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Fran Brearton

POETRY AND FORGETTING: ON HEWITT'S 'NEITHER AN ELEGY NOR
A MANIFESTO'

*This is an abridged version of the talk given by Dr Brearton on 25 July 2011 in the
Market Place Theatre and Arts Centre, Armagh, as part of the 24th John Hewitt
International Summer School*

Bear in mind these dead:
I can find no plainer words.
I dare not risk using
that loaded word, Remember...¹

Hewitt's early 1970s poem, 'Neither an Elegy nor a Manifesto' is a poem about the politics of memory and memorialising, and an embodiment of them; it also has, or courts, the quality of being forgettable, even as it wants to make itself heard. It is, therefore, a poem of paradox, both iconic and iconoclastic, putting in mind what it strives to avoid, setting itself up for failure. In these opening lines, 'Remember' is a 'loaded' word in the sense of being freighted, burdened with historical and political pressures (through exhortations to remember 1690, 1798, 1916) in a way which needs no further explication here. To remember the dead makes no difference to the dead; how or whether they are remembered may make all the difference to the living. To remember, in one definition, is to recall the memory of a person or event with feeling or *intention*. So the word can be, as Hewitt knows, a dangerous one – loaded, like a gun perhaps, and something that may discharge itself in violence.

Yet it's loaded in another way too, since remembering carries within it, exists only on the basis of, forgetting. To remember is 'not to forget'; to forget is 'to lose remembrance of'. As Derek Mahon puts it in the early poem 'The Spring Vacation': 'Once more, as before, I remember not to forget.' Remembering and forgetting are inseparable and they are often both necessary. If the twentieth century was a century obsessed with remembrance in a way no other has been, it is also the case, as Adrian Forty notes, that 'forgetting has, in a manner of speaking, been *the* problem of the twentieth century. ... In post-war Europe, the ability to forget has been put to the most severe test. The relative stability of Western Europe since 1945 has in part been due to a colossal act of collective, consensual forgetting...'²

The need to remember, and the need to forget, are held in tension – in politics, in society, in the individual too. They're held in particular

tension in John Hewitt's aesthetic, and manifest themselves there in ways that are highly distinctive. That might be illuminated by thinking about some of the problems of memorialising as they've emerged through two world wars – notably the concept of the memorial, and of the anti-memorial – and to map these onto the oddness one finds in Hewitt of the poem in tension with a kind of (forgettable) anti-poem.

War memorials constructed in the aftermath of World War I generally work on the principle that something solid is built to preserve, for all time, what has been lost: 'Lest we Forget'. A permanent presence reminds us of a permanent absence. The solidity and durability of some war memorials seems to embody the sentiment inscribed on them. One example might be the Cenotaph, another the Stone of Remembrance placed in the British military cemeteries in France and Belgium and inscribed with the words: 'Their Name Liveth For Evermore'. They are large, solid, stone objects, whose physical form is implicated in what they try to do – resist forgetting. They work on the principle that 'memories, formed in the mind, can be transferred to solid material objects, which can come to stand for memories and, by virtue of their durability, either prolong or preserve them indefinitely beyond their purely mental existence'.³

Yet as time goes by are such memorials really *seen*? They become almost invisible, despite their size, their solidity. That may be one reason to doubt the relation between objects and memory; another, post-1945, as Forty points out, 'has been brought about by the difficulties of remembrance of the Holocaust, and the realisation that conventional memorial practices were inadequate and inappropriate to the task.'⁴ The problem is one that Adorno identified in 1962. To write lyric poetry after Auschwitz, he said, is barbaric; yet, as he went on to say, 'literature must resist this verdict'. He identifies a paradox, an aporia, in that 'suffering demands the continued existence of art while it still prohibits it':

The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for a single moment, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. The aesthetic principle of stylization ... make[s] an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims; yet no art which tried to evade them could stand upright before justice.⁵

It's also something Paul Muldoon identifies in relation to poetry and the Troubles in 1984: 'If you don't engage in it, you're an ostrich... If you do engage in it ... you're on the make, almost, cashing in'.⁶ Or, one might say, you're damned if you do, damned if you don't.

One response to the problem has been the emergence of a genre of anti-memorials, memorials that try to express the paradox of remembering and forgetting, aware of their own inadequacy, and perhaps even their own culpability (their potential, that is, to render the unthinkable 'thinkable' in a way which falsifies, and therefore effectively forgets, the experience they simultaneously purport to remember). Two such memorials, by the German artist Jochen Gerz, are self-conscious about the ways in which they are doomed to failure, doomed perhaps to be forgotten.

The first is the Hamburg Memorial against Fascism, described by Gerz as a counter-monument. Unveiled in 1986, it was an aluminium, lead-plated pillar, 12 metres high, 1 metre wide. Initially it looked much like traditional monuments. But it was transient and fluid, not permanent and fixed. People were invited to sign their names on it with a steel stylus. Each time 1 ½ metres of the pillar were covered with signatures, it was lowered into the ground – six or eight times in total – until it was sunk completely in 1993.

The second is the Place of the Invisible Monument in Saarbrücken, Germany. Between 1990-93, Gerz and his students, at first clandestinely, removed 2146 cobble-stones from a town square, engraved on the underside of each the name of a (desecrated) Jewish cemetery in Germany before 1933, then replaced them with the inscription pressed into the ground, permanently hidden. It's an invisible monument, one to be 'walked over'.⁷ Since any memorial can become almost absent and forgotten, part of the landscape that is no longer seen, a text that is 'unread', these counter-monuments are not acts of commemoration, but anti-monuments that commemorate forgetting to remember. They're a paradox, in that to trigger memory, they have to be remembered in advance of the fact; it is their absence that gives them a presence.

This might seem to take us a long way from Hewitt. But Hewitt, with his interest in, and understanding of, the world wars, and his own work in the field of preservation and memory, is remarkably attuned to some of the broader problems surrounding remembering and forgetting. Remember is a word he dares to use, if not often, then often enough to see a pattern emerge in the memory work his poems undertake:

'I wrestled with my father...then suddenly remembered who we were' ('Jacob and the Angel'); 'remembering that satin pouch of poems, / I clasp her bony hand' (My Grandmother's Garter); 'remembering / they'll be outlasted by the marching stars / and...no man dare be too sure of anything' ('Sunset over Glanaan'); 'holding your tongue from quick comparisons; / remembering that you are a guest in the house' ('The Search'); 'if we remember when life first arose' ('Freehold').

'Remembering' is not negatively loaded in Hewitt's poems, it is a positive force. It is about, variously, remembering loved ones, the ordinary people who make up the tapestry of the poet's own personal history and

who would otherwise be forgotten. It places necessary checks and balances on one's own behaviour (the opposite of 'forgetting oneself'). It is about an awareness of man's place in the natural (or spiritual) world – an avoidance of hubris. His work thus exhibits, as we might expect, a fear of forgetting, of what he calls in 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited' 'the creeping haircracks of indifference'.

But this is only one side of a paradoxical coin. As Terence Brown writes, Hewitt 'understands the spectres that haunt and threaten his province and sets about the task of exorcism with a serious, intent concern', while at the same time he fulfils a less 'exalted duty' with 'quiet zeal' – the 'duty to record and celebrate the everyday life of a people – to save even "a little people" from oblivion'.⁸ Or, one might say, he recognises the need to forget *and* the need to remember. For all the reiterations of the word remember in his work, we can set beside them another preoccupation too, found in those poems which step outside individual into collective memory and politicised identity, an anxiety about 'poisoned memory', about 'ways of hate' that are 'long-nurtured', in an island 'maimed by history'.⁹ Where poisoned memory endures, the wound is kept green; the people are 'never checked' in the way that Hewitt's more positive forms of remembering would check behaviour. To dream, in 'The Dilemma', of 'unfettered thought', of a 'free' people is, in effect, to say people should also be free to forget, which also means free to remember differently.

These two preoccupations in Hewitt – with remembering, with forgetting – are not contradictory; they are necessarily intertwined. And they bring me back to 'Neither an Elegy nor a Manifesto', a poem which embodies the paradoxes of remembering and forgetting at the heart of much 'memory work' in the twentieth century.

An elegy remembers what is past, a manifesto anticipates a future: this poem is simultaneously neither and both. Its opening line, 'Bear in mind these dead' is followed with 'I can find no plainer words'. But 'bear in mind' is not a plain phrase. It means to keep in mind, to recall to mind; but also to suffer in one's mind perhaps, to carry a burden. And it has behind it the echo of bearing a coffin, of the dead literally carried with us. The line is monosyllabic; but it's not plain in terms of a clear, one-dimensional meaning. The 'hedge of dead bramble, heavy / with pathetic atomies', is an oblique war landscape of barbed wire and skeletons. The poem will not advocate prayer in the second stanza, since 'prayer in this green island / is tarnished with stale breath, / worn smooth and characterless / as an old flagstone'. '[T]arnished', that is, as if it were a physical object. The eschewal of failed strategies here recalls some of the conventional, worn, stone monuments, or bronze statues, with fading inscriptions, that no longer fulfil the purpose for which they were built.

There is an awareness, too, that conventional memorial practices cannot cope anymore: 'I might have recited a pitiful litany / of the names of all

the dead: / but these could effectively be presented / only in small batches'. Yeats recites a litany of names in 'Easter 1916', one that is definitely not 'pitiful', either in the sense of being futile, or of evoking 'pity' (and Yeats was not a poet for whom 'pity' formed part of his world-view). Hewitt's poem is conscious of Yeats's great political elegy, but far removed from it in style and ambition. The dead of Hewitt's poem, who can only be presented in 'batches' (a sinister, rather clinical term in itself), literally cannot be 're-membered'. Re-membered, that is, in its archaic sense of putting things together again, reversing a dismembering, seeing them 'whole' or entire. The 'policeman dismembered / by the booby-trap in the car', gives us the only direct echo of, or 'companion' word for, 'Remember' in its opening stanza. The poem is, in terms of theme and content, self-consciously concerned with the politics of remembering and elegising, as well as apparently containing within it its own exhortation to remember ('Bear in mind...'). But it is more complicated than that too, in terms of its form, language, and style.

Yeats's 'Easter 1916' is one of the most memorable poems of the twentieth century, with its haunting refrain, and its superb utilisation of the ballad tradition to enhance its power. Refrains (as in 'A terrible beauty is born') intensify poetic memorability. The principle is not confined to poetry and poetic form. Alan Baddeley's study of human memory points out that 'there is a strong relationship between the imageability of a word and the ease with which it can be remembered'; that memories practised and rehearsed and retested are more likely to endure. And, of relevance to poetry too, he cites the case of Professor Aitken, who could 'recall to the first 1000 decimal places the value of π ' (the ratio of any circle's circumference to its diameter). He did so by arranging the numbers in rows of 50, with ten groups of five in each row, and reading them in a particular rhythm, an almost incantatory style.¹⁰ In a sense, one might say he made a poem out of π , and that is how he remembered it.

Hewitt wilfully resists the poetic devices, the form and style that would render his poem memorable. 'Neither an Elegy nor a Manifesto' is in verse paragraphs, irregularly patterned – not an unmemorable thing in itself of course, but a notable refusal of the regular rhythms that characterise much of his poetry. It avoids rhyme. By the third verse, the diction has become profoundly anti-poetic, adopting or parodying the language of the 'manifesto' or the media: it over explains (the 'careful words'); it adopts scientific and legalistic discourse ('injunction', 'unaligned', 'propose'); the poem is almost ponderous in places ('these could effectively be presented'). The extreme point comes in the fourth verse with 'but do not differentiate between / those deliberately gunned-down / and those caught by unaddressed bullets: / such distinctions are not relevant'. The writing is prosaic in the extreme, dry and preachy. The style here is deliberately forgettable, in its refusal of mnemonic devices.

Hewitt is more than capable of the memorable lyric, but largely avoids anything that would give this poem such lyric qualities. It is, therefore, in some ways, an anti-poem, like the anti-memorials erected in Germany in the 1980s and 1990s, a poem which refuses any easy terms on which it can be remembered, whilst also saying 'do not forget'. To recall Adorno, one can say this poem is also resistant to stylisation, aware of its ethical dilemma, scrupulous in its refusal to create a verbal icon.

Yet a poem that refuses what makes it a poem, must surely fail too. Hewitt can't write out of his text entirely those things which make it a work of art, that make artistic capital out of suffering – indeed, the poem cannot, if it is even to exist, do anything else. His words, he says, 'do not pound with drum-beats'. Yet if we look at the two lines which precede his prosaic instructions quoted above, they are: 'So I say only: Bear in mind / those men and lads killed in the streets'. Their rhythmical quality is incantatory; he uses octosyllabic, iambic tetrameter (the rhythm of Yeats's 'Easter 1916'); and with the introduction of the slightly archaic 'lads' he draws not on the plainest words, but on those most tellingly emotive (the language of elegy). His reaction against that lyricism is extreme perhaps, but it jars all the more in its resistance to stylisation *because* it follows on from its opposite. Avoiding Yeatsian refrain, the exhortation to 'bear in mind' nevertheless repeats itself five times in the poem. And the last line irresistibly draws to its close in a perfect iambic pentameter, the line that comes naturally to poetry in English, that imprints itself on the memory more than any other: 'but, at this moment, bear in mind these dead'.

It is an uneasy poem, a poem struggling with itself, with its own 'nature', with its own being *as* a poem. The work of art is created; but Hewitt is an iconoclast, who as he creates the artefact, the monument, also destroys it from within, sinks it into the ground, makes it invisible to the memory through his resistance to mnemonic devices. In a poem such as 'The Harvest Bow', Heaney does the opposite: he creates the icon. Heaney's harvest bow 'does not rust'; it is 'burnished' unlike Hewitt's 'tarnished' memory; it is presented as what it is not – a solid object which endures even beyond, say, the bronze statue, a conduit into the past, a trigger to memory: 'And if I spy into its golden loops / I see us walk between the railway slopes / Into an evening of long grass'. It is palpable, an object he can 'tell and finger'; a living breathing thing, 'still warm'. The harvest bow, like the poem itself, carries an awareness of its own vulnerability: it could be 'throwaway', or, the implication is, thrown away. It's a 'frail device'; but the sheer beauty of the imagery and diction, the perfection of form, the haunting quality of its rhythms, work against frailty to make this, perhaps in a more traditional and more familiar sense, the work of art which aspires to permanence.

Poems aren't memorials, of course, and the degree to which a poem is a tangible material object is a question for another day. But such is the nature of the medium, a poem can express complexities in a way that any memorial (even anti-memorial) struggles to achieve. Hewitt's poem, like any poem, is a finished and complete object; it has a kind of physical form, preserved on the page, in the book; but the process of reading is also one of discarding and forgetting, something that takes place over time. With each word and line we read there is a discarding of the one which preceded it. We don't experience a poem 'entire'; we experience it as something gradually disappearing, aware of its transience as much as its permanence. When Hewitt ends 'Neither an Elegy nor a Manifesto' with 'at this moment, bear in mind these dead', the moment, by the close of the line, is already gone. The poem doesn't just try to address a problem of remembering and forgetting that has haunted writers and artists in the twentieth century; it is itself that problem. It's unusual, perhaps, in embodying that problem so fully, and so self-consciously; its very uneasiness, its inability to resolve the contradictions on which it rests, make it one of the more interesting, and (ironically enough) more memorable poems he has written.

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- 3 See Forty, *The Art of Forgetting*, p.2.
- 4 *Ibid* p.6.
- 5 Theodor Adorno, 'On Commitment' (1962), *Performing Arts Journal* 3.3 (Winter 1979) pp.60-61.
- 6 Quoted in Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986) pp.12-13.
- 7 See <http://memoryandjustice.org/site/monument-against-fascism/> and http://www.arttimesjournal.com/speakout/Oct_10_online_Callaghan/Oct_10_Callaghan.html
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- 9 See Hewitt, 'An Irishman in Coventry' and 'An Ulsterman'.
- 10 See Alan D Baddeley, *Essentials of Human Memory* (Hove: Psychology Press, 1999) pp.23, 65, 118.