence Brown finds that its failures outweigh its achievements; he stresses the sequence's "withdrawal" into lyricism.[6] For Seamus Deane, Montague "remains exemplary in terms of the risks he has taken" in *The Rough Field.*[7]

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[1] See Wolfgang Kayser, *Das Sprachliche Kunstwerk: Eine Einführung in die Literaturwissenschaft* (Bern: Franke, 1948); *Die Vortragsreise: Studien zur Literatur* (Bern: Francke, 1958). Emphasising the literary work and its constituent parts, Kayser pays special attention to structural forms and their interrelation; these are, in particular, outer form, sound, rhythm, stanza, word, register, rhetorical figures, syntax, events, motifs, perspective, and atmosphere. See Kayser, *Die Vortragsreise* 46.

[2] Frank Kersnowski, *John Montague* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1975).

[3] Seán Lucy, "Three Poets from Ulster," *Irish University Review* 3.2 (1973): 183-93; "John Montague's *The Rough Field*: An Introductory Note," *Studies* 63 (Spring 1974): 29-30.

[4] Thomas Dillon Redshaw, "*Ri*, as in Regional: Three Ulster Poets," *Eire-Ireland* 9.2 (1974): 56; "John Montague's *The Rough Field*: *Topos* and *Texne,*" *Studies* 63 (Spring 1974): 41.

[5] Edna Longley, "Searching the Darkness: Richard Murphy, Thomas Kinsella, John Montague and James Simmons," *Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1975) 118-53.

[6] Terence Brown, *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill, 1975) 168.

[7] Seamus Deane, "Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism," *Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1975) 16.

In the eighties, Deane points out that history is "a maiming influence" in Montague's work and briefly sketches the development towards a more patient stance in Montague's poetry after *The Rough Field.*[8] Other discussions in this decade explore how Montague's poetry manages to remake,[9] or heal and redeem,[10] cultural and personal losses and memories. Dillon Johnston's readings are less sure about this aspect; he foregrounds the fact that Montague questions the capacity of language adequately to record memory and moment.[11] Elizabeth Grubgeld reads along similar lines, when she sees *The Rough Field* as "divided against itself"; for her, whilst the poem affirms language, it also "calls into question the capacity of language to preserve memory".[12]

Criticism in the eighties culminates in 1989, in a special issue on John Montague in the *Irish University Review.*[13] Critics in this volume do not focus on *The Rough Field.* Antoinette Quinn sees Montague as "an autobiographical poet" and explores Montague's concern with "the eternal feminine",[14] while Dillon Johnston discusses some of Montague's love poems.[15] Robert F. Garratt foregrounds the search for self in Montague's writing.[16] Terence Brown gives a reading of *The Dead Kingdom,*[17] and Eamon Grennan closely analyses select poems in order to underline Montague's attachment to the particularity of the moment.[18]

Scholarship in the nineties has not lost sight of *The Rough Field.* Robin Skelton's chapter on Montague discusses his development up to and including this sequence.[19] The treatment of history is at the centre of Elmar Schenkel's analysis of

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[8] Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Literature, 1880-1980* (London: Faber, 1985) 152, 153-55.
[9] Robert F. Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 198-229.
[10] Brian John, "'A Slow Exactness': The Poetry of John Montague," *Anglo-Welsh Review* 72 (1982): 46-57; "The Healing Art of John Montague," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 12.1 (1986): 35-52.
[11] Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1985) 180-203.
[12] Elizabeth Grubgeld, "Topography, Memory, and John Montague's *The Rough Field*," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 14.2 (1989): 25.
[13] *John Montague*, spec. issue of *Irish University Review* 19.1 (1989): 5-160; hereafter referred to as *SI.*
[14] Antoinette Quinn, "'The Well-Beloved': Montague and the Muse," *SI* 29, 27.
[15] Dillon Johnston, "Eros in Eire: Montague's Romantic Poetry," *SI* 44-57.
[16] Robert F. Garratt, "John Montague and the Poetry of History," *SI* 91-102.
[17] Terence Brown, "*The Dead Kingdom*: A Reading," *SI* 103-09.
[18] Eamon Grennan, "'Of So, and So, and So': Re-Reading Some Details in Montague," *SI* 110-28.
[19] Robin Skelton, *Celtic Contraries* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1990) 225-46.

The Rough Field.[20] Steven Matthews's study shows how Montague's poetry "often performs a dialectic within itself" and that *The Rough Field* "is in dialogue with its own practices and aspirations";[21] Matthews concludes that the sequence "ends in acknowledging its own failure".[22]

Patricia Coughlan gives a rigorous feminist reading of poems taken from several volumes.[23] Hers, and several other major studies in the nineties are comparative in approach. Paul Bowers compares Williams and Montague,[24] Elizabeth Grubgeld looks at *The Dead Kingdom* within the context of the postwar American elegy,[25] and Michael O'Neill focuses on Derek Mahon's and John Montague's American dimension.[26]

While Richard Allen Cave emphasises the degree to which Montague's poetry is "depersonalised" in his analysis of earlier poems and two pieces from *Mount Eagle*,[27] Augustine Martin seeks to bring out Montague's concern with family, love and transcendence. Martin does not foreground the link between the private and the public in Montague's poetry, but concludes that "[e]rotic and family affection are at the centre of his poetic focus".[28]

What emerges from this selective overview of major secondary sources is the focus on *The Rough Field.* Critics hint at the variety of themes to be found, and connections to be made, in Montague's *oeuvre.* Building on the valuable work of these critics, while exploring more thoroughly aspects of how the poet deals with love and

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[20] Elmar Schenkel, "Embodying the Past: History and Imagination in John Montague's *The Rough Field*," *Proceedings of the Anglistentag, 1992, Stuttgart*, ed. Hans Ulrich Seeber and Walter Göbel (Tübingen: Niemayer, 1993): 102-10.

[21] Steven Matthews, *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) 109, 130.

[22] Ibid. 121.

[23] Patricia Coughlan, "'Bog Queens:' The Representations of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney," *Gender in Irish Writing,* ed. Toni O'Brien Johnson and David Cairns (Milton Keynes: Open UP, 1991) 88-111.

[24] Paul Bowers, "John Montague and William Carlos Williams: Nationalism and Poetic Construction," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 20.2 (1994): 29-44.

[25] Elizabeth Grubgeld, "John Montague's *The Dead Kingdom* and the Postwar American Elegy," *New Hibernia Review* 1.2 (1997): 71-82.

[26] Michael O'Neill, "John Montague and Derek Mahon: The American Dimension," *Symbiosis* 3.1 (1999): 54-62.

[27] Richard Allen Cave, "John Montague: Poetry of the Depersonalised Self," *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Michael Kenneally, Studies in Contemporary Irish Literature 2, Irish Literary Studies Ser. 43 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1995) 216.

[28] Augustine Martin, "John Montague: Passionate Contemplative," *Irish Writers and their Creative Process*, ed. Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc'h, Irish Literary Studies Ser. 48 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1996) 49.

family, I study his whole career. The overview shows that Montague's later work has not captured scholarly interest. It was this lack of attention to *Mount Eagle, The Love Poems, Time in Armagh* and *Border Sick Call* that prompted me to embark on this project. Additionally, the foregrounding of poetry itself in Montague's texts has not been addressed in detail.

My chapter headings employ verbal forms that can be found in, or are suggestive about, the poems. I have deliberately split the chapters into some that discuss themes and others that focus on one or two sequences only. This split ensures that issues across his *oeuvre* as well as single collections can be thoroughly discussed. My first chapter shows how Montague's concern with the poem, poetry and the poet surfaces within his poems. The poems selected for analysis in this chapter are taken from various stages in his career. The chapter is placed before the roughly chronological reading of his work in order to offer an initial overview. I return to his preoccupation with poetry in his *oeuvre* at various points throughout the thesis.

The second chapter aims to bring out important strands in Montague's early poetry, focusing on poems from *Forms of Exile, Poisoned Lands* (1961), *A Chosen Light* and *Tides*. It aims to show Montague's concern with exile and land, but also his increasing preoccupation with the more private themes of family and love. I attend to thematic and technical particularities in the early writing, in the belief that the topics addressed by Montague here will concern him in the later sequences: which constitute, I contend, a magnification and intensification.

In chapter 3, I offer an analysis of *The Rough Field.* Guided by the text's multi-journey structure, I show that Montague uses the journey as a structural device throughout the sequence. Montague's text is slowly unfolded in the second half of the chapter, conveying how his journeys interconnect. My study tries to reveal how *The Rough Field* moves towards its, as I see it, culminating point in section X and in the Epilogue.

In chapter 4 the theme of the family is considered. Evoked in *A Chosen Light,* the figure of the father is important for Montague in *The Rough Field, A Slow Dance* and *The Dead Kingdom*; even his latest volume, *Smashing the Piano*, contains a poem on the father. After a discussion of this poem and a brief comparison with Seamus Heaney's employment of the father in his poetry, I turn to the role of the mother, a figure who dominates *The Dead Kingdom.* It is a sequence that constitutes the climax

of Montague's return to family members. A detailed analysis of the poem "The Silver Flask" that foregrounds the poet's father and mother rounds off the chapter.

Montague's skill as a love poet comes to the fore in chapter 5. The sequence *The Great Cloak,* in particular, is his attempt to write about a disintegrating relationship and the beginning of a new one. What emerges from this painful exercise is Montague's constant and often explicit quest for an appropriate and adequate form in order to address love in writing. In the second part of the chapter I examine how his re-contextualisations and use of pictorial illustration affect the reading of some love poems, before I demonstrate how love and writing are intertwined in the late poems, "Postscript" and "Chain Letter".

Mount Eagle's range of topics is vast; Montague includes poems on love, Ireland, children and nature. In the sixth chapter, concerned with this volume, my selective close readings are attentive to the aesthetics of the late writing, Montague's development of old and new themes and how they interweave. I seek to show how the poems are "chatting amongst each other",[29] in a collection that has not as yet been analysed in full.

The final chapter examines *Time in Armagh* and *Border Sick Call. Time in Armagh* magnifies one theme, the poet's experience in a Catholic boarding school. The consequences of this period have been obliquely referred to by Montague in his early poem "Soliloquy on a Southern Strand", but it takes until his sixties until he confronts it in a collection. I bring out the ways in which Montague transforms the autobiographical, here his traumatic school experience, into art.

In *Border Sick Call* Montague slows down to perception's pace and thereby creates a sequence that absorbs earlier strands, whilst creating its own densely woven fabric. It opens up existential questions, and leaves speaker and reader navigating mysterious waters. *Border Sick Call* again addresses "*the poem*" and it ends with the phrase "But in what country have we been?" Appropriately, the question constitutes the final line in Montague's *Collected Poems.* Overall, the readings offered in the thesis seek to demonstrate the various and fascinating "country" mapped by his poetry.

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[29] John Montague, "An Interview with John Montague," interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, *SI* 71.

Chapter 1

DEFINING

Poems on Poetry

The aim of this chapter is to focus on John Montague's addressing of poetry and the poet within his poems. Three types of poems published from 1958 until the nineties will be taken into consideration: poems that are allegories of themselves, poems that can be read as allegories of poetry or allegories of the poet, and poems in which the poet directly surfaces or poetry is directly addressed. In the present chapter, "allegory" is seen in its literal translation from the transliterated Greek "allos agoreúein" where "allos" translates as "other" and "agoreúein" as "to speak": something that speaks for something other.[1]

The poems chosen for analysis display a self-consciousness that is frequent in modern and post-modern literature and culture. The cultural critic Fredric Jameson, for example, observes: "In the earlier, naïve state, we struggle with the object in question: in this heightened and self-conscious one, we observe our own struggles and patiently set about characterizing them".[2] In contrast to fiction,[3] "self-consciousness" in poetry is the subject of analysis to a lesser extent and is, so it seems, often taken for granted, a "convention", to employ Jonathan Culler's term.[4] John Montague's self-conscious

[1] See also Angus Fletcher who points out that "allegory says one thing and means another". See Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1964) 2.

[2] Fredric Jameson, "Metacommentary," *PMLA* 86.1 (1971): 9.

[3] Patricia Waugh, for instance, has studied "metafiction", a genre that she characterises by stating: "Writing itself (...) becomes the main object of attention". See Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984) 24.

[4] Culler names three general conventions, namely "that a poem should be unified, that it should be thematically significant, and that this significance can take the form of reflection on poetry" and continues: "The convention that poems may be read as statements about poetry is extremely powerful". See Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1975) 177.

observations about poetry give important insights into his work which will function as a background for the exploration of his *oeuvre*.

In addition to the modern and post-modern foregrounding of self-consciousness, Montague's Irish context has to be taken into account when reading his poems on poetry. Seán Lucy's phrase summarises particularities of the Irish as follows:

> [W]hen asked recently if I could think of one single characteristic which marked the Irish, *all* of the Irish (...), the question itself and my own interest in it provided me with an answer and I said, 'I think we must be one of the most self-conscious peoples on God's earth.' I would qualify that now and say that at the centre of most Irish people is what might be called a *dramatic self-awareness*. This has deeply marked Irish and Anglo-Irish poetry, in subject, in mood, in imagery, in technique, and in speech rhythms. It may be objected that all poets of all countries are a self-conscious lot, but (...).[5]

Concerns with the function of art and the place of poetry and the poet can be found in various contemporary Irish poets. What also has to be noted with respect to John Montague is the fact that, as well as his American dimension that has been acknowledged, his early interest in French poetry constitutes a factor that has probably influenced his broodings on poetry. He met several French poets regularly when living and working in Paris and has translated widely: in particular, poems by Francis Ponge and André Frénaud.[6] In both their works various comments on writing can be found. Frénaud's poems display self-consciousness acutely; in "Haeres" it is claimed that the real heritage is the poem itself and in the early "Le château et la quête du poème" one finds a reflection on poetry.[7] Francis Ponge often links his elaboration of an object with

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[5] Seán Lucy, "What is Anglo-Irish Poetry," *Irish Poets in English: The Thomas Davis Lectures on Anglo-Irish Poetry,* ed. Seán Lucy (Cork: Mercier, 1973) 27.

[6] Montague published translations of André Frénaud and Eugène Guillevic in book format; he was one of three translators for the Faber edition of Francis Ponge's poems. See John Montague and Evelyn Robson, *November: A Choice of Translations from André Frénaud* (Cork: Golden Stone, 1977); Eugène Guillevic, *Carnac*, trans. John Montague (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1999); Francis Ponge, *Selected Poems*, ed. Margaret Guiton, trans. Margaret Guiton, John Montague and C. K. Williams (1994; London: Faber, 1998). More recently, Montague has translated poems by Robert Marteau, Michel Deguy and Claude Esteban. See *Contemporary French Poetry in Translation*, spec. issue of *Poetry* 177.1 (2000): 44-47, 62-63, 79-83.

[7] André Frénaud, *Haeres: Poèmes 1968-81* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1982) 7-17; *Il n'y a pas de paradis: Poèmes* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1962) 289-92.

the act of writing. In "Les mûres" the blackberries evoked and the poem become intertwined.[8] Ponge likewise comments directly on language, the word and writing, as in "Des raisons d'écrire" and in the essay "My Creative Method".[9] It seems that Montague's addressing of poetry within his poems stems, at least in parts, from a preoccupation with French poets.

If not a source for Montague's self-conscious "Within" from *Tides* (1970)[10] then at least a parallel with it, Ponge's "La bougie" ends, "the candlelight flickering on the book encourages the reader – then, bending over its plate, it drowns in its own nutrients".[11] Montague's poem reads:

> Spears of lilies,
> The wet full flesh
> Of roses crowd &
> Ride the coffin.
> Tall as guardsmen,
>
> Pallid candles lengthen
> On their brass sockets:
>
> A saffron tent of
> Flame, a smaller,
> Darker tent within
> Where the wick, bent
> Over like an old man,
> Whispers softly as
> Bringing light to
> Life, it hurries
> To consume itself.

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[8] Ponge, *Selected Poems* 14.
[9] Francis Ponge, *Tome premier* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1965) 184-86; *Le grand recueil: Méthodes,* vol. 2 ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1961) 7-42.
[10] John Montague, *Tides* (1970; Dublin: Dolmen; Chicago: Swallow, 1978) 23; hereafter referred to as *T.*
[11] Ponge, *Selected Poems* 18-19. The poem has been translated by C. K. Williams.

This poem circles round a funeral, but it is also about poetry and ultimately talks about itself. It focuses on fire as well as consummation. The motif of the fire brings together the oppositions built up in the poem. On the side of life, one finds "flesh", the verbs "lengthen", "Ride", "Whispers", and the "wick" that is "Bringing light to / Life". Messengers of death are "Spears", the "coffin", "guardsmen", the verbs "bent / Over" and "consume" and adjectives such as "Pallid", "Darker" and "old". The two opposites are inevitably intertwined and the poem manages to exhibit in language the closeness between the two and by implication between life and death. Coloured shades of the fire-flames are spread through the poem: red as in the rose, white as in lilies, black with its associations of death and yellow in the saffron. On the one hand, the tent within the tent gives rise to womb-like associations, hence life itself, but on the other hand, the other entity in the poem, namely the coffin, holds the associations of life in balance. If the bent-over wick is embryonic, referring back to the "wet full flesh" of the first stanza, it also refers to "an old man", possibly the poet, who is bent over by the burden of age. The wick carries the suggestion of warmth as well as visual life and sound. It shares these sensuous qualities or illuminations with the imagination and poetry, and when in the end, its soft whisper ceases, the last phrase "it hurries / To consume itself" describes the hurry towards the end of the poem as well as the destiny of a wick. It is a poem that in its sparseness almost drowns in the whiteness of the page, and a poem that even has to be given significance by the title "Within". The impersonality of the poem, a "within" that appears to be without a speaker, makes it paradoxically possible to transcend the boundary of a pure funeral poem. The poem addresses death and indeed its own death. It is, in its allegorical mode, similar to a poem by Montague's contemporary, Thomas Kinsella, his "Leaf-Eater" from *Nightwalker* (1968):

> On a shrub in the heart of the garden,
> On an outer leaf, a grub twists
> Half its body, a tendril,
> This way and that in blind
> Space: no leaf or twig
> Anywhere in reach; then gropes
> Back on itself and begins

To eat its own leaf.[12]

Writing poetry might be like eating your own leaf, your basis as self. Or, as Ponge has it, it can be a drowning in one's own nutrients.

Yet, Montague does not always allude to poetry in such an oblique fashion as in "Within".[13] "The poet" or "the poem" is often referred to on the surface of a poem. In "She Cries" from *Mount Eagle*[14] a wife laments a poet's position "in this strange age". Technological progress and its "paraphernalia", such as "missiles hoarded in silos" and a Concorde plane with its "supersonic boom, soaring", are alluded to sceptically. The wife cries for herself, for the world and "most of all" for her husband,

> the poet at his wooden desk,
> that toad with a jewel in his head,
> no longer privileged, but still
> trying to crash, without faltering,
> the sound barrier, the dying word.

The lines convey how, in the face of increasing external noise, the poet's voice has to make itself heard. It is a permanent "trying (...), without faltering", and Montague reinforces this insistence by the adverb "still". The poem ends with a desperate attempt to save the word. The poet himself is depicted unfavourably as "that toad", yet this toad carries a jewel inside. Indeed, if the poem addresses the difficulty of the artist in making himself heard, it also mocks the idea of supposed difficulty, consciously overemphasising the wife's cries. In fact, whilst she weeps, he takes action. He is "still / trying".

The tension between unceasingly "*seeking* / To speak" [emphasis added][15] and the difficulty of doing so is conveyed in 'A New Siege'.[16] Montague is here painfully aware of the hard task of writing when the external circumstances are difficult. In 'A

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[12] Thomas Kinsella, *Collected Poems 1956-1994* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 75.
[13] Montague uses obliquity to a lesser extent than Thomas Kinsella or the younger generation of Irish poets such as Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon or Medbh McGuckian.
[14] John Montague, *Mount Eagle* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1988) 48; hereafter referred to as *ME*.
[15] This phrase is quoted from the poem "The True Song". See John Montague, *A Chosen Light* (London: MacGibbon, 1967) 69; hereafter referred to as *CL*.
[16] John Montague, *The Rough Field* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1972) 67-71; hereafter referred to as *RF*.

New Siege' he mentions "the poem" directly after having paralleled the uproar in Berkeley and the world at large with the Irish Troubles. He notes that "the poem [is] invaded / by cries, protestations / a people's pain" (*RF* 71). External discord cannot be confined to the realm outside the text. Montague shows that the external powerfully comes into the poem and may not always be transcended. Whereas here the public sphere invades the poem, in the love poems in *The Great Cloak* (1978),[17] the limits of poetry come into focus. In "Tearing" (*GC* 24), upholding the song is almost impossible. The speaker declares: "I sing your pain / as best I can". Yet he admits: "But the pose breaks. / The sour facts remain". The speaker cannot take on a poetic pose. In the face of private discord a masking in the stylised words of poetry cannot do. "No Music" (*GC* 34) is drawn into this issue. Here the speaker asserts that "To tear up old love by the roots, / To trample on past affections: / There is no music for so harsh a song". The speaker then refers to "A blind cripple, trailing / His stick across cobbles; / A butterfly with a torn wing".[18] The butterfly, frequently associated with the imagination and poetry, here has a torn wing, mirroring the impossibility of a poetic undertaking.

Montague may directly refer to poetry's limits, yet he also overtly and rather frequently communicates its powers. He even offers writing as a therapeutic undertaking. It is "the sweet oils of poetry" that close the wound of loss and parental abandonment in "A Flowering Absence" from *The Dead Kingdom* (1984),[19] to be discussed in detail in chapter 4. Furthermore, he spells out poetry's "healing" forces. In the poem "Process" (*DK* 18) "the healing harmony / of music, painting, poem" stands as an "absorbing discipline" against the "structure of process" and against the void. Significantly, Montague's referring to poetry's "healing harmony" in brackets underlines its difference from the "devouring" change referred to elsewhere in the poem. Moreover, the brackets paradoxically act as a safe haven against being "locked / in":

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[17] John Montague, *The Great Cloak* (Dublin: Dolmen; Oxford: Oxford UP; Winston-Salem: Wake Forest UP, 1978); hereafter referred to as *GC*.

[18] Montague has left out this stanza in his *Collected Poems*. See John Montague, *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1995) 105; hereafter referred to as *CP*.

[19] John Montague, *The Dead Kingdom* (Dublin: Dolmen; Dundonald: Blackstaff; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) 91; hereafter referred to as *DK*.

races, nations locked
in their dream of history,
only love or friendship,
an absorbing discipline
(the healing harmony
of music, painting, poem) (...).

What is more, in order not to confine the power of the "healing" to the brackets, we read in due course that "music, painting, poem" act "as swaying ropeladders / across fuming oblivion". Alongside friendship and love, art is a fixed point within chaos and fluidity. It can constitute a point to refer to; it can be an anchor; and it can, as in the poem "Storm" from *Poisoned Lands* (1977),[20] be a means of establishing sudden connections. Watching rain and lightening evokes an earlier similar situation in the adult speaker:

As the thunder groans
and breaks we kneel
in a circle to intone
a decade of the Rosary

Lightning joins that room
to the one I now stare from;
the child to the grown man:
art, a warm brooding.

Montague foregrounds the subtle power of poetry: "art, a warm brooding". Most importantly, it can connect the two rooms, the room of childhood and that of adulthood. The "Lightning" hovers between the concrete and the abstract; it is both a meteorological feature and the en-lightening poem.

[20] John Montague, *Poisoned Lands,* new ed. (Dublin: Dolmen; London: Oxford UP, 1977) 62; hereafter referred to as *PL77*. This collection is a considerably revised and extended version of *Poisoned Lands: and Other Poems* (London: MacGibbon, 1961); hereafter referred to as *PL61*.

In the poems discussed above, "art", "the poem", "song" or "the poet" are mentioned within Montague's poems. Several of his poems fall into the category "allegory of poetry or allegory of the poet". Within this category there are poems that use a persona interpretable as the poet. There are poems, too, that prescribe specific features that in turn offer themselves as features of a certain kind of poetic language Montague wishes to use. Lastly, there are complex poems such as "The Water Carrier" (*PL61* 50), "The Source" (*RF* 47-50) and "Conch"[21] that depict a speaker who slowly and indirectly maps out an approach to poetry and the poet's situation.

The usage of masks and personas is a common phenomenon as a consequence of doubts about the constitution of the self in the twentieth century,[22] and it is exhibited to a high extent in the Irish context. Yeats, who with Joyce is a main point of departure and return for modern Irish poets, is a case in point. Yeats frequently dramatises the self. The empirical self is extinguished by a persona or even by a heightening of poetic form per se.[23] From early on in his career Montague makes use of personas and he moreover employs these in connection with describing a poetics within a poem. In "Beyond the Liss" (*CL* 66-67) dedicated to Robert Duncan, Montague employs the persona "Sean the hunchback", who

> Hears an errant music,
> Clear, strange, beautiful,
>
> And thrusts his moon face
> Over the wet hedge
> To spy a ring of noble
> Figures dancing, with –
>
> A rose at the centre –
> The lustrous princess.

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[21] John Montague, *Time in Armagh* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1993) 43; hereafter referred to as *TA*.
[22] See Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modernist Poetry since Baudelaire* (1968; London: Anvil, 1996) 59, 61-109.
[23] "As Yeats implies, and Hofmannsthal made explicit, poetic form itself can act as a mask". See Hamburger 74-75.

After pleading to join this Yeatsian fairy dance, he undergoes a sudden transformation, "And he steps forth, shining // Into the world of ideal / Movement". In this different world selfishness and envy are replaced by harmony and the ability to act as one "might wish to be". This world of the fairies and imagination, found beyond the liss and therefore spatially set apart may resemble that of poetry. The voyage into the world of the imagination is made possible for Sean and he can be lifted into the world of beauty "beyond". "But slowly old habits / Reassert themselves", he behaves improperly towards the princess and – "Presto!" – is carried back into the quotidian world: "His satchel hump securely / Back on his back". The "pure gift" and "a perfect music" have not been sufficient, although the persona longed for these in the first place. Montague evokes the realm beyond, yet also gives an awareness of all too human habits that stand against such a "perfect" realm. He thereby parodies Yeats and Duncan. Yeats' image of the rose is conjured up when Montague evokes "A rose at the centre". Equally, the word "liss"[24] is not far from a Yeatsian realm of the beyond. The line "Clear, strange, beautiful" is reminiscent of a line in "The Wild Swans at Coole", a poem concerned with two realms (dream and waking): "But now they drift on the still water, / Mysterious, beautiful".[25] The Yeatsian notion of the beautiful realm of art is demystified by Montague; first, by choosing a hunchback and secondly, by letting this figure glimpse, yet not stay beyond, the liss. Robert Duncan's proneness to the dream, fairy dance, mythic and Celtic world and his conscious attempt to cross realms, as exhibited in the early prose piece "[The Matter of the Bees]" or in the poem "Often I am Permitted to Return to a Meadow" from *The Opening of the Field*, are conjured up as well as mocked, too.[26] Additionally, Montague starts and ends the poem with the same lines, echoing yet changing Duncan's method of repeating a word once again (at the start of a line). The poet's voice stands somewhere in between Yeats and Duncan, is itself a parody of them and puts itself in relation to them. The use of the persona ensures a necessary distance and playfulness.

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[24] Montague explains "*liss*" as "a fairy mound or fort". See *CL* 67.
[25] W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Dent, 1990) 181.
[26] Robert Duncan, *A Selected Prose*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf (New York: New Directions, 1995) 51-60; *The Opening of the Field* (1960; New York: New Directions, 1973) 7.

"Time Out" (*CL* 39) offers a touch of humour with a donkey-persona pausing "as though tired of carrying / His cross".[27] The donkey is, as admitted in brackets, "not beautiful but more fragile / than any swan". Its attentiveness towards a daisy implicitly reinforces the link with the poet who is equally devoted to the minute, burdened and "fragile". The donkey is "lipping" the flower

> As if to say – slowly, contentedly –
> Yes, there is a virtue in movement,
> But only going so far, so fast,
> Sucking the sweet grass of stubbornness.

The lines playfully sketch an *ars poetica* that emphasises slowness and a stubborn holding on.

In the later poem "Mount Eagle" (*ME* 68-70) Montague employs an eagle-persona that has a "last reconnoitre" before taking on a "greater task", a task though not fully revealed before the poem's final part. The first two sections give a description of the eagle's aloofness and surveying. He is "bending his huge wings into the winds' // wild buffeting, or thrusting down along". The "last reconnoitre" hints at the change to come; the eagle sees the tides turning and there are "now contrary winds". What is more, the eagle's daily routine that the poem maps out resembles a self's and a poet's development from young to old age ("To be angry in the morning, calmed // by midday, but brooding again in / the evening was all in a day's quirk").

In the last section the eagle moves from observer to guardian. He is to be "the spirit of that mountain". Parallel but separate events underlined by "while" earlier ("while // the fleet toiled on earnestly beneath") are now replaced by interaction with and responsibility for the people of the region. Montague evokes the old function of the poet as shaman or seer in these lines. What the poem had hinted by its allusion to development is now fully revealed as affecting the eagle. When "the whole world was

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[27] This poem is to be found in the second section of *CL*, a section that also comprises the *ars poetica* poem "A Bright Day", to be discussed in due course. The occurrence of these poems in the second section underlines that, apart from the final section, seen by Kersnowski as important with respect to art, poems on art are to be found in other parts of the volume, too. See Frank Kersnowski, *John Montague* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1975) 37.

changing", it is his task and destiny to change as well. The "different destiny" he "now" has to face exacts a price, but Montague manages to bring in humour:

> When he lifted his wide forehead
> bold with light, in the morning,
>
> they would all laugh and smile with him.
> It was a greater task than an eagle's
>
> aloofness, but sometimes, under his oilskin
> of coiled mist, he sighs for lost freedom.

The poem presents an eagle which is a spiritual being, yet at this stage not in airy realms or aloof, but revealing all too human character traits. Even before mentioning the "lost freedom" the poem mimics the sighing for freedom through the sound-pattern of "oilskin / of coiled mist". Reading the poem in line with the other two persona-poems, one senses Montague's attempt to place the poet between the playful and the serious.

Belonging to the second sub-group, the group in which a prescriptive emphasis dominates, is the poem "Tim" (*PL77* 56-57), in which the speaker evokes the cart-horse from his childhood. The poem starts with a row of negations:

> Not those slim-flanked fillies
> slender-ankled as models
> glimpsed across the rails
> through sunlong afternoons
> as with fluent fetlocks
> they devoured the miles
>
> Nor at some Spring Show
> a concourse of Clydesdales
> (...).

Nor that legendary Pegasus
(...).

In the second half of the poem, the speaker focuses on "those" horses that are weighty, "rumbled" and "lumbering". Rather than glorifying the animals of his past the speaker describes them in an unglamourised fashion. Concentrating on Tim, both transforming as well as addressing the horse, he concludes that this horse is

as warm an object of

loving memory, as any
who have followed me
to this day, denying
rhetoric with your patience,
forcing me to drink
from the trough of reality.

The movement into airy realms comes to a halt. The final image embodies the abstract in the word "reality" as well as the concrete in the "trough", suggesting that the two have been brought together. The horse is "forcing" both "patience" and "reality" onto him. The conceptual points raised in "Tim" are aspects of Montague's art that occur throughout his *oeuvre* and become more controlled with time. Whilst employing rhetoric, the poem asserts plain speech and a focus on what is close to the speaker.

In the poem "Windharp" from *A Slow Dance* (1975)[28] a prescriptive mode comes to the fore towards the end:

The sounds of Ireland,
that restless whispering
you never get away
from, seeping out of
low bushes and grass,

[28] John Montague, A *Slow Dance* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1975) 28; hereafter referred to as *SD*.

(...)
sound hounding sight,
a hand ceaselessly
combing and stroking
the landscape, till
the valley gleams
like the pile upon
a mountain pony's coat.

After projecting a restlessness onto the external realm and foregrounding the impact of the landscape by pathetic fallacy, the poet creates his own sound and self-consciously foregrounds "a hand ceaselessly / combing and stroking". The addressed "you" is as much a poet referring to himself, an anonymous "one", and an address to the reader. Being drawn towards the landscape is in the course of the poem turned into an image of poetic creation with "a hand" in fact "stroking" not only a landscape, but also the mindscape that is the poem.

In "A Bright Day" (*CL* 36) the speaker stresses that the focus of poetical language is on "details"; he denies the "richness / Of an old historical language". As in the poem "Tim", the speaker describes what he rejects as well as what stands in the centre:

At times I see it, present
  As a bright day, or a hill,
The only way of saying something
  Luminously as possible.

Not the accumulated richness
  Of an old historical language –
That musk-deep odour!
  But a slow exactness

Which recreates experience
  By ritualizing its details (...).

Exactness, recreation of experience, attention to detail and ritualisation are the key elements. Strikingly often, Montague has stressed in prose pieces and interviews his admiration for writers who exhibit this exactness, most notably Francis Ponge and Gustave Flaubert.[29] The beginning and end of the poem are as important as its central message, for Montague emphasises the subtlety and fragility that comes with the poetic attempt. Poetic seeing is rare, because only possible "At times". These poetic seeings are epiphanies and thereby establish connections otherwise not possible. They are "As a bright day, or a hill". They make time and space strange and magical, "luminous". In "A Bright Day" Montague combines a Wordsworthian epiphany with a Williams-like stress on the local and experience.[30]

The ending releases the poem and the poet into the open realm "Of so, and so, and so". Starting off from the local means ending up with something more. The path to it, as many of Montague's poems exhibit, entails exactness and ritual; a ritual, in fact audible by the repetitive "so" in the last line, and re-enacted in the poem's lineation. Hence, the ritualisation conveyed through "ceaselessly / combing" in "Windharp" is spelled out on various levels in "A Bright Day".

As far as the attention to "details" is concerned, the poem "11 Rue Daguerre" (*CL* 46) acts out the procedure prescribed in "A Bright Day", for here the tips of a cherry tree slowly and softly crystallise as the "detail" the speaker sees from his atelier door:

> In that stillness – soft but luminously exact,
> A chosen light – I notice that
> The tips of the lately grafted cherry-tree
>
> Are a firm and lacquered black.

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[29] In a letter to William Cookson he refers to Flaubert. See William Cookson, editorial, *Agenda* 34.3-4 (1996/97): 4. In a conversation he mentioned a fascination with Flaubert's exactness. See John Montague, personal conversation with the author, 15 May 1999. For Ponge, see John Montague, "*Preface to* Pièces: *Live Studies*," Ponge, *Selected Poems* 111.

[30] I agree with Robert F. Garratt who sees Wordsworth as influential on Montague. See Robert F. Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 217-18. Paul Bowers notes that critics have mentioned the influence of Williams on Montague "in terms of local cadences and images". Williams, as Bowers puts it, shows Montague how "to compose poetry that is rooted in a local idiom, but speaks internationally". See Paul Bowers, "John Montague and William Carlos Williams: Nationalism and Poetic Construction," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 20.2 (1994): 30, 31.

Here one senses that Montague uses imagism without being imagist.[31] Most interesting with respect to "11 Rue Daguerre" however is its liminal vantage point, a feature that abounds in Irish poetry. The speaker perceives the surroundings from the atelier door. Montague is not the only Irish poet to employ a liminal experience. Thresholds can be found in several Irish poets, from Patrick Kavanagh to Michael Longley and Paul Muldoon.[32] Montague's contemporary Thomas Kinsella comes to write in "Baggot Street Deserta":

> Fingers cold against the sill
> Feel, below the stress of flight,
> The slow implosion of my pulse
> In a wrist with poet's cramp, a tight
> Beat tapping out endless calls
> Into the dark (...).[33]

Liminal experiences mirror a poet's position between inner and outer, private and public, or between distance and involvement. This often seems a rather comfortable position for the Irish poet to be in or one that is chosen by him. One speaker in a poem by Montague stresses, "on the edge is best" ("Edge"), and these words even constitute the concluding lines of the sequence *The Great Cloak*. A concern with a liminal situation and a conscious choice to place the poet at it form part of Montague's *ars poetica*.

A complex and very fine poem that exhibits a variation on this feature is the early poem "The Water Carrier" (*PL61* 50). Its speaker steps back into his childhood, as the speaker does in "Tim":[34]

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[31] Whereas Montague echoes imagist modes, the "lacquered black" letters of his poem and the setting may have been in turn a starting point for Eavan Boland in her poem "Midnight Flowers". The speaker sees "A whole summer's work in one instant! / (...) / shadows of lilac, of fuchsia; a dark likeness of blackcurrant: // little clients of suddenness (...)". See Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995) 165.

[32] I discuss thresholds in these poets in an essay presented for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of Durham in 1997.

[33] Kinsella, *Collected Poems* 15. Montague's "11 Rue Daguerre" and Kinsella's poem, despite sharing the threshold-feature, give very different views to the outside. Kinsella's speaker stares "into the dark", Montague's finds "A chosen light". It may be reductive to see these two poems as outlining the different poetics at work in the two poets from the same generation. However, their comparison does hint at Montague's fascination with light, whereas Kinsella is preoccupied predominantly with darkness.

Twice daily I carried water from the spring,
Morning before leaving for school, and evening;
Balanced as a fulcrum between two buckets.

Finding a balance "between" two different features, here different types of water and source, is one of the major themes of the poem. It is a poem that is overtly built upon dualities. The boy carries two buckets "Twice daily". Time stretches from morning and youth to evening and old age. In due course the poem balances the central image between childhood memory and rationalisation of the adult; between written word and a picture of an Egyptian water-carrier. The image also asks to be read as a picture of a poet in between two worlds, be they Ireland and America,[35] outer and inner, art and reality or experience and memory.[36] The imaginative landscape through which the memory is expressed hovers between denotations and connotations.

After its opening lines the speaker describes the childhood activity in detail and one cannot but allegorise the poem's lines. The path to the first well is "bramble rough" leading to a river with "slime-topped stones", the corners of which are "abraded as bleakly white as bones". The adjectives give rise to associations of death, as do the bones. A "widening pool" gives release, and flickering fish are proof of life's pulses in this before fossilised area. The second attempt of the speaker is to fill an enamel bucket with spring water. This experience is ambivalent, for the water comes "bubbling in a broken drain-pipe", despite its cleanness, and it is "pure and cold". The "cold" is heightened by comparing the water with threatening "manacles of ice" ("It ran so pure and cold, it fell / Like manacles of ice on the wrists"). As the speaker dives deeper into memory, the tactile sensations are accompanied by smells:

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[34] Michael Parker points out that "The Water Carrier" was an influence on Heaney's "Mid-Term Break" and "Personal Helicon". See Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993) 38-39, 236 (footnote 30).

[35] Maurice Harmon argues that it "might be taken as a metaphor for the balancing act to be found in the work of all these poets [Murphy, Kinsella, Montague] as they try to find a place for themselves between their native traditions and those that appeal to them abroad". See Maurice Harmon, "New Voices in the Fifties" 205.

[36] Scholars try to pin the central image down to one particular meaning. I would like to interpret the poem as one that broods upon itself and shows the "balancing" in its very structure. Adrian Frazier's reading is informative, for he focuses on the "instability of meaning" in the poem. See Adrian Frazier, "John Montague's Language of the Tribe," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 9.2 (1983): 63.

One[37] stood until the bucket brimmed
Inhaling the musty smell of unpicked berries,
That heavy greenness fostered by water.

For the first time the water's nourishing quality is foregrounded after several references to its destroying force and forms: abrasion, rust, slime or ice. The experience described is destructive as well as creative. Yet, the scene of memory has to end, for the reflective speaker states:

Recovering the scene, I had hoped to stylize it,
Like the portrait of an Egyptian water-carrier:
Yet halt,[38] entranced by slight but memoried life.

The speaker explicitly names the pause and surfaces as the one who has tried "to stylize". On the one hand the journey into his childhood terminated with the beginning of this stanza; the attempt "to stylize" can only be hoped for and he is even uneasy about it. On the other hand the "memoried" life offers inspiration in itself. The speaker pauses, "entranced by slight but memoried life". Poetic evocation results in an emotional flight and further inspiration. The attempt to come close to memory shows that a transformation is almost impossible, yet that permanent trying ensures a deeper recovery and understanding of the memory. Ultimately, one main strand of the poem is how to deal with memory, and how to write about it. The poem ends with the present:

I sometimes come to take the water there,
Not as return or refuge, but some pure thing,
Some living source, half-imagined and half-real

Pulses in the fictive water that I feel.

The speaker fetches water "there". Despite the evocation of space here, the "there" is deliberately vague. As the speaker named his tasks and the poem became a self-

[37] In *CP* the general term is replaced by the more personal "You". See *CP* 189.
[38] In *CP* Montague uses "But pause". See *CP* 189.

conscious one, the "there" has become a more general memory, the source of poetic inspiration. Or, to put it differently, it names the poetic text itself. The specific memory of fetching water takes on a new dimension with these final lines. It is now neither part of a childhood activity, nor a mere symbolic, poetic feature (standing for something). What it becomes is a thing in itself, stripped of denotation as well as connotation: "some pure thing".[39]

That we move from a specific memory to a more indefinite one is further underlined by the repetition of "some". The poetic process leads to an internalisation: "Pulses in the fictive water that I feel". Internal and external, real and imagined can live side by side; the memory of water, "Some living source", is "half-imagined and half-real". Memory feeds poetry, but it is also fed by poetry. Holding the balance between real and imagined ensures that the poem is neither mere stylisation nor mere biographical reporting. It becomes a renewing, electrifying force ("Pulses"). Moreover, the subtlety of "The Water Carrier" lies in the fact that it moves from the particular to the general without inhibiting a reversal; it flickers between the two as the term "fictive water" powerfully spells out. The complexity of the poem lies in the fact that it allegorises, but it neither denies representation nor glorifies allegory. What is more, it tries to find the very balance it describes. The lines stress Montague's position "between" and his starting off with a concrete memory that in turn becomes transformed and transforms during the course of a poem.

In both "The Source" (*RF* 47-50) and "Conch" (*TA* 43) "the poem" or "the poet" is not directly mentioned, nor does Montague use a persona, nor is he overtly prescriptive. As in "The Water Carrier", the two poems offer a speaker who can be read as the poet. The two poems have inscribed in them the aspect of poetic growth. In the second stanza of "The Source" Montague focuses on a speaker who passes a gate that opens an imaginative journey in darkness and into the past ("A gate clangs, I grope against / A tent-fold of darkness"). The external darkness is overwhelming, as the intensification by pathetic fallacy indicates, with "Fields breathing on either side". The concrete situation of hearing the rattling stream initiates a further journey into the past, the speaker's remembrance of his climb to the stream's source. As the stream "Define[s]" the townland's shape, so the speaker starts to come to "Define" his relation to this source by slowly moving toward its starting point. What leads him is "a thread /

[39] Echoing Heidegger's "Ding an sich" ["thing in itself"].

Of water", with "Thin music unwinding upwards". The word "Till" that follows immediately afterwards marks a first destination, "a pool of ebony water". The trout he tries to catch in it is referred to as a "monster trout" of legend, yet the speaker arrives

To find nothing but that
Wavering pulse leading to
The central heart where
The spring beat, so icy-cold
I shiver now in recollection (...).

The speaker's bodily reactions in the present reinforce the impact of the former experience; he not only shivers, but also hears "Movement over the pebbles". Its echo is taken into the blank space that follows after this stanza. We have reached an inner sphere, in fact the speaker's "central heart". "Was that / The ancient trout of wisdom / I meant to catch?", he asks conveying the attempt to rationalise experience, similar to the concern with stylisation in "The Water Carrier". He does not answer this question, but continues the journey, now with an extended ability to memorise:

As I plod
Through the paling darkness
Details emerge, and memory
Warms (...).

Going to the source reveals further details, and it offers insight:

My seven league boots devour
Time and space as I crash
Through the last pools of
Darkness. All around, my
Neighbours sleep, but I am
In possession of their past
(The pattern history weaves
From one small backward place)

Marching through memory magnified:
Each grassblade bends with
Translucent beads of moisture
And the bird of total meaning
Stirs upon its hidden branch.

The pools of darkness and the unknown are here transcended and the speaker literally delves beyond the surface, the water's meniscus (and, on a cultural level, grasps his region's past). The bilabial "m"-sounds in "Marching through memory magnified" give this line a special emphasis. The attempt to possess the trout may have failed, but the speaker takes from this the ability to access memory and is even "Marching through" it. This results in the fact that something that was "hidden" is for a moment audible, visible, perceivable. "Each grassblade" is seen.[40] The journey of the poem subtly alludes to the act of writing, offering magnifications, discoveries, a devouring of time and space and an increase in perception.[41]

The poem "Conch" (*TA* 43) shares with "The Source" a Wordsworthian moment of attempted discovery and combines it with Francis Ponge's method of taking one object and brooding over it with exactness via a prose poem. "Conch" starts with the memory of a "cream seashell" and "large rose" on "our parlour sideboard"; hence it begins with a recollection of an interior. The reference to the familiar, local sphere ("our parlour sideboard") can later in the poem be found in "our house" and "Our cattle". Yet the seashell is brought into this sphere from outside, and gives rise to associations of travelling, being moved and now "rest[ing]" after coming from a "distant strand". It is a shell without living interior, because the mollusc is not in it anymore. For the animal the shell was a "palace", a fact that the poem reinforces by the term "Turreted". The adjective "spiky" and the coldness of the surface hint, together

[40] In an almost Proustian way memory is intensified in the last four lines given above. In *Swann's Way* one reads: "We would take refuge among the trees. And when it seemed that their flight was accomplished, a few last drops, feebler and slower than the rest, would still come down. But we would emerge from our shelter, for raindrops revel amidst foliage, and even when it was almost dry again underfoot, many a stray drop, lingering in the hollow of a leaf, would run down and hang glistening from the point of it until suddenly they splashed on to our upturned faces from the top of the branch". See Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way, Within a Budding Grove*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Chatto, 1981) 164.

[41] As Garratt puts it, "Montague describes no less than the poetic act itself here (...)". Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry* 218.

with the later employed words "pink", "dark" and "broken", at the complexity and even danger of the shell.

In the second half of the first paragraph we increasingly move towards the focus on the child's activities, a child that is trying to "reach" the shell's interior. Something awakens in the speaker. Montague reinforces the sexual connotation of the line through the "sliding" of the "hand around the cold smooth flange" and by his employment of the colour "pink", that also refers back to the rose at the start of the poem. This first attempt ends in dissatisfaction underlined by a harsh, abrupt tone and monosyllabic words: "But my reach was too short".

In the second paragraph the speaker contemplates the shell's inner life and conjures up what he did as a boy:

> They said that if you listened to its hidden heart or lung you could hear the sea's roar. I cupped my ear against it, again and again, and dreamt that I heard a distant, gentle humming, the air whistling, perhaps, in that dark, secret interior.

The secrecy is intensified through "air whistling" and the tactile sense is accompanied by the auditory sense, the speaker "cupped" the shell against his ear. "They", presumably adults, gave him guidance on how to use the shell. Yet it still does not reveal its secret, as its imaginative "heart or lung" remains "hidden" and a "distant, gentle humming" can only be heard in a dream, despite several efforts ("again and again"). The calm, even shy "perhaps" and the accumulation of "n" and "m" sounds emphasise a humming, hence only vague sound.

Relocating the shell by carrying it outside, from the sideboard into the open air, from fixed point to unfixed one, but one that is closer to nature, induces a major change: "Now the sound was louder and stronger, a groan more than a whistle, as the wind poured through". The speaker tries to make things resound, figuratively and directly. At the "broken" end of the shell he can "manage" "to blow a low, slow note". The "o"-sounds reinforce the slowness and carefulness of the attempt. Most importantly, the speaker takes action by carrying, raising and blowing the shell, whilst simultaneously being guided from within: "On impulse, I raised the jagged orifice".

In the final paragraph we move into the connotative realm of the shell:

> Then from my solitary reading, I remembered what it was,
> a conch, a marine shell or spiral, sometimes used as a
> trumpet, a slughorn.

The reference to reading connects the speaker's activity and memory with the literary sphere. The blowing of the slughorn echoes Browning's ending in "'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'".[42] The seashell's mythic implication is foregrounded, too, as the image of a "slughorn" or "conch" goes back to the ancient times in which it was used by Tritons. Referring to Ulysses in the next sentence intensifies the literary reference and the focus on development through experience. Finally, in a dense summary, the idea of growth, both physical and mental, that the poem's lines have sketched is given:

> Each
> year, as my fingers reached further into the curl of the
> spiral, took a firmer grasp of its creamy mantle, my note
> grew stronger.

The poem has described a curious boy, and suggested trying to discover secrets, whether the secrets of knowledge or sexuality.[43] It likewise gives a "note" on a poet's growth going through stages towards a "stronger" "note". The shell is a complex object. It is "broken", but it can still be used. It is displaced, but it can magnify sound and indirectly brings the sound of the ocean to life. It may mirror the fragility of poetry, yet it also implies poetry's power and possibilities. As such it serves as an appropriate emblem of Montague's career long vigilance about and trust in his medium.

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[42] Robert Browning, *Robert Browning's Poetry*, ed. James F. Loucks (New York: Norton, 1979) 139.

[43] Concerns with exploration on a technical level show in Montague's revisions and re-contextualisations of his poems. For the re-contexualisation of some poems in his work, see Terence Brown, *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill, 1975) 157-58; Steven Matthews, *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) 112-20; Quinn, *SI* 33-34; Thomas Dillon Redshaw, "John Montague's *The Rough Field*: *Topos* and *Texne*," *Studies* 63 (Spring 1974): 38-45.

Chapter 2

CONTRASTING

Early Poems

> [E]xile is an immense force for liberation, for extra distance, for automatically developing contrasting structures in one's head (...); it is (...) undoubtedly a leaping forth.[1]

Although the collection's range is remarkable for a first book, Robin Skelton exaggerates when he remarks that *Forms of Exile* (1958)[2] "lay[s] out (...) clearly and fully what lines his later poems are to follow".[3] After examining Montague's first collection *Forms of Exile* in detail, an analysis of select poems from *Poisoned Lands* (1961), *A Chosen Light* (1967) and *Tides* (1970) seems necessary in order to illuminate clearly the thematic roads Montague takes at the start of his career. In contrast to *Forms of Exile* and *Poisoned Lands* where Montague focuses on exile and place, in *A Chosen Light* and *Tides* the theme of family and love increasingly comes to the fore.

That the theme of exile should concern Montague hardly surprises; he is not the first Irish writer to have made the world his oyster, following the examples of Joyce, Beckett or Devlin. He and others have written of the discouraging climate for poets in the Ireland of the mid-century, in the Republic as well as in Northern Ireland. Beginning to write today, Montague stresses in 1989, "would be a much more cheerful prospect";[4] "when I was starting out all Irish poets were in a state of stunned isolation,

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[1] Christine Brooke-Rose, "Exsul," *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travellers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Durham: Duke UP, 1998) 20.
[2] John Montague, *Forms of Exile* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1958); hereafter referred to as *FE*.
[3] Robin Skelton, *Celtic Contraries* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1990) 228.
[4] John Montague, "An Interview with John Montague," interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, *SI* 71.

except for Louis MacNeice".[5] Terence Brown's observation that "[f]or many, literature, art, intellectual endeavour or architectural innovation would have seemed luxurious irrelevancies set against the daily struggle for survival in years of economic despair" underlines difficult social and economic circumstances in the fifties.[6] In an essay in *The Bell* in 1951, Montague had addressed the possibility of going abroad, stressing that "[t]he serious young writer will inevitably have to face the problem of exile", as "it is difficult to feel that Ireland, in her present shape, has any real claim on him".[7] In 1953, he takes this route himself; first to America remaining there until 1956, and then, in 1961 to Paris.

On the one hand, as he admits in the preface to the second edition of *Poisoned Lands*, "leaving for America became partly a flight",[8] but on the other hand, the immediate driving force was the need to meet his own exiled father. James Montague had gone to Brooklyn after involvement in local republican activities in Co. Tyrone. John Montague was born there, but was to be sent back to Northern Ireland at the age of four. He was taken care of by his father's sisters, Brigid and Freda, on a farm in Garvaghey and remained there, despite his mother's return to Ireland three years later. Hence, apart from the Joycean legacy, he had his father's "form" of exile before him and had to deal with an uprootedness of self, yet another form of exile, inflicted on him by family circumstances. With respect to the gestation of *Forms of Exile* he reports:

> I think I now understand why *Forms of Exile* (1958) took so long to crystallize (...). There was too much of a backlog of confusion for an early start: Brooklyn-born, Tyrone-reared, Dublin-educated, constituted a tangle, a turmoil of contradictory allegiance (...). And the chaos within contrasted with the false calm without: Ireland, both North and South, then seemed to me 'a fen of stagnant waters'.[9]

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[5] John Montague, *The Figure in the Cave and Other Essays*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput, 1989) x; hereafter referred to as *FC*. In the explanatory preface to *PL77* Montague writes: "A marooned Northerner, I began to write as a student in post-war – sorry, Emergency – Dublin. (...) I was discovering with awe that I might possibly be able to write something like the kind of modern poetry I admired. But the literary atmosphere was against it, and (...) what prevailed in the poetic world of Dublin was acrimony and insult (...)". See *PL77* 9.

[6] Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (1981; Dublin: Fontana-Harper, 1985) 236.

[7] "The Young Irish Writer and *The Bell*," *FC* 172.

[8] *PL77* 9.

[9] "The Figure in the Cave," *FC* 8.

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Montague's first book depicts places outside Ireland – Australia, America and Rome. The collection's strength lies in the fact that Montague moves outward and blends these places of otherness with Ireland. If Montague situates a poem in a recognisably Irish setting he either chooses a persona that gives a certain distancing momentum, or his speakers remain detached from or uneasy about the Ireland they depict. Additionally, the form of exile evoked often becomes that of exile from the self, irrespective of place. His personas or speakers are, as is the case with true exile, *forced* into something. Through employing these layers Montague manages to offer an interesting blend between an implied social criticism and a facing and overcoming of a personal idiom reflected in the quotation above.

In "Slum Clearance" (*FE* 13) his speaker is situated at a threshold, the window, and remains a mere watcher of the scene. He describes rain that lashes

> The evening long against the stubborn buildings
> Raised by man, the ugly rubbish dumps,
> The half-built flats, the oozing grey cement
> Of hasty walls, the white-faced children
> (...)
> And arched over all, the indifferent deadening rain.

"Emigrants" (*FE* 12) is another poem in which Montague carefully addresses a topic of the Ireland of his time, focusing on emigration at a period when it reached its peak.[10] The "landing stage" his emigrants go onto anticipates the ills they face in exile. The new place is more artificial "stage" than warm home. Like the actor they are self and other, whole and split. These emigrants become "[t]he stranger", who in the words of sociologist Alfred Schütz, might be "able to share the present and future with the approached group in vivid and immediate experience; under all circumstances, however, he remains excluded from such experience of its past. Seen from the point of

[10] The number of people emigrating from Ireland increased steadily in this century: Between 1936 and 1946, 187000 people left the country, between 1951 and 1956, 197000 and from 1956 to 1961, 212000. See Brown, *Ireland* 186.

view of the approached group, he is a man without history".[11] Montague uses statement to convey this prospect in its factuality and with sympathetic distance: "Sad faced against the rails, / Suitcases clasped in *awkward* hands" [emphasis added].

Montague's first collection is "priest-ridden".[12] Catholicism tends to be portrayed as inhibiting and imposing self-doubts or self-exile on those who practise it. The madness of the priest in the opening poem "Dirge of the Mad Priest" (*FE* 1) is somewhat too willed, with his insistence on a God that "watches all" and from everywhere. However, the poem powerfully conveys the sense of self-estrangement inflicted upon the priest. God closes him in and everything outside himself seems to be mocking him ("'O! cheerless man in sunshine wearing black?'"). His breakdown is fully conveyed in a blood-imagery that becomes overpowering and a syntax that runs on:

> And the mirror in my hands cracked too
> And ran in blood and my hands were blood
> Until the burning sun came down and stood
> Against my sky at three in blood.

The setting in "Rome, Anno Santo" (*FE* 9)[13] adds another layer to the theme, as it helps to underline the distinction Montague makes in a later essay, namely that "the negative Catholicism we [the Irish] practise is far from that of Italy and France".[14] Rather than merely focusing on vivid "facades" and "Bernini's baroque" glimmering under a "splendid Italian sun", these elements are used to contrast with "Irish matrons, / girded in nun-like black". The scene is grotesque. Enclosed in their attempt to please their god, the pilgrims are "ignorant" of the scene around them. A "church's humanism" is opposed to Irish pilgrims' relentless marching and attributes that hint at repression. The

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[11] Alfred Schütz is quoted from Tibor Dessewffy, "Strangerhood without Boundaries: An Essay in the Sociology of Knowledge," Suleiman 360. See Alfred Schütz, "The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology," *Collected Works,* vol. 3 (The Hague: Martinus, 1976) 96-97.

[12] Kersnowski, *John Montague* 15.

[13] The poem underwent minor revisions from *FE* to *PL61*. However, the version in *PL77* differs greatly from the one in *PL61*. With its heading "Anno Santo" it is a poem of two stanzas only. The first stanza takes its first two lines from the start of stanza two of the version in *FE*, and the remainder of the stanza takes the ending lines from *FE*. The second stanza in *PL77* derives from the early "Poem" published in *The Bell*. See *PL77* 23; John Montague, "Poem," *The Bell* (Oct. 1952).

[14] "The Unpartitioned Intellect," written in 1985. See *FC* 36-41.

schizophrenic atmosphere is captured in the oxymoronic reference to the pilgrims' "rhythmic wildness" and their "sweating" under the heat.

The opposition between "humanism" and Irish Catholicism that Montague builds up in the poem echoes Austin Clarke in his collection *Night and Morning* (1938) and in particular his satirical poems from 1955 onward. Several critics have noted the effect of Clarke on younger Irish poets.[15] Both Clarke and Montague report a fascination with Joyce's *The Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and a line can be drawn from Joyce's novel to the poetry of the two.[16] Although Montague avoids the sort of narrowness Clarke exhibits, we feel in Montague's poem a critique, an unease and an unresolved tension that are not unlike those of the older poet. "Rome, Anno Santo" hovers between irony and seriousness, mirroring in the ambivalent position of the speaker within the poem. He uses the pronoun "us" that hints at an inclusion within the group of pilgrims, yet caricatures it at the same time. The speaker separates himself from these, as "our final God" becomes "their Godhead". He describes the Irish matrons

> March towards their Godhead, with bead and book,
> relentlessly.

The poem's final word "relentlessly", together with the weight it carries through the preceding indent, hovers between resentful comment and the forcefulness of a belief that the speaker seems to know all too well.

In the fine poem "Soliloquy on a Southern Strand" (*FE* 16-18) belief is again an issue. Additionally, foreign terrain takes one back to Ireland with even more rigour, combining self-estrangement and a more general social critique. The Australian shore triggers in an old priest thoughts of boyhood and vocational decisions and is likewise a visual presence in its modern depiction. Starting with its subtitle, "An old priest,

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[15] John Jordan characterises the effect as "electric". See John Jordan, "Irish Poetry, 1939-1972," *Irish Poetry Now*, Project Arts Centre Catalogue (29 Feb.-11 Mar. 1972) (Dublin: Elo, 1972) 7. For Clarke's influence on younger writers, see Harmon, "New Voices in the Fifties" 189-92; Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry* 103-36. In his essays Montague stresses Clarke's revival of satire and that "his favourite *persona* is that of the straying cleric". See "In the Irish Grain," *FC* 123. For Montague mentioning Clarke, see also *A Tribute to Austin Clarke on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. John Montague and Liam Miller (Dublin: Dolmen, 1966) 8-10.

[16] Montague reports that Joyce's novel "was like a case study of my own little psyche". See "The Figure in the Cave," *FC* 7.

holidaying on the coast outside Sydney, thinks nostalgically of his boyhood in Ireland", the poem plays with not only spatial, but also temporal duality and polarity.[17] The Australian coast brings one back to Ireland, to a friar's preaching "'Each hair is counted, everything you do / 'Offends or sweetens His five wounds!'" A priest's "harsh and tuneless voice" has burnt deep marks into the old man's memory. Against it Montague sets another experience, that of the priest's clear, innocent childhood faith emphasised by a magnified perception and bodily sensation:

> I saw God standing on a local hill,
> His eyes were gentle, and soft birds
> Sang in chorus to his voice until
> My body trembled. O! Sweetness!

The poem tries to find the balance between two poles, between freedom (then) and restriction (now). Montague moves further, for ultimately the separation from home and past means being cut off from a wholeness of self; significantly, the priest's brooding in his "separate cloth" over his "darkling self" and asking questions illustrates this later on.

In the second stanza the priest counterpoints the Ireland of his childhood with the one his sister reports from:

> 'The harvest has been bad this autumn,
> 'The grain fields drowned and lost and I'm afraid
> 'To hear the young men idle and complain.
> 'I hear a chill wind blowing through the land:
> 'We shall never see our country thrive again'.

The poem registers that the Ireland of a childhood has given way to difficult economic circumstances in the countryside, and it is for this and its anticipation of a theme in *The*

[17] The poem underwent considerable and suggestive revisions. In *PL61*, *PL77* and *CP* Montague omits the adjective "old" in "old priest", thereby weakening the distance between modern world and priest. For the poem, see *PL61* 26-28; *PL77* 26-27; *CP* 196-97. I shall mention important revisions in due course.

Rough Field that the stanza, omitted in later versions for its sentimentality,[18] is of value.[19] When the priest describes his path towards priesthood, starting off with the harsh years at college, Montague equally anticipates a concern that will be fully explored in his late collection *Time in Armagh*.[20] In "Soliloquy on a Southern Strand" bodily images are employed not only to underline the force of the cane, but also to show a boy attempting to come to terms with his awakening sexuality. He is afraid of boys with "smoother" hands, "burn[s]" with shame and "conquer[s]" his passions. Rolling pastures, a God in natural surroundings on the local hill and the God of childhood-freedom are replaced by a restricting life behind college walls in order to serve God.[21]

The polarities are continued toward the end of the poem. Back in the present, the old priest observes youngsters at the Australian coast: "The young people crowd the shore now, / Rushing from Sydney, like lemmings, to the sea". Rather than singling out one individual, the young people are characterised unfavourably as "lemmings". Their crowding and rushing are underlined by harsh "s"-sounds which likewise contribute to an increase in speed. The observation of these teenagers in a dusty, humid atmosphere goes hand in hand with describing bodily sensations, for the heat, the speaker emphasises, "Casts as in a mould my beaten head and knees". By employing a different kind of song and different bodily features in order to characterise the crowd and priest, Montague underlines their contrast. Hence, instead of singing birds or

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[18] Montague indicated that he omitted the stanza, because it seemed too sentimental. See Montague, personal conversation with the author, 15 May 1999.

[19] Sabine Wichert remarks with respect to Northern Ireland: "In the industrialised world the 1950s were characterised by rapid technical change, productivity gains, fewer tariff restrictions than in the agricultural markets, and a buoyant trade, but Northern Ireland did not fully benefit from this in either industry or employment. The difficulties of the restricted structure of her industry (...) did reappear after the new prosperity of the war years and in the immediate postwar period". She stresses that the economic structure of the North "made her vulnerable to cyclical fluctuations" and that "the region felt every decline in the UK's economic cycle more strongly than other areas". In the agricultural sector the modernisation meant that the number of employees went down by more than a third from 1949 to the sixties. See Sabine Wichert, *Northern Ireland since 1945* (London: Longman, 1991) 59, 63. Terence Brown stresses with regards to the South that there is a "crisis in Irish rural life of the 1940s from which the countryside did not begin to recover until the late 1960s". See Brown, *Ireland* 188.

[20] Montague has revised his references to the years in college in "Soliloquy on a Southern Strand". The priest "weathered years of sameness" in *PL61* and *PL77*, rather than "all that strangeness" as in *FE*. In *CP* the versions are recombined: "I weathered years of strangeness".

[21] Montague comments on both these periods: "I think of those few years from four to eleven as a blessing, a healing. (...) I explored the mountain, roving farther and farther with my dogs (...)". Of the years in college he reports of the "frustration, the swish of the cane in the dean's study, the priests patrolling the corridors at night, the endless walking around the Junior or Senior Ring". See "The Figure in the Cave," *FC* 2, 4.

singing in chorus conjured up earlier, the old priest faces radio noise and extravagant songs such as "'Hot Lips, Hot Lips'". Girls "tossed / With shrill abandon on the strand"[22] clash with the black-robed priest. These contrasts are indeed spelled out: "What here avails my separate cloth, / My darkling self, whose meaning contradicts / The youthful drama they enact in play?"[23] A "drama", namely a colourful, loud and bustling scene, surrounds him; his drama is that he does not belong to it. Home and past are gone and the present is marked by a separation on several levels. Moreover, the "young" man who "preens aloft and dives" only serves to point out the "old" priest's inactivity.[24] Outer warmth contrasts with the priest's cold blood. What remains is a questioning, anticlimactic, and wryly ironic ending: "Is it for that poor ending that I / Have carried all this way my cross?" The end of his life seems inadequate in comparison to the harshness and self-sacrifice endured, an aspect the poem so vehemently brought to the fore. Montague has changed the adjective "poor" to "mild" from *Poisoned Lands* (1961) onwards, thereby foregrounding the inadequacy and weakening the aspect of self-dramatisation.

In "Downtown, America" (*FE* 19), Montague once more focuses on modern life, here in particular the consumer and leisure society. America's "Big Sale store", anonymous voices and slogans dominate and are, amongst other developments, ironically welcomed in the refrain: "These are normal things and set the heart at rest". The "new form of fear", media power or nuclear threats, unsettle the lines. Yet, with Montague, Audenesque social criticism combines with experimental form.[25] The disturbance is visualised and we see what he has absorbed from encounters with American poets:

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[22] Montague replaces these lines by "raced / With whirling beach-balls in the sun" in *PL61*, thereby conveying the girls' abandon in a more subtle way. There is also the switch of the "words" crackled by the radio from being "love-sick" in *FE* to "static" in *PL61* and *PL77*. The "words" are entirely left out in *CP*, foregrounding the wireless that "crackles love-sick static / As girls are roughed and raced".

[23] In *CP* Montague employs "sober self", reducing the speaker's (self)-dramatisation.

[24] The inactivity comes out also in the "body" that is "slack". The replacement of "body" by "shoulders" from *PL61* onwards foregrounds relaxation and underlines the mildness more than ageing.

[25] Montague met Auden at Yale and saw him as "the liberating example for Irish poets in the late fifties". See "The Impact of International Modern Poetry on Irish Writing," *FC* 217. His friend and supervisor at Berkeley, Thomas Parkinson, reports of his surprise to see *FE* "so Audeny". In her reading of *PL61* Edna Longley's emphasises that "the influence (...) goes beyond verbal and rhythmical echoes, though it includes them" and rightly stresses that "Auden's 1930s role of cultural diagnostician" resonates in Montague's poems. See Thomas Parkinson, "Belial to Moloch: Four Letters," *Hill Field: Poems and Memoirs for John Montague on his Sixtieth Birthday, 28 February 1989*, ed. Thomas Dillon Redshaw (Minneapolis: Coffee House; Loughcrew: Gallery, 1989) 21; Edna Longley, "Searching the Darkness:

The car radio suggests our new form of fear,
TOTAL TERROR AND ECLIPSE ARE HERE –
ATOMIC MUSHROOMS MAY FLOWER ANYWHERE –
But these are normal things and set the heart at rest.

The employment of different scripts will be further developed in his pamphlets of the sixties, and lead up to *The Rough Field.* Montague's "American Landscapes" (*FE* 22-23) are given with a critical eye – be it in the "husky madmen scrabbled for wealth" in "Ghost Town" (*FE* 22) or the "cheap pies" and "slot machines" in "Bus Stop in Nevada" (*FE* 22). "Hollywood and Vine" (*FE* 23), abandoned by the author in later collections, records some of the boisterousness touched on in "Soliloquy on a Southern Strand". Boys "call, on an urge of shrillness, / To girls stuttering past, aloof on high heels". American youth culture is recorded by merging the highly colloquial with the candidly artificial; the latter manifests itself in forced alliteration ("cats' call"), accumulation of fricatives ("s" and "t" from line 3 onwards) or the attempt to imitate action through language and sound. "In their own awkwardness suddenly angular" is indeed "awkward", simply because one can hardly pronounce two fricatives between the noun and the adverb. This is a pseudo-reality, even a film-image, with the pseudo-attractive American youngsters stalking "under the lights".

In "Irish Street Scene, with Lovers" (*FE* 2), the two lovers the poem depicts in "marine light" can momentarily escape what Montague has more recently called the "cactus-littered desert" of the time, Dublin.[26] The small space under the umbrella protects against the city's greyness and total absorption by it. This is a paradoxical form of exile; it is the creation of a separate sphere through love. Rather than focusing on a macrocosm of the urban, the small microcosm of life under the arch of an umbrella interests the speaker. And it is the reader's eye that travels this time: downwards towards leaves that "hang", then towards a robin, then towards "skies washed and grey", down towards "stone-grey pavement" and finally towards the lovers themselves. The movement downwards, anticipated in the hanging leaves, but also

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Richard Murphy, Thomas Kinsella, John Montague and James Simmons," *Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey,* ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1975) 139.

[26] John Montague, "The Sweet Way," *Irish Writers and their Creative Process*, ed. Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc'h, Irish Literary Studies Ser. 48 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1996) 31.

through the pressing greyness of the scene and a "day / (...) on the verge of sleep",[27] hints at stagnation, but it gives rise to the encounter with the couple. The vertical movement ("Dripping") is accompanied by a horizontal one; the lovers move forwards, "Seeming to swim more than walk", under the protection of the umbrella which is likewise the point where the vertical and the horizontal meet. The privacy of their world of love is concealed from the world and the reader's eye "with a most suitable tact".[28] The reader sees the umbrella from above, and the rest is silent privacy. "Irish Street Scene, with Lovers" anticipates the subtlety of language as well as the sense for detail and perspective in Montague's later poems. It seizes the depressing atmosphere of post-war Dublin and shows his concern for the minute, alongside his cosmopolitan lenses. We as readers cannot share their form of exile, we remain outside, hence exiled ourselves.

Ultimately this poem – the only love poem in the collection – draws together the mood the volume communicates. The speakers remain distant and the reader is equally placed at a distance. Montague's speakers are observers. The fact that he at times employs a persona equally hints at a willed distancing. The theme of exile, which haunts Montague's poetry, is directly addressed and constitutes the precondition for a productive act of writing. Montague differs from his contemporary Thomas Kinsella whose proneness to the idea of exile is similarly strong, but whose first major collection *Another September* (1958) exhibits its author's potential predominantly by way of fine love poems and does not overtly address public themes. His "Baggot Street Deserta" may be an exception, but even here one can sense the difference between the two poets, with Kinsella's speaker looking obsessively inward into the psyche, and reinforcing this aspect through a nocturnal poetic landscape. In *Forms of Exile* Montague communicates issues of the Ireland of the fifties, be they emigration, the narrowness of Catholicism, modernisation or stagnation, and probes them by voyaging elsewhere. Other places serve to bring out contrasts, yet even then the speakers must "suffer the facts of self", as Montague puts it in the later poem "That Room" (*CL* 20).

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[27] From *PL61* onwards the line "Was on the verge of sleep" is replaced by "Swayed towards sleep". The line is smoothened through the word "Swayed". The melting of day into sleep, the mingling of rain and Dublin, and the landscape and the lovers is underlined through another picture in his imaginative landscape; it becomes a landscape of a love. For the poem, see *PL61* 47; *PL77* 50; *CP* 206.

[28] Montague omits this phrase in *PL77* and *CP*, thereby foregrounding the lovers' privacy even more by not commenting upon it.

In contrast to Kinsella they seem to do so during and after having observed the varied, colourful world, not from the very start.

As is the case in Goldsmith's *The Traveller* the hope "to find / Some spot to real happiness consigned" through the act of wandering remains finally unfulfilled.[29] Montague's modern America is one of his "negative utopias".[30] America is, however, technically enabling for Montague. Ireland is not a home, either. Yet it often pulls him back against his will and one senses, to use his own words from an essay in *The Bell*, that the writer carries "his country or his city with him in his heart".[31]

II

In *Poisoned Lands* Montague is less forcefully distanced from Ireland. The collection starts with a reflection on "country" in the first part, moves to a "poisoned" past and present Ireland, before Montague probes more "healing" grounds in the final section of the volume.[32] Several poems of *Forms of Exile* have found their way into *Poisoned Lands*.[33] It is a volume that significantly lacks poems on America, although it still uses places of otherness in order to confront Irish (mainly Ulster) themes. Whereas Montague seems to have been concerned predominantly with place in *Forms of Exile*, the dimension of time is now equally explored.

"Like Dolmens Round My Childhood, the Old People" (*PL61* 18-19) reveals Montague's pull towards the past, the historical past as well as his own past. The speaker attempts not only to re-enter former times, but also to remake and reshape

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[29] *The Traveller* is quoted from *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London: Longmans, 1969) 634. Montague began a thesis on Oliver Goldsmith at University College Dublin round the time he wrote the poems for *Forms of Exile*. See "Biographical Notes," *FC* 223.

[30] Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997) 128.

[31] "The Young Irish Writer and *The Bell*," *FC* 172.

[32] There is no separate heading for each section and the themes are not as consistent as Montague's preface suggests ("I tried to arrange the poems in a development of themes"). See *PL61* 7. Kersnowski notes: "The necessities of publishing partially mutilated the structure of the book as Montague had planned it, but the three parts are still evident: country, sickness, healing". See Kersnowski, *John Montague* 22.

[33] These are "Soliloquy on a Southern Strand", "Irish Street Scene, with Lovers", "Rome, Anno Santo", "The Sean Bhean Vocht", "Prodigal Son", "Dirge of the Mad Priest", "A Footnote on Monasticism: Dingle Peninsula" (now under "A Footnote on Monasticism: Western Peninsula"), "Rhetorical Meditations in Time of Peace" (now under "The Sheltered Edge") and "Cultural Center" (now under "Musée Imaginaire").

them in the poetic process. He thereby adds a further dimension to old neighbours, a Jamie MacCrystal, a Maggie Owens and the Nialls, by connecting them with old megaliths, ancient forms.[34] The speaker shows that he has a first-hand knowledge of the area, that he knows the people and their customs as well as the landscape. In the poem the distanced ending and abstract "dark permanence of ancient forms" contrast strongly with the plain, even colloquial style in the rest of the poem. The first line is a verbless statement: the vowels and soft consonants help a gliding back in time; it is as if Montague wants to bring out the mysteriousness of the dolmens.[35] The word "childhood" stands in the middle, between "dolmens" and "the old people".[36] Childhood is linked to the Irish ground and people, but also separated from them. In the description of the neighbours that follows, the poet is, as in *Forms of Exile,* an observer. We become aware of his presence only in stanza 2 ("all I could find"), by the pronoun "We" in stanza 5 and in the end. His position is productively ambivalent.

Fierceness and friendliness, the blend of attraction and repulsion, that MacNeice describes as *"Odi atque amo"* in "Autumn Journal",[37] are opposites that haunt the stanzas. Whereas Jamie MacCrystal has all the kindness ("Fed kindly crusts to winter birds"; "He tipped me a penny"), Maggie Owens spreads gossip. The Nialls are chilling in their blindness and Mary Moore is a "by-word for fierceness". These oscillations resemble the balance between two buckets sketched in the poem "The Water Carrier". In the poem's texture we also find a duality, as in the oxymoronic "muddy sun". This rural world is rotten, "robbed" by materialism, "blind", "crumbling" and "painful". At the same time the poem circles round the warmth, the sun of a home: housing, the hearth, stables, gates, and the finding of a shelter from the mountain rain. Communal values are conveyed not only through these details of a home, but also through the fact that a system of help has been put into place: "Through knee-deep snow, through summer heat" curate and doctor attend these people. Moreover, man and nature are one, for birds are fed and Maggie Owens is "surrounded by animals".[38] Finally, the sense that this civilisation is a well-functioning entity comes

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[34] The poem shows the autobiographical edge of Montague's poems. Antoinette Quinn stresses that "Montague is primarily an autobiographical poet". See Quinn, *SI* 29.

[35] Eamon Grennan comments that the line is "a gesture of strong but not at all strident (...) affirmation". See Eamon Grennan, "'Of So, and So, and So': Re-Reading Some Details in Montague," *SI* 110.

[36] Grennan, "'Of So, and So, and So,'" *SI* 110.

[37] Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (1966; London: Faber, 1979) 134.

[38] See also Grennan, "'Of So, and So, and So,'" *SI* 112.

out through the emphasis on regularity: like the cyclicity of nature, the doctor's marching "Through knee-deep snow, through summer heat" goes together with MacCrystal giving the child a penny "every pension day".

Yet, the fact that these figures live in a mountain lane suggests that this is a threatened marginal civilisation. This marginality is underlined by the fact that MacChrystal's song is without word and tune; it is solipsistic, for he sings only to himself. His activity is aimless and ending before it actually started. Jamie lost his – traditional – song; his song is "without tune, without words". The poem arrests this moment of frightening loss, but also conflates it with the speaker's own childhood fear of these figures, thereby mutually increasing the personal and the cultural dimension. Montague underlines the people's position in detail. Alongside the MacNeicean or Audenesque familiarity with the urban and modern, Montague not only exhibits a concern with the rural, but also depicts it with authenticity, having clearly absorbed Patrick Kavanagh's example.[39] There is no glorification of peasant life, harsh particulars are given and what dominates the poem are simple descriptions. "Sentences lay themselves out without syntactical difficulty, each line at once a unit of rhythm and of sense, as natural as speech"[40] and, one may add, as the rural life described. The poem wants to get the facts right: "He tipped me a penny (...) / Fed kindly crusts to winter birds". Through the almost objective diction, a sense of the fatality of history is woven into the lines. The inevitability of events leaves nothing behind except a "corpse". The hearth becomes "smokeless".

The last stanza starts emphatically:

> Ancient Ireland, indeed! I was reared by her bedside,
> The rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head,
> Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud.

[39] He records how he gave the poem to Kavanagh and "waited for the master's comment". See "Patrick Kavanagh: A Speech from the Dock," *FC* 138. John Montague and Martin Brian edited Patrick Kavanagh's *Collected Poems* (London: MacGibbon, 1964). Montague stresses that the publisher "knew my basic concern for the older poet, my desire that he should receive some of the recognition he deserved before it was too late". See *FC* 139. For the influence of Kavanagh on Montague, see Michael Allen, "Provincialism and Recent Irish Poetry: The Importance of Patrick Kavanagh," Dunn, *Two Decades* 33-36; Seamus Deane, "Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism," Dunn, *Two Decades* 14-17; Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry* 208; Seamus Heaney, "The Sense of Place," *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1980) 139-44.

[40] Grennan, "'Of So, and So, and So,'" *SI* 110.

Gaunt figures of fear and of friendliness,
For years they trespassed on my dreams,
Until once, in a standing circle of stones,
I felt their shadows pass

Into that dark permanence of ancient forms.

If Montague has summed up the bare reality of his threatened community until this stanza, he now, although evoking "Ancient Ireland", distances himself from a glorifying idiom. The speaker indicates that he is connected with Ireland, that he was brought up there and is familiar with "The rune and the chant". However, the monosyllabic words in the second line, together with the accumulation of fricatives in the third line, convey the haunting quality of his past.

If the stanza was introduced by an exclamation mark, it is only in its second half that this indication of an epiphanic moment can come fully to the fore. The poet brings the ancient monuments and the concrete figures together. The mnemonic process has led to an illumination of the self; Montague can now let the haunting memories pass and can create his own voice. He conserves the neighbours as though they were like those mysterious monuments. We end in what Thomas Kinsella characterises as "stony stillness",[41] and it is a stillness that anticipates some of the force of "Luggala" and "The Hill of Silence" in *Mount Eagle*. These later poems arrive at a stillness from a different angle, but underline Montague's concern to shape his lines towards a stony permanence. In "Like Dolmens Round My Childhood, the Old People" he combines this focus on one detail (the dolmens) with a regional concern modelled on Kavanagh. It is one of the first poems in which Montague attempts a psychological journey backwards in order to arrive at the present refreshed. The poem enacts an attempt to no longer let shadows fall across his (childhood) dreams.[42] He feels them pass, yet by way of the poem they are preserved, timeless as the dolmens. Personal dreams and concern for familiar people are both equally given a voice by the poem.

In "A Royal Visit" (*PL61* 34-35) it emerges even more clearly that, whilst drawing on Kavanagh's sense for the rural and authentic, Montague does not continue

[41] Thomas Kinsella, "Some Irish Poets," rev. of *PL61*, by John Montague, *Poetry* 102.5 (1963): 329.
[42] I agree with Richard Kearney that what we are presented with here is an "exorcism". See Kearney 128.

the elder's ahistorical stance. The poem is a turn back to the history of Tara, seat of the High Kings of Ireland for centuries.[43] The poem starts with "insidious music" that "exhort[s]": "Axehead of the intellect washed / In hovering fragrance of hawthorn, / The primary colours of a summer morning". Tara, so Montague quotes from the *The Book of Leinster*, "Once was the habitation of heroes . . .".[44] The past, however, is not all glory and magnificent saga, nor can it be "approached simply". The hill "resounds / With din of war and love", virgins are "Devious", and "fisty" men underline the "martial extravagance of mounds". The crucifixion these figures evoke is some sort of prehistoric crucifixion; the fort "we" revisit is far from stainless. Montague demystifies the place and his speaker even asks: "Gaelic Acropolis or smoky hovel?" The bards, singing for place and people, are not presented in a positive light, for they are "sotted" in their rehearsing of a genealogical glory: "Stately assonance of verse / Petrifies wolf-skinned warriors / In galleries of race". Blood, race and petrifaction are also part of this place's past.

In IV the attempt at a subtler singing is made, as the past is approached differently, but again "erotic terror" lies "Over stony beds of love". The saga Montague refers to, with couple and landscape blending, is demystified through allusion to terror and death. Landscape and couple only mingle momentarily, "Till beneath the hunchback mountain / Rears the fated boar of death". The speaker cannot let go of images of war in V where "A battle of miracles / Proves the Christian dispensation". The move from prehistoric to Christian times means only a replacing of snow by rain; "Christ is [only] the greater magician". St. Patrick whose statue overlooks Tara from the nineteenth century onwards, is brought into play. Significantly, he overlooks neither "Acropolis" nor "hovel", but a "provincial magnificence". The sentries again

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[43] Even before the arrival of the Celts Tara was a place of ritual burial. From Tara radiated the five main roads of Ireland. Despite the fact that Ireland was far from being one kingdom at the time, Tara has symbolized the unity of Ireland. The place was symbolic focal point for ritual, the mythical powers of the druids, hostages were held there and marriage with the tutelary goddess of Ireland confirmed the monarch's sovereignty at Tara. The Rise of Christianity meant the desolation of pagan Tara after the 6th century. St. Patrick is said to have converted the druid Dubthach at Tara. He supposedly used the shamrock to explain the Christian canon of the trinity. In popular memory, however, Tara retained its pagan ethos. For details, see Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age* (1994; London: Thames, 1997) 65-70; Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (London: Routledge; New York: Columbia UP, 1967) 39; *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, ed. Robert Welch and Bruce Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 554-55.

[44] A second version of the *Tain* dates from the second half of the twelfth century in the volume known as *The Book of Leinster* and it "aims to provide a unified, coherent telling of the tale (...) by adopting throughout a relatively consistent, if somewhat inflated, narrative style". See Raftery 14.

remind the reader of war and violence. The poem ends with country Meath. It ends in a calmer picture: "The central lands of Meath dissolve / Into royal planes of blue". County Meath can be overlooked from Tara, and the sight and scene itself are preserved and preservable over time. Revisiting the past meant envisaging war and a demystification, but the leap backwards in time also meant returning to a more soothing present and, maybe, a more promising future: Dark age and sagas end in "planes of blue".

Poems such as "Musée Imaginaire", "Pastorals" and "Woodtown Manor" in the last section give Kersnowksi reason to refer to this section as the one that aspires to "healing". "Woodtown Manor" (*PL61* 48-49) takes its imaginative landscape from a painting and captures something of what Montague stresses in "A Bright Day" (*CL* 36), for it shows "a slow exactness", a sense of visual "detail" and minute observation.[45] Through the employment of the present tense, Montague intensifies his observational stance, bringing the painting back to life for the reader. The poem likewise conjures up images of artistic creation: delicate dances, minute essences moving in and out of creation, illusions, waking dreams, paint – all described "As though a beneficent spirit stirred". The animals described have a calming effect and seem to enable the speaker to find words. Two poles, the detached, sensual Indian God and Franciscan belief, are reconciled and one can sense an almost pantheistic undercurrent: something Montague will probe especially in *Mount Eagle.*

Whereas this poem or "Kenmare Bay, Co. Kerry" (*PL61* 52) conveys the feeling for minute essences, first probed in *Forms of Exile* and now clearly developed further in *Poisoned Lands*, an element of satire can be found in "Walking the Dog" (*PL61* 57). "With a visage grave as Richelieu / Contemplating the state of France" a dog "examines his universe" and "circulates a bench / To distribute his signature". This is the element of satire that Montague wants the young writer to employ, as communicated in his essay "The Young Irish Writer and *The Bell*".[46] The lighter tone counterpoints the serious broodings of the collection and anticipates the French setting of *A Chosen Light.* I agree with Thomas Kinsella, however, who underlines in his review of the collection that "[i]n Montague's best poems his playfulness is virtually

[45] Montague points out that "Woodtown Manor" is "about the house outside Dublin" that the American painter Morris Graves had reconstructed. The poem "draws on images from his work". See John Montague, "The Poet and the Artist," *Hibernia* (August 1967): 17.
[46] *FC* 172.

absent".[47] Montague only suggests the possibility of healing, for the majority of the poems underline Ulster's troublesome past and present, "red beaks flash // Above visitor's hats / Like scalping knives" ("Kenmare Bay, Co. Kerry"). Montague tries for connections, be they between past and present, childhood and adulthood, myth and reality, but one can also sense that his is still an exiled psyche and at this stage, in imaginative terms, beneficially so.

III

Going to Paris after the interim period in Dublin was modelled on Joyce, but also reinforced by Montague's personal circumstances. Montague's fascination for France dates back to 1948; he went there on a cycling-tour. France, he stresses, is "*chosen*"[48] by him, not chosen for him – this fact probably constitutes one layer of the title of his Parisian collection *A Chosen Light*. Furthermore, he had married a Frenchwoman, Madeleine de Brauer, in 1956. In 1961 he settled with her in Paris. A private tone and theme dominate in *A Chosen Light*. The collection includes Montague's first volume of love poems, *All Legendary Obstacles* (1966),[49] and his family poems in collections start here, as he offers a poem on his uncle as well as the fine poem on his father, "The Cage" (*CL* 54-55).

"My father, the least happy / man I have known" are the first lines of the poem, the line-break wryly opening up the gap between the man and happiness. Montague continues the factual description with the father's "lost years" in exile. He works as a ticket officer for Brooklyn underground, "listening to a subway / shudder the earth" all day. Life is sucked out of the man for whom Irish whiskey is the only link to tradition, his only "home". "And yet" he "picked himself / up, most mornings" and his attempt to smile despite everything underlines his stamina, as does his "march" through the streets of Brooklyn. The undertone in the line hints at the superficiality of America once again. The father's smile is given "to all sides of the good / (non-negro) neighbourhood", where the bracketed "non-negro" implies the latent racism of the "neighbourhood".

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[47] Kinsella, "Some Irish Poets" 328.
[48] John Montague, "Global Regionalism," interview with Adrian Frazier, *Literary Review* 22 (1979): 154. The verb is italicised in the interview.
[49] John Montague, *All Legendary Obstacles* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1966).

After this portrait, arresting in its realism, the speaker recalls a brief moment of intimacy between father and son. When the father revisits Garvaghey, a pastoral scene, a merger between past and present, and a being at one with the outside world, are both possible:

> When he came back
> we walked together
> across fields of Garvaghey
> to see hawthorn on the summer
> hedges, as though
> he had never left;
> a bend of the road
>
> which still sheltered
> primroses. But we (...).

It is "as though / he had never left". They walk together instead of separately and father, son and reader leave the subway-underworld to walk on solid ground instead of a shuddering (Brooklyn-) earth.[50] Likewise, definite entities are foregrounded such as the place, Garvaghey, the bend and the hedges. They contrast with the displacement of Brooklyn where the only certain place – the booth in which the father works – is, in fact, the most haunting one. In this moment of equilibrium father and son look into the same direction and time pauses. Likewise, continuity and resemblance are carried over through the image of primroses that are "still" carefully "sheltered". Nature is unchanged; the poet longs to bring this stability into the relationship. The idyll comes to a standstill through the breaking in of an emphatic "But". Generations differ, because "when / weary Odysseus returns / Telemachus must leave". Rationality brings the attachment to an end and the emotional gap becomes predominant, because "the shared complicity / of a dream" is missing. The lineation beautifully captures the futility and fluidity of the epiphanic moment, for it forces the reader to travel rapidly over the lines.

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[50] The walking with the father perhaps echoes F. R. Higgins' poem "Father and Son" that Montague included in his edition of *The Faber Book of Irish Verse* (1974; London: Faber, 1978) 264-65.

Despite the inevitability of personal and cultural history, however, the father has remained vividly present in the poet's mind. Montague plays with the power of memory not only by making a past walk present, but also by revealing the triggering moment at the very end of the poem. Descending into a subway means seeing the father's "bald head behind / the bars of the small booth". The poet carries with him a strong visual image. The booth is both a literal cage for the father and figuratively a metaphor for the fact that he is caged by exile. The poet, too, is hemmed in, haunted by a recurrent memory of this father:

> Often as I descend
> into subway or underground
> I see his bald head behind
> the bars of the small booth;
> the mark of an old car
> accident beating on his
> forehead: a mystic wound.

The father is present in many underground journeys.[51] The picture of the cage likewise becomes a haunting symbol for the situation of the Irish poet who is caught between the rural and the modern, past and present or, to remain with the theme most directly, between native soil and the turmoil of the outside, alien world. In the poem's technique these two pulling forces surface. On the one hand, utterances are sharp, dry and judgmental: the father is "the least happy / man" and the years are "lost years" in "oblivion". On the other hand, one finds nostalgic elements such as the primroses and hedges. An attachment to the father is achieved, because he is so plainly and clearly

[51] In its visionary aspect the passage is reminiscent of Kavanagh's "Memory of My Father" that addresses the extraordinariness of triggering effects with regards to memory, for Kavanagh's speaker admits: "Every old man I see / Reminds me of my father / When he had fallen in love with death / One time when sheaves were gathered". The stanzas' movement from the general to the specific continues until one finally arrives at a voice stressing "'I was once your father'". In his second stanza a "man" triggers the memory whereas in the third it is a musician, but it is interesting that the poet ends with an inward look at the end of each stanza: "I might have been his son" and "He too set me the riddle". There is an inner need to connect with the common stranger; the poem is itself a bridge to the dead father. In its haunting quality Kavanagh's poem is similar to Montague's "The Cage", too, as at the end of Kavanagh's poem an indefinable voice speaks: "Every old man I see / (...) / Seems to say to me: / 'I was once your father'". See Patrick Kavanagh, *Selected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996) 10.

recalled. The poet oscillates between being haunted by the memory, and the associations it gives rise to, and an intimate relationship with the father. In the adjective "ghostly", that Montague employs in the later version of the poem these two forces meet even more powerfully.[52] He attempts to transform the "ghostly" quality of the memory, for the adjective "ghostly" comes across as uncanny and can likewise carry an intimate colouring. The poet-son can bring the father back imaginatively and comes to "see", to see more, and to see more widely, so that he can give the father a place in his memory, despite the fact that the memory carries a troubled mark, "a mystic wound". When compared to the distancing momentum predominant in *Forms of Exile*, the poem "The Cage", with its intimate subject matter and an almost confessional manner, comes as a surprise. It is a quality that aligns Montague with Lowell, but will be shaped into his more arresting own form in *The Dead Kingdom.*

The collections *A Chosen Light* and *Tides* contain several love poems that have absorbed not only American and French techniques, but are also "unusually erotic for an Irish poet".[53] What comes out in these two collections is Montague's evolving skill as a love poet. Poems that fall into this category have caught the critics' attention to a lesser extent than Montague's poems on Ireland.[54] Several love poems in *A Chosen Light* show that the uninvolved depiction that had dominated "Irish Street Scene, with Lovers" has disappeared at this stage in his career. In "That Room" (*CL* 20) we enter a spatial, but also psychological interior: "Side by side on the narrow bed / We lay, like chained giants, / Tasting each other's tears, in terror". In the course of the poem we are not given the answer to "What happened in that room". In fact, the speaker stresses that "no one will ever know" it. Yet, whilst sharing this secrecy with "Irish Street Scene, with Lovers", Montague does not shy away from generalisations ("Rarely in a lifetime comes such news", "we must suffer"), admitting hurt ("like acid to the bone") and playing with exterior and interior. The latter comes out in "the usual show" the two lovers put on; a show that stands in sharp contrast to the acid terror, the tears the poem

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[52] For the later version, see *RF* 42; *CP* 44.

[53] Brown, *Northern Voices* 153.

[54] Discussions that focus on love are Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1985) and his "Eros in Eire: Montague's Romantic Poetry," *SI* 44-57; Augustine Martin, "John Montague: Passionate Contemplative," Genet and Hellegouarc'h 37-51. Patricia Coughlan analyses some love poems from a feminist angle in "'Bog Queens:' The Representations of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney," *Gender in Irish Writing*, ed. Toni O'Brien Johnson and David Cairns (Milton Keynes: Open UP, 1991) 88-111.

conjured up and the fact that "the news (...) left little to hide". The poem is based on contradictions, carefully conveying the fact that the relationship is out of balance. This love is dominated by "terror", as well as "sorrow" and "harm", and the only thing that is in balance is the adversity with which the poem ends: "Love's claims made chains of time and place / To bind us together more: equal in adversity". The sharpness with which Montague portrays a presumably disintegrating relationship, whilst foregrounding the hurt that both the lovers have to endure, is drawn together in the phrase of resignation: "we must suffer the facts of self". The very facts of self surface and occupy Montague's poems at this stage, not only in the relation to place, but also toward the other.

It becomes increasingly clear that Montague's thematic focus is on love or Ireland, and that he builds up a tension between evocation and detachment in both these areas alike. In *Tides* the "other" and the land become intertwined in the figure of the *Cailleach*, "an old woman, a hag" and "a nun", as he explains.[55] The relation of the speaker to her can be characterised as one of repulsion and attraction. The poems "The Wild Dog Rose" (*T* 16-18) and "The Hag of Beare" (*T* 19-22), in line with the earlier "The Sean Bhean Vocht" (*FE* 6-7), depict a poet repelled by the old women's appearance, yet fascinated by them.[56] The spell of Graves' *The White Goddess* on Montague has been noted by some critics and has been emphasised by Montague himself. In several poems, Montague hovers between myth and realism; so, in "The Wild Dog Rose", to be discussed more closely in connection with *The Rough Field*, the poet has a personal history with the female figure, revisits her again and becomes a confidant of her. In the course of the poem, the "mythological goddess is humanized".[57] The hag figure turns out to be another element in Montague's attempt to demythologise and re-mythologise.

Other female figures evoked in *Tides* hover between the ideal and the real, and therein lies the innovative force of the collection. Women are goddesses, but are also brought down to the quotidian:[58]

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[55] *T* 16.

[56] Quinn ably analyses the hag figure. See Quinn, *SI* 31-35.

[57] Kearney 128.

[58] Johnston sees "the poet's mediation between idealized and quotidian lover" as running through Montague's volumes. See Johnston, "Eiros in Eire," *SI* 48.

Seen,
as in a pallid
lightning flash

a grieving woman
& not a goddess.

We begin
the slow
climb
down. ("Down" (*T* 28))

Experimental though still recognisably lyric forms underline the attempt to write innovative love poetry. The use of the prose poem in the collection, again a novelty for an Irish poet, and perhaps influential on Heaney who uses the form in *Stations* (1975), deepens the attempt to infiltrate the old with the new, to bring in a form popular in French poetry from Baudelaire to Ponge and thereby internationalise the collection's reach. The conscious work with the page that calls attention to the shaping of the poem comes out in "Life Class" (*T* 39-42), underlining Montague's attempt to write "visually diverse poems".[59] The poet is again an observer, now of "a system / of checks & balances – / those natural shapes" of a female model, that becomes also "simply human // a mild housewife". Montague's female figures come in various guises; from this "housewife" to the anonymous "you", from the young girl to the queen, and from the goddess Ceres to ninth-century hags.

One of the most haunting poems in the collection is "The Pale Light" (*T* 27), for it evokes woman as Medusa, frightening as well as arresting. The play with line-lengths and the placing of the poem on the page underlines the poet's ambivalence and is Montague's way of controlling, but also being controlled by, the devouring quality of the Medusa-figure. The speaker admits that the "putrid fleshed woman"

[59] "Notes and Introductions," *FC* 49.

Tears away all
I had so carefully built –
Position, marriage, fame –
As heavily she glides towards me
Rehearsing the letters of my name
As if tracing them from
A rain streaked stone.

It is as if the poem wants to reverse the process of her tearing away by its willed moulding. Words and images hinting at fluidity ("glides", "rain" and "more fluent" in the third stanza) not only carry an overt sexual connotation, but also oppose the shapeliness of the poem. The two words "*Re*hearsing" and "*re*laxes" [emphasis added] underline the duality, which culminates in "death being born" at the end of the poem.

Interestingly the very title of the poem highlights the fact that Montague takes great care to ensure a dialogue between his poems and to generate dynamic relationships within his *oeuvre*. In this poem from *Tides* we do not find "a" light, and it is not "chosen", but rather "the" light, and "pale". This contrapuntality, accompanied often by the will to simultaneously reveal a connection, is intrinsic to Montague's early poems and is their driving force.

Chapter 3

JOURNEYING

The Rough Field

> But I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed,
> The woven figure cannot undo its thread.[1]

Montague's *The Rough Field* attempts to confront what is underlined in MacNeice's lines. The re-visitation of the past is a predominant aspect that runs through *The Rough Field*.[2] By the time of publication of this sequence, Montague has returned to Ireland in person and this is of special significance to him. In a conversation he puts it as follows: "In 1972 everything changed; I decided that it was time for me to go home".[3] Poetically this means that he confronts his "home" on a large, sequential scale.

Montague's confrontation with his "past" takes place through what I shall call the text's multi-journey structure. Illuminating the text from the angle of its various journeys allows me to reveal aspects (personal, universal, textual) other than, but also including, the often discussed historical dimension, and arrive at a fresh reading. Journeys are Montague's means of shaping his re-visitation of the past. In fact, the idea of writing the sequence is connected with a journey: "Bumping down towards Tyrone a few days later by bus, I had a kind of vision, in the medieval sense, of my home area, the unhappiness of its historical destiny. (...) I managed to draft the opening and the close (...)".[4] The triggering moment occurred during a journey and the prefatory lines indeed make a point of this.

The array of journeys ranges from the literal travelling that frames the poem, namely the journey from Belfast to Tyrone and southwards, through the Ulster

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[1] These lines are quoted from MacNeice's "Valediction". See MacNeice 53.
[2] If not stated otherwise, I quote from the first edition of *RF*.
[3] Montague, personal conversation with the author, 15 May 1999.
[4] Backcover of first edition, from third edition onwards to be found in the preface.

landscape, past and present, to journeys in individual pieces. The poet is on foot on several occasions, for he walks with friends in the first half of "The Source" (section VI) or with his father in "The Cage" (section V), takes the mountain road in "The Road's End" (section IV), or leaves the car in order to walk to "Penal Rock / Altamuskin" (section III). It is in these walks that he connects with the landscape, records it, transforms it and is transformed by it. He steps into it physically, emotionally and imaginatively, as this extract from "The Road's End" (section IV) underlines:

> May, and the air is light
> On eye, on hand. As I take
> The mountain road, my former step
> Doubles mine, driving cattle
> To the upland fields. Between
> Shelving ditches of whitethorn
> They sway their burdensome
> Bodies, tempted at each turn
> By hollows of sweet grass,
> Pale clover, while memory,
> A restive sally switch, flicks
> Across their backs.

Montague's journeys can be grouped into three categories; these are categories that intersect, but which shall be taken as a means of unfolding the work. First, there are backward journeys, returns as in the quotation above; second, progressing journeys, journeys that are still under way; and third, outward journeys. They cohere with how the reader experiences the sequence. There is the reference to something that was "before" the text, such as history, personal memory, even older textual material. Then, there is the process of an unfolding, immediate and self-conscious collage-poem on the page, or the listening to a reading of it.[5] Lastly, something that is set up as a vision (future) is attempted through the sequence. In the current chapter I shall outline

[5] It has been read, for instance, in the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, on 11 Dec. 1972. "Biographical Notes," *FC* 224.

the types of journeys in part I. In part II select stretches of the sequence will be analysed to show how they interact. Part III constitutes a summary.

I

Past journeys are constituted most directly by various historical references and allusions. Key-points within Montague's circling through history include, amongst others, several allusions to the plantation of Ulster in the seventeenth century. In section I he mentions the planter Mountjoy in this context. Montague refers to the "Ancient Order" of Hibernians, includes the "post Famine years" and alludes to The Battle of the Boyne through "'To hell with King Billy'". The second section starts with a woodcut that depicts a burning of a peasant's house. Section III includes a letter in the *Belfast Newsletter* from 1967 and the crisis of 1640-41 is indirectly referred to in an extremist pamphlet by a Protestant organisation ("LOYALISTS REMEMBER!"). Open-air masses of Catholics that took place until the 1870s are evoked in "Penal Rock / Altamuskin" and the "*new man*" mentioned in the third extract from the uncle's letter is Terence O'Neill who took office in Northern Ireland in 1963. The plantation of Ulster becomes a topic at the beginning of section IV and Sir John Davies is directly mentioned. After foregrounding Kinsale Montague circles back a few years to Con Bacach O'Neill who had invaded the Pale. The section moves up to "After Kinsale" before ending with the Flight of the Earls from 1607. Montague alludes to this flight once more through including an extract of its description as it occurs in the *Annals of the Four Masters*. The plantation is referred to by Montague's insertion of a letter of the planter Chichester to Mountjoy.

Section V circles round the failed revolution of 1916, and the exile of the poet's father in America. VI stays with revolution by alluding to Bolivia in one of the opening epigraphs and focuses on economic change in the Ireland of the sixties. VII refers to economic changes in the North, whereas VIII mentions the revival of traditional music through Seán Ó Riada, circles back to 1916 again, before moving to the sixties with indirect allusions to Lemass's and Whitaker's programme of economic renewal in the South. IX focuses on the Civil Rights marches in the North and is dedicated to Bernadette Devlin. Additionally, this section is a re-visitation of events already mentioned and a blending of the upheavals in Northern Ireland with the civil rights movement around the world, in Berkeley, Berlin, Paris and Chicago

respectively.[6] In 'Driving South' Montague returns to a concern with technological progress, stressing the change in the pattern of farming.[7]

Given the density of historical references, the critical emphasis on the historical and Montague's treatment of Ulster hardly surprises.[8] However, although critics elaborate on its historical dimension, they hesitate to go into historical details. Even if these are taken as a starting point, as David Gardiner has done, it is discovered that the events apparently evoked, such as the ones in 'A New Siege', are difficult to pin down. Montague "denies a fixed reading of these historical declarations".[9] Equally, an overall focus on historical issues in *The Rough Field* all too quickly faces the problem of historical interpretation, heightened in the Irish context. The question of Montague's biography with his "singular attitude toward Ireland"[10] and his Ulster Catholic background, further complicates a reading of the sequence along such lines. Awareness of these potential problems is vital in a discussion of the text of *The Rough Field* and of texts on *The Rough Field.*[11]

Several sections are, however, journeys back into a very personal past, in particular, sections I, II, V, VI and X.[12] Even the most historically dense section, 'A New Siege', has a deep personal undercurrent. It has been characterised by Montague as follows: "And the poem contained one of the most personal passages I had ever

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[6] David Gardiner counts approximately ninety-five allusions to history in 'A New Siege'. See David Gardiner, "Campaigning Against Memory's Mortmain: Benjaminian Allegory in John Montague's *The Rough Field*," *Notes on Modern Irish Literature* 8 (1996): 12.

[7] I am indebted to Thomas Dillon Redshaw for his "Notes on the Text" to *RF*. See *The Rough Field,* 5th rev. ed. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Boodaxe, 1990) 87-95.

[8] For a summary, see Robert F. Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry* 217; a longer compilation is to be found in his "John Montague and the Poetry of History," *SI* 92-93. Additionally, Elmar Schenkel discusses Montague's "uses of the past", in particular, history, landscape and language. Steven Matthews points out that *RF* "recognizes itself as a part of history". See Elmar Schenkel, "Embodying the Past: History and Imagination in John Montague's *The Rough Field*," *Proceedings of the Anglistentag, 1992, Stuttgart*, ed. Hans Ulrich Seeber and Walter Göbel (Tübingen: Niemayer, 1993) 102; Matthews, *Irish Poetry* 129.

[9] Gardiner 14. Gardiner refers here to the beginning of 'A New Siege', and demonstrates that instability in historical viewpoint is written into Montague's text. To support his argument he points out that Montague changed his dedication of this piece from Mary Holland to the more radical Bernadette Devlin. See Gardiner 16.

[10] Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry* 200.

[11] John Wilson Foster remarks: "The Ulster Catholic writer has lived for so long with the imagery of land-decay and land-loss that he has become addicted to it (...). What he wants is (...) a mythic landscape of beauty and plenitude that is pre-Partition, pre-Civil War, pre-Famine, pre-Plantation and pre-Tudor". See John Wilson Foster, "The Landscape of Planter and Gael in the Poetry of John Hewitt and John Montague," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 1.2 (1975): 21. For a critique of Montague, see also George Watson, "The Narrow Ground: Northern Poets and the Northern Ireland Crisis," *Irish Writers and Society at Large*, ed. Masaru Sekine, Irish Literary Studies Ser. 22 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1985) 215-17, 223; Longley, "Searching the Darkness," Dunn, *Two Decades* 142-46.

[12] For Garratt, *RF* "recites a personal rather than a social or political history". Garratt, "John Montague and the Poetry of History," *SI* 94.

written; (...) it is about exile and return, and my earliest awareness of the relationship between the outside world and Ireland".[13] The invocation of the uncle and "old people" in section I, the aunt in section II, the father in section V and the old hag in section X reveals the sequence's rootedness in the personal. Furthermore there are childhood-episodes such as finding a swallow's nest and the climb to the source. The personal dominates in "The Source" (section VI). This poem starts in the present, before the poet's memory is triggered by seeing a stream ("I climbed to its source once"). He remembers the local people, such as "Old Danaghy". The poetic act itself combines powerfully with the memory; the walk sketches the act of writing, as underlined in chapter 1. That the historical cannot do without the personal is emphasised in brackets; "(The pattern history weaves / From one small backward place)". Other parallel journeys and simultaneous explorations underline the intertwining of personal and historical in *The Rough Field.* A parallelism is established at the very start by blending the poet's journey by coach with that of Mountjoy in the seventeenth century by a different coach. The ship on which the Earls flee crops up in a different context in section IX, in the personal memory of a past journey of

> a
> ship motionless
> in wet darkness
> mournfully hooting
> as a tender creeps
> to carry passengers
> back to Ireland
> a child of four
> this sad sea city
> my landing place (...).

The pull backwards includes allusions to Wordsworth, as surfacing in "The Source" and although denying him validity in section I ("No Wordsworthian dream enchants me here") Montague cannot do without him. The autobiographical urge as well as a concern with memory and with nature as triggering force is a feature he can

[13] "The Impact of International Modern Poetry on Irish Writing," *FC* 219.

sympathise with and is pulled towards.[14] A journey backward constitutes his re-visitation of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village.* Montague's speaker says that what remains are "Only the shed", "deserted" cabins and "shards / Of a lost culture" ("The Road's End"). His poem echoes Goldsmith's speaker's personal contemplation of Auburn, visualised as follows:

> Thy sports are fled, and all thy charms withdrawn;
> Amidst thy bowers the tyrant's hand is seen,
> And desolation saddens all thy green:
> One only master grasps the whole domain,
> And half a tillage stints thy smiling plain:
> (...)
> Far, far away, thy children leave the land.[15]

This passage deploring "the tyrant's hand" anticipates Montague's 'Driving South' where "A giant hand / as we pass by, reaches down / to grasp the fields we gazed upon". The elegiac tone in the sequence owes much to Goldsmith, a writer whose work Montague knows well.[16]

The return to Yeats hardly surprises with an Irish poet. Montague attempts to take on a critical, even ironic stance, as in section VIII where

> The visitor to Coole Park
> in search of a tradition
> finds
> a tangled alley-way
> (...)
> high wire
> to protect the famous beech-tree (...). (poem 7)

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[14] For the parallel to *The Prelude,* see Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry* 218; Redshaw, "John Montague's *The Rough Field*" 42.

[15] Quoted from *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith,* ed. Roger Lonsdale (London: Longmans, 1969) 677.

[16] See Montague's essay "The Sentimental Prophecy: A Study of the *The Deserted Village,*" *The Dolmen Miscellany of Irish Writing*, ed. John Montague and Thomas Kinsella (Dublin: Dolmen, 1962) 62-79; rpt. as "Oliver Goldsmith: The Sentimental Prophecy," *FC* 61-77. For the importance of *The Deserted Village* to *RF*, see Brown, *Northern Voices* 159, 170; Deane, *Celtic Revivals* 154; Matthews, *Irish Poetry* 121-29; Skelton, *Celtic Contraries* 245-46.

Montague's echo of Yeats underlines the fact that a dialogue with the older poet cannot be escaped. The historical and mythological dimension is something Montague shares with his predecessor, extending Kavanagh's concern with and contemplation of a local area in "The Great Hunger". These journeys backwards with respect to authors make up an important strand in the sequence.

Montague's extensive reworking of older material constitutes another backward journey. That the sequence shaped itself between 1961-1971 is underlined in the subtitle and the preface. Sections in it have been published separately before. 'Patriotic Suite' and 'Home Again' were both published in 1966, 'Hymn to the New Omagh Road' and 'The Bread God' occurred in 1968, whereas 'A New Siege' has been published in 1970.[17] Several individual lyrics from the earlier collections *Poisoned Lands*, *A Chosen Light* and *Tides* found their way into the text. Although these collections differ in their thematic focus, they have formulated issues of *The Rough Field.* While *Poisoned Lands* is concerned with place and time, Montague touches on the aspect of technological progress in *A Chosen Light*; not only in "The Road's End", a poem that the reader finds again in *The Rough Field*, but also "Henhouse" and "Hill Field".

The Rough Field absorbs concerns not only expressed in poems, but also in stories and essays published between 1961 and 1970. As Thomas Dillon Redshaw has shown, two earlier essays of Montague's meet: the essay entitled "The Rough Field" of 1963 in which Montague focuses on his home area with its tradition and changes, and "A Primal Gaeltacht" from 1970.[18] In the latter he is concerned with the Irish language, myth and legend and puts forth the claim that an Irishman, willingly or unwillingly, is influenced by these. Concerns with language are taken up in section IV; "the severed / head now chokes to / speak another tongue" ("A Grafted Tongue").

The fine collection of stories *Death of a Chieftain*[19] published in 1964 is consciously arranged in the manner of Joyce's *Dubliners.*[20] "The New Enamel Bucket"

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[17] John Montague, *Patriotic Suite* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1966); *Home Again* (Belfast: Festival Publications, 1966); *The Bread God* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1968); *Hymn to the New Omagh Road* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1968); *A New Siege* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1970).

[18] Redshaw, "John Montague's *The Rough Field*" 38. For the essays, see John Montague, "A Primal Gaeltacht," *Irish Times* 30 July 1970: 7; "The Rough Field," *Spectator* 26 Apr. 1963: 531. Although the latter essay can be found in a revised version in *FC*, I shall quote from its original publication in this chapter.

[19] John Montague, *Death of a Chieftain and Other Stories* (1964; Dublin: Wolfhound, 1989); hereafter referred to as *DC*.

focuses on travelling in the Ulster border area downhill, and facing the distance between one point (home) and the other (Moorhill), a place that is described as being "of extreme bleakness", "stagnant" and "down-at-heel" (*DC* 21). The story "The Road Ahead" anticipates the section 'Hymn to the New Omagh Road':

> We stood side by side, looking at the landscape. Something curious about the quality of the silence struck me: I could not hear a single bird. There were no hedgerows any more, they had been bulldozed to level the ditch on either side, and lengthen the view. (*DC* 89)

Furthermore, the subject of progress had been confronted fictionally by Montague through the story "A Change of Management". In the story, old company traditions have to be given up, a re-structuring takes place. O'Shea has to give way to the new boss Clohessy. "A Change of Management" concludes:

> Somewhere, on the banks of the Liffey, or overlooking a Georgian square, a great new building would rise, a glass house against which the world might, at first, throw stones, but would gradually accept. Inside, in a large, discreetly lighted room, with Tintawn carpeting and an abstract on the wall, would be Clohessy. And in one of the adjoining cubicles, perhaps a file open before him, just as it was now. . . . Half-surprised, as though looking into a mirror, John O'Shea greeted his own future. (*DC* 114)

The story "The Cry" depicts the journalist Peter Douglas's visiting his Irish home after a long absence and witnessing a sectarian street fight. Douglas wants to write an article about it, but fails.

One can conclude that the "recurrent disease, a recurrent disease called violence"[21] and the technique of confronting it in writing is an issue that had arisen for Montague in the sixties. In *The Rough Field* the orchestrated piece becomes

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[20] "Fifty years later, when I assembled *Death of a Chieftain* I tried for a similar pattern, from childhood to manhood, though I was dealing with the Ulster countryside, and a much later Dublin". See John Montague, "Work your Progress," *Irish University Review* 12.1 (1982): 49.

[21] John Montague, "Beyond the Planter and the Gael: Interview with John Hewitt and John Montague On Northern Poetry and The Troubles," interview with Timothy Kearney, *Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies (1977-1981)*, ed. Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney (Dublin: Blackwater, 1982) 724.

thematically and technically an exploration of the possibilities of poetry in general and its capacity for dealing with the "recurrent disease" in particular – extending concerns already surfacing in short poem, short story or essay. The sequence absorbs these previous texts.

That these returns to earlier texts are balanced by "take-offs" or outward glancing journeys surfaces in the explanatory, and later prefatory, lines that emphasise a universal significance the sequence should equally carry. Montague moves outward, away from Ulster:

> Although as the Ulster crisis broke, I felt as if I had been stirring a witch's cauldron, I never thought of the poem as tethered to any particular set of events. (...) [T]he New Road I describe runs through Normandy as well as Tyrone. And experience of agitations in Paris and Berkeley taught me that the violence of disputing factions is more than a local phenomenon.[22]

In the sequence itself Montague ensures a movement outward by the blending of different locations. This becomes most potent in section IX, in 'A New Siege'. It can also strongly be felt in section II. The section recalls the poet's aunt's life and describes her journey into death; it also recalls the poet's being at a different place, in Paris, when she dies. It resembles Montague's biographical situation in the sixties – writing *The Rough Field* in Paris, but at the same time brooding over, looking towards and travelling to Ireland.[23] The sequence originated in a period of transition, a moment that is deeply inscribed in it. Montague's usage of place, probed in *Forms of Exile*, becomes more refined; in the quiet lyrics in section II his situation as insider and outsider is most successfully sketched. His crossing himself is a religious act, as much as it is of personal significance to him. It suggests, too, his attempt to cross the gap between home and exile. The crossing is a look outwards, over to the aunt, and inwards, a brooding over her. In the midst of the "paraphernalia of a / swollen city", the poet says

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[22] See backcover of first edition.

[23] In a conversation he stressed that he wrote *RF* in Paris and went to Ireland via London; he would often work for four weeks and then go to Ireland for a few days, through London, where his publisher was. See Montague, personal conversation with the author, 15 May 1999.

I crossed myself
from rusty habit
before I realise
why I had done it.

When the speaker asserts "I crossed myself", we recall that he has "crossed" the water. It is afterwards that he comes to consciousness ("realise").

In a similar quiet moment, in section III, the walk outside is starting point for the melting of the ball of snow, the act of baptising, which is a transitional state, before moving on, before the "before I go" ("Penal Rock / Altamuskin"). The ending in "Up for Sale", to be found in section VI, is another device avoiding standstill and ensuring that one is led to something "beyond": "The moon on the road is a river / Of light, leading to new adventure . . .". These double-layered endings are attempts in the text's micro-structure to move on and out. Spaces are left blank or open, in order to be filled with meaning by poet and reader alike.

Moreover, the journey outward is constituted through Montague's exploration of multiple forms and genres, which, in turn, allow him to situate his sequence in a future-oriented poetics and the genre of the collage-poem. Lyrics contrast with narrative statements and excerpts; elegies stand next to newspaper articles, sonnets next to pamphlets. The epic and the lyric are stretched to their extremes.[24] Montague will never have these two in tension as much as he does here. A quieter lyrical mode becomes more predominant in *The Great Cloak, Mount Eagle, Time in Armagh* and *Border Sick Call*. The latter's narrative element is counterbalanced by a dense imagery, lyrical tone and a net of allusions. Even when Montague narrates, the imaginative arch becomes much wider in later works, avoiding the social commentary that at times overburdens the lyric sections in *The Rough Field*, most notably visible in the epilogue, 'Driving South':

A changing rural pattern means clack
of tractor for horse, sentinel shape
of silo, hum of milking machine:
the same from Ulster to the Ukraine.

[24] Montague characterises them as "a dance of forms, some of them actually contradictory". See Montague, interview with Kearney 726-27.

The Rough Field tries to incorporate everything possible formally, as much as it tries to incorporate the whole of a civilisation thematically. In this, the work shares features with the novel, reinforced by its different voices and shifts in perspective.[25] Later works predominantly play with the potentialities of one form, be it the sonnet in *Mount Eagle*, or the *terza rima* in *Time in Armagh*. Montague characterises his search for formal devices with the semantic field of the journey describing the time before *The Rough Field* came into being and focusing on the result in 'A New Siege': "Like the explorers of the North-West Passage, I had gone round the world in order to discover the oldest metric in English (...)".[26] This poem is innovative in so much as he uses this line or "the line" to emphasise disturbance and to visualise the energetic pattern:

> the rough field
> of the universe
> growing, changing
> a net of energies
> crossing patterns
> weaving towards
> a new order
> a new anarchy
> always different
> always the same

Charles Olson's manifesto on "Projective Verse" is enacted in Montague's travelling outward; so is the attempt to be rooted in the local, but make it universal, which overtly echoes William Carlos Williams. The latter has been cited in connection with "The Road's End" that ends with "someone has / Propped a yellow cartwheel / Against the door".[27] *Paterson*'s walks are likewise a parallel and one notes Montague's remark

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[25] Brown, although stressing that the sequence has "something of a novel's density", also argues that it "lacks the organising authorial intelligence we expect from a novel that purports to deal with social and cultural themes". For Lucy, *RF* comes close to a novel through its "richly realistic and imaginative texture". See Brown, *Northern Voices* 169; Seán Lucy, "Three Poets from Ulster," *Irish University Review* 3.2 (1973): 185.

[26] "The Impact of International Modern Poetry on Irish Writing," *FC* 219.

[27] Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry* 223.

that he met William Carlos Williams when Williams was writing Book 3 of *Paterson*.[28]

Williams as well as Olson influence the poet's interest in the ongoing journey. Olson's idea of poetics is that it should be all process. For Montague "[t]he only unchanging thing in life is change"[29] and it is that aspect that fuels his sequence and its form. Olson underlines "the *kinetics* of the thing"; "the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge". He emphasises: "USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!" With respect to poem and reader he stresses "[a] poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (...), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader".[30] It hardly surprises that Montague experiments with open form after having been exposed to American poetry in America when studying and teaching at Yale, Iowa and Berkeley and after having met several American poets.

The sequence is a montage of ten different sections, and there are collages within this frame-collage. Section III, in particular, cannot deny the influence of American experimentalism. Montague subtitles it "A Collage of Religious Misunderstandings". The tragedy of religion in the Irish context is shown by pamphlets of the Orange Order campaigning overtly against Catholics. Interwoven are shorter lyrics in which people of the (poet's) parish are described moving "Along cattle paths" ("Christmas Morning"). The narrative element is a strong presence, whether in the form of the various pamphlets, or through the uncle's letter and even in the lyric poems themselves.[31] By making the force of violence formally explicit, the reader is bound to experience its immediacy. Disturbance has in fact been written into these lines since their early publication. The 1968-version displays different ink colours, three different types of script as well as bold and normal letters. On the title page of Montague's earlier version is written in red ink:

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[28] Montague, personal conversation with the author, 15 May 1999.
[29] Montague, interview with O' Driscoll, *SI* 64.
[30] Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," *Collected Prose,* ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997) 240.
[31] For Kevin Sullivan and Grey Gowrie the section is subject to critique on these grounds. The latter "find[s] the collage-like arrangements (...) irritating distractions". For Sullivan the hatred carried in the prose has not been "absorbed", but "interjected". See Grey Gowrie, "The Sour Land Truthfulness of a Modern Irish Poet," rev. of *DK*, by John Montague, *Fortnight* 17 Dec. 1984: 16; Kevin Sullivan, "Poets in Crisis," rev. of *RF*, *Nation* 25 June 1973: 822.

Listeners are warned
that reception may be interferred
with by pirate stations, but every effort
will be made to provide undisturbed
contemplation

Layout-devices and the sudden switches from lyric to narrative elements ensure that the reader's experience with the text is dominated by violation. The lyric elements themselves convey this aspect, too. In the poem "Late-Comer" the "late-comer" is the one on whom our eye focuses, as "On St. Joseph's / Outstretched arm, he hangs his cap".

How the "net of energies" conveyed in *The Rough Field* is transmitted shows the switch between a pamphlet and a poem. The pamphlet that begins with "LOYALISTS REMEMBER!" ends with an exclamation ("TO STOP / *The Catholics murdering Protestants!*"), whereas "Penal Rock / Altamuskin" starts with a quest. The poet surfaces, but the movement towards the intimate is harsh. The icy climate persists, since the "lesson" is to

Descend frost gripped steps to where
A humid moss overlaps the valley floor.
Crisp as a pistol-shot, the winter air
Recalls poor Tagues, folding the nap of their frieze (...).

During the course of the poem the poet is depicted as a part in the process of history: two thousand years are literally left behind. Finally his action follows. He melts a ball of snow. He baptises the place, as if to ensure that it regains significance. His "before I go" points out that he is only a visitor, but also reinforces that he intends to leave a trace. The uncle's hopeful tone in the letter that follows reinforces this intimacy, before giving way to a darker, prophetic poem with the ironic ending: "surveying / a United Ireland".

Furthermore, the very arrangement of a section, 'The Bread God' may serve as an example, ensures that issues are experienced like a journey in progress by the poet-observer as well as the reader. The section's structure consists of going to mass in

"Christmas Morning", the communion at its centre and "After Mass" towards the end. The walk, here by the congregation, is in focus:

> Lights outline a hill
> As silently the people,
> Like shepherd and angel
> On that first morning,
> March from Altcloghfin,
> (...)
> Along cattle paths
> Crusted with ice,
> Tarred roads to this
> Gray country chapel (...). ("Christmas Morning")

The journey-structure of this section is more layered still. Minute journeys within the journey of the poet's revisitation of the parish not only include the late-comer's "step", but also the going through the rosary by alluding to its beads. Additionally, through evoking the stages in a sermon, stations in Jesus' life are relived.

The sequence's forward flowing is overtly interrupted; the script and tone of the pamphlets break into the lyrics. As the sequence moves on, several, even opposing movements increasingly criss-cross. Poems form and re-form in the process of writing and reading. The collage structure is a form that directly displays these reformings, making the process explicit. Montague uses this montage-technique to ensure immediacy and fluidity.

The title-symbol, "the rough field" itself, is a field that stands for his home area, but takes on different shapes in the course of the sequence. It is the personal field of memory and the rough field of history. In 'A New Siege' it almost becomes the matrix for landmasses that move against each other. And it is literally one of the fields the poet walks on. The symbol of the swan and the symbol of the bird likewise change their connotations in different sections. The "wound" anticipated in the bleeding fuchsia ("The Road's End"), taken over in the father's scar ("The Fault") and again evoked in 'The Wild Dog Rose', shows the flowing of one image into an altered other. Finally, death in all its shades crops up with people (the old people, the aunt) as well as

the landscape and the language. These stand for one another, but also inform one another.

The climax of Montague's technical explorations is the self-conscious moment in 'A New Siege' where the sequence spells out that it is itself "invaded". The progress and process are both commented upon:

> the emerging order
> of the poem invaded
> by cries, protestations
> a people's pain (...)

What were just interruptions by pirate stations now become invasions. Something emerges, is on the verge of becoming, moves out, but cannot reach order, is "still" searching, progressing indeed. Through overtly and self-consciously admitting that the sequence is to be seen within cries, protestations and pain – history, in short – the poem almost denies itself one final destination, one final meaning. It describes means, not ends. Self-consciousness becomes a central part of an ongoing journey.

The process of an inscription within itself, that is also hinted at by the spiral (back and forth) orientation towards the present of the historical events mentioned, is deepened by the sequence's publishing history to date. The sequence has journeyed to a considerable degree. Its different layouts and revisions carry significance. Not only has the cover been changed, but one also finds a preface from the third edition onwards. In the first edition and in the second edition of 1974 the later prefatory lines stand on the back-cover of the book – the explanation follows the sequence. Their weight has been reinforced and, at the outset, the sequence stresses the universal significance of Montague's home area through the long preface. Headings to poems have been inserted or altered. The former is most potent in section I which does not display headings in the first and second edition.

Two epigraphs reinforce the redemptive element:

> I had never known sorrow,
> Now it is a field I have inherited, and I till it.
> from the Afghan

> The Greeks say it was the Turks who burned down
> Smyrna. The Turks say it was the Greeks.
> Who will discover the truth?
> The wrong has been committed. The important thing
> is who will redeem it.
>
> George Seferis

These epigraphs occur together throughout the sequence's publishing history. The third epigraphic lines, Montague's "Old moulds are broken in the North / In the dark streets firing starts. . .", have been affected by alterations as far as their layout is concerned, but it is still a dominating element in the opening pages. Whereas in the first edition it follows the epigraphs, in the second it dominates the cover itself, for it is a woodcut surrounded by this statement, and repeated after the first two epigraphs. Significantly, in the most recent publication of *The Rough Field* (in *Collected Poems*) the three quotations orchestrate the opening page together. Thus, it is the focus on "the North" as well as the stress on redemption that has caught the reader's eye even before being introduced to the contents page. This coheres with what Montague has stressed in an interview on the subject of *The Rough Field*:

> For we have had many 'troubles' in our country (...). I myself endeavoured to document the disease as early as 1961 when I wrote my long story on the subject called *The Cry*. (...) Now it is all the more important that the poet should have that necessary tact that you [interviewer] mentioned about his work.[32]

In a later part of the interview he goes on to stress that "the poet's job" is "to warn and to try to heal".[33] The poet is healer and early warner and should have the tact necessary for his undertaking.

The reader is also struck, so far as the sequence's layout is concerned, that the comments and pamphlets occur parallel to the lyrics in the first edition, whereas in subsequent editions, though also placed on the margin, the eye is naturally made to

[32] Montague, interview with Kearney 724.
[33] Ibid. 725.

switch from one to the other.[34] One reads the section chronologically rather than being forced to take in individual pieces almost simultaneously. The parallel gives way to the successive. Additionally, other comments surround the woodcuts in the first edition, whereas in later versions only the one beneath the woodcut remains, the others find their place on the following page. By this change the narrative sections move not only spatially but also conceptually towards the lyric sections and become part of the actual section itself rather than an *overture* to it.

The different art form, woodcuts, reinforces Montague's painting of a detailed picture. The woodcuts themselves provide a visual journey, together with and interrupting the textual one. While the rose on the woodcut underlines section X, 'The Wild Dog Rose', it is also a segment in the chain of illustrations. The woodcut introduces and sums up visually, and is a more immediate presence in the reader's experience. As it is not peopled, not historically outspoken, the woodcut directs our eye to one motif only and is a symbol of hope and reconciliation. In the first edition this is the final woodcut; from the third edition onwards the epilogue also opens with an illustration. It presents flowers that wither on the margin and the rough (battle) field stands in the foreground. We end on the rough field rather than with the rose. *The Rough Field* is not, as these changes show, a fully fixed entity, but still in the process of becoming. The publication of the sequence that Montague has called "the sequel" to *The Rough Field, The Dead Kingdom,* adds another layer to *The Rough Field.*

II

An analysis of select stretches of the sequence serves to show the "process" closely and attempts to reveal how the three categories mentioned intersect in an energetic net.

After the woodcut and "'*So you're home again!*'" section I starts on the margin with Mountjoy's take-over. One is also in present Belfast where the poet catches a bus at Victoria station. The reader is confronted with the experimental structure from the start:

[34] Montague refers to a "version": "In the first version of *The Rough Field*, I place blocks of material against each other (...)". See "Notes and Introductions," *FC* 47.

Vast changes have taken place, and rulers have passed away, dynasties fallen, since that glorious autumn day when Lord Mountjoy, accompanied by his land steward, arrived by coach in Omagh ...

Catching a bus at Victoria Station,
Symbol of Belfast in its iron bleakness,
We ride through narrow huckster streets
(...)
To where Cavehill and Divis, stern presences,
Brood over a wilderness of cinemas and shops,
Victorian red-brick villas, framed with aerials,
Bushmill hoardings, Orange and Legion Halls.
A fringe of trees affords some ease at last
From all this dour, despoiled inheritance,
The shabby through-otherness of outskirts:
'God is Love', chalked on a grimy wall
Mocks a culture where constraint is all.

His Lordship (...).

Through half of Ulster that Royal Road ran
(...).

Whereas the poem on the right records the bleakness of Belfast, the text on the left goes back to the time of the plantation of Ulster. The historical reference ensures that the speaker's present journey is crossed by an inescapable past journey that reinforces and interrupts the present one. Through the pronoun "We" the reader is drawn into the poet's journey. It also introduces a communal voice into the sequence. The poet-traveller records and is a witness, he sees a "culture where constraint is all". The aspect of religion is taken up in the second stanza; the Royal Road symbolises the division between Protestant and Catholic Ulster: "End of a Pale, beginning of O'Neill". The poet passes several plantation towns; the "twilight road" introduces the difference between Gaelic and English. As documents about the Earl accompany the lyric throughout this section, the blending of past and present can hardly be escaped. The switch from one to the other, demanded of the reader, brings in an element of disturbance from the very beginning. At the end of the second stanza, the lyrical subject announces itself through the pronoun "me":

Hugh O'Neill was soundly asleep by the banks of the Tiber, where no bugle blast of his fiery clansmen could ever reach or rouse him, McArt's stronghold was (...).

Narrow fields wrought such division,
And narrow they were, though as darkness fell
Ruled by the evening star, which saw me home

To a gaunt farmhouse on this busy road,
Bisecting slopes of plaintive moorland,
Where I assume old ways of walk and work
So easily, yet feel the sadness of return
To what seems still, though changing.

The speaker's travelling is interrupted. A stanza break opens between "home" and "To a gaunt farmhouse". In later editions this gap becomes even wider through the layout:

> Narrow fields wrought such division,
> And narrow they were, though as darkness fell
> Ruled by the evening star, which saw me home
>
> Hugh O'Neill was soundly asleep by the banks of the Tiber, where no bugle blast of his fiery clansmen could ever reach or rouse him. McArt's stronghold was (...).
>
> To a gaunt farmhouse on this busy road (...).[35]

A switch to the margin, to another voice conjuring up Hugh O'Neill, occurs. This voice blocks the straight homecoming; it is a voice that is external as well as internal and imaginative. The speaker cannot help but connect his arrival with the historical dimension of the place. An inner drama is expressed. The journey back into history constitutes an attempt to establish a link between past and present, be it positively or

[35] *RF*, 5th rev. ed. 11.

negatively charged. The change in perspective in the main poem equally ensures that the travelling home acquires a wider significance; we look at the prodigal son from above ("Ruled by the evening star, which saw me home") before treading onto the ground. The standstill that comes with the imaginative entry into the farmhouse is only temporary, for the haven of home lies on "this busy road", adding the aspect of urbanisation. In the last stanza the speaker's emotions in his attempt to take on old habits are overtly displayed: "Where I assume old ways of walk and work / So easily, yet feel the sadness of return / To what seems still, though changing". The first section's main theme is summarised, and this point will echo throughout the sequence. The speaker has to confront not only his home area, but also the changes in it. The "busy road" from the lines above trembles again in the participle "changing". Equally, the contrast between "farmhouse" and "road" is reinforced by the contrast between "still" and "changing".

The poet attempts to remain calm, for in poem 2 he is back to his first mornings of childhood paradise and "strive[s] to rekindle / That once leaping fire", "rekindle", that is, personal memory as well as old tradition.[36] He wants to bring the past into the present, re-energise it and make it more immediate. The imagery with "damp air" being "Like first kiss" carries his intimate relationship with the place and it underlines Montague's remark that "An Irishman may travel, but the memory of his maternal landscape persists".[37] The passage reveals what Maxwell sees as central to the sequence, how close the poet is, imaginatively, to the landscape of Garvaghey.[38] He is haunted as well as enchanted by it. Journeying in this literal and imaginative landscape constitutes the attempt to re-possess it and to trace hidden parts of the self.

Section I re-contextualises "The Country Fiddler" (poem 4) from *A Chosen Light* and "Like Dolmens Round My Childhood, the Old People" (poem 5) from *Poisoned Lands* (1961). Since these are surrounded by references to Elizabethan times, they move into the public realm. They are re-visited, evoke their former contexts, but acquire additional layers of meaning. In poem 4 several threads meet. First, the lot of

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[36] For Edna Longley the passage exemplifies how "the tactics of *A Chosen Light* supply an over-obvious corrective" to the employment of certain adjectives in poem 1 and at the beginning of poem 2; adjectives such as "dour", "bleak", "harsh" and "pale". See Longley, "Searching the Darkness," Dunn, *Two Decades* 143.

[37] "The Impact of International Modern Poetry on Irish Writing," *FC* 208.

[38] "The gathering landscape is a complex one, familiar and again to be explored (...)". Maxwell underlines that "[g]radually the landscape extends into interior scenes, where inner and outer, past and present, coalesce into symbol". He argues that this contributes to unity. See D. E. S. Maxwell, "The Poetry of John Montague," *Critical Quarterly* 15.2 (1973): 181.

the exiled family, touched upon in poem 3 ("Sons scattered to Australia, Brooklyn"), is taken up again. Second, an uncle plays the traditional Irish instrument and the uncle's tragedy of exile – "A rural art silenced in the discord of Brooklyn" – is made to represent a greater cultural loss. The threatening of folk tradition stems from the historical wound introduced by referring to the plantation of Ulster at the beginning of the section, and through the allusion to exile given in the poem itself, a destiny that has been pressing Irishmen for centuries. The second threat to tradition is a rapid technological progress, underlined by the contrasting life of Brooklyn. However, there is the quest not to be or to be made silent:

> Twenty years afterwards, I saw the church again,
> And promised to remember my burly godfather
> And his rural craft, after this fashion:
>
> So succession passes, through strangest hands.

Music, the rural craft referred to in these lines, is a means of connection between generations. It may survive against all odds. If it cannot directly be passed on, the textual undertaking may continue the musical one. The succession is laid into the hands of the poet. The poem becomes the field to sing on and a space of rendered or rendering memories. As stressed in "A Bright Day", "ritualizing (...) details" may be a means of evoking tradition, to find continuation despite discontinuities and finally to overcome that fiddle in pieces. A visionary space "beyond" opens up in the final lines. Music and text will, on a number of occasions during the sequence, underline a longing for an imaginative "opening out". Montague does not abandon the hope that a lost past and a complex urban present can combine in and through a textual undertaking. The speaker stresses his unease in taking on this task; he is an unexpected, strange successor, for "succession passes, through strangest hands". The surprising comma in this line has several consequences. First, the poem moves into a thoughtful contemplation even more self-consciously. Second, the verb "passes", picking up the earlier "changing", draws attention to itself as a movement forward as well as leaving something behind. The speaker's ambivalent position as insider as well as outsider surfaces directly at this stage in the sequence. Confronting the familiar area means confronting a personal history as well as a cultural history. The poetical journey

is a painful process revealing a troubled psyche and personal losses, yet it is also a "take-off", a discovery – of a craft. The craft might be a way out of personal and historical dilemmas as much as it is a means of moving into them.

By evoking the fierce figures of the past and journeying imaginatively backwards, the speaker of poem 5 (the early "Like Dolmens Round My Childhood, the Old People"), overcomes their threatening qualities and can let them pass, as stressed in the discussion of the poem in chapter 2. What is more, the speaker records a rural way of life, poverty, gossip and superstition. The re-contextualisation of this poem heightens the aspect of a personal and cultural drama. Technically it opens up the possibility of reinforcing the impact of the poem by referring to these neighbours in section IV again and to connect the woman-figure Maggie Owen with the old hag in section X.[39]

The link from section I to section II is established by remaining in the personal field as the poet mourns his dying aunt. The pain of the family the aunt has gathered around her resembles a communal pain ("the helpless, hopeless task / of maintaining a family farm, / (...) / maintaining a family name"), anticipating the connection of community and language, and the loss of Gaelic, as pointed out later in section IV. The death of the aunt is linked with the death-ridden land. As in the personal poem 4, these lines acquire a heightened cultural significance. With the introduction of the image of the tree of inheritance this is fully achieved. After focusing on awakening sexuality the poem moves outwards:

> The sap of another generation
> fingering through a broken tree
> to push fresh branches
> towards a further light,
> a different identity.

As with the fiddler-poet's "strangest hands" the identity is drawn from the past, though being "different" – because of a troublesome and changing present world. The attempt "to push fresh branches / towards" carries the aspect of the journey through its figural

[39] Montague points out the link between the female figure in poem 5 and the old woman in 'The Wild Dog Rose'. See John Montague, "The Hag, the Hill, and the Heart: An Interview with John Montague," interview with Carolyn Meyer, *Poetry Canada* 10.3 (1989): 17.

imagery. The pushing is a movement forward and is reinforced by the participle "fingering" that through its very form embodies an ongoing process. There is the possibility of renewal, a move "towards a further light".

The parallel blending of the dying aunt with the speaker's Paris in poem 3 underlines this difference through its shift in perspective. The poet is hemmed in between the intimate dialogue with the aunt, his past ("it is hard to / look into the eyes / of the dying // who carry away / a part of oneself – / a shared world // & you"), and the bare technology of the world: the "autobusses", "taxis" and "paraphernalia of a / swollen city". The time-span stretches from a childhood past referred to as "a shared world" to recent impressions. Most importantly, it reaches out to the all too immediate noise of the present. A cry connects the two spaces:

> on the night
> she lay dying
> I heard a low,
> constant crying
>
> over the indifferent
> roofs of Paris (...).

The crossing that follows is the only means of overcoming displacement, but is also partly out of place.

The intimate action of section II is followed by a collage of religious misunderstandings in III, through religion rather obliquely connected with section II. Section III in turn ends wryly, "surveying / a United Ireland". On the title page of IV follows a historical and geographical "survey", whereas "The Road's End" gives the land a private significance. When the self-absorbed speaker drives cattle to the upland fields his memory "flicks / Across their backs". "The well / Is still there" and sensual impressions draw the poet into an oscillation between past and present. The walk serves as a vehicle to enter the past. Equally, the poet journeys outward to other texts. Wordsworthian echoes hover in the background as much as Paterson's walks. The positive imagery at the start of the poem cannot persist, as the present breaks vehemently into the poem: "Now there is a kitchen extension / With radio aerial, rough

outhouses / For coal and tractor". Noise, extension and technological progress surround the speaker. The lines absorb his concern in the essay "The Rough Field":

> But, since the war, the rate of change has become relentless. The replacing of the hearth fire by a stove dealt a blow not merely to turf-cutting and breadmaking (...), but also to the practice of *ceilidh*-ing. The battery wireless was an endearingly faulty messenger from outside, but with the arrival of electric light and television the Rough Field has become a part of twentieth century.[40]

The shift to the ground and the private sphere results in sharpened memory as much as in a contemplation of loss:

> Like shards
> Of a lost culture, the slopes
> Are strewn with cabins, deserted
> In my lifetime. Here the older
> People sheltered; the Blind Nialls (...).

The "old people" of poem 5 in section I are taken up again, their fate and symbolic meaning being reinforced. In "A Lost Tradition" the painful "All around, shards of a lost tradition" opens a detailed description of the "shards" culminating in the lamenting "Brish-mo-Cree". This phrase, "my heart breaks" in translation, speaks for itself, but Montague also achieves immediacy through the employment of direct speech. What follows is the loss of the skill to read and understand the landscape: "The whole landscape a manuscript / We had lost the skill to read". Montague here evokes two aspects simultaneously – the extinction of language (Gaelic) as well as the picture of a landscape that carries cultural memories.

Instinct is the only means left in order to read the script, they "fumbled, (...) / Along the fingertips of instinct". "Ulster's Pride" traces the loss of the Gaelic language historically, giving, in the lyrical mode, an account of the time just before and after Kinsale. From here Montague starts his mourning of the dying out of Gaelic. The

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[40] See Montague's essay "The Rough Field" 531.

Flight of the Earls means the rise of English. He laments as the fiddler or the bardic poet, in the present tense. The combination of the evoked and described music has an impact on the reader:

> With an intricate
> & mournful mastery
> the thin bow glides & slides,
> assuaging like a bardic poem,
> our tribal pain –
>
> Disappearance & death
> of a world (...). ("Lament for the O'Neills")

The ampersands reinforce an impression of sliding from one thing to another: this sliding can be ominous insistence, as in the alliterative movement from "Disappearance" to "death". But it can also be at the service of artistic skill, as when "the thin bow glides & slides".

The climax of the section is Montague's often cited and anthologised "A Grafted Tongue" that culminates in

> To grow
> a second tongue, as
> harsh a humiliation
> as twice to be born.

The lines speak of the cultural wound, and the personal tragedy and they do so in a form that is all stammer, all anger, all explosion. Past and present, personal and cultural fuel each other; the poem exhibits the heart of Montague's strength as a poet, but also his dilemma. The excursion back into the past, into the land leads him to language itself, and in turn, touches upon a deeply personal concern. Montague connects his own childhood experience of acquiring a stammer with the significance of Gaelic and its suppression since Kinsale. In his later work, he focuses on the importance of sound, speech, language and silence in a wider and subtler manner, as in *Mount Eagle*. The topic, however, has its roots here.

The section's end examines the origin of several place-names, reveals the blending of Scottish and Irish names that was a result of the plantation. Starting off with the names of the present means drawing back the line towards the past, a backward journey. By doing so through the act of writing Montague subdues the feeling of dispossession, re-enacting a naming himself; or as Seamus Deane phrases it in a general discussion: "The naming or renaming of a place (...) is, like all acts of primordial nomination, an act of possession".[41] Montague might open up the possibility of a variety of languages and traditions side by side at present and in the future: Irish, Scottish, English; this becomes indeed an overt concern for Montague in an essay in the eighties.[42]

The middle part of *The Rough Field* circles around changes in the North and in the South of Ireland. Section V focuses on the speaker's father. His activities as a Republican are of importance as well as his personal significance for the speaker; further implications of which will be discussed in the following chapter. Through the father-figure's scar, Montague connects the past and the present, the private and the public. It is evoked as a symbol for the fault that "ran through / Us both: anger, impatience, / A stress born of violence". The speaker draws a straight line from past to present and describes it in active terms, for the fault, he points out, "ran". The father's re-evocation goes hand in hand with the realisation that the Province is still "broken". The change of rural life in the North comes into focus in VI. The evening evoked in "Up For Sale", with a focus on its particulars reminds of Patrick Kavanagh's realistic portraits of life in rural Ireland. It records "the usual / Grotesque, half animal evening so / Common in Ireland". A group of friends meets in the pub and remembers traditional songs, family history and childhood episodes. A Gaelic song silences the crowd, "Tentacles of race seeking to sound / That rough sadness". The poem admits that "Man looks at man, the current / Of community revived to a near- / ly perfect round . . .". A communal feeling can be "near- / ly" revived, old stories are being told, but the circle is "Soon broken / As talk expands"; "Contrariness" has come to the foreground.

The speaker undertakes a backward journey in his remembering of school days. Finding a swallow's nest, and having it destroyed by a friend helps him to come to an

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[41] Seamus Deane, introduction, *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature,* ed. Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward W. Said (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990) 18.
[42] "The Unpartitioned Intellect," *FC* 36-41.

understanding of the present in "The Fight": "To worship or destroy beauty – / That double edge of impulse / I recognise, by which we live". After leaving his "old friends" a seemingly literal journey makes him climb to "The Source". He undertakes the furthest journey back to origins, a "journey perilous". An oscillation between reality and imagination begins in Montague's poem; "The Source" is as much a take-off than a backward journey. These bridgings are suggestively hinted at by letting the speaker peer over a bridge before his walk. He walks into the past, but comments from the point of view of the present: "Remembering, / I seem to smell wild honey / On my face". A similar moment has occurred in section I in the image of the damp air that was compared to a first kiss. The poem culminates in a "Marching through memory magnified". The choice and arrangement of the words ensures that the speaker stalks in both times. He magnifies the memory as much as the memory itself becomes more alive. The line underlines his urge to possess this past, mark it, walk "through" it and cover it imaginatively. His journey comes full circle, since when the speaker reaches the main road the frame journey comes to a close.

The following inserted newspaper-article, placed on the left hand side of the page, informs us in a factual manner about the development of a music industry based on the rapid increase in showbands and dancehalls:

In five years, showbands have become the most important part of the Irish entertainment industry. About 10,000 ballrooms, small halls, clubs (...).

And there, on a ravaged hillock
overlooking the road,
the raw inheritor of this place,
an unfinished hall.

Hence, apart from exploring the imaginative, personal and mythical, the section presents the way of life of the younger generation in rural Ireland at present. In the poem that accompanies the press article the poet can only "sway and stare" at this new, "unfinished" building. It is not only important to regain the past, but also to master the life in the North of Ireland; a life, dominated, so the poem "The Dancehall" suggests, by the breaking in of urban values into the rural community. The poet cannot only focus on personal memory, he also has to find his viewpoint or place with regard to modern developments in the society around him. Significantly, we read "concrete" twice in this poem, denoting material substance, but also pointing towards the present

that has to be faced. The force of the sight of the dancehall becomes foregrounded in the immediacy of the writing's antropomorphism, for "Its blank eyes – gaps in concrete – / stare blindly back". This hall is empty, and the dreams it "house[s]" are also empty. The poet's craft is set against the music that "may" be produced in this hall. The speaker half-ironically, and half-honestly, stresses that it "could house more hopes than any / verse of mine", addressing the limits of poetry referred to in chapter 1. The entertainment industry might be attractive to people, but might not heal and can only momentarily still the hunger for spiritual unity. A picture forms in the poet's mind; thus the walk triggers how the scene "may" look. The adjective "vague" and the stops at the end reinforce his doubts about the cure that this "industry" brings. The "industry built / on loneliness" and "vague dreams" contrasts with the experience at the beginning of the section, where a sense of community was at least attempted to be revived. The music in "The Dancehall", so the lines suggest, does not give reconciliation.

The minute exploration triggered by the sight of the hall illustrates how the three categories stand in tension with one another. The reader journeys back to Yeats through the very landscape that is called "Roseland". However, the "raw" inner sphere of the "unfinished hall" underlines the fact that, rather than a culturally grand place, a hall with "the narrow privacy / of plastic seats" dominates the scene. And the "Roseland" is not one in which the imagination flowers, but "a concrete prow cargoed / with vague dreams". The journey to Yeats and the departure from him serve to illustrate the contrast between deep imaginative source or cultural force and the sort of energies Montague sees as dominant in the society in the North at present. A woodcut depicting a harpist, placed after "The Dancehall" in later editions, sets a traditional culture (music, poetry), against this urban, modern dancehall; so, too, will the section 'Patriotic Suite' which remembers the reviver of traditional Irish music, Ó Riada. Montague moves back once more by means of an emblem for the composer's type of music. By including these items Montague underlines his hope that such traditional art forms should not be forgotten and may be "placed" in the present world.

Section VII echoes a concern raised in the story "The Road Ahead" and in a passage of the essay "The Rough Field" where Montague remarks that "[t]he old coach-road is now a magnificent highway, running straight as a die through the built-

up valley".[43] The epigraphic beginning, the "*grapnel jaws lift the mouse, the flower*" and "*the mountain trout / Turns up its pale belly to die*", describing a kind of "*terra informis*",[44] anticipates *Mount Eagle*. Moreover, a trout and the bird's nest that had personal significance to the speaker in the section before, are dying or "*shaken by the traffic*". Their relevance is literal as well as symbolical. Violence can be felt as a personal wound here. Whereas the past had been recovered in the subtle journeys before, part of its symbolic elements of beauty are being threatened by the building of the new road. Hence, symbols trigger past memories, but also undergo a process of metamorphosis. They show the fragility and instability at present. Montague's contemplation of the building of a new road in section VII extends the use of the collage in section III. In "Balance Sheet" the lyric mode of "Loss" stands against the epic mode in "Gain". The arrangement of the whole section reflects a speaker thrown off balance; in the next poem the division is graphically made explicit by the introduction of a ballad in small letters within the poet's own lyrics.

Moreover, in the 1968-publication of the section the words "Balance" and "Sheet" of the poem "Balance Sheet" occur on separate pages; "Balance" on the left and "Sheet" on the right. They are in balance. In *The Rough Field* both words stand on the left page, together with the sub-title "Loss". This might be a mere graphical feature, but it is symptomatic of Montague's sympathy towards "Loss", toward the downside, that is, of this new road. "Loss" drowns in losses, "shearing away", "suppression", "filling-in", "disappearance", "uprooting" and the "removal" of nature's resources, its wild life and what can be seen as nature's obstacles to man. An "assembly of thistles" is deemed "unlawful" and in the last "Item" loss is

> The removal of all hillocks
> and humps, superstition styled fairy forts
> and long barrows, now legally to be regarded
> as obstacles masking a driver's view.

[43] See Montague's essay "The Rough Field" 531.

[44] David Jones employs this term in his preface to *The Anathemata.* He underlines that it becomes more difficult to seek the muse, "when bulldozers have all but obliterated the mounds, when all that is left of the potting sheds are the disused hypocauts (...)". See David Jones, *The Anathemata: Fragments of an Attempted Writing,* 2nd ed. (London: Faber, [1955]) 25.

By focusing on the destruction at present Montague conjures up elements of the past. Through this technique he combines past and present journeys, before outlining his vision of the future.

In "Gain" he writes:

> Item: A man driving from Belfast to Londonderry can arrive a
> quarter of an hour earlier, a lorry load of goods ditto,
> thus making Ulster more competitive in the inter-
> national market.

A consumer society intends to remove the "wild" and untamed; the new market demands effective, productive and fast action. The irony is heightened in the last two "Item[s]", as the faster speed ensures arriving earlier at places such as the hospital or lunatic asylum. Loss and gain are indeed ironically weighed up in this section and society's ills portrayed without obliquity. The poem ends with the picture of speeding to death, and driving into the graveyard, together with the macabre, ironic viewpoint of the poet's grandfather from his grave. The journey of the driver towards death, faster now than ever before, summons up a bleak future, and the circle of life, so the undercurrent of the poem suggests, becomes a means without end. The lineation after the last "Item" in "Gain" has been noted by James D. Brophy and Robin Skelton as sketching a gravestone inscription.[45] It is a feature that underlines the sombreness of this "Balance Sheet". Thus, the poetry's immediacy in portraying death at present and its implications for the future is foregrounded through linguistic, symbolic and graphic devices.

The collage technique of the section finds another culminating point in poem 2 where Montague mixes a ballad reprinted from a newspaper with his own lines. Whereas the ballad depicts an idyllic scene by the waterside, his lines carry the destruction of a natural refuge:

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[45] James D. Brophy, "John Montague's Restive Sally-Switch," *Modern Irish Literature: Essays in Honor of William York Tindall*, ed. R. J. Porter and James D. Brophy (New York: Iona College P, 1972) 166; Skelton, *Celtic Contraries* 242.

The trout are rising to the fly; the lambkins sport and play;
The pretty feathered warblers are singing by the way;
The blackbirds' and the thrushes' notes, by the echoes multiplied,
Do fill the vale with melody by Glencull waterside.

slipping sand
shale, compressed veins of rock,
old foundations, a soft chaos
to be swallowed wholesale,
masticated, regurgitated
by the mixer.

In evoking the journey in the journey, the "stroll by Glencull Waterside"[46] through the ballad, Montague goes back to the past, as in his evocation of things lost in the poem "Loss", but takes a critical view of this past. The "dreamland" of the ballad becomes, in the context of Montague's own lines, a mere self-conscious ironic commentary. His interspersed lines give facts about the scars of the landscape, how the earth is turned upside-down. The "dreamland" has been changed utterly: "swallowed". Ironically, the poet searches for beauty afterwards in the poem "Envoi: The Search for Beauty". Whereas the title affirms a search, idealism on the poet's part, the lines of the poem can only depict a farmer buying a swan to "deposit it" on his cultivated lawn. This "*concrete* swan" [emphasis added] might involve an ironic glance at the Yeatsian legacy. It also poetically revives Montague's concerns with respect to the change in farming raised as early as 1963 in the essay "The Rough Field".

Montague concentrates on the South and facts. 'Patriotic Suite' had been written in the context of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. Montague remarks: "I wished to show the contrast between the ideals of the so-called 'national revolution' and the actual, physical facts".[47] The first poem evokes 1916 with its depicting of an interior in a museum, the memorabilia of the past. Then, "the wail of tin / whistle climbs against fiddle" and a Celtic battle song begins. It merges with nature's sounds, the "lost cry / of the yellow bittern!" Running through the section is the sense that culture played its role in the rising. In poem 4 the Worker's Republic,

[46] "Waterside" is capitalised in the first stanza.
[47] John Montague, "An Interview with John Montague: Deaths in the Summer," interview with Stephen Arkin, *New England Review* 2 (1982): 221.

alluded to through the name "Connolly", interests the poet. James Connolly was an ally of James Larkin in the Dublin lock-out of 1913, and commandant of the General Post Office during the Easter Rising.[48] Social and political change and cultural impulses are grouped under what the speaker summarises as "spirit", but he cannot deny that "fact" overrules them: "All revolutions are interior / The displacement of spirit / By the arrival of fact".

The very facts are given from 5 onwards. Poem 5 contemplates the loss of Gaelic and gives an ironic, rather dark future vision, for its vanishing will be "A tragedy anticipated in the next government report". The poem describes the past of these tribes, their readings of "runics of verse"; later on they are praised for "their blue eyes, open smiles". The revolution means entering into an urbanised world, that brings only momentary comfort, "Soon townspeople tired of them, / Begin to deride their smell, their speech" and some Gaels return, others get used to speaking English. In poem 6 the train journey serves to depict "Row after row" of cottages, "thousand backyards" and a crane that "tilts into emptiness". The language conveys a sick landscape with "the antlike activity of cars" as the sad sign of life. The additional final stanza gives hope as the poet passes through summer fields, but the "Bruising" of a roller returns to the picture of a landscape wounded by technological progress.[49] In poem 7 "high wire" seems all that is left of the imaginative landscape of a Yeats. What remains is "a lake / bereft of swans". The South's trade expansion of five per cent is looked at with irony in poem 8, the now "World-witnessed" South is more involved with political business, "Rational in the U.N.", "exemplary in the Congo". Poem 9 interpolates the quotidian and the refrain *"Puritan Ireland's dead and gone, / A myth of O'Connor and Ó Faoláin"*. Montague's evocation of sexual freedom ("Young girls roamed / The streets with eager faces, / Pushing for men") parodies the pastoralism of Ó Faoláin's stories. As Steven Matthews notes, the last stanza with its allusion to "The Wild Swans at Coole" registers that "Montague seems to want to set a more sonorous Yeatsian and 'noble' music against the inhibitions of nostalgia in 'Puritan Ireland' (...)":[50] "Further on, breasting the wind / Waves of the deserted grain harbour / We saw a pair, a cob and his pen, / Most nobly linked". The last poem reveals again the

[48] Redshaw, "Notes on the Text" 93.
[49] *Patriotic Suite* of 1966 lacked this stanza. See Montague, *Patriotic Suite* 11.
[50] Matthews, *Irish Poetry* 113.

inescapable journey towards the modern, quotidian world; registering a gloomy picture of the contemporary South, Montague ends with the image of "a self-drive car".

'A New Siege' focuses on the North; the poem is set in Derry during the siege of the Bogside. Montague read the poem on the steps of Armagh prison where Bernadette Devlin was held. Its gestation is directly connected with the events in Ireland at the end of the sixties. Montague tries to see the upheaval in the light of civil rights movements around the world. The section is an attempt to combine the present with the past and to set up a future vision. It circles back in time, it brings in cultural, but also personal elements of the past, as his arrival in Ireland from America, "a child of four".

The poem comments on its own development, on its own structure. The "invasion" of "cries" takes on an added significance if one takes into account that Montague read 'A New Siege' in public, outside Armagh Jail.[51] The poem's technique mimics impulses that go forward as well as backward; the lineation mirrors the poem's concerns. It cannot break out of its structure, which is further underlined by the "always". Montague emphasises the repetitiveness of historical events:

> Lines of loss
> lines of energy
> always changing
> always returning (...)

He manages the past journeys, and connects with the present, but a true outward move fails. It remains disputable, whether his attempt to move outwards, to Berkeley and a wider pattern, is valid. I would not go as far as Terence Brown, however, who reads the section as a "naïve example of historical faith" and remarks that "the poem does little to clarify how the new order will contain the old civilisation of Garvaghey (...)".[52] I would like to place more emphasis on the two sections that follow, 'The Wild Dog Rose' and 'Driving South'.

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[51] "Biographical Notes," *FC* 224.
[52] Brown, *Northern Voices* 167.

III

Section X constitutes on a small, but very dense scale a summary of the journeys outlined above. 'The Wild Dog Rose', a poem from *Tides,* now moves into title-position. Being firmly grounded in the personal, the section combines the private and cultural, individual significance with communal relevance. The poem's re-contextualisation from *Tides* to *The Rough Field* and its taking up a whole section in *The Rough Field* reinforce its significance. Moreover, since its negative counterpart, "The Hag of Beare", has not found its way into the sequence, the episode becomes more hopeful. Within the context of *The Rough Field* the line of female figures from the end of section I and from section II is taken up again. The three parts of the poem are shaped round walking and pausing: the walk of the poet, the walk of woman and poet, a prolonged interruption and the presumed leaving of the poet. This exhibits on a small scale what we have seen in the sequence at large: the poet's movement and his standstill at several points in order to reflect, and in order to explore the mind as well as his environment. Understanding emerges.

The poem starts with the speaker's approach to a ruined and old but familiar cottage. When the poet and hag-figure finally meet, a meeting depicted in painstaking detail, one has moved into the third stanza and after this suspension the speaker's description of the hag follows: "And I feel again / that ancient awe, the terror of a child / before the great hooked nose, the cheeks". The word "again" underlines the merger of past and present. The poet who was rather assertive at first in his "I go to say goodbye to the *Cailleach*" has to relive the moment of terror in order to cut loose, before he can "return her gaze" and the meeting can end "in friendliness", "like old friends, lovers almost, / sharing secrets". She tells a personal story in a story, a journey in a journey and the poet is "Obscurely honoured by such confidences". He "idle[s] by the summer roadside", listening to her story "while the monologue falters, continues". Her "rehearsing the small events of her life", is interrupted only to continue again – a principle of the sequence inscribed in the small journey that is being told.

The frame-walk comes to a standstill when she tells "a story so terrible" that the poet's "bones [are] melting". The immediacy is conveyed through the present participle. The intrusion of the drunken man she recalls is the intrusion of the male figure, the coloniser even. It brings the destructive forces of mankind into the poem and continues the metaphor of invasion from 'A New Siege'. Her weakness parallels

the wounds of Ireland and of "mother-earth",[53] but also the poet's own. She is becoming his double, one of his "female alter-ego[s]", as Antoinette Quinn calls the female figures.[54] The hag's fate, the fate of Ireland and that of the poet come together. This becomes inscribed into the text exactly at the moment when the woman "gathers" the rose and branch "into us":

> And still
> the dog rose shines in the hedge.
> Petals beaten wide by rain, it
> sways slightly, at the tip of a
> slender, tangled, arching branch
> which, with her stick, she gathers
> into us.

Through the enjambment and the blank space the term "into us" the hag's action of gathering is explicitly emphasised. It takes a few moments until the rose presents itself in front of their eyes. The poet and hag stand as they had done when she started the story ("And there / where the dog rose shines in the hedge / she tells me a story"). The adverb "still" is a temporal one within their walk and standstill, but also a marker of hope and emotional continuity despite violence (troubles, rape) and loss of home and virginity. The "arching branch", "the air [that] is strong with the smell" and the vivid visual description of the rose likewise re-install poetic values, images and continuity into the poem. The arch becomes symbol for the combination of journeys.

In due course the flower and its parts are "beaten", "weak", "crumbled" and "bruised" and "without thorns". But it is this latter quality, together with its "offering" flower that is held up until the end. It culminates in the oxymoronic "pale bleeding lips / fading to white". The journey from the inside, a source, outward is re-enacted. The technique of increasingly thinning the line towards the "white" of the page reinforces the weakness of the woman or the rose, or the land, or the poet's undertakings. However, in the lines that follow values are still asserted. The poem does not end in white and nothingness. It is "at the rim" of doing so, but the "still" and the "strong (...) smell" save it from nihilism. The section is all "lyricism", but not a "retreat to

[53] Montague's comment on this poem. See Montague, interview with Meyer 17.
[54] Quinn, *SI* 31.

lyricism", as Brown argues.[55] It is rather, to use the slight difference in phrasing of Nicolas Jacobs, a poet's withdrawal "to a more reflective stance".[56]

The rose is a traditional Irish symbol, stands for love, and conjures up Yeats and also other texts: Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*, MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and poems by William Carlos Williams. In MacDiarmid's text the Scottish national symbol, the thistle, acquires a complex significance. Its inert qualities of having a flower in the shape of a rose as well as spiky thorns play against each other. Williams conjures up the rose on several occasions. His play with the petal in "The Rose" hovers in the background of Montague's poem. Montague evokes the rose also in its religious dimension and he underlines that his rose does not have thorns. It does not hurt, can only be hurt. Its intrinsic lack is also its intrinsic gain. Pain can be manageable and overcome. Suffering can hardly be denied, but qualities such as love, revealed in the friendship between speaker and hag and her act of admiring the flower, are not put away either. If the sequence has a vision, for the future, then it surfaces at this point.

In 'Driving South' Montague stays with personal history and he ends the sequence with a literal journey: *"Driving South, we pass through Cavan". The Rough Field* started with *"Catching a bus"*, and Montague rounds up his travel graphically, too, using italic script. The beginning of 'Driving South' is more social comment than complex lyric web. The speaker reports changes in the methods of farming. On the one hand, "Only a sentimentalist" would want to have to confront "heavy tasks" without machines; on the other hand, the speaker stresses: "Yet something mourns". The "Yet" breaks into this present world of "Fewer hands, bigger markets, larger farms". It is difficult to leave old ways behind, the speaker cannot help but regret the threat to tradition. He mourns "a world where action had been wrung / through painstaking years to ritual". In the next stanza he conjures up a priest's blessing of corn, and "Protestant / lugged pale turnip, swollen marrow / to robe the kirk for Thanksgiving". Whilst travelling literally southwards, he undergoes a backward journey to Goldsmith, refers to "Palmer's softly lit Vale of Shoreham" and conjures up the world of art through the picture of Chagall. Art is a point of reference here, a way out for him momentarily, a small, but important vision. Equally, the lovers he refers to here leap back to section X. Love, amidst the changes in the poet's environment, is again an

[55] Brown, *Northern Voices* 168.
[56] Nicolas Jacobs, "John Montague," *Delta* 55 (1976): 30.

issue. They are "floating above". And Montague can let go: "Our finally lost dream of man at home / in a rural setting!" The dream cannot be retrieved, a giant hand grasps onto the fields and dominates them. Art, by contrast, has remembered and is a way to remember "softly", "friendly", to use Montague's words of the preceding stanza. The poet has to live with change, writes a work that, in contrast to the poems it conjures up – whether by Wordsworth or Goldsmith – is unsettled, disturbed. The process of coming to an understanding has been difficult, the journey painful, but the speaker accepts the inevitability of change. The final lines are all travel-metaphor: "we pass by" and "going, // going // GONE". The poem comments on itself, and by removing the comma after the first "going" from the third edition onwards Montague underlines how fluid the exploration has become.

The first part of the chapter set out to reveal the three predominant strands at work in *The Rough Field.* With respect to the "journeys in progress" the second part has shown, by close analysis, the workings of the three categories. Rather than solving tensions "between" the categories, Montague consciously plays with them. The overall frame-journey and a reliance on a strongly felt presence of a speaker ensure that the poem with its various energetic centres does not fall apart. Montague evokes diversity through his journeys; they are cultural, personal, textual, backward as well as forward journeys. He uses different means and contradictory voices and genres. The journey becomes a metaphor for the processes at work in the act of writing.

Moving on, as inscribed in the text by its various journeys, is inevitable. By the same token, interruptions bring new perspectives on the present and on things left behind. Past and present inform one another and the sequence not only indicates the notion that times feed into each other, but also displays, through its form, a self-consciousness about this aspect. Montague does not give solutions; by constantly altering perspectives, changing symbolic focus, and starting afresh with each section, each poem and each line, he adds to what went on before and continually works towards a resolution that he does not reach. Montague is sympathetic to his own Catholic people, but from this sympathy does not spring a sectarian vision. His revisions and re-contextualisations reinforce the shift in viewpoint. Rather, he is conscious of change, as he embeds this aspect in the sequence and changed *The Rough Field* itself. Likewise, each individual journey attempts to assert continuity, it is often literal, and symbols, despite changing their connotations in the course of the sequence, are recognisable as such. The same goes for his reworked poems.

The Rough Field has an abundance of material and centres and the immediacy of the historical and cultural context cannot be escaped. Both aspects are subdued in the sequel, *The Dead Kingdom*, where the private overtly dominates in a sequence, in which Montague, again, cannot deny his past.

Chapter 4

RETURNING

Family Poems

> Who has a father, but is fatherless?
> Who has a mother, but is motherless?
> Who has brothers, but no family?[1]

In an essay Montague answers this altered riddle with "Myself, of course".[2] Counterbalancing this statement, his poems are peopled with family members. The father is evoked in his early poetry and has his section in *The Rough Field*; as well as *The Rough Field* entire sections of *A Slow Dance* and *The Dead Kingdom* contain poems on family members. These are section IV of *A Slow Dance* and sections IV and V of *The Dead Kingdom.* It is in Montague's mid-career, with a time-lag of about a decade after the death of father and mother, that his family poems accumulate.[3] Montague has stressed that "when you write about the dead, you are expiating your connection with them, you're cleansing it. (...) Even if they're not there as spirits, your own mother and your father (...) are actually present inside you and therefore you must come to terms with them".[4]

The current chapter explores how Montague returns to the parents and relatives in writing and how the coming to the surface of memories, often negative ones, is resolved. I start my analysis with the figure of the father, follow his path from *The Rough Field* to *The Dead Kingdom*, refer to later developments and examine what Montague makes of what he calls being "fatherless". An interval section discusses the

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[1] "The Figure in the Cave," *FC* 15.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Montague's father died in 1959, his mother in 1973. See "Biographical Notes," *FC* 223, 225.
[4] John Montague, "John Montague: An Interview," interview with Shirley Anders, *Verse* 6 (1986): 34.

family poems from *A Slow Dance*: it re-visits an aunt and the uncle – "the country fiddler" – and focuses on this sequence, because Montague's confrontation of the mother has its origins here. Finally, I concentrate on the journey to the mother in *The Dead Kingdom*. I end the chapter with a close analysis of the poem "The Silver Flask" from *The Dead Kingdom*, followed by a more abstract conclusion.

The Dead Kingdom is a sequence in which Montague's autobiographical side surfaces more predominantly than in his reworking of the past in *The Rough Field.* The matter of Ireland – past and present, private and public – plays a role in the first parts, but the subtle last sections give the sequence its uniqueness in Montague's *oeuvre*; hence my focus on its family poems and discussion in the light of Montague's "familial journeys". That the theme preoccupies not only Montague will be shown by referring to other Irish poets where appropriate. Robert Lowell has been influential on Montague with regard to these evocations, showing him how to transform private material, and evoke close relatives, how to present and come to terms with being an "unwanted" child,[5] and how to do so with irony and through a fusion between "realism" and a "romantic mode".[6] In *Life Studies* (1959), in particular, Lowell contrived to "[create] a mythology out of his own life and those of his friends, relatives, or historical counterparts".[7]

I

In section V of Montague's *The Rough Field*, suggestively entitled 'The Fault', the political and the personal meet and intersect in the figure of the father. If the poems are a means of coming to terms with the theme of exile and separation, they also explore the relationship between father and son.

In "Stele for a Northern Republican"[8] the father pulls the poet from a region of (inner) darkness; the poet "Hesitantly" confronts the process of memory as well as the father's "part in / the holy war to restore our country". The poet's halting is underlined by the pause after the third line:

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[5] Their biographies converge in as that the relationship with the mother was troublesome, the father often absent and they both have been conscious of being "unwanted".
[6] Marjorie G. Perloff, *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1973) 86.
[7] Ibid. 36.
[8] A "stele" is an upright stone; in a handwritten note found in a copy of the first edition of *RF* Montague refers to it as a "statue over a grave".

Once again, with creased forehead
and trembling hands, my father calls
me from stifling darkness . . .
Little enough I know of your struggle,
although you come to me more and more (...).

Slowly an intimacy is created and the lines after the omission sound like an answer to the father's call. The poem moves from description to a dialogue in which the poet can in the fourth and fifth lines finally address the father as "you"; and the father, in turn, "come[s]" to him and then "upward to life". The movement back and forth that imitates a conversational pattern is made explicit by the poem's subsequent lineation. What follows is a dense, narrative rendering of details describing the father's activities as a Republican: the burning of houses moving from "home to smoke", the "cross-fire at Falban", and the implications of the "holy war". The poet "trace[s]" the father as images of childhood flash in his mind:

Games turned serious
when the cross-fire at Falban
riddled the tender of policemen,
one bleeding badly
stretched upon
the stone flags of our kitchen,
your sisters moving in a whisper
of blood and bandages.

Effort ends in disillusion, "the only sign / of [the father's] parochial struggle was / when the plough rooted rusty guns" a generation later. The poet's question "But what if / you have no country to set before Christ, / only a broken province?" slows the rapid movement down. The father's situation in Brooklyn is weighed up against the poet's own in Ireland. Tyrone is the "betrayed", the "by-passed and dying place" and would not be appreciated by the father either:

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

There was nothing left for the father but to go into exile, his "choice" effectively limited. The word "dying" makes the tragic situation in broken Tyrone more vivid, and obliquely connects with the spiritually dead father. The poet plays with "signs", "marks", "stamps", "uniforms", "armour" and "medals", but all that remains of efforts is resignation in the face of the fact that developments in Ireland did not fulfil the father's hopes. For the poet, the father, "free of that heavy body armour", can be re-visited in memory and finally "lie still" there. Despite knowing the father's "difficult" personality the poet can now confront him and tell him to lie still. Montague has undergone a circular journey, from present to the past and back to the present, but the shift from being "call[ed]" to telling the father to "lie still" indicates his progression.

Whereas "Stele for a Northern Republican" introduces the axis of war-father-exile, "The Fault" starts a line of three poems that deal with the symbol of "the fault". The symbol brings father and son together physically, and also shows that they share certain inner characteristics: "anger, impatience, / A stress born of violence". It is "the same scar", at "the same place" and almost "The same fault" as the "as if" suggests:

When I am angry, sick or tired
A line on my forehead pulses,
The line on my left temple
Opened by an old car accident.
My father had the same scar
In the same place, as if
The same fault ran through
Us both: anger, impatience,
A stress born of violence.

The pulsation brings the anger to the surface; it is an anger that is rooted ("born") in the younger originally stemming from his father. At the same time, it is triggered by

the outside world, the violence in the region. The scar, therefore, is likewise a symbol for division, leading back to the divisions in Ireland, and "open[ing]" a perspective upon these divisions. It is a distinct line on the skin drawing attention to itself. The poet calls it a "fault", on the surface commemorating the father's anger, but the sign also alludes to a fault-ridden Ireland. The dividing line is geographical, religious and social, and when re-evaluating the Irish situation the image of anger is, on one hand, suitable. On the other hand, the poem suggests that a "breaking" of the sewn (healed) line that could be a consequence of the overt pulsing might not be a resolution either. The poet seems angry not to have other qualities than those of the father. The impatience breaks out, when the poet is "angry, sick or tired". The poet gives a negative, divisive connection here on a personal as well as a general level. He attempts to get away from it, but by the same token it is a shared division which runs "through / Us both".[9] It unites him with his father. Violence ("born of violence"), is the key root of this union. During the course of the poem the fault acquires a mythic quality, especially because of its ghostly location on father's as well as son's forehead. It is a haunting connection and suggests how the poet is bound to his family, his roots and is marked by them.

"The Sound of a Wound" broadens the topic of inheritance. It starts with a question directed as much to the reader as to the poet himself: "Who knows / the sound a wound makes?" Through the image of the sound the poet moves to facing the possibility that

> Scar tissue
> can rend, the old hurt
> tear open as
> the torso of the fiddle
> groans to
> carry the tune, to carry
> the pain of
> a lost (slow herds of cattle
> roving over

[9] A. K. Weatherhead argues that the scar is "symbolically the inherited human flaw, original sin". See A. K. Weatherhead, "John Montague: Exiled from Order," *Concerning Poetry* 14.2 (1981): 107.

soft meadow, dark bogland)
pastoral rhythm.

The scar's opening is paralleled with the groaning fiddle. Montague indicates the parallel not only through the conjunction "as", but also by obliquely connecting the "torso" of the fiddle with the "wound" and the "Scar". The "old hurt", historical as well as psychological, "can" come to the surface. The fiddle likewise laments old ways, a pastoral rhythm that is "lost". And it is itself part of that lost rhythm and significantly impaired, for it can only "groan" and is a mere "torso". The Irish fiddle groans endlessly, and gives rise to the rhythm of "slow herds of cattle / roving over / soft meadow, dark bogland". The cattle, the meadow and the bogland, symbols of the Irish pastoral, can only be rendered in brackets. They are almost "lost" to knowledge and have to be spelled out to clarify what the poet means. Peacefulness must remain within brackets, for what dominates a poem written in the seventies is division and a torsic stance. As a torso is marked by its lack of something, so the poet's song is distinct in its brokenness. Nonetheless, the poet has a voice, nourished by "pain".

The landscape is taken into the tearing, rending and opening, for it "trembles", taking up the pulsing of the scar:

I assert
a civilisation died here;
it trembles
underfoot where I walk these
small, sad hills:
it rears in my blood stream
when I hear
a bleat of Saxon condescension,
Westminster
to hell (...).

Emotion is projected onto the "sad hills" and Montague manages to convey a slowly surfacing "bitterness" verbally and syntactically. "Westminster / to hell" and the use of the cliché of the "Saxon" are overtly directed against the English. In the last stanza, the

speaker attempts to justify the emotional outbreak, the rearing of blood, by mentioning the father:

> This bitterness
> I inherit from my father, the
> swarm of blood
> to the brain, the vomit surge
> of race hatred,
> the victim seeing the oppressor (...).

The "bitterness", echoing Yeats's "bitterness" from "Ancestral Houses"[10] yet de-glamorising it, is "inherit[ed]" from the father. Although the poet does not want to be overtly aggressive, he cannot but be bitter and almost irrational. Emotions are expressed through physical images, as the "swarm of blood" that goes "to the brain", playing off against the idiom "goes to his head", reveals. Moreover, the poem plays with the paradox that a wound is also the condition for sound.[11] In "The Sound of a Wound" Montague sets the Celtic symbols against the coloniser's ("oppressor") activities. The stone and the cross have survived five thousand years. Montague underlines the fact that tradition persists and resists, albeit "strangely" – despite its brokenness. The poem forces one to let the eye glide rapidly down the page, but one nevertheless realises how distinct several line-breaks are and how inevitability and emptiness are made transparent in the very form of the poem.

In contrast to the familiar Irish scene conjured up briefly in "The Cage", moved from *A Chosen Light* into *The Rough Field*, and thereby ensuring that the section also gets an intimate touch, father and son travel through "landscapes / exotic" to "Northerners" in the poem "At Last", in section IV in *The Dead Kingdom*.[12] They drive across Ireland and through Southern Ireland from which they are depicted as distanced. The lack of a relation to the landscape also stands for the distance between father and son that the poem tries to overcome. Although Montague's piece carries cultural undertones, a personal and emotional drama stands in the foreground. The poem

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[10] Yeats 246-47.

[11] As in "Lament" (*SD* 63) where "With no family / & no country // a voice rises / out of the threatened beat / of the heart & the brain cells", voice, family theme and the Irish theme are connected.

[12] The poem "At Last" can also be found in the family section of *SD*.

attempts to find ways of establishing connections and ways of communication. The poet-son tries to connect with the father and needs a means to communicate the scene adequately to the reader. And it is in these two areas that progress can – finally – be achieved.

The speaker's personal memory is underlined by the fact that the poem is dotted with present participles; the reader cannot escape the immediacy of "carrying", "seeking", "clouding", "laughing", "hooting", "striking" and "halting".[13] That we deal with private experience is apparent from the start, for Montague foregrounds feelings and perceptions:

> A small sad man with a hat
> he came through the customs at Cobh
> carrying a roped suitcase and
> something in me began to contract
>
> but also to expand. We stood,
> his grown sons, seeking for words
> which under the clouding mist
> turn to clumsy, laughing gestures.

The persisting silence is striking, the visual picture reinforces it. The sons and the poet are "seeking for words" in this situation. Words are buried under "clouding mist" "turn[ing]" to "clumsy, laughing gestures". By employing "turn" instead of "turned" the presence of the past moment is stressed. The poet's links to the external, be it to the landscape or the father, have their limits. If he finds words for his feelings, they are characterised by mystery and paradox: "something in me began to contract // but also to expand". The poet cannot precisely name his state, it is "something". Together with the misty atmosphere that mirrors inner unease, these first lines create a veil of silent mysteriousness.[14]

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[13] In the version in *SD* Montague uses the additional participle "raising". The example given above may illustrate Brown's remark that the history of his family "composes a permanent present tense in the mind of the poet". See Terence Brown, "*The Dead Kingdom*: A Reading," *SI* 107.

[14] Deane captures this mysteriousness when he stresses that Montague "exploit[s] all the possibilities of muteness in which, in the absence of speech, there is gesture – of the body, of landscape, or objects in a

Yet Montague turns this mysteriousness into "something" more by subtly and gradually managing to "*expand*" [emphasis added] aspects not only of atmosphere, but also of voice and sound. In the third stanza the view moves towards an open external space, for it expands to the "mouth of the harbour". By employing "mouth" the poet stays within the imagery of sound and silent sound. Then we hear the "hooting farewell" of the steamer and can sense the waves' hardness in their "striking" against the island. Still, these sounds are produced by objects and by nature rather than by a human voice. We hear a person talk, but via an object, the medium of the radio. The poet's broadcasting voice seems "strange", "disembodied" to him and out of place ("*that* cramped room" [emphasis added]). It mirrors a son's unease, when so directly exposed to the father. After this first sounding of a voice, the silence carries weight once again:

> How strange in that cramped room
> the disembodied voice, the silence
>
> after, as we looked at each other!

The enjambment between "silence" and "after" allows the blank space to speak and spell out this intense silence. It swallows space and time. Together with the look – this time not directed outward but "at each other" – silence says more than words. The extension marked by the blank space is reinforced by the extension of time: "*Slowly* our eyes managed recognition" [emphasis added]. The connection takes place through the visual sphere, but this very "recognition" stands at the end of the line. The fact that it needs to be "managed" underlines the effort it costs father and poet to respond adequately to experience.

Finally, the father's judgmental "'Not bad'" breaks the silencing of human voices and the silence between father and son.[15] The father breaks the ice, and it is now that a direct voice can be heard. He accepts not only the delivery given by his son on the radio, but the son as son. Inner disembodiedness is overruled by outer connection.

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room". See Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Literature 1880-1980* (London: Faber, 1985) 149.

[15] In the version of the poem in *SD* the father's words are "'Well done'".

Suspending the "at last", until the end of the stanza and after the comma, emphasises once more the long duration of the process of visual, audible and, most importantly, spiritual recognition: "father and son at ease, at last". The poet comments and with the very word "last" ends this attempt to connect; the poem silences, but ends in positive silence. The repetition of "at" adds suspension, but also a sense of relief to the line. What had been anticipated by moving from contraction to expansion from the first to the second stanza is a movement that takes place in the poem as a whole. It changes from silence to speech and positive silence, from alienation to recognition and from sadness and being "roped" to freedom and being "at ease" (as father, son and as poet).

In "Last Journey", also to be found in *The Dead Kingdom,* father and son are closer together from the start.[16] It is the last journey of father and son in the familiar region; it is the father's journey towards death; a farewell to the landscape; and technically the end of the specific section in *The Dead Kingdom* (the section's very last poem being a general one). The underlying sense of loss and death, connected with the "forgotten / Northern landscape" as well as the father, is anticipated by the wetness of the fields. A landscape and the poet are figuratively in tears in this process of saying farewell and from the very first stanza intimacy and a rainy atmosphere are combined:

> We stand together
> on the windy platform;
> how sharp the rails
> running out of sight
> through the wet fields!

Equally, the love poem "All Legendary Obstacles" (*CL* 16), in which the speaker awaits his beloved in the rain, merges outer and inner powerfully, here in connection with an arrival: "I was too blind with rain / And doubt to speak (...)". Throughout "Last Journey" there is an oscillation between projection onto the external and reaction to the external. The external becomes connected with bodily features or markers of direct compliance. The signal, for example, has a "hand" paralleling a human wave by the poet, and the station master is peering over "*his* frosted window" [emphasis added].

[16] For "Last Journey", see also *T* 50.

These elements, hinting at a known, familiar system of distinct objects, are counterbalanced by an indefinite distance. The protagonists stand at first, but their sight is already directed toward the horizon "running out of sight", maybe towards death. What is more, the poem ends with a look backwards, leaving smoke behind:

> and we leave, waving
> a plume of black smoke
> over the rushy meadows,
> small hills and hidden villages –
> Beragh, Carrickmore,
>
> Pomeroy, Fintona –
> placenames that sigh
> like a pressed melodeon
> across this forgotten
> Northern landscape.

Hence, the text and its protagonists move between past and future, and we are literally as well as figuratively in between. One looks back whilst travelling and reading forward. The poem formally re-enacts the relationship and action it presents. By extension, the poem explores movement between life and death, young and old, Ireland and America, and the North and the South of Ireland. This being in between is likewise underlined by the present tense in the poem. The memory that the speaker evokes is not truly past ("We stand together") and it is not future either. It becomes a magnified present and as if to reinstate the magnification the tense is sustained throughout the poem.[17] Through the syntax the poem mimes how memory comes back in flashes: "A smell of coal, / the train is coming . . . / You climb slowly in". Equally, the poet brings the scene back via sensuous images: the wet fields, smell of coal, the visual presence of people and objects, the sigh of the melodeon. In order to hold on to

[17] Although the father is a "memory", Augustine Martin in an otherwise informative article, sees the father as an "unflowering absence, [rather] than a presence on the train out of Fintona". See Martin, "John Montague" 48. I argue that the tense Montague employs lifts the memory into the present; and makes the father a presence.

the moment and to intensify it, the speaker declares, "and we leave, waving". The participle "waving" embodies in its form the immediacy of the memory; in what it connotes, however, it suggests a farewell to the memory, "this" landscape and his father, a farewell that has been anticipated from the start.

Because the external scene is familiar, the "windy", "wet" and "frosted" atmosphere takes on a heightened quality. Places and people are in decline, about to be left, lost and "forgotten". The sharpness of recollection and sadness is present in the rendering of sighing "placenames", echoing but likewise absorbed by a landscape of fog and frost. As the smoke covers the scene, so a sigh covers everything, the sigh of saying farewell to this culture. Indicative of the cultural loss is that the poet moves from the particular to the general – out and over to the "forgotten / Northern landscape". But by evoking the area in all its familiarity, the speaker is able to lift it into the present; he slowly re-covers it. The veil that presses onto this landscape can be lifted momentarily and, ultimately, Montague subtly balances a knowledge of loss against a longing for recovery. In the end, it remains deliberately open whether the speaker's mood stems from the father's subsequent death, the last rite of visiting the scene with him, or the cultural death of the landscape.[18] The word "across" in the second last line reinforces the endless sadness of the melodeon's sigh, but also brings out the presence of the instrument's and the poet's sound.

In the poems previously discussed, the father has several functions. He is often employed to address symptoms of a cultural crisis. The father is not only used to reveal the difference between life in America and life in Ireland, between being at home and being in exile, he is also a person who is emotionally haunting and a vacuum that needs to be faced. Anger and bitterness echo through the father-poems in *The Rough Field.* The symbol of the fault flickers between emotional rage, personal and cultural connotations of inheritance and the autobiographical. The tone becomes subtler in *The Dead Kingdom*; "Last Journey" and "At Last" merge the cultural and the personal element. Moreover, the poet comes as close to the father as possible, literally and figuratively. The father in turn, by giving his recognition can be communicated with as a father.

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[18] John Greening sees the icy, crisp atmosphere as directly paralleling the relationship between father and son. See John Greening, "On the Wings of Sense," rev. of *ME, RF, New Selected Poems*, by John Montague, *Poetry Review* 81.2 (1991): 23.

Montague's recent evocation of the father in *Smashing the Piano,* "Sunny Jim",[19] contains familiar images, a "drunken father", and son and father "Once, side by side" and "together". The dead father's face is compared to "Dante's bony visage". Montague conjures up the father in the present tense, addresses him intimately as "you" and asks him to forget his anger. The poem tries to register the distance to the father stressing towards the end "Your faith I envy, // Your fierce politics I decry". The stanza break widens the distance and the gap between "envy" and "decry". Whereas the former line is smoothened by open vowels, the latter pushes out the fricatives and plosives. Finally, Montague does not abandon the hope that the two sing together, but it "May" be "someday", maybe after death. The speaker sees a future, yet it is a conditional one, reinforced by interspersing the phrase "saving your absence":

> May we sing together
> someday, Sunny Jim,
> over what you might
> still call the final shoot-out:
> for me, saving your absence,
> a healing agreement.

The son intends to sing, but paradoxically the father's absence seems to be a pre-condition for the song and for the father to "guide" the son's "pen" ("guide my pen"). In that respect, depicting the father at his death, therefore absent, this poem itself is in fact a healing song about the father. Additionally, one notes that the "final shoot-out" and more obliquely the word "agreement" carry cultural-political connotations, partly because the preceding poem is "A Response to Omagh". The agreement the speaker sees possible between father and son is laterally connected with a milestone in Irish politics, the Good Friday Agreement. It is hardly surprising that Montague evokes the father in this part of *Smashing the Piano*, as the parent had frequently been a point of departure when addressing the matter of Ireland (see *The Rough Field*).

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[19] John Montague, *Smashing the Piano* (Loughcrew: Gallery 1999) 77-78; hereafter referred to as *SP*.

The shadow of the father occurs strikingly often in modern Irish and British poetry.[20] Kavanagh's is a rural father, a man whom Kavanagh's speaker truly misses and that is evoked in order to emphasise, in a direct and honest manner, the necessity for familial connections in particular as well as human relations in general. Seamus Heaney, too, employs the picture of a rural father, an "expert" with "horse-plough" and "furrow" whom the unskilled child follows in the field:

> I stumbled in his hobnailed wake,
> Fell sometimes on the polished sod;
> Sometimes he rode me on his back
> Dipping and rising to his plod. ("Follower")[21]

The speaker wishes to grow up and plough, but can "only" barely follow:

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

The bond between father and son is present and becomes ever more present, underlined not only by the adverb of time ("today"), but also by the overt role reversal that takes place in this last stanza. As he is an artist and poet Heaney cannot directly follow his father in his rural craft, too wide is the educational gap between artist and farmer. The conjunction "But" marks it clearly in the poem "Digging", another early poem on the father: "But I've no spade to follow men like them".[22] What he does have, however, is his ability to create with his pen and he will "dig with it". The poet wants to resemble, but "means to follow in his own fashion".[23]

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[20] See Blake Morrison, "The Filial Art: A Reading of Contemporary British Poetry," *Yearbook of English Studies* (1987): 179-217; Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature & Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994) 150-72.
[21] Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber, 1998) 11.
[22] Ibid. 4.
[23] Morrison 182.

Within his *oeuvre* Heaney moves from a rural father towards indefinite and, as Blake Morrison underlines, more literary fathers, as in *Station Island* (1984).[24] Although it is in the reworking of literary fathers where a point of resemblance between the two poets might be found – the influence of older writers on the poetic career of the younger artist is by no means surprising or exceptional – Montague has foregrounded the elders throughout his career. As early as *A Chosen Light* we find a section on "literary fathers". Moreover, he connects these overtly with his biography, not only writing on them, but also foregrounding that his path crossed theirs.[25] It hardly surprises therefore that Montague stresses that for him the first proposition of the rhyme ("Who has a father, but is fatherless?") lies at the root of his "veneration for older writers of genius" and that he "was always fond of [his] literary fathers, in verse and prose".[26] His essays, dedications, allusions, or references to other writers in interviews, and his "syncretic" style – both illustrated in my discussion of *The Rough Field* and pointed out in other parts of the thesis – are a case in point.[27] Whereas the biological father often carries a troubled mark, these others and the elders, be they a Goldsmith, a Kavanagh, a Lowell, a Ponge, a Williams, or a Wordsworth, constitute enabling sources. They seem to take the place of the father. A father is asked to guide the pen in "Sunny Jim", but it is only of late that Montague makes this overt connection between his own biographical father and writing, or, by extension, creativity.

In several of Heaney's later poems his early connection between art and the father's rural craft is intensified. The picture of the parent outdoors serves as a starting point, but Heaney's aesthetic play tends to become more complex. In "Markings" from *Seeing Things* (1991), as Alan Peacock's attentive reading brings out, "the father is not simply the deft wielder of a spade, but connoisseur of 'pegged out' lines, of the 'straight edge', of string 'stretched *perfectly*' – or, as ploughman, of 'the *imaginary*

[24] Blake Morrison notes a broadening from "rural fathers" over "The Tollund Man" to "'familiar ghosts'", writers such as Joyce. Edna Longley notes the aspect of "'following'" with early Heaney. Referring to *Wintering Out* (1972) she observes a change to "more unsubstantial forebears", sees "Harvest Bow" (1979) as a "renewed vision of poetry as calling on the father's "'gift'" and a poem that "reinstates him as Jung's Wise Old Man archetype". See Morrison 182; Longley, *The Living Stream* 158.

[25] See his essays collected in *FC*.

[26] "The Figure in the Cave," *FC* 15.

[27] Robin Skelton characterises the style as "syncretic". Gerald Dawe equally underlines Montague's mentioning of literary fathers; as a mechanism of "approval-seeking" and "tradition-making". See Skelton 238; Gerald Dawe, *Against Piety: Essays in Irish Poetry* (Belfast: Lagan, 1995) 128-29.

line straight down / A field of grazing'".[28] Although admitting that the father being "privy to an extraordinary world" is not always the case in Heaney, Peacock rightly emphasises how Heaney tries to bend the bow from the memory of everyday and childhood experiences to the "*imaginary*".[29] His point can be underlined through "A Call" from *The Spirit Level* (1996) where the father-son relationship ends with a speaker's admitting "I nearly said I loved him", but it arrives at this concluding line through an oscillation between presence and absence.[30] One moves from a father who is present in the mother's words, to a picture of the father in the poet's imagination, over to an absent father when the poet focuses on the phone that lies "unattended" in the hall. Then the father becomes present at the other end of the phone, moves from a silent other, to a speaking subject. And yet there is another twist, for his talking is merely recorded by the poet ("Next thing he spoke"). We quickly move from the situation of calling to the inner landscape of the poet. He overtly imagines parallel actions. Additionally, with the father's "Touching, inspecting, separating", Heaney obliquely connects aspects of parenting with the father's activity. A note on the short poem "The Strand", also from *The Spirit Level*, may round up this brief account of Heaney's evoking of the father:

> The dotted line my father's ashplant made
> On Sandymount Strand
> Is something else the tide won't wash away.[31]

The father's ashplant simultaneously becomes "something" that stays in the memory, and that significantly leaves not only a trace, but "a line" in the sand: an *imaginary* "dotted line". Despite being "something else" that remains, it is turned into "something else".

Both Heaney and Montague visualise and evoke the father in detail, thereby continuing and illustrating Robert Lowell's "At every corner, / I meet my Father"

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[28] Emphasis added by Peacock. See Alan Peacock, "Mediations: Poet as Translator, Poet as Seer," *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Elmer Andrews (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 247. For the poem, see Heaney, *Opened Ground* 335-36.
[29] Peacock 248.
[30] Heaney, *Opened Ground* 432.
[31] Ibid. 436.

("Middle Age").[32] Compared with Heaney's father, Montague's father tends to be more static, and Montague often presents a politically charged meeting between son and parent. A shift in Montague takes place, when he starts to transform poetically his own father position. His birth as father means conjuring up both an abstract, father-guardian as well as a recognisable, father-parent in the later poems. Montague's tone can then often become playful, as in *Mount Eagle.*

II

The father, established after *The Rough Field* in Montague's psyche and in the reader's consciousness, serves as a starting point for the conjuring up of a gallery of relatives, referred to as "*Ghosts*", at the beginning of the fourth section of *A Slow Dance*:

> *Fusillade of raindrops.*
> *I fall asleep in the room*
> *where my father was born.*
> *Ghosts buffet the walls*
> *creak lovingly as I dream.*
> *I haul them up, one by one,*
> *from the well of darkness,*
> *greet and name each face –*
> *warm playing cards.*

This epigraphic poem works as a manifesto. The poet "*haul[s]*" relatives "*up*", and his evocation is ritualistic and detailed. "*[O]ne by one*" the poet names these relatives and greets "*each face*", in an attempt to transform a visual picture (the pictures, the cards) into a textual rendering of a mother, a father, an aunt and an uncle. The boundary between imagination and reality, suggested by a juxtaposition of dream and photographs, as well as a creative, dreaming poet and one that is nonetheless exactly placed, becomes quickly blurred. The ghosts' sound is both outside and inside the dream, as the parallel-construction with "*as*" suggests. The poems will not only represent the relatives as pictures, but also as in dream, imagination or play and this

[32] Robert Lowell, *For the Union Dead* (London: Faber, 1965) 7.

play is, as the animation of these ghosts reveals ("*creak*"), a two-way process. The poet is both origin and recipient. Despite the fact that the relatives are "*Ghosts*", they "*creak lovingly*" – like the poet who will sympathetically re-create these ghosts in his sounding lines. The poet conjures relatives up from "*the well of darkness*", from the source of memory. His look into the well anticipates that its meniscus will also show him the reflection of himself, or better, his self.

In "A Graveyard in Queens" this source of darkness is revisited; the poet visits a cemetery in New York. Speaker and aunt walk towards the grave of the uncle. A poet in turmoil is conveyed in a surreal landscape. A "dance of pain / over the grave of // my uncle & namesake" begins. In the second section the speaker feels himself into the aunt, brings out the pain of exile, in lines dominated by abundant "h"-sounds:

> You would cry out
> against what has
>
> happened, such
> heedless hurt,
>
> had you the harsh
> nature for it
>
> (...)
>
> but your mind is
> a humble house, a
>
> soft light burning
> beneath the holy
>
> picture, the image
> of the seven times
>
> wounded heart of

her, whose portion

is to endure.

The emotional tension is underlined through punctuation that does not follow the lineation. The pronouns flicker between addressing the aunt and mirroring the state of the poet, while the ambivalent "her" oscillates between the aunt and the figure of Mary. A hen that the poet observes obliquely connects with the family-theme in its "shushing her young / along the autumn". In contrast to the human emotional drama, this animal seems indifferent. A squirrel, however, "halts", being characterised as

serious, still,
a small ornament

holding something
a nut, a leaf –

like an offering
inside its paws.

Indirectly this squirrel comes to anticipate the poet who "halts", is "serious" and "still" at the grave and may have something to offer, despite and because of the lot of these exiled relatives: "a nut, a leaf – // like an offering".[33]

After picturing this strange "offering", the poet moves from observer to having to face his own, here doubled, self; "and far from / our supposed home", he stares at his own name – that of his uncle John Montague – on the gravestone. The poem is at once a conjuring up of a past scene, dead relatives, a stressing of the theme of exile, and a placing of the self. (The name and the "leaf" also refer self-reflexively to the poem itself.) Reinforcing this placing of the poet's tunes in relation to his roots, the uncle's "ghostly fiddle" creaks "the slow pride / of a lament". The grave is not merely

[33] The nut is attributed a positive quality in Celtic tradition. "Those destined to partake of the nuts (...) obtained the gifts of the seer and the poet". See Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (1961; London: Thames, 1995) 161.

revisited, for the visit becomes a means of foregrounding loss through the tune of the fiddler's lament. That the poet hears this sound clearly when at the grave reinforces the loss lamented here. So does the fact that the uncle and his fiddle are part of an intersequential dialogue. From *A Chosen Light* and *The Rough Field* ("The Country Fiddler" and the torso-fiddle in "The Sound of a Wound"), it is taken over into *A Slow Dance* and the musician is even, albeit not overtly, a ghostly presence in his more recent poem "Fairy Fort", in "the fiddles' scraping" (*SP* 15). Taking on a life of his own, Montague's fiddler persona reaches beyond the autobiographical. He is, for Montague, an image for cultural loss. What Perloff observes with respect to Robert Lowell counts for Montague's *oeuvre* as a whole: "Names of persons and places, settings, objects, and key incidents in one poem are woven into the total fabric, which becomes something like a novel, but a novel conceived in spatial rather than in temporal terms".[34]

The poem entitled "All Souls" in *A Slow Dance* takes up music as a characteristic family-activity. The poet recognises "the dusty silence of the piano lid / Which has not been lifted since Auntie died".[35] He sees her dead hand running down the scales. It is a memorable and warm music of the dead. "All Souls" connects each soul with an array of personal characteristics and details; a John Joe "rehearsing his oldest joke" or Uncle James "Tapping the hall barometer". The poet brings these figures together in his mind and surrounds himself with them.[36]

The ambivalence built up cannot be overlooked; the tone flickers between seriousness and irony. Death stands against "human warmth", and comes out in an oxymoronic "dead hand" that plays the piano, an uncle's "decent skeleton" and "dying armchairs". As with the father, the intimacy is prone to disturbance, threatened: "Now the dead and their descendants / Share in the necessary feast of blood". Is it secular violence the poem alludes to in the "feast of blood" or a Christian symbolism? The last lines do not give answers, but assert song, as a child "trembles into song", and the pronoun "you" finds its way into the poem:

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[34] Perloff refers to *Life Studies*. See Perloff 93.

[35] The aunt on the piano as well as imaginatively visiting the family-graveyard as depicted before is another, though minor, parallel to Lowell, see "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow", "Dunbarton" or "Sailing Home from Rapallo" in *Life Studies*. See Lowell, *Life Studies* 73-78, 79-81, 91-92.

[36] See also in Montague's late poem "The Family Piano" (*SP* 70-71).

The knuckles lifting the clove scented glass
To your lips are also branched with bone
So toast your kin in the chill oblong
Of the gilt mirror where the plumage
Of a shot bird still swells chestnut brown.

The address is as much to the family-members evoked in the poem as to the reader or the poet himself. As in "A Graveyard in Queens", the poet undergoes a process of self-recognition, suggested by the mirror allusion and the glass that goes to the lips. The lack of punctuation reinforces the merger of outer and inner. Dead ghosts are treated as if alive; he wants to toast them, lift them into the present through the gesture, and the act of writing. The end takes up the stuffed bird of the preceding stanza, a bird that has been "shot", is artificial and displaced. Most importantly, Montague may not only refer to death, or to how a dead object may survive, but also, self-reflexively, to the artifice ("song") he has created. The lines, like the bird, survive, despite carrying signs of death: that the plumage "swells", actively and in the present tense, and that it "still" does so, gives a sense of continuity to the poem, despite the mortality evident in the skeletons, bones and knuckles it conjures up. In that respect, the evoking of relatives becomes a parable about writing – making absent, dead objects present through words that are, in themselves, nothing more than black markers on the page, but that become, when read, like the relatives (on the wall, in the mind, in dream), alive and pregnant with meaning.

III

It is the mother who plays the most haunting part in the family section of *A Slow Dance*. Montague's condition of being "motherless" is evident through the fact that it takes until "A Muddy Cup" and "Mother Cat" for the mother-poems to appear. Before, and even in parts of *A Slow Dance* still, it is as if he – consciously or unconsciously – seeks abstract mothers, surrogate mothers, anti- or pseudo-mothers. *A Slow Dance*

itself is obsessed with "the eternal feminine",[37] the "earth womb" ("Back"), death and birth, and openings and closings. Section I, in particular, seeks a source and sources. In its first poem, significantly entitled "Back", "we move slowly / back to our origins". The atmosphere in the second poem is pre-natal, wet, humid. As much as a "dance", a "slow" movement of feet on earth means coming closer to inner origins and constitutes an expression other than, even prior to, language, so the poet "slowly" approaches origins, with his "lifting[s]":

> Start a slow
> dance, lifting
> a foot, planting
> a heel to celebrate
>
> greenness, rain
> spatter on skin,
> the humid pull
> of the earth. ("Sweeny")

Throughout the section rebirths and images of fertility – the evocation of eggs, cattle and phallic stones – conjure up an early, former state of existence. The culminating point is the song "For the Hillmother", a poet's prayer to the Muse and a pagan, pre-Christian mother that ends singing "Gate of birth / open for us".[38] The poet addresses a "Hinge of silence" or a "Rose of darkness" and they, together with other images, are to become active in the poem. The hinge shall "creak" and the rose "unfold", until the "Hill of motherhood / "wait[s] for us". And, finally, the gate opens. Allusions to plants and flowers, as well as verbs such as "unfold", "bend", "lean", "flow" or "inflame", intensify this hymn to fertility and procreation.

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[37] Quinn 27. I agree with Quinn in that there is a link between Montague's employment of female figures and his obsession with "the eternal feminine", with the fact that Montague was deprived of maternal bonding in infancy. Quinn briefly outlines that Montague "journeys back to the primal source of his fascination with the female" in *DK*. See Quinn, *SI* 27, 40. My analysis in this part of the chapter seeks to analyse *how* Montague "journeys back to the primal source".

[38] For Quinn it is "a prayer to the fecund, maternal earth, fertility goddess and poetic Muse" and "Montague's hymn to the fine delight that mothers thought, his celebration of the erotic roll, rise and carol of creation". For Coughlan the poem is an example of Montague's using the idea of landscape as female body, here "sexually welcoming and fertile". See Quinn, *SI* 35; Coughlan 96.

The abstract evocation is counterbalanced by and contrasted with the autobiographical reference to the mother in the family section.[39] In "A Muddy Cup" the trauma of neglect and abandonment surfaces; and the mother's refusal of him is symbolically and obliquely made apparent in the first lines:

> My mother
> my mother's memories
> of America;
> a muddy cup
> she refused to drink (...).

Her refusal is a refusal of America, but also anticipates her refusal of her third son (the poet). The repetition of the bilabial "m" in these lines, the closing of the lips to form this silent sound, underlines her rejection. It stands in opposition to the connotations of a "cup", namely the act of drinking, an oral act involving the opening of the lips. This ambivalence is carried over in the title image itself, too: a "muddy cup" combines earthen, dark soil and drink, ugliness and nourishment, softness and hardness, openness and enclosure. Yet, the group of opposites does not end with the oxymoronic "muddy cup". The denial of the marriage to the outside world hints at the emotional difficulty of the union:

> his landlady didn't know
> my father was married
> so who was the woman
> landed on the doorstep
> with growing sons
>
> my elder brothers

[39] Brown stresses with respect to the later sections in *DK* that "the poet's mother ceases to be a mythical or generalized female presence but takes on particular attributes and a personality". See Brown, "*The Dead Kingdom,*" *SI* 107. The pattern is also visible in the earlier *SD*. In *SD* earlier and later sections may not be connected directly through the frame and the natural mother as in *DK*, but Montague probed the shift from the general to the particular in *SD*. Interestingly, *SD* is build on extremes, the abstract, often enabling eternal feminine, and a haunting, disabling concrete mother.

lonely & lost
Father staggered back (...).

The situation of exile goes hand in hand with a questioning of identity that comes out in the question "so who was the woman". The ambivalent syntax leaves room to spell out ways of being "lost". The brothers are "lost"; so are the parents in their exile. They are also "lost" to one another, and, most importantly, they are "lost" to the poet.

Details follow in a dry tone and given by a poet whose disembodied self is underlined by his not employing the pronoun "I" throughout the poem. He points out that he came into existence in connection with disturbance and disgust, the filth and "garbage" of urban, modern life in an American ghetto:

and harshly under
a crumbling brownstone
roof in Brooklyn
to the clatter of
garbage cans

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

That last, deliberately trite rhyme has an undertone of irony to it, intensifying the doubt brought in by "*like* a loving man" [emphasis added]. The poet turns to himself as

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

from that muddy cup
my mother refused (...).

Poetical inspiration, a song, is linked to origin and roots. The strangeness ("muddy cup") of his familial past planted also a nervous quality into him ("bubbled") and he does not sing, but rather "beats out" this song in the present tense and celebrates muddy "odours".

The poem ends with an image of "a she cat" bringing her kittens "home", an image that dominates the following poem, "Mother Cat". Montague can only address his traumatic experience of neglect indirectly through describing a mother cat nourishing her kittens successfully, "except one"; the kittens

jostle & cry
for position
except one

so boneless
& frail (...).

The one kitten is as "boneless", "frail" and sparse as the lines and the layout of the poem. The poem mimes a condition of being neither fully present nor fully absent, seeking its small, narrow path along the blank of the page. The gap that opens between "except one" and "so boneless" is yet another device of underlining the kitten's "position". It comes without surprise that the kitten, in fact, drinks "air", not "milk". The voluptuous mother – the very adverb "voluptuously" lengthening the line – does not care for this child, she did not want him, and he is a blank space, a gap, a sparse letter on the page. He feels that he does not have a place at all:

you are already

set for death
never getting
a say against

the warm circle
of your mother's
breast (...).

The pronoun "you", both distancing and intimate, is the only means of addressing a traumatic neglect. The speaker connects infancy and death. This supposed-to-be infant memory brings out all the "confusion" ("A Flowering Absence") of his birth and sketches a troublesome pre-verbal state. The mother's breast is warm, but he does not have "a say". The adult-speaker acknowledges the importance of the breast and underlines that he experiences the lack of it as a wound. He turns "against" this object. The breast becomes a "bad object", to use Melanie Klein's term.[40] Depicting the mother as a "cat" adds to the hostile atmosphere, reinforced by "never". The infant is depicted as out of balance, for it is neither separated from this breast, nor healthily connected with it. And even from the later vantage point of an adult-speaker, an imbalance can be felt, as he addresses the mother's breast in language ("a say"), but paradoxically refers to a time when a child does not yet have its language developed.

In the later sequence *The Dead Kingdom* it is as if the two mother-poems from *A Slow Dance* merge into a more haunting version of "A Muddy Cup". "Mother Cat" as poem may have been dropped here; the image of the mother cat and her kitten, however, is taken over into the last, added stanza of "A Muddy Cup". The poem ends on an unsettling, non-maternal note, as the mother-figure drags the kittens with her,

(all but the runt,
the littlest one, whom
she gave to be fostered
in Garvaghey, seven miles away;
from her husband's old home).

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[40] For the object-relation theorist Melanie Klein, the relation of the infant to the mother's breast plays a central role for the very young child (she focuses on the pre-oedipal phase) and affects its later relations. For Klein, the "relation to the loved and hated – good and bad – breast is the infant's first object-relation". If the child feels hungry, it introjects the idea of a bad breast and, as its self and the mother are not yet separated in its mind, it experiences her and its self as bad. In her later study Klein points out that the feelings of the infant "seem to be that when the breast deprives him, it becomes bad because it keeps the milk, love, and care associated with the good breast all to itself. He hates and envies what he feels to be the mean and grudging breast". See Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963* (1975; London: Virago, 1988) 70, 183.

Having established an American dimension, the poem returns to Ulster, with a mother who brings her "kittens", his brothers, back home. The "womb-warm / basket" excludes "the littlest one", the poet. In the earlier version his lot is not spelled out directly, whereas in *The Dead Kingdom* the terrible trauma is added, in brackets, present in absence, revealed and concealed.[41] On the one hand, Montague wishes to show that anguish exists. On the other hand, he reveals that he wants to push what, in "A Flowering Absence", he calls "primal hurt" back under the surface. The "muddy cup" and "A Muddy Cup" as poem not only bridges the gap to the past, but also embodies in its ambivalence the poet's inner struggle.

The poem "A Muddy Cup" of *The Dead Kingdom* is framed by several poems that confront the mother within a sequence that constitutes an attempt to come to terms with personal memories and kinship – not unlike Robert Lowell in *Life Studies*.[42] Montague's familiarity with this book is captured in the essay "American Pegasus" where he underlines that although the first two sections "bring no surprise", the "final group of autobiographical poems, which constitute the bulk of the volume, present a new Lowell, quieter, more sympathetic, distinctly tender".[43] It is in this third section where Lowell evokes his neurotic mother and whose coffin the poet accompanies on a ship to Dunbarton ("Sailing Home from Rapallo"). Similarly, Montague's journey back to his mother is framed by a journey northwards to attend her funeral.[44] As with *The Rough Field*, the idea of writing occurred when travelling; Montague began working on it on the Dublin-Cork train.[45] It is a sequence that confronts neglect and hurt, that attempts to bury the wounds of the past, and to bury the mother literally and imaginatively. It is here where Montague's comment, "I have no doubt that the

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[41] See also Quinn, *SI* 27. Johnston comments rightly: "At great risk, Montague dips into the pathos of this relationship without altogether escaping a note of self-pity". For Elizabeth Grubgeld "the poem succumbs to self-pity and misogynist fury, as Montague incorporates parts of what must be the worst poem ["Mother Cat"] he has published". See Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* 198; Elizabeth Grubgeld, "Matriarchs, Mothergoddesses, and the Poetry of John Montague," *Études Irlandaises* 18.2 (1993): 79.

[42] Although brief, Grubgeld's insightful comparison of *DK* with Berryman's *The Dream Songs*, Lowell's *Life Studies* and Ginsberg's "Kaddish" concludes that "in its ethnic self-reflexivity and its tonal discontinuities, *The Dead Kingdom* recalls in a precise cultural framework the shifts in persona, the Oedipal confessions, and the parodic variations on elegiac consolations of the postwar generation of American poets". See Elizabeth Grubgeld, "John Montague's *The Dead Kingdom* and the Postwar American Elegy," *New Hibernia Review* 1.2 (1997): 82.

[43] See "American Pegasus," *FC* 193, 194. Montague met Lowell in 1953. See "Biographical Notes," *FC* 222.

[44] And it is also in the later sections where *DK* becomes "distinctly" different from *RF* and where we see "new" nuances in Montague.

[45] "Biographical Notes," *FC* 225.

separation from my mother, whatever the reasons for the decision, is at the centre of my emotional life (...), shadowing my powers of speech (...)",[46] is explored in poetry. Montague's trip back to Ireland at the age of four was, in the words of Richard Bizot, "a journey into forced exile: exile from his immediate family".[47] If *The Rough Field* constitutes a return from exile spatially back to Ireland, *The Dead Kingdom* is a return to his biological roots. What Montague anticipates in *A Slow Dance,* the confrontation of the mother and family members, becomes magnified in *The Dead Kingdom*'s last sections.

Structurally, Montague's journey can be read as an imaginative re-enactment and recovery of his life from the time of the mother's death back to his own birth. The more we move northwards, the more we move back in the poet's life and the more we move from distance to involvement. The reality of the mother's death starts a journey into conscious and unconscious territory of the mind, through idyllic landscapes as well as into the terror, death and myths triggered by the Irish scene.

As in *A Slow Dance*, Montague comes at the personal in the second half of the sequence from and through dealings with nature, myth and Ireland in its first half. In section I of *The Dead Kingdom* the poet hears of the mother's death. The theme of life and death echoes in natural images; the poet's pull northwards is paralleled with a salmon's pull upstream, "journeying back" towards "the source" and "A Murmuring Stream"'s remembrance of a boy that had carried "home" jamjars of water with "minnows twisted / and turned in prison". The "minor roads of memory" travelled here anticipate the full confrontation of his own imprisoned self and its relation to the mother in the family sections.[48] As races, nations are "locked / in their dream of history" so the poet is one of us, "Each close in his own / world of sense & memory" ("Process").

In section II of *The Dead Kingdom* the poet goes back further in time. The landscape evokes memories of idyllic childhood holidays, reminiscent of the epiphanic walk within "The Cage". The landscape of Longford is soothing, but "an undigested perch" that is "compact as / an embryo" in a pike's stomach hints at imprisonment, the

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[46] "The Figure in the Cave," *FC* 17.

[47] Richard Bizot, "A Sense of Places: The Homing Instinct of John Montague," *Eire-Ireland* 30.1 (1995): 171.

[48] Brown sees section I as depicting "the poet at a distance from his pain, unable as yet to confront it directly in memory or actuality". See Brown, "*The Dead Kingdom*," *SI* 105.

mother-child topic and at the poet's difficulty at digesting the news of death ("Red Island"). The final point is the abstract poem "The Well Dreams" that concentrates on the well's inner and outer life, life's ebb and flow, its surface and depth. The well has its secret, its heart, for under "*the unpredictable ballet / of waterbugs, insects, // There the wellhead pulses*". Eugène Guillevic's *Carnac* is echoed by the watery imagery of the poem. The French poet's sea evoked in *Carnac* is, like the well, not to be fully grasped, intangible, secretive and seductive, dreaming and, above all, maternal.[49] Interruptions through a stone or coin in "The Well Dreams" are only a means of showing the well's renewing and powerful forces, as the "*Water's slow alchemy washes it [a coin] clean*" and a stone is absorbed and digested "*in the well's stomach*".[50]

In the third section we move into "that border county of which no one speaks" ("Border Lake") and the territory evokes memories of violence, is a journey into myth and collective unconscious, driving into the violent, stricken northern landscape, "that shadowy territory / where motives fail" ("Border"). In "The Black Pig" "some mythic bristled beast" "races forever", whereas in "The Plain of Blood" the poet underlines that "The evil sprang from / our own harsh hearts".

Having confronted life's ebb and flow, and seen both imprisoning and healing qualities in the landscape in the first three sections, the poet is ready to focus on his family. He starts the most painful trail backwards in sections IV and V. As if to emphasise the autobiographical, Montague replaces the opening manifesto poem that conjured up family "ghosts" in *A Slow Dance*, with a family-photograph for *The Dead Kingdom*. In section IV itself Montague moves from the time of meeting the mother at old age ("Gravity") into infancy ("A Muddy Cup").

In "Gravity", Montague doubles mothers and children, contrasts young and old and brings mother and wife together through gravity and motherhood. Whereas Evelyn waits for "the leap / of conception", for new, "unknown" life, the mother faces the

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[49] Eugène Guillevic reworks in natural elements, often menacing ones, a difficult relation with the mother. Montague underlines that translating *Carnac* inspired him to "The Well Dreams". A fascination for water, sea, stone, woman and land is shared by Montague – after reading *Carnac* he has written in his notebook "'Sea, Stone, Woman, Land'". See John Montague, "A Personal Note," Guillevic 28.

[50] For Johnston the well is a "contained fluidity and a source of life". See Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* 201. Johnston connects a series of "container[s] within flux", namely, for instance, the jamjars "in which minnows twisted" ("A Murmuring Stream") and "God's golden eye" ("Process"). See Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* 200.

gravity of death. Montague reminds us of the constellation in the sequence's first poem with its news of death and the cryptic mentioning of the pregnancy, as Evelyn had been "weeping" for "her child's grandmother" ("Upstream"). "Gravity" spells out Montague's preoccupation with inheritance, the "familial communion", but the parallel is strange, "a flaring mystery":

> The gravity of our child
> growing in Evelyn's womb,
> unacknowledged, unknown,
> while my forsaken mother
> wastes glumly away in
> a new aseptic hospital
> high above Enniskillen;
> an exhausted woman, and
> a child who will resemble
> her, spirits exchanging
> in familial communion.
>
> What lonely outcry equals
> such a flaring mystery?

The poet's "lonely outcry" stresses the fact that both birth and death are intrinsic to life and that their "mystery" can confront one at the same time. The poem also questions whether language can equal this experience; the poet has needed a winding road so far.

The mother seems to react as a mother normally does, with her "motherly" concern and the poet, in turn, treats her with gentleness, leaving her "antique" world intact. He does not mention that his first wife, Madeline, is not with him, and he asks: "Should one disturb / the dreams of the old (...)?" In this line of respect Montague seems to parallel that of Heaney in "Clearances" in which the speaker lies in order to preserve a moment of harmony.[51]

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[51] The son governs his tongue in order to ally and communicate with his mother, revealing to the reader "a genuinely well- / adjusted adequate betrayal / Of what I knew better (...)". See Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber, 1987) 28.

However, the poem "Intimacy" reveals that Montague whispering "Mother, mother" cannot deny ambivalent undertones and is closer to Lowell's tone on the mother; his "Mother, Mother" from "During Fever" and the depiction of mother and son closely together, "bent by the fire",[52] in the father's absence is echoed in Montague's poem. Montague's stating that "over the years we had won / to a sweet intimacy together" underlines the fact that they lacked a natural relationship, and the mother's peculiar status in her son's life comes out in her being "rigged out like a girl friend / in her evening finery" and "munching / soft centred chocolates", or in the fact that "Naturally" they chose Romances when going to the cinema. What had been anticipated in the exaggerated "sweet intimacy" comes out in the description. Montague's use of the mother's language and direct speech ("*I hate films about real life*") not only means giving a detailed portrait of the mother, but also ensures a distance of the self from this mother figure.[53] Whereas in *A Slow Dance* the parallel to the cat and her kitten ensured a self-protective distance, here this device is paired with irony.

The second stanza notes the parents' and, by implication, son's separation, a verbless "Melancholy destiny, indeed. / Young love, then long separation". The father's song lightens the scene, but "his eyes [are] straying in strangeness" to the mother and the poem replaces the mother as "girl friend" by an "old", "gray" woman. The song-line "*tho' lonely my life flows on*" reinforces her despair, but we move forward in time, with mother and son watching films (on love, but also violence) after the father went "*to a fairer world than this*". The songs bring out the parents' fate and foreground oral tradition, yet also contrast with the poet who has not yet found his own song-lines.[54] The last image of the mother in excitement, yet with "dust / settling on her apron . . . .", conveys the mixed emotions the poem conjured up.

Song enters the title in "Molly Bawn", a poem in which the mother is portrayed as the father's "Irish Molly", and that, in a colloquial style, gives details of the times before and after "courtship & wedding". Montague foregrounds the historical-political

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[52] Lowell, *Life Studies* 93.

[53] See also Grubgeld who emphasises the "empathic entry" into character, but also that, by "a self-conscious use of her language, (...) a critical distance from his mother" is achieved. See Grubgeld, "John Montague's *The Dead Kingdom*" 74.

[54] Grubgeld, referring to "A Muddy Cup", sees song as "enlarging the experiences of his own family from the level of personal melodrama to that of cultural tragedy". See Grubgeld, "Matriarchs" 79.

circumstances rather than the parents' emotional union, for their wedding took place "to the sound of marching" and the mother follows the father into exile, "making sure to land in / good time for the Depression!" The phrasing captures a comic factualism, as if Montague were saying that his family could always be relied upon to do the wrong thing at the wrong time. America's desperate situation parallels that of the parents and, similarly, the Depression anticipates the mother's refusal of America in "A Muddy Cup" that now follows naturally in the chronology of events.

In the final section of *The Dead Kingdom* the

> drive down
> the seven long miles that
> separated me from mother
> and brother, Montague
> from Carney (...) ("Northern Lights")

overtly spells out the long way to the mother. It is only after the mother is buried that the poet goes "down" into the first months and years of his existence to confront his pain. One extreme, namely the poet's arrival at the mother's death and funeral, is accompanied by another, the arrival at his birth within the imaginative journey back.

In "A Flowering Absence" Montague tries to overcome "absence" and "confusion" by "rehears[ing]" the time of infancy and incorporating a trip to his birthplace, "darkest Brooklyn". The former only reveals his mother's neglect, his being "taken" from a sick room, "given away" for fosterage and "shipped" back to Ireland. When revisiting Brooklyn he only comes upon "another cold trail", for the nun who assisted at his birth is dead. The journey to "learn" of origins reveals further deaths and absences on its way. As Longford could not last long, so the hope to meet the nun and enjoy the father's and aunt's love is short-lived.

Montague fuses a narrative mode with a syntax that stutters out abstract nouns, the "confusion, poverty, absence" and "Stammer, impediment, stutter". Sayings such as "There is an absence, real as presence" summarise preceding lines, but are also functioning as an epigraph; the presence of his daughter reminds him of his hurt, hence catalyses absence in the poet. The nuns "were the first to succour / that still terrible thirst of mine" he says, picturing the concrete thirst of the child in "Mother Cat", but it

is also a more abstract "thirst for love and knowledge" in the next lines that triggers the journey to the nuns. The oscillation between concrete and abstract, narrating and summarising, reinforced by complex syntax and register, mirrors the poet's confusion and fragmentation, and the desperate attempt to construct a story of the self.

Furthermore, the poet's "confusion" is revealed through the various voices that cross in the poem. These range from a nun's answer ("*She died, just before you came*"), Brooklyn slang ("*motherfucka*"), songlines and a teacher's voice to the poet's voice as adult and child ("big boat") and the ventriloquising of society's clichés ("how a mother gave away her son"). This polyphony also mimes the sequence's epigraphic citations from Hesse, Kafka, Lennon, Milosz, Donne and folk songs. They give different views about motherhood, are an "amplifying apparatus",[55] and likewise underline the poet's difficulty in facing the topic in his own voice.

Spatial terms such as the repetition of "away" reinforce the gap between parents and son. The phrase "All roads wind backwards to it. / An unwanted child, a primal hurt" serves as a meta-commentary on the poet's attempts in the preceding lines and as a merger of literal and imaginative journeys. The placing of the phrase's words – starting with "roads" going back to the "hurt" – underlines the depth of the wound. The pain and "that still terrible thirst" are carried over by an endless tracking back:

> Year by year, I track it down
> intent for a hint of evidence,
> seeking to manage the pain –
> how a mother gave away her son.

The unmatched rhyme ("down"-"son") and the off-rhyme ("pain"-"son") register the semantic closeness of these three words. The almost ritualistic process of attempting "to manage the pain" is conveyed by the poet's "seeking". He wants to find "evidence" in order to free himself as well as change the unfavourable picture of the mother. Even if he does not seek it, it pulls him back, for when he sees his own child rushing to its mother he is reminded that he "never could".

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[55] Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* 199.

The "hurt" is furthermore intensified by a figure of doubling. As if the knowledge of having been abandoned is not painful enough, a wound is inflicted on the boy when a teacher asks "*What do you expect, with no parents, / sent back from some American slum*". That he is like an orphan is spelled out in public. What had run "briefly underground" through the soothing love of aunts "break[s] out" again. The result is all "Stammer, impediment, stutter". The syntax stutters it out. We move into "speechlessness" with a poet describing the end of "those magical words I had begun / to love, to dolphin delight in". To "dolphin delight" in words and play with sounds is what Montague paradoxically and self-consciously does here; counterbalancing the factual content of the poem that underlines that the feeling of being at ease in language is deadened for two decades.

After Montague has conjured up the streets of traumas, rather than a walk "Together through the shops and stalls and markets / Free in the oriental streets of thought", as Kavanagh does in his "In Memory of My Mother",[56] his last lines are all the more surprising and liberating:

> Grounded for the second time
> my tongue became a rusted hinge
> until the sweet oils of poetry
>
> eased it and light flooded in.

Montague was torn between the ironic "Grounded" and the direct "Wounded", for in poems from *The Dead Kingdom*, published in *Exile* before the sequence was published in full length, he employed the latter.[57] The later "Grounded" soothes the path for the final lines that spell out his real grounding. Inner and outer may be finally united via art. Poetry is a fluid medicine. It can transport and give rise to "light". It quenches thirst and is an attempt to come closer to an answer to the question that the speaker had asked at the opening: "How can one make an absence flower, / lure a

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[56] Kavanagh 83.

[57] John Montague, "A Flowering Absence," *Exile* 8.3-4 (1981/82): 45. In *DK* he also omits the lines preceding the lines under discussion. The speaker remarks on the school teacher: "Was it any remission to learn / that she drove her daughter to suicide / later, with that same lashing tongue? // None. Only bewildered compassion".

desert to sudden bloom?" The single last line, an arrangement missing in *Exile*, reinforces the "healing" quality, so does the replacement of "light" with "grace".[58] The poet tries to overcome the negative aspects of his birth by a different birth, a different "flood[ing] in", a compensatory re-birth of the self in art. Absence, loss and "terror" may be made to "flower". Therefore, the poem is not only about the relationship with his mother and past, but also explores the powers of poetry. What he had stressed in "Process", namely that poetry is one of the "absorbing discipline[s]" that are "ropeladders / across fuming oblivion", is brought out here. How far the impact of poetry goes, and whether or how "the sweet oils of poetry" can heal the numerous wounds that the poem has opened up, remain questionable, but Montague has found a "trail" to connect his mother and the art of poetry.

"The Locket" soothes the poetic drama of *The Dead Kingdom*. A possible reconciliation anticipated at the end of "A Flowering Absence" may find its continuation in the first lines that invite to "Sing a last song / for the lady who has gone, / fertile source of guilt and pain". These lines echo the poem "Gone" from section I. What Montague had probed with "things" that are "gone", is now played out with the mother. She is the "source of guilt and pain", but also "fertile". She gave birth to him and is the root not only of his existence, but also of his poetic capacity and capability. Yet this aspect is at the beginning of the poem subdued by the irony of the lines: "*The worst birth in the annals of Brooklyn*, / that was my cue to come on, / my first claim to fame".

Throughout the poem oscillates between guilt and recognition, between blaming the mother and attempting to love her. The reason for giving the child away is summarised: "coming out, both the wrong sex, / and the wrong way around". The financial situation of the couple is offered as another reason why the child was given away to be nursed. The latter aspect is reinforced by the mother's harsh "favourite saying": "*when poverty comes through the door / love flies up the chimney*". The syntax and stanza break run counter to the overt reasoning that takes place: "Not readily forgiven, // So you never nursed me". A paradoxical courtship stanza depicts how the abandoned child seeks a mechanism to rid itself off his guilt. When courting the mother "like a young man", the speaker is again denied:

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[58] In *CP* Montague changed "light" to "grace". See *CP* 182.

Standing in that same hallway,
don't come again, you say, roughly,
I start getting fond of you, John,
and then you are up and gone;
the harsh logic of a forlorn woman
resigned to being alone.

Rather than interpreting his rejection as another hurt, the poem underlines an understanding of the mother's behaviour; she is seen as in a "cocoon of pain", as herself in a psychological trauma. The mother is pressed into "being alone" and pitied as a "forlorn woman". Her lack of affection and roughness ("roughly") are seen as consequences of a troublesome life and the mother's own experience of being alone.

The climax of the poem, however, breaks the relationship's imbalances:

And still, mysterious blessing,
I never knew, until you were gone,
that, always around your neck,
you wore an oval locket
with an old picture in it,
of a child in Brooklyn.

The locket reveals that she was capable of loving him. The poem tries to come full circle, underlined by the term "blessing" and the various modes of continuity Montague uses, for she "always" wore the "oval" locket "round" her neck. These modes try to compensate for the negations the poem was full of until this final stanza. She has had the child with herself and treasured in herself. The mother ends up treasured in the poet's memory. Despite the fact that a locket embodies both a sense of treasure and repression, imprisoning and revealing, what dominates now is that what has been unknown and locked away is unveiled.[59] Whereas preceding poems could not entirely flee trauma, this poem aims at reciprocity. The token of the locket connects

[59] Several critics note the locket's duality. See John "The Healing Art of John Montague," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 12.1 (1986): 50; Quinn, *SI* 42.

mother and son.[60] The picture in the framing locket is a point the poet's eye can fix upon. The poet as child is carried over into the present through the "old picture" and an imaginative replacement of the missing child-womb connection is found. Montague's aesthetic progress in adequately capturing the mother is apparent here. He has found in "the locket" the key to convey hurt as well as love. The poem converts it into a symbol where death and birth, openings and closings meet. The poem exorcises those earlier moments which where haunted by the "primal hurt".

Furthermore, "Brooklyn", the place the mother refused and a place of estrangement of the modern self, acquires a different quality; a softness is carried over by the very way in which the word is placed in the last two lines. Although the impersonal "a child" at first sight undermines a sense of felt intimacy the diction runs counter to it. The poem was busy to escape, to go and come, as the number of times these verbs are employed reveals ("coming out", "*don't come again*", "cue to come on"). However, the connection "neck"-"locket"-"in it" allays the restlessness. Concurrently, the last imaginative "going" to the mother turns out to be an arrival. Her death is a prerequisite for a reconciliation with her. The movement from the impersonal lady and the invitation to "Sing a last song" towards a more intimate address ("you", "your") has increased. She is a source of pain, but Montague manages to approach her in poetry. Whereas it is unclear who utters and listens to the words in the first stanza, we come to see that the speaker uses them not only rhetorically, but also addresses them to the mother. Finally, he engages in an overt dialogue with her. And, most importantly, the very locket embodies the climax and closure of the imagery of imprisonment. It is after its discovery that

> The rites duly performed,
> goodbyes decently said,

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[60] For Quinn, the locket "[a]s a consolatory image" is "facile, appearing fictionally faked, even if factually true". John is more sympathetic when he underlines that "the poet learns of one more instance of her [the mother's] inability to express a love she clearly felt, an instance caught appropriately then in the locket". For Martin the poet "begins to apprehend the mystery he had set himself to understand". For Johnston the locket "offers balm"; for him it should, however, be connected with the "'universal'" poems to be found at the end of sections in *DK*; most notably "The Well Dreams" is "magnifying the significance" of "The Locket". Grubgeld noting Quinn's and Johnston's remarks, stresses that the knowledge of the locket "serves at best as only the most tenuous sign of a settlement between mother and son". See Quinn, *SI* 42; John, "The Healing Art" 50; Martin, "John Montague" 47; Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* 199-200; Grubgeld, "Matriarchs" 71.

honour satisfied, we
head back across the
length of Ireland, home. ("Back")

Montague started with his journey to the mother in "Back" from *A Slow Dance*; he ends it with the poem "Back" in *The Dead Kingdom*.

IV

There is one poem in *The Dead Kingdom* in which mother, father and son are together from the very start, "The Silver Flask". Its imaginative journey is framed by a car journey to mass. In contrast to the more angry and commemorating tone in most of poems on mother and father, the title poem of the fourth section in which the family has sweet hours together is at first sight one of harmony and melancholy. It seems to be a nostalgic recollection and above all an attempt to come full circle. The amount of references to circles and full rounds is striking: The very word "round" is employed three times ("the silver flask went round", "round her knees", "the spirits round again"). The passing round of the flask and drinking from it builds this item up almost as a "counter-image to the muddy cup".[61] This poem attempts well-roundedness for the poet recalls a past moment as an epiphany.[62] Time is magnified and a linear movement to Christmas mass is accompanied by a circular one. It is a journey out and back to the warmth of a home, a "warm" kitchen, a rare moment of familial harmony. During the drive the father sings one chorus after another. Once again a forward movement entails a repetitive one at the same time. It goes with, but simultaneously against, the linearity of the road: "Chorus after chorus of the *Adoremus* / to shorten the road before us". The father's singing is an action that is itself happening "once again". It is a circular repetition going back to roots, to where he had "sprung from". It is a voice "now raised vehemently once again // in the valleys he had sprung from". Equally the "again" that is emphasised by its end-position in the phrase is employed in "spirits round again". One can go as far as to say that the religious allusions and ceremonies are circular ones and have a profound ritualistic quality to them: a mass, a song, the holy communion

[61] Martin, "John Montague" 48.
[62] John also characterises it as an "epiphany". See John, "The Healing Art" 45.

and – on a different level – even the wafer of the communion describes a circle. Things such as the parish or the family come together; and the ice breaks (snow melts), the small wafer is soaked in the mouth. The mother significantly warms herself by putting a rag "round" her knees. Her nostalgic act of storing the tinsel means a preservation of things through time and therefore a holding on to something.

Although "again" is repeatedly employed, it seems more like a fake facade, a mere over-used "decoration". That the deep familial bonding is lost can be felt in various elements that run counter to the images of roundness and lines discussed above. The song is, in fact, "broken" and metaphorically, therefore, marks the fact of exile. The dimness of the bars in Brooklyn reminds of the father's present situation and runs against the superficially positive tone in this poem. At times the outside strongly creeps into the text. Only for a few moments the warm enclosure of car, mass and kitchen can be preserved. There is still a "hungriness" in the lines, an awareness that this event is almost unreal, a would-be-state. Snowflakes that are melting in the car's hungry headlights suggest that the voice still longs – for the warmth of the kitchen and this past moment's continuation. The melting in connection with "hungry headlights" also has a quality of destruction to it. As the poem ends on a strange note that brings one back to the historic topic of exile, the recognition that a shutting off is not possible is becoming more and more predominant. The rush to the service and the father's broken song carry an ambivalence even within that "moment of stillness". Likewise the father's tenor soars and falters, there are fierce blasts of song and the adverb "vehemently" disrupts the quietness of Christmas Eve. The song comes from within and one senses the father's Republican roots. Similarly, the mother is sad, but proud. A sense of the fatality of history and the impact of strong personal beliefs makes this Christmas Eve not only a recollection of a rare warmth experienced as a child, but also a poem of the absence of such an epiphanic moment on the wheel of actual history.

The journey by car is terminating only to give rise to the association of another one, namely the one by ship (to America). One circle is closed, but the theme of a linear journey, on a line back and forward has the last word. This Christmas Eve is a constructed one, with the "same tinsel" and the poet realises that it is a "tinsel of decorations", a hoarding of things past and an attempt of a mother to hold on to something "carefully". Did not the very first stanza, in fact, have an ironic quality to it, for a family normally has more than "short" hours together? The poem starts and

stresses: "Sweet, though short, our / hours as a family together". This event is exceptional and mirrors the exceptional familial circumstances by the very fact that it spells them out. Furthermore, the pronouns that are used throughout embody the split in the family. The poet calls the father "my father", but speaks of "our mother" when the family circle is briefly restored. He does not change the pronoun to "my mother" at the end, even after the "twenty lonely years". The last stanza is a distanced one and does not move away from its very impersonal start, namely the phrase "The family circle briefly restored". And finally, the hoarding of decorations "in the cabin trunk of *a* Cunard liner" [emphasis added] remains in the indefinite realm.

The poem does not cease to long for moments of timelessness, for moments without loneliness and for moments of belonging. If it achieves relief, recalling a "festive", fragile celebration, it does so in the very act of writing. The poet tries to connect in his imaginative journey with his roots, with the people he sprang from, with his landscape and religious practices. He thereby comes closer to the "festive lights", maybe finding a narrow path and some warmth against the looming background of mountainous darkness and brokenness.[63]

Overall, Montague goes back and comes closer to his biological parents, but his are fragile circles. He can only momentarily stay with times of harmony and this is overtly conveyed in his literal journeys with his parents, in his father-poems and in the poem "The Silver Flask". The poems show that it is, to employ Montague's own words, "hard to work so close to the bone".[64] Poetry is, however, a means of filling the familial vacuum for Montague. He tries to make his parental "absence flower" by employing close relatives again and again in his mid-career. He thereby addresses

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[63] The latter aspect is subdued in Montague's predecessor's poem, Kavanagh's "A Christmas Childhood". The poem is reminiscent of "The Silver Flask" in its nostalgic atmosphere of a rural Christmas in the family circle. The speaker longs for a moment of harmony as he re-enters the garden of childhood. Father and mother are described in their "magical" ordinariness. The former is depicted as playing the melodion whereas the latter makes the "music of milking": Kavanagh stresses the significance of the local in his employment of parental figures. The child's excitement is underlined by the sensual, visual and auditive perceptions that bring out the magic of the ordinary. The star-imagery reinforces the transformation of the ordinary – such as a local farmer and a bush: "Cassiopeia was over / Cassidy's hanging hill, / I looked and three whin bushes rode across / The horizon – the Three Wise Kings". The poem ends in the everyday; the repetition of the parent's activities and the fabric of Mary's blouse washes the magic moment away. The adult-poet cannot quite stay in the magic childhood moment with the family, but he likewise manages not to diminish its impact and significance. In comparison to Montague's "The Silver Flask" the recollection is less painful, Kavanagh can magnify the gone childhood moment without regrets. It is not a traumatic approach to a traumatic experience, but a mere magnification of a gone childhood moment. See Kavanagh 14-15.

[64] "Notes and Introductions," *FC* 57.

problems of personal as well as cultural heritage. The aspect of family has its specific dynamics in his *oeuvre*, for the poems are never far from a lament of a lost past, the sound of Ireland and America, selfhood and poetic self-consciousness. When he addresses further relatives we not only find that his urge to describe them in Lowellesque-detail is strong indeed, but also that their lot – exile – becomes a vehicle for Montague to show the difficulty of heritage and writing adequately about it. In both "A Graveyard in Queens" and "All Souls" the placing of the self and the placing of the artefact, in relation to roots, play a crucial role.

His evocation of the mother is contradictory. On the one hand, he blames her; on the other hand, he seeks reconciliation. How difficult the process is shows in his bitterness about her in the family section of *A Slow Dance* and in the length and complexity of the journey to her funeral in *The Dead Kingdom,* in the sequence as a whole, and especially within the last two sections. Every poem accuses and seeks to heal. Poetically, the mother's "absence" is enabling. She is a "fertile source" in that respect, for Montague deploys different tones, voices and images. With the locket, we finally have an image that may open up a real connection and free him from his negative memories. His familial journey in *The Dead Kingdom* ends at home, it is the last word in this sequence. It is a literal new home with wife and child, but at the same time an imaginative and consoling home that is poetry. Montague has managed to bring his "hurt" across, to "name" it, and show us "ropeladders" over it. That is itself an achievement, a successful act of "returning".

Chapter 5

MOVING

Love Poems

In Montague's early love poem "All Legendary Obstacles" (*CL* 16) the speaker, who awaits his beloved's arrival by train, stresses that "All legendary obstacles lay between / Us, the long imaginary plain, / The monstrous ruck of mountains". The enjambment between "between" and "Us" conveys a sense of distance, underlined by the speaker's "shifting / Nervously from station to bar". His waiting is reinforced by a chain of details. At the end of "All Legendary Obstacles" the readers, not unlike the lady who marks a circle on the train-window after the beloved has arrived, "watch [the lovers] / Move into the wet darkness / Kissing, still unable to speak". As in the family poems discussed in the previous chapter, these lines convey the speaker's sense of exile and longing for return. "All Legendary Obstacles" anticipates Montague's poems of love; poems which often foreground a spiritual and temporal distance, describe a process, and border on the silent, even the futile.

In the first part of the present chapter, a chronological analysis of Montague's main love-sequence *The Great Cloak*[1] reveals the inner and outer "plain" and "ruck of mountains" addressed by Montague in writing about love in a sequence. The discussion tries to do justice to Montague's remark at the outset of *The Great Cloak*, in the introductory "PLOT",[2] that "*These poems should not only be read separately*", and to his emphasis on the development from the libertine section 'Search' through a "*disintegrating marriage*" in 'Separation' to the 'Anchor' in "*a new and growing*

[1] The version of *GC* in *CP* is altered. It omits "Gone", "Back", "Signs", "Lunula" and "Content". It adds the poems "The Huntsman's Apology", "Love, A Greeting" and "The Same Gesture", as well as "Liadan Laments Cuirithir" and "Plea".

[2] Adrian Frazier rightly stresses the importance of its plot and compares it with a novel, whereas for Quinn it "does not aim at the density of reference or the contextual realism of a novel". See Adrian Frazier, rev. of *GC*, by John Montague, *Eire-Ireland* 8.3 (1978): 150; Quinn, *SI* 37.

relationship".[3] In order to face present and future, Montague goes back to the past. In part two of the chapter his collection *The Love Poems*[4] will briefly be discussed. This part explores the effects of the re-contextualisation of two old poems and the dialogue between the book's illustrations and poems. The concluding third part focuses on two recent love poems, to be found under the heading 'Dark Rooms' in *Smashing the Piano*.

I

At the start of *The Great Cloak*, Montague writes:

> As my Province burns
> I sing of love,
> Hoping to give that fiery
> Wheel a shove.

Montague both juxtaposes the burning Province with love and brings them together in the image of the "fiery / Wheel" as well as in the conjunction "As". We expect simultaneously a love-sequence and a sequence that draws a connection between its themes and the turmoil in the Province: a sequence in which the state of the Province remains outside, yet a sequence which, in its own terms, deals with or incorporates disturbance, ultimately moving into a more peaceful direction. The speaker "give[s]" the wheel a shove, as though the wheel could be "the golden wheel of love" evoked in

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[3] Johnston notes that Montague's introductory lines entitled "PLOT" parallel the opening lines in D. H. Lawrence's *Look! We Have Come Through!* Lawrence's lines run: "These poems should not be considered separately, as so many single pieces. They are intended as an essential story, or history, or confession, unfolding one from the other in organic development (...)". See Johnston, "Eros in Eire," *SI* 55. For the citation from *Look! We Have Come Through!* see D. H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts, vol. 1 (1964; London: Heinemann, 1972) 191. Montague's sequence shares with Lawrence's, apart from the conflict between old and new love, a developmental structure and the stressing of darkness and solitude, reference to "Don Juan", several balcony and hotel-room settings and the fact that woman is made to look back and to speak (in Lawrence's "Fireflies in the Corn" "*She speaks*"; Montague has a poem entitled "She Speaks"). Montague mentioned his fascination with Lawrence's love of Frieda. See Montague, personal conversation with the author, 15 May 1999.

[4] John Montague, *The Love Poems* (Toronto: Exile, 1992); hereafter referred to as *LP*. An American edition, without drawings by Claire Weissman Wilks, circulates under the title *About Love: Poems* (Riverdale: Sheep Meadow, 1993).

the early poem "Sentence for Konorak" (*CL* 17). The lines take up from *A Slow Dance*, the sequence Montague wrote immediately before *The Great Cloak,* where he ends with a lament for the globe "turning in endless halls" ("Lament") and stresses that "violence is inside man".[5] In the later poem, shoving the fiery wheel, hints at a positive process. The fire-flames of love can heal open wounds; so, too, by implication, can the poet's song. The quotation anticipates three central themes and their interconnections in *The Great Cloak*: love, conflict and the art of poetry.

In the first section, 'Search', love borders on violence; the fiery wheel's destructive side is brought to the fore within the private realm. It is a period of libertinism comprising several encounters of the speaker with lovers disguised as ladies, huntresses, birds or simply an anonymous "you". From the start the overt carpe-diem attitude of the section surfaces:

> Forever the slim demon
> elevates his claret cup
> saying, there is but one life,
> fill and drink up, while
>
> over the villa'd suburbs
> his careless laughter rings
> before his snout vanishes
> among a lady's earrings. ("Mount Venus")

The poet captures and momentarily identifies with a pleasure-seeking attitude to life that is ultimately found to be inadequate. The picture of the demon-lover's snout that "vanishes / among" the earrings combines a devilish quality with an unmistakably aggressive sexual intrusion. By placing "over" at the start of the second stanza Montague reinforces the sense of power, enjoyed by the slim demon's "careless laughter" "over the villa'd suburbs". Although the second stanza outlines a successive action ("before"), the "careless laughter" blends into his taking possession of this anonymous lady.

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[5] Montague, interview with Frazier 169. Montague refers to section III in *SD*.

The aggressive stance is taken over by "The Hunt" where "the battle" of the bodies stands in the centre:

> Chased beast, exultant huntress,
> the same flood of hair.
> I gripped you, you seized me.
> In the battle, our limbs tangle forever.

"You" clashes against "you"; the speaker grips, she seizes. The present tense that follows reinforces the physical aspect of the encounter. "But my love poetry", Montague has underlined, "probably is closer to French love poetry, which is certainly more physical [than Yeats's or Kavanagh's]".[6] The mode of "The Hunt", "after André Frénaud", is taken over in Montague's poems "Tracks", "Do Not Disturb" and "Don Juan's Farewell", all to be found in this first section. The preoccupation with clear forms and a raw language for love poems, developed by Montague in the earlier sequence *Tides,* most notably in the poem "The Pale Light" and in "The Huntsman's Apology", is still an issue in *The Great Cloak*, and seems to have been reinforced by the fact that by the time of writing *The Great Cloak* Montague had just finished a translation of Frénaud's poems.[7] A distinct gap between sexual ecstasy and a later state of emptiness comes to the centre of "The Hunt" before the lovers "refind" their bodies. The fluidity of the moment is anticipated by the position of the adverb "already" and the emphasis that it carries: "But already impatient dawn breaks". The poem ends with the presence of "somebody else", a third party; ironically there is "only" and "So far" someone else.

In contrast to "The Hunt", the hotel-encounter in "Do Not Disturb" ends with a reference to "the mind". The end likewise suggests a void:

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[6] John Montague, "'Elegiac Cheer': A Conversation with John Montague," interview with Earl Ingersoll and Ben Howard, *Literary Review* 31 (1987): 31. In the later essay "The Sweet Way" Montague reinforces this excitement: "[T]here was French poetry, the fluency of Eluard especially, a singing humanist, lover of liberty, lover of women". See *Irish Writers and their Creative Process*, ed. Jacqueline Genet and Wynne Hellegouarc'h (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1996) 32. In the second section of *GC* Montague's fascination with French poetry is underlined by referring to Jaccottet and Apollinaire.

[7] John Montague and Evelyn Robson, *November: A Choice of Translations from André Frénaud* (Cork: Golden Stone, 1977).

Before, disentangling,
through rain's soft swish,
the muted horns of taxis,
whirl of police or fire engine,
habitual sounds of loneliness
resume the mind again.

The poem can render only a brief moment of "strange", "habitual" intimacy: "That always strange moment / when the clothes peel away". It ends in loneliness. The heat of ecstasy ceases, the situation is as before. The "habitual" after-scene deepens isolation and separation. The encounter itself is far from a nostalgic recollection, for there is "not a blessing moon, / but a city's panelled skyline". A metaphoric parallelism can only be spelled out in brackets: the peeled-away clothes are similar to "(bark from an unknown tree)". What does remain and will be permanent is not so much urban sounds of taxis and engines, but the inner, all the more persistent "sounds of loneliness", which themselves "resume the mind". The poem leaves the reader with the paradox that it did "disturb", as it opened the door to glimpse inside. One wonders, however, what it is that is being disturbed. The scene inside is already out of balance. The phrase, the "early warning system", works subliminally on the reader giving him an "early warning" about the encounter. In the long run the speaker cannot escape the emptiness of his inner self. The dawn already breaks and warns within the sexual encounter. The solitude that accompanies couple as well as speaker is, in fact, as "habitual" as the encounters in the hotels with, as the poem starts, "A lift rising towards / or falling from, love".

The short "Snowfield" captures the poet's emotion after a hotel-room encounter:

The paleness of your flesh.

Long afterwards, I gaze happily
At my warm tracks radiating

Across that white expanse.

The flesh's paleness is reinforced by the whiteness of a "Snowfield", as well as by the bed linen implied in "that white expanse". Montague transforms the snow, the body and the linen, thereby conveying the "expanse" of sex itself. A poet "gaze[s] happily" after his hunt is over, but the allusion to snow in the title hints at the coldness that comes after the sexual heat. There is an exaggerated self-satisfaction in this "gaze" at one's own tracks.[8] In this first section Montague comes dangerously close to mere objectification; the reader may be troubled by the pleasure-seeking at the expense of women portrayed here. In "Tracks" the setting does not change, for there is

> The vast bedroom
> a hall of air,
> our linked bodies
> lying there.

Even in this first, short stanza the plain, sharp diction runs counter to the moment of shared intimacy. Throughout the poem the crisp atmosphere persists, culminating in a complete absorption of the two lovers in the external:

> *I shall miss you*
> creaks the mirror
> into which the scene
> shortly disappears:
> the vast bedroom
> a hall of air, the
> tracks of our bodies
> fading there, while
> giggling maids push
> a trolley of fresh
> linen down the corridor.

[8] Patricia Coughlan points out that the woman is represented as "a 'white expanse' over which the male lover makes 'warm tracks'". Quinn sees the woman's body portrayed as "a *tabula rasa*" in this poem. See Coughlan 98; Quinn, *SI* 36.

The poem's voice itself is "fading", taken over not only by the mirror, but also by maids that are "giggling" whilst pushing their trolleys down the corridor. Inside and outside have fleeting movements in common, with the external, the echoes in the corridor having the last word. This ironic ending sums up the moment's futility: while physical love fades, maids push trolleys outside. The poem rapidly moves towards the future,[9] towards the new sexual encounters implied in the supply of fresh linen.

Stanza 3 with its "pleasure dome" and a "fragrant" encounter does away with time boundaries. All is visualisation, imagination, fantasy, "a sky of colours / that change, explode / a fantail of stars". From the "I" in stanza two the poem moves to "we", to a landscape exploding inwardly and opening behind the lovers' eyelids. The allusion to Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* in this stanza lifts the poem out of the quotidian setting into the world of imagination and "miracle":[10]

> Behind our eyelids
> a landscape opens,
> a violet horizon
> pilgrims labour across,
> a sky of colours
> that change, explode (...).

After this explosive illumination, the shift to the plain diction in the last stanza and the intruding voice of the mirror is all the more powerful. "Tracks" must fade. Its form

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[9] Johnston stresses that "the straitened, mostly two-stress lines destabilize the normal horizontal motion of reading to a rapid downward thrust, thus emphasizing movement, process, and descent". See Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* 186.

[10] *Kubla Khan*:

> It was a miracle of rare device,
> A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!
> (...)
> That with music loud and long,
> I would build that dome in air,
> That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
> And all who heard should see them there,
> And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
> His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, ed. William Keach (London: Penguin, 1997) 251-52.

mirrors the intensity as well as the rapid ending of this love that it, in turn, puts into question.[11]

The tightening of the fist whilst kissing in the poem "Hand" leaps back to the aggressive speaker in "search" of "possession" in the second stanza of "Tracks". Ambivalent undertones are apparent in the fact that the couple sit together, but the speaker mentions the table "between / us" and that the force of the fist is accompanied by fingernails that "stroke / & stroke". In the third stanza the female lover can "rest" her "fragile fist" in the speaker's hand that had slowly opened. In its fragility, its "trembling" and allusion to a butterfly, this female fist differs from that of the speaker. Also, the comparison of her fist being like a "balanced butterfly" in his open hand oscillates between unexpected undertones of intimacy and a slightly ironic tone, for the relationship seems not entirely "balanced" here. Equally, the closely connected "Gold Leaf"[12] with its "golden dust" on the woman's skin cannot escape an oxymoronic interpretation:

> Love's pollen
> lies lightly
> on your skin;
> a golden dust.
> Let me brush
> it with my wing!

Whereas the skin, the butterfly, the golden dust and the wing give rise to connotations of love and are emblems of love, in the insisting stance ("Let me") and the brushing lies a harshness; a harshness that is taken over from the start of "Hand". The dust lies lightly on the skin only, it is loose and on the surface, as is the relationship. The rapid movement down the page and the harsh line-breaks enact the difficulty of deep feeling taking root. Though "Caught" shows a poet who is physically dependent on the female lover, she is "A slight girl and easily got rid off". "Conqueror turned plaintiff", he

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[11] For Johnston, the poem proposes "the incapacity of memory and poetry faithfully to record the process of love". See Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* 186.

[12] In *CP* "Hand" and "Gold Leaf" are one and the same poem, entitled "Gold Leaf". See *CP* 89. The poem echoes Blake's poem "The Fly". See William Blake, *The Poems of William Blake*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (London: Longman, 1971) 165-66.

cannot rid himself off her memory. The heightening of the visual, sensual and tactile picturing comes when "a meek voice" breaks into the poem: "'Are you back, my love, back to stay?'" Despite the man's physical dependence, the "meek voice" supports Quinn's observation that woman in the sequence is "always depicted as the more vulnerable partner".[13]

The end of "Closed Circuit" is calm, comparing lovers to "flowers after rain" and thereby anticipating poems that end with images of nature and evoke the warmer season in other parts of the sequence. In "Closed Circuit" the speaker is excluded from such harmony; he jealously imagines a woman's "soft body / under another's". As in "Caught" he "sees" the woman, and this physical aspect is reinforced by hearing her cries. Despite acknowledging that the moment cannot last long, the poem moves from the physical to the spiritual, as does "Talisman" with its thoughtful, positive ending; an ending reinforced by the "slowly / developing" movement of the lines. "[T]he superstructure / of the city outside" is not disturbing, haunting or absorbing;[14] these

> are elements in a slowly
> developing dream, a talisman
> of calm, to invoke against
> unease, to invoke against harm.

Montague's prefatory line "*a slight affair (...) turns serious*" is borne out here. Love in a truer sense of the word can shine through and is represented as a desired island "against harm".

The section's final poem, "Don Juan's Farewell", shows how central the evocation of an aggressive male lover is to 'Search':

> Ladies I have lain
> with in darkened rooms
> sweet shudder of flesh
> behind shadowy blinds

[13] Quinn, *SI* 38. I agree with Quinn in that woman is "only (...) granted autonomy" in "The Point" in section III.

[14] Johnston foregrounds the reflecting quality of the lake; it does not absorb as the mirror in "Tracks". See Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* 186.

long bars of light
        across tipped breasts (...).

Montague evokes Don Juan, a type of lover whose "attention is engaged absolutely but always newly by every woman whom he comes across, and his aim is, not sexual excitement or physical pleasure, but conquest – the passionate invasion of yet another point of view, so as to compel it to surrender its embodiment to his own bodily prowess".[15] It must all end with mental emptiness:

        and you slowly awake
to confront again
        the alluring lie
of searching through
        another's pliant body
for something missing
        in your separate self
while profound night
        like a black swan
goes pluming past.

The effectiveness of this poem derives from its syntactical organisation; "it enacts through its syntax – a list of pleasures transformed to a statement about pleasure-seeking – the change from purposeless flight to a purposeful search for an end to unhappiness".[16] This opening section discloses that occasional affairs can neither cure the speaker's disintegrating marriage nor his loneliness, and cannot reveal the self to the self. The fact that the speaker is pursuing fake relationships finds expression in suggestions of transience. Reflections after the encounters often stress the moment's futility and the bare reality of external noise, and underline the sound of inner solitude. Montague uses emblems traditionally associated with love, but intersperses them with the strikingly quotidian or overtly physical. "Caught" and "Talisman" open up the possibility of true affection for later sections.

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[15] Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (London: Weidenfeld, 1986) 168-69.
[16] Frazier, rev. of *GC* 152.

Section II, 'Separation', focuses on revisits to the past and the broken marriage, and shows the fragility of a love that "seemed permanent" ("Wedge"). Through placing "The Screech Owl", "after Jaccottet",[17] as the opening poem of the section, Montague effectively sets the scene. Two events are evoked simultaneously: sleeping in "safety" inside is contrasted, but also paralleled, with the activities outside. From the start, the animation of inanimate objects brings out the fact that the marriage is threatened:

> The night is a great sleeping city
> where the wind breathes. It has come
> from far to our bed's safety, this June
> midnight. You sleep, a hazel tree rustles,
> I am led towards the borders of dream.
> Comes that cry, nearing, disappearing (...).

The lovers's worlds have separated; one sleeps and the other is half-conscious. As if to reinforce the separation between the two, the phrase "a hazel tree rustles" stands between the "You" and the "I". Equally, the evoked underworld ("hell") underlines the threat to their bond; it follows in the second half of the poem and is accompanied by haunting "shades" and a "cry". The "borders of dream" anticipate that the poet will enter this sphere in due course. The immediacy of "Comes that cry" subverts the reassurance in the following lines that it is "only a bird called the screech owl, calling". That the cry is "nearing, disappearing" is hauntingly plain and yet surreal. It indirectly conveys a sense of love "disappearing". Most importantly, the poet's concern with how to address his topic, how to "say" things, comes to the fore, for he emphasises that the cry is "a gleam fleeing through woods, or shades / *some might say"* [emphasis added] and points out what he may perhaps say or, indeed might not say, as he uses brackets: "(Of this midsummer night cry, how much / I might say, and of your gaze)". Both modes, adopting the words of others and speaking one's own voice, prove to be inadequate and cannot convey love, hate or loss.

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[17] Montague here translates the French poet's "'La nuit est une grande cité endormie'". See Philippe Jaccottet, *Words in the Air: A Selection of Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, trans. by Derek Mahon (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1998) 16.

The owl's call becomes a means to reflect on, and anticipate, the termination of the marriage. The final image of the poem is connected through the word "And" to the preceding lines:

> And
> already our bodies smell of the rankness
> of the small hours, as under the warm skin
> the bone pierces, while stars fade at street ends.

The conjunction reinforces the inevitability of what "ends" – the marriage, the love, the poem and the poet's attempt to "say" something. The various sensuous pictures – the screeching owl, the rank smell, the piercing bones and the fading stars – allow the reader to grasp the fact that the "street" of a safe marriage is at its end. The spatial differentiation between the crying outside and the couple inside is deliberately fading in the poem and within language. The poem rushes towards dawn, towards the fading of stars.[18]

In "Late" the couple's disintegration is spelled out in the wife's silent reproach:

> I return late, on tiptoe.
> Moonlight pours over the bed
> and your still, sleeping head
> reproving silently
> my stealthy prowler's tread.

The speaker's guilt is implied in his "prowler's tread", his tiptoeing and the "stealthy" step. The shortness of the poem and its precision, enhanced by the nagging rhyme of "bed", "head" and "tread", make the separation apparent, widening the gap between past familiarity and present artificiality. Similarly, "Darkness" depicts a wife who seeks affection, lying "curled" "Against" the speaker's knees, but who can only "speak sadly" of the dreams she has to

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[18] Montague's translation is closer to the original in wording and word-order than that of Derek Mahon. Mahon translates: "bone pierces the living skin / while stars fade at the end of the street". See Jaccottet 17.

endure, left alone
at the mercy
of the powers
of night, when
darkness holds
all the land.

The image of the darkness gripping "all the land" uses the idea of "hold[ing]" to show that the only thing that "holds" here is darkness; a lover's holding hand can only be hoped for, as the woman's "seeking" of warmth implies. The woman longs for a connection, but the end scene with its negative holding overshadows "all" else and makes her lying "Against" the knees retrospectively convey the conflict. The personification of darkness, like the active bird in "The Screech Owl", underlines the ebbing away of affection. The "powers / of night" have the last word; they are stronger than the bond that holds the couple together. Montague manages to convey in the echoing final line a deep sadness; the poem illustrates what Augustine Martin notes when referring to this section, namely that it contains poems that are "remarkable for their handling of the primary emotions" such as loneliness, grief, tenderness and rage.[19]

Central to the section 'Separation' is the four-part poem "Tearing" (comprised of the title-poem, "*Pastorelle*", "*Never*", "*Refrain*"). It focuses on how love can be recorded poetically, taking up from "The Screech Owl". In the title-poem, the poet tries to "sing" "pain":

I sing your pain
as best I can
  seek
like a gentle man
  to assume
the proffered blame.

But the pose breaks.

[19] Martin, "John Montague" 43.

The sour facts remain.
  It takes
two to make or break
  A marriage.
Unhood the falcon!

The poem contrives its own disintegration, building a new structure out of the breaking of a "pose". The poet is neither "a gentle man", nor a gentleman, nor can he sing gently. The plosive diction, together with the monosyllabic words, reinforce the breaking of the marriage. "Tearing" brings out the fact that he is torn apart emotionally, that he is separated from his wife and that the attempt to sympathise with her "pain" is bound to fail. Though he tries to take on her voice, "the pose breaks". As briefly mentioned in chapter 1, this poem brings out that poetry's "pose" cannot always suffice. The pain is too deep; the "facts" remain and are too personal to be expressed in language and in public. Again, in the fourth part of this poem, entitled "*Refrain*", a "chivalric mode" cannot soften the pain when something is ending. In "*Pastorelle*", a French landscape is conjured up that is reminiscent of that in *A Chosen Light*, but the couple moves rapidly towards autumn, implied in "chestnut" and "rusty apples". The poem desperately attempts to hold on nostalgically to its spring imagery, but hawks and furious moles undermine any idea of harmony, and the protagonists realise

  how slowly we had come
to where we wished each other
happiness, far and apart, as
a hawk circled the wood,
& a victim cried, the sound
of hooves rising & falling
upon bramble & fern, while
a thin growth of rain gather-
ed about us, like a cowl.

A cry signals distress, the two are "far and apart". However, the final image simultaneously conveys sadness and growth. The cowl brings calmness and

paradoxically intimacy and protection. It constitutes a first allusion to the sequence's title-image, the cloak. At least the rain is a shared experience and brings the poem to utter an "us". The poem "*Never*" destroys any hope conjured up before. A woman speaks for the first time in the sequence; she does not sing her pain, but "thrash[es] out" her words. The poem "*Refrain*" leaps back to a hotel-setting, but the libertinism of the section 'Search' gives way to a painful re-visitation of the past with his wife, a recollection of their honeymoon. The speaker is "shouldering all the blame", but he is only able to declare "'we shall never be / what we were, again.' / Old love's refrain". These final words concede that, for all the "pain" experienced, "we" can only regret "Old love's refrain".

"In the Dark" obliquely refers back to 'Search', too, for we find the other, with a "claw", "frantic" and clamping. But the cause is one of despair of trying to hold on to the partner. The storm outside is taken into this encounter in a car. The hope for a kiss "in friendliness" is overshadowed by "this salt / smart of anger and despair".[20] Lips become bruised, we hear an angry voice and are left with "a worn car tyre // smouldering, a stench / of burning rubber". This stench of disturbance is taken up by the hallucinatory "She Walks Alone" where Montague shifts the focus to the woman. From the start, the whiteness of the city Evora, the moon, the reference to the goddess Diana and the woman's praying all conjure up a picture of a portentous world. Montague's poem evokes the woman in a nightwalk-tale; a tale that ends in a puzzling scene underlining the separation. What is told is a story in itself, an enfolding of encounters. Dog and cat accompany and follow the woman; a man rises from Dantean shades frightening her, though he then strangely becomes the one to kiss her. On the one hand, the animals that connect with her and the man's attempt to replace a lover find a positive response. On the other hand, these elements, the man in particular, serve to bring out the depth of her pain:

> He looked so young, my heart went out to him.
> I stopped in the shadows under the Cathedral.
> We kissed, and the tears poured down my face.

[20] In Lawrence's "She Looks Back" from *Look! We Have Come Through!* we read, in a different context: "I have seen it, felt it in my mouth, my throat, my chest, my belly, / Burning of powerful salt, burning, eating through my defenceless nakedness". See Lawrence 207.

The ambivalence of "my heart went out to him" suggests this pain. She needs a bond and receives that here, but only to burn with despair, being "scalded", as Montague puts it in a later version of the poem, even more.[21] Montague's figures are lonely, even desperate as they search for love. The poem's lines reveal a concern with loneliness that goes beyond the particulars of a marriage.

That togetherness can be a prison is conveyed by the prose poem "She Daydreams, by the Blue Pool", with its image of two fish imprisoned in a glass bowl. The female speaker spells out her partner's wish that she were someone else and her thoughts terminate with the self-image of a crumbling tower at the water's edge. This image contrasts with the image of "a dreaming child" that she imagines her partner to be. The aspect of jealousy refers us back to the poem "Closed Circuit" where the male speaker imagined the lover with "another". The overabundance of the conjunction "and", mirroring the attempt to connect, cannot cover the fact that the poem must end with the more appropriate conjunction, "But" ("But I have lost both faith and hope"). "Separation" lets the two finally float into different directions with "the golden / marriage hook / tearing its throat".

The short poem "L'Adieu" leaves gaps, deliberately leaving a prolonged space before the repeated "remember":

> I gathered this sprig of heather
> The autumn is dead remember
> We shall never again see each other
> Smell of time odour of heather
> I wait for you remember
>
> after Apollinaire

Montague has altered Apollinaire's poem with this layout device that foregrounds both emptiness and the desperate attempt of its anonymous speaker (presumably the woman) to make the addressee "remember".[22]

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[21] In *CP* Montague's line runs: "We kissed, and the tears scalded my face". See *CP* 101.

[22] Apollinaire's lines run: "J'ai cueilli ce brin de bruyère / L'automne est morte souviens-t'en / Nous ne nous verrons plus sur terre / Odeur du temps brin de bruyère / Et souviens-toi que je t'attends". See Guillaume Apollinaire, *Oeuvres poétiques*, ed. Marcel Adéma and Michel Décaudin ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1956) 85.

The next two poems switch to the perspective of the male persona. "No Music" tackles the question of whether it is "harder to leave" or to be left, and reveals in self-conscious lines a poet who understands and admits that "To tear up old love by the roots, / To trample on past affections: / There is no music for so harsh a song". Rather than singing, the poet has to recognise his failure, the harm done. Despite the occasional rhyme, the poem "tramples" on melody; the fact that it cannot find a music offers an aesthetic mirroring of the severity of the marriage-crisis. The stalking-off of the male persona in "The Wanderer's Song" brings the couple's spatial separation within the plot. The speaker tries to imagine his former wife in her grief and his perceptions range from "hearing / The lean gulls cry" to feeling the warm sun on his shoulders, and to the sinking of feet into the rough grass. He wanders on the edge ("Along the cliffs"), not knowing where he is bound, but realises in his very walk: "To be alone again, strange happiness!". Although he found rest outside, the speaker feels unsettled in "The Blue Room":

> Tired, turning, restless
> the insomniac feels the pulse
> that feeds his body
>
> pity for his past,
> fear of the future (...).

He cannot run away from himself. He is imprisoned by his body, by memory, by the night and by fear. The haunting bird again "starts its habitual // terrible, day-beginning cry". Likewise, the female speaker in "She Dreams" has a nightmarish vision of eggs opening after she has gathered them into her apron, the eggs being for the speaker "The embryos of our unborn children".[23] Her re-visitation of the old house is a surreal search; the shape of the house has fallen, and what remains of the love is a mere "skeleton". As in her earlier daydream, she ends her speech with an image of

[23] The poem conjures up Frénaud: in the French word "Habituée" and in its surreal imagery of bursting eggs. In Frénaud's "Le miroir de l'homme par les bêtes", itself a homage to Hieronymus Bosch, "Tous les oeufs se fendaient pour qu'en sorte / un museau qui se dandinait en avançant, qui mordait" ["All eggs burst open, that a muzzle could come out / which then swayed forth, which was biting"]. See André Frénaud, *La Sainte Face* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1968) 205.

dilapidation. Montague thus parallels her with the male persona of a "blind cripple" in the poem "No Music". The safe tower of marriage is broken and Montague illustrates this fact by connecting images of emotional crumbling with both woman and poet. By switching perspectives and letting several images radiate around both of them, Montague manages to preserve an element of dignity. In "Lament" the male persona undergoes a further attempt to sympathise with his partner, and understand her crying for her companion, "a more than human // Grief". He tells himself to "learn to give" and the reader senses his unease, regret, pain and guilt in these lines; lines that stand in sharp contrast with the carpe-diem poet of the section 'Search'.

"Herbert Street Revisited", dedicated to Madeline – presumably the old partner –, brings the unsettling, nocturnal second section to a close.[24] A tender recollection of the past, it is a gathering of several images the sequence has conjured up so far: including a cat ("She Walks Alone", "Wedge"), a fish ("She Daydreams, by the Blue Pool", "Separation"), a tree, a leaf, a dream, hobbyhorses ("The Blue Room"), and the "rising and falling" of hooves ("*Pastorelle*"). "Herbert Street Revisited" shows a poet who has learned to sing about this broken marriage in an appropriate manner, including and extending attempts he has made before. Or, to stay within the central and final image of the poem: there is a "rising and falling", but Montague adds a "lifting", as will be explained in due course.

At its start the present tense lifts his memory into the moment of speaking:

> A light is burning late
> in this Georgian Dublin street:
> someone is leading our old lives!
>
> And our black cat scampers again
> through the wet grass of the convent garden
> upon his masculine errands.

Through the reference to the cat, followed by the "roaring [of] 'John'", the mentioning of the name "Behan", and further references to the monkey, the donkey and the nurse

[24] Quinn characterises these poems as "nocturnes". See Quinn, *SI* 37.

Montague foregrounds personal elements and familiar emblems of the past. Tense and details underline the vivacity of memory. Moreover, the exclamation mark in the first stanza underscores the emotional immediacy and attachment which will dominate the poem. At the same time, Montague indicates that the present reality is different ("someone is leading our old lives!"). The poem holds on to the present tense for three stanzas, before moving into the past form and a further distancing in stanza 6 where the poet sums up and acknowledges the inevitability of history:

> Animals, neighbours, treading the pattern
> of one time and place into history,
> like our early marriage, while
>
> tall windows looked down upon us
> from walls flushed light pink or salmon
> watching and enduring succession.

This part ends and starts with dominant visual elements, an artificial "light" opens the poem, and the end-image burns itself into the speaker's mind. The image of "windows [that] looked down upon us" cannot escape a slightly frightening connotation in its anthropomorphism, reinforcing the indifference of the external toward personal turmoil.

In part two the poem moves to the past relationship, with the woman's request that the poet should not betray "our truth", begging him to let the past affection stand as it is. The poet, in turn, allows himself to wander in an imaginative world when summoning up the shared past. Halting, alone, he sings of old happiness. The poet is a ghost dancer. He borders on dream and trance, as the last part reveals. It is here, finally, that the poetic process of transformation enables the poet to reverse time:

> So put the leaves back on the tree,
> put the tree back in the ground,
> let Brendan trundle his corpse down
> the street singing, like Molly Malone.

Despite the fact that the poem evokes reversals and is haunted by images of death as "Wedge" (a black cat falling into the dustbin, for instance, recalls the cat that dozed towards death in "Wedge"), "Herbert Street Revisited" differs from this former poem. Its reversal is more active, with its emphatic "put". Moreover, the poet does not end with dark images as in "Wedge", for he moves into the "slow motion of a dream":

> And let the pony and the donkey come –
> look, someone has left the gate open –
> like hobbyhorses linked in
> the slow motion of a dream
>
> parading side by side, down
> the length of Herbert Street,
> rising and falling, lifting
> their hooves through the moonlight.

In this poem the word "let" does not have the harsh, self-imposing quality as the one in "Gold Leaf" ("Let me brush / it with my wing!"). Instead, it subtly gives rise to the poem's final lines. The colloquial "look, someone has left the gate open" creates an intimacy, a shared moment and is a voice in a shared dream, a dream in which the poem actually ends. Despite the ceasing of love and life in Dublin, and the "death" of the marriage, it is possible to preserve the memory of it and come close to resurrecting, in imagination, those past moments. The picture of two creatures "parading" together, their hooves "rising and falling" is surreal and cannot be reality (anymore), but in its context, in the poem and in the imagination it is valid and vivid.[25] The pony and donkey, though far removed from the quotidian reality of part I of the poem, are now moving actively. A third realm is found, the gate pushed open to make the poem itself the space for a revisitation.[26]

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[25] For Johnston the final stanzas are "deliberately evanescent, as if to remind as that *this* is poetry and *that* is the irrecoverable past. Paradoxically, such (...) acknowledgements of the poem's failure to recapture love's territory and time, poised against the poem's effort to depict that love, vector the poem someway toward recollection". See Johnston, "Eiros in Eire," *SI* 52.

[26] Michael O'Neill notes the change from "the half-fear" implied in Montague's line "someone is leading our old lives" (part I) to his line "look, someone has left the gate open", which so O'Neill, "suggests the

Montague ensures that the doublings of the poem and of the section (past-present, voice of poet-voice of woman, pony-donkey, life-death, dream-reality, up-down, rising-falling) constructively oscillate and might even be transcended altogether. To the frequently employed dualism of rising and falling (see "Do Not Disturb", "*Pastourelle*", "The Blue Room") is added a "lifting" in the same line; and this elusive "lifting" has the last word; it is in fact the last verb in the poem and in the section. Moreover, hobbyhorses, "grinning" in the nightmare of "The Blue Room" before, are now parading side by side. In the very last word, the "moonlight" crystallises poem and section. Haunting previous moons are given additional light. And, in turn, the artificial light of the first part of the poem is replaced by moonlight. Furthermore, moonlight constitutes the bridge between the second and third section of the sequence; we move to light and Montague *lifts* the sequence upward to light.

By starting the final section of the sequence with the epigraph "the hearth is a good anchor", the poet anticipates a positive ending and homecoming. He will transcend sorrow and "the unhappy madness of his life", as Frazier puts it.[27] Meeting and connection replace isolation and separation. There is an allusion to Ceres with her "Fulfilled", "abundant" attributes ("A Dream of July") and the autumnal mode of 'Separation' is replaced:

> The son of the King of the Moy
> met a girl in green woods on mid-summer's day:
> she gave him black fruit from thorns
> & the full of his arms
> of strawberries, where they lay.[28]

Montague gives associations to fertility and the summer season. The lines from "Back" push the plot further along, as it becomes explicit that the speaker is with a new love. The female partner "knew you had / come back" more or less obliquely echoing the

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unlocking made possible by the third section". "John Montague and Derek Mahon: The American Dimension," *Symbiosis* 3.1 (1999): 58.

[27] Frazier points out *GC*'s "transcendence of sorrow", a characteristic he sees as untypical of a "confessional" poet, while Quinn and Barrow use the word "confessional" to characterise *GC*. See Frazier, rev. of *GC* 148; Quinn, *SI* 37; Craig Wallace Barrow, rev. of *GC*, by John Montague, *Eire-Ireland* 14.2 (1979): 143.

[28] Montague here includes a poem from the Irish, 9th century.

lines from "Caught" of the first section: "'Are you back, my love, back to stay?'". The sequence finally gives an answer to the question – it is answered by someone else, in a different time and place and section. Before walking through life with his new companion, however, the poet takes time to strengthen his inner peace in "Allegiance":

> Slowly, in moonlight
> I drop to one knee,
> solemn as a knight
> obeying an ancient precept,
> natural as cattle
> stooping in river mist.

Inner and outer merge in harmony through parallelisms ("as a knight", "as cattle"). The imaginative landscape is reminiscent of, yet more calming than, Jaccottet's twilights. A projection of calmness on to the external is anticipated by the first lines when "Beyond the village / herds browse peacefully". The outer sphere seems to have a pattern or can be given a pattern, whereas outside "enclosures", pattern could normally "only be hoped for", as Weatherhead observes.[29] In section III the movement of the self into the open takes place without ending in turmoil. "[O]beying" now, he takes on the gesture of kneeling "solemn[ly]", no longer conquering as in section I.

In their "Walking Late" together, the two new lovers can preserve an idyll without suppressing the increasing presence of the habitual and the urban, embodied in the city that "will surge towards activity *again*" [emphasis added]. Montague foregrounds unity, wholeness and togetherness in his conjuring up of "our path" and the use of pronoun "we". Lovers "share a life", and can have moments of extraordinary perception, sharing "night sounds" and wading in and through imagination, "through the filaments / of a giant silver web / the brain crevices of a cloud". Again, they go to "a home" "uncertainly" and "must return" from their unearthly estate, presently and in the future, but their hands meet and one protects the other. The speaker closes by depicting "your / small, damp hand in mine, / no heavier than a leaf".[30] The poem is

[29] See Weatherhead 99.

[30] Montague has revised these last lines. In *CP* it is a "smaller" hand and the final line is omitted. In *LP* Montague replaces the final line with "trustful, still afraid". The speaker ends with the attempt to feel what she is feeling. See *CP* 117; *LP* 133.

thoughtful, but hopeful. Whereas before a raindrop bent the leaf, made it heavy, the hand itself is now light, delicate in its smallness. Love is fragile and life's shortness is given its full due by Montague, but the poetic process which focuses on a walk outside society's restrictions insists that these journeys together can magnify moments and amplify time. "Walking late", it starts, "we share night sounds / so delicate the heart misses / a beat to hear them". This is a glimpse of eternity, a moment in which the linearity of time is momentarily abandoned. That they "circle" home in the final lines reinforces that they have found true love: "Love" which Octavio Paz sees as enabling us to "steal from the time that kills us a few hours" which we may "turn (...) into paradise" and a state in which "time expands and ceases to be a measure".[31] Or, as Montague puts it self-explanatorily in the poem that immediately follows, "Signs":

> I have grown accustomed to signs & marvels,
> A tree that leaned & spoke, a timely moon,
> A star wandering where no star had been,
> A six pointed star, the sign of union.
> We share intuitions like a religion.

Montague's poem tries to capture love's estate. If they "share[d]" night sounds before, now they "share intuitions". Their sharing culminates when they "share (...) / a glimpse of richness" in the following poem. Montague revives the star-imagery. The troubling, fading sign of the second section of the sequence now becomes "the sign of union". Here he refers back, reminds us that nothing is final or fixed, the star can die and be born, or as he states elsewhere, "Everything dies into birth" ("Undertow" (*T* 63)).

The "Song" gives the shortness of life and bonding its due, when it begins with the invitation "Let me share with you / a glimpse of richness". If observing two swans triggers the longing to find "a place to lay our heads", the poem depicts a poet who could free himself from past grief:

> By the curl and gleam
> of water, my sadness

[31] Octavio Paz, *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism*, trans. Helen Lane (San Diego: Harvest, 1995) 160.

was washed away:
the air was bright
and clear as your forehead,
the linked swans
reached the wood:
my love, come here to stay.

The language foregrounds cleansing, embodied in the term "washed away", "clear" and "bright". The moment he conjures up the other, we move to the harmonious picture of "linked swans". The poem "reached" its climax, and final direct address "*my love*". The speaker finds a spatial as well as spiritual home.

Rather than spelling out the new love, "Working Dream" conceals it:

To end with a space between a lean I
And a warm and open-armed You.

An hour later, you were at the door;
I learnt the world that space was for.

Language does not have the capacity to circumscribe the love; the poet prefers to let spaces speak and speak for themselves. In doing so, rather than giving precise details as in section I, the love becomes heightened – a quality tangible in the early love poems "All Legendary Obstacles" and "Irish Street Scene, with Lovers". Additionally, as in "Signs" where he has "grown" towards love, he stresses an educational dimension ("I learnt"). This is a mutual relationship, she makes him learn and see. It becomes apparent that the speaker broods about poetry itself and the part assigned to the reader: learning what the space is for, going beyond the lines. "Blessing", which is given a privileged position as the opening poem of *The Love Poems*, emphasises the magic of love; a "light" led them to their resting place, led them in, because and despite their loneliness.

The emotional upheaval caused by the woman's father who stirs from the past can be overcome and transformed: "After a Quarrel" they make love as if "this small house were / a paradigm of the universe". A lover can hold one up, "Safe and sound, /

Above the void, / On the tree-top", despite shadows of the past ("When the Wind Blows"). In contrast to "Darkness", the woman is genuinely soothed. She sings and does not lie "curled / like an animal" and the holding hand of the poet replaces that of the darkness that had taken possession of his old relationship. Even the fish imagery from section II ("Separation", "She Daydreams by the Blue Pool") takes on a positive force, thereby anticipating the finding of a harbour in the last poems:

> In Lough Lene
> a queen went swimming;
> a redgold salmon
> flowed into her
> at full of evening. ("Sunset")[32]

Evelyn, the new partner, is mentioned directly in "Waiting". In her pregnancy and connotations she is diametrically opposed to Madeline who cannot be freed from nightmarish, shadowy realms, a weeping voice, an empty, fruitless body and references to the moon. Evelyn, by contrast, is admired for her sunny maternity and abundance. She is "A curved figure, sleek as a mermaid, / Or bowsprit Venus, of smooth wood, / Courting the sun and not the shade". The mythic description of Evelyn lifts the poem out of the personal. Her courting the sun refers back to "Ceres" in "A Dream of July". This reference intensifies the golden atmosphere that surrounds her, an atmosphere enhanced by references to "honey", "butterfly", "gold" and "river gold". Moreover, Lawrence's "Gloire de Dijon", with its imagery of gold, echoes in the background:

> When she rises in the morning
> I linger to watch her;
> She spreads the bath-cloth underneath the window
> And the sunbeams catch her
> Glistening white on the shoulders,
> While down her sides the mellow
> Golden shadow glows (...).[33]

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[32] Translated from Féliré Aengus.
[33] Lawrence 217.

The birth of the child follows and a tribute to this "young moon, / frail, luminous" in "Lunula". The symbol of the cloak in the title poem is first a sensuous image as it swathes a woman's body; secondly, it encompass the lover; and thirdly it covers mother and child. The stress is now on the maternal, the warmth of a home. The cats and dogs of previous sections are now "the wholesome / litter of love" ("Content"), a "trail" behind Evelyn, whose child is addressed:

> Now you hide beneath
> everything I write;
> love's invisible ink,
> heart's watermark. ("Child")

The poet veils the private. The more love develops, the less he confronts its mysteriousness in language. He does so, because the child brought forth by love is behind "everything".

"The Point" takes up the imagery of veiling, but has a surprising tone of loneliness:

> Rocks jagged in morning mist.
> At intervals, the foghorn sounds
> From the white lighthouse rock
> Lonely as a cow mourning her calf,
> Groaning, belly deep, desperate.

The calf's flailing "briefly on the straw, / A wide-eyed mother straddling it" and its being born with a "broken neck" bring Madeline's experiences from "She Dreams" back to the reader's consciousness. The turning point, however, comes with the self-conscious line: "Listen carefully. This is different. / It sounds to guide, not lament". The speaker engages in a dialogue with her, as much as addressing himself or the reader. The reader must listen carefully, notice the shift and read and re-read the sequence. Rather than mere confession or fixed statement the sequence succeeds in making us aware that experience of whatever sort – reading, poetry, love – is process.

Laments for past and self are replaced and poetically paralleled with the foghorn's double qualities. If the light fails, there is still a sound and "Ships hesitating down the strait / Hear its harsh voice as friendliness". The poet turns the symbol on itself, converting harshness into friendliness:

> Our two lives have separated now
> But I would send my voice to yours
> Cutting through the shrouding mist
> Like some friendly signal in distress.

The ship that enters the lines of the poem is indicative of a new life. "The poet and the world are reborn", as Brian John phrases it.[34] A reversal of unhappiness cannot only be an episode in a dream as in "Herbert Street Revisited". Unveiling constitutes a substantial possibility: "The opposite shore unveils itself, / Bright in detail as a painting, / Alone, but equal to the morning". The lines suggest separation, but also consolation. In this picture of seeing the shore "Bright in detail" the speaker freezes his past and sees it clearly. The poem hints, through referring to the morning, at the awakening future of the new lovers.

Bolstered by this achieved equilibrium and having put the past relationship to rest, the final poem "Edge" centres on the new home and the new relationship. There is "clarity" as far as wife, home and love are concerned. The poem culminates in an "Edenlike" garden where even the Atlantic tides are caressing and the rocks are rose-coloured. The couple ends up blessed in their shelter. The poet parallels Evelyn with the flowering garden, and the Edenic quality of the home brings the mythic associations to a close. The symbols of distress in preceding sections are replaced by the clarity of a lighthouse, the sheltering arms of the harbour. Compared to the ghostly lifting of hooves in "Herbert Street Revisited", the "lifting" is now a more physical possibility. The home is

> where the vast
> tides of the Atlantic

[34] John, "'A Slow Exactness'" 56.

lift to caress
rose coloured rocks.

So fate relents.
Hushed and calm,
safe and secret,
on the edge is best.

Nightmarish lakes and rivers are replaced by the bright of day near the open sea. It is a place on the edge, and the poet knows that it is a withdrawal as much as a solution. The new love portrayed constitutes a retreat to other shores, leaving a bustling city behind and acknowledging that the Atlantic setting is itself a fragile idyll.[35] "[L]iving at the sea's edge, the poet is aware also of the tidal ebb and flow affecting all temporal things, including love".[36] In the realisation of this fact, in journeying from 'Search' through 'Separation' to 'Anchor', lies the more universal nature of the sequence. It unfolds through a careful plotting, through shifts in voice and perspective, and through its radiating motifs.

In his moving towards love the poet-speaker experiences the decline of a marriage and focuses on a new one, realising in this process the fragility, temporality and mystery of self and marital bonding. The end of the sequence is hopeful. Most importantly, his search for love is likewise a search for an adequate poetic language, an adequate form. The sequence is a form that serves as a "cloak" round positive and negative experience; a cloak that gives safety as well as secrecy, that veils and unveils and under which he can gather his store of emotions.

[35] Weatherhead argues similarly when discussing the end of the sequence: "And yet the poem offers no sense of permanent security: the two people are there out of good luck, and fate relenting, and at last only on the edge". See Weatherhead 113.
[36] John, "'A Slow Exactness'" 56.

II

Mary O'Donnell argues that the publication of *The Love Poems,* which mostly collects Montague's earlier love poems, "does a disservice to the writer whose work is, in general, a wonder to read (...)".[37] She points out that the volume removes the poems from their context in sequences (she refers to *The Rough Field, The Dead Kingdom*), and that Montague is "repeating and repeating (...) tales of conquest, quarrels, reconciliations".[38] The objectification of women to which Montague is often prone, she argues, is too much at the forefront of the volume. The woman is, indeed, hardly an agent in the collection. If she is a speaking subject, as attempted by Montague through the final section, 'She Speaks', her voice is not strong enough to counterbalance other sections. To some extent it is also true that, by having been taken out of their context, several poems lose in scope.

It has to be noted, however, that the section 'Tracks' for the most part includes the poems we find in the first section of *The Great Cloak* and thus their former context is mostly preserved. Also, some poems in the collection *The Love Poems* are not re-contextualised for the first time; "The Wild Dog Rose" occurred in *Tides* even before it was moved into *The Rough Field.* Poems such as "A Dream of July" and "Tracks" can be found in *Tides*, *The Great Cloak* and *The Love Poems.* Underlining the importance of the ordering and re-working of his poems in an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, Montague has referred to Hugh Kenner's essay on Yeats in which Kenner proposes that "instead of looking for an explication of a particular poem (...), look at the poem on the next page".[39] Re-contextualising a poem means a shift in its explication. One of the possibilities *The Love Poems* offers is to recapture this shift; a shift that can be shown with respect to Montague's poems "A Dream of July" and "Tracks", both of which have undergone a voyage from *Tides* and *The Great Cloak* to *The Love Poems.*

In *Tides*, "A Dream of July" (*T* 36) is couched between "A Meeting" and "The Same Gesture". First, Montague therefore moves from the ninth-century Irish poem

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[37] See Mary O'Donnell, "Montague's Love Poetry," rev. of *LP*, by John Montague, *Poetry Ireland Review* 37 (1992): 56.

[38] Ibid. 55. For a more positive reception, see Richard Bizot, rev. of *LP*, by John Montague, *Eire-Ireland* 28.2 (1993): 145-50; David Barber, "Body and Soul," rev. of *About Love: Poems*, by John Montague, *Poetry* 164.3 (1994): 157-61; Stephen Dobyns, "Love and Other Tricky Subjects," rev. of *About Love: Poems*, by John Montague, *New York Times Review of Books* 21 Aug. 1994: 22-23.

[39] Montague, interview with O'Driscoll, *SI* 66.

with its "black fruit" and offering of "strawberries", over to allusions to Ceres whose "mythic burden" ("A Dream of July") is comprised of being goddess of agriculture, grain, and the love a mother bears for her child. The goddess Ceres herself is traditionally portrayed with a basket of flowers or fruits. A female figure, surrounded by fruit, abundance and the summer, connects "A Meeting" and "A Dream of July". Montague then moves to the quotidian poem "The Same Gesture" with its "secret room / of golden light" that must end in "late traffic". The golden colour, bodily images and the secrecy echo the preceding "A Dream of July". Offering, "exchange" and "rite" are aesthetically transformed in different ways in the three poems. We end with the image of changing gears ("The Same Gesture"), obliquely referring us back to love's exchanges, whilst at the same time softening the mythic quality of a "A Dream of July".

In contrast, in *The Great Cloak* "A Dream of July", again preceded by "A Meeting", is followed by "Back": a poem that remains with the moon imagery and mythic allusion. Montague reveals "The friendly moon / that overlooks / our twinned destinies". The female figure that is depicted in an exchange with the moon in "A Dream of July" has a partner from now on, as "Back" makes what the poet imagines in this previous dream become a possibility. Montague conveys new, "twinned destinies". The moon recedes into the background, approvingly guarding the scene.[40]

In *The Love Poems* "A Dream of July" stands in the section 'Allegiances', between the poems "Lee Song", formerly entitled "Song", and "Allegiances". "Lee Song" ends with *"my love, come here to stay"* and the reader is likely to link the addressee to the Ceres-figure of "A Dream of July". We move from this personal remark in "Lee Song" to the impersonal in "A Dream of July". "A Dream of July" is linked with the poem "Allegiances" by a misty setting, the allusion to past chivalric modes ("solemn as a knight") and a figure that moves in a mythical landscape. Nature and the people within it are brought together. They merge in the process of reading. This aspect is reinforced by the lack of a stanza break after the first three lines in this

[40] Whereas the move to the purely quotidian is abandoned here, it is re-employed in the version of *GC* as it occurs in *CP*. Hence, Montague takes up the old cluster of poems from *Tides*, and stresses their connection and their common theme of exchange. Through adding "The Same Gesture" he emphasises Evelyn's and the relationship's domestic and down-to-earth quality and arrives at it even earlier than in the original version of *GC*. Similarly, through including "Love, A Greeting" Montague moves less abruptly from the first to the second section.

version of "A Dream of July". Through placing "A Dream of July" between "Lee Song" and "Allegiances", Montague foregrounds a harmony with the external and the mythic quality of "A Dream of July".

With the poem "Tracks" context and versions are intertwined. For convenience the poem is given in its longest version:

I
The vast bedroom
a hall of air,
our linked bodies
lying there.
II
As I turn to kiss
your long, black
hair, small breasts,
heat flares from
your fragrant skin,
your eyes widen as
deeper, more certain
and often, I enter
to search possession
of where your being
hides in flesh.
III
Behind our eylids
a landscape opens,
a violet horizon
pilgrims labour across,
a sky of colours
that change, explode
a fantial of stars
the mental lightning
of sex illuminating

the walls of the skull;
a floating pleasure dome.
IV
I shall miss you
creaks the mirror
into which the scene
shortly disappears:
the vast bedroom
a hall of air, the
tracks of our bodies
fading there, while
giggling maids push
a trolley of fresh
linen down the corridor.
("Tracks" in *The Great Cloak;* henceforth "Tracks, *GC*")

The version in *Tides* (henceforth "Tracks, *Tides*") lacks the second stanza. In "Tracks, *Tides*" (*T* 43) the poet does not describe the woman and does not explicitly "search possession" of her. In the poem "Life Class" that precedes "Tracks, *Tides*", the poet draws a female figure in detail, "a system / of checks & balances". Stanza two of "Tracks, *GC*" would in this context overemphasise this aspect. Instead, the allusive stanza three becomes the centre of the poem and one moves naturally on and into the "floating pleasure dome" of sexual delight. This stanza becomes opposed to the quotidian stanzas that surround it. Montague conveys this fact by "a sky of colours" and an imaginative landscape which opens upwards ("sky", "stars") and inwards ("walls of the skull"). The omission of stanza two also brings a greater consistency of voice. The speaker conjures up the experience with the lover using the pronoun "our" throughout, even when he/she (and in this version it can be both) clearly describes the "mental lightening / of sex" from his/her point of view. Most importantly however, the *"I shall miss you"* comes across more poignantly. The creaking comes from the outside as much as being rooted in the speaker's self, stopping and rationalising the "shared" experience. The poem "Earthbound" follows after "Tracks, *Tides*", replacing the movement of horizontal expansion and constriction by a vertical movement: "a

male" "creaks down to a / stricken surface". The poem pulls us down to the earth after the "lightning". In *The Great Cloak*, as shown in part I of the present chapter "Tracks, *GC*", continues the stress on brief hotel-encounters of "Do Not Disturb" and "Snowfield".[41]

The collection *The Love Poems* exhibits two versions of "Tracks": the long version from above, "Tracks, *GC*" and a shorter version in which Montague omits stanza three. For convenience this new version will be called "Tracks, *LP*".[42] "Tracks, *LP*" connects stanza two and stanza three via a colon:

> I enter
> to search possession
> of where your being
> is hidden in flesh:
>
> I shall miss you
> creaks the mirror (...). ("Tracks, *LP*")

"Tracks, *LP*" stands in the section entitled 'Rooms' in *The Love Poems*. The poem is surrounded by "Cave" and "The Screech Owl". Love, as these three poems reveal, is never far from disturbance. "Cave" describes the violence outside a hotel-room in Northern Ireland, ending with a couple "seeking refuge as the / cave of night blooms / with fresh explosions". "Tracks, *LP*" shows the shortness of the "refuge". It flows rapidly into the last stanza with its creaking mirror. The emphasis on sound will be taken up and reinforced by the following poem "The Screech Owl".

In contrast, in "Tracks, *GC*" and its context in the section 'Tracks' in *The Love Poems*, Montague foregrounds the visual: "Tracks, *GC*" stands between "Snowfield" and "The Huntsman's Apology". The white expanse of "Snowfield" is taken into "Tracks, *GC*". The eroticism of the latter is reinforced by an equally brutal killing in the following "The Huntsman's Apology" with a male persona "settling down to his favourite meal of dying flesh".

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[41] Through omitting "Snowfield" in *CP*, Montague does not take up "Snowfield"'s "tracks".
[42] Montague entitles the version "Tracks, *GC*" with "Tracks, II", and "Tracks, *LP*" with Tracks, I".

Additionally, in *The Love Poems* the reader's response to the poem "Tracks, *GC*" is influenced by the drawing that introduces the section. Indeed, the collection as a whole has a special edge to it through Claire Weissman Wilks' illustrations that open each of the eight sections. They are an integral part of *The Love Poems*. For Montague, prints, paintings or drawings on the cover to his books or accompanying a poem open up a dialogue with the poetry and this tends to "add another dimension to the book", as he puts it with regards to John Derricke's woodcut to *Patriotic Suite*.[43] In his short essay "The Poet and the Artist" he illustrates his concern for the process and possibilities at work between artist and poet, between visual and textual representation, and calls for some "correspondence" between the book and the artist.[44] Montague sees the interest in painting as "natural to [his] French contemporaries", whereas it "seems unexpected in Ireland"; his own interest, he claims, is not shared by fellow Irish poets.[45] He also gives clues as to the relationship with some artists he worked with himself.[46] Montague describes how he moved from the procedure of *Forms of Exile*, where he picked an existing image for the cover, a figure that is "little more than a pleasant adjunct", to taking "(literally) [his] heart in [his] hands and ask[ing] Barrie Cooke for a line drawing" for *All Legendary Obstacles*. Working together with Louis le Brocquy for *A Chosen Light* meant having the artist give his own response.[47] This is a feature that is taken over and dominates the collaboration with Weissman Wilks for *The Love Poems*. Weissman Wilks has known Montague's poems and the poems for each section have been chosen in a dialogue between her and the poet.

The picture accompanying the section in which one can find "Tracks, *GC*", depicts a couple, naked, bare, entangled, with the female figure sitting on the male's knee. The poem's emphasis on the physicality of the encounter becomes heightened

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[43] Montague, "The Poet and the Artist" 17.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid. However, younger Irish poets such as Mahon, Heaney, Durcan or Muldoon have poems inspired by paintings and covers from painters.

[46] Jack Coughlin, Barrie Cooke, Louis le Brocquy and Verling have contributed more than once to Montague's works. See T. D. Redshaw, "Books by John Montague: A Descriptive Checklist, 1958-1988," *SI* 139-58. Wilks also illustrated *Hillmother* (Toronto: Exile, 1983).

[47] For Montague being, in turn, inspired by artists, see the last section of *Tides*, 'Sea Changes', that was triggered by a fascination with S. W. Hayter's sea-paintings. A painting lies behind "The Black Lake" in *Mount Eagle*, as Montague revealed in a personal conversation, 15 May 1999. He has written introductions to exhibition catalogues, as the one to Maud Cotter's *My Tender Shell* (Dublin: Gandon, 1991). He wrote on painters, see "Primal Scream: The Later le Brocquy," *Arts in Ireland* 2.1 (1973): 4-14; "A Tribute to S. W. Hayter on his 80th Birthday," *Exile* 8.3-4 (1981/82): 100-05; and his essay on Morris Graves, "Creatures of the Irish Twilight," *Temenos* 6 (1985): 115-17.

through the drawing. The figures do not look into each other's eyes. The woman's jaw rests on the side of the male's head. Blackness surrounds the couple. In their whiteness they seem to be squatting within a womb-like sphere, for their outlines describe a cubicle-shape. However, the female figure's dark hair runs over into the surrounding darkness and is pushed back, as if stirred by an external force. That there is no complete blooming oneness equally comes out in the facial expressions of Weissman Wilks' figures. The open eyes of the male figure lack a spark, the woman's eyes are entirely closed. Their gestures convey isolation and despair more than affection. The figures may find some warmth against external coldness, may escape from loneliness through sexual pleasure, but the drawing cannot deny the fragility of their bond. Similarly, in the poem "Tracks, *GC*" the shell of harmony cannot last long, for the giggling maids, and a feeling of unease is what the poem gives way to. The fragile bond shown by Weissman Wilks in setting the figures apart from the external, whilst dissolving the boundary at one point, finds its parallel in the rapid progress towards separation in Montague's poem.

The drawing that opens the section 'Allegiances', in which "A Dream of July" can be found, has two figures in a similar pose, but here both their eyes are closed. They share a moment of intimacy. In Montague's poems the stress lies on mutual exchange and these are love poems that end with a positive undertone, be it the early "Irish Street Scene, with Lovers", "All Legendary Obstacles", "Walking Late" or "Edge". In contrast, an imbalance asserts itself in several poems in the section 'Rooms', as in "Do Not Disturb", "The Screech Owl" and "Tracks, *LP*". In Weissman Wilks' accompanying drawing the two figures look into the same direction, but the male's gesture of reaching for the woman's breast and body hovers between intimacy and aggressiveness.

Reading the poems of these sections reveals certain limitations of the paintings; limitations which are more or less inherent in visual representation itself. A painting can only depict one, at best a crucial, moment, whereas movement is the sphere of the poet.[48] Moreover, Montague is drawn to the corporeal quality of Weissman Wilks'

[48] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laokoon* became a formative work on the difference between the two art forms. Painting uses "Figuren und Farben in dem Raume" [forms and colours in space], poetry however "artikulierte Töne in der Zeit" [articulated sounds in time]. Lessings argues in favour of poetry, his points have to be understood against the background of the emphasis formerly put on the similarities of the arts, as well as tendencies to grant painting a higher place than poetry. Later, as Wendy Steiner

paintings and her drawings share the tendency towards the elementary with other works by painters he admires. However, his poems equally convey spiritual aspects and the language of poetry enables him to include negation or metacommentary alongside affirmation. The shades that the poems can take on with regard to physicality, the relation between the external and the internal, or with regard to gender, are more subtle and varied than in the illustrations. Lessing's claim for poetry seems to be underlined, he points out the "weitern Sphäre der Poesie, aus dem undendlichen Felde unserer Einbildungskraft, aus der Geistigkeit ihrer Bilder, in grö[ss]ter Menge und Mannigfaltigkeit nebeneinander stehen können, ohne da[ss] eines das andere deckt oder schändet" ["wide sphere of poetry, the boundless field of our imagination, and the spirituality of its images, which can exist simultaneously without concealing or damaging each other"].[49]

The drawing opens doors to very different textual 'Rooms' in the poems: rooms of disturbance, lust, loss and even rooms of which "no one will ever know // What happened" in them ("That Room"). The expressionistic last picture in the collection cannot entirely match the poems' density and contradictions. What it does is to open up a blank spot, leaving a white sphere vacant – inviting the poet to inscribe himself, his lines and his voices onto it: Weissman Wilks has a kneeling, naked female figure turned away from the onlooker, with hands raised upward, the area behind and above its head being entirely white. In contrast to the rest of the drawing, it appears whiter than white. Furthermore, the Munch-like pose of the figure anticipates the female voices in the poems in 'She Speaks'.

These poems oscillate between an assertive and a desperate stance, and Montague covers emotional shades in and amongst the poems. In the contradictory sequential poem "A Woman Speaks" a female speaker argues that she gives herself but "to give [herself] ease", "to keep out the night / by drawing it in" or "To find a nest / and lose [herself]". The woman searches for something and uses her partner(s), "And it's always the same dismay. / A hundred bodies, a hundred too many". "She Writes"

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summarises, "[d]espite the modification of Lessing's position made by phenomenology, physiological psychology, and such critics as Frank, modern theory has not been able to overcome certain spatial-temporal barriers between painting and literature". See Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) 39. For Lessing, see *Laokoon*, ed. Dorothy Reich, Clarendon German Ser. (London: Oxford UP, 1965) 157.

[49] Lessing 101.

and "She Dreams" evoke past happiness only to show present loneliness even more deeply. In the poem "The Wild Dog Rose", the hag-victim can deal with pain and finds transcendental fulfilment. Its twin-poem "The Hag of Beare" takes this affirmation back, as it did in earlier in *Tides*. For the hag "Where once was live's flood / All is ebb", as the abrupt ending conveys. "She Walks Alone" plays with absence and the resulting absurdities in its depiction of woman, whereas in "She Cries" the crying is an affirmation, is one for the world and the poet who tries to crash the sound barrier. The tender poem "Blodewedd", translated from a poem by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, reveals its female speaker through its flower-imagery and the depiction of woman in the pose of waiting, whereas in the translated "The Death of Acteon" (after Frénaud), woman is assertive.

More than any of the pictures inside the book, the cover-illustration hints at strands and contradictions, characteristic of Montague's love poems. Despite their nakedness and the utter loneliness which comes across in facial expressions, the two figures on the cover exhibit a wholeness by the way they hold each other. Technically, this is achieved by a play with parallel lines at their backs and by a red line that flows from the man's arm and hand into the woman's back. Despite and because of dissolving bodily features, their grounding is fairly stable, for the bottom of the page is of a firm blackness. The partners are attached to each other and detached in their emotion for each other. The kneeling male figure that holds the female in its arms conveys a longing for warmth, which is reciprocated by the protection-seeking woman. There is a "correspondence" between the cover-drawing and poems in the book. The drawing opens up as much as it condenses. It adds a layer to the poems as much as the poems add a layer to it. Weissman Wilks other drawings push the physical to the extreme and that, in turn, means Montague's proneness to the French and early Irish mode becomes emphasised throughout *The Love Poems*. The cover manages to oscillate rather than freeze within its crucial moment. Although its fragility is acknowledged, affection is also affirmed by the image – as it is in Montague's poems.

The interspersing of drawings, together with translations from other poets and several epigraphs, is one means of working against repetition. Another means is the fact that Montague is concerned with love in the widest sense of the word, as he includes a poem on the love for a child ("Child") and for a friend ("The Wild Dog Rose"). One may see child or friend as objects, too, yet the reference to these reveals

the greater scope of love Montague intends to make transparent. Moreover, through the inclusion of the lighter "Beyond the Liss" he varies the tone in the collection. *The Love Poems* ends with a quotation from Camus that stresses bringing light into the face of "*a person*" and going out to "*bring this light into the faces / which surround us*". The "*person*" is the other in the widest possible sense. This may not shine through in some parts of the collection, yet its overall thrust into this direction is apparent. *The Love Poems* reveals the shades Montague's poems can take on in different contexts. Simultaneously, Montague has the space to affirm his interest in visual art and its dialogue with poetry.

III

In writing about love Montague is concerned with the art of writing itself. The love poems collected in *The Love Poems* clearly reveal this aspect.[50] In "Working Dream" (*LP* 9) Montague spells out "a space between a lean I / And a warm and open-armed You". In "Virgo Hibernica" (*LP* 31) the speaker starts with a question: "Dare I yet confront / that memory?" The confrontation in writing is questioned here. The lines write themselves, but the poem reports a communication between the couple, the reader does not get a share in this conversation. The attempt to "neither / willing to let the other / come or go. . ." with which the poem ends brings the poem as close to the relationship as possible and shows that the relationship in its current state lies somewhere in between coming and going, the future and the past. The intimacy flees from a recording in language; graphic devices are all we are left with. A poet's silence best represents the moment.[51] In "All Legendary Obstacles" (*LP* 131) the lovers are "unable to speak" and the lady "mark[s]" a circle on the screen, thereby hinting at the interconnection between love and writing. Montague refers several times to letters in his love poems; to one that ends the marriage in "Special Delivery" (*LP* 99-100), with its ominous beginning "The spider's web / of your handwriting", and to another one in

[50] See also Bizot, rev. of *LP* 149.

[51] As George Steiner notes, "language cannot reveal" "the deeper truths of consciousness, nor can it convey the sensory, autonomous evidence of the flower, of the shaft of light, of the birdcall at dawning". Language, as Steiner puts it, "labours to do so, to draw nearer to them, falsify, corrupt that which silence (...) may communicate to us in privileged moments". See George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London: Faber, 1989) 111-12.

"Absence" (*LP* 26), which is written to "summon / The sweet blessing of a girlish presence".

Montague continues his concern with love and writing in two poems in *Smashing the Piano*. The poem "Postscript" (*SP* 34) broods over a "page":

> *A fuel fiercer than love: bitterness!*
> As I bend to this long neglected page
> in my stonecold attic, another, younger man
> bends to your brown face: another less
> mottled hand reaches out to cover yours
> which lately lay so warm in mine
> now desperately trying to forge a line
> where furious, calm, I can control my rage,
> wrestle my pain so as to take up again
> my old-fashioned courtly poet's pilgrimage
> towards the ideal, woman or windmill;[52]
> seething inside, but smiling like a sage.

The poem draws together polarities at work in Montague's love poems; quotidian love and idealised love, loving and writing about love, inner state and outer shell, and past and present. When the old speaker remembers his love and imagines her with someone else he, instead of "bend[ing]" over her, has only the "page" to lean over. He poses in the face of inner bitterness and rage. Equally, Montague manages to convey the merger between the past relationship and the present state through the (warmth of) the hand which the speaker now projects onto the woman's new lover, and which is, at the same time the hand of the writing poet. There is a desperate attempt to find an emotional equilibrium through writing, whilst being aware of the proneness to failure. Paradoxically, love is fuel, but bitterness is one as well, and fiercer. The speaker seethes, but smiles. Writing, too, is a gaining of "control", but likewise a confronting of the past and a painful re-living of it and, simultaneously, a facing up to a present that

[52] Despite admiring and being influenced by Graves – his *The White Goddess* in particular – Montague has increasingly stressed that for him the Muse can also be "domestic". Montague aligns himself with Auden who, as Montague puts it, "suggests that the Muse could be an abandoned mine, mill, or water-wheel (...)". See Montague's essay "Love's Equal Realm," *Southern Review* 3.1 (1995): 565.

differs. The poet is at first depicted in his incapacity to confront the present loneliness in writing; the page is "long neglected", empty. Moreover, adoring a woman, in a courtly pose, is but a farce in the poet's present situation. He wants to or needs to obey rules, overcome emotions and be wise, "seething inside, but smiling like a sage". The very word "sage" hints at the wise man, but we see how off-balance the speaker "inside" is. The interior that the poem gives a glimpse of reveals not only the ambivalent position of the speaker, but also the ambivalent position of a writer of love poetry. A heading, namely love, triggers certain expectations and may demand certain poses of those who write about love. Montague suggests the difficulty, even hollowness of this attempt for the twentieth-century writer in particular, whilst affirming his belief that love is a final anchoring and can have the last word. Or, as Montague emphasises through the placing of "love" in his earlier poem "The Same Gesture", "everything – love, violence, / hatred is possible; / and, again love" (*T* 37).

In "Chain Letter" (*SP* 35) Montague brings love and writing into contact, too, for the speaker not only broods over love letters, but also theorises about these:

> Love letters, like messages, telegrams
> from a more real world. You write
> or read them, elated, trembling,
>
> then stumble across them, moons later,
> bundled in a corner, in a drawer (...).

Montague uses love letters to elaborate on the journey from past to present. More importantly, the poem addresses the issue of authorship and readership, as "You write and read" love letters. If Montague mirrors poet and beloved, he also mirrors writer and reader. The issues he elaborates on is the territory of a poem and poetry itself; poems' change in emphasis that may come through time, their emotional origins, that one may stumble over them and that, as Montague concludes, they show the metamorphosis of those who write or read them:

And now, to come upon them, all over again,
a different, 'a sadder and a wiser man',
bemused by the fury of these wild lines

to someone changed, estranged, or gone.

Past wild lines amuse in the present. The aspect of mutability, the change to a "different" man he describes, is reinforced in the final line, for this was a letter written "to someone changed, estranged or gone". Both the poet and the beloved (the reader) are involved in this process. The "someone" is both the poet and the reader of any love poem. And both have changed. Employing "you" instead of the first person throughout the poem ensures this fruitful flickering. Despite the fact that history has outlived the lines of old love letters, the title and the fact that this is in itself a love poem asserts an ongoing chain of writing and love.

Although not shying away from conveying the ruck of mountains, such as estrangement or "exposed feeling" ("Chain Letter"), Montague asserts the possibilities of love poetry and, above all, its capacity to open up new and ever-changing realms. He emphasises different shades by changing his poems' context and allowing a dialogue with a drawing in his collection *The Love Poems*. As if to echo, but also alter earlier realms and "rooms" of love, "Postscript" and "Chain Letter" occur under the heading 'Dark Rooms' in his latest collection *Smashing the Piano*. Montague revives a dialogue with the bright rooms in *A Chosen Light*, and those dark ones in the second section of *The Great Cloak*. The last poem in *Smashing the Piano*, a love poem, ends in a "final anchoring" ("Landing"), thereby referring back to the section 'Anchor' in *The Great Cloak,* but bringing out a present security that contrasts with the past provisionality ("on the edge is best"). Montague's poetry problematises the issue of love and writing about love; "Chain Letter" and the developmental structure of *The Great Cloak* mime a coming to terms with love and offer a re-working of experience through writing. What emerges as a central thrust of Montague's love poetry is its constant moving, both backward and forward, away from and towards the other.

Chapter 6

CROSSING

Mount Eagle

In contrast to several of John Montague's other collections, *Mount Eagle* (1988) offers a striking range of themes, including Ireland, love, journeys, nature and children. Montague's evocation of Ireland centres on the fate of the individual and subtly draws on elements of tradition. He outlines how these elements evoke memory, showing that they are emotionally disabling, but poetically enabling. They "are obstructions / as well as veins of growth" ("Cassandra's Answer" (*ME* 22)). In the love poems Montague focuses on mature love, most notably in "Matins" and "Harvest". His poems "Above" and "Discords" convey troubled love with elaborate technical devices. These two older themes of his, love and Ireland, are set alongside the new stress on nature and children.

The addition of new themes brings several aspects into the collection, for children are not only sources of poetic transformations, but they also hint at poetry's powers, as is illustrated in "Tea Ceremony" in particular. The environmental concerns that Montague raises in *Mount Eagle* are advanced with rigour. In taking on this subject, the collection is in tune with its historical period, for "some time during 1988", as a member of the Club of Rome, Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, points out, "a critical threshold was crossed";[1] a concern with the destruction of nature by man, manifesting itself in the thinning of the ozone layer, global warming and the fate of tropical forests, started to become part of widespread public initiatives and discussions.[2]

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[1] Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, *Earth Politics* (London: Zed, 1994) 11-12.

[2] Weizsäcker points out that *Time* put the Earth as Planet of the Year on its cover for its New Year issue in 1989, and *Scientific American* devoted its whole September 1989 issue to global environmental matters. Moreover, Green parties were on the rise in several European countries. In America environmental concerns picked up again in the eighties, and in Britain they peaked during the summer

Whereas the volumes *The Rough Field* and *The Dead Kingdom* are framed by a journey and divided into sub-sections, *Mount Eagle* does not have these structural devices. Instead, "Crossings" are the means by which *Mount Eagle* is held together. The crossings of lakes or rivers, evoked in individual journey poems ("The Leap", "The Black Lake"), hint at the importance of crossings on a wider scale. These crossings are thematically and structurally the collection's secret centre.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the aesthetics of *Mount Eagle*; how Montague addresses old and new themes and how he structures the collection as a whole. After focusing on the aesthetics of a select number of poems from the collection, the second part of the chapter explores Montague's journey poems. How Montague addresses the themes of love and Ireland will be outlined in the third part, before, in the final part, the focus is on what is seen as central to the collection, its construction as a net of crossings.

I

Recalling his practice in *The Dead Kingdom*, Montague uses the image of the salmon in the opening poem in *Mount Eagle*, but, rather than paralleling the salmon's journey upstream with the return to a private source, "Pacific Legend" tells a more universal tale, focusing on the relationship of man to nature. Montague dives underwater where "the salmon glide, in human form" before alluding to their move upstream which goes hand in hand with the fact that "They assume their redgold skin". The more Montague moves upward and upstream in the poem, the more the salmons' threatened position surfaces, as man is brought into play when Montague depicts salmon as victims, "a shining sacrifice for men!" The fish has to die when it is most beautiful, most fertile and "Wild", namely in spawning season after it brought a new generation into existence. The notion that destruction and creation go hand in hand lies behind these first lines. Additionally, despite the fact that death is not mentioned directly, Montague brings danger and concern through the exclamation mark; the species of the salmon is threatened by man. With line 7 his speaker emphasises, "So throw back these bones again: / they will flex alive, grow flesh". Hence, Montague wants and offers an imaginative reversal of destruction and destructiveness, implied in the mere "bones"

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of 1989. See Weizsäcker 12. For further details, see Alison Anderson, *Media, Culture and the Environment* (London: UCL, 1997) 79-95.

left of the salmon. The poem longs for the notion of renewal and balance, wants to go "back (...) again" and stresses the return of the "ruddy salmon" as "lord" over its "kingdom". It longs for man to give up his high position as "lord" over nature, and allow kingdoms to "glide" smoothly side by side, to use the crucial verb of the poem's two opening lines. For once, man's intrusion ("throw back") can make something "flex alive", make it "grow flesh" and seems vital for the threatened species' survival.[3]

Montague reinforces his concern through the title's play with the double connotations of "pacific". The title not only implies pacific concerns, but it also allows Montague to move into another geographical region, namely the American Pacific Northwest.[4] And it is used, too, in order to address the guardianship and responsibility of a writer. The image of the salmon does not only play a role in Irish legends, resembling here most notably the "salmon of knowledge",[5] it is also a means of conjuring up Native American tales. According to Northwest coast cosmology "[i]n the undersea and sky worlds, beings (...), much like humans, live in houses and in villages".[6] Montague echoes this account in his lines, "In their houses beneath the sea / the salmon glide, in human form". For the Native Americans, the salmon is an important resource and their myths about this fish centre on "respecting nature in a manner that will insure the return of this important resource each year"; these myths stress the punishment of those who do not do so.[7] The myths which the salmon evokes are a reminder of the power it was given by human beings and of the fact that in legends, be these Native American or Irish, it was indeed a "lord". For Montague the salmon is a means of crossing different mythic and geographic realms. Instead of being

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[3] In the interview with Dennis O'Driscoll Montague mentions that another poem in the collection, "Springs", "is based on the sight of a dying salmon which had UDN". See Montague, interview with O'Driscoll, *SI* 65. Ulcerative Dermal Necrosis affects salmon in spawning season. The environmental concern of the eighties may have combined in Montague's case with a raised awareness from the sixties onwards. In that period the British Isles saw the rise of UDN; in America there was a large-scale environmental debate about pesticides, sparked off by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). The title image of his collection, the eagle, may conjure up the fact that at the time, as Weizsäcker points out, "America was seized by the fear that its national emblem, the bald-headed eagle, would become extinct as a result of the effects of DDT (...)". See Weizsäcker 13.

[4] In the autumn of 1975 Montague lived on Vancouver Island. See "Biographical Notes," *FC* 225. He met Native Americans as underlined in his note on *A Slow Dance*. See "Notes and Introductions," *FC* 52.

[5] It is the "salmon of knowledge" in the Irish tale of Finn mac Coul/Cumhail. Fulfilling a prophecy and eating this salmon enables the hero to challenge Goll mac Morna and the tale goes that no man could hope to be better in magic, poetry, or wisdom than Finn.

[6] Gary Wyatt, introduction, *Mythic Beings: Spirit Art of the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas; Seattle: U of Washington P, 1999) 8.

[7] Wyatt 13. Furthermore, summing up Indian ethical systems Roderick Frazier Nash points out that salmon form "a nation comparable in stature and rights to human nations". See Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) 117.

torn between Ireland and America, as was the case in the earlier *Forms of Exile,* he brings these countries together. The crossing of boundaries is further strengthened by the fact that the salmon itself naturally crosses realms, leaping from water into air and moving from salt water into fresh water. Montague makes the reader look anew at what we have done with an element so rich of natural and cultural significance. We are not presented with the pastoral longed for in parts of *The Rough Field*; in "Pacific Legend" Montague wants direct action and underlines this through the line "So throw back these bones again".

In "Up So Doün" (*ME* 12) he makes his concerns even clearer, for here the underwater sphere is characterised as the "great lost world". The poem aims at retrieval, for the speaker "open[s] underwater eyes" to see "a living thicket of coral / a darting swarm of fish". Montague does not only arrive at the conclusion that nature's creations are "glimpses of miracle", he also describes these very glimpses and raises the reader's awareness by letting the poet enter and illuminate "forgotten" worlds: the underwater as well as the upper sphere. An important element of the poem's aesthetics is that it plays with separation and fluidity. The poem stretches towards separation; switches between italic and normal script correspond to the changes of spheres. He gives the distinction between realms its full due, and thereby imitates modern man's separation from nature. His speaker is not excluded from such a feeling, as he, despite having reached the moon, continues to "*stilt*" over it. Yet Montague omits punctuation, simultaneously overriding the difference between the spheres and conveying the fluidity of both water and air. He makes sparse usage of verbs, ensuring a flashing of images that imprint the two spheres vividly on to the reader's consciousness. Montague moves from centring on the speaker's self, the first word "I", to the underwater sphere, before, with the conjunction "*or*", directly switching to

> *the moon with an apron*
> *of iceblue tinted cloud,*
> *rust bright Mars or Saturn's*
> *silvery series of spheres* (...).

The situating of his speaker "down here" in stanza three is echoed in stanza four by "*how still it is up here*". The more the speaker becomes part of both spheres, the more he perceives. Elements of nature are not only part of the speaker's visual underwater-

journey, but are made active themselves, for "wandering minnows", he says, "explore / the twin doors of my eyelids / lip silently against my mouth". These lines reinforce the proximity of man to nature. The openings mentioned by Montague – doors, eyes, mouth – underline the poet's attempt to enter and shed light onto the complexity of creation. Most importantly, awareness of the larger cosmos as represented by the moon, Saturn and Mars goes hand in hand with the discovery of peacefulness in the place "*where I dance quietly to myself, / stilt across a plain, hardly / disturbing the dust on the moon's shelf*". Delicately, the speaker is "*hardly / disturbing the dust*" and does not leave a troubling mark. What is more, the speaker discovers that he can "*dance*" to himself; hence, creativity is fostered by a contact with the upper sphere and the speaker concludes:

> I had forgotten that we live between
> gasps of, glimpses of miracle;
> once sailed through the air like birds,
> walked in the waters like fish.

The poem's formal pattern has anticipated these final lines; man is part of the evolutionary process and he is at the same time a point where the spheres come together. Mutuality and sameness dominate over difference and separation. The fluidity between air, water, man and nature is foregrounded by the end. This resemblance between the upper and the lower spheres is reinforced by the repetition of the word "like". The verbs here, "sailed" as well as "walked", show the return to essential activities and likewise brings the spheres together. Man comes to stand within these spatially and finally also morally.

A poem that unveils and reveals another process is Montague's subtle, evocative "Tea Ceremony" (*ME* 52), the most interesting of the poems in which Montague focuses on children. Not only does Montague use the form of the prose poem, he also manages to combine the portraying of a child's imitation of a tea ceremony with a brooding over the powers of the imagination in general. The poem touches on reversals of categories, the idiosyncrasy of perception, and exhibits a careful choice of sounds as well as alluding to myth.

In the first paragraph a girl leads her parents, who are nicely captured by Montague in the term "bashful giants", up a path towards a "secret place", a place

where in due course "solid object[s] [are] made of air" "so delicate that they are invisible". The fact that the parents are "assigned" their places and that Montague employs direct speech ("'*you* sit here'") underlines the child's intention to be an adult during the ceremony. Not only her forceful tone, but also the fact that her teddy is "bruised" and her doll "half-broken" hints at disharmony and is later on again implied in the "pall of smoke over the docks". The subtlety of the poem, however, lies in the fact that the more Montague moves into the ceremony itself, the more he builds up a different and a counter world to the disturbed one hinted at through tone, adjectives and image. His placing of the words in the sentences in the second paragraph foregrounds the spell of the ceremony:

> A child's hand reaches out,
> plucks and distributes china cups so delicate that they are
> invisible. Then it grasps a teapot handle out of space and
> leans across to each of us in turn, before settling back that
> solid object made of air down in front of her.

This seems like a child's game, a handle is grasped "out of space" and later a leaf becomes a sandwich, but the play has an effect on its participants. At first the parents have difficulties in accustoming themselves to the reversals that take place, the reversals between small and big, the material and immaterial. But they undergo a process of feeling themselves into the child's perspective, until at the start of part three a soothing calmness signals a change, for "Solemnly", Montague starts, "we lift the cups out to our lips, toasting each other silently".

That the word "silently" echoes "Solemnly" and that "lift" and "lips" go together hints at the care Montague takes in his choice and placing of words. In fact, the employment of the sound within the last paragraph foreshadows the last words to come, as the sounds Montague uses in the words "s*ee*", "L*ee*", "tr*ee*", and to a lesser extend "w*e*" and the participles ("-ly") culminate in the harmonious "hon*ey*-s*ee*king b*ee*" [emphases added] of the prose poem's final line:

> Beyond those small hills is
> the airport and as we drink invisibility a plane climbs, a
> sliver of silver in the sunlight. Filtered through the apple

blossom its sound is as distant and friendly as the hum of
a honey-seeking bee.

In the last word "bee", the abundantly employed bilabial "b" of part one ("brings", "behind", "bossily", "bashful", "boards", "balanced", "half-broken", "bruised") enters the final line, merging with the dominant vocal sound of this third part. The phrase "sliver of silver" not only takes up the summing "s" sounds of the last paragraph, it also becomes for Montague a means to make visible in language a dissolving of categories, a nearness of one thing to the other, so that in our imagination a plane can become a bee.

Most importantly, a child's innocence can be momentarily re-experienced by the parents. Montague ensures that the reader sees that towards the end the parents gain the capacity to transform impressions themselves. The poem is not only a depiction of the child; it is also about adults seeking for something "beyond", a "secret" "behind" and "on the last terrace". The text drives towards solemnity and silence in order to experience a third realm. And it succeeds in this process, for a pure solid surface becomes a silvery reflection and loud noise becomes a bee's slight humming, "distant and friendly". As the bee seeks for sweet honey, the poem is a search for something beyond. The last picture exhibits a longing to "drink invisibility", to slip into a different realm, be it childhood, the imagination or indeed art.

Together with the apple blossom at the poem's start the bee is portentous; as a symbol it not only stands for industry, but also purity and immortality. The innocence of a child conjured up in the poem may be a parallel to the bee and Montague's ending points out that, despite polarities, something immortal might persist, if only in the imagination. The fact that, "in Celtic tradition, bees have a secret wisdom and hail from Paradise"[8] reinforces the searching quality of Montague's final picture.

It is through the deliberate parallel to a Japanese tea ceremony, however, that Montague extends the poem beyond mere delight in a child's play. He has directly included elements of a traditional ceremony: the bare surroundings, the approach via the garden path, the aspect of immortality, the stirring of the imagination, a situation that influences participants, and a positive tension between the minute and the world at

[8] Rees 136.

large.[9] Through the evocation of the ceremony Montague puts in front us a world of harmony, he tries to overwrite categorisation, fragmentation ("half-broken") and the smoke of the modern ("dusty"). He conjures up a state of innocence and suggests with subtlety a parallel to art's processes, even healing qualities, as comes out in the walking towards the secret last terrace, in the ceremony itself and in the transformation afterwards. The poem reveals the proximity of art to play; both are transactional, both are real and imagined, and both transform.

An exploration and process of retrieval of a different kind is Montague's poem "Hearth Song" (*ME* 16-17), recalling "The Country Fiddler" in its preservation of song and tradition.[10] Montague brings out the fact that this fireplace, the family of the Nialls, familiar to the reader from *The Rough Field*, and activities such as chatting together, "all of us", are closely linked. The speaker attributes love and life to the hearth: "it lived under a large flagstone, / loving the warmth of the kitchen". In the following stanza Montague stresses the hearth's slowly evolving sound. The sound is strikingly "constant", "compelling", "insistent", "old", "strange", "solitary", "compulsive" and "fragile". This haunting, ambivalent sound has a life of its own; its attributes are characterisations as well as projections. The sound is "coming *at* us from under the ground" [emphasis added]; the "audience" turns quiet, "Accustoming" themselves "to that old, but always strange sound". Through the comma between "strange" and "sound" that Montague adds to the poem in the version as it occurs in *Collected Poems*, he even reinforces the power of the sound.[11] The terms he uses add to it, too; it is "praise" and "song". Its elemental quality is superbly captured by Montague. The more the poem moves towards the "ground" and origins, the louder the sound becomes, culminating in the last two stanzas of this part:

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[9] "The tea ceremonies of Japan are conceived in the spirit of the Taoist earthly paradise. The tearoom (...) is an ephemeral structure built to enclose a moment of poetic intuition. (...) The guest approaches by the garden path, and must stoop through the low entrance. He makes obeisance to the picture or flower-arrangement, to the singing kettle, and takes his place on the floor. The simplest object, framed by the controlled simplicity of the tea house, stands out in mysterious beauty, its silence holding the secret of temporal existence. Each guest is permitted to complete the experience in relation to himself. The members of the company thus contemplate the universe in miniature, and become aware of their hidden fellowship with the immortals. The great tea masters were concerned to make of the divine wonder an experienced moment; then out of the teahouse the influence was carried into the home; and of the home distilled into the nation". See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Ser. 17 (1949; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968) 168. Campbell refers to Okakura Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea* (New York: 1906); Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (London: 1927); Lafcadio Hearn, *Japan* (New York, 1904).

[10] It hardly surprises that Montague should dedicate the poem to Heaney; see Heaney's poems on rural tradition and "following".

[11] *CP* 298.

Rising from beneath our feet,
welling up out of the earth,
a solitary, compulsive song

Composed for no one, a tune
dreamt up under a flat stone,
earth's fragile, atonal rhythm.

The "atonal rhythm" is created through formal devices, too.[12] The sound is so compulsive that it even breaks the rhyme-scheme of the poem at this stage. At the beginning one finds internal rhymes such as "one" and "flagstone" and "days" and "praise". An interruption of the rhyme-scheme occurs in stanza three. In stanza four rhyme returns, as "ground" follows "sound".

In part II a speaker carefully asks "And did I once glimpse one?" He "call[s] up" a farmhouse, empty, with a crack in the flagstones. A sound "strikes up again". The tune is, however, ghostly, uncontrollable, even "manic": The coal in the hearth is a "minute, manic cellist" that "scrap[es] the shape of itself",

Its shining, blue-black back
and pulsing, tendril limbs
throbbing and trembling in darkness

a hearth song of happiness.

As in his poems about his father, participles help Montague to achieve immediacy and he sets the rustling coals alive through the accumulation of plosives and "i" sounds. The poem becomes self-conscious, "scraping the shape of itself". The lines suggest a poet who tries to strike a note, in spite of loss and emptiness. There is a "blind" audience and a boy's legs are "bare". The letters tremble in darkness, as does the cellist and by implication, the poet. Yet, the poem's "blue-black", "tendril" letters can preserve the power of the hearth. The last lines re-enact what is at stake here. Montague's speaker strikes a final note, a line that stands out by its very lineation. It is

[12] Moreover, in its referring to earth's rhythm the poem converses with the poems on evolutionary origins and "The Well Dreams" (*DK* 38-40) that ends with earth's hidden laughter.

a line between the white expanse and the emptiness of the paper: "a hearth song of happiness", "fragile" and "minute". In "The Country Fiddler" the violin, the means of striking a note, was handed over and tradition passed on, and the hearth in *Mount Eagle* is another image that stands for tradition. Through its evocation Montague preserves this Ulster tradition and, by connecting it with sound, affirms the power of it as a source.

II

The first longer journey poem in the collection, "The Leap" (*ME* 39-42) uses Ulster as its setting, showing a fine past-present voyage and stressing its own procedure in its opening part:

> This journey I have made
> a leap backwards in time,
> headstrong as a young man,
> against all warnings.

The speaker goes back to his childhood, makes the leap "backwards", and will move to the present in the final part.

First, he remembers crossing Garvaghey river as a boy. Home ground, summer, holidays, youth and a "warm / web of sounds" reinforce the positive atmosphere and depict the boy as one with nature. These childhood details, the poem admits, are "amplified by distance". Line-endings, enjambments and interpolations stress the learning process and increase tension. Montague foregrounds moments of intense concentration:

> The lengthy run-up
> – muscles tensing –
> to sail over the
> slate expanse of
>
> Slow moving water
> (did a trout start?)

Despite remaining in the past tense, the poem brings the past experience to life and the immediacy is reinforced through the question in brackets through which Montague ensures that we move into thought processes.[13] He nicely balances this inner process with a lightness at the end of the first part, as the boy is "greeted / by astonished rabbits, / like a parliament / of dwarfs, assembled".

In the second section another intensification takes place through the thick layer of "grass growth, / smell of sorrel, watercress, / a bat flitting, hazel / and sally whispering", and through the comment that this is a "patient audience" for the speaker's "sound take-off". Here the task described is paralleled with a poet's "training rites" and "urge to perfection". After "moving the marker / further down the river" and jumping bigger leaps, the speaker admits that the ultimate jump is "A task to which I / slowly nerve myself / circling always nearer" until he finally "take[s] off". Powering this leap is a controlled take-off, minutely planned and fully concentrated upon in the poem's lines, but what happens after the jump is less certain:

> Closing my eyes,
> I take off, to find
> myself on the far
> ledge, scrabbling.

Montague uses the phrase "to find / myself" conveying that something is done to the speaker at this very moment, but also that he finds something, namely his own "self". Similar to the end of section one, but through a different device, Montague manages to move away from a mere concentration on the literal task.

In the third and final part, "No longer young", the speaker takes a lover's hand, hoping to land on a "warm bank". This twist towards love comes as a surprise, and Montague plays with the parallel between the jump over the river and the moving into a new relationship. He shows a speaker who has learned from his probings and a speaker who takes a risk, "leaving behind ground / tested and safe". What comes with this jump, however, is also the awareness that past experiences can be taken into

[13] The setting and reference to a trout recall the concentration involved in catching a trout in Montague's poem "The Trout" (*CL* 12). The bucket echoes "The Water Carrier" (*PL61* 50).

account.[14] These experiences can be positive, as is suggested by the harmony of summer. They can also be negative, as is implied by Montague's mention of "a deep, dark, circling / turnhole" looming during the boy's trials. It is a new journey towards love that is "Defying conventions" and is made "against all warnings", as the opening lines had anticipated. Again Montague combines return and "take-off", a past and a present that give rise to a future; a future in which past experiences may be useful, but that is also "different". He combines the linear and the round within a journey, the "flow" and "circling": "circling the task, / to vault the flow". The beauty of the poem lies in its dense oscillation, its brooding on life's journey in general, and the evoking of the experience of a writer, "circling always nearer" towards "perfection".

In "The Black Lake" (*ME* 65) a river crossing is replaced by a journey over a lake that is, at the same time, a visual journey over the canvas of a picture.[15] Two rowers move across a lake in rhythmic strokes, but after Montague has moved away from them in the second stanza the reader finds himself in a maze of mystery. Not only several numbers (seven pillars/stooks, three cattle and two haystacks/figures), but also the colours "black" and "silver", along with the "moon" and the "pillar", contribute to the surrounding secrecy.[16] The only sound audible is the munching of cattle, and a grinding. Visualisation dominates over sound. Several other devices reinforce the

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[14] For Richard Allen Cave "[t]he wonder, which the poem explores, is the mind's astonishing ability to find occasion in past experience to give support to more immediate purposes". See Richard Allen Cave, "John Montague's Poetry of the Depersonalised Self," *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. Michael Kenneally, Studies in Contemporary Irish Literature 2, Irish Literary Studies Ser. 43 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1995) 229.

[15] As revealed in a personal conversation with the author, 15 May 1999.

[16] In its haunting atmosphere the poem is reminiscent of Thomas Kinsella's "Downstream". See Kinsella, *Collected Poems* 48-51. Furthermore, "The Black Lake" conjures up Plath's "spirit of blackness is in us" and her poem "Crossing the Water". Plath's poem depicts a problematic relationship, gives external and internal projections:

> Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people.
> Where do the black trees go that drink here?
> Their shadows must cover Canada.
>
> A little light is filtering from the water flowers.
> Their leaves do not wish us to hurry:
> They are round and flat and full of dark advice.
>
> Cold worlds shake from the oar.
> The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes.
> A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand;
>
> Stars open among the lilies.
> Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?
> This is the silence of astounded souls.

See Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber, 1981) 190.

uncertainty. Montague does not use a full sentence at the end of the second stanza and he gives a brief outline instead: "While beyond, two haystacks / Roped down to the earth". Constructions become strange; the view is towards a couple that "lean *from* each other" [emphasis added]. The last stanza has a strikingly factual diction. The end consists of the haunting line: "The couple do not speak".

It is here that the secret of the poem lies hidden and Montague invites us to read the poem from this endpoint. Through the elements of strangeness Montague communicates the discrepancy between the couple; the inevitability of the rowers' strokes, their journey, their reaching the shore had paralleled and underlined the couple's move towards silence, towards non-communication. Several details in the poem hint at the imbalance in, even the termination of, a relationship: stacks are "Roped down", cattle eat "aftergrass", and the couple stand in the small space of a "stonewalled corner". The night is "silent with milk", hinting at the veil that moved over the relationship; the more "The night brims with light", the more silent the poem becomes.

The journey poem and prose poem "Luggala"[17] (*ME* 66-67) stays with "the dark, dark waters" of a lake. In this piece the poet travels over the surrounding landscape, changing from the particular in part I to the more universal in part III. "Again and again in dream", the speaker starts, "I return to that shore". The major reflection-image of its first part conjures up earlier poems of Montague, in which a self looked into the well, into the past and saw a reflection or his own reflection. In "Luggala" the face of an other comes with the look into the water basin within a mausoleum near the lake. Into its "calm surface (...) like a mirror or crystal", the speaker continues, "your face rises, sad beyond speech, sad with an acceptance of blind, implacable process". Ireland's crisis is not far from the surface, for the sadness stems from the fact that brothers and sisters were "killed" young. In the face of such tragedy, the poem "Luggala" suggest, "there is no promise of resurrection, only the ultimate silence of the place".

The second part constitutes another return to a lake approaching it from afar, leaving a lodge behind, taking a path that "twists and turns", pushing open a wooden

[17] Luggala, "Fancy Mountain", Co. Wicklow. Close by is "Lough Tay".

gate and being looked at curiously by deer.[18] The culminating point is a rowing to "the heart" of the lake with Montague conveying the rising and falling of the oars, and ending with "hills forming a circle, you the centre". However, the speaker is "not alone", for young swans go "flying" above the lake, sometimes falling into the water and breaking the reflection. After this look upward and downward, our eye is led further, to a "still greater presence":

> Motionless
> and gray, the huge cliff hangs upsidedown in the mirror of the lake; water, mountain and forest held in lasting embrace.

The reflection leads us back to part I and through several parallelisms the poem manages not to lose touch with the tragedy referred to whilst offering a more universal picture, an "embrace", and what Montague in "The Hill of Silence" calls "A stony patience".[19] Montague intertwines the two reflections: the face of another ("you") becomes that of the lake in part III. The dark colours that create the sombre atmosphere in I, recur in the picture of the "Motionless and gray" cliff. The reference to stones throughout "Luggala" shifts from rock to cliff and the place's "ultimate silence" becomes reinforced and magnified by that final "lasting embrace".

The collection's journeys reach a climax in "The Hill of Silence" (*ME* 72-74), for with its journey upward we move into the transcendent realm. In part I "lines appear to lead us" uphill, forcing us down to "perception's pace". The external world is "softening" and "slowing" us, but also "restraining" and "clawing". In part II our eyes move from the ground upwards:

> A small animal halts,
> starts, leaps away

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[18] The poem exists in different versions. In *CP* only the first part is given; in an earlier version, published in 1985, Montague's poem has two parts, with the second part including what can be found as third part in *ME*. See *CP* 321; *Exile* 10.1 (1985): 114-15.

[19] A link can be drawn to Kathleen Raine. She conjures up "Substance of rock that remembers the unending undending / Simplicity of rest" ("Rock"). See Kathleen Raine, *Selected Poems* (Ipswich: Golgonooza, 1988) 50. Montague points out her concern with "a primal landscape" and sees her as "a voyager, concerned not with the physical details of the journey so much as with its spiritual implications". See John Montague, "Singer of the Sacred," *Agenda* 31.4-32.1 (1994): 96, 95.

and a lark begins
its dizzy, singing climb (...).

At the end of the section the sight returns downwards onto "the old path". The description of another stone, "ancient, looming, mossed / long ago placed, // lifted to be a signpost", captures the processes of thought, moving back to the past before reaching the present.[20] Internalisation increasingly takes place within the poem. Indeed, by the time we arrive at part III, the speaker draws a parallel between thought and ascent:

Let us climb further.
As one thought leads
to another, so one lich-

ened snout of stone
still leads one on,
beckons to a final one.

The two stanzas interestingly start with a bidding, and the indefinite adverb "further". Then the focus is on the steps of thought, before returning to the stone after the word "so". We end with the hope for the definite "final" stone.

In part IV Montague's use of language imitates thought processes further; he manages to "lead" the reader over and through this landscape: "thin trickles of water // gather to a shallow pool", a pool in which a stone "rears / to regard its shadow self". With the mentioning of the reflection we are back at the image of "Luggala" and the shadow reminds the reader of "Hearth Song"'s scraping. The more "delicate" the perception becomes, the more we move into an inner landscape. It is a fascinating but also frightening territory where a spider weaves a "trembling", silvery web,

[20] The poem echoes *The Prelude*, Book 3: "To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower, / Even the loose stones that cover the highway, / I gave a moral life". See William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979) 98. I refer to *The Prelude* of 1805.

a skein of terrible delicacy
swaying to the wind's touch

a fragile, silken scarf
a veined translucent leaf.

These lines are minute in perception: they visualise as much as they project. The inner region is obliquely connected with creation – is of "terrible delicacy". On the one hand, Montague stresses the net's craftiness with the adjective "terrible"; on the other hand he underlines its destructibility.

A different connection between outer and inner landscape occurs in V, with the key phrase: "This is the slope of loneliness". A feeling, loneliness, is combined with a geographic term. The stanza tries to define this region and mindscape through phrases such as "hill of silence", "wind's fortress" and "world's polestar" and culminates with the short line "A stony patience", where a word denoting a material and a word denoting an attitude are moved as closely together as possible.

In VI the place becomes more substantial for a moment, as it recalls a battle that took place in the plains below the hills. As in part II, Montague plays with perception. He imitates a man's surveying the valley and interpolates the poet's inner thoughts. Our eye fixes upon the valley, then on the warrior and finally we are drawn into what happened to him. He "was ferried up here // where water and herbs / might staunch his wounds". Up here is hope, "herbs / might staunch his wounds". It is also a place "above", a healing place. In the final part the poet includes himself and the reader in the resting:

Let us also lay ourselves
down in this silence

let us also be healed
wounds closed, senses cleansed (...).

The poem manages to end in silence, with animals gathering around: "cranny and cleft, soft-footed / curious, the animals gather around". The animals, strikingly curious, help to avoid a moral comment. Silence lies in their "soft footed" gathering. Montague

collates the attributes from preceding lines: soft and softening, healing, cleansing, closing, staunching, gathering. He does not do away with external, threatening features, for the mad multiplying larks are part of his final section ("the mad larks multiply // needles stabbing the sky"). Nonetheless, he aspires to a calmness beyond external and internal disturbances and to the oneness of man and nature. He conjures up and illustrates healing and transcendence, a state that might be achieved by slowing down, by perceiving rather than suppressing, by being patient and listening to the signs of nature. Likewise, Montague brings the shadow self to the fore, together with hinting at a more general "fury" and complexity "multiply[ing]" around us. Facing these is part of a healing process, as his construction with "as" and "while" illustrates on a technical level.

It remains open what this journey ultimately stands for. The "lines" may describe how life "flowed and ebbed", its polarities, its "terrible delicacy" and the hope to reach the summit. It could be a love poem, two people whose "wounds closed" finally. Moreover, the poem might map man's relationship with nature. The journey's "lines" seek connections with nature, but additionally, they seem to seek hills of silence within, hence, could map a psychological journey. Inner and outer gatherings – the verb "to gather" is used twice in the poem – seem the "final" point and one to strive for. Most importantly, the "lines" outline the journey of reader and writer as their activities are a move upward to reveal or gain access to the hidden. One slows down, learns and "survey[s]" as much as one needs to be "lead". Reading like writing, may induce a healing process, a closing of wounds, and constitute a move towards a positive silence. When achieved, as demonstrated in some love poems in the preceding chapter, Montague's poems cease. Finally, in "The Hill of Silence" the gathering animals convey that curiosity, towards nature or the other, goes hand in hand with this reaching of silence. Curiously, reader and critic have traced a journey that cannot and should not be pinned down; one remains curious *and* leaves this journey to its silence.

III

Nicely played against the transcendent is Montague's more concrete evocation of Ireland and love in the middle of the collection. Within the poems that centre on Ireland, Montague makes use of relatives again. Brigid Montague "bear[s] that always renewed burden" in "Postmistress: A Diptych" (*ME* 18) and after evoking Winifred

Montague, Montague gradually steps onto the political minefield of "Foreign Field" (*ME* 19-20) and "Semiotics" (*ME* 21). In these poems a colloquial and ironic tone underlines the immediacy of sectarian violence. The attribute "foreign" in the title stresses the alienation between the parties; it also indicates the attempt of Montague to write about Irish concerns. Deaf-mute sign language in "Semiotics" is a means of approaching the fatalistic non- and misunderstandings in Ireland.

A longer poem on home and Ireland is "Cassandra's Answer" (*ME* 22-23), in which Montague reworks the theme of family and centres on one individual. The poem circles round roots and the effects of violence on these and on the self. It starts harshly with the line "All I can do is curse, complain" and the accusation that "Precious little" was done, despite the foresight that "the flames would come / and the small towns blaze". A "thick tongue longs / for honey's ease, the warm / full syllables of praise". Her "voice / changed", the female speaker speaks of funerals and casualties, decease and the "storm cloud" of violence loom over the scene. Her mouth growing heavier again, she foresees the next bombing, a bombing that silences the script and first part of the poem: "*Goodbye, Main Street, Fintona, / goodbye to the old Carney home*".

In part II we step inside the "hosed down" Carney home and move towards the consequences of sectarian violence for a particular place and person. Whereas in part I the tone was one of anger, in part II, as we step inside the home, the tone turns into bitterness. Emptiness haunts line after line, stairs climb towards nothing and what remains are "roomfuls of tears". Loved ones are "Gone as if the air has swallowed them" and we end with the plain phrase "you were born inside a skeleton", a phrase that is set apart from the main body of the poem and functions on several levels.

There is a connection with Montague's biography, between womb and tomb, because "*the old Carney home*" is Montague's mother's home in Fintona that had been destroyed in the context of sectarian violence.[21] Montague, however, also manages to extend the personal, since the pronoun "you" he employs can be read as "one", adding a communal voice to the line. Moreover, Montague may allude to a Hopi-legend, namely, "A Journey to the Skeleton House" in which a young man journeys to his ancestor's house where "[a] skeleton took him over to the house where his clan lived and showed him the ladder that led up to the house".[22] The young man cannot go

[21] See also Quinn, *SI* 41.

[22] *American Indian Myths and Legends*, ed. Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz (1984; London: Pimlico, 1997) 443. The text is based on a tale collected by Henry Voth in 1905.

upstairs, but the ancestors bring him food, they themselves only eat the odour of food and have heavy burdens. They agree that, if the man makes prayer-offerings for them, they will send rain and crops. "And from that time, the living and the dead began to work together for the benefit of both".[23] Similarly, in Montague's poem the line to the past is crossed, origins searched for and a connection with the ancestors affirmed. Roots cannot be overcome; they belong to oneself, as does the body, as does our own skeleton (an issue Montague equally brought to the fore in the father-poem "The Fault"). Montague is drawn back to origins, but also asserts, "Roots are obstructions / as well as veins of growth".[24]

The father himself is mentioned in the colloquial "Respect" (*ME* 25-26), for old Thady remembers him from years in exile and "reverses gears" further to a Donegal girl. Despite outer circumstances – Montague points out the hardship of exile, "horsebox" dwellings, "Among gasoline fumes, run-down brownstones" – Thady has not lost respect for the father and for the woman. The title, moreover, suggests respect for Thady's coping with exile. Montague foregrounds the individual and human qualities summarising in a single, separated final line: "yet, on the litter, that stray offering". Along similar lines, the preceding poem "A Real Irishman" deals with uniting roots showing that, despite all sectarian difficulties, friendship can override divisions: "'What does it matter, your religion – / (...) / What counts most is, you're my friend'".

A man with the name MacKenna is another person Montague employs in the rural "A Sharpening Stone" (*ME* 28) in which he evokes

> That rasping sound;
> Someone cleansing metal,
> Scouring a saucepan, sets
> Memory's teeth on edge.
> A sharpening stone.

First there is the "sound", then memory is triggered, before, as a concluding line of the stanza, the "sharpening stone" enters the poem, unaccompanied by a verb. One is back in the speaker's past, remembering MacKenna using a sharpening stone, stropping

[23] Ibid. 445.
[24] The body imagery ("veins") echoes Montague's father poems.

both sides of a blade "Until its crescent arc / Glints". The whole process of sharpening is only the preparation for what will follow, "to confront / The nodding heads of corn: / Work yet to be done". The end of the poem gives rise to a beginning. Echoing Heaney, Montague's evocation of a rural craft is a way of talking about the process of writing.

Dillon Johnston claims that Montague's love poems in *Mount Eagle* do not have "the tension of the erotic poetry" of earlier volumes and that "none of these poems escapes from the past into the erotic present tense".[25] However, echoes of Montague's earlier physicality can be felt in the poem "Crossing" (*ME* 38), a poem reminiscent of the first two sections of *The Great Cloak.* The woman's "lithe and golden body" and "scents" disturb the male speaker's rationality. "There is a way of forgetting you, / but I have forgotten it", he admits with wry playfulness. The relationship is over; now "different", they only "cross by chance". However, the woman still inhabits dreams, threatens masculine identity and makes the old poet behave "like a young man". Montague broods over the spell of love, concluding that age does not bring relief and wisdom does not relate to age. And the central question that has haunted his love poems remains unanswered: "Why is the heart never still, / yielding again to the cardinal / lure of the beautiful?"

In the sonnet "Matins" (*ME* 37), despite moving towards a spiritual stance in the encounter with the other, Montague does not fully omit the physical, writing of the couple's "bodies linked, blazed". There are still remnants of earlier poems' contrast between external and internal, for in "Matins" the impact of the outside world is represented by "a capital city [that] swarmed / Beneath us". However, the couple is clearly set apart from the city and achieves an almost total absorption. Whereas in poems such as "Tracks" where an absorption of the lovers was only temporary, in "Matins" soft, voiced bilabials and voiced plosives, especially the consonant "d" anticipate the positive ending and work against the harshness. This meeting of bodies is at the same time a melting of spirits: "Our spirits melded". By employing "melding" instead of "melting" (that would be in line with the plosive "capital", "city", "taut" and tent"), Montague signals that softness and warmth dominates over external harshness. The warmth becomes reinforced by the "widening light" that dominates the room.

The positive ending does not come as a surprise, but Montague moves towards an abstraction: "There is in such exchanges a harvest, / A source or wellspring of

[25] Johnston, "Eros in Eire," *SI* 56.

sweetness, / Grace beyond sense, body's intelligence". Love is "exchange" and the encounter is "such" that it is a true "source" one can draw on and that gives a harvest. The word "sweetness" gains in scope when taking into account that Montague favours what he refers to as the "'Sweet Way'", tender and open encounters out of which one returns "reborn".[26] Arguably, the abstract commentary unbalances some of the silent beauty that the poem has conjured up until then. Still, the "Grace" of the poem is ultimately enhanced by its "intelligence", to use the last line's terms. Montague reinforces his affirmative mode, as the ending of this poem underlines; it lies "in such exchanges a harvest". The poem "Harvest" (*ME* 43) itself makes clear that we have moved from summer, conjured up in the last section of *The Great Cloak*, to autumn's harvest within Montague's *oeuvre* as far as love is concerned. Montague spells out positive emotions within a portrayal of a mature relationship. Echoing ("That first wild summer"), but again contrasting the earlier poems, the woman's body fascinates the speaker, as he notes her "flaring hair, abundant body". In the second stanza, the male gazer is called down from his high tower, noting that she is "No ice princess". Nevertheless, he is drawn to mythological perspectives, viewing her body as "a shower / of gold in the moonlight". These associations give rise to an old fable, as he asks, "Danae deluged by Zeus?" Yet immediately after the question the speaker leaves mythology behind:

> Rather, youth's promise fulfilled,
> homely as a harvest field
> from my Tyrone childhood
>
> Where I hoist warm sheaves
> to tent them into golden stooks,
> each detail, as I wade
> through the moonlit stubble,
> crayon bright, as in
> a child's colouring-book.

[26] John Montague, "The Sweet Way: An Interview with John Montague," interview with Larry Sullivan, *Psychoanalytic Review* 81.1 (1994): 39.

He conveys through his personal reference to his past the relationship's uniqueness. Not only is the love able to open up the book of childhood, it is also an integral part of the speaker's self, as are his past and childhood moments. Moreover, the woman is not constructed out of myth or stylised. She is closer to home, to him. The golden body recalls the golden hay and her warm body recalls "warm sheaves". He bridges childhood and old age and suggests that this relationship has some of the purity and clearness of childhood itself.[27] With these last lines Montague finds a private picture, which despite being "bright" and less elusive, is still colourful and imaginative.

Whereas "Harvest" sees love as an anchor, in "Above" (*ME* 44) Montague underlines its difficulties through technique and tone. The word "Love" stands above the lines of the poem, being not only the first word, but also personified:

> Love transfixes me
> with an accusing eye
>
> – I have been angry
> with you, all day,
>
> ever since, clumsy,
> suspicious, heavy-
>
> footed, you recalled
> the terms of our bargain (...).

The accusing eye of love and the lover pierces here and cannot be escaped from in the poem, as the poem's rapid movement brings out. The short lines and stanzas as well as the break in "heavy- // footed" draw attention to a disturbed relationship. Furthermore, Montague breaks up the flow of the lines through commas, his adjectives attempt to characterise the situation, but simultaneously postpone meaning and press themselves onto the partner who is accused of being "clumsy, / suspicious, heavy- // footed". The

[27] As Bachelard writes: "Childhood sees the world illustrated, the World with original colors, its true colors". See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos,* trans. Daniel Russell (1969; Boston: Beacon, 1971) 117.

"grid of society" cannot be escaped from and even the speaker, despite accusing his lover of giving in, "float[s] down to it", and is included in it by the pronoun "we".

In "Discords" (*ME* 45) Montague addresses difficulties by a play with speech and silence, as he did in earlier poems, but his technique and both the change in perspectives and the employment of pronouns shows how he has refined his brooding on troubled love. First, the discord between the couple is presented in the third person:

> There is a white light in the room.
> It is anger. He is angry, or
> She is angry, or both are angry.

Through the impersonality in part one Montague reinforces the atmosphere of hostility between the couple. Nouns and adjectives accumulate:

> To them it is absolute, total,
> It is everything; but to the visitor,
> The onlooker, the outsider,
> It is the usual, the absurd (...).

The repetition of the definite article unsettles the reader and a tension builds up, as Montague overtly links his lines through sound patterns, for "usual" echoes "total" and "absurd" echoes "absolute". The "anger" is described in a factual style, Montague's method of showing emotional turmoil. The conscious focus on the perspective as it presents itself to the outsider constitutes another splitting within the poem. Montague foregrounds how the moment of arguing seems "everything" to the couple, whereas for the outsider it is "normal" and he goes on to give the onlooker's viewpoint, "For if they did not love each other / Why should they heed a single word?"

It is not until the middle of part two that the pronoun "You" comes into the text, only partly ensuring that a personal quality enters the scene. The pronoun is not used in connection with love, but rather linked to duty: "You bring me, collect me, each journey / Not winged as love, but heavy as duty". On the one hand, there is disharmony; on the other hand Montague signals a movement towards a solution. He intersperses a sadness that comes with each goodbye at the start of a journey.

The full re-inscription of love into the text comes with the poem's last lines. Tears, the speaker says, "tell me more than any phrase, / Tell me what I most need to hear" and the poem can end with "You have never ceased to love me". Bodily expression alone, the woman's face "made ugly / By a sudden flush of tears", when seeing him leave for a journey, signals love. Montague asserts the power of primary gestures, and that tears can say "more than any phrase". Silence, discomforting throughout, becomes the silence of tears, soothing and reassuring. The stereoscopic whiteness of anger with which the poem had started is replaced by a veil of tears, not obstructing, but rather there to "Wash away" and "cleanse" fears. The adverb "sudden" shows how the unexpected – the tears – enters the scene and ensures that the chain of discords can be broken, and love crystallise.

IV

The subtlety of the collection as a whole lies in its *web of crossings*. Montague weaves his web by various devices and by constantly regrouping the poems. One web lies over the other, and also oscillates and interacts with it. How important the image of the web is to the collection comes out in the fact that we find "a trembling, silver web // a skein of terrible delicacy" ("The Hill of Silence" (*ME* 73)), "webs of / water" ("Springs" (*ME* 13)), "cobwebbed cellars" ("Fair Head" (*ME* 33)) and "that warm / web of sounds" ("The Leap" (*ME* 39)) in the micro-structure of the text. Also, Montague employs the word "crossing" directly not only in the two journey poems discussed in part II, but also in "Crossing", significantly placed in the middle of the collection, and at the end of "A Small Death" (*ME* 54) where we hear of "dark coastal clouds / crossing Vancouver Island". Moreover, several other verbs that Montague employs describe a movement from one sphere to another, be it a crashing, a thrashing, a lunching upward or a leaping ("She Cries" (*ME* 48), "Peninsula" (*ME* 64), "Survivor" (*ME* 75), "The Leap" (*ME* 39- 42)).

Similarly, within the macro-structure of the collection, Montague lets some poems act as bridges – crossing points – between one theme and another. These poems condense as well as disperse. "Moving In" (*ME* 15) is a bridge between poems concerned with nature and poems on civilisation, for its opening sentence, "The world we see only shadows / what was there", connects with the evolutionary concerns of "Pacific Legend" and "Up So Doün". Montague reinforces this link by the poem's

title, as it leaps back to "Up So Doün", too. Origin and past are evoked, not only through the opening statement, but also through the move into a speaker's mind. The speaker brings the past to life. The poem leaps back three generations, juxtaposing the present state of affairs and past meadows. In the mind, so the poem seems to suggest, different times coalesce. By employing the pronoun "you" Montague involves the reader in the process of past and present perception. The process culminates in a final picture: the speaker imagines how the city of Atlantis may look to a fish's eyes. He leaps back to the salmon in "Pacific Legend" and simultaneously moves on further, as the last images combine nature and civilisation. The astonishment and estrangement attributed to the fish are the means of expressing a feeling of unease with expansions, complexities and the multiplicity of the modern. Furthermore, by switching the perspective in the end Montague makes explicit the need to see things afresh and anew. His use of "o"-sounds mirrors the attempt to find an appropriate voice; the opposition of fish and Atlantis and that between observer and metropolis hint at the immensity one is faced with, be it within nature or within culture.

"Sheela na Gig" (*ME* 31) converses with poems on nature, too, but also with the poems on love, heritage and with the poem "Knockmany" (*ME* 71) in which an old landmark is evoked. "Sheela na Gig" is not merely a poem on woman, despite the fact that the poem cannot deny its male perspective and the register can hardly seem inoffensive to a female reader.[28] The poem has to be seen within the whole of *Mount Eagle*, because the entire collection is concerned with the wonders of life and nature, and their mysteriousness. Indeed, the meaning of these obscene figures on medieval churchwalls has remained a mystery and secret until this day.[29] Montague uses the figure to capture the "mystery" not only of women, but also of life and the longing for return from "banishment" in general. The poem bridges birth, the "first darkness", and sexual encounter, the "return to that first darkness".

"Deer Park" (*ME* 35-36) leaps back to poems on Ireland in its juxtaposing of Englishness and Irishness and it converses with surrounding love poems, in particular with the following "Matins". Through the image of light these two poems are intertwined. Not only is the uniqueness of the exchange stressed in "Matins" itself, but also in contrasting its atmosphere and vocabulary with "Deer Park", "candid light" is

[28] For readings along feminist lines, see Coughlan 109 (footnote 13); Grubgeld, "Matriarchs" 80-81.
[29] See Montague's editorial comment in *LP* that it is a "warning or fertility symbol. Nobody knows". See *LP* 40.

replaced by a "widening light". In fact, several movements from one poem to the other are subtly done, ensuring either a smooth or an interesting transition. In the poem "She Cries" (*ME* 48) the female speaker is, amongst crying for "herself", "all of us" and "the poet", also "crying for our children" and what follows is the first lengthy poem on children, namely the "small being" in "Sybille's Morning" (*ME* 49). "Fair Head" (*ME* 33-34) establishes a link with the preceding angelic "Gabriel" simply through its title. "Gabriel" furthermore rather obliquely takes over the church from "Sheela na Gig" (*ME* 31). "Husbandry" (*ME* 27) is not only preoccupied with a rural craft as is its neighbouring poem "A Sharpening Stone", for it is the image of cutting that intertwines the two poems even more. Finally, there is the characterisation of the child as "small being" in "Sybille's Morning", followed by "small daughter" in "Difference" and "a small fairy queen" in "A Small Death", connecting these poems. The repeated employment of the adjective "small" ensures that the death of a bird referred to in "A Small Death" gains in significance.

Moreover, despite having blocks of poems stand together to give different shades of the same theme, Montague manages to place one poem as yet another variation on a topic in later parts of the collection. "The Black Lake" (*ME* 65), a love poem, stands apart from the group of love poems discussed in part III, and Montague thereby intensifies his concern with a love that is out of balance.[30] Montague also uses the placing of the title poem "Mount Eagle" (*ME* 68-70) to play a variation on the theme of the relationship between father and child depicted earlier. Montague contemplates the aspect of fatherhood on a general, universal level. He employs the persona of an eagle who is a local guardian, a guardian of place and of the people, the children of the region. He cannot be mere watcher and listener, as he has a task, a task "greater" than that of a mere eagle. It is the eagle's "destiny" "to be the spirit of that mountain":

> The whole world was changing, with one
> language dying; and another encroaching,
>
> bright with buckets, cries of children.
> There seemed to be no end to them,

[30] "The Black Lake" has a double function, as it also foreshadows through its secrecy the more elusive poems, with which the collection ends, such as "The Hill of Silence" (*ME* 72-74).

and the region needed a guardian –
so the mountain had told him.

The eagle has moved from aloofness in part one and enjoying his freedom in part two towards responsibility in this third part. And Montague uses him, too, to address the guardianship and responsibility of a writer, whilst saving the poem from self-indulgence through the fact that it is a children's story.

The evocation of nature that dominates the opening poems is returned to with the poem "Peninsula" (*ME* 63-64) in a later part of *Mount Eagle*. Through a densely woven scarf Montague stresses nature's richness, colourfulness, abundance, secrecy and, above all "natural defences". Man, rarely inhabiting the scene, only surfaces in stanza five, seven and eight. The peninsula is a secret place "where few come". Montague's description moves from land and trees to water, fish and shellfish, then reaches the shore and land before ending in the image of dolphins moving in water. The tidal rhythm of the poem is not only inherent in the movement from land to water, but also in a butterfly that sails or in the stress on the change of light. In its switches between air and water "Peninsula" is reminiscent of "Up So Doün". The poet also opens up the natural world, but nature is "Dame Nature" and "mother earth" and Montague focuses on nature's power, on its menacing spikes and its procreative qualities. The damp atmosphere is "slow with sex";[31] in the first part, the sprouting, the juices, the defending of warm caves, the bed of mussels are all suggestive, as is the term "water's hymen" in the middle of the poem. A culmination is reached when the speaker focuses on a butterfly, whose scarlet spots seem both beautiful and dangerous. Montague delights in a mixture of comment, allusion, description and connotation; in

Dame Nature's self-
delighting richness;
in a clump of iris
a grasshopper shrills.

The lineation draws the reader's attention to "self- / delighting"; on the one hand Montague celebrates nature, but on the other hand she is rich in self-centred activities.

[31] The phrase is used by Thomas Kinsella in "Tao and Unfitness at Inistiogue on the River Nore". See Kinsella, *Collected Poems* 213.

Montague contrasts the poem with those in which nature was a victim. Nature triumphs here:

> Abruptly in the bay
> a school of dolphin
> rehearse their turns,
> thrashing the water
> with their flat tails,
> exultant watermills!

With the dolphin, as with the salmon before, Montague hints at a bridge between water and air, for the species has a special status as mammal living in water.

The dolphin's connotations range from being of human origin and a virtuous creature to being a symbol for Apollo, or maritime power, or rescuer of the poet Arion who attracted the dolphin by his singing; the dolphin is also one of the many attributes of Aphrodite.[32] Hence, Montague aligns "Peninsula" with poems that evoke myth and symbols. The mentioning of iris and the trout in the poem can equally be seen as part of Montague's web of symbols, woven out of elements that have acquired that very quality in both Western and other traditions. Moreover, Montague's allusion to Native American myth in the title and in "Pacific Legend" is continued in the title poem "Mount Eagle" and culminates in the collection's final poem where "Fintan" changes his appearance, a transformation reminiscent of Native American legends. But Montague is not restricted to these geographical realms, for the lines also remind of the lingam in Hindu myth, and in "The Hill of Silence", as Martin brings out in his discussion of the poem, there is a strong Eastern undercurrent.[33] That Montague uses Japanese material, as already discussed in relation to "Tea Ceremony", is a case in point. Employing this rich material suggests the importance of nature in myth, and the richness of oral tradition.

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[32] James Hall, *Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art* (London: Murray, 1994) 19.

[33] "'The Hill of Silence' (...) has a long ancestry in Eastern religion and in Irish Christian tradition. The ascent, whether mystical or penitential, towards the summit, can symbolise an approach to God or the oversoul, to beatitude or nirvana". Martin also stresses that the movement "takes us upwards in a priest-like *Levate*, through seven movements (the 'Seven Storied Mountain', the seven levels of karma, the seventh heaven of Islam?)". See Martin, "John Montague" 50.

He reinforces this concern through the centring on sound and the production of it throughout *Mount Eagle.* Indeed, this is one of the secret themes within the collection. Montague plays the poems against each other, for some depict sound as threatened, others affirm it. Its importance has come to the fore in the discussion of "Hearth Song", as here it acts as a bridge between past and present, as a mourning sign, but also as a hint towards the powers of the poet's song. In "Gabriel" (*ME* 32) the last point is made explicit through the announcement to *"sing peace"*, *"tenderness"* and *"sweetness"* in the face of the abyss. Sound is reaffirmed three times in the poem by the repetition of "*sing*". The task seems utopian, but the angel in "Gabriel", and by implication the Muse, is affirmed as a source of energy. There is the hope that the addressee, namely the poet or a reader, can give hope, however "weak the vessel" may seem.

"Mount Eagle" underlines that the new task of a father persona is almost equivalent to finding a new poetic language, but also hints at the cultural changes of the past in Ireland with its "one / language dying; and another encroaching" (*ME* 69). "Cassandra's Answer" (*ME* 22-23) is bleaker when it comes to sound, as is "Semiotics" (*ME* 21). Nonetheless, "She Cries" (*ME* 48), despite acknowledging the difficulty of the poet's task asserts that he "still" tries to crash the sound barrier. In the children poems Montague predominantly centres on sound and foregrounds different aspects of it. In "Sibylle's Morning" (*ME* 49-50) an observant father delights in the child's first steps in this world, emphasising her "basic happiness" and "sound experiments". The poem "Difference" (*ME* 51) tackles the complexity of language, for whilst the speaker is passively watching mother and child, the child learns how to pose a request. The lines imitate the child's slow steps towards an appropriate, acceptable phrase. The comma between "*word*" and "*missing*" brings form and content together, because postponing the participle underlines the incompleteness of the child's utterance. Speech and "the silence between" are explored. The employed term "opposition" is first, the "opposition" between these two realms, secondly an opposition towards the parent. Thirdly, it is the difference in language and register – between "*would like*" and "*want*". Not only the play with the word "opposition", but also the Derridean title makes this poem a contemplation on language. The poem takes a "pleasure" in playing with script, lineament, words and register. It broods on verbal probings whether as adult, child or artist. Or, to use Michael Allen's characterisation of the poem: "The small precocious presence of Sybylle (...) makes the poet himself the

third party, seeing in her struggle with her mother a parallel to his own search for a satisfactory style (...)".[34]

In "Phillipe" (*ME* 55), the speaker tries to capture the deaf child's experiencing of the world. Montague tries to re-enact what happens when sound is absent. Not only are the numerous "s" as well as "i" sounds strikingly unsettling and haunting, they also underline through the changes in perspective the emotional burden of child as well as that of the father-speaker. After characterising the child from an outside perspective in the first line, the poet moves inside in line two and three where everything echoes inwardly, and is absorbed:

> Deaf and dumb since his hapless birth,
> Inside the echo chamber of his skull
> He hears the grimace of grinding teeth;
> His form of broken, internal speech.
> And always he lifts white, sightless eyes
> Towards all pulsing sources of light, skies
> That warm his insistent, upraised face,
> Airs that play around his naked body,
> Waters that pour, caress, and bless until
> He breaks, like a bird, into grateful cries.

The perspective of an onlooker is adopted in line four. Philippe has a different kind of "speech". In the description that follows he "always" lifts his eyes towards light, towards a different source. With the warming of the face the speaker attempts to feel himself into the child. The tactile sense replaces sound, for the child might feel the warmth and "pulsing" of the light. Other elementary sources are evoked and they seem to lessen the abnormality, for the child is surrounded by air, and waters caress and bless. The speaker lacks the words to describe the absence of sound adequately and therefore can only employ comparisons ("like a bird", "Handsome as some damaged Gothic angel"). Philippe moves increasingly out of sight and out of hearing during these poetic transformations. He literally disappears ("disappearance") towards the end of the poem. Montague manages subtly to mirror Philippe's soundless world. Its death

[34] Michael Allen, "Celebrations: Review of *Mount Eagle*," *Irish Review* 7 (1989): 101.

is, significantly, not stated as such and it is only through the title that the reader knows about whom the speaker talks, but the presence of the child is evoked only to spell out its absence. By moving into silence the poem comes as close as possible to the deaf, and also dead, child.

Equally complex and connected with sound is the "wellspring" that Montague uses in "Matins" (*ME* 37), where love is a "source or wellspring", and also in the "spring well" of "Peninsula" (*ME* 64) where the poet got his water as a boy and in "The Leap" where the childhood probings are "Secret wellsprings / of strength, forgotten" (*ME* 41). When it surfaces, Montague focuses on origins, on the source of the craft of writing and, in consequence, of the self.

The bird imagery is not new to Montague's *oeuvre*, but the sheer amount of variations on the title image of the eagle is worth mentioning in its own right. In "Philippe" the child is compared to a bird, then to a damaged Gothic angel. "She Cries" has images of winged objects, so do "Tea Ceremony" and "A Small Death", "The Leap" has a bat, "Up So Doün" mentions birds, "Gabriel" ends with the image of a dove, a bird stirs in "Husbandry" and finds a place in "Nest". Additionally, the fleet the eagle surveys from above is just one element within a net of fish images. Montague starts with the salmon, gives the trout in "The Leap" and "Peninsula", but a fish enters the central stage in the final sonnet "Survivor" in which "Fintan" changes into "a great fish" and survives in that form for centuries. After having reached the terminating point of regression, "Slowly, the old bare earth reappeared, / Barren, but with a rainbow brightened. / Life might begin again. He lunges upwards". The positive image is reinforced by the comment and Fintan's movement. Despite parallels to Tennyson's sleeping "Kraken", Montague's giant fish does not "on the surface die".[35] He is more like the lingam in Hindu myth, growing, part of and initiating the creation of the world,[36] or hints through its transformation and regeneration so central in legends of the Pacific Northwest. Slowly the world is created "again", from bareness, from nothing. "Life might begin again". Montague may only use "might", nonetheless, "Survivor" affirms the possibility of life, despite the difficulties conjured up in the

[35] Alfred Tennyson, *The Poems of Alfred Tennyson*, ed. Chistopher Ricks, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Harlow: Longman, 1987) 270, 3 vol.

[36] "The notion that there is nothing static, nothing abiding, but only the flow of a relentless process, with everything originating, growing, decaying, vanishing – this wholly dynamic view of life, of the individual and of the universe, is one of the fundamental conceptions (...) of later Hinduism". See Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation*, ed. Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Ser. 6 (1946; Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 131.

collection;[37] the poison, the discords, the deafness, the uncertainty. *Mount Eagle* starts and ends with a fish-image.

The image of the rainbow that underlines Montague's attempt to build bridges and foreground crossings occurs in the journey poem "Knockmany" (*ME* 71).[38] Revisiting a familiar place in a poem means seeing

> a brilliant rainbow
> lifting its prismatic arch
> *across* Kockmany Hill
> as a healing dream
> in savage Chicago. It
> shone both a secret
> and a sacrament, a promise
> and its fulfillment.
> I still live by it. [emphasis added]

The rainbow, an image for the "brilliant" arch of the imagination, brings points together. In his imagination the speaker connects Knockmany Hill and Chicago. Seeing the rainbow gives rise to "a healing dream" and to the speaker's affirmation of hope. Past and present, two places, earth and sky, rain and sun cross imaginatively. Points are connected in an arch of different colours and in a phenomenon that occurs suddenly. The eye is raised upward, as we are given yet another "lifting" in Montague's *oeuvre*, alongside the one in "The Hill of Silence" and Fintan's move "upwards". In *Mount Eagle* Montague moves into more airy regions, especially in "Knockmany", "The Hill of Silence" and "Survivor". Whilst not losing touch with the ground, he simultaneously looks upwards and surveys from above. In the imagination, fish and bird, lake and sky or air and water, the elements that also feature strongly in his journey poems, are brought together. Moreover, Montague's switches in perspective in *Mount Eagle* underline his urge to view things from various sides and

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[37] Brian John compares Kinsella's poem "Survivor" with Montague's and comes to characterise Kinsella's Fintan as being pushed towards a "dislocated state". I agree with John's conclusion that the difference in outlook and form (narrative without rhyme versus sonnet) mirrors "the distinctive characteristics of the two poets and their ways of looking at the world". See Brian John, *Reading the Ground: The Poetry of Thomas Kinsella* (Washington: Catholic U of America P, 1996) 132.

[38] In the essay "A Primal Gaeltacht", Montague refers to Knockmany Hill's "mysterious saddle shape". See "Notes and Introductions," *FC* 42.

the need for ever-changing views. Montague searched for love in *The Great Cloak*; he searched for a "place" in *Forms of Exile,* and he was troubled by one in *The Rough Field.* In *Mount Eagle* he has found an imaginative space to dwell in, a web in itself, "the light always shifting" ("Peninsula" (*ME* 64)).

Chapter 7

MAGNIFYING

Time in Armagh and *Border Sick Call*

Montague's sequences of the early- and mid-nineties, *Time in Armagh* and *Border Sick Call*,[1] rework autobiographical material. In the former Montague tries to come to terms with his time at school in Armagh, whereas *Border Sick Call* recalls a journey he undertook with his doctor-brother along the Fermanagh-Donegal border. Although differing greatly, the two works both show and refine "a slow exactness // Which recreates experience / By ritualizing its details" (*CL* 36). In *Time in Armagh* Montague manages to recreate the time in school through a variety of poems that differ in form, mood and tone.[2] In the shorter *Border Sick Call* the icy conditions bring a slowing down to perception's pace, a focus on detail within the sequence, and a journey of concentration and density. The preoccupation with Dante is an aspect that *Time in Armagh* and *Border Sick Call* have in common, an aspect new to Montague's *oeuvre*. In *Time in Armagh* he is near the canzone, the Catholic subject matter inviting such a strict form. Whereas this work conjures up a Dantean hell, *Border Sick Call* slowly moves out of the underworld, and becomes a "*purgatorial journey*", as the text self-consciously conveys. The present chapter explores how Montague translates autobiography into art in both these recent works. A selection of poems from *Time in Armagh* will be commented upon in part I of the chapter, before in part II a discussion of the elaborate sequence *Border Sick Call* follows.

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[1] John Montague, *Border Sick Call*, in *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1995) 345-57; hereafter referred to as *BSC*.

[2] It is not framed by a journey or surrounded by commentary as originally contemplated; "*I don't know if I will try to weave a collage of commentary around them, or not*". See John Montague, introduction to the poem "Time in Armagh", *Ploughshares* 17.1 (1991): 108. His remarks in *Ploughshares* can later be found in shortened form in the "Preface" to *TA*.

I

In *Time in Armagh* the majority of poems refer to episodes from the Catholic boarding school St. Patrick's in Armagh that Montague attended from 1941-46. How troubling this time is in Montague's life brings out a paragraph in "The Figure in the Cave":

> Those five years in Armagh were the most cramped of my childhood; just as I was learning to play with the healthy girls of Glencull I was enclosed in the black chill of celibacy. (...) Someday I will exorcise it enough to forget and forgive, but at the age of sixty, images from that little hell on the hill haunt me, too harsh for long contemplation. I know many of the priests of the Armagh diocese as friends, but some as school bullies.[3]

Montague's *Time in Armagh*, written a few years later, reveals the boys' harsh treatment, the bullying, the repression of sexuality and how guilt was planted into them.[4] Montague communicates his anger as far as the boys' treatment is concerned, in *Time in Armagh* he now faces what was left in the unconscious. Anger's surfacing is most notable in overt statements such as "The only opening left was our imagination" ("*Peephole*" (*TA* 21)) or "A system / without love is a crock of shite" ("Time in Armagh" (*TA* 31). However, in the sequence as a whole and in individual poems, Montague tries to employ several means in order to record the experience with honesty and to move away from the personal at the same time, to strike the balance between involvement and distance.

First, his "Preface" gives the reader the necessary background for the encounter with the sequence, and it anticipates the power of Montague's prose pieces in the sequence itself. Secondly, Montague uses the Dantean *terza rima* form as a model, and attempts to vary it, too. Thirdly, he refines his usage of perspectives, as an analysis of "Time in Armagh", "A Bomber's Moon" and "A Human Smile" will bring out.

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[3] "The Figure in the Cave," *FC* 3.

[4] No full length study of *TA* has been published to my knowledge to date. For reviews, see Denman, "The Muse of Memory," *Irish Literary Supplement* 13.1 (1994): 11; Conor Kelly, "Fine Tuning," *Poetry Review* 84.2 (1994): 56-57; James Simmons, "Poetry," *Linen Hall Review* 11.1 (1994): 18-20. The latter, although admitting that it has "few images that pierce you to the heart and mind" as Montague has done, points out the author's "command of language". For a review on *TA*, see also general reviews on *CP*.

Equally, humour is a means of approaching the haunting occurrences in the seminary, as a discussion of the last-mentioned poem will show. That the Second World War is connected with his time in Armagh adds another layer to the sequence, and ensures that it steps beyond school walls. Furthermore, Montague offers a poem that not only mirrors the awakening sexuality of the boy at the time, but that likewise broods on sound, poetry and the growth of a poet in the poem "Conch", as discussed in the first chapter. Finally, the warmth longed for in harsh times shows through in several poems, most notably the impressive final poem "Stone".

The collection's "Preface" reinforces the austere experience; the speaker explains subject, scope and method. His first sentence gives all essential details about the school, the time and the place. In the course of the preface he stresses the strictness of his style and compares the collection with other works – his own and Joyce's. The "Preface" is also, however, a well-crafted piece of prose. The identity of the speaker remains unclear, shifting between author, implied author, and speaker of a poem. The choice of register forestalls the poems; "being regimented" anticipates the military vocabulary; the drive "to produce" priests communicates the school's mechanical, inhuman procedures depicted, for instance, in "A Lesser Species" (*TA* 42), while "the ragging, the fagging" will be at the centre of the title poem "Time in Armagh" (*TA* 28-31). That they "fantasized" about girls and film stars, mentioned at the end of the third paragraph, comes into focus in several poems. Hence, important themes are not only factually introduced, but also given through images and motifs, culminating in "And over it all the great bell rang every quarter".

What also strikes the reader are the abrupt switches from one sentence to the next. The explanation concerning the style is followed by "The only disruptive element might have been love, but that was an absence". Factual points, in the manner of stage directions, give rise to a comment: "So ancient history and modern history crossed, as the German planes wandered over Ulster, where the Invasion armies were assembling". The sequence's main theme of repression and isolation is given by direct example: "But we were forbidden the radio or the papers". The sudden switches show on a small scale what is typical for a sequence as a whole. Similarly, the ringing of the bells, despite being linked to the sentence before by the conjunction "And", seems to break powerfully into the poem, mirroring a sudden flashing of memory.

The inclusion of exceptions is noteworthy ("except the skivvies"; "except in confession"). As in several poems of this sequence, Montague conjures up comparisons only to withdraw from them again. The frequent use of the disjunction "but" is indicative: "But at an age when tenderness was needed we got none", "but never saw real girls", "but we never discussed our bodies". Comparisons stay in the reader's mind and hover in the background; Joyce's text is mentioned, but Montague is also "*near* [emphasis added] the *canzone*" of a Dante. Even when pointing towards a work of his own the prefatorial speaker states: "I give a picture of it in 'That Dark Accomplice' from *Death of a Chieftain* (1964), *but* the story was more complicated than that, the cruelty, the compelled chastity, the ignorant isolation" [emphasis added]. Overall, the "Preface" oscillates between emotional attachment and self-conscious detachment. It goes back to the past as well as referring to what will follow in the sequence itself. This movement interestingly resembles the *terza rima* form that Montague uses predominantly in the sequence. The change of tenses furthers this movement, for after the first two sentences the poet switches to the past tense only to employ the present tense later again.

In the opening poem "Guide", the "black chill" mentioned in "The Figure in the Cave" echoes "in the long dormitory's chill". The speaker comments on lost freedom, for

> Garvaghey and Glencull were fleeing,
> Leaving me to float,
> A stray leaf, down the furious whirlpool
> Of a junior seminary (...).

The outer closes in on him, "A stray leaf", he cannot escape the force of the priests. The body is violated by external forces such as the "cane's swish", but also by having to suppress the signs of puberty, the "growing body". From the poem's beginning the poet is set apart from the school by being "late" and is retrospectively admitting his "rival beliefs" ("If, late again, I arrive flaunting my rival beliefs").

"Time in Armagh" (*TA* 28-31) reworks more specific days in the seminary and their consequences. Content, the *terza rima* form and the division into three parts conjure up *The Divine Comedy*; Montague uses this parallel to mirror the strictness in

the seminary. (However, his rhymes are not perfect ones and can go over several lines; "victim" refers back to "Virgin" and "pin" in the first part. Moreover, the two single lines at the end of two parts are un-Dantean and their content is deliberately made memorable through the separate line.)

In part one a young boy is bullied by "bigger boys" and nicknamed "*Froggy, Screwy, Rubberneck* or *Dopey*". The opening phrase "*Hazing*, they call it in America, / but I already knew it from Armagh" links America and Ireland and suggests the nearness of the speaker to the author. The poem hovers between involvement and distance; in the following stanza, the pronoun "his" rather than "I" is employed. Montague can convey being haunted by nicknames through the use of assonances and alliterations. The names are

> some shameful blemish, his least attract-
> ive aspect, hauled out to harry, haunt him
> through his snail years in St. Patrick's,
>
> a five-year sentence. Even in the chapel
> in that hush of prayers and incense
> the same cruelty was ritually practised (...).

The years in Armagh are compared to "a five-year sentence" and its length is mirrored in the fact that it takes until the fourth stanza four for the poem to halt in a full-stop.

The "same cruelty" is reinforced by not naming the specific agent; we do not know who is "shoving the prongs of the dividers / into the thighs of the smaller boy / who knelt before you". Montague uses another distancing device, namely reporting the scene from the row behind the "smaller boy". Yet, his speaker seems to know the boy's feelings all too well: "He couldn't cry // in such a sacred atmosphere, disturb / the priest". A group of boys ("they") jabs the boy, who is characterised as "the victim", with a "Sacred Heart pin". His body is affected literally and figuratively, as "Tears spilt down / his face", but what is more, the poem stresses the external indifference to his emotions, for whilst he cries,

the Blessed Virgin

smiled inside the altar rails, and
Christ stumbled from station to station
around our walls, to His crucifixion,

thorn spiked, our exemplary victim.

In this final, separate line Montague tries to merge the two victims. On the one hand, the capitalisation in "His crucifixion" is attributed to Christ, so is the adjective "thorn spiked". On the other hand, the poem has given the jabbing, dividing and "shoving", and prongs and pins in connection with the victimised "smaller boy". Cruelty happens within the sphere the speaker knows well, within "*our* walls" [emphasis added]. It is "our" that provides the ground for the productive ambivalence inherent in the phrase, "*our* exemplary victim" [emphasis added].

The second part goes back to Gaelic football and gym, stressing that both were "compulsory". The boy described escaped the "Spartan training sessions" by hiding in a manhole, "but thirty years later, a grown man", he is still haunted by this traumatic experience:

he began to break down, a boy, weeping,
plunged in the pit again, long hours waiting
in that damp darkness, until he heard

the thud of studded boots above his head.

The boy falls into darkness, an inner hell; the "long hours" and the lengthy sentence stress the past's impact. Montague shows the influence of the past on the present; the man is "a boy" "again". The fears return with Montague subtly and vividly merging a description of the experience the boy Dopey had then with the resulting psychological trauma inflicted. Montague is simultaneously in the past and reporting from a later point in time. The boyhood experience that is inside the grown man is ended by "the thud of studded boots"; the signal that brought relief then marks the end of the focus on

this episode. Its aliveness is underlined through the fact that Montague employs a separate line to bring out the sound of the boots above, before the speaker comments and Montague signals involvement through the pronouns: "Endless games designed to keep us pure – / 'Keep your hands out of your pockets, boys' – / we wore togs even in the showers". The denial of the body induced by the priests is not only mentioned, it is implied, too, by leaving the commanding voice anonymous. Using the impressions of others serves Montague's speaker as a means of justification: Danaghy, he notes, broke a window when leaving school and Des stresses retrospectively, "'I loathed every hour, / every minute'". The culminating point, however, is the focus on the use of the cane. The emphasis is on the detail of the procedure; Father Roughan flexes canes,

> test-lashing the air before he landed one
>
> right down the middle of the open palm,
> or tingling along the shaking fingertips,
> until the hand was ridged with welts.

The stanza break leaves a blank space that the reader may fill by imagining the pain. The "tingling" and "shaking" fingertips communicate the fact that, despite recording the happenings about "the boys" with a distance, the pain felt is "all too rightly" known. Montague stresses the tingling by placing the "fingertips" at the end of the line with the adjective "shaking" likewise acting as a means of suspense. Outer appearance, the welts, and inner feeling, the "tingling", are simultaneously brought into play. No assonance or alliteration gives stress to a particular aspect; rather the "tingling" can be felt through the lines' auditory quality with the phrase "ridged with welts" reinforcing and referring back to the sound of a cane. By not mentioning the victim Montague ensures distance. It is only afterwards that we hear that "the boys" "hide / and hug their hurt under the armpits". They "hide" also, because admission of pain would mean confession of weakness; each gives bodily warmth to himself. The older boys admiringly give "cold comfort" and a group atmosphere builds itself up, since they are all "united before the black-skirted enemy". In the face of a third party we find a "sudden conspiracy of bully and victim".

In the last two stanzas Montague arrives at the present. It is at this point that the speaker refers directly to himself: "Still to this late day, I rage blind / whenever I hear that hectoring tone, / trying to put another human being down". Now old, he is still troubled: a tone can spark off the memory. He rages "blind", the anger is still not canalised. Montague chooses several episodes introduced by "Then" and describes "exemplary victim[s]" variously. What matters is showing the inhumanity of "A system", and the fact that "A system / without love is a crock of shite", as the last line has it. The sentence draws together personal anger and a universal concern. The statement itself is general, whereas the colloquialism underlines the personal and idiosyncratic.

Montague makes use of the explicit, as in this final line, and a sarcastic or lighter tone on various occasions in *Time in Armagh*, trying to lessen the emotional pain. In the opening poem "Guide" the priest is addressed ironically with "Dear Frank Lenny" and poems such as "A Lesser Species" (*TA* 42), "*Peephole*" (*TA* 21), "Red Hat" (*TA* 34) or "Father Kangaroo" (*TA* 37) take a single, punning line in order to resolve tension. Day boys are used as love messengers or a schoolroom is cleared by using a stink bomb. Montague underlines in "The Figure in the Cave" his tendency towards humour even in these early days of his life, emphasising that it "saved me in Armagh".[5] In the sequence, it also has its place; he uses it to intertwine past and present, and it assists him well in writing about the past time.

One of Montague's finer lighter poems in *Time in Armagh* is "A Human Smile" (*TA* 40), a poem that starts rather seriously by conjuring up boys that "paraded / in a slow crocodile, down Armagh town". The speaker is part of the group, as indicated by his use of "we". As in *Mount Eagle*, Montague employs switches in perspective. The reader looks on the "crocodile" of boys from above and is also made to see the environment from the ground and with the eyes of the young speaker. The Cathedrals that are mentioned draw the attention upwards. The boys are "beneath the shadow" of the new one, and the old one is even "glooming over" the boys, suggesting that religion overshadows the marches. The poem admits its constructedness through its *terza rima* form and Montague's use of the past tense that underlines the fact that the experience is re-viewed:

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[5] "The Figure in the Cave," *FC* 4.

Two by two, bright boots and shoes,
arms swinging, eyes fixed before,
small soldiers of the religious wars

We marched primly past Protestant boys (...).

Montague moves away from a mere description of the orderly formation, for sound accompanies sight, the marching is made audible. This is achieved by the shortness of the individual words ("Two by two, bright boots and shoes"), by the accumulation of fricatives and plosives, and by the alliterations and assonances – as in "Time in Armagh". That they "marched *p*rimly *p*ast *P*rotestant boys" [emphasis added] is the first climax.

The adverb "Then" and the pause end the military diction, and, in effect, the seriousness:

Then – a tactical error – one day we crossed

A more unnerving race. All the girls
streaming down from the convent, uniforms
as well, but sporting pert looks, curls

That threatened to disrupt our column.
The Prefects had to give a signal.
One (a future bishop) raised his cap.

Sheepishly, we followed that gracious sign.
For one split second, grim habit's crocodile
blinked, risked a human smile.

Rather than describing an incident of direct confrontation with Protestant boys, as one might have expected, the poem opens towards a different and for the boys at the time not less important subject matter: meeting the "race" of girls. The "error" of encountering them is emphasised by the parenthesis and the breaking into the orderly

formation is underlined by the line break between "crossed" and "A more unnerving race". The word "tactical error" springs into the eye, because it is placed in the middle of the line. It turns out to be an error attributed to the prefects who intended to avoid this confrontation in order not "to stir the boys' senses", as Montague puts it in "Retreat, 1941" (*TA* 17). The girls embody disruption. In their "sporting pert looks" they do not march, but are "streaming down". As soon as they are mentioned the poem enlivens its diction. The girls threaten to "disrupt" the "column" of the poem. As mentioned in the "Preface" the poet's aim is to keep a strict form, but here the field of love and humanity that the poem moves into "blinks" through the *terza rima*, and is, later on, even smiling. The outer event that gives signs of order (blazer, uniform, marching, two by two) can be interrupted "For one split second" and a habit be thrown over board. Amusingly, the very body (of priests) that created rigour is the victim of it at the same time. "Sheepishly" following the herd is a victory for the boys. The grimness of life in the school is resolved; the final line is short, a blink in itself, and its words run counter to what one read before. One event, the raising of the cap, has made others follow. What stays in the reader's mind is the final line ("blinked, risked a human smile") rather than the overshadowing and glooming Cathedrals and religious differences.

The comparison of boys to "small soldiers" stands within the wider framework Montague tries to construct in *Time in Armagh*, for the experience of the Second World War in Armagh is part of and wrapped around the school experiences. This addition allows Montague first, to hint at a parallel between rigid school system and military harshness. Boys return to their "brisk, bell-dominated rule" ("Waiting" (*TA* 33)), wear uniforms and walk "in orderly formation" ("Extra Mural" (*TA* 23)). Secondly, Montague communicates the fear and fascination of the war years and tries to use his own experience as a starting point, as is subtly done in "A Bomber's Moon" (*TA* 18-19). Here he depicts the time in an air-raid shelter and extends his personal experience at the same time. Montague begins the prose poem rather unobtrusively with "Then"; a word that is out of place, considering what is at stake, but capturing that for the poet Armagh is connected naturally with the events of the Second World War: "Then there were the terrible nights when Belfast was bombed". The first paragraph describes the boys "Crouched" in the shelter. The speed increases, not only by referring

to the "hastily" built dwelling, but also because of the parataxis describing the attack, for they "awaited the shudder, the flash, the quick moment of extinction".

The following direct speech moves the past experience into the present, reinforcing the impact that this border-stage between life and death had on the boy: "'Oh, Lord,' I prayed, on my knees at the leaf-strewn entrance, 'let me not feel death, only die so suddenly that I will not know what it is all about'". That the entrance is "leaf-strewn" conjures up the speaker's feeling of loss conveyed in the image of "A stray leaf" in the poem "Guide". To pray is the only solution, a solution yet diminished by the image of air quivering and a plane zooming. Montague places the victims, the boys, towards the end of a long sentence after having focused on the threat from the sky. Despite having gone "away", the loud noise leaves the boys "staring at the sky, the silvered spires of the Cathedral". Moonlight is not a calming experience, but eruptive, as these nights are the "best" for bombing raids. A reflective comment focuses on the boy, and does so in an indirect way: "In that moment he had known everything". Images in a Lenten sermon are paralleled with the apocalyptic experience when entering the boy's inner thoughts. Finally, the word "Then" gives way to a releasing "Then the rising wail of the All Clear".

The second part of the poem deals with the aftermath of the attack with Montague intensifying the relief by direct speech: "'It's gone . . . .'". He repeats the phrase, as the boys say it in chorus. The role religion plays is intensified by the fact that the shelter, their "concrete cave", conjures up a candle-lit church. Heads are "turned (...) upwards (...) in thanksgiving", and the boys "turn" to read the Rosary "with relief". Montague suggests the impact of rituals in the release of the mind. In the face of death the act of praying is one reaction, as is chorusing and blessing. These procedures are sureties, opposed to the uncertainties that war brings. The poem itself seems to come full circle in employing another "then". Yet, Montague does not end at this stage, for he starts the next sentence with the word "As", indicating that something else takes place whilst (the priest's) praying:

> As he knelt, running the beads through his fingers with practised skill, he was aware of some menace, at the edge of his retina. From the vantage point he could see that,

although they themselves were safe and sound, the stain
on the Eastern sky was growing, like a bloodshot eye.

There is more to be experienced than moving from one point to the next, from one bead to the other. The "menace" is visible "at the edge", contrasting with and intruding on the habitual praying of the Rosary. Montague combines in the sentence the movement forward that the praying gives rise to and the intruding happenings outside. The eye cannot only look straight ahead, the preacher cannot help seeing to the side, for perception is too refined to be canalised. The alliteration in "they themselves" stresses the enclosure and rhetorically opens up to what follows afterwards, namely the fire visible "on the Eastern sky". The progressive form ("growing") gives the fire-imagery its impact and what was "at the edge" moves to the centre. The comparison with the "eye" shows how the external overshadows the scene. The edge of the priest's retina (his eye) is close to an enormous, threatening, red eye. This "bloodshot eye" is the image that remains in the reader's mind. And also his and the poem's invitation: "'Let us pray (...) for all the poor people of Belfast'". Now, the praying includes those outside the seminary, too. The prayer is the only action that can be taken for these. It is the poem's desperate cry for humanity. Montague underlines this issue by a concerted action. What is more, he moves beyond the mere school episode and communicates this by switching the pronoun from "I" to "us" in the poem.

At several points in the sequence Montague counterpoints the harshness of the time in Armagh with longings for community and images of unity as here. He gives the sounding of "grave Gregorian" with "the whole school" that "joined warmly in" in the poem "Deo Gratias" (*TA* 36), a group "united" against the priests in "Time in Armagh" (*TA* 30) or stresses "our" Tyrone accent in "Guide" (*TA* 16). The final poem, in particular, conveys a longing for unity and closure, as Montague ends: "Cathedral, / Enclosure and cloister, prow of lost surety, / Resound for me!" (*TA* 53).

From the poem's start the tone is intimate. The speaker begins with an address rather than a mere statement: "Cathedral, / I shape you in the air with my hands". He wants to leave a trace, even if it is just "in the air" and with his mere "hands". The hand shapes and is shaped by the memory; it writes and shapes the poem. Montague hovers between the conjuring up of childhood-memories and taking the shaping of words as a topic. Indeed, the poem itself does not hide its craftedness. The line lengths

alter and the shape of individual stanzas varies. At times one stanza flows into the other (enjambment between 2 and 3) and at other times the stanzas are closed in themselves. The atmosphere created in the last three lines of the first stanza is dominated by the wind that is "cutting" and "Counts the hours / With chill bursts of rain" [emphasis added]. The harshness of the external is intensified later by the word "iron" attributed to the church-bell. We are offered far more than a mere nostalgic recapturing of the poet's time in Armagh.

In the second stanza the speaker explicitly goes back to his boyhood and gives the monument a location:

> Cathedral,
> Tall-spired guardian of my childhood
> In the Ulster night,
> Over Saint Patrick's city
> The roofs are eyelashed with rain (...).

The Cathedral was his guardian in Armagh, a point of reference for him that he tries to re-create. One is referred back to the first poem "Guide" in which the speaker's longing for guidance from a present point of view is underlined in the last stanza ("Will you be there (...)?"). This final poem "Stone" draws together moods, themes and motifs from other poems in *Time in Armagh*. The atmosphere in the poem "Absence", where the speaker is also on his own, is similar to the one conjured up here and is reinforced by the reference to a "you" in the last line. Similarly, in the poem "Vigil" memory is triggered by sound, too.

Montague underlines the cathedral's domination in "Stone" through starting lines with "Tall-spired" and "Over". He addresses the monument and ends with an associative line bringing the intimate into the text again: "The roofs are eyelashed with rain". The rain merges with the eye, and tears and rain go together.[6] There is a connection of past and present. The counting of the hours before had anticipated the speaker's concern with past, present and future. The hand given in the first stanza finds another bodily feature in the eye of this stanza. Furthermore, the eyelash anticipates the

[6] For the water imagery, see also "All Legendary Obstacles" (*CL* 16) and "Last Journey" (*DK* 74-75).

woman whom the speaker longs for at the end of the poem. As with the activity of the hands that was set against the cutting wind, the tenderness in the final line of this second stanza is played against the swinging of the iron bell in the following line: "As the iron bell / Swings out again". The word "again" refers back to "rain". One looks upwards to the bells and hears the tones that are "Dwindling down a shaft of past / And present, to drown / In that throat of stone". The lines imitate the sounds of bells through their employment of different vowels, and communicate their slow dwindling within the walls of the tower. The "past / And present" mirror the switches between the past and the present that the speaker faces in the poem, for the past is given in stanza 2 whereas in the first one we seem to be in the present. The throat, connected with the hand and the eye, makes things drown, but is also an amplifier of sound.

What follows is a statement and conclusion at the same time and Montague is back in the present. The future is addressed both in the past and the present:

> I lived in Armagh in a time of war,
> The least conscious time of my life.
> Between two stones may lie
> My future self
> Waiting that you pass by.

The speaker faces the future that he considers to be hidden between two stones. As probed in "The Water Carrier" as well as in poems in *Mount Eagle*, Montague conjures up a third realm, "Between". What is more, the self waits and moves towards the other, a "you".[7] This movement overcomes the contrasts conjured up in the poem, intensified by the fact that the "you" becomes a "she":[8]

> If she pass by,

---

[7] The poem conjures up "Absence" (*TA* 41), in which the speaker longs for an other, "Shaping [his] lips to kiss her absence".

[8] In an earlier version of the poem, the poem "Cathedral Town" in the small collection *All Legendary Obstacles,* Montague only employs the pronoun "she": "I lived in Armagh in a time of war, / The most unconscious time of my life. / Between two stones may lie / My future life / Waiting that she pass by. // If she pass by / Dislodging the stone of my youth, / Cathedral of my childhood, / Shape of lost surety, / Witness for me". See John Montague, *All Legendary Obstacles* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1966) 14. In another earlier version of the poem he (merely) addresses the cathedral. See *PL77* 29.

Dislodging the stone of my youth,
Cathedral,
Enclosure and cloister, prow of lost surety,
Resound for me!

The cathedral is both enclosure and cloister, as seen in the poem's oscillation between intimacy and impersonality. It is a fixity and starting point for the imagination. Love together with sound has the final word. That love might be possible has kept the poet alive; it counterbalances the harshness now and might do so in the future. As in the love poem "Harvest", a parallel between boyhood (here childhood) and pure love is conjured up. In this stanza the "she" addressed and the intimate tone that was used to address the Cathedral subtly merge.

"Stone", together with "Conch" (*TA* 43), is a poem in which Montague extends the scope of his sequence. The poems Montague devotes to music and the healing power of sound in order to attempt to bridge a broken tradition come to mind, poems such as "The Country Fiddler" and "Hearth Song". It is worth noting that in "Stone" and "Conch" we find a relatively coherent "I", whereas in the school poem "Time in Armagh" Montague switches between "the boy", "Dopey", "I" and "we"; in several other poems he uses this technique of switching between selves. In "The Prophet" (*TA* 45) the oscillation between outsider and insider comes out in observing "an innocent from my lost townland", "our old American one". Additionally, a poem such as "*Peephole*" (*TA* 21) employs this split, here mirrored in "John and I". One may see this split and the overt statements in the sequence as indicative of Montague not having fully mastered this time in Armagh. Yet it is also a means of being true to the experience, finding a way to be distanced as well as involved. "Stone", in particular shows him at his best, transforming a personal event, playing with perspective, voice, pronoun (now an other, a "you"), longing for a reunion and being concerned with the "shaping" of poetry. Ending *Time in Armagh* on this "note" is a preparation for and anticipation of *Border Sick Call*.

II

Rather than employing a "Preface", Montague gives two quotations and a dedication before *Border Sick Call* and thereby establishes a balance between the personal and the general.[9] An intimate line reveals that the piece is devoted to the memory of the brother and "a journey in winter / along the Fermanagh-Donegal border". Montague makes use of another family member in his *oeuvre*; the elder brother Seamus is referred to in "The Figure in the Cave" as having "been born a medical student" and Montague briefly discusses the doctor-poet theme – John as poet, Seamus as doctor.[10] Having doctor and poet as protagonists hints at an old Irish tradition where the poet was medicine man, shaman and priest all in one person. Montague employs a journey in the frame once again, by making poet and doctor-brother visit patients in the border region. By citing Fats Waller and the poet Hayden Carruth who shout against "*ice*" and "*cold*", Montague ensures a move away from the merely biographical. He also anticipates the imaginative cold atmosphere created in the sequence itself.

Montague slows down to perception's pace in *Border Sick Call*. The more the sequence slows down, the more mysterious, but also the more enlightening the journey becomes. Its first word "Hereabouts" in fact anticipates the tension at work between knowable and unknowable. *Border Sick Call* starts with an adverb of place and conjures up a place. By the same token the attempt to define a location is taken back by the indeterminacy of "Hereabouts". The "abouts" blurs the point that "Here" suggests. The adverb hovers between the "somewhere" and the "here", between the definite "here" and the indefinite "everywhere", the area around a centre and the centre itself.

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[9] *BSC* has been mentioned in some reviews on *CP*. Eamonn Wall praises it: "Frequently, in volumes of collected poems, there is a tapering off towards the end; however, Montague's recent work is a welcome exception to this trend". Equally, Désirée Hirst stresses: "There is no better way to end this amazingly varied and powerful collection than with the 'Border Sick Call' (...) [in which] the poet is still able to show wit and humanity in the midst of poverty, receiving little help and support, yet showing an enduring stoicism". For R. T. Smith, *BSC* ranges amongst Montague's "finest" works, while Brian Lynch sees it as "profound and wise". Steven Matthews points out that it there is "a weariness" in *BSC* and *TA* and that they "add little to what Montague has already achieved". See Eamonn Wall, "A Second Tongue," *Shenandoah* 46.3 (1996): 118; Désirée Hirst, "The Poetry of John Montague," *Agenda* 33.3-4 (1996): 219-20; R. T. Smith, "To Do Penance and Rejoice," *Southern Review* 34.1 (1998): 104; Brian Lynch, "The Breaker of Moulds," *The Irish Times* 11 Nov. 1995: 9; Steven Matthews, "On Family Ground," *Times Literary Supplement* 2 Aug. 1996: 25.

[10] A few lines later Montague states about his own profession: "While I thought of becoming a civil engineer, slide rule and all, it had become obvious that my talents were literary". See "The Figure in the Cave," *FC* 4. Montague has hinted at the personal undercurrent of *BSC*. See Montague, personal conversation with the author, 15 May 1999.

Later on in the sequence Montague compares the place with a moon-like, "Antarctic *or* arctic" [emphasis added] landscape. Precision and indeterminacy are combined powerfully. In the opening the general is merged with the specific in the whole phrase: "Hereabouts, signs are obliterated, / but habit holds". Section I conjures up the violence in this place; the custom's post has been blown up twice and Montague's speaker wryly comments that "The personnel still smile / and wave back, / their limbs still intact". The rhyme mocks the very idea of intactness. Through the repetition of the adverb "still" Montague hints at the endurance of "The personnel", anticipating patients that will endure suffering, and he conveys the sheer absurdity that comes with entering this territory. This is underlined by bringing another voice into the text, a voice that reveals: "*Long years in France, / I have seen little like this*". The speaker admits his – spatial – distance to "*this*". France and Ireland are contrasted and connected; the poet tries to link present Ireland and past France via war, for he has not seen "*this*" apart from "le guerre Algerienne".

Rather than staying with war, as the reader may expect, the references to violence are transformed into a fighting with the circumstances of a wintry landscape. The visitors "sail" along the "salt-sprinkled" main road and over a "surface" that becomes all the more powerful by making the adjectives follow this noun: "bright, hard, treacherous". The fighting is made apparent by the "r"-sounds, for the car "rocks" and "ruts" are "ridged with ice". The sounds are closely packed, intensifying the difficulty of transport and establishing an air of expectation, as "silent folk wait and watch". Even a tractor tilts "helpless" in these roads, "slips and slopes / into a hidden ditch". Its "spinning" tyre parallels the helpless speaker. The brother, in contrast, is brought into focus by Montague through a crafted rhetoric, as the speaker stresses that the patients "wait and watch / for our, for your, arrival". The speaker acknowledges that it is the doctor's terrain to fight death and Montague intensifies the sense of separation his speaker feels in the earlier poem "Sick Call".[11] In this poem the speaker projects a feeling of isolation onto the landscape; he is isolated as the trees against the sky. *Border Sick Call* starts with a similar separation, but Montague moves a step further in the course of the sequence. The oscillation between a connotative and a

[11] The poem is dedicated to Séamus. The speaker waits outside whilst the brother cures a patient: "I tramped moodily back / And forwards in the snow // Meeting my own drowning / Footprints, as I turned, / Seeing, as the dog barked, / The trees, isolated and black / Against the grey, whirling / Bowl of the sky". See *PL77* 16.

denotative landscape is much more skilfully done, and the old poem not only thematically, but also technically magnified.

Montague's protagonists drown in the animation of inanimate objects, sighing branches and burdened hedges. In section II the external seems to control them:

> Shanks' mare now, it seems,
> for the middle-aged,
> marching between hedges
> burdened with snow,
> low bending branches
> which sigh to the ground
> as we pass, to spring back.
>
> And the figures fall back
> with soft murmurs of
> 'on the way home, doctor?'

The insertion of "it seems" underlines the insecurity with respect to the external; an external that becomes prone to be read as a psychological internal landscape. The passage, reminiscent of Kinsella's haunting "Downstream", foregrounds the encumbrance by starting a line with "burdened" and connecting this word by alliteration with "branches". The snow makes the branches bending down, they "sigh to the ground" and spring back. The people are described as mere "figures" and are strongly connected with the landscape, being "shades that disappear / to merge into the fields, / their separate holdings". Blurred and clear distinction, union and separation go hand in hand, too, as far as brother and speaker are concerned. In contrast to the speaker, the brother knows better where to go: "Only you seem to know / where you are going". Yet, whilst the brother gives practical help, a speaker helps in a different way through communicating with the people later on in the sequence.

The word "Only" employed in the quotation given above is used at several points in *Border Sick Call*, as, for instance, a few lines later in "only the so solid scrunch / and creak of snow crystals"; so, too, is "still", the word that had so prominent a position in "The Wild Dog Rose". In *Border Sick Call*'s icy environment sureties are

scarce, but what is left is all the more reliable and even continuous, as the accumulation of the word "again" further illustrates. These words convey the hope that, despite insecurities, something can be perceived and thus preserved.

The sight of a mountain tarn reveals a heightened perception and its consequences. The tarn has become "filmed with crisp ice", its surface transforms the concrete outer into the abstract inner, as it is

> a mirror of brightness,
> reflecting, refracting
> a memory, a mystery:
>
> > *Misty afternoons in winter*
> > *we climb to a bog pool;*
> > *rushes fossilised in ice.*
> > *A run up, and a slide –*
> > *boots score a glittering*
> > *path, until a heel slips*
> > *and a body measures its length*
> > *slowly on ice, starred with*
> > *cracks like an old plate.*

"[R]eflecting" and "refracting" both share in a remaking. Refracting is as much a creating as it is redistribution, even destruction. Also, memory and mystery are connected, the line transforming memory to mystery. The poetic act, so the line suggests, is more than memorising a reality at a moment in time, it is also a mystifying. Montague not only gives a memory in the memory when he speaks of sliding on ice, but also manages to intensify this "flash[ing]" (of "sunlight"), this sudden rise of a memory. It is reflected and refracted. Past and present are intertwined through the mirror imagery; the memory alludes to the personal, a childhood, as well as to the cultural: "*rushes fossilised in ice*". The time stands still, the poetical transformation captures the moment finding its height in "*a body [that] measures its length*". The poem, too, measures itself, spells out its self-reflexivity even at this early stage in the sequence. A new, unsuspected place comes into being. Lines later "*a memory of*

coldness" imprints itself onto the speaker's mind, echoing W. C. Williams' phrase "memory of whiteness" and the brooding on memory from Book 2 of *Paterson*:

> The descent beckons
>
> as the ascent beckoned
>
> Memory is a kind
>
> of accomplishment
>
> a sort of renewal
>
> even
>
> an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new
>
> places
>
> (...)
>
> and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory
>
> of whiteness .[12]

"For as a revitalisation of experience," so Walter Scott Peterson argues, commenting (partly) on this passage, "memory is itself a variety of that [original] experience. In bringing the particulars of the past over into the present, moreover, the imagination metamorphoses them into something new".[13] What Williams describes is acted out in Montague's italicised lines. In Montague the icy surface triggers the imagination. Montague's "refracting" captures what Williams conjured up. He reveals how the "new" unsuspected "place" comes into being in the course of the journey, magnifying the memory by slowing down the time. That the two texts are related manifests itself not only in the play with Williams's phrase "memory of whiteness", but furthermore by using "*the heart of whiteness*".

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[12] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 77-78. For a parallel between the two texts, see also O'Neill, "John Montague and Derek Mahon" 56.

[13] Walter Scott Peterson, *An Approach to Paterson* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967) 104-05. Peterson continues: "The spaces in the mind that such a revitalised and transfigured memory opens are peopled by new thoughts – thoughts 'heretofore unrealised', not only because a kind of recollection and re-collection in tranquillity allows more time for imaginatively grasping more of the memory's particulars, but also because subsequent experience will necessarily modify and supplement the past". See Peterson 105.

Moving from mere "*whiteness*" to its "*heart*" conveys entering an inner territory. It is a landscape that is no less intangible than the heart of darkness in Conrad's novel.[14] Montague ensures this secrecy also by placing abstract terms within an at first sight tangible landscape. Seeing a gate whilst climbing in the "wide, white world" is a "silvered statement". Even if Montague peoples the landscape with objects usually closely associated with it, the constructions ensure that these elements are surrounded by an air of mystery: from a deserted cottage "cattle / pear out, in dumb desolation". A crisp, death-ridden atmosphere finds its height also in the echo-chamber such as "'Hello,' we hallo, like strangers" in the third section. Sudden shifts in scripts and voices, at times of personal at times of cultural significance, add to the text's mysteriousness. The poet "*remember[s] how, in Fintona*" his brother "*devoured*" Dante by the fireside. The past is left behind by self-consciously paralleling Dante's purgatorial journey with the present one:[15]

> *But no purgatorial journey*
> *reads stranger than this,*
> *our Ulster border pilgrimage*
> *where demarcations disappear (...).* (section II)

Though in italics, the aspect of "*pilgrimage*" links two memories, two stanzas and indeed two texts. What is more, the text mimes that demarcations disappear, here between past and present. As in *Time in Armagh* Montague directly mentions Dante, and hovers between using him and establishing a distance ("But"). We come to know that the journey is a "*purgatorial*" one, but we are told that it is a rather "*strange*" one.

Contrasting the secrecy, the "dreamlike" and "sluggish", however are hopeful "signs" that Montague increasingly includes at several points in the sequence. The first

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[14] Overcoming the distance between the known and unknown, isolation and communion as well as unfavourable conditions connect Montague's text with Kafka's "Ein Landarzt" ["A Country Doctor"]. Kafka's narrator stresses that "eine dringende Reise stand mir bevor; ein Schwerkranker wartete auf mich in einem zehn Meilen entfernten Dorfe; starkes Schneegestöber füllte den weiten Raum zwischen mir und ihm" ["I had an urgent journey to make; a dangerously-ill patient awaited me in a village ten miles away; dense snow flurries filled the distance between myself and him"] and centres on a more abstract level on the repressed unconscious of the doctor depicted. See Franz Kafka, *Sämtliche Erzählungen,* ed. Paul Raabe (1970; Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987) 124. For the parallel to Kafka's story, see also Smith 194.

[15] Later on the "fireside" (the brother devoured Dante by the fireside) can be found in the cottage ("hearth", "flames") again. Past and present are connected in details.

one is the brothers' encounter with "a human figure" in section III. By allowing a reading-pause only at the juxtaposed "until", the meeting is skilfully suspended and consequently gains in impact. Despite being "shrunken" and "an old, old man", the figure they encounter is "agile" with the repetition of "old" reinforcing his age, but at the same time pointing towards his steadiness and doggedness. The man is a "potential guide", "pathfinder" and compared to a "lamplighter". He is syntactically, semantically and rhetorically at one with the landscape:

> We watch as our pathfinder,
> our potential guide, dwindles
> down the valley, steadily
> diminishing until
> he burrows,
> bolts under,
> disappears into,
> a grove of trees.

The text plays with connection and disconnection through its use of line-breaks. Whilst Montague conveys that the man belongs to this region, the figure drowns and disappears within the technical devices used.

Another positive sign is that the doctor can be "sure" of a "good welcome". Most importantly, in interior spaces light is given instead of reflected or absorbed. The inside of the small cottage that the brothers are led to is "shining" and "The fire laughs on the hearth", contrasting with the external vastness and coldness. The marginalised people in this region still have a hearth instead of the modern stove. Montague employs the element too to communicate his concern with tradition.[16] The brothers, characterised as "strangers", can catch a glimpse of it by visiting these houses, entering spheres where habits and traditions are still held onto; significantly, the people's

[16] Montague comments that in the house "the centre was the great blackened tent of the hearth, where the crook swung, supporting a hierarchy of pots and pans. (...) The hearth was also the focus of the strongest custom in Ulster farming communities, the habit of dropping in, for a visit or *ceilidh*, after milking time. One rarely knocked, your approached being heralded by the dog's bark, the shadow crossing the window". See "The Figure in the Cave," *FC* 25.

waiting for the doctor is characterised as a "ritual murmured demand". The lines set rituals against a coldness that is both external and internal.

Communication is shown as a means of lifting one veil of insecurity. In section IV the speaker converses with the host, who is "*still* pert with the weight of his eighty years" [emphasis added], before the host utters a key stanza:

> 'Border, did you say,
> how many miles to the border?
> Sure we don't know where it starts
> or ends up here, except we're lost
> unless the doctor or postman finds us.

Significantly, the border-line as such is unknown to the man, reinforced by employing "Sure" that is likewise an Irish colloquialism. Community is stressed ("we"), despite the loss and being "lost" the people have to face. What is more, the disappearance of demarcations mimed by the sequence before – in content, landscape and voice – becomes the subject of the conversation, on a different level. Continuity rather than borders is foregrounded: the host is delighted with an audience and offers old poteen, stressing that "not all is gone". The bottle, "Snug as an egg under a hen", has survived and constitutes a visible link between the region's past and present. The roles of doctor and patient are being reversed. The host becomes the one offering something to the visitors who come out to help his family. Bravery binds these men together. If the visitors respect the folk ("but still they resist"), they are also respected by these local people; the old man stresses that the brothers "were brave men to come".

After this exchange, Montague places the first climax of the sequence in section V. It is constitutive of the sequence that, rather than moving fully into clarity after this freeing conversation, it throws the speaker and the reader into the unknown once more. The section starts with the descent and "The same details of field, farm / unravelling once again". The repetition of "again" reinforces the brother's laborious task and the implied stoicism of the people. Despite the bright light, the atmosphere is "eerie" and of a sterile, "iceblue" quality. The "eerie (...) glow" of light is directly reflected and boosted by the sullen weight of snow, but then completely absorbed by the landscape; it is "boosted by the sullen weight / of snow on the hedges". Moreover, the adjectives

that dominate the imaginative landscape are not only "icy" and "frosty", but also "diamond-hard", later "metallic" and "stereoscopic". The flickering between an overwhelming outside world and a projection of inner perceptions onto the landscape contributes to the eeriness; so does the ambivalence of the actions of the brothers. Their tread is steady, but the employed "we" seems weak in comparison with the impressions of the external given. The doctor's incongruity is not only mentioned, but also conveyed through a perspective from above:

> The same details of field, farm
> unravelling once again, as the doctor
> plods on, incongruous in his fur boots
> (but goodness often looks out of place) (...).

The "goodness" is asserted in these resonant lines. It is saved within brackets. As if to underline how "out of place" it looks, the overall impression of a movement downwards is reinforced by twice juxtaposing "downhill" and letting a glacier *"sink"* its snow into the sea. The eye moves rapidly downwards. A distinct voice in italic script parallels Ireland with a glacier that is scooping down the face of Europe. The weight of the past is described by the glacier's *"sliding down (...) / to seep, to sink / its melting weight / into chilly seas"*. The stone and gravel are what is left until outer coldness is transformed into an inner, almost timeless state of consciousness. What remains is *"always within us – / a memory of coldness"*.[17]

It is however, at this coldest of points, that the following "detail" is perceived:

> Only one detail glints different.
> On that lough, where the sun burns
> above the silver ice, like a calcined stone,
> a chilling fire, orange red,
> a rowboat rests, chained in ice (...).

[17] Montague has directly worked the earlier poem "Northern" into *BSC*. In contrast to Montague's previous technique of re-contextualisation, the poem is fully integrated into the natural flow of the sequence, although italicised. This voice differs from the one in section I, but is similar to the one in section IV and is a voice in italics that is textual rather than colloquial. In *SD* "Northern" occurs in

A glinting stops the downward movement and with the mentioning of the sun the poem seems to have found a balance. After this suspense over four lines, the boat's surfacing comes in all the more powerfully. The boat has a special status. It contrasts with the setting conjured up before through its connection with the sun and orange red colour, and through the fact that it is "chained" and that the speaker sees it "only on the journey home". Montague conveys its ambivalence by the oxymoronic "chilling fire". Its resting suggests not only that it is not removable, but also that it is an element that makes one halt and go back, as is stressed in "The Hill of Silence" from *Mount Eagle*, to "perception's pace". This detail stands against the forward movement of the protagonists. It is a halt also for the eye. What is more, the speaker's emphasising that it is "'the small bark of my wit'" suggests a parallel between the boat and the poetic navigation.[18] This is a moment not only of halt in the journey, but also of poetic inspiration, despite and because of the fact that the boat that is "chained in ice", trapped, isolated. Though Montague underlined in *The Rough Field* "No Wordsworthian dream enchants me here", thereby distancing himself from as well as associating himself with Wordsworth, in *Border Sick Call* the Romantic poet resonates quietly through the lines, as when the speaker remembers moving on ice, echoing the skating-scene from *The Prelude*.

The text holds on to its more hopeful colouring. It is after the "detail" of the boat, after the epiphanic moment, that the speaker can "watch, as if an inward eye were opening, / details expand in stereoscopic brightness". An "inward eye" that is "opening" reveals the vision's impact. It is a moment strongly connected with wondering, waiting and watching:

> I wonder as my brother briefly disappears
> across the half-door of another house,
> leaving me to wait, as glimmers gather
> into the metallic blues of twilight,

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section III within the sequential poem "Coldness"; it stands in the vicinity of poems dominated by death and violence and is followed by a poem that recalls a human massacre.

[18] The line is to be found in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. See Dante Alighieri, "Purgatorio," trans. John D. Sinclair, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri,* vol. 2 (1939; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961) canto I, 19. In "Paradiso" it is referred to "a little bark". See Dante Alighieri, "Paradiso," trans. John D. Sinclair, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri,* vol. 3 (1939; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961) canto II, 33.

and watch (...).

The poem acts out in its dense lines what has just happened. The speaker-poet frees his boat. His perceptiveness comes out further in describing a buck hare; there is an oscillation between earth and air, ending with a view from above and features are seen as well as heard. The hare is

not trembling, unabashed,
before he bounds through the frozen grass,
a quick scatter of rabbits, while
a crow clatters to the lower wood,
above the incessant cries of the sheep herd.

A learning process is involved, for he could not "see (...) on the way up". Only later, after the exchange with the people and a facing of internal and external hardship can he see the details that matter most. He now stands within the diversity of things and actions, as the conjunction "while" reveals, and the prepositional phrasing with "before" and "above" adds to these parallelisms. Experience is recreated and details are ritualised in this rare moment of a rich poetic perception.

It is communication that Montague continues to offer as a surety; in section VI, after returning from the patient, the brother "unleashes" the tongue. This leads to his unexpected, abstract philosophical remark: "but the real border is not between / countries, but between life and death, / that's where the doctor comes in". Montague's employment of the doctor here ensures a magnification of the border-topic beyond the mere geographical. What follows is the brother's description of the people's unceasing fight against death, conveyed technically by the plosive diction:

'But the pain is endless,
you'd think no one could endure it,
but still they resist, taste the respite,
until the rack tightens again
on the soiled, exhausted victim.'

The suffering "victim" suggests the family's and by extension the community's state, communicated also through the pronoun "they"; it is a state both of pain and endurance. Within the sequence, both the entering of the unknown territory and the holding on to signs, be they communication, light, or "detail" has on a rather different level shown what is at stake here. It is nothing less than fighting death.

The key lines of the sequence follow:

> *But the poem is endless,*
> *the poem is strong as our weakness,*
> *strong in its weakness,*
> *it will never cease until it has said*
> *what cannot be said.*

It is poetry itself that Montague comes to address and offer in the face of death: Montague manages to combine the brother's remark with that of "*the poem*", and the specific with the abstract. Italic script and normal script are connected and intertwined through the similarity of the stanzas' opening lines. The parallel evokes a semantic relationship between "pain" and "*poem*"; the poem carries (endless) pain endlessly. Despite the difference in script, pain and poem, death and poetry are intertwined. Here it becomes visible that the poem turns on itself. Even before, a body measured its length, the poem mentioned forms that disappear, and gave a reference to reading. The speaker, in the midst of voices, external and internal allusions, new experience, and confronted with death, can find in the poem a means of approaching death: with, in and along the lines of the poem, *"it will never cease until it has said / what cannot be said*". It is a difficult, almost impossible task, a paradox, for the poem is "*strong in its weakness*". Here, the poem is – on an abstract level – summarising what it tried to register before. It tries to describe and come close to mystery, to death, indeed to "*what cannot be said*". What we have been offered was the fight of the sequence to address the mystery, that which can hardly be addressed, whilst still offering hopeful signs.

Most importantly, the sequence turns out to address poetry itself. A poem, a sequence, Montague suggests, is weak in comparison with the burden or mystery around, but strong in its weakness. It might bring its own kind of healing, light or sign; *"it will never cease"*. Montague hints at the problematic issue that the people at the

border, at the margin, face. Poetry may enlighten the way they live. Yet he also admits how weak poetry is in doing so, for it cannot directly change the suffering. It is weak in that respect, even "chained" as the boat is, and only a constant trying and certain stoicism may make a difference.

The sequence shows poetry's attempt to bring the mystery, that lies in the plurality of things and the "incompatible" into a poetic form.[19] When it comes to life and death the task is even harder. Montague anchors in a "*homely detail*", yet the following stanzas also show a struggle to face the unsayable – death – in language. By evoking it in the poem, Montague in fact finds a way to address it. The present world is set against "*another*" which "*they*" only have "*heard tell of*" through religion or seen in dream. People are "lacking a language" to face death. It is "this terrible thing, / a forbidden subject, a daily happening, / pushed aside until in comes in". Even in the world of religion or dreams one is distanced from "it", as "*uneasily*" emphasises. The doctor recollects his first encounter with the dying, but a hesitation to tell the episode in the sick-room is emphasised by putting the description in brackets. The memory is vivid, the brother remembers the "smell" of the room.

Montague extends this account by alluding to genealogy within the brother's story, taking up a theme and similar image from his earlier poem "The Centenarian" (*CL* 44):

> All afternoon we assemble, a cluster
> of children, grand-children, great-
> grand-children, in-laws like myself
> come to celebrate this scant haired
> talkative old lady's
> long delaying action against death.

Whereas "The Centenarian" is related to the process of industrialisation with technicians arranging cables for "sound", in *Border Sick Call* the balance is shattered by the fact that there is no recognition between man and woman, a symptom Montague reinforces by the alliteration in "back" and "broken". Relationships and "habits" and

[19] The word "incompatible" is used by MacNeice in "Snow". See MacNeice 30.

values within the family and community are about to break, the tree, the nourishing, firm base is in danger: "Three generations, and the tree shaking". When the speaker is referring to "lost places" one recalls earlier poems centring around communal values, death and suffering. There is his melancholy tone in the evocation of Ulster echoing in poems such as "A Grafted Tongue" and "A Lost Tradition" from *The Rough Field*, or a poem such as "Red Branch " in *The Dead Kingdom*. In *Border Sick Call* the family still gathers and lost places are places not yet spoilt by the consequences of modern, urban life (see "no television") in which generation are separated from one another.

In section VII the text offers another and a final visit. Whilst adding a sign of hope in brackets – "(out of the darkness, they gather to your goodness)" –, a "shade" and a "tangled" path have to be mastered. As in section III the inside is a place of warmth and dominated by light and the "Nursing" qualities of the host. Yet switching viewpoint to the children's perspective also underlines the incongruity of the brothers, for they are strangers, alien and "from Mars". Moreover, silence dominates the inner-scene, the "little ones" just "stare". In detail the speaker describes an interior that is without modern equipment. The silencing continues, for there is "no more conversation" after the doctor is finished. Suffering silences. The poem itself moves into the unspeakable, as the phrase lacks a verb and breaks into the line. The only perceivable sound is that of the gate that "scringes on its stone". The landscape, despite being described as "sheltering", still features remains of the world of icicles. Yet "a bright crop of stars" expands the sight:

> and a silent, frost-bright moon
> upon snow crisp as linen
> spread on death or bridal bed;
> blue tinged as a spill of new
> milk from the crock's lip.

The last two lines suggest a renewal, a holding on to something new, a nurturing quality, as the "new milk" suggests. Silence is slowly turned into a new, calm resting. The image combines the outer, the snowy landscape, and an inner world of covering (linen) with the moon bridging the gap between the two. From the mirror that reflects and refracts light, to the boat that glints, the lamplighter, the shining cottage and the

hearth, the "slight steam" that rises from the socks, and a candle, we come to the crop of stars.

"Another mile, our journey is done. / The main road again" signals the end of entering a mysterious, but also enlightening territory. In this final section, several elements register the complex shades of the journey conjured up before. First, the brothers are back to their "space machine" which is now their shelter (they sit "cocooned", their "engine warms"), but which is perceived as "strange" at first glance, reminding of and reversing the strangeness at the start of the sequence. Second, the car has become part of the landscape, in its being covered with snow and in its disappearing form. The engine is the first sound the brothers hear, then it is the beat of the wipers, steady, as a metronome. One is back to (time-) measurements again. A few lines later, however, the speaker's exclamation breaks into the calm reporting: "Brother, how little we know of each other! / Driving from one slaughter to another". The line conveys the internalisation that has taken place. The striking word "slaughter" also underlines the brothers' and patients' fight against harsh conditions and death. Echoing *The Rough Field,* the section might conjure up a landscape, scarred with slaughters, personal and historical. Equally, the line may refer to the speaker's remembrance of their driving from the sick region back to the world beyond the custom post. He may regard this as driving from one slaughter to another and indeed questioning whether there is any real difference between these two realms.

Although the alignment and the end-rhyme link the line "Driving from one slaughter to another" with the preceding "Brother, how little we know of each other!", syntactically it does not belong to it, but rather to something the speaker remembers vividly:

> Driving from one slaughter to another
>
> Once, you turned on the car radio
> to hear the gorgeous pounding rhythms
> of your first symphony: Beethoven.
>
> The hair on your nape crawled.
> Startled by the joy, the energy,

the answering surge in your own body.

In the face of suffering, unexpected affirmation.
For hours we've been adrift from humankind,
navigating our bark in a white landlocked ocean.

Suffering and art, here music, are connected. Music gives energy and reveals inner energy, nourished by suffering. The brothers seem to have managed to understand each other better in this extreme situation and this border-like journey started a process of education, a process of seeing, of encountering the unexpected. The text draws together its sudden shifts, and its moving from unknowable to knowable and vice versa: "In the face of suffering, unexpected affirmation". The line itself opens up several paths of interpretation. It not only refers to the brothers, but also to the will of the people in the region to endure. Again and again the people resist, again and again the poem attempts to affirm. That the tasks are difficult, shows in the questions raised towards the end of the section: "Will dogged goodwill solve anything?" Montague does not hide his scepticism, but his lines also uphold the hope to heal wounds, to find a path within the mystery towards light. *Border Sick Call* is similar to the piece of Beethoven that the brother, in fact, listens to. It is a piece of art which combines suffering and healing. Or, to use Montague's own words: "poetry redeems suffering, like Beethoven's *Ninth*".[20]

In contrast to *Time in Armagh*, Montague uses the Dantean *terza rima* only in this last section. In *Border Sick Call* it is not so much the form that reminds of Dante, but some aspects in content and detail. Montague reworks these on a small scale, makes them modern and they serve him to extend the journey beyond the autobiographical. As in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, ascent and descent play an important role in *Border Sick Call*. Other Dantean devices are the relevance of light, of sun and stars, the weight of the landscape on people, the carved marble in canto X, the mirror image in canto IX, gates, the walk in the hedges, the lonely plain and the employment of a landscape populated with various animals. Dante's purgatorial mountain where tasks have to be accomplished hovers in the background, especially with regard to the educational aspect for the two brothers. The difficulty of brother

[20] John Montague, "Q. and A. with John Montague," interview with Kevin T. McEneaney, *Irish Literary Supplement* 4.1 (1985): 31.

Seamus's task and the fighting against bad conditions is made transparent by the old man's remark: "You were brave men to come". Similarly, an angelic guide in Dante points out with respect to the mountain that not many people come there: "To this bidding they are very few that come".[21] The aspect of "pilgrimage" is directly mentioned in connection with Dante in the remembrance of the poet's brother who "*devoured Dante by the fireside*". The *Purgatory* is referred to a few lines later, and a citation in section V is from the opening of this very part: "To course over better waters *the little bark of my wit* now lifts her sails, leaving behind her so cruel a sea, and will sing of that second kingdom where human spirit is purged and becomes fit to ascend to Heaven" [emphasis added].[22]

At variance with Hell the purgatorial place is a "spatially and topographically unspecific realm", not in "easy reach of the habitable world".[23] The unspecific in Montague's text has been hinted toward by the opening "Hereabouts", and the landscape is a rather deserted one, indeed away from the habitable world. The pilgrimage to a specific place is conjured up and questioned at the same time in the last line of the sequence: "But in what country have we been?" The strangeness of the place in Dante comes out when Virgil answers the "new people": "'You think, perhaps, we are acquainted with this place, but we are strangers like yourselves (...)'".[24]

Brother and poet parallel Virgil and Dante with the former functioning as "guide". Only the brother "seem[s] to know where [he is] going" in the second section. The doctor is more accustomed with the place, but, as the verb "seem" already anticipates, even he has his limits. Both of them need "pathfinder[s]" or "lamplighter[s]" in order to find their way and to help. In Dante's text Virgil needs others to show him the way or the sun leads him. Hence he has his limits, too. The relationship between guide and the one who is guided is not without doubt. Likewise, a distance is sometimes felt between the two brothers in *Border Sick Call* and it reaches the surface in section VIII. On the one hand one reads "In the face of suffering, unexpected affirmation". On the other hand the speaker remarks: "Brother, how little we know of each other!" The two came closer together, as did Dante and Virgil. But

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[21] Dante, "Purgatorio" canto XII, 159.
[22] Ibid. canto I, 19.
[23] Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "Introduction to *Purgatorio*," *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) 193.
[24] Dante, "Purgatorio" canto II, 35.

revelation is only to oneself, and the "seeing" is something one can be helped, but one finally has to see oneself. Virgil is a transitional guide and his task ends once Beatrice is reached. Virgil remarks about the potentiality of his guidance:

> 'I have brought thee here with understanding and with skill. Take henceforth thy pleasure for guide. Thou hast come forth from the steep and the narrow ways. See the sun that shines on thy brow (...). No longer expect word or sign from me. Free, upright and whole is thy will and it were a fault not to act on its bidding; therefore over thyself I crown and mitre thee.'[25]

Dante has several visions during the journey, an aspect that also counts for the poet in Montague, reinforced by the voices in italics. What is more, however, the journeys are both journeys of reunion. In the *Purgatory* dispersed communities and broken families are united as well as the individual with his Creator; these reunions are spiritual, political, linguistic or even moral.[26] The old friends Dante and Casella are brought together (canto II) and the political enemies Rudolf I and Ottokar II are united (canto VII) and, according to Schnapp, "codes of civility (...) are reborn", namely "courtesy, hospitality, honor, respect, compassion, and piety".[27] In *Border Sick Call* the brothers communicate with the people, are sure of a "good welcome" and can warm themselves on their hearth. Here, however, these values are not so much gone, as they are forgotten. The visit brings them back to consciousness. Old traditions and "rituals" are revived, such as drinking poteen or focusing on the family who is together with the dying. This illumination seems one of the outcomes of the journey. One could also call it "rebirth" and would then be close to Dante once again.

Poetry itself is reborn in Dante where there is the wish that dead poetry rises again in the *Purgatory* ("But here let poetry rise again from the dead").[28] In Montague's self-reflexive passage in section VI it is stressed that poetry does not cease to say what cannot be said. What Schnapp sums up with regards to the *Purgatory* is a hope for Montague: All the arts are "'reborn' by becoming regenerative tools,

[25] Dante, "Purgatorio" canto XXVII, 357.
[26] Schnapp 197.
[27] Ibid. 198.
[28] Dante, "Purgatorio" canto I, 19.

instruments of salvation, torches that illumine, sparks that kindle other sparks".[29] Significantly, Montague's last section shows the brother listening to music, and being "Startled by the joy, the energy, / the answering surge in [his] own body".

As in the sequence as a whole, in its final line we find echoes of certainty as well as uncertainty; Montague leaves the reader with a "strange" note. There is no view towards a paradise, but rather a backward look, another question: "But in what country have we been?" The pronoun "we" includes not only the doctor-brother and poet, but the readers, too. Where have we been? Whereas in Dante goodness leads to Beatrice's Eden, Montague is "thoughtful", as Carruth's word anticipates. The poem refers and reflects back on itself. It does not end in the manner of the earlier journey *The Dead Kingdom* that came "home", nor in The *Rough Field*'s admission that all is "gone". In *Border Sick Call* Montague leaves us with a "But" and a question, despite the fact that his protagonists reach the main road in the frame. The journey is circular, yet also open. *Border Sick Call* asks the reader to brood over the term "country". Montague has not used nation, or place, but country. In doing so, he includes a geographical concern, but he also addresses a philosophical one. Have we been in death's country or the one of life, or indeed somewhere in between? Was this a dream or reality? Or, have we been in an aesthetic, imagined place, in memory or the realm between text and pretext(s)? Montague is not specific. Most importantly, the question sends the reader back to the text. It intensifies the fact that this has been a journey into poetry, the imagination, the landscape of the poem itself. Similarly, it is Montague's attempt to "speak of" what cannot be spoken of, what raises more questions than answers: death. He speaks as much of the stretch along the Fermanagh-Donegal border where it reigns as of the heartland of poetry that tries to overcome it. *Border Sick Call* burdens, but purges, too. Montague confronts the reader with a "whiteness" of immense connotation and the reader re-enacts the difficulty of the poet and doctor in his crossing the wide ocean of signs, voices and pretexts. And the reader crosses the sound barrier with the poet as the latter tries to face the border between life and death by filling the white page. Questions remain, but some progress has been made. Montague plays in *Border Sick Call* with concrete and abstract, locality and universality, using various voices as well as intertextual devices in a subtle manner. Within his *oeuvre*, Montague gives a journey that is at once the most literal and the most abstract journey. *Border Sick Call*

[29] Schnapp 199.

as a whole can be seen as the state "in between". The sequence is the border-landscape. It is the poetry of the border-country, but also the border-country of poetry.

In *Border Sick Call* Montague manages to condense and extend his earlier concerns. He goes some way to approaching what he admires in Dante, "the way he unites lyric and narrative".[30] Montague has tried to combine the two, most notably in *The Rough Field,* and he now brings them together by shaping a strong story-line through eight dense poems. *Border Sick Call* constitutes another work in which he employs autobiographical material; Montague returns to a family member, the brother, and to people who live on the margin of society, as conjured up in "Like Dolmens Round My Childhood, the Old People". He offers, in the midst of near-tragic awareness, "liftings" towards light, giving a variation on themes in *A Chosen Light* and on several of his love poems from *The Great Cloak.* And *Border Sick Call* echoes the "liftings" of poems such as "Knockmany" and "The Hill of Silence" in *Mount Eagle.* Moreover, the sequence reinforces this earlier collection's stoicism, as the employment of "still" and "again" underlines. *Border Sick Call* shows the poet as searcher and navigator: a theme that has had a prominent role in his poetry. As discussed in chapter 1 and particular in chapters 4 and 5, the poet and poetry surface powerfully in his work. In *Border Sick Call* he condenses these broodings on poetry and affirms poetry's strength: the poem is "*strong in its weakness*". Montague plays with two realms (here mystery and light), a concern that has preoccupied him very differently in the contrasts within both *Forms of Exile* and *Poisoned Lands. Border Sick Call* is a discussion of fundamental questions, is in its own way about "crossing" spheres, a theme central to *Mount Eagle.* Above all, as in much of his finest works, the sequence offers nothing less than an exploration of the process of secrecy and discovery that is "*the poem*".

[30] John Montague in a letter to William Cookson. See William Cookson, editorial, *Agenda* 34.3-4 (1996/97): 3.

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