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John Montague: Global Regionalist?

Elmer Kennedy-Andrews

BORN IN BROOKLYN IN 1929, shipped back at the age of 4 to County Tyrone, where he was raised by his paternal aunts while his elder brothers stayed with their natural mother seven miles away, John Montague from an early age knew all about feelings of rejection, dispossession and exile. From his childhood Garvaghey home, to boarding-school in Armagh, to University College Dublin, then Yale, various American universities as poet and teacher, three years in Paris as correspondent for the *Irish Times*, back to Dublin in 1967, then sixteen years teaching in University College Cork interspersed with frequent visits to America and France – he continues to lead a mobile life, with bases in France, Cork and New York. Experience and outlook have combined, Montague claims, to make him the quintessentially modern Irish poet:

My amphibian position between North and South, my natural complicity in three cultures, American, Irish and French, with darts aside to Mexico, India, Italy or Canada, should seem natural enough in the later twentieth century as man strives to reconcile local allegiances with the absolute necessity of developing a world consciousness to save us from the abyss. Earthed in Ireland, at ease in the world, weave the strands you're given.¹

Reacting against both extremes of a closed regionalism (which he simplistically associates with Frost and Heaney) and a boundless globalism (as exemplified by Pound), Montague insists:

the real position for a poet is to be global-regionalist. He is born into allegiances to particular areas or places and people, which he loves, sometimes against his will. But then he also happens to belong to an increasingly accessible world ... So the position is actually local *and* international.²

¹ John Montague, *The Figure in the Cave* (Dublin 1989) pp. 18–19.

² Adrian Frazier, 'Global Regionalism: Interview with John Montague', *The Literary Review*, 22 | 2 (Winter 1972) pp. 153–74: 17.

The rootedness is clearly evident in the loving, Kavanagheseque attention to the local and particular; the internationalism, spurred on by a desire to free Irish poetry from Yeatsian orthodoxies and make it responsive to changing social conditions, is largely shaped by the influence of the great American experimentalists – Pound, Williams, Olson, Duncan, Snyder, Berryman and Roethke – whom Montague has claimed as ‘kindred spirits’. Steven Matthews, remarking on Montague’s deep eclecticism, praises ‘a steely modernity matched in Ireland only by that of Thomas Kinsella from the South’, and characterises Montague, in contradistinction to the ‘beautiful pieties of a Heaney or a Longley’, as a ‘modern poetics of failure, of failure to return to those roots and origin which inspire the romanticism of some of the younger poets’.³ Edna Longley similarly emphasises Montague’s importance as a moderniser: ‘More than any poet of his generation he opened up channels between the Irish and English tradition, between regional and cosmopolitan allegiances, between Ulster and Irish perspectives.’⁴ But how much of a challenge to narrow definitions of Irish poetry does Montague’s own work really represent? And just how inclusive is Montague’s localism, especially when it aspires to public poetry?

* * *

Like Heaney, Montague continually looks back to childhood and the idea of a sacral world which, as Heaney put it, still retained ‘some vestigial sense of place as it was experienced in the older dispensation’.⁵ Both poets present a totemistic, hieratic, legendary landscape ‘instinct with signs’ of folkloric belief. This sense of place, Heaney has suggested, is ‘the foundation for a marvellous or a magical view of the world, a foundation that sustained a diminished structure of lore and superstition and half-pagan, half-Christian thought and practice’.⁶ Montague’s sequence of nature poems, ‘A Slow Dance’ (in the 1975 collection of that name), begins with Sweeney’s ‘slow dance’ in celebration of a wet, green, silent world, and ends with ‘For the Hillmother’, which echoes both early Irish nature poetry and the Marian litany. The second item in Montague’s sequence is the prose poem, ‘The Dance’, strong echoes of which are found in Heaney’s prose piece, ‘Mossbawn’ (1978). Lost in the peadrills, Heaney remembers ‘a green web, a caul of veined light, a tangle of rods and pods, stalks and tendrils, full of assuaging earth and leaf smell, a sunlit

³ Steven Matthews, ‘On Family Ground’ [review of *Collected Poems*], *TLS*, 2 Aug. 1996, p. 25.

⁴ Edna Longley, *Selected Poems* (London 2001), cover blurb.

⁵ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Sense of Place’, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London 1980) p. 133.

⁶ *Ibid.*

lair'.⁷ His close, sensuous relation with the landscape is described in terms of 'betrothal', 'initiation' and rebirth: Montague uses a similarly mystical language to describe 'the dance' which draws its inspiration and power from nature: 'Then the dance begins, cleansing, healing ... the earth begins to speak ... In wet and darkness you are reborn.' In Montague's poem 'The Northern Gate' (*Tides*, 1971), the speaker 'tried to follow' the owl into the rural night, into the pagan, folkloric Gaelic past, into a mental landscape beyond the gate which separates town and country, the *pagus* from the civilised world. The gate gives access to the 'North', the dark and troubled home ground of the poet's childhood, the atavistic depths of his own being. Out of his fleeting perceptions of the owl, the speaker imagines a 'feathered ghost', a spirit of place who occupies the space between dream and reality. Heaney, too, in 'The King of the Ditchbacks' follows the 'trespasser' Sweeney, taking a path through a barred gate into the marginal pagan and cultural Gaelic ground, just as in earlier poems he had been drawn into the trail of the servant boy or the 'geniuses who creep out of every | corner of the woodes and glennes' in 'Bog Oak'. In 'The King of the Ditchbacks' the speaker is 'translator' as well as 'trespasser', reading in the signs of the rural landscape an ancient Gaelic text, a dark, othered sensibility: 'just beyond the hedge | he has opened a dark morse | along the bank'. If, as Montague says, 'the whole landscape [is] a manuscript | We had lost the skill to read', poems such as 'The Northern Gate' and 'The King of the Ditchbacks' are doors into the dark, into the cave of night, the dark kingdom, the green world of the mythic past.

In dedicating 'The King of the Ditchbacks' to Montague, Heaney associates the older poet with the spirit of Sweeney, the pioneer who sought to move beyond the accepted limits. Both poets have identified with the mythic, hag-ridden wild man who was in conflict with the Church and in touch with the earthy forces, but Montague is anxious to out-Sweeney Heaney. In his review of Heaney's *Sweeney Astray*, 'Tarzan Among the Nightingales', he criticises Heaney for being too 'literary' and not 'lunatic' or 'wild' or 'Irish' enough: 'he does not, it seems to me, possess the crucial gift or wound of a grafted tongue; part of his mind does not think naturally in Irish ... his concern is more with the effect in English than the force of the Irish ... Although he may live in a lunatic land, Seamus Heaney seems to me eminently sane, both as man and poet.'⁸ For Montague, Mad Sweeney is 'the secret genius behind not only Irish but modern literature in English, a lunatic note undermining our sense of reality'.⁹

⁷ 'Mossbawn', *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁸ 'Tarzan Among the Nightingales', *Fortnight*, 200 (Dec. 1983) p. 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Inscribed in a traditional rural culture and a pagan, Catholic metaphysics, the imagination of both Heaney and Montague is deeply scored by awareness of loss and change. Their poetry stems from a nostalgic, elegiac ‘backward look’. Both write poems about traditional rural folkways, about mummers, water-carriers, forges, about places and place names as the bearers of history and ancestry, about the ‘heart land’ (the title of a recent Montague poem), about neighbours, local people and family members. Like Heaney, Montague continually returns to his personal past, *à la recherche du temps perdu*. Just as Heaney found in the felled chestnut tree a memory ‘ramifying forever’ (‘Clearances’ 8), so for Montague the loss of his mother is ‘a flowering absence’: memory and imagination are magical faculties through which absence is converted into presence, loss and emptiness into plenitude. In ‘A Graveyard in Queens’, Montague keeps faith with family despite dispersal and death. ‘First Landscape, First Death’, from his most recent collection, *Drunken Sailor* (2004), evokes memories of a dead father, a dead aunt, a dead neighbour. But this landscape also affords ‘gentle nourishment’ and ‘still gives solace’. Though the poet moves ‘light-footed between | cities’, he is ‘stopped suddenly by | the sight of some distant hill | or curving twilight river, to see | on a ghostly mound, my abiding | symbol, a weathered standing stone’. As Heaney’s imagination was grounded in his notion of the omphalos, so Montague’s is centred on the dolmen – the ‘weathered standing stone’. In Montague’s poetry, as in Heaney’s (but not in Kavanagh’s), landscape has a cultural and political meaning. Both Montague and Heaney see themselves as the custodians and celebrants of a lost culture, a lost history and heritage; for both, identity is profoundly embedded in ancestral terrain and native culture. In times of doubt, Montague takes it upon himself to reaffirm the lost centre, as he does in dedicating his finely worked poem ‘Hearth Song’ to Heaney who, in *The Place of Writing*, had lamented the loss of the hearth in Irish homes:

the transition from a condition where your space, the space of the world had a determined meaning and a sacred position, to a condition where space was a neuter geometrical disposition without any emotional or inherited meaning. I watched it happen in Irish homes when we first saw a house built where there was no chimney, and then you’d go into rooms without a grate – so no hearth, which in Latin means focus.¹⁰

Montague’s answering poem affirms continuity with the past, and does so in the same way as Heaney does, through a redemptive, healing aesthetic, symbolised by the cricket ‘throbbing and trembling in darkness | a hearth song of happiness’:

¹⁰ Seamus Heaney, *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta, Ga. 1989) p. 71.

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.

Compare Heaney's attentiveness to his whispering landscapes, or his intuition of the 'undersong' in the 'Lightenings' section of *Seeing Things*:

Beneath the ocean of itself, the crowd
 In Roman theatres could hear another
 Stronger groundswell coming through ...
 ('Lightenings' iv)

In both Heaney and Montague there is the consolation of a deeper, truer life going on beneath the public world of history and politics. Rather than presenting history in linear terms as something developing towards a predetermined goal, both poets concentrate on a present moment still in touch with its depth.

But Montague is aware of the dangers of sentimentality in the 'backward look'. He refuses to acquiesce unquestioningly in the received myth. 'The Source' (*The Rough Field*, 1972), dramatises the attempt to return to 'the central heart' of the landscape, provocative of childhood memories and ancient myth ('ancient trout of wisdom', 'bird of all knowledge'). But Montague unceremoniously dispels the atmosphere of hushed awe and reverence in which Heaney communes with mystery. In 'Kinship' (*North*, 1975), Heaney's quasi-sexual intrusion of the spade into the bog – 'As I raised it | the soft lips of the growth | muttered and split, | a tawny rut | opening at my feet | like a shed skin, | the shaft wettish | as I sank it upright' – brings him to 'the edge of centuries, where he stands 'facing a goddess'. Contrastingly, Montague's journey to 'the source' takes place in a debased context of drunken debauchery, in which we find the poet 'plung[ing]' and 'crash[ing]' boisterously through the darkness, 'singing | In a mood of fierce elation'. His probing of the dark depths of 'a pool of ebony water' is described with the same kind of erotic intensity that we find in Heaney ('Legend | Declared a monster trout | Lived there, so I slipped | A hand under the fringe of | Each slick rock, splitting | The skin of turning froth'), but Montague finds 'nothing' – 'nothing but that | Wavering pulse leading to | The central heart where | The spring beat, so icy-cold'. He rejects the temptations of 'legend', suggesting that meaning depends not on the collective myth-kitty or traditional lore but on the individual's direct imaginative engagement with the world. Penetration to 'the source' involves making

oneself susceptible to nature's magic, a prerequisite for which is the suspension of rational mind – 'The seventh state of drunkenness', a heightened or defamiliarised state of awareness which the poet celebrates elsewhere in poems such as 'The Hag's Cove' (*Drunken Sailor*). The resources of personal memory and imagination succeed where collective mythology fails: 'As I plod | Through the paling darkness | Details emerge, and memory | Warms'.

Much of the interest of Montague's poetry lies precisely in his ambivalent attitude to both tradition and modernity. The poet is both absorbed in and distanced from his home place. Poetry can, as Heaney put it, 'continue, hold, dispel, appease';¹¹ but the imagination is wayward, it is a potentially destabilising force, as likely to undermine as to confirm cherished ideas, images and myths. Like Heaney in 'Terminus' ('Two buckets were easier carried than one | I grew up in between'), Montague is caught between two worlds, life and art. In 'The Water-Carrier', Montague's speaker is 'balanced as a fulcrum between two buckets', drawing water from the spring, a symbol of poetic inspiration rooted in his childhood memories of rural Ulster: 'Recovering the scene, I had hoped to stylise it, | Like the portrait of an Egyptian water-carrier'. But he recognises that mere recollection and reflection are not enough. Experience only achieves its full meaning when reality is impregnated by imagination:

I sometimes came 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 Stevensian 'fictive water' is a 'living source' because it springs from actual experience. Memory is inevitably a creative, fictionalising, mythologising (and potentially falsifying) faculty. The great challenge is not to let rhetoric displace reality. In 'Tim', Montague praises the old horse for 'denying rhetoric with your patience, | forcing me to drink | from the trough of reality'. But while committing himself to 'reality' – 'the struggle with casual | Graceless unheroic things' – the poet recognises art's ritualising function. In 'Bright Day', 'the only way of saying something | Luminously as possible' is not through 'the accumulated richness | Of an old historical language', but 'a slow exactness | Which recreates experience | By ritualising its details'. Thus, if poems such as 'The Shan Bhean Bhocht' and 'The Wild Dog Rose' move towards emblem and ritual, the mythicising impulse is rooted in carefully observed realistic portraiture which produces something rather different from traditional nationalist iconography. Memory

¹¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Clearances', in *The Haw Lantern* (London 1987).

supplies, not romantic female images of traditional Ireland, but pictures of crazed and lonely old people whom the poet has known – Maggie Owens, Mary Moore, Mary Mulvey. In ‘Like Dolmens Round My Childhood’, the poet begins with affectionate close-up re-creation of the past and then pulls back to reconfigure the realistic details into ritual and symbol, thereby achieving some measure of control over the raw and often difficult facts of experience:

Fomorial fierceness of family and local feud.
Gaunt figures of fear and friendliness,
For years they trespassed on my dreams,
Until once, in a standing circle of stones,
I felt their shadows pass
Into the dark permanence of ancient forms.

‘Old Mythologies’ (the title taken from Yeats’s ‘The Coat’ – ‘I made my song a coat | Covered with embroideries | Out of old mythologies’) debunks the heroic imagery of nationalist myth, reimagining the ancient Gaelic warriors ‘To bagpiped battle marching, | Wolfhounds, lean as models, | At their urgent heels’. As Seamus Deane remarks: ‘Montague claimed that Kavanagh “liberates us into ignorance”, by which he meant, among other things, that he liberated a whole generation of Irish writers from the erudite, the esoteric and the sometimes overpowering mythological systems of the writers of the revival.’¹² Montague seeks in his own poetry to continue this work of liberating the imagination from the Yeatsian grand narratives of Irish nationalism. In ‘Patriotic Suite 10’ the sound of O’Riada’s traditional Irish music evokes, not a sense of cultural wholeness or rejuvenation, but a demeaning sentimentalism: ‘The gloomy images of a provincial catholicism ... | wound in a native music | curlew echoing tin whistle | to eye-swimming melancholy | is that our offering?’ The music conjures up images of the mythic west, but the very last line of the poem suddenly makes us aware that the speaker is listening to the music on the radio of ‘a self-drive car’. The imagery of car and radio signals the modern journey of the exile uprooted from his home place, but still hankering after stable ground, the resonances of a mythic past, in a disintegrated modern world. Access to the primal Irish psyche now ironically depends on the technology of a dispossessing, mass-mediated, commodified modernity, in which traditional culture has to fight for public attention against the rival attractions of a growing ‘Gross National Product’ and a general modernising tendency in the sphere of artistic culture: ‘is that our offering?’ the poet asks in reference to O’Riada’s music, ‘While all Europe seeks | new versions of old ways, |

¹² Seamus Deane, ‘John Montague: The Kingdom of the Dead’, in *Celtic Revivals* (London 1985), pp.146–155: 147.

the hammer of Boulez swing- | ing to Eastern harmonies. | From 1960 the Gross National Product ...'. Montague registers his scepticism about the possibility of ever being able to repossess the past, and a doubt about the wisdom of even trying, given the dangers of nostalgia and regression. The poem balances longing for an original wholeness with awareness of the need to adapt to new conditions. Recalling the harsh conditions of rural life in 'Epilogue', he explicitly rejects the bogus pastoral of the Irish past: 'Only a sentimentalist would wish | to see such degradation again: | heavy tasks from spring to harvest; the sack-cloth pilgrimages under rain | to repair the slobbery gaps of winter | with the labourer hibernating | in his cottage for half the year | to greet the indignity of the Hiring Fair'. In a review of Heaney's *Selected Poems*, Montague criticises the younger poet for trying to escape from a rapidly changing modern world into a sentimental pastoralism, 'as if Goldsmith had celebrated the ideal Auburn only, and not its desolation'.¹³ For all his careful evocation of tradition, rural landscape, folk custom, Montague's quest for 'the source' is conducted in full awareness that the idea of a centre is fictive. While this knowledge may at times frustrate, it is also creatively enabling. In 'The Plain of Blood' (*Drunken Sailor*), the speaker sets off in quest of what Foucault calls an 'archaeology of knowledge': 'our most fearsome legend. | We went in search of him ... halting to follow the lost | stone alignments of Moytura ... This mythic battleground'. The archaeological image implies a vein of 'truth' lying waiting to be disinterred, as opposed to the Foucauldian recognition that history is a dynamic construct of discourses designed to produce specific knowledges of the past. Montague's poem acknowledges that the past can never be available in pure form, only in the form of narratives and representations. The idea of a single, authoritative version of the past is displaced by an awareness of the constructedness of myth, and the need to revise the images of the past in the light of new historical circumstances. Aloft on 'the wings of the imagination', the speaker journeys into the Irish heart of darkness, determined to discover 'beauty' as well as 'terror', sunlight as well as darkness. The object of his search is Crom Cruach (which means 'bloody crescent' or 'bloody bent one', and is mentioned in the sixth-century *Dinnseanchas* in the Book of Leinster), the most ancient and venerated god of all the various tribes of Ireland. The god was worshipped in idol form on Moyslacht (the plain of adoration or destruction) in County Cavan. Situated around him were twelve smaller idols made of stone, while he was gold. To him the early Irish are supposed to have sacrificed one-third of their children on Samhain (1 November) to ensure the fertility of their land, though there is no evidence to prove or disprove this theory. The idols were extremely ancient

¹³ John Montague, 'The Poet's Workshop', *Guardian*, 27 Nov. 1980, p. 11.

even in Patrick's time around AD 500, and, according to tradition, it was he who destroyed them and worship of them. Crom Cruach was believed to be a sun god, and it is the life-giving rather than the destructive forces associated with him that Montague chooses to emphasise: 'here was no sullen dark god | but a shining central stone ... the Sun God and His seasons, | an Irish Apollo pouring | down His daily benison'. With a nod to the problematical nature of historical knowledge ("There's them", he says, "that believe | there was no human sacrifice, there was | no Plain of Slaughter or Blood. | 'Twas all invented by the Christians | to change old gods into new demons"), Montague's intervention aims to rewrite tradition for his contemporary world. He does so by transforming a god of horror into a foundational symbol of life, hope and unity: 'Sure it's only one step to the border. | They were all one people living here ... They hoisted this stone upright there | long before the Christians came'. The poem, with its alternative interpretation of the presiding Irish deity, is a radiant, affirmative response to the earlier poem also entitled 'The Plain of Blood', in *The Dead Kingdom* (1984). The earlier poem invokes 'malignant Cromm' as the source of Ireland's present Troubles, but then proceeds to dismiss myth, invoking instead a reinterpretation of the present situation in terms of a colonial and sectarian politics: 'wise imperial policy | Hurling the small peoples | against each other, Orange | Order against Defender, | neighbour against neighbour, | blind rituals of violence, | our homely Ulster swollen | to a Plain of Blood'. Returning to myth in the later poem, Montague exploits the doubts and uncertainties in the historical record to rewrite the earlier 'mournful auld poem, *The Dead Kingdom*' ('Last Court'). The reconstructed narrative of the Plain of Blood – the last poem in his last collection – clears away outmoded or unhelpful myths and stereotypes and, starting with the poet's own personal experience of the 'plain of blood' in the actual present, attempts a revisioning of Irish tradition that could contribute to a more optimistic future. Montague, it would seem, is no more willing to accept a fatalistic view of Irish historical myth than he is to accept a sentimentalised one.

Yet, while interrogating old mythologies, he never entirely puts them to rout, for he cannot ever completely accept the rapidly changing, disorienting and deeply uncongenial world of colonial modernity. He sees a deserted countryside and laments the way the land has been bought up for new road construction. While acknowledging that the hardship of farming life has been eased by the introduction of new technology such as tractors, milking machines and grain silos, he decries the break-up of traditional rural values. He celebrates a new era of youthful freedom and sexual licence in 'The Siege of Mullingar', yet in 'The Dancehall' opposes the forces of modernisation as manifested in the new dance-hall youth culture. His detachment from the past never completely cancels out the plangent note of elegy: 'Yet something

mourns', he says, as he contemplates 'a world where action had been wrung | through painstaking years to ritual'. The fate of his ancestral rough field is linked to that of Goldsmith's deserted village. 'In all my wanderings round this world of care', Goldsmith's narrator intones, 'I still had hopes, my long vexations past, | Here to return – and die at home at last'. But the ending of 'The Deserted Village' emphasises the erosion of traditional values and natural rhythms, the destruction of a traditional rustic idyll by the forces of modernisation: 'E'en now the devastation is begun, | And half the business of destruction done; | E'en now, methinks, as pond'ring here I stand, | I see the rural virtues leave the land'. In a 1962 essay, 'Oliver Goldsmith: The Sentimental Prophecy', Montague describes 'The Deserted Village' as a 'lament of the returned exile', 'a vision of destruction and waste' which sees the end of 'the narrator's childhood and his dreams of escape and peaceful retirement'. The fall of Auburn implies the disruption of 'a divine order', the loss of 'a pastoral Eden'. Goldsmith's theme is the destruction of 'rural virtues', 'spontaneous joys', 'piety' – even poetry itself: 'And thou, sweet poetry, thou loveliest maid, | Still first to fly where sensual joys invade! | Unfit, in these degenerate times of shame, | To catch the heart or strike for honest fame'.¹⁴ The closing lines of *The Rough Field* express a similar sense of failure: 'Our finally lost dream of man at home | in a rural setting! ... with all my circling a failure to return | to what is already going | going | GONE'. The rural past, and the poetry in which it has been reconstructed, fall under the hammer of commercial modernity. A historic process of colonial dispossession, combined with the renewed outbreak of violence in the North and the encroachment of advanced capitalism, it would seem, have silenced the poetic spirit. *The Rough Field* ends by arresting process, freezing it into an emblematic moment of eternal circling, expressive of the traditional nationalist nostalgia for a home transcending the torn ground of historical and political strife.

Even while various international influences were drawing Montague beyond Kavanagh's parish, he was at the same time engaged in the recuperation of revivalist narratives of Irishness based on notions of the continuity of tradition, a concept of the poet as tribal bard, and an old-fashioned sectarian politics. Coming to prominence in an age of electronic mass media and transnational capitalism, his totalising tribal and nationalistic approaches, his mythopoeic and antiquarian concerns, his constant circling of grounded, rural communal origins, place him in outright or ironic opposition to the forces of modernisation. Poems such as the early 'Portrait of the Artist as a Model Farmer' (*Poisoned Lands*) mock the kind of Ulster regionalism that was

¹⁴ John Montague, 'Oliver Goldsmith: The Sentimental Prophecy', in *The Figure in the Cave*, pp. 61–77.

espoused by Hewitt and practised by Kavanagh, yet for Montague place has a grounding force for both self and community. Like many poems in his most recent volume, 'Slievemore' returns to the poet's native region. Section 3 of the poem first appeared in *Tides*, under the title 'King & Queen':

Jagged head
 Of warrior, bird
 Of prey, surveying space
 Side by side
 They squat, the stern
 Deities of this place,
 Giant arms
 Slant to the calm
 Of lap, kneebone;
 Blunt fingers
 Splay to caress
 A rain-hallowed stone
 Towards which
 The landscape of five parishes
 Tends, band after band
 Of final
 Pewit haunted,
 Cropless bogland.

The description of 'Slievemore's guardian forms' is conveyed in the loose triadic stanza associated with William Carlos Williams. But where Williams emphasises endless process, there is inscribed in Montague's poem a teleology signalled by the evolving language of convergence ('towards which | the landscape of five parishes | tends') and ultimacy ('band after band | of final, | pewit haunted, | cropless bogland'), and by the central organising symbol of the 'rain-hollowed stone', which, in a much more absolute way than Stevens's jar in Tennessee, orders the surrounding landscape. More like Heaney's 'untoppled omphalos', Montague's foundational dolmen image stakes and centres the imagination, identity, culture and poetry. The vocabulary of 'warrior', 'guardian forms', 'deities of place', 'rain-hallowed stone', 'parishes' and 'haunted... bogland' springs from the kind of atavistic feeling that the revivalist F. R. Higgins believed poetry should be all about – poetry as 'blood-music that brings the racial character to mind'.¹⁵

¹⁵ Quoted by Paul Muldoon in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Verse* (London 1986) p. 18.

It is not the language that one would normally associate with a self-avowed moderniser. Montague may express his admiration of 'the diversity of American poetry, its daring directness in pursuit of a language to accommodate modern experience',¹⁶ but his own formal hieratic style and patriotic attitude are a far cry from the variety and flexibility of poetic speech that we find in modern American poetry.

In *Drunken Sailor*, something continues to mourn. 'Last of the House' is a haunting, sentimental lament for a lost Gaelic past, a lost tribe, the title based on the Irish phrase *An Fear Deireanach den tSloinneadh* ('the last of that family name'). The landscape is 'numinous', the ground of a shared but diminished culture, redolent of the life of the poet's people, disinherited and dispossessed. The poem itself is an affirmation of 'stubborn continuity' in the face of the 'fierce calamity' of an encroaching colonial modernity. From the beginning, Montague has seen the poet as having a special relationship with his people. He is the representative writer of the nation, insisting, as Corkery had done before him, that there is a continuity between individual and national identity: 'Is the writer the people's voice?' Corkery asked; 'has there ever been, can there be, a distinctive literature that is not a national literature?'¹⁷ Montague explicitly sees himself (in his introduction to *The Rough Field*, 1979) as 'the last bard of the O'Neills', the exemplary spokesman, or dramatic conduit, for his nation, dedicated to the task of revealing the community to itself.

Another elegy from the same collection, 'Demolition Ireland', continues a perennial theme in Montague's work – lament for the demolition of 'Ireland', both physical and mythical – which goes back to the ironic 'Hymn for the New Omagh Road' (*The Rough Field*). The hidden Ireland, originary ground, the 'dear perpetual place', is falling to the modernisers and developers who are responsible for the de-magicking of an ancient, sacral landscape. The poem, written in the most traditional of poetic forms – the sonnet – registers the poet's fear of newness and otherness, his desire to hold on to the 'prymaeval dream'. This poem, too, concludes with an assertion of romantic faith in the 'stubborn continuity' of the life-force: 'But see, the rushes rise again, by stealth, | tireless warriors, on the earth's behalf'. In 'Hermit', 'stubborn continuity' manifests itself in nature's processes of 'endless death, ceaseless birth'. Montague posits a principle of identity of mind and nature in his suggestion of a correlation between the gradual emergence of a poem and the slow processes of nature in the surrounding world: 'Intellect and universe | held briefly in tune'. The apotheosis of the self is realised to the extent that the poet recognises his identity with nature, his

¹⁶ John Montague, 'American Pegasus', in *The Figure in the Cave*, p. 189.

¹⁷ Daniel Corkery, *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Cork 1931) p. 2.

implication in ‘the pull and swirl of the current’ (‘The Current’) – a typically Wordsworthian or Emersonian notion of the ‘life-force’, the ‘Universal Being spread o’er all’. Out of the poem’s tranced stillness and mood of susceptibility arises the image of another kind of standing stone – the lighthouse, ‘upright and defiant | against the night’, imperious phallic symbol of the ‘well-made poem’ itself, one of the ‘night structures’ which bring life and light to old chaos.

The poem immediately preceding, ‘Roethke’s Ghost at Roche’s Point’, ends with a similar climactic reference to a lighthouse: ‘as the night finds tongue ... under the driving moon | by the lighthouse dome’. These repeated references to the lighthouse appear strangely ironical beside another poem, ‘The Hag’s Cove’, in which the poet identifies with the drunken sailor who despises lighthouses. The drunken sailor is a Sweeneyesque figure who flouts authority and convention, who wants to go his own way, heedless of all expectation and good reason. The Captain is so drunk that he is unable to control his vessel, and it founders on the rocks. The incident is now a ‘hushed pub legend’, testimony to the power of language to recreate actual events and give them a new kind of life. However, the drunken sailor is a confused figure in unintended ways. Far from representing some kind of poetic ideal of freedom from rational control and social responsibility, the Captain is prosaically ‘drunk in his bunk’, simply unconscious of what is going on around him. Yet, as the closing lines make explicit, the drunken sailor is a figure of the poet: ‘what shall we do with *this drunken sailor* | *early in the morning?*’ As an experimental poet who has sought to modernise and internationalise Irish poetry, Montague might well see himself as something of a drunken sailor who tacks and veers from straight lines. But for all his questioning of the traditional rules of Irish poetry, he remains perceptibly attached to an essentialist vision of place as the stable ground of identity. Where MacNeice revels in ‘the drunkenness of things being various’, Montague’s renegade imagination is held in check by his bardic ambitions. For all his claims to ‘drunken’ freedom, the poet operates within a continuous ideological framework. In the last two lines the poet coyly entertains the image of himself as a hopelessly wayward and irresponsible case, but the poem, despite its fragmented, polyvocal form, is not at all ‘drunken’ or out of control. As the title emphasises, the poet situates himself within the ‘old mythologies’ of Irish tradition, subject to the whims of the ravaging sea-hag of Irish legend who is particularly associated with the Beare Peninsula in County Cork. She is the *cailleach bhéarra*, the goddess of sovereignty and fertility, the pagan mother of the physical landscape. For Montague, it would seem, the drunken Captain is exemplary because he has ‘allow[ed]’ himself ‘to be swallowed again, | repossessed by nature’s thick sweetness’. The hapless sailor is at one with the great processes of

nature in which death and life, decomposition and re-composition are inextricably connected: '(Over the steeped, heaped seaweed | the flies sing their song of harvesting)'.

Montague is too rooted a poet to be a convincing drunken sailor or lunatic Sweeney. Or magic carpet rider. *Smashing the Piano* (1999) has a number of poems – 'Araby, 1984', 'The Straying Blackthorn', 'Magic Carpet', 'Landing' – about travelling, specifically flying, as a metaphor for the imagination in flight. The panoptic bird's-eye or godlike perspective gives rise to feelings of lightness, exhilaration and visionary freedom, reminiscent of those found in Heaney's flying poems, beginning with 'Honeymoon Flight' and including 'A Kite for Michael and Christopher', the Sweeney poems, and *Seeing Things*. Flying is expressive of the desire for escape from social responsibility, from history and politics. It is an image of transcendence made possible through the magical force of imagination, the etymological connection between magic and imagination reinforced by Montague's fondness for seeing the aeroplane as 'our flying carpet' (p. 52), a 'magic carpet' (p. 79). These poems, in which modern air travel is magicked and mythologised, alternate with others about Margaret Thatcher, Bobby Sands and the Omagh bomb which are rooted in the very different idiom of contemporary history and politics, the contrast designed to keep alive the central dialectic of this collection – the tension between the sense of social obligation and the impulse to creative freedom.

'Araby, 1984' testifies to the international scope of the poet's experience and poetic reference, but the 'other' in the poem – 'the hot colours and confusions of Bombay', 'emigrant workers queuing for Dubai' – is always held at a safe distance, the object of a tourist's curiosity rather than the source of a potential metamorphosis of the self. The cultural 'other' is figured only in emblematic, almost epigrammatic, terms ('lone wolf Kurdistan', 'disputed glitter of Sophia's dome', 'saffron robes of holy men'), in a poem of typological evocations. Even the poet's partner is denied real life: 'Our ship glides above all as in a dream, | a mayfly light on the Heraclitean stream, | as you rest your head's gilt casket on my arm'. She is a precious ornament, symbolically linked with the aeroplane itself (*'Morning Jewel'*), rather than a human being.

In 'Magic Carpet', detachment from the known world once again leads not to a complexification of the self through engagement with the 'other', but escape into a transcendent dream-time: 'dreaming time | had finally stopped, meanness | been put to rout, the world | become safe for lovers'. A Heaneyesque note of caution is sounded, as the speaker asks, 'is this paradisaal gleam, this Dantean | spaceship, yet another form of deception?' But doubt is outweighed by the sense of buoyancy and exhilaration. Despite disappointment and failure, the speaker, Gatsby-like, holds to the dream 'as

my little personal plane beats on'. The poem, concerned with 'dream- | ing a haven that is suddenly real', expresses a longing that runs through the whole volume, the exhausted desire for the end of history.

In 'Magic Carpet' the speaker is 'in no hurry | to come hurtling, or sailing down', but in 'Landing' he looks forward to a return to earth which is now viewed in terms of precious gems – 'jewel caskets' and 'lampstrings of pearls': '*how the floor of earth is thick inlaid!*'. The language of Shakespearian romance displaces the overt nationalist idiom that more usually characterises Montague's sense of place. 'I race homewards | towards you, beside whom I now belong ... my late, but final anchoring', the speaker says, no longer 'circling to return' but assured of anchorage in his loved one. For Montague, as for Robert Frost, 'earth's the right place for love'. Love is what gives meaning to 'home' and 'belonging'.

Difference and otherness are suppressed in the urge towards transcendence. The poet's engagement with feminine otherness in his love poems is no more convincing than his negotiation with the tribal other in his public poems. For Heaney, otherness lies inside as well as outside the tribe, and he draws attention to the unconscious pagan and violent barbarian drives within his Ulster Catholic rural community, pursuing the most tabooed knowledges within the culture, probing the diseased psychopathology of his people ('the spirit that plagued us so') in a series of dark and powerful poems, including 'Funeral Rites', 'North' and 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces'. Montague develops no such sustained and radically troubling critique of his own tribe, nor does he display any such tortured ambivalence in referencing his own tribal affiliation. But what he does share with Heaney is a tendency to ignore the presence of the Protestant 'other' in the North, a constituency for or about which neither poet has much interest in speaking. Montague's poetic terrain, like Heaney's, is remarkably sparsely populated by the so-called majority community, and, when the two poets *have* turned to Catholic-Protestant relations, they have done so in remarkably similar ways. In Heaney's 'The Other Side', the Protestant neighbour, a somewhat unsubtle personification of the Planter, unwittingly asserts his sense of superiority to his Catholic neighbour in terms of farmland, language and religion, referring to his Catholic neighbour's 'scraggy acres', speaking with a 'fabulous, biblical dismissal | that tongue of chosen people', and making the observation that Catholics are not guided by the Bible. However, Heaney's picture affirms neighbourliness and community. He portrays with sympathy the Protestant farmer's feeling of uneasiness as he waits in his Catholic neighbour's yard until the prayers are over and he can pay his social call. In Montague's 'The Errigal Road', 'old Eagleson', a Protestant farmer, and his Catholic neighbour are walking through their 'shared landscape', and lament the violence of the Troubles. The Protestant tells his

Catholic neighbour that when he returns to the Republic he should tell the people there that Protestants and Catholics can still be friends: “‘Tell them down South that old neighbours | can still speak to each other around here” | & gives me his hand, but does not ask me in’. The gesture of friendship is again compromised by a sense of distance and unease. Ultimately, both poems seem to valorise difference rather than challenge the immutability of sectarian division. For both, identity is given, stable and ethnically defined. As John Goodby puts it: ‘In the work of Montague and Heaney ... insistence on an identity confronting difference confirms the binary terms or “timeless” divisions, which have dominated cultural debate, rather than undoing them.’¹⁸ Commenting on the larger work in which ‘The Errigal Road’ appears – *The Rough Field* – Goodby concludes that ‘fossil rhetorics contradict a thematics of change, fluidity and openness’, with the result that ‘*The Rough Field*, for all its major achievement, fails in its epic attempt at representative inclusivity’.¹⁹ Patrick Crotty, in reference to Montague’s treatment of amorous and historical themes, voices a similar opinion: ‘Though his [Montague’s] handling of those themes is strongly modernist in terms of style, it is rather traditionalist in ideation, leaving his work open to the charge that it reproduces stock nationalist and masculinist tropes without subjecting them to any particularly energetic species of interrogation.’²⁰ The strongest criticism comes from Peter McDonald, who accuses Montague of resorting to the usual media stereotypes. In ‘A New Siege’, McDonald says, ‘second-hand images stand in for straightforward contempt’, and ‘bull-voiced bigotry’ is taken to represent ‘the essential nature of Ulster Protestantism’: ‘The loudest, and least acceptable, manifestation of the tradition is insisted upon as its most essential expression. Yet there is something itself “bull-voiced” about such depictions, as can be seen when Montague’s poem, written throughout on the auto-pilot of prejudice and “history”, is compared with Derek Mahon’s “Ecclesiastes”’.²¹

McDonald overlooks those poems in which Montague distances himself from the collective historical consciousness, but he has a point that the rigorous self-interrogation that forms the substance of much of Mahon’s poetry is not the characteristic Montague mode. Comparing the two poets, Mahon, we might say, is less inclined to ‘trade self-knowledge for | a prelapsarian metaphor, | love-play of the ironic conscience | for a prescriptive

¹⁸ John Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester 2000) pp. 145–6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

²⁰ Patrick Crotty, ‘Montague Bound: A Note on *Collected Poems*’, in Thomas Dillon Redshaw (ed.), *Well Dreams: Essays on John Montague* (Omaha 2004) pp. 376–92: 381.

²¹ Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford 1996) pp. 84–5.

innocence'.²² For, while admitting the impossibility of ever repossessing the past, even conceding that the idea of a source or centre is fictive, Montague nevertheless keeps returning to prelapsarian metaphors and invocations of a prescriptive innocence. If he has learned from Joyce the potential of a cosmopolitan realism and detachment, the prospect of renewal is always contained within traditional ideological structures of thinking and feeling. In 'A Response to Omagh', one of the 'Civil Wars' sequence in *Smashing the Piano* (1999), the poet asks, 'Who can endorse such violent men?': on the opposite page another poem pays tribute to Bobby Sands. In the final poem of the sequence, entitled 'Sunny Jim', the poet's pronouncement on his father's politics – 'Your fierce politics I decry' – has to be placed alongside earlier poems of explicit race hatred such as 'The Sound of a Wound' (*The Rough Field*): 'This bitterness | I inherit from my father, the | swarm of blood | to the brain, the vomit surge | of race hatred'. If there is a less angry note sounded in his more recent work, that is perhaps because, 'weary | of discords, heart-sick for harmony', exhaustions have nominated peace. 'Last Court' (*Drunken Sailor*) is an affectionate tribute to his dead brother in which the poet is nevertheless at pains to distance himself from the traditional 'narrow' family attitudes epitomised by his brother: 'against your patriarchal views, | I assert the right of love to choose, | from whatever race, or place. And of verse | to allay, to heal, our tribal curse, that narrowness'. But the poetry seems reluctant to accept 'the reality of the North as a frontier-region, a cultural corridor, a zone where Ireland and Britain permeate one another'.²³ 'Border Sick Call' crosses state borders, but not the more fundamental religious or tribal ones. Montague's is a poetry which seems either to reinforce old divisions, or to smooth over conflict and difference in pursuit of a transcendent master narrative. In an essay of 1985 he speaks of 'the unpartitioned intellect', an idea of Irish unity based on tolerance and acceptance of diversity highly reminiscent of Friel and Field Day's concept of the 'Fifth Province' and of Homi Bhabha's 'Third Space':

So I would like to introduce a new element into the discussion of Anglo-Irish literature, an inclusiveness towards which we might all aspire, a passionate welcoming, a fertile balance. The unpartitioned intellect is a sensibility which is prepared to entertain, to be sympathetic to, all the traditions of which our country can be said to be composed ... Let us declare an end to all narrowness, in our thoughts at least.

²² Derek Mahon, 'Beyond Howth Head', in *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew 1999) p. 53.

²³ Edna Longley, 'From Cathleen to Anorexia', in *The Living Stream* (Newcastle upon Tyne 1994) p. 195.

The unpartitioned sensibility would be able to accept, or listen to, the many voices, agreeable and disturbing, which haunt our land. 'The isle is full of noises', but they should be made to blend, as a symphony contains its dissonances, structures of healing.²⁴

Even granting the sincerity of Montague's expressed intentions, his terminology, with its complicating postcolonial or pre-colonial connotations, is unfortunate, for it is trapped within the old discursive fields of (Northern) Irish colonial politics. The concept of the 'unpartitioned intellect' implies a rolling back or suppression of history and politics, and embracement of what J. W. Foster calls 'a politico-spiritual impossibility – a mythic landscape of beauty and plenitude that is pre-Partition, pre-Civil War, pre-famine, pre-Plantation and pre-Tudor'.²⁵ In favouring the prelapsarian metaphor of a unitary state (whether personal or political), Montague overrides the fact that intellect is never unitary, and that there is always a political dimension to 'structures of healing'. In the end, he is more convincing as a poet of fracture than of wholeness. His best work, focused on the local and the particular, demonstrates his capacity for rendering the actual in a crystalline style of exquisite lyrical precision: it is his more strenuously ritualising rhetoric that betrays him into abstraction, stereotype and cliché.

²⁴ 'The Unpartitioned Intellect', in *The Figure in the Cave*, pp. 36–42.

²⁵ J. W. Foster, 'The Landscape of Three Irelands: Hewitt, Murphy and Montague', in Elmer Andrews (ed.), *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Houndmills 1992) pp. 145–67: 150.