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RESTRAINT IN THE POETRY OF
BERNARD O'DONOGHUE

and

NATURAL HISTORY

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“To make the passion keep its distance”: Bernard O’Donoghue’s Poetry of Restraint.

Preface

When studying for my degree at Oxford University (1997-2000) I was lucky enough to be taught by two excellent medievalists, the poet Bernard O’Donoghue and Dr Christopher Cannon. Chris had come from Harvard with some challenging new ideas about medieval literature including his theory of Chaucer as feminist. His series of lectures on that topic, starting with a look at the legal documents produced at the time of Chaucer’s prosecution for the rape of Cicely Champagne (and, he argued, Chaucer’s subsequent need to clear his name through his writing) opened up the Middle Ages for me as a fascinating realm. I relished the work of mystics such as Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich and Richard Rolle. Although initially finding Middle English difficult, I became engrossed by the way shades of meaning travelled through various influences, touching and altering the infra-structure on which our literary traditions are founded.

With *Ancrene Wisse*, a rule book for anchoresses written by an author whose humility demanded anonymity, I was absorbed by the paradox of earthly self-denial in order to reap heavenly rewards, attempts to understand and approach perfection, and the language of metaphysics itself. Just as interesting were the domestic details of daily life in the Middle Ages, from the *nouveau riche* youth of Margery Kempe in 14th century Norfolk where she describes how she wore ‘gold pypys on hir hevyd’ and had her hoods lined with fur ‘typettys’¹, to the induction of novice anchoresses in the South West Midlands circa 1215 AD. The question of why someone would choose to be walled up in a cell attached to a church or convent for the rest of her life must be almost as bewildering to 21st century minds

¹ *The Book of Margery Kempe*, OUP 1997, p.9.

as one of the Exeter riddles themselves. It was only through studying the traditions of mysticism and the Beguines (nuns who worked in the community) in Europe, and unpicking the complexities of thought and language associated with them that I began to gain some insights into these worlds.

In medieval terms, the person who chose to retire from the world to a place where she could devote her life to prayer was not only serving her community (by intercession) but also guaranteeing her own place in heaven. Yet the anchoress was told that, because of Eve's tempting of Adam, and the subsequent 'Fall' of humanity, women were still the main culprit of wickedness in the world - 'sites of sin'. This led to a craving for purification by the anchoress who sometimes starved herself – often trying to survive only on the sacrament. Not surprisingly, such anorexics often died young. As to the 'Outer Rule', or routines of daily life, she was usually allowed a maid and, sometimes, a pet cat. She could receive visits only from her spiritual instructors – the priest who gave her communion and the abbot. In both *Ancrene Wisse* and *De Institutione Inclusarum* (written for his middle-aged sister by the 13th century Cistercian, Aelred of Riveaulx) details of what was and was not allowed include the banning of hedgehog skins as an instrument of flagellation (although stinging nettles were tolerated); idle gossip at the window facing the outside world; and the temptation to talk to children at the window (in case the anchoress's maternal instincts became aroused). My interest in *Ancrene Wisse* and related texts, led to my sequence 'Anchoress' which I began during my degree and finished in February 2003 (see Appendix 3.i).

This greater understanding of the medieval world gave me deeper insight into the poetry of Bernard O'Donoghue, which I had always admired. I spent a term studying Lyric Poetry with Bernard, and started by extending my knowledge of the Middle Ages to the *trouvères* and *troubadours* of Northern France and the Languedoc, the *silnovisti* of Tuscany, and the German *minnesangers*. Bernard also helped me to look more carefully at the area of subjectivity in the lyric. Pound had exploited the way the *troubadours* played with notions of

the 'I' and truth versus fictionalisation in his collection *Personae*, published in 1909. Through these studies, I also became interested in the idea of the 'unreliable narrator' as a voice in poetry as well as in the late 19th and early 20th century novel. Linked to this, at the start of the Glamorgan M.Phil. course, one of my key aims was to find a way of unifying my own voice.

As well as the Middle Ages, Bernard has said that his other two main themes are death and the Irish countryside (nature). As I studied his work, I realised that one of the reasons I connect to it so strongly is because, as Stephen Knight and I have finally concluded, my own work is much concerned with similar themes. In my collection *Natural History*, the subjects that constantly recur are the Middle Ages ('Anchoress', 'Troubadour', 'Saissac Castle', 'Cathar') and death/ mortality ('Prospects', 'Dear Field', 'Natural History', 'Crane'). As with Bernard's work, nature and the natural world works as a continuous motif across the fabric of the whole as one type of unifying factor ('Freesias', 'Swan', 'Hare', 'Sign'). This study of Bernard's poetry, and the interviews and discussions I have had with him, has not only convinced me further of his importance as a 20th/ 21st century poet, it has also helped me to think about strategies for my own poetry. An illustration of this is his habit of beginning a poem in a chatty, accessible tone of voice which darkens to a kick in the tail in much the same way as a short story might. An example is 'Coronach' (see attached, Appendix 2. x). It starts 'No two told the story the same way,' and ends with a stark death scene. I feel my poem, 'Prospects' attempts to use the same technique (see Appendix 3.viii). It starts humorously, with a dormitory of ten year old school girls frightening themselves with gory details of ways to die. But the final stanza provides a volta into a much darker tone, with historically accurate reportage of the fate of young girls buried alive in order to accompany the dead Viking kings into the next world as concubines. A high price to pay for the honour of becoming 'arm candy' in Valhalla! The final stanza of this poem was written after a workshop at Glamorgan, and during a time when I was reading and analysing Bernard's work.

Where I have included examples of my own poems, I have done so, not in any way to suggest they are comparable to the Whitbread Prize-winning work of Bernard O'Donoghue, but to show (and investigate the reasons for) our commonality of interest. This was the initial reason for undertaking this study which I hope I shall be able to extend further at a future date. A parallel concern, which emerged after I had started work on the study, was the feature of 'restraint' in Bernard's work which is a result of a combination of the Irish Bardic and medieval traditions, and the poet's own personality and character. It is this which is the main focus of this Critical Study.

cont.

“To make the passion keep its distance”: Bernard O’Donoghue’s Poetry of Restraint

Introduction

Jill Mann, in ‘The Narrative of Distance and the Distance of Narrative in Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*² discusses the representation of distance as ‘a pervasive and permanent element in human experience of all kinds’ and sees that the emotional power of Malory’s writing

has its roots in the poignancy that comes from this sense of distance, and from its inevitable corollary – a longing for wholeness, for the obliteration of fissures, gaps, fragmentation, both within the self, and between the self and the outside world.

As a medievalist, it is not surprising that a key element in the work of Bernard O’Donoghue is distance of various kinds, with its ‘inevitable corollary – a longing for wholeness’. The distant past exerts a decisive influence on his poetry with medieval ideas about the sublimation of passion and loving from afar (*amor de lonh*) providing the ground into which other textures are woven. Emotional distance figures strongly in poignant fables about unexpressed love and inarticulate grief; and the strategies used to tell the tales themselves often emphasise the distance of the speaker from his audience, either by stressing the techniques of storytelling (‘Far be it for me to start telling/ the truth at this stage...’ ‘Caedmon’)³ or by using exclusive devices such as, unexplained phrases of Gaelic.⁴

In my interview with Bernard he says

The literary idea I’m most interested in is the medieval one...that kind of ‘passion in society’ idea, courtly love, the notion that good behaviour is society, and passion is the impulse to do things that are against the order of society. That’s how the Middle Ages defined it. So that in literature there’s always the figure of the person whose individualistic love affair is a disaster in public, and from a social point of view. Someone like Guinevere...these figures continually appear as figures of social disaster. This would mean, of course, public disaster, death, war and famine...Desire is the impulse towards illicit personal fulfilment....People have these

² The William Matthew Lectures, Birkbeck College, London 1991.

³ *Gunpowder*, Chatto and Windus, 1995 p.29

⁴ See later in this essay, my discussion of ‘The Road to Doon School’, p. 35.

two impulses, on the one hand you're a good citizen and on the other you're a selfish individual with all these appetites you want to satisfy but can't.⁵

An example of how this idea is expressed is in 'Claire, Playing Schubert'⁶, where O'Donoghue describes the pianist holding down the chords and leaning back 'to make the passion keep its distance'. Passion, and its encroachment on life, is dangerous, and must be held at bay: and the sense of emotion being held back is one of the most distinctive and animating forces of his work. His article in the *PBS Bulletin No: 166*, Autumn 1995, adds a further layer to this idea when he talks about the 'mixture of universal emotion and the power of the half-stated' which is attributed to classical Irish Bardic poetry and its connections with Old English. He goes on to discuss the power of elegy, and explains how its ability to stress the negative highlights the positive. To lament the loss of what Virgil calls 'a share of the sweet life', is to remind us of the irony that, while we currently have a share of 'la dolce vita' it will not last. The poems he likes best, he says, are those where the meaning is 'left to dawn on the reader, but is unmistakable once it has.' This 'dawning' of comprehension reminds us of Geoffrey Hartman's suggestion that it is shifts of meaning in language (because words mean something different to the speaker and listener/reader) which produce 'the obscurity that is vital for the process of imagination.'⁷

In other words, it is the gaps in meaning between speaker (poet) and listener (reader) which allow for what Wordsworth defined as the essential process of imagination, that which suggests but cannot explain: the sense of 'something evermore about to be'.⁸ Whether it is to make connections between original and pastiche (e.g. Irish gnomic poetry as in 'The Pleasures of the Circus'⁹) or lay side by side images to make a point (as in 'Ter Conatus'¹⁰) it is the imagination of the reader that must illuminate the obscurity left by the

⁵ Appendix 1, p.xv: First Interview with Bernard O'Donoghue, 1st October 2002.

⁶ *Outliving*, Chatto and Windus, London, 2003 and Appendix 2, p.i.

⁷ Quoted by Peter Zima, in *The Philosophy of Modern Literary Theory*, p.10.

⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen Book Prelude*, Book VI, l.542.

⁹ *Here Nor There*, p.35.

¹⁰ *ibid* p.52 . See also Appendix 2, p.iii.

'gaps' and 'fissures' in the text. A reluctance to embrace certainty, coupled with the low-key tenor of his voice, has led some critics to accuse O'Donoghue of ordinariness and marginality.¹¹ However, this essay will attempt to show that, far from being a marginal poet, Bernard O'Donoghue, by employing types of distance over two main themes - the Middle Ages and death¹² - has created an oeuvre which addresses the 'longing for wholeness' in us all, and which, with its unifying principle of nature and the Irish countryside, contributes significantly to the traditions of British poetry.

¹¹ Andrew Biswell, *TLS*, January 5, 1996

¹² '...my 3 main subjects: the Irish countryside, death and the Middle Ages.' Bernard O'Donoghue, *PBS Bulletin*, Autumn 1995, No.166.

1. THE MIDDLE AGES

In his book *The Courtly Love Tradition*¹³, O'Donoghue traces back to Arabic love poetry, the earliest ideas about the 'longing for wholeness' and the human condition. In *The Dove's Neck Ring*,¹⁴ written by Ibn Hazm circa 1022, the writer talks about love as a 're-union of souls, separated in the creation, with their original higher element' and the 'yearning between things that are mutually similar'. We can see these ideas in the poetry of the 'Song of Songs', which is based on early Arabic love poetry, and whose elements (including the use of synaesthesia) are found in the religious poetry and language of the Middle Ages across a range of writers and texts such as Richard Rolle (the 'Hermit of Hampole') *Pearl*, *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *Ancrene Wisse*¹⁵

By the 12th century, the emergence of the *troubadours*, from the Albigensians of the Midi, heralded the arrival of one of the greatest and most influential cultural movements in the history of European literature. Influenced by Catharism, which regarded the physical side of humanity as insignificant and perceived the need to separate the material from the spiritual world, the *troubadours* created a rarefied poetry in which love was sublimated and passion condemned. In courtly love, the state of mind of the lover becomes the site of poetry as he (or occasionally she, in the case of the *trobaritz* Beatrice de Diaz) suffers the exquisite pain of *amor de lonh*, or loving from afar. The convention of *fin amor* where the object of love was 'angelicised', meant that, through self sacrifice and non-consummation, the act of loving became a form of ennoblement for the lover. Raimbaut d'Aurenga (c.1144-1173) says

my lady, stop me from laying you down to kiss you...your lovely
eyes are rods to me which strike me in the heart with joy so that I dare not have low
desire for you'¹⁶

¹³ *The Courtly Love Tradition*, Manchester University Press, 1982

¹⁴ *ibid*, p.83

¹⁵ see Appendix 3, pp.ii-iii: my poem, 'Anchoress' part iv, which adapts the language of the Song of Songs to the state of *unio mystica*, or union with Christ the bridegroom.

¹⁶ *The Courtly Love Tradition*. p.124, l.31

and in earlier poem to his 'worthy lady' or *domna valens* he says 'O Abstinence, bring me happiness from the place where my lady is...' ¹⁷ Guirat de Borneil (c. 1165-c.1212) expresses a state of ecstasy although he does not 'embrace or hold or kiss' – 'E no mani, ni tenh, ni bais.'¹⁸ Bernart de Ventadorn, one of the most famous and accomplished *troubadours* writes of seeing the lark, moving its wings against the sun's rays for joy until it 'forgets itself and lets itself drop because of the sweetness that comes into its heart'. Then he is overcome with envious melancholy that he is not able to share the blissful state:

Can vei la lauzeta mover
De joi sas alas contra.l rai,
Que s'oblod'e.s laissa chazer
Per las doussor c'al cor li vai... ¹⁹

This lyric inspired my own poem 'Perfect'²⁰ which attempts to synthesise some of the complexities of the influence of Catharism on *troubadour* ideas of perfection. The idea of the distant lark, beating its wings against the sunlight and singing for joy, brilliantly encapsulates the importance of distance in the courtly love tradition. The earth-bound lover gazes up at the emblem that represents the 'prize' he must continue to long for. He is blinded by its beauty and rarefication, and in striving towards it, his own soul will be purified. Then comes love's comrade, sorrow, with all its exquisite pains and the longeurs of separation, crowned by the greatest and most desolating separation, that of death.

It was the ideas of the *troubadours* that influenced the Tuscan *stilnovisti*, so named because Bonagiunta of Lucca referred to their poetry as 'the sweet new style' or *il dolce stil nuovo*,²¹ and filtered through to Boccaccio, Dante (who invents some lines from the Provençal poet, Arnaut Daniel in *Purgatorio XXVI*) and finally, to the English poets such as Chaucer, who plays on the courtly love conventions for both tragic and comic effect in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and uses distance in the form of hiatus at a pivotal moment of the book, Troilus's

¹⁷ *ibid* p.122 l. 50-51

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 128 l. 32

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.116 ll.1-4

²⁰ See Appendix 3, pp.iv-v.

²¹ *The Courtly Love Tradition*, p.258

swoon.²² In the second half of ‘The Day I Outlived My Father’,²³ O’Donoghue invokes the 12th century *troubadour* Arnaut Daniel who played with the figure of the ‘world upside down’ or *adyntata*²⁴ whereby things are shown behaving in a manner which is contrary to their nature, he can ‘hunt the bull/ On hare back’ or ‘swim against the river’. I shall discuss this poem more fully later in this essay, but wish to draw attention here to the significance of the final stanza of this, the title poem of the collection, where a *troubadour* inversion of reality is used to subvert the elegiac mood of the piece, and distance is created between the living and dead, past, present and future, and the feelings of the poet from the subject of the poem.

The courtly love theme continued to persist in the English tradition with the poetry of Wyatt, Spenser and, especially, in Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*. There has been debate as to the sincerity of this 108 stanza sequence about Astrophil (Philip Sidney) and his frustrated love for his beautiful, unreachable ‘star’, Stella (Penelope Rich, née Devereux). Despite being told by his muse to ‘look in your heart and write’²⁵, Astrophil (Sidney) prefers to show off his wit and knowledge of European literature in a dazzling display of intellectual and verbal pyrotechnics with parodies of Petrarch’s oxymorons – ‘living deaths, dear wounds...freezing fires’²⁶ and slighting references to the ‘humbler, wit’ of Spenser whom he advises to retire to his ‘shepherd’s pipes’.²⁷ Whether the main theme of the book is the pain of unrequited love, and the masochism of the hopeful lover or the skill and panache of the consummate Elizabethan courtier, a central idea, and one which links it to the poetry of Bernard O’Donoghue, is the poet’s capacity to create distance from emotion, and from self-disclosure, through the medium of language.

²² *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 3 l.1092.

²³ *Outliving*, p.1.

²⁴ *The Courtly Love Tradition* p.311

²⁵ *Sir Philip Sidney: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. K.Duncan-Jones, OUP, 1989, p. 153, ‘Astrophil and Stella’, l.14.

²⁶ *ibid.* p. 155, VI.4.

²⁷ *ibid.* l.7.

A poem which adapts and the courtly themes of Bernart de Ventadorn's lark motif is Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'The Windhover: To Christ our Lord'. Here, Hopkins takes the idea of the distant bird to symbolise religious fervour. To link the poem more closely to the courtly love tradition, Hopkins uses chivalric terms such as 'daylight's dauphin' and 'O my Chevalier!' This reflects the crossing-over of the secular and sacred that was a familiar trope in the literature of the Middle Ages. Hopkins, as a Jesuit priest, would have had experience of *visio pictoralis*²⁸ or the habit of meditating on an 'outward sign' of the numinous. Often, the meditation would be on a nail, representing the Crucifixion, or a piece of straw, representing the Nativity. In this case, Hopkins sees the shape of the hovering bird as a cross in the sky which puts him into sudden, intense contact with Christ's suffering and its concomitant promise of love and salvation for mankind. Again, it is the *promise* of fulfilment which is the point of the ecstasy; and the distance between the unregenerate being looking upwards towards its eventual goal, and the saved soul taking flight into bliss, is the space in which poignancy and poetry are made. It is the enigmatic power of this hiatus between the 'unsaved' and the 'saved' moment, with its deferral of human passion and longing for integration with the numinous that releases the outpouring of creative passion in the poet. In many ways, the excitement such poets as Hopkins and Sidney communicate to the reader is as much to do with the possibilities of language as the emotion that inspires them. We are often left with a conflicting dynamic: the distance created by use of heightened language and courtly motifs versus the thrill of entering into the poet's rapture or melancholy, or whatever the mood he or she is setting.

O'Donoghue's own poem 'A Nun takes the Veil'²⁹ although using as its title Hopkins's epigraph to his poem 'Heaven-Haven'³⁰ characteristically emphasises the ordinariness of the occasion - an Irish girl taking Holy Orders who, the morning of setting out

²⁸ see Appendix 3, p.iii: 'Anchoress' section v.

²⁹ *The Weakness*, p.11 and Appendix 2, p.ii.

³⁰ *Selected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, James Reeves, London 1954, 12th reprint 1975, p.1

to the convent³¹ ‘ran early through the briars/ To catch the calves that were bound for market’ and continues, not with the rapture of a mystic approaching union with God, but with poignantly simple details of a girl’s last breakfast at home for forty years.

I had what I wanted (they said
I could), so we’d loaf and Marie biscuits.

Her reminiscence continues

We strung the calves behind the boat,
Me keeping clear to protect my style:
Confirmation suit and patent sandals.

She watches her brothers ‘heaving the calves// As they lost their footing’ (a marvellous use of distance between stanzas here to mimic the calves being hauled up as they stagger onto the muddy quay). The last she sees of her father is ‘a jacket, hat and salley stick,’

Driving the cattle to Ballyvaughn.
He died (they told me) in the county home,
Asking to see me. But that was later:

The image of the father dying without seeing his daughter one last time is laid down without comment in a masterly instance of understatement which sums up whole lifetimes of separation which are accepted and born with stoicism. The girl remembers most vividly her thrill at seeing a car for the first time, and she recalls, her first night in the convent, falling asleep to the image of ‘this morning’s vision’ with its engine ‘humming through the open window.’ Here O’Donoghue uses the meiosis of domestic detail to keep emotion under the surface. We empathise with the girl in her ‘style’, trying to help out as usual with getting the calves to market while keeping her confirmation suit and patent sandals clean. Soon there will be the distance between her home on the farm and the convent on the Galway mainland to be traversed; and eventually, a forty year gap of time – a lifetime dedicated to the Catholic Church.

In the first stanza, the girl watches, for the last time ‘the sun/ Rising over Doolin across the water’. This has resonance with the Middle English lyric ‘Now goth sonne under

³¹ Note: O’Donoghue’s sympathetic, biographical telling of the girl’s story partly influenced my own way of thinking about ‘Anchoress’.

wod' where the watcher equates the setting sun to another kind of passion – the Passion of Christ.

Now goth sonne under wod:
 Me reweth, Marye, thy fair rode.
 Now goth sonne under tre:
 Me reweth, Marye, thy sone and thee.³²

As Edmund Reiss says, in his essay on this lyric³³ the imagery plays on the related double meanings of the words. 'Rode' is Mary's 'countenance', but also the 'rood' or 'cross; 'sonne' becomes 'sone' or 'son'; and 'tre' (tree) also means the cross on which Christ was crucified. So that the sun going down behind the wood (forest) becomes both the sun going down behind the cross and the 'son' sinking towards death. The focus for the speaker is Mary's face as she watches her son die.

What is encapsulated here are various forms of distance: the distance of the watcher from the hillside scene, the distance of Mary from her son on the cross, unable to reach towards him and comfort him, the decreasing distance of the sun gradually drawing downwards towards earth and the scene on Calvary; and the distance of the reader from all these things. Standing apart, the watcher fills the emotional distance for the reader with his own pity: 'I pity, Mary, thy fair face' and 'I pity, Mary, thy son and thee'. In this way, distance from passion has two meanings, both the passionate grief of Mary at losing her son (and watching him die in agony) and the Passion of Christ. Paradoxically, it is Christ's death and resurrection that closes the distance between humanity and the divine: but this 'Passion' is redemptive rather than the socially divisive 'passion' of the self-indulgent individual.

If O'Donoghue were a different sort of writer, it would be tempting to identify the fact that the girl 'stops the once, to watch the sun/ Rise over Doolin across the water' with the rising of Christ in her life and her ultimate resurrection through his own rising. However, the

³² *Middle English Lyrics*, ed. Luria and Hoffman, W.C Norton, 1974, p.179

³³ *ibid* p.317

ambiguity here is that, despite his Catholic upbringing by an observantly religious mother³⁴ O'Donoghue is himself an atheist. In 'A Nun Takes the Veil' it is the country girl and her pleasant young face with whom he empathises, and the Catholic tradition that he implicitly criticises. Except for a fleeting reference to the disappointment of the father, feelings are not articulated. As in many other of his other poems, we are left with a sense of stoicism and philosophical acceptance. We are shown the images, told the stories, then invited to make our own connections and fill the gaps with our own emotion. At the same time, with O'Donoghue's poetry, we are always aware of being in the presence of the 'intense and compassionate consciousness'³⁵ of the writer.

In his translation of *Piers Plowman* O'Donoghue again, uses plain language which is suited to Langland's own Malvern dialect

While I was dreaming Nature enlightened me
 Calling my name and saying to take notice
 While she led me on through all the world's marvels.³⁶

Although the tale told by Long Will, the dreamer, is extraordinary, the telling of it is simple and designed to appeal to an audience of commoners. O'Donoghue's love of nature and attention to details of the countryside and seasons comes through strongly in his sympathetic rendering of the 14th century text

Who on earth, then I wondered tutored the magpie
 To arrange all the sticks that she lays on to breed?
 No joiner, I'm certain could make a dome like it.

The final lines of Christ's death are often told in heightened language. Yet O'Donoghue again uses a restraint and plainness to tell the story as if in the vernacular of the watching crowd, or as might be recounted in a Cork pub by one of the locals.

Consummatum est, said Christ, and began to pass out,
 Pale as a prisoner that's dying the death

³⁴ Appendix 1, p.iv: First Interview.

³⁵ John Fuller, *PBS Bulletin*

³⁶ *Here Nor There*, p.23.

The lord of life and light laid his eyelids together.

The crucified man is seen here not as a far-removed divinity, but as ordinary a man as, for example, Denis Hickey sitting by the gate of the graveyard with his 'knuckle-headed blackthorn'³⁷ or the village blacksmith, cleaning his Sunday shoes in 'Saturday Evening'.³⁸

Although the work is threaded through with intertextual references such as to Dante, Leopardi, the Irish of Séamus Dall Mac Cuarta (c.1700) Yeats, classical myths, Edward Albee and Gerald of Wales (to name but a few), what stays in the memory from O'Donoghue's work, are the ordinary people who make up the local community, and the comic and tragic things that happen to them. He stresses the responsibility of the poet to 'give back' to the community from which he or she has taken. While on the one hand 'poaching' ideas, characters and stories from them, he feels that, like the bards, poets have a duty to bear witness: yet events should be allowed to 'speak for themselves, rather than being mediated or judged.'³⁹ In 'Caedmon' he retells the story of the young boy, suddenly gifted with poetry and music, who wrote the earliest known lyrics in English (circa 8th century AD), recasting it in a modern setting, but starting with the voice of the older Caedmon, the seasoned storyteller, preparing his audience to hear a story

Far be it from me to start telling
The truth at this stage of life;
But this, anyway, is how it happened.⁴⁰

Slipping away from festivities to avoid having to perform a 'party piece', the speaker tells how he unexpectedly meets a girl in the cow byre, dressed in red and green, who encourages him to 'sing one song' for her. 'But what about?' the lad asks. She replies

Sing about the locals here and how
The whole thing started: what put them
At the music.

³⁷ 'Kilmacow' *Here Nor There*, p.50

³⁸ *ibid* p.36

³⁹ *Oxford Poetry, Vol. 10. No.3*: Eds. Jane Griffith and Graham Nelson, Magdalen College, Oxford, Summer 1999, p.41.

⁴⁰ 'Caedmon', *Gunpowder*, p.29

The 20th century Caedmon closes his eyes and sings. The girl, who could be a personification of Ireland or the Celtic world, approves, and he goes on to become a singer who is in constant demand in the local pubs and bars.

Here, O'Donoghue leaves us with our poetic antennae attuned to two existences – that of the Celtic Caedmon, carrying the gift of song through from the mysterious 'otherworld', and the local lad overcoming his shyness to become a popular entertainer on the evening and weekend circuit. As with the yearning for completeness of *The Dove's Neck Ring*, the *amor de lonh* of the *troubadours*, the embroidered barricades of language in *Astrophil and Stella*, the projection of spirituality in *The Windhover* and *Now Goth Sonne Under Wod*, O'Donoghue's poetry is built on architectures of distance; although the spell of his storytelling often leads us to believe that we too, like him, can straddle divides and have a foot in both worlds.

cont.

2. DEATH

Death as a subject is, of course, a central theme in all literature, yet O'Donoghue employs it particularly effectively, using elements of elegy and lament which are deeply rooted in poetry which goes back even further than the Middle Ages to its roots in Anglo-Saxon and Celtic poetry. As Kenneth Jackson says in *Early Celtic Nature Poetry*⁴¹ an elegy is not of itself a nature poem, but 'certain kinds of elegy can deal with nature'. The elegiac quality of much of O'Donoghue's work comes from a sense of mourning the loss of a world seen through the eyes of childhood. There are several elements that link it to Celtic and Anglo-Saxon poetry: the use of a voice which assumes the position of the exile; the meditations on ageing and death; the laments for 'real' people who have contributed to the community and the poet's memory of it. Added to these is the Fenian element of frequent naming of places, and things associated with them, to recreate them vividly in the mind. The Fianna⁴² were forced to leave their forests and hills, their hunting places and 'mead-halls and melt away into supposed exile. So we have 'hymns' of praise such as the one to the Well of Tráigh Dhá Bhan which begins 'Well of Tráigh Dhá Bhan,/ lovely is your pure-topped cress;'⁴³ And in poem XVII which begins

High and delightful hill
to which the fair Fiana used to come,
there was wont to be a very great encampment
upon you, and a band of fine young men.⁴⁴

the bounty of sea and shore is remembered

Swift salmon of Lindmuine,
eels of the noble Shannon,
woodcocks of Fidrenn,
otters from the recesses of the Deel.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Cambridge University Press 1935, facsimile reproduction, Llanerch, Felinfach 1995, p.110

⁴² A legendary band of warrior-heroes said to have roamed Celtic Ireland led by the visionary poet, Finn MacCool. Finn is thought to be sleeping still, awaiting the call to rise up and save Ireland when her need is greatest.

⁴³ *Early Celtic Nature Poetry* p.15. XV st.1, ll.1-2

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 16, st.1.

⁴⁵ *ibid.* st. 5.

O'Donoghue is also scrupulous in his naming of people, places, flowers, birds and animals in order to vividly create and honour memories of the past and, like his Fenian antecedents, uses nostalgia for the past, and the longing to recreate it, as a powerful emotional tool.

Another element, which uses distance to create converse feelings of alienation, is the trope of the person coming towards the end of his life, exiled from his friends, family and roots and forced to wander over land and sea which provides the fundamental narrative principle of such poems as *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* and *Beowulf*. In *The Seafarer*, the exiled poet is forced to leave his homeland in early summer when the air is filled with 'cuckoo cries' and set out

On to the whales' roads irresistably,
Over the wide expanses of the sea⁴⁶

In *The Wanderer*, the speaker sees no reason why his heart shouldn't grow 'dark' when he thinks of the passing of the 'bold and noble thanes' who have 'left their hall' and a way of life which has fallen into ruin symbolised by a landscape in which stand 'wind-blown walls, frost-covered, ruined buildings' and where 'The wine-halls crumble; monarchs lifeless lie...'⁴⁷ As in O'Donoghue's work, an important requisite of *The Wanderer*, combined with the sense of deliquescence as the 'earth, and everything thereon/ Declines and weakens each and every day,' is the need for the tale-bearer to keep his grief to himself.

I know it for a truth
That in a man it is a noble virtue
To hide his thoughts, lock up his private feelings,
However he may feel⁴⁸

and

And so those jealous of their reputation
Often bind fast their sadness in their breasts.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, ed. and tr. Richard Hamer, London 1970, p.19, ll.5-6

⁴⁷ *ibid* p.179 ll.21-22

⁴⁸ *ibid* p.175 ll. 11-14

⁴⁹ *ibid* ll.17-18

The poem 'Hermes' from *Here Nor There*⁵⁰ is a typical example of O'Donoghue's treatment of elegy where he uses the low-key vernacular speech of the local community, and affectionate yet respectful reminiscence to mourn the passing of a local 'character' – the village's gravedigger, Dennis O'Connor. The man is vividly brought back to life by the speaker, who professes to specialise in 'writing letters to the bereaved' and 'consoling/ Children, widowers and widows' and now wishes to 'honour' the dead man, praising his 'unrivalled singing', his 'wit barbs', 'merriment among the dancers' and 'vamped mouth-organ'. The second half of the poem invests O'Connor with the 'fox's glamour' and the 'excitement of the hare, /And a like form, away from the everyday.' Here we can see the Celtic influence, invoking the natural world and the magical properties of animals to suggest a hidden layer of meaning which infuses the life of an ordinary man with the 'out-of-the-ordinariness' of 'that thrush's nest, sealed with spit/ You showed us above the arum lilies'. As in 'Who Goes With Fergus', where Yeats conjures the spirit of a long dead Celtic king who still rules the 'shadows of the wood,/ And the white breast of the dim sea.'⁵¹ so here, O'Donoghue suggests a blending of real and fantastical worlds. He identifies the dead man as 'Hermes, bearing messages/ From the past' who must return, 'like summer/ Out over the top of the fairy thimbles'. Using the nature motifs of Celtic poetry where the ghosts of the Fianna still move among the 'Wanton deer' upon the peaks of Arran and gather with the

Hunting dogs there, and hounds
blackberries and sloes of the dark blackthorn,
dense thorn-bushes in its woods,
stags astray among its oak-groves.⁵²

O'Donoghue suggests that the spirit of the local gravedigger has returned to where it came from, a world which is simultaneously past, present and future. By presenting parallel realities side by side, O'Donoghue creates a paradox. There is the obvious distance of different eras and worlds: the classical period of Hermes, the winged messenger of the Greeks, the Celtic world of fairies and animal spirits, and the recent past of someone who has enjoyed an 87

⁵⁰ p.17.

⁵¹ *W.B. Yeats: a critical edition of his major works* ed. Edward Larissy, OUP 1997, p.22 ll.10-12

⁵² *Early Celtic Nature Poetry*, p.15, XVI.

year span of the 20th century. Yet there is an acceptance that these disparate elements make up the sum total of an ‘out-of-the-ordinary’ life. Where we feel a gulf most keenly is the poet’s need to keep his own polite distance, asking ‘Are we now at liberty to call you/ Damsel?’ an example of how, like the speaker of *The Wanderer*, O’Donoghue honours the old tradition of courtesy, restraint, and the need for those mourning their dead to ‘bind fast their sadness’.

In ‘The Day I Outlived My Father’, there is the same mixture of regret and ambivalence about death. The poem starts, typically, as if it comes half way through a conversation, ‘Yet no-one sent me flowers, or even/ Asked me out for a drink’. In the traditions of Anglo-Saxon and Welsh lament⁵³ the poet seems to be showing more sympathy for himself, the bereaved, than for his dead father. Then comes the extraordinary suggestion that the speaker is ‘lacking imagination’ because he has failed to follow his father ‘In investigating that other, older world.’ The second, balancing stanza, acknowledges the fact that the poet is in ‘new territory from here on:’. With the death of his father, it is his own maturity, both as a man and a poet, which has to interpret the interface between self and other, real and fantastical, English and Irish, modern and medieval. The final six lines of the poem accelerate into an extraordinary burst of energy as the speaker imagines himself now ‘At liberty’ to go his own way without obligation to meet the expectations or limitations set on him by his father or others. Like ‘...mad Arnaut’ in this new territory, perhaps, the poet will be able to behave differently because the context of being the ‘father’s child’ has been outgrown. The final lines of the stanza darken to a reflection on the possibility of following the deceased to ‘that other, older world.’ This suggests the ‘older’ Celtic and Yeatsian world of liminalities and fugitive territories that fluctuate between realms of the living and the dead, when spirits are set free to roam among ‘...all the dishevelled wandering stars’⁵⁴

⁵³ *ibid.* p.116 ‘An important group of elegies, particularly in Welsh, is that where the speaker bewails his dead lord and friends and the ruin of their home’ but is not ‘concerned with his own sufferings’. An example is the Elegy on Cynddylan *The Red Book of Hergest*, XVI.

⁵⁴ ‘Who Goes With Fergus’, Larissy, p.22, l.12.

A far more terrible poem is 'Dogs, Would You Live Forever?'⁵⁵ about his mother's painful death from cancer at a young age. O'Donoghue has said that it the one poem he would never read publicly⁵⁶. Here, there is a total absence of the whimsicality which softens 'The Day I Outlived My Father'. For a start, the first image of his mother 'bent at stool' is uncharacteristically grotesque and intrusive. We see invalid's 'arched back' like 'white fish/ That has been too long in the fridge,' and hear her crying out: 'this is the worst now.' At first we assume that 'worst' means pain, but, when the speaker re-assures her by saying 'You did as much for children/ Often enough' we realise that it is the indignity of helplessness that is 'worst'. This shocking insight into the realities of invalidism and dying helps us to understand the immensely private nature of the mother. More importantly, it sheds light on the reluctance of the poet to reveal emotion openly. O'Donoghue has said that his early poetry was coloured by his awareness that his mother would read it⁵⁷ and for this reason he avoided unsuitable topics and 'loose observance'. Yet at his mother's death, there is no sense of any kind of release, as suggested in 'The Day I Outlived My Father'. What does happen is that feelings come perilously close to the surface when the 'scene/ Comes back, untriggered, more/ Rather than less often'. As his mother might have done, he asks us to keep our distance: 'I'd prefer you to wait outside.'

There are other instances where the suddenness and brutality of death causes the reader to take a mental step backwards, as the poet remembers trying to make moral sense of the actions of adults. In 'Killing the Pig' there is no shirking of the grotesque and brutal details of the 'degrading, upside-down/ Pulleying upwards of the condemned beast – /Aghast, screaming, foaming with fear.'⁵⁸ In 'O'Regan the Amateur Anatomist'⁵⁹ the sinister O'Regan saws at the legs of a gander 'with a friendly smile', and the poet, at a loss as how to respond, manages a bemused smile in return

⁵⁵ *Here Nor There*, p.21 and Appendix 2, p.iv.

⁵⁶ Appendix 1, p.v: First Interview.

⁵⁷ *ibid*

⁵⁸ *Gunpowder*, p.10.

⁵⁹ *The Weakness*, p.15

Knowing what grown-ups do, whatever breeds
About their hearts, is always for the best...
...babies learn in the night
By being left to cry.

A similar sort of bleakness is created by 'Ter Conatus'⁶⁰ and 'The Definition of Love'⁶¹. In 'The Definition of Love', the distance measured by the time it takes for the eye to travel down the page mimics the journey of a tentative hand trying to take courage to reach out to touch someone else's on the linen tablecloth, or the journey of the young curate of a parish in 'West Cork' who races to be at his mother's bedside and dies in a car crash before he gets there, (no-one told him she was already dead.) In 'Ter Conatus', the woman dying of cancer rejects the offer of her brother's hand 'I can manage',/ She answered, feeling for the stairs.' Three times, we're told, he tried to help her, but each time 'the hand fell back', being 'so little practised in such gestures.' Even at the point of death, old habits of reserve can't be thrown off. Expressions of love not practised end in failure. We are reminded of the mother in 'Dogs, Would You Live Forever?' saying 'This is the worst now', and the son, shocked with grief but still bound by the ties of propriety and what is 'decent', asking the reader to 'wait outside'. These are the elements that constitute the 'old thin ache'⁶² of a culture that is harsher, thinner and less forgiving than that of the poet's adopted milieu, but that is just as much a vital part of himself.

O'Donoghue has talked about being 'hostile' to the ageing process⁶³ which is the theme of *Outliving*. The outliving of youth, vitality, usefulness and the general 'fallings from us'⁶⁴ of hopes and capacities lead to a sombre tone which, as he says, moves further from the acceptable melancholy of the Romantic period towards a darker sense of futility.

⁶⁰ *Here Nor There*, p. 52. Also Appendix 2, p.iii.

⁶¹ *ibid.* p.6. Also Appendix 2, p.iii.

⁶² 'Westering Home', *Here Nor There*, p.51. l.13. Also Appendix 2, p. iv.

⁶³ Appendix 1: First Interview, p.iii.

⁶⁴ William Wordsworth, 'Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' from *Poems in Two Volumes*, 1807, l.146.

'Vanishing Points'⁶⁵ shows O'Donoghue the moralist, taking a stand against the outrage of war. As a father, he says, he feels he has the right to make his voice heard on such issues. Typically, he comes from an oblique angle, first showing us the image of his daughter in her school jumper in the dentist's chair and the necessity of being 'cruel to be kind'. He then juxtaposes an image of the photograph of the

thrown away body
of the young Taliban soldier. His trainers
similarly foregrounded, look as if
they could be the same designer label

The gulf between the two images puts in perspective two definitions of suffering, one for the greater good of the individual, the other from which no good can come. The two are left for us to dwell on. Typically, the schism between definitions and different moral standpoints remains open, and becomes a part of the recurring patterns of distance which characterise O'Donoghue's work.

⁶⁵ *Outliving*, p.55. Also Appendix 2, p.i.

3. PERSONALITY/ DUAL NATIONALITY/ LANGUAGE.

We have looked at how O'Donoghue exploits distance over two of his main themes – the Middle Ages and death. We now need to consider the issue of identity and factors that present distance in the poetic voice. For this purpose, I will look at comparisons between O'Donoghue and four of his contemporaries who share elements of his own practice and background. Carol Ann Duffy is similar in that she moved from Scotland to Staffordshire as a child and is influenced by displacement; Tony Harrison's journey was between social groups and their language use; Seamus Heaney shares O'Donoghue's divided Irish heritage; and Derek Walcott because he uses heteroglossia, as O'Donoghue does, to synthesise the scholarly English tradition with the idioms of his native culture.

With the publication of *Here Nor There*, O'Donoghue acquired the reputation as a poet of the split "I". The duality was perceived as emerging from his position as an émigré who felt at home neither in one place or another – the oppositions being the rural Ireland of his childhood versus his 'privileged'⁶⁶ life in the 'ivory tower' of Oxford where he now teaches medieval English Literature as a Fellow of Wadham College. This sense of being an 'outsider' was considered by some⁶⁷ to be integral to the meaning of his work, and aligned him with poets such as Carol Ann Duffy and Tony Harrison. Duffy's reaching towards her lost country of birth (Scotland)

The other country, is it anticipated or half-remembered?
It's language is muffled by the rain which falls all afternoon
one autumn in England...⁶⁸

has the same nostalgic tone as O'Donoghue's 'Westering Home'

Though you'd be pressed to say exactly where
It first sets in, driving west through Wales
Things start to feel like Ireland.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ See Appendix 1, p.vi: First Interview.

⁶⁷ For example, 'Three Ways of Looking at the Gaeltacht' Laurie Smith, *Magma 14, Spring 1999*.

⁶⁸ 'In Your Mind', *The Other Country*, London, Anvil, 1990

⁶⁹ 'Westering Home', *Here Nor There*, p.51. Also Appendix 2, p.iv.

Like Duffy, O'Donoghue searches for signifiers to articulate the change from one state to another and, in this poem, concludes that it is less the outward, visible signs of chapels, buzzards and blackthorn hedges, as the 'architecture of the spirit;' that reminds you have passed over the border from one state to another. He defines the feeling of returning to his Celtic roots as reconnecting with

The old thin ache you thought you'd forgotten –
More smoke, admittedly, than flame;
Less tears than rain. And the whole business
Neither here nor there, and therefore home.⁷⁰

Although these lines suggest a feeling of displacement, O'Donoghue contends that the line 'Neither here nor there, and therefore home.' in his case means he actually feels at home in both places, rather than neither;⁷¹ which presents a more complex and ambiguous scenario than Duffy's with her overt feelings of loss and displacement.

In her most personal poems, Duffy writes far more explicitly about the painfulness of feeling displaced as we can see in 'Survivor'

I have hidden myself in my heart, where I rock
and weep for what has been stolen, lost.⁷²

Duffy's experience of loss of 'culture, speech, sense of first space/ and right place'⁷³ resulting from her move, at a young age, from Scotland to Staffordshire, leads to feelings of 'outsideness' and 'overwhelming nostalgia'⁷⁴. When Duffy watches her brother swallow a slug as an initiation rite to placate the 'big boys' at the new school, she feels a 'skelf of shame'⁷⁵ both at being an incomer with a strange dialect, and at the humiliation her brother is forced to undergo. As Neil Roberts suggests there is a powerful suggestion here that 'adapting

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ See Appendix 1, p.vi: First Interview. Also *Oxford Poets* p.46: 'I was immensely happy in both places [Cork and Manchester.] I think it's to do with writing about where you're not. You write about the other all the time.'

⁷² Quoted by Neil Roberts, 'Carol Ann Duffy: Outsideness and Nostalgia' *Narrative and Voice in Postwar Poetry*, London and New York, 1999, p.192.

⁷³ *ibid* p. 184.

⁷⁴ *ibid* p. 185.

⁷⁵ *ibid* p.184

to unfamiliar speech is like taking something repulsively alien into the mouth.⁷⁶ By using the word ‘skelf’ which is Scots for ‘splinter’, the poet suggests that her own speech has been reduced to a splinter, or foreign body, in the English idiom that has subsumed it.

In my interview with him of 1st October 2002, O’Donoghue discusses the ‘strong sense of different languages’ around him when growing up and claims that ‘The most significant single point about my bringing-up was, I think, that I had a mother with an English accent, and she was very unusual.’⁷⁷ Yet, as much as bi-lingual language acquisition, it was as much social and cultural levels, and the general usage of language itself that helped form the personality of the writer and his ways of relating to the outside world. For example, in ‘Child Language Acquisition’⁷⁸ O’Donoghue describes how the ‘first skill’ that had to be learned was ‘how to sustain a double conversation’ between people who were not on speaking terms. More crucially, ‘you had to learn which families/ Were feuding’ so as not to stray into ‘damaging allusion to the enemy’. This draws a picture of the child who has to skirt round the difficult edges of adult relationships which affect him deeply but which he doesn’t really comprehend. Understanding the role of language in resolving difficulties, or at least, holding their consequences at an arm’s length is later transposed to the adult poet’s tendency to use language as a many-layered filter through which passion (especially anger and grief) can be kept at a distance, and therefore, controlled.

In ‘The Uvular R’ O’Donoghue ruminates upon how dialect and the sound of particular forms of speech help to define character:

We were the Cork crowd;
We always lacked the definition
Of the more western voice and land in Kerry.
The south Cork coast, kind and all as it was,
Wasn’t Dingle. Our gaeltacht was speckled,
Consonants that compromised and faded

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Appendix 1, p.xii: First Interview.

⁷⁸ *Here Nor There*, p.45.

On the roof of the mouth like Communion wafers.⁷⁹

By inference, it is the Cork crowd itself which lacks definition, which is 'kind and all' yet seems compromised by only producing consonants that, unlike the jaggedness of Duffy's 'skelf of shame', fade 'on the roof of the mouth like Communion wafers.' O'Donoghue ends by commenting on the incursion of the harder, consonantal sound of English into the softer, more vowel dominated Celtic speech of the Irish

That our bruachs were riverbanks; that our local names
Took the English word for it: Newquarter,
Watergrasshill and Coalpits and Halfway.⁸⁰

Because of his part-English heritage, the triumph of the English tongue over the Celtic and Gaelic, has to be a part victory and part defeat which can mean either 'here nor there' or 'here *and* there'. The reluctance to come down either one side or the other of the linguistic fence gives O'Donoghue the advantage of an overview and has led to superbly fluent heteroglossia: but the overview contributes to the sense of distance in his work in that it is coolly observed, detached and objective.

Heaney, in his poem 'Ocean's Love for Ireland'⁸¹ reflects that

Our guttural muse
Was bulled long ago
by the alliterative tradition.

Like O'Donoghue's, Heaney's response to the invasion of the Irish by the English language is ambivalent. For example, in his introduction to *Beowulf*, he talks about his excitement at finding an Old English word that was still used in his childhood by his 'older, less educated relatives'⁸². The word, *þolian*, meaning 'to suffer' had emigrated from Scotland some time before the 6th century. When the *thorn* at the beginning is given its correct pronunciation of *th*, the word becomes 'tholian'. Heaney remembers hearing his aunt saying of a recently

⁷⁹ *ibid.* p.9. ll.5-11

⁸⁰ *ibid.* ll.12-14

⁸¹ *North*, Faber, 1975

⁸² *Beowulf*, Faber, 1999, p.xxv

bereaved family 'They'll just have to thole like the rest of us'. This and similar discoveries have had a 'wonderfully sweetening effect' on Heaney, as he senses the Irish/English and Celtic/Saxon antitheses being 'momentarily collapsed'. In the resulting 'etymological eddy' he experiences a 'gleam of recognition' as he glimpses the potential of a common language.

In an earlier book, *Preoccupations*, he speaks of how, in a Northern Ireland dominated by the 'received pronunciation' of the local BBC, poems by Patrick Kavanagh gave him 'permission to dwell without cultural anxiety among the usual landmarks' of his life in a farming community where there were few books.⁸³ Like O'Donoghue, Heaney's writing experience has been schizophrenic, vacillating between the old words he has grown up hearing and using, and the new ones he has acquired on his way to becoming a Nobel Prizewinner. His opening lines in 'Death of a Naturalist' were originally 'My father wrought with a plough', but he changed it to 'My father worked with a plough', because, although until recently the verb was common to the speech of mid-Ulster, to 'educated' ears it sounded archaic and over-literary, with allusions to New Criticism (Cleanth Brooke's *Well Wrought Urn*) and to Donne's original use of the phrase.⁸⁴ Heaney explains the difficulty presented to the poet in having to make such decisions

Once you have to think twice about local usage you have been displaced from it, and your right has been contested by the official linguistic censor with whom another part of you is secretly in league.⁸⁵

The idea of a 'linguistic censor' creating a gulf between acceptable and non-acceptable language has been explored by writers such as Tom Paulin and Tony Harrison. In v, Harrison's skin-head alter-ego reminds him of his mother's reaction to his first collection, *The Loiners*

She didn't understand yer fuckin' art!
She thought yer fuckin' poetry obscene!⁸⁶

⁸³ *Preoccupations*, p.10.

⁸⁴ 'As well a well wrought urne becomes/ The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,' 'The Canonisation' *John Donne: Complete English Poems*, J.M. Dent, 1994, p. 9-10, ll. 12-13.

⁸⁵ Quoted by Neil Roberts, 'Language, Nationality and Gender: Seamus Heaney and an English Reader' *Narrative and Voice*, p.122.

Harrison's attempts to 'occupy language on behalf of his class' is in some respects doomed, because his 'class', represented here by his mother, doesn't want to listen to the versification of raw vernacular, and is equally reluctant (or unable) to comprehend the more heightened 'literary' language which Harrison also uses. When asked by John Haffenden⁸⁷ why he pays so much attention to the artifice of prosody, especially metre, Harrison says 'I learned it as skilfully as I could so that people would have to pay attention'.

In 'On Not Being Milton', Harrison describes

The stutter of the scold out of the branks
of condescension, class and counter-class
thickens with glottals to a lumpen mass
of Ludding morphemes closing up their ranks⁸⁸

using a highly sophisticated linguistic mix, skilfully held together by rhyme and alliteration. 'Branks' is an old Scots word for a scold's bridle, 'condescension' a Latinism, 'morphemes' is derived from Greek and 'scold' puns on 'scald' which is Old English for poet, probably dating back to Old Norse. 'Ludding' is a neologism suggesting Luddite, and 'lumpen' is pseudo-vernacular derived from Marx's German 'lumpenproletariat'.⁸⁹ Harrison, who was forbidden by a teacher at his Northern grammar school to recite Keats because of his Leeds accent, was constantly spurred on to find speech that was relevant to his own background, yet that would be heard and accepted by the literary establishment. Had the same middle class criteria been applied to Keats himself, his cockney accent would have barred him from reading his own poetry.

Harrison's rage at what Paulin calls the 'apartheid'⁹⁰ of the English class system has been shared by most poets who have used any form of regional language that has ended up

⁸⁶ Quoted by Neil Roberts, 'Tony Harrison, Author and Subject in *The School of Eloquence and v' Narrative and Voice*, p.164.

⁸⁷ 'Interview with Tony Harrison', Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994. p.17

⁸⁸ Quoted by Neil Roberts, *Narrative and Voice*, p.154

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Minotaur*, p.50

'beating its head against the walls of urbane polished, Official Standard'.⁹¹ John Clare, the subject of Paulin's essay, is a case in point. O'Donoghue pays tribute to Tony Harrison's attempts to progress 'the unequal struggle between working class speech and the various dominant discourses that suppress it.'⁹² by writing a poem in homage to him - 'Command of English'⁹³. In this poem, O'Donoghue speaks of how his English pronunciation sets him apart from the other pupils: 'I would say 'luck'/ For what the rest of them pronounced like 'look'.' On the bottom of an essay was written 'Good command of English'. In the same poem, another less scholarly boy sits 'crownawning along' to a popular tune on the radio.

Like O'Donoghue, Derek Walcott, use registers more smoothly to create a distinctive heteroglossia. Walcott says 'when I write/ this poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt' and 'my common language go be the wind'⁹⁴ and we get a sense of an expansiveness towards culture and language encapsulated by the buoyancy of his native West Indian dialect. In *Omeros*,⁹⁵ his resetting of Greek myths in a St Lucian fishing community shows how he is able to exploit the dominant culture, rather than trying to 'occupy it' on behalf of class or race. In this way, Walcott and O'Donoghue show that distances between class, race and region can be bridged, and that barriers and antitheses between cultures can be collapsed. Synapses can be leapt with more or less ease, depending on the personality of the writer, and how far s/he can persuade the reader to use imagination to illuminate the obscurities that all these 'shifts in meaning' cause.

At the same time, the polarity between Englishness and Irishness did create a division within O'Donoghue, of which he was aware from an early age,⁹⁶ and is an underlying cause of the fragmentation that enables him to empathise so strongly with the 'longing for

⁹¹ *ibid* p.52

⁹² Neil Roberts, *Narrative and Voice*, p.153

⁹³ *Here Nor There*, p.4.

⁹⁴ Quoted by Neil Roberts in 'The Mulatto of Style: Derek Walcott and Hybridity', *Narrative and Voice*, p.97.

⁹⁵ Faber and Faber, New York, 1990

⁹⁶ See Appendix 1, p.xiii: Second Interview with Bernard O'Donoghue, 3 March 2003.

wholeness'. The fact that his name was pronounced with an Irish, uvular 'r' as in 'Berrnarrd' by his father and most of the rest of the Cork/ Kerry community, and as 'Bernard' by his mother (who named him after Bernard of Clairvaux) made him feel, he says, uncomfortably set apart from the crowd. O'Donoghue was 16 when his father died and the family sold the farm and moved to Manchester. His Irish accent, he says, was very soon modified to fit in with the locals.⁹⁷ Yet the lilting rhythms of the Cork accent are still very much present in his speech and the poetry he writes, suggesting that it is the part of his identity he most chooses to express.

Despite their smooth usage, O'Donoghue's use of the local Cork dialect as in 'jarveys' ('The Munster Final') 'cafflers' ('The Courtesy Stone') 'pishgogue' ('The Pishogue Master') and occasionally complete lines of unexplained Gaelic such as found in 'The Road to Doon School'

*Buchaill dána dob ea Seán Ó Riain.
Bhí dúil mor aige in úlla.*

do have the effect of creating a distance between the "I" of the poems and the reader. The 'Road to Doon School' is a small parable about finding goodness where it is least expected, as the schoolboy O'Donoghue and his band of fellow apple-robbers realise, with a shock, that the owner of the orchard was bearing down on them 'Without a look or headshake of rebuke,' but anxious to dispense a 'gwáil/ Of the sweetest fruit' his orchard has to offer. Peter Trudgill talks about 'covert prestige'⁹⁸ when dialect speakers use words which identify them with a minority. Like canting terms or rhyming slang, they are the shibboleths which guarantee entry to a privileged group or 'clan'. Here, O'Donoghue is identifying himself not only with the less dominant culture and remnants of old countryside tradition, but also with the myth and

⁹⁷ *ibid*

⁹⁸ In his book, *On Dialect* (New York University Press, 1984) Peter Trudgill talks about the 'high covert prestige' of speaking ' 'orrible' by groups of young, working class people in Norwich. This reflects the desire by certain groups to 'resist comprehension by the 'high' language of the dominant socio-economic groups with whom they do not identify. See also, *A Table Alphabeticall*, Robert Cawdrey, 1604 and Thomas Harman's *Warning for Vagabones: A Glossary of Canting Terms*, 1566, which shows cant as anti-language.

magic of the Bardic tradition by which he has been so influenced. The distance set up here is of the maestro, the speaker of wisdom and teller of tales, the 'scop' or 'scald' and his audience. O'Donoghue, then, uses language and dialect in two ways – to bind the reader/listener to him and the story he is telling, but also to flag up barriers and no-go areas that can only be negotiated by language. At the centre, there is an ambivalence about identity. O'Donoghue belongs at the same time to both sides of his cultural heritage and neither: and the discomfort this caused him in early life has left him with the habit of protecting himself and his need for privacy by keeping the world at a polite distance, a position which is reinforced by the courtly and elegiac nature of his themes.

cont.

4: UNIFYING PRINCIPLES: HUMOUR, LYRICISM AND THE IRISH COUNTRYSIDE.

To talk about O'Donoghue as a poet of distance belies the overall impression of his work which is of lyrical, and often humorous, accessibility. His concerns about ageing are wryly disparaged. In 'Nel Mezzo del Cammin'⁹⁹ he objects to finding himself past the 'mid-point' saying 'I wasn't ready...the sun was in my eyes,'. In 'Pencil It In'¹⁰⁰ he feels his impact on life is fading like the signatures he has written in books, from assertive fountain pen to progressively softer pencil leads. In 'Stealing Up'¹⁰¹ he finds himself unexpectedly ambushed by signs of ageing, and in 'Ghouls'¹⁰² he is surprised to find he has acquired his mother's face and skin. The writing is also full of sly barbs and wordplay. In 'Ex Corde' he gently mocks 'the Almighty's/ Taxing system.' whereby each person to enter the doors of the village chapel on All Soul's Day represents a saved soul, even irreverent schoolchildren. The poet presumes that God

In his infinite whimsy can't resist
The sight of innocent children shoving
And sniggering in and out of the door.
You could save twenty [souls] in an afternoon.¹⁰³

He concludes 'His ways are not our ways,/ Even if they're suspiciously reminiscent.'¹⁰⁴

In 'Romantic Love' he subverts romanticism with

I've never felt the same about your eyes
Since learning that it's superfluity
Of uric acid that causes their brownness.¹⁰⁵

The engaging humour and conversational style make for eminently readable, enjoyable poetry where form (often sonnets) is used to underpin but never over-ride the content. These, with elements of lyricism and reflections on nature,

⁹⁹ *Gunpowder*, p.15, ll.11-12

¹⁰⁰ *Here Nor There*, p.12

¹⁰¹ *Gunpowder* p.20

¹⁰² *Here Nor There*, p.3

¹⁰³ *The Weakness*, p.20, ll. 6-9

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.* ll.19-20

¹⁰⁵ *Gunpowder*, p.40, ll.1-3

throw a light (and delightful) covering over the 'fissures' and 'gaps' that I have discussed. The continual references to the Irish countryside do contain some distancing factors- for example, O'Donoghue poems about social exclusion and the Catholic community's attitude to outsiders shown, for example, in 'Unknownst To The People'¹⁰⁶ where a settlement of tinkers disappears from the locality without trace; but on the whole the descriptions of nature work in an assuasive way to create the atmosphere of a flawed Eden. The listing of birds, animals and plants, can be traced back through the traditions of pastoral and its debates between art and 'great creating nature'¹⁰⁷ to early Celtic nature poetry with its delight in all things natural. The Irish poems use lists to celebrate the bounty of field and forest, river, sea and shoreline. Number V mentions 'apples, yew-berries, rowan-berries, sloes, whortleberries, crowberries, strawberries, haws, hazel-nuts, acorns, pignuts, watercress, herbs, wild marjoram, onions, leeks, eggs, honey, salmon, trout, milk and beer'; XVI lists 'deer, swire, hazel-nuts, blaeberrys, blackberries'; XIX adds 'pigfat, porpoise steak, birds, venison, badger fat, fawns, salmon and fish'; also mentioned in other poems are garlic, cress, martens, woodcocks, otters, eels, raspberries, brooklime, saxifrage, seaweed, herbs, sorrel and wood-sorrel' (*Early Celtic Nature Poetry*¹⁰⁸)

Several of O'Donoghue's poems are dedicated to birds, e.g. 'The Nuthatch' whose 'woodwind/ Stammering exalted every work-day'¹⁰⁹; 'The Robin in Autumn'¹¹⁰ and 'Bittern'. In 'Bittern' we see an instance of O'Donoghue's lyricism;

He's trying to pass like Syrinx for a reed,
 ... the keen heron
 The stiletto-shod crane stilting archly
 Round the puddles, the pink-gorged flamingo
 Dropping off on one leg, bored with alluring.¹¹¹

Here, subject matter inspires a musicality which, when treating other subjects, is provided mainly by the lilt of the poet's Irish accent. The repeated 'r' sound of 'trying', 'Syrinx' and

¹⁰⁶ *Here Nor There*, p.34.

¹⁰⁷ 'For I have heard it said/ There is an art which in their piedness shares/ With great creating nature.' Perdita to Polixenes, Act IV, Scene iv, on nature versus artifice in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.

¹⁰⁸ p.125.

¹⁰⁹ *The Weakness*, p.43, ll.5-6.

¹¹⁰ *Gunpowder*, p.50

¹¹¹ *The Weakness*, p.44, ll. 7-13.

'reed', echoed by the long 'a' in 'pass' narrows into the long 'ee' of 'reed' and 'keen', becomes staccato in the 'short 'i', 'e', 'o' of 'stiletto-shod', stretches briefly into a long 'a' in 'crane' before the cropped, alliterative onomatopoeia of 'stiling archly/ Round the puddles' brings the subject back to the mundane. Meanwhile, the short, repeated 'i', 'i' of 'pink-gorged flamingo' descends to a lower note- the 'o' of 'dropping' and 'off' which chime with 'shod' two lines before. The long 'ore' sound of 'bored' takes the cadence into its final, feminine line ending - 'alluring'.

In 'Croke Park at Ballylee, 1989', O'Donoghue advises us to

Look for guidance to the swallows,
Still protesting against ravishment,¹¹² now from
Their wire platforms high above the scabious
Or weaving their telling tapestries
Of air¹¹³

In 'Morning in Beara' the abrupt cessation of the gannet's call is compared to an engine suddenly cutting out¹¹⁴; in 'Aurofac 20' we are told of the 'echo/ Of the hayfloat's stammering ratchet',¹¹⁵ in 'Louisburgh',

Gross orange jellyfish closed and opened,
Engine-valves slowed nearly to stopping.¹¹⁶

and in *Here Nor There*, 'Reaper-and Binder', is perhaps the only poem written in praise of a piece of farm machinery, is a good example of how pastoral reminiscence can act as a corrective to distance, creating a pleasurable sense of unity and wellbeing and alleviating the 'longing for wholeness'.

Voices were lost as the reaper-and-binder
Went clacketing past, spitting out at you showers
Of gold you embraced with your arms overfull,
So the sheaves slithered down from the grip of their bindings
As children, incompetent, slide out of jumpers.

At night on your pillow your ears went on singing
In time to its music by echo and echo
While your awn-scalded forearms still throbbled from its fallout.¹¹⁷

¹¹² Philomela, raped by her sister Procne's husband (Tereus) and silenced by having her tongue cut out, weaves her story into a tapestry to tell her sister the truth. After wreaking vengeance on the rapist, the sisters flee. During the chase, the protagonists are turned into birds by the gods- Philomela into a nightingale, Procne into a swallow and Tereus into a hoopoe.

¹¹³ *The Weakness*, p. 50, ll.29-33.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.* p.45, ll. 5-6

¹¹⁵ *Gunpowder*, p.21, ll.8-9

¹¹⁶ *ibid.* p.3, ll.10-11

¹¹⁷ *Here Nor There*, p.32

CONCLUSION

The object of this essay was to explore the use of distance in the work of Bernard O'Donoghue and to assess the significance of his 'poetry of restraint' in contemporary British poetry. I have done this by separating out certain strands of his work and looking at them individually. I first looked at what he has identified as his main themes – the Middle Ages and death. I then looked at identity and the language used to express it as interface between poet and reader. Lastly, I considered how, with humour and heteroglossia, his third main influence - the Irish countryside - provides a unifying element.

We have seen how medieval writers such as Malory use 'narratives of distance' to suggest the 'longing for wholeness' in the human condition. This is particularly evident in the poetry of the *troubadours* for whom passion must be kept at a distance. O'Donoghue says in our first interview that the idea he is most interested in is the

...medieval one...that kind of 'passion in society' idea, courtly love, the notion that good behaviour is society and passion is the impulse to do things that are against the order of society.¹¹⁸

In 'Claire, Playing Schubert' he uses the actual phrase 'to make the passion keep its distance': and in his poetry there are countless instances of how he achieves this. In 'Dogs, Would You Live Forever' we are asked to wait outside. In 'O'Regan the Amateur Anatomist' and 'Killing the Pig' we find the child affected by rural violence who distances the horror by use of cool observation. In 'Ter Cornatus' and 'The Definition of Love' it is the poignancy of unexpressed love that suggests a falling short in human relationships. In all these cases, the 'passion', whether it is love, anger, horror or despair, by being held back, assumes the vaster and more terrifying proportions of the unknown - the looming shadow, the approaching tornado, the prediction of the worst that can happen which is often as bad as the disaster itself.

¹¹⁸ See Appendix 1, p.xi: First Interview.

In relation to death, O'Donoghue has said that his writing is becoming increasingly elegiac¹¹⁹ and *Outliving* is especially elegiac in tone. What is being simultaneously mourned and celebrated is the passing of an era that can now only be recaptured in the mind.

Characters that have fired the imagination in previous collections are now definitively gone –

Now Con is gone, his short bout of cancer ended,
And Dandel, after three years forgetfulness,
Lies in an unmarked grave by the wall of the Old Graveyard¹²⁰

As well as personal friends and memories, he mourns more universal losses. Along with Tim John who 'forced the jawing horse back towards the haybarn' and is now himself 'backing out of the picture, / twisting the long hayrope as he goes' the corncrake has already disappeared, and the 'cuckoo's on her way'.¹²¹ As he says in the *PBS Bulletin* interview, among his favourite texts are the 'wisdom' poems represented by Old English and Irish bardic elegy where 'universal emotion is mixed with the half-stated' to 'convey feeling, and even opinion, without labouring them'.¹²² Inevitably, the traditions of elegy and lament with their functions of remembrance and looking back, combined with 'the power of the half stated' contribute significantly to the sense, in O'Donoghue's work, of severance and separateness: and of the unredeemable moment which passes, like a beat in music, leaving us in the silent space before the next note.

Looking at the 'I', it seems that, although his Anglo-Irish roots caused a certain confusion of identity, O'Donoghue's positive attitudes to belonging both 'here *and* there' (rather than 'here *nor* there') serves to sharpen his focus on the past and his mixed heritage. At the same time, his 'caution about direct expression of emotion'¹²³ has led to strategies such as the avoidance of personal subject matter and the avoidance of attempting to verbalise emotions by 'naming.' This reticence of character and dislike of showing feeling is a major element of restraint in O'Donoghue's poetry, and one which creates distance - between the

¹¹⁹ See Appendix 1: First Interview, p.ii.

¹²⁰ 'Good Fences Make', *Outliving*, p.39

¹²¹ 'The Twisting of the Rope', *ibid.* p.44

¹²² *PBS Bulletin Autumn 1995, No. 166*

¹²³ *Oxford Poetry*, p.49.

poet and his subjects, and the poet and his readers. Conversely, rather than Tony Harrison's attempt to use dialect to 'smash the frames of Art,/ the looms of owned language'¹²⁴ O'Donoghue's fluency with heteroglossia and enjoyment of re-creating the registers of his childhood works to synthesise the diverse elements of poetic tradition and storytelling that we have examined.

Finally, we come to the recurring motif of Bernard O'Donoghue's poetry, and one that loosely binds the disparate strands in much the same way as the child, in 'Reaper Binder'¹²⁵ holds the 'slithering sheaves of gold'- the Irish countryside. Against the repeated arcs of distance he creates, spanning time and space, observer and subject, remembrance and actuality, he plays the unsentimental reality of farming life in a 1950's countryside which was still governed by the slow pace of walking - leading calves to market or following the plough. By highlighting the distances by which individual lives and expectations, and even whole communities fall short, he shows us the other side of the coin - the potential for achieving the completion that Malory's Knights of the Round Table symbolised. Paradoxically, even paragons of virtue such as Sir Lancelot are doomed to failure. Because of our flawed natures, 'wholeness' can never be achieved. So we are left with the longing, and the longing becomes the poetry. Whilst he is unflinchingly unsentimental in his understanding of this, O'Donoghue's 'rare'¹²⁶ qualities of compassion and courtesy, combined with his love of nature and gifts as a storyteller, provide the reader with solace. Using wry humour and understatement, O'Donoghue adapts the traditions of Anglo-Irish poetry to his own uniquely individual talent: and in this he has made a lasting contribution to the Western canon.

¹²⁴ 'On Not being Milton', *The School of Eloquence*, quoted *Narrative and Voice*, p.153.

¹²⁵ *Here Nor There*, p.32.

¹²⁶ Letter to Jenny Lewis from Sheila O'Hagan, Editor of the *Cork Literary Review*, April 2003: 'Bernard O'Donoghue is a fine poet and a rare man'. *The CLR* has accepted a 5,000 word version of this essay for publication in 2004 in an issue celebrating Cork's election to 'European City of Culture' 2005.

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APPENDIX 1.i.

First Interview with Bernard O'Donoghue

1 October 2002

JL Andre Gide says that we write because we feel disharmonious with the world and we need to reshape it to a design with which we feel comfortable. Do you agree and why do you think it is you write?

BO It is, I suppose, trying to suggest a kind of potential harmony as against disharmony. But I think I've probably said before, that I'm not quite sure why I write at all anymore. You get into the habit of it. When I wrote at first, which wasn't very early, in my thirties, I think I had quite a clear sense of why I was writing then and it was much more like the proposition you put to me. There was a kind of campaigning sense to it. I remember very early on being interviewed for a student magazine and they said, "are you a 'committed poet'?" and I said, "more committed than poet". I felt there was a kind of drive to correct the world.

JL In the *Oxford Poetry* interview¹ you talked about "bearing witness". Is it more that?

BO Yes, I think it's more that. I feel more humble before the facts in a way, than to talk of them as 'disharmony'. It is a kind of bearing witness to things. It's not even a matter of approval or opinion either. It's just describing events because they're there and because they happen.

JL There's quite a fine balance between passing judgement and bearing witness...

BO Yes, and I suppose witness is also a kind of protection against despair. Things could so easily seem so terrible, and one's power to intervene so completely non-existent, that witnessing becomes a kind of intervention? Did you see Heaney's interview in *The Independent* yesterday? Quite interesting. He was talking about South Africa and the sense in which poetry can make things happen. And it really does effect things in the political order itself, which is one kind of action which turns into a sort of reality - even if it's only a textual reality. So at least it makes that much happen. There are a number of things in the world that *have* changed when something has been borne witness to, even though the usual things, like making money and people socially advancing themselves won't be changed. You can only bear witness *against* it really.

JL To some extent the pen is mightier than the sword, then? Or perhaps, as mighty?

¹ Interview with Graham Nelson and Jane Griffiths, *Oxford Poetry Volume X: Number 3: Summer 1999* pages 39-51.

BO Yes, I suppose, but there's a kind of chaos theory element to it. You've got to believe that by effecting a very tiny area it might ripple. It won't ripple far obviously, but at least there aren't many areas where an individual can have much kind of impact. That's why you have to try to have a solitary impact where you can.

JL And now you're about to have your fifth collection published.

BO Yes. The poems are increasingly elegiac. It's called *Outliving* which I'm keen on as a title because it's a way of accounting for, and coping with, ageing and going on to the next stage of life all the time, with all the implications, you know - outliving people and regretting the people that you've outlived. Outliving usefulness and so on as well, the whole notion of utility. It ends with the translation of a bit of Dante's *Inferno*, it's a story about Fra Alberigo's bad fruit. Fra Alberigo pretended to have healed a rift with a relative of his and invites him to dinner then calls for the fruit and kills him. Calling for the fruit was the agreed signal to the assassin. Then Dante meets him. Dante says if he will tell him his story he will unfreeze his eyelids which are frozen together. So Fra Alberigo tells Dante the story and at the end he says, "Now unfreeze my eyelids like you promised" and Dante says, "I didn't do it for him" and "It was a courtesy to be discourteous towards him". The horrible hook-end to a moralising view of the world!

JL I was going to ask you about translation, your translations of the *troubadour* lyrics for example.

BO I'm trying to translate *Gawain and the Green Knight* at the moment, for Penguin. I'm quite enjoying it, but I don't think I have any gift for translation really.

JL When we talked before about *Outliving* we talked about you achieving more than your father did in his life. Does it make you slightly uncomfortable?

BO I suppose prospering more might be the word. As people know he was a frustrated farmer who sold insurance, although he was actually rather talented... But that's the fundamental sense of *Outliving*, just getting past deserving or something like that.

JL It's interesting, the idea of treading in your father's footsteps and when the footsteps end having to take that next step.

BO Which is a kind of a conceit I suppose isn't it? But there is some kind of truth, I think, at each stage of life you are going to be on to something mildly new, aren't you, and that's one way in which private and public circles come together, because in your private life, you're

always free to go home and shape it for yourself. But also the public world around you changes. It keeps taking you by surprise, doesn't it? I'm very struck by how dramatically the public world has changed in the last two years. We're living in a completely different sort of world. There's a kind of millennial feel, and everyone was saying in 2000 that actually, things would get better. With the collapse of Eastern Europe and so on. In general there did seem to be a sense of the world maybe having more of a sense of responsibility. And then how spectacularly it's all fallen apart since 2001! There's this terrifying sense of a new imperialism, that the people with the greatest power have absolute authority... and it's being seen openly in a way that hasn't been seen since the Seventeenth Century. I think it's extraordinary, because even the British Empire, whatever people said about it, it at least had a kind of presentation of good manners, you know. But this idea that simply says, "because we are stronger we'll make sure we get our own way" is very scary.

JL Especially the way in which President Bush was brought into power by the utility and oil companies

BO Completely, yes. And now oil interests govern the world. It's almost like a medieval morality play, in a way, in which oil suddenly has become like the devil. If you believed in antichrists, it would be oil.

JL In the *Oxford Poetry* interview, you seem to be an optimist....

BO Yes, I think I am by instinct, but I think it might be coming apart a bit now... I'm not sure actually that I'm as optimistic as I was.

JL I wondered if, your father, perhaps wasn't such an optimist...?

BO He probably wasn't, though I think by and large he was reasonably content. He certainly wasn't an unhappy person. He used humour a lot.

JL I don't know if you agree, in a way, that the way in which our parents view the world colours the way we view it, in a way. So although your poetry has wonderful humour and life, perhaps there's a sort of underlying melancholy.

BO People talk about the Romantic period and the movement from melancholy to dejection. Coleridge moves into a much deeper sense of gloom with his Dejection Ode. And I suppose I've also been inclined to indulge melancholy. What makes it worse now is ageing, which I'm very hostile to... I'm doing it very poorly, unfortunately!

JL Is this the essence of 'outliving'?

BO I think it means outliving everything. It means outliving all kinds of usefulness - physical fitness, enthusiasm and all kinds of good things that you used to do. It's a rather nasty realisation actually.

JL It's important that you are able to speak for your generation, these are the things that everyone commonly goes through.

BO Yes. I mean, I used to say that kind of, rather glibly, that to dwell on the negatives of life is to implicitly exalt the positives by contrast. But I'm not sure that I'd put that quite so blithely anymore, really. I think it's quite hard. I sometimes need to pull myself together and make more effort. So I think I feel guiltier than I used to about being negative, but I do feel rather negative [although I make an effort not to be in front of my children]

JL You said that after you mother died you could speak about things you couldn't before. What sort of things?

BO Almost the whole thing, really, it isn't even subjects. There are things, like loose observance. But it's the whole view of the world in a way, that you think, "right ok, what do I really think?" I know what I've been conditioned to think and what I wouldn't feel at liberty to admit that I no longer do think but am supposed to think. I'm much less clear on what's the right thing or the wrong thing.

JL Was your mother quite religious?

BO Yes she was. At least she was observantly religious - Irish Catholic background in England. There was an issue of loyalty with it. Loyalty was a big deal. So I think that any kind of scepticism about religious observance would have seemed like a disloyalty. That's the root of it. But then that means that you can't write about things you need to write about - things that are important.

JL People have a difficult time readjusting after someone's death.

BO Yes. I've written two poems about that. One of them is very terrible. It's called 'Dogs, Would You Live Forever' that I wrote when she was dying. She died very young, horribly, of cancer. And I suppose it's very lurid and grotesque and physical but I think that it is also metaphorically about the dramatic personal shift you have to make when somebody dies. The other one, 'Ghoul', takes up the same thing more light-heartedly.

JL 'Dogs' is a very shocking poem.

BO It is yes, it is. I've never read it in public and never will.

JL To go back a bit, I was just going to say, before I go on, do you feel apart from your mother, other forms of censorship?

BO That's a very interesting question. I don't know that I consciously think that there are really. I mean, I think in some ways the writing isn't kind of campaigning or direct enough for that, in a way. There are things I don't write about, but that's an act of choice really, rather than censored constraint, you know.

JL I suppose the literary establishment.

BO No, I don't really care what the literary establishment thinks. The literary establishment is about posterity rather than current judgement. What gives me most pleasure, is when people I know say they like things, which is always pleasing. But also when the bits of the bread come back on the water. It's surprising and nice really. I don't care what the literary establishment thinks. It's interesting. It hadn't occurred to me, but I don't.

JL That's good.

BO Yes. I maybe don't understand what it means. I remember, for instance, one very dismissive review in *The Independent* of *Gunpowder* by Bill Scammell. He said it couldn't be taken seriously, he thought it was a waste of time. But he said, 'However, it has one unquestionable success, the poem called "The Iron Age Boat". I thought that was quite a positive experience in a way, because I thought he was right. I think that was miles away the best thing in the book, and so I felt quite shaken by it. But also reinforced, because he must have read the whole thing well enough to see what was the best poem in it. I met him years afterwards and he was terribly nice.

JL Did he remember writing the review?

BO Well he did, very well. He came up to me at the end of a reading and said 'Look, I didn't know how pleased you would be by an introduction to Bill Scammell'. We had a very nice and interesting conversation about the need to really tell the truth in reviews. I'm not very good at it, I don't think, but that's the way to do it, if you've got the guts to. Of course he died shortly after that, which I was sad about.

JL Tom Paulin's given you some good reviews...

BO He gave me two actually, very good, for two of the books. 'The Witness' was one but I don't consciously read reviews at all. That sounds like grand indifference, but I really don't care in a funny sort of way. It isn't that I don't care what people think, because I do care what people think a lot. I very strongly believe that writing is a kind of public activity. There's no point in writing unless you envisage a readership. I'm very keen that people should read them and I do care what they think.

JL I suppose in a way it's better to have more extreme reviews, because at least you're provoking a strong response.

BO I remember when I first published this little pamphlet *Razorblades and Pencils* Edna Longley said the poems read more as a group of occasional poems than as a coherent volume. I think that was dead right. Sometimes you impose a determinist shape on the book with the title. And sometimes titles of books are urgent and single minded, like Heaney's *North*. But I think *Here Nor There* for instance, which I liked as a title, was a bit misleading in a way because it meant people inevitably said, 'well, do you feel not at home in either place?' and so on, and that's just not true, I mean I feel quite at home in both places actually!

JL But there is a lot of 'in between' in that book...

BO That's true. And the other titles - *Gunpowder* was mostly about surprising death, and *Here Nor There* about indeterminate stages. At the stage of writing *Gunpowder* death was still surprising, you expect to live forever. *Here Nor There* is sort of something between the two and then *Outliving* is getting ready to go!

JL Going back to having a foot in two worlds - you said in *Oxford Poetry* that it was a tremendous relief being able to say 'I don't really belong here,' so it seems that you feel, sometimes that there are advantages and sometimes not, probably at the same time.

BO I think I would now say something slightly different, which is that I like to have a get-out clause. You know, where you get into a situation and you think, 'I don't *only* belong here, I also have this other life'. I think it's a universal thing. After all, feeling at liberty to be in two different places, is an economic thing isn't it, in part.

JL ...a privilege...

BO It's a privilege and it has to be gratefully recognised. It is to do with injustice really. Most people's lives are constrained by not being paid enough and so they get stuck in the same place.

JL We did talk a bit about experiencing 'the old thin ache' of going back to a culture that, in some ways, you've outgrown, and the difficulty of talking about that without sounding patronising

BO Exactly. England does have that sense of cultural richness and diversity. But I suppose with the 'old thin ache', there's a kind of sweetness about it as well.

JL Do you think so?

BO Yes. But I suppose it's also therefore, a kind of a cultural construct. It's what you associate with places.

JL When do you intend to retire?

BO I think as late as possible, because what I'm afraid of is that there are no other measures left, apart from just, as Larkin says 'We shall find out....!', referring to the old boys who think it's clever to sit around, slaving and falling over all the time. So I think, when you're doing anything structured and organised, where there's a sense of moving on from stage to stage, time passes slowly because you're working. When you stop that, it's supposed to be like the weekend all the time, going increasingly fast, and no other logic lent to it apart from *the* end, you know. I worry about that a bit. It's a bit frightening. So I'm not so sure. I do look forward to the things you do in retirement... listening to music and going for walks.

JL Before I go any further, could you explain about Mad Arnaut?

BO Oh yes, that's the Provençal poet, Arnaut Daniel, the one that Dante praises in *The Inferno*. He's got those lines of Provençal that Dante's probably made up and attributed to him. He was famous for the 'World Upside Down' poems or *adynata*. One of his poems ends 'I am Mad Arnaut who hunts on hare-back and tries to catch the wind'. I changed them a bit, but it's basically the Upside Down Poem.

JL You're not seen as overtly political, which I think is quite strange.

BO I think that's what I most want to be, but I just find it difficult to do, really.

JL You often deal with social issues. For example in 'The Great Famine', which starts with the marvellous phrase – 'It's a bit Irish, you well might think,' and goes on to talk about the

... beautiful, inedible dog-roses,
Made to flourish by the same hot damp

That caused the crops to putrify.

and

A farmer

Distinguished past years by the weather;

And he hungers most for the seasoning

That salts glamour with the old taste of failure.

Are you saying that you think people can be conditioned to failure, and then only feel comfortable with failure, and that it's a way of keeping them down – like Orwell's claim that tramps in the spikes were only given two slices of bread and margarine and only one mug of tea with two sugars...it's a way of keeping them only at subsistence level so that they haven't the energy to protest and they can never actually break out of that level?

BO Well it's true isn't it, it's true. It's true of underclasses in general really, I think. I slightly worry about that poem, I think the rhetoric is a bit facile really. Again, it goes into the rhetoric of famine a bit too directly. As you say, it is thinking of wider disenfranchisements.

JL Or are you making a more philosophical point about life and death - beauty and decay.. you know... the medieval and renaissance distrust of vanity... that we all come to dust in the end. If you look at it from that point of view, it's less sort of an angry statement about history, more of an acceptance, what Tom Paulin notices about your work, a sort of resignation or stoicism, because that's the way it is, and that actually makes a quite different colouring.

BO I think that's exactly right, that is the primary motivation. Things are very unjust and there's very little we can do about it. I suppose, also, there are some poems that do kind of try and take the risk of becoming fairly overtly political. In *Here Nor There* there's one called 'Unknownst to the People' which is about Irish attitudes to refugees. And in the new book there's a poem called 'Vanishing Points' that was in *The New Statesman*. It's quite interesting that you fall back on *The Statesman* to publish political poems. It's about a Taliban soldier from November last year. There's a picture from the *Observer* and it's just stressing the fact that he's just lying there dead and you can see his shoes. He's only half-bearded, he's too young to grow a beard, he's about fifteen I suppose. He's wearing Afghan clothes, he's got his gun by the side of him. The most touching thing is that you can see, in the foreground of the picture, the soles of his very Western-looking trainers. The poem says – 'get it in perspective, he's still a child, you should be taking him to the dentist not sending him to war'. It sounds facile the moment I say it, but I suppose politicians are required to... this is the fairest way to say it... to make these horrific calculations that will no doubt kill thousands of people. It's just awful.

JL Did you write a poem about September 11th ?

BO No I didn't. I just read the wonderful poem by Simon Armitage, called 'The Convergence of the Twain' in *E Magazine*, the *English Magazine*. It's wonderfully done, because there's two twains and two towers, a lot of twains really, but then he makes it into a sort of titanic poem, an extraordinary, momentous event - the convergence of east and west. For the same kind of reason, I've never written anything about Northern Ireland, because I feel that, interested and involved as we all are, it's not something that I know. It's Derek Mahon's thing about 'living it bomb by bomb'. If you haven't done that, you haven't got the right to talk about it. Whereas I do think I have the right to object to enlisting fifteen year olds into armies and then choosing to blast them from the skies. As a parent, I have quite strong views about both of those things. I think I've got a vote on that. I don't think I've got a vote on other things, though obviously I still have very strong views on them.

JL You can only write...coming from actual experience, living it.

BO Absolutely. That's why [Armitage's] is such a fantastically great poem. And it's a controversial poem, because it tells the truth about what people think, and people are extremely reluctant to tell the truth. I do greatly admire people who can write clearly and feel they have the right to talk about political things. I think a great political poem is a greater poem than any non-political poem.

JL You do think that?

BO Yes I do, yes. There are very few of them, I suppose. Because – I'm not sure I haven't said this before – you know, poetry is not the most obvious language for political discourse. It is not direct enough. It tends to fall back on opinion.

JL And you've said short stories are something you've been moving slowly into?

BO I'm not sure that I do so much anymore.

JL A lot of your poems are like short stories. And especially in the endings. You seem to lull people into this false sense of security by starting anecdotally. You build up a picture with all the place names and names of the characters... and then at the end, there's suddenly this kick.

BO Kick in the knee, yes. The short story does do that, I suppose. Whenever I think about short stories I'm always thinking of Frank O'Connor, a poet/writer, his short stories are great poems. Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolin, Daniel Corkery and Mary Ladden. She's further

up the country...of course the greatest short stories are Russian, she's seen as the Irish Chekov.

JL That sense of being deeply in the physical and psychological landscape is important.

BO Place is very significant in short stories, isn't it. You've got to get it right, you know, because you've got to establish very quickly what the kind of place is in terms of reference, and all the localising effects have got to be right straight away in a short story. There isn't time to unfold it.

JL Another poem that I was interested in was 'Pencil It In'; it seems to be saying something about identity, but I can't quite work out whether it's about self-effacement or the opposite? The fact that a few years ago you wrote in pen and ink, and then in HB and then 2B pencil...it's sort of like you're not bothered now to leave traces of yourself, or perhaps you don't need to any longer?

BO I think it's gloomier than that really. The idea is just that the signature has become more and more effaced. I suppose it's a general sense of – I'm not sure this would stand much Freudian scrutiny really – but the impact one makes on the world. The immediate impact, in the sense of physical engagement, gets less and less. It's also a reversal of that Larkin thing. He wrote his first chapter in 2B pencil and then toughened it up.

JL Then I thought perhaps this was more subtle, you don't need to impress your identity, or need to shore it up.

BO I don't think I did feel that actually, I'm sorry to say.

JL In 'Holy Island' you talk about 'guilt-arousing girls'. When you talk about sex it's often with a kind of wry humour. Is this your Catholic upbringing?

BO Probably. And guilt, almost certainly. I listened to Tony Harrison talking about his 'dirty books'. I suppose there's that really. I do think of love and sex and all that as being the whole key to poetry, I think the medieval poetry I like best are the love poems, you know. But love poetry is very hard to write. I mean, it's quite interesting that, maybe, gay love poetry is easier to write, because it's got the power to be surprising. A lot of what I'm saying is about the power to be surprising. I'm just thinking of someone like, let's say Carol Ann Duffy for instance, who writes gay poems, if that's the right description, which are very arresting and very beautiful still, because there is a sense of surprise and shock in the encounter.

JL Although you write with a very intimate voice you don't usually write about intimate things...

BO Not so many of them I suppose. I'm not quite sure why that is really. I suppose I do think that the public realm has more general urgency than the private. But then of course, the private is much more important to each individual. That's the kind of balance we're making all the time. Our private lives are much more important to us than the public world in terms of what we can effect and how we are experiencing it. But I guess the duty towards the public world is a duty.

JL A duty towards others...?

BO I think so yes. I suppose, the literary idea that I am most interested in is a medieval and a modern one. That kind of 'passion in society' idea, courtly love again, the notion that good behaviour is society, and passion is the impulse to do things that are against the order of society. That's as the middle ages defined it, you know. So that in literature there's always the figure of the person whose individualistic love affair is a disaster in public and from a social point of view. Someone like Guinevere for instance. These figures continually appear as figures of social disaster. Which would mean of course public disaster, which would mean death and war and famine coming about because of the exercise of private choice. Desire is the impulse towards illicit personal fulfilment. So in a way, you can sidestep the question of guilt in a way because that's just how it is, and in the twelfth century or the twentieth century it was the same. You know, people have these two impulses. You're on one hand a good citizen, and on the other you're a selfish individual who's got all these appetites that you want satisfy, but you can't. So I think it all fits into that really.

JL Finding the middle way...the median...?

BO But there isn't a middle way. You just have to do both or one. Yeats is very good on that. His sex poems are very shocking.... 'love which is found in the place of excrement' and so on... makes the reader sit up. The thought of someone writing that in the 1930's is astonishing! And of course Yeats is also a slightly skewed but nevertheless, a strong political conscience, political involvement. The things that Yeats wrote... his time could not be understood without them. It's that kind of thing really.

JL I wondered how much your teaching of the History, Theory and Use of the English Language has affected your poetry? Do you think it has?

BO I was predisposed to be very interested in language from upbringing. The most significant, single point about my bringing up was, I think, that I had a mother with an English accent, and she was very unusual.

JL Was she accepted?

BO Yes, yes she was. And her mother was from nearby, actually, so she was only kind of one generation out, but she was very English. But there was a very strong sense of different languages around you. Then there was the kind of school voice as well, the educated English language. And I had a terrible name for it, my name couldn't be worse. She spoke with silent Rs, and while everyone around me called me "Berrnarrd" with rolling Cork 'r's, she said "Bernard". I just didn't know who the hell I was. It was extremely disorienting. It's very significant actually.

JL And the last thing for today, You have said that Richard Murphy has had a great influence on your work...

BO I think he's a very good poet. There's one called 'The Reading Lesson' which I like very much, about teaching a tinker boy to read; and his long poem called 'The Battle of Aughrim'. My favourite poem of his, which I'm always alluding to is called 'Pat Clagherty's Version of the Maisie' which is about the sinking of a boat off Connemara. Murphy just copied down the words which one of the survivors of this boat used. He's almost the only person I know who can do that. He's very Anglo-Irish, but was born in Sri Lanka, the son of the last Governor of Colombo. He went and lived off the west of Ireland, on this island called High Island and he can just do it. He can write a kind of clear vernacular, which is how people speak English locally, without any sense of strain at all. He's one of the poets I most admired in the Sixties.

JL Well... thanks for this.

BO Thanks very much.

APPENDIX 1. ii.

**Second Interview with Bernard O'Donoghue
3 March 2003**

JL: At what age did your father die and did you come to England?

BO: I was 16, we immediately sold up the farm and moved to Manchester, where my mother grew up.

JL: In the last interview, you said you found your name – 'Bermarrd', as in *Outliving*, the 'Cork girls, rolling their eyes and 'r's'² - extremely disorienting and didn't know who the hell you were. This opens up the whole issue of difference – Irishness v Englishness. Could you talk about that a bit?

BO: My mother had an educated Mancunian accent and called me 'Bernard' with a silent 'r'. Everyone else called me 'Bermarrd'. But it did make me feel like two different people... set apart... you know. The odd thing was that, as soon as I got to Manchester, the Irish accent pretty well went. I made sure I fitted in.

JL: The language you use for poetry seems to be a well integrated form of heteroglossia (learned, vernacular and dialect). Were you ever aware of thinking in separate compartments?

BO: Not really.

JL: I wondered about 'The Pleasures of the Circus'.

'Pleasant are the clowns.../Acrobats are the highest.../Parents are the rattiest'

Is this Irish or Welsh. Gnomic? (Show *Early Celtic Nature Poetry*)

BO: It's Irish Gnomic poetry – you're the first person whose ever picked up on that!

JL: In 'Claire, Playing Schubert' you talk about 'making the passion keep its distance' and 'those dreamt despairs' of childhood. And poems like 'Kerry v Cavan, 1955', 'The Mule Duigan' and 'Child Language Acquisition' 'Stealing Up' - seem particularly *felt*. Are these autobiographical? Or would you say the "I" is provisional?

BO: They are autobiographical, except for 'The Mule Duigan' – the whole story of that was told as reported to me. It was his blast against sentimentalism.

² 'The Orange Girls of Cork' p.19

JL: Words I don't understand – i) in 'Munster Final' – 'jarveys'? ii) 'The Courtesy Stone' – 'cafflers' iii) 'Nel Mezzo del Cammin' iv) in 'Pishogue Master' – 'pishogue', 'gliogars'

BO: 'jarveys' – pony traps that take visitors on rides round the lake; 'cafflers' – mockers; 'pishogue' – black magic and tokens of bad luck; 'gliogars' – bad eggs.

JL: Some of your language is marvellous, especially about nature e.g. 'Bittern' – 'The stiletto-shod crane stilting archly/ Round the puddles.'

BO: I'm glad you like it!

JL: Ciaran Carson quotes Michael Longley (in Poetry London 1999) as suggesting that the defining characteristics of Irish poetry are:

- i) attention to detail
- ii) reflections on the natural world
- iii) knowing when to say nothing
- iv) a sense of craft and obligation to language

Do you agree?

BO: Well, that could be applied to all poetry, couldn't it?

JL: Thank you, that's all there's time for this time.

BO: Thank you.

APPENDIX 2: POEMS BY BERNARD O'DONOGHUE

1. THE DAY I OUTLIVED MY FATHER

Yet no-one sent me flowers, or even
 Asked me out for a drink. If anything
 It makes it worse, your early death, that
 Having now at last outlived you, I too
 Have broken ranks, lacking maybe
 The imagination to follow you
 In investigating that other, older world.

So I am in new territory from here on:
 Must blaze my own trail, read alone
 The hooftracks in the summer-powdered dust
 And set a good face to the future:
 At liberty at last like mad Arnaut
 To cultivate the wind, to hunt the bull
 On hare-back, to swim against the river.

2. CLAIRE, PLAYING SCHUBERT

This is the kind of poem I never write,
 dropping musicians' names. But where else
 is there to turn, but back down the path
 that leads to childhood and those dreamt despairs.
 After the power of the closing bars
 that made you thrust down the keys, then lean
 back to make the passion keep its distance,
 your hands stay fixed, reluctant at the end
 to leave their sense of triumph. Dream children,
 of course. I've never heard you play. I know less
 than I know Uchida whom I saw once
 taking the stairs two steps at a time,
 hurrying back to play in the Festival Hall
 on the floor above where I was reading.

3. VANISHING POINTS

for Robert and Badral Young

Safe in an armchair in the dentist's surgery,
 you observe your daughter's treatment:
 being cruel to be kind again. You fix on
 the criss-cross of her trainers' soles
 in the foreground, on past her brave socks,
 grazed knees, school jumper and clasped hands
 to the vanishing point that is her head,
 laid back. It is the same perspective as
 in the photograph of the thrown away body
 of the young Taliban soldier. His trainers,
 similarly foregrounded, look as if
 they could be the same designer label.
 But this vanishing-point is past his head, way out
 in the impassive desert sands towards Kabul.

4. A NUN TAKES THE VEIL

That morning early I ran through briars
To catch the calves that were bound for market.
I stopped once, to watch the sun
Rising over Doolin across the water.

The calves were tethered outside the house
While I had my breakfast: the last one at home
For forty years. I had what I wanted (they said
I could), so we'd loaf bread and Marie biscuits.

We strung the calves behind the boat,
Me keeping clear to protect my style:
Confirmation suit and my patent sandals.
But I trailed my fingers in the cool green water,

Watching the puffins driving homeward
To their nests on Aran. On the Galway mainland
I tiptoed clear of the cow-dunged slipway
And watched my brothers heaving the calves

As they lost their footing. We went in a trap,
Myself and my mother, and I said goodbye
To my father then. The last I saw of him
Was a hat and jacket and salley stick,

Driving the cattle to Ballyvaughan.
He died (they told me) in the county home,
Asking to see me. But that was later:
As we trotted on through the morning mist,

I saw a car for the first time ever,
Hardly seeing it before it vanished.
I couldn't believe it, and I stood up looking
To where I could hear its noise departing

But it was only a glimpse. That night at the convent
The sisters spoilt me, but I couldn't forget
The morning's vision, and I fell asleep
With the engine humming through the open window.

5. TER CONATUS

Sister and brother, nearly sixty years
 They'd farmed together, never touching once.
 Of late she had been coping with a pain
 In her back, realisation dawning slowly
 That it grew differently from the warm ache
 That resulted periodically
 From heaving churns on to the milking-stand.

She wondered about the doctor. When,
 Finally, she went, it was too late,
 Even for chemotherapy. And still
 She wouldn't have got round to telling him,
 Except that one night, watching television,
 It got so bad she gasped, and struggled up,
 Holding her waist. 'D'you want a hand?', he asked,

Taking a step towards her. 'I can manage',
 She answered, feeling for the stairs.
 Three times, like that, he tried to reach her.
 But, being so little practised in such gestures,
 Three times the hand fell back, and took its place,
 Unmoving at his side. After the burial,
 He let things take their course. The neighbours watched

In pity the rolled up bales, standing
 Silent in the fields, with the aftergrass
 Growing into them, and wondered what he could
 be thinking of: which was that evening when,
 Almost breaking with a lifetime of
 Taking real things for shadows,
 He might have embraced her with a brother's arms.

6. THE DEFINITION OF LOVE

It's strange, considering how many lines
 have been written on it, that no-one's said
 Where love most holds sway: neither at sex
 Nor in wishing someone else's welfare,
 But in spending the whole time over dinner
 Apparently absorbed in conversation,
 While really trying to make your hand take courage
 To cross the invisible sword on the tablecloth
 And touch a finger balanced on the linen.

A young curate of a parish in West Cork
 Was told his mother was seriously ill
 And he must come home to Boherbue
 (In fact she was dead already; they had meant
 To soften the blow). He drove recklessly
 Through mid-Kerry and crashed to his death
 In the beautiful valley of Glenflesk.
 This was because he fantasised in vain
 About touching her fingers one last time.

cont.

7. WESTERING HOME

Though you'd be hard pressed to say exactly where
 It first sets in, driving west through Wales
 Things start to feel like Ireland. It can't be
 The chapels with their clear grey windows,
 Or the buzzards menacing the scooped valleys.
 In April, have the blurred blackthorn hedges
 Something to do with it? Or possibly
 The motorway, which seems to lose its nerve
 Mile by mile. The houses, up to a point,
 With their masoned gables, each upper window
 A raised eyebrow. More, though, than all of this,
 It's the architecture of the spirit;
 The old thirn ache you thought that you'd forgotten –
 More smoke, admittedly, than flame;
 less tears than rain. And the whole business
 neither here nor there, and therefore home.

8. DOGS, WOULD YOU LIVE FOREVER?

Frederick the Great

She's bent at stool, as the saying is,
 Next to her deathbed. Her arched back
 Is like white fish
 That's been too long in the fridge,
 Greyed at the spine-bones.

Crying, she says, 'this is the worst now.'
 I say 'of course it's not.
 You did as much for children
 Often enough.'

But of course it was: the scene
 Comes back, untriggered, more
 Rather than less often,
 Oddly enough.

I'd prefer you to wait outside.

cont.

9. UNKNOWNST TO THE PEOPLE

The small boy's clothes smelt terrible:
Goats, maybe pig's droppings – or something worse.
We had to defumigate the car
After we'd unwisely picked him up
Out of the rain on his way to shop
In Carraiganima (where Art O'Leary
Met his poetic martyrdom).

A strange accent: north of England
Overlaid with the aspirates of North Cork.
He told us about his Mum and Dads,
And how they'd built the palisade themselves
From bits and pieces of discarded wood.

All that summer, though we never saw
The occupants, we watched the holding grow
In confidence on its small quarter-acre:
The washing hung to dry; plastic buckets
Lying round. And always the blue of woodsmoke.

When we came back next spring, the whole place
Was gone, only marked by soaking, charred wood.
A year later again, the green grass was growing
To the neatly locked gate at the roadside.
We asked around, but no-one seemed to know
Where they had gone to, or why,
And everyone looked downward to the ground.

10. CORONACH

No two told the story the same way,
 Even afterwards. The Caseys, driving back
 From a job above Rockchapel, as they did
 Every day at that time, saw nothing
 Unusual as they passed the house.
 They said the light was on, the gate closed
 Just like it always was. Whether there was
 Smoke from the chimney, they couldn't say.

Leary's niece swears that she saw him lying
 On his bike against the ditch, with one hand
 Over his chest. She said nothing to him,
 Thinking he was only out of breath, or drunk.
 But as she hurried on, she thought she heard
 Him saying, 'I'm fin.' She took one look back,
 But he was still propping himself on the bike,
 Against the ditch. Earlier in the day

He'd certainly been to the butcher and had bought
 Two chops and a half a pound of sausages,
 As he often did. The butcher half-remembered
 That he'd said something about the horse-fair
 (Or maybe the pony-show was what he meant)
 And talked about football. But the strange thing
 Is the butcher said he'd certainly walked *down*
 The street after leaving the shop. The woman said,

With equal certainty, that he'd walked up.
 She remembered because he'd broken into a trot,
 Something he never did. Two people independently
 Confirmed his bike had been parked outside
 The church. They couldn't have been wrong because
 One mudguard was black and one was green. He
 Was found with a prescription in his pocket,
 But no-one saw him at the doctor's.

The blackbird sang at 4 a.m.;
 The cattle shifted in the field.
 An almost silent tapping sound
 Could be heard from the gully
 Under Lisrobin bridge.
 Did he hear them, any of them,
 As his blood cooled and his
 Muscles set, fixing in his ears
 And retina the sound
 And scenery of his death?

APPENDIX 3: POEMS BY JENNY LEWIS

1. ANCHORESS

i. *And was he not himself a recluse in Mary's womb?*

Today, there's the fig tree's palmate leaves
stretching to feel the ripe fruit,
split like a vulva, bulging seeds:

and light
thrown over the sea like a starched cloth
as if pinned to the sky by her mother's flashing needles.

There's fishing boats, shouldered by the swell,
tacking the blue with lines of silver:

and rain
turning earth in the yard to clay
as she runs to gather in the membranous washing.

There's the smell of oregano, scant from her father's plot
chopped with salt and pungent basil
over a dish of aubergine and tomatoes:

the taste of cedar and orange blossom,
mixed together by the dancing swarm, honey for her bread
and to sweeten her milk.

Tomorrow, there'll be a Requiem Mass,
a handful of dust against the anchorhold,
a bowed head, uncomfortable new clothes:
freckles already beginning to fade.

ii. *She who chatters grinds chaff*

She was always the chatty one,
turning the atoms that fell on her consciousness
into a stream of language constant as rain

on the roof, or the hens clucking in their dusty roost,
or the breathing in and out of the slow Mediterranean:

it started first thing, when the sun came up
behind the cork forests, and Tomaz the Goatherd
led his tinkling flock to lower pastures

and didn't cease until her mother, finger to lips,
folding the child's still warm shift and pinafore,
blew out the candle at bedtime.

Tomaz was with her when she had the first vision.
She made him kneel with her, although
he saw and heard nothing.

He remembers how the twigs and cones
dug into his knees, and how the bells of his goats
grew fainter as they wandered off.

He remembers her face in the shadowed grove,
lit up as if by a halo of candles. On the way home
for the first time ever, she was silent.

Now the movements her mouth make
become more gradual. She is a swimmer
floundering far out where sounds cease to carry.

Those words she used have flown
away, each one carrying an olive leaf,
each one a white dove disappearing.

iii. Those birds fly well which have little flesh

Although it is not in the rules,
she tests herself, leaving the bread
and cheese untouched until her maid
takes it away; and the more she hungers
the more she has to test herself.

She is not allowed to beat herself,
to flail herself with nettles
or hedgehog skins. The abbot forbids it.

She is not allowed to cut herself,
but she can force herself to lie
on stones until the imprint on her body
is like a nail in her side.

She can force herself to sit, undressed
under the window on winter's nights
until her bones groan with cold.

If she doesn't eat, her body will remain
pure and empty to receive the sacrament.

The wafer is like honesty, a paper moon,
and she is a fledgeling stretching up its beak
to take the gift, turning the web of her blood to silver,
her flesh thin as air.

iv. Come to me my beloved, my dove

At first she seems to be drowning:
her self diffusing out and down
into unsearchable deepness

as if a sound, scintillas of high notes,
like a robin's song crushed into particles,
is dissolving

like coloured notes
of a church wall-painting
drifting on the choir's breath.

Then she feels she is melting:
liquified, streaming golden as honey,
the fire outside and in her

the heat unbearable yet welcome,
white as an orchard at Easter,
the unspeakable longing

packed in surprising sweetness
like her cold finger
testing jam at boiling point.

At last she knows
the melting is red
blood like her own

but a dearer, sacred blood:
her senses are birds
nesting in his five wounds.

Site of peace, City of Zion,
her eyes become doves
meekly to approach him.

When she herself is the city,
she is filled with music
which is the food of Heaven.

Now she is a garden of scents.
She is a flower opening
in her bridegroom's heart.

v. Visio pictoralis

Light starts to hum, straw becomes a halo,
She sees herself reflected in the baby's eyes.
The Blessed Virgin strokes her hair as her mother used to.
Suddenly the sky outside is loud with trumpets.
She stops her ears. The moment is over. Then Mary says -
"Come to me".

vi. Come to me my beloved, my bright bride

Cedarwood coffin freckled with fading light.
He wonders, once more, about what might have been.
Ruefully, Tomaz stops to cross himself.
Inside the anchorhold a spider spins.
Scents of thyme and honey on the hillside.
This is the last time he will think of her.

2. FREESIAS

I hold them in their paper cone
inhaling a scent that is spring and my mother
all wrapped into one. She loved these flowers

and kept some always, in a cut glass vase
beside her bed, with the photo of my father
and the latest Neville Shute.

Now the flower shop's closing, they've taken in
the jugs of snowdrops and tulips - narcissi from the Scillies,
and heading home towards St Aldates,

I remember how I'd come into her room,
with a cup of tea that always spilt,
however carefully carried,

and find her at her dressing table, the scented air
stooped round her shoulders like the Jaeger scarf
she used, when she brushed her blonde hair

to keep her navy suits ship-shape for business:
or standing by the window gazing out,
not humming Clair de Lune or laughing

at some *double entendre* off Round the Horne.
After our father died, she laughed alone -
we were too young to get the jokes.

His last letters, scribbled in pencil from a hospital bed,
always ended the same – *Goodnight sweetheart –
kiss our girls for me, love you lots, and then some* .

The writing as faint as the scent of these freesias.

3. PERFECT

after Bernart de Ventadorn

A dual existence between matter
and spirit, poised in flight
like a lark beating her wings over water

against the sun's rays, feeling it better
to be translated into air, to fight
the dual existence between matter

and spirit with poverty, to batter
flesh into chastity, make it light
as a lark beating her wings over water.

Power of blossom and bloom to flatter
our senses with joy of touch, smell and sight
betrays every creature's need for matter

as well as spirit. For the pure Creator
has a dark counterpart of equal might,
and the lark beating her wings over water

is like spirit trying to shatter
its vessel, reveal its light, give insight
into duality: spirit and matter –
a lark beating her wings over water.

4. PROSPECTS

We lay, a dormitory of ten year olds, deciding
which death would be preferable – our summer skins
watermarked by smears from mushy flannels
now stiffening on washroom pipes to pungent, dried
marine shapes. With hands that smelt of pencil shavings
we proved self-strangulation was impossible, although
our gluey fruit-gum mouths ran technicolour trying it.

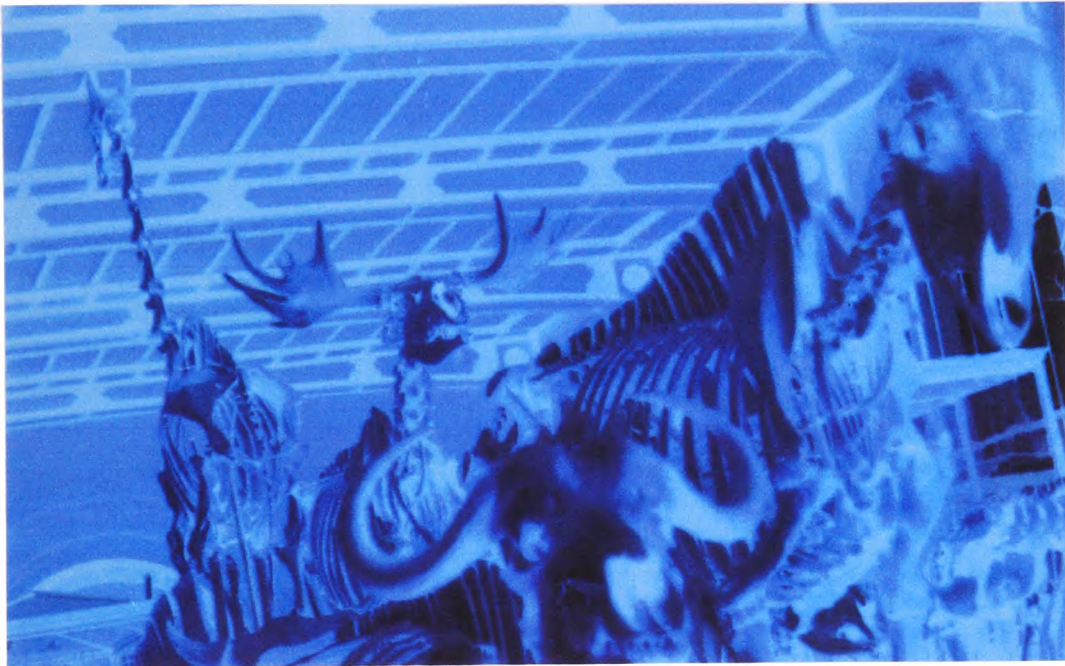
Burning from the feet up like Saint Joan would be worst,
someone suggested. *You'd faint before it got too bad –*
the sturdy girl cut out to be a nurse assured us.
But until then? Remembering the courage test
of fingers over candle flames, we shared the pop
and prick of sizzling flesh, the smell of singeing hair,
and slowly drew our knees up, hugged ourselves.

Yet drowning would be just as horrible, we knew
from when we held our breaths in swimming; a gallery
of underwater fossil shapes in black wool costumes,
buoyant on our silver strings of seed pearl bubbles,
while springboard plunges boomed and banged, swerves
of light made wavy lines along the tiled bottom,
our lungs cracked and our eyes bulged like onions.

We didn't know, then, about the Viking burials -
those skeletons found in funeral vaults in the same
positions they'd died in, scrabbling at the walls of their
stony tombs – sobbing their need of food and air, young girls
not much older than we were, no doubt promised a share
of glory in Valhalla: fated by their wombs and breasts
to be buried, screaming, with the old, dead king.

NATURAL HISTORY

JENNY LEWIS



NATURAL HISTORY

By Jenny Lewis

Contents

Natural History
Swan
Hare
Woman Brushing Her Hair
Sur le Pont des Arts
Freesias
Lupins
Perfect
Troubadour
The Opposite of Light
Five Billion Years of Secrets
Child at the Window
The Other Wife
Anchoress
Geisha
August Heavenly Alarming Female
Balcony
Chair
Bright Morning
Drummer
Crane
Coven
Hot Air
A Night With Ulysses
When Penthesilia Fell
Tribute
Aquatics
Seal
Dear Field
Aubade
Last Rites
A Dog Named Frodo
Eclipse
Poems for Peter:
 i. Last Visit
 ii. Losing Your Voice
 iii. Maureen's Story
Follow the Leader
Father
Celibate
David
Icicles
Cathar

Saissac Castle
Boarder
Prospects
Survivors
Masonic
Baboushka
Seeing with Dharma Eyes
Sign
Swan Lake
Natural History

NATURAL HISTORY

My face is changing again
I caught it in a different light
yesterday

the flaky grey
of ocean-going
tankers

my face has turned
to someone else's

inside the inside
of the ocean, fish are hanging
cuttle-coloured

they sway, silent
not even a rattle of bones

and the dead stir in us too,
coming as they do from the weight
of darkness

they want our breath

want to tunnel out of us,
force apart our gullets,
appear stark-white

and raving at daylight

one more moment
they plead
just one more

SWAN

Consulting the bones, no-one could have predicted it, except that the dull roar of the ring-road, constant as tooth-ache, drowned out a sound, the beating of wings over Cowley, past the Asian Centre, on up to Iffley Lock where the year turned fiery amber in the beaten sheet of the Isis, and bonfires marked the end of summer. The sky, rolling away, showed its wild markings like a shoal of bloodied mackerel dumped over the side *en masse*, or an anaconda writhing with souls of Quetzuan Indians turning into stars.

On the towpath were bikers, joggers, cocky-tailed dogs out without their owners, couples wheeling push-chairs, language students in earnest conversation. Beside them, the river traffic - rowers in training for Eights Week, boys in skiffs examining their blisters. And none knew about the silent creature mourning the death of its mate, or noticed, yet, the beat of its wings, heading away from the city where thousands of T.V. screens made a babel of sound out of light.

12 September 2001

HARE

We made new forms and in them rested
words, then watched them bolt and spring
in ways Taliesin might have dreamed of.

Some spoke in colours deep as Arles
lavender, others were held by hawks
which circled over gorges, rose and rose
in fractured slipstreams, spoke in tongues
which changed our thoughts for ever.

One Easter, we were sitting by a stream,
our feet in splashing water, facing the April sun,
when a hare came and laid down with us

as if instructed to. While we wondered
at this, we heard, in the next field, a lamb,
ignorant of its message, begin to bleat.

WOMAN BRUSHING HER HAIR

after Degas

In spring, I lived underwater with it –
my dappled hands held auburn hanks
like uncoiled ropes to brush and brush,
while my thoughts drifted upwards
into the pearly green and umber.

By summer, my face was a scribble –
no eyes, a mute mouth. I forced the auburn
from its lair at the nape of my neck,
brushed it over my brow in torrents
with hands like ham bones. By now
I knew I couldn't tame it by myself.

That autumn, I sat on a bed while my maid
tried to groom it. *Does it hurt?* she asked,
as the auburn itself fell like a curtain
over any other possibilities my life held.
She tilted her head and pulled, spilling
a ginger snakeskin over my face and forearms.

In winter, roasting chestnuts, I was caught
in the blaze. My dress became flames.
My maid grabbed the inferno and tried
to brush it out. A jigsaw of shapes held us firmly
in place while in one corner, just in the picture,
a dab of dappled pearl.

SUR LE PONT DES ARTS

He's looking at a painting of a river and trees,
houses roughly charcoaled in against a foggy smudge,
a foreground blob that could be a terrier's shadow

or a black hole of invisible light, dark matter
sucking viewers into the artist's untidy mind,
showing them the dissatisfied wife left clearing plates

after a silent Sunday lunch, the son who bores him,
the treasured daughter who ran off to the Pyrenees
with a specialist in sustainable energy

who builds houses out of cartons and solar panels,
where rotas of guests are needed so that they can pee
frequently in order to keep the bathroom lights on.

He's looking at a painting of a river and trees
and thinking about his mistress whom he hasn't seen
for three weeks because she's gone to stay with a sister

he knows she's just invented. Now he's thinking about
his new hat, a smart homburg, and how superior
it is to the artist's floppy hat which is hiding,

probably, a mess of impasto passing for brains.
He's thinking of the terrier, who has just caught up
and is now regarding him with small, adoring eyes.

He's thinking it costs him more to feed the terrier
than buying the new homburgs he prefers to his wife.
He's thinking his mistress is a liar, the artist

is an impostor, the artist's wife and son should leave,
the artist's daughter and her husband are complete fakes
and that his own wife is less attractive than a hat.

He's thinking that his terrier is an expensive
excrescence. In fact, he's wishing he was someone else.
He's looking at a painting of a river and trees.

FREESIAS

I hold them in their paper cone
inhaling a scent that is spring and my mother
all wrapped into one. She loved these flowers

and kept some always, in a cut glass vase
beside her bed, with the photo of my father
and the latest Neville Shute.

Now the flower shop's closing, they've taken in
the jugs of snowdrops and tulips - narcissi from the Scillies,
and heading home towards St Aldates,

I remember how I'd come into her room,
with a cup of tea that always spilt,
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and find her at her dressing table, the scented air
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After our father died, she laughed alone -
we were too young to get the jokes.

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always ended the same – *Goodnight sweetheart –
kiss our girls for me, love you lots, and then some .*

The writing as faint as the scent of these freesias.

LUPINS

with their peppery, summery smell,
filled the moment to its joyous rim,
lifting the shadow my father left by dying.

Eight years of living with my mother's grief
wiped clean by the heat and promise of the day.
And I, a small child, tending my garden,

shedding the past for that moment's clarity,
absorbed and delighted by the task's simplicity,
planting stones in a rough circle, turning up worms

the colour of corsets, hardly aware that time
was passing, of the smell of gym shoes
and grass being cut, or the way the heavy

summer air curved the sound
of four o'clock striking.

Now, lupins remind me of when I met you -
how you lifted the stain of childish sorrows,
kept the day bright like a sun-warmed garden;

until night came and our spirits ventured -
silently, hand in hand, without fathers:

black as lupins at dusk
setting out against a tall sky.

PERFECT

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TROUBADOR

after William of Aquitaine

Strings of gut, stretched
to within a cat's whisker
of snapping, catch

each movement of the breeze
so that the universe
can play tunes on them.

His lyre, laid
on the pillows of ladies,
vibrates to sighs

caused by his touch:
and later, miles away
in another castle

there's a song about
how he'll have this one
painted naked on his shield

so that in battle
he can die beneath her.

THE OPPOSITE OF LIGHT

We think we know that space is silent,
only the words of astronauts reach us
as they stumble as if through water to place
flags while all the time light is escaping
faster than the fastest sand-storm.

Here, the light is full of water, a membrane
of unshed rain, the sky a cheap pendant
you might wear round your neck for love,
the weight of it against your skin, as we,
stumbling home from the fair that time, felt
something pressing on us, invisible, silent.

FIVE BILLION YEARS OF SECRETS

Summer comes, soft-footed to the doorway,
slips over the sill, threadless and shining,
filling us again with the old yearning,
making us want to skip work for the day.

High in the Altai, Umai shakes her grey
tattooed leather free from ice, and turning
in her grave gives off a smell of burning:
Kali is also on the move, they say.

Meanwhile, on Jupiter, the mean wind speed
is three hundred and thirty miles an hour –
a storm the size of Earth which shows up red

on NASA's screens. And, far from Ganymede,
Callisto, the most similar to our
own life-giving planet, is (already) dead.

CHILD AT THE WINDOW

A child, standing at an open window,
watching daylight fade and lights come on
along the seafront and the twinkling pier.
The Swanee Minstrels sing about Dixie.
She doesn't want the show to end.

She can sing all the songs, do all the actions,
pretends she has a black face and hands
sticking out from her Wincyette pyjamas.
Now get into bed her mother says.
Just five more minutes the child pleads.

Stop the minutes trickling light away,
the pier lights are like a twinkling necklace,
she imagines night wearing a necklace of lights
like a black mammy stooping down to her
with soft hands the colour of coal dust.

You must go to bed now her mother says.
She will kiss her goodnight and close the door.
Then the others will come, stooping from corners,
she will hear their breathing like waves breaking,
the man with sand feet trickling away,

small, mean ones with gritty shell faces. The kiss
her mother gives her is like a butterfly on her cheek,
she imagines its wings, like powdered rainbows.
Outside the Swanee Minstrels take off their black.
On the shore sweetpapers rock in the moonlight.

THE OTHER WIFE

She used to enjoy summer but now it seems
the world is all dolled up and nowhere to go.
The big chestnuts have started to look blowsy,
nights too hot to sleep and mosquito bites
on her ankles and behind her knees.

He thinks of her as his second wife, he said
when he last saw her – that time before Easter -
and she felt pleased. This is the next best thing.
She can be her own mistress, independent.
Except for Christmas, it isn't so bad.

She keeps herself busy, does the church flowers,
filling the nave with stocks and peonies, the peonies
lean out with their overloaded globes
catching the light like shiny new lipstick:
and at night the stocks pour out a scent

that laps under the church door, down the path,
climbs up the wisteria beneath her window
and enters her dreams where she seems to be
always counting, counting hours and days
and seeds falling from their bursting plush.

ANCHORESS

i. *And was he not himself a recluse in Mary's womb?*

Today, there's the fig tree's palmate leaves
stretching to feel the ripe fruit,
split like a vulva, bulging seeds

and light
thrown over the sea like a starched cloth
as if pinned to the sky by her mother's flashing needles.

There's fishing boats, shouldered by the swell,
tacking the blue with lines of silver:

and rain
turning earth in the yard to clay
as she runs to gather in the membranous washing.

There's the smell of oregano, scant from her father's plot
chopped with salt and pungent basil
over a dish of aubergine and tomatoes:

and the taste of cedar and orange blossom,
mixed together by the dancing swarm, honey for her bread
and to sweeten her milk.

Tomorrow, there'll be a Requiem Mass,
a handful of dust against the anchorhold,
a bowed head, uncomfortable new clothes:
freckles already beginning to fade.

ii. *She who chatters grinds chaff*

She was always the chatty one,
turning the atoms that fell on her consciousness
into a stream of language constant as rain

on the roof, or the hens clucking in their dusty roost,
or the breathing in and out of the slow Mediterranean:

it started first thing, when the sun came up
behind the cork forests, and Tomaz the Goatherd
led his tinkling flock to lower pastures

and didn't cease until her mother, finger to lips,
folding the child's still warm shift and pinafore,
blew out the candle at bedtime.

Tomaz was with her when she had the first vision.
She made him kneel with her, although
he saw and heard nothing.

He remembers how the twigs and cones
dug into his knees, and how the bells of his goats
grew fainter as they wandered off.

He remembers her face in the shadowed grove,
lit up as if by a halo of candles. On the way home
for the first time ever, she was silent.

Now the movements her mouth make
become more gradual. She is a swimmer
floundering far out where sounds cease to carry.

Those words she used have flown
away, each one carrying an olive leaf,
each one a white dove disappearing.

iii. *Those birds fly well which have little flesh*

Although it is not in the rules,
she tests herself, leaving the bread
and cheese untouched until her maid
takes it away; and the more she hungers
the more she has to test herself.

She is not allowed to beat herself,
to flail herself with nettles
or hedgehog skins. The abbot forbids it.

She is not allowed to cut herself,
but she can force herself to lie
on stones until the imprint on her body
is like a nail in her side.

She can force herself to sit, undressed
under the window on winter's nights
until her bones groan with cold.

If she doesn't eat, her body will remain
pure and empty to receive the sacrament.

The wafer is like honesty, a paper moon,
and she is a fledgeling stretching up its beak
to take the gift, turning the web of her blood to silver,
her flesh thin as air.

iv. *Come to me my beloved, my dove*

At first she seems to be drowning:
her self diffusing out and down
into unsearchable deepness

as if a sound, scintillas of high notes,
like a robin's song crushed into particles,
is dissolving

like coloured notes
of a church wall-painting
drifting on the choir's breath.

Then she feels she is melting:
liquified, streaming golden as honey,
the fire outside and in her

the heat unbearable yet welcome,
white as an orchard at Easter,
the unspeakable longing

packed in surprising sweetness
like her cold finger
testing jam at boiling point.

At last she knows
the melting is red
blood like her own

but a dearer, sacred blood:
her senses are birds
nesting in his five wounds.

Site of peace, City of Zion,
her eyes become doves
meekly to approach him.

When she herself is the city,
she is filled with music
which is the food of Heaven.

Now she is a garden of scents.
She is a flower opening
in her bridegroom's heart.

v. Visio pictoralis

Light starts to hum, straw becomes a halo,
She sees herself reflected in the baby's eyes.
The Blessed Virgin strokes her hair as her mother used to.
Suddenly the sky outside is loud with trumpets.
She stops her ears. The moment is over. Then Mary says -
"Come to me".

vi. Come to me my beloved, my bright bride

Cedarwood coffin freckled with fading light.
He wonders, once more, about what might have been.
Ruefully, Tomaz stops to cross himself.
Inside the anchorhold a spider spins.
Scents of thyme and honey on the hillside.
This is the last time he will think of her.

GEISHA

i.

Pin-bright, a huge moon
peers - the disembodied face
of a bad actor.

ii.

His feelings are like
a bunch of coloured silks. But
they are the wrong ones.

iii.

Restraining her yawns,
she smiles and claps, while really
longing for breakfast.

AUGUST HEAVENLY ALARMING FEMALE

(Ameno-uzume-no-mikoto)

The Sun Goddess has hidden all winter, but now
the August Heavenly Alarming Female arrives
to wake her. Inside a cave, the Sun Goddess
shines her gold shield, determined to make us wait

for summer. Shaking off snow, the August Heavenly
Alarming Female puts on silver and gold flowers
from the Celestial Spindle Tree, then climbs onto a tub
and begins to wave a posy of plaited bamboo grass

from the slopes of Mount Kagu. She thrusts out
her breasts, and pushes down her skirt to reveal
her most crowd-pleasing wonders. Encouraged
by the applause, she starts to strip completely -

then Sun Goddess decides enough is enough,
and appears, holding up her shield. The show is over
for the August Heavenly Alarming Female. She sighs.
Until next year, she must keep her clothes on.

BALCONY

The daffodils had sooty trumpets
like herald angels from the poorer part
of heaven. Our granny planted them

with bulbous winter fingers
around Christmas. She told us stories
about Lazarus and Nazarenes

and Gaderene swine falling from cliffs.
She said *hark!* instead of *listen!*
and *you can't make a silk purse*

out of a sow's ear. No! I said
it would be cruel to the sow.
She didn't hear.

Hark! Hark! The Lark! sat open
on the old German piano with its
scuffed legs and treacly varnish.

Your Tiny Hand Is Frozen
on the wind-up gramophone
sounded like an asthma attack

until it got going. Sometimes I hid
behind the daffodils to catch sounds
as they came up. A girl my age

down the road sat at her window
like a smudge in a painting book.
Her mother fell down once with bags

full of empties like jingle bells.
Another time some boys came round
the corner shouting –

*Christ I need a fuck! My balls
ache! My granny was sleeping.*
I put on *Jerusalem the Golden.*

CHAIR

You still see their products in show rooms,
sporting velvet or paisley, saved by the salesman
for the end of his spiel – the coup de grâce:
And of course there's always the Parker Knoll.
Pricey but worth it, we had to stretch our funds.

She'd survived widowhood, bankruptcy,
and bringing up grandchildren until well into her eighties,
but finally my grandmother ran out of steam –
was reduced to sitting all day every day

with a pile of thrillers from the Hammersmith library,
waiting for the health visitor, the district nurse,
old Mrs Hammond who did for us on Wednesdays.
The least we could do was to provide a good chair.

Now, finally, I've thrown it out. Threadbare,
full of moth, springs sticking through like ribs
of famine victims, it sits alone in the road,
waiting for skip robbers or men from the council.

BRIGHT MORNING

for Tom

Coming into the bright morning as he used to,
quietly, feeling his way round the edge of silences,
appearing suddenly in doorways, smiling,

he witnessed scenes Vermeer could have painted –
a child stripping redcurrants, a woman with a letter,
a cat cleaning its paw, a man drinking from a pint pot.

Now he says he watched it all as if from a distance,
like looking through a fishbowl at potbellied colours
and shapes bleeding sideways – the child at the window,

the woman crying, the man turning away; and inside
him, none of the brightness he brought to them,
but only despair and coldness, like a moonstone

where his heart should have been. He preferred
the garden, looking over the valley with its boundless
moments, its possibilities lying thick as grass stems

for him to chew over. His dens had entrances
only a small child could get through, and there he hid –
behind the old milking parlour, under the laurel,

between the holly hedges, in the drapes of the willow.
Is that where he transports himself to now – away from
the grey and black of Manchester, the concrete stairwells,

the bad trips, the broken, the dying, the empty cans,
the kicked dogs? Or is it possible he feels
this life's at least more honest than those childhood

tableaux. And if he could look again, would he trample
down the barriers, and stampede through to this bright morning
where the pictures have, at last, been turned to the wall?

DRUMMER

For Ed

Your teacher showed me, once,
some pages of your hurried writing,
where, beneath the blots and squirls, we found
a slipstream of thought, weaving words
and spaces into an intricate rhythm section.

Just as now, with closed eyes and averted face,
you start to tease a beat from somewhere,
subtle as photons brushing skin.

It's your new mode of communication,
leading us a dance of sound, syncopated,
charismatic: like the way you wore
your short-brimmed hat of Symi straw,
exactly placed, insouciant, original.

CRANE

i

All day it drops
its concrete blocks
onto the city

raining sound
like sediment

and the ring-road roars
a hoarse
accompaniment.

It is important, turning
its probing jib
this way and that

stiff as a child
pretending to be a robot:

with its hoist and trolley
its cab and slewing gear

and men rising up
in its gorge.

ii

Down Iffley Road
the blackbirds sing all night
in the artificial day of arc lights

and the crane stays still,
high above chimney pots
saying *Leadbitter*,

until sunrise
when robins wake
in gardens below

where corms and bulbs
push through the gritty soil
of Cowley.

iii

We didn't know at first,
drawing our curtains
on the sullen morning:

Leadbitter greeted us
as usual: as usual
the rush hour started

morning papers,
absorbing dank air,
told us the story

of how he was drunk,
it was his birthday,
a pub, an argument -

one of the students
it was building
housing for.

iv

As if scaling a rock face
Kai Dawson
climbed the rig.

He might have made it
if the wind hadn't shuddered
the metal:

nowhere to grip
and then the fall

into an old lady's
flower bed,
glinting with February
snowdrops -

white as the swan
on its muscle of water
that slipped

under Magdalen Bridge,
like a scrap of cloud
travelling east.

COVEN

She lies flat on the seabed, tiger-striped,
mottled like fish skin

the moon's wand
sends tidal currents through her

She has pebble teeth
and a sly eye

her mouth is a wet valve
slippery as salmon

She feels her power
to pull the universe into her

She is a crucible of blood
through which the whales sing

the arch of dolphins
is in her instep

and out there
in the glazed bowl of the sky

there are more of them:
winding on the seasons

deflecting electricity
and the storms it makes.

And in the earth, and in the air,
more and more:

waiting for their time.

HOT AIR

Hot air balloons, clowning above our heads,
like inflated knickers on a seaside postcard:
a Duracell battery, a double pack of Andrex,
a tub of Haagen Das and Bertie Bassett -

all steering away into a sky that's soft neon pink
but so shockingly bright, and still only April,
that people have stopped in the road
and are staring up at it: like the aeroplane

in *Mrs Dalloway* writing its advertising slogan
which turned to drifts of white, then vanished
into thin air and people's minds. These won't
disappear so fast. At the end of the day they'll

come down in a nearby field, their buxom contours
collapsing abruptly like a big woman putting her feet up.
But for the moment, we're still at the Cutteslowe Park
Balloon-a-Thon, watching as they fade from view,

incongruous among the Oxford spires.
And as they go, a cloud bank shapes itself
into a prancing black horse, and a solitary thrush
is belting out the Coca-Cola jingle.

A NIGHT WITH ULYSSES

Winged back, scapulae like stretched sails,
bones found in a desert bleached dry:
or a frail craft setting out, the bang
of its sinewy rigging strumming like wires.

You, the master-mariner with your
traveller's tales, make a taste in our mouths
like salt, smell of a warm harbour,
emptying crevices, running filmy fronds.

There's a healed scratch where Calypso
caught you with her sharp nails
and intimate small wavings – those sirens
threw a rope of song that couldn't hold you:

Scylla and Charibdis clashed over you
but lost you. As for your tapestry
of quick conquests - your wife is already
losing the thread.

But now it's our turn to make fables,
wondering how far we'll go this time,
when the tide is going to turn:
watching for the ebb. No other reason.

WHEN PENTHISILEA FELL

we gawped. Struck dumb. She was supposed to be a queen, but her hair was the only thing queenly about her: a copper shining, drooled with mud, foam from her stallion's mouth, and blood from the sword thrust the bugger died from. Achilles promised parley, but he lied of course. Got her away from her troops south of the battlefield, agreed to her demands, then the archer we paid as a sniper reached over his shoulder for a lighter shaft to fell her. I caught sight of his hands seeming to move slowly, then all at once she rose from the saddle, turning her face back to us, unbelieving. At her waist something flashed. Her shield falling, next her lance, then her helmet flew, let loose this glorious burnished river. Lying there, her one breast just showing under her armour, it was lust at first sight, and could you blame us?

Well – could you blame *them* really. For *me* it was different. Not that I don't get hungry for sex like the next man. But this beauty was dead, for Zeus's sake! She'd had it! I remembered once before, outside the walls of Troy, another woman with the same red coils of hair, hidden by veils which she shed as she went down under my weight. Her squalls added to the excitement, as did her fright. She was small (unlike this warrior lass) and pleaded with me as I tore her dress "Please sir, spare me, I have five children". Right then I could have stopped, but it was too hard by that stage. I learned later she had died – stoned by the crowd. So as my cohort vied to go first with Penthisilea, I heard that woman's voice again, and stopped and turned aside, and, making my way back to camp fast as I could with my cursed new limp, claimed, rightly, that I had to a wound to tend.

.

TRIBUTE

They made shields from themselves, a phalanx of bony mantles
we crushed as we stepped ashore: clams, cockles, whelks - oysters
that changed from male to female over a hundred tides.

Then those women with their blue-veined forearms flung back
against the pebbles, not understanding us - their men off fighting each other
somewhere behind the hills, lost in perpetual drizzle and cloud.

All we wanted was comfort, but they showed us no compliance,
instead, they shut their ears to the foreign sounds we made:
white ears more delicate than shells, with tiny, labyrinthine cochleas.

They were less impressive than African bounty – the conch
and cowrie we used as currency, displays of wealth to string
round the necks of our black-haired Pompeian women.

We took them anyway, translucent as the sunlight our ships turned
to plough through. Scant booty, but it was enough for Caligula.

AQUATICS

Snorkelling to work became the best way to travel,
 the river buses being always late. Avoiding
 dead animals was turned into a game by people
 that could stomach it - the young, the hip. Post-modernists
 found witty definitions for the decomposing
 statues, called them *ORGPA*, or Organic Public Art.

Captains of industry, drug barons and pop stars built
 arks and floated them on privately annexed oceans
 while those on benefits were trained to dive then stockpiled
 and later used to scavenge wrecked cities for booty.
 They could keep 10%. *You're either with us, or with
 Poseidon* was a favourite recruitment catchphrase.

Most agreed to radical housing schemes, the homeless
 allowed themselves to be waterproofed then stacked upright
 along wharves and used as ballast or, sometimes, fenders.
 Parents carried their young shoulder high, small hands clutching
 at hair (which was what it was meant for) and the babies
 looked calm, pleased at the turn evolution had taken.

Some grew fins and rudimentary gills, slipped quietly
 from their mother's breast at three months old and then cast
 off for new climes, swishing mermaid tails. Scientific ways
 were developed to help non-swimmers remain buoyant.
 Some, in the absence of electric light, were given
 permanent jobs holding up lanterns. It took a while

to rediscover fire. Once we had it back, it warmed
 our cockles (which were now a staple of our diet).
 It was great finding coconuts and turtles washed up
 outside your door of a morning, or rafts of plimsolls
 from Japanese showrooms. Oh yes, the consensus was
 it was preferable by far to the boils and locusts.

SEAL

Cowl of water
round a whiskery face,
an old nun basking
in remnants of sunshine.

Flippers clasped like hands praying,
she blows out roundly
through serene nostrils,

hearing the surf's
answering vespers:
sucked breath of shingle,
cascade
of pebbled rosaries.

Light stains the sea
to windows
of red and gold

as texture of salt air
coarsens. Cloistered waves
slap rocky sacristies.

Shutting her nostrils to slits
seal dives, sensing, perhaps,
the tug of fatal currents

something cold
beached somewhere

and the night air
chill as confessions
in an empty church.

DEAR FIELD

for Molly-Ella Rose

Dear field, don't let me talk to you as if you were
a woman, that's an easy cliché – your mounds and dips,
your tufts by gurgling hollows – but dear field,
you are more than this, patiently taking the mud-squelch

of cattle, ricochet of may bugs, bees buzzing
in a cupped hand of clover. Beneath bent blades
light dips unwinking as a cockerel's eye:
chaotic flecks: a cage of shade which hoops

and casks kaleidoscopes of beetles. While I pilot
my shape between computer and tea kettle - a brief
image going bent quick as a flicker book before

flickering out – you remain. Your small hill, sporting
its spindly mohican, still headbutts the sky each spring –
always will. For our daughters. For our daughters' daughters.

AUBADE

She thinks of bread and butter sliced thin;
a brown egg, smooth as a knuckle;
a cup of milk, slightly warmed
already forming a brave, new skin.

Then later, chocolates, sweet wine,
maraschino cherries shiny in syrup
reflecting panes of brightness; cream
whipped to an adolescent frenzy.

But, lying here with him, the dawning light
is, so far, painless. She waits for him to wake
with appetite refreshed by sleep – knowing
that what he enjoys most is her hunger.

LAST RITES

Last night I laid some flowers at a grave,
daffodils, thick-stemmed, leaking sap and milk,
and letters in a box of cedarwood,
five mornings on a Spanish hillside, with vines
well-hung, a fruitful rosary: a photo
of that boat trip when the grey swell hurled us
high against the curling walls of water.
Seals slid from rocks, slunk from slabs, and a few
last shags, heraldic on limestone henges,
spread wings to dry like gutted black umbrellas.

We saw our wake make glassy coils that snaked
away, like you, as slippery as silk.
Last night I laid some flowers at our grave:
daffodils, thick-stemmed, leaking sap and milk.

A DOG NAMED FRODO

They name their eldest children Aragorn and Galadriel, ban TV for years until their youngest, Gandalf, pops up on a Channel 4 documentary, helping his bemused Tobagan friends prove their Cuban ancestry.

The dug-out canoe takes two years to carve, and one year more to decorate with peace symbols. Then there's a row because they don't all fit on board, the weather's changed, and they've lost the tide. Now we see the other side

of Gandalf, the idealist. No longer the cool toker with hat balanced raffishly, he reveals eyes that are close-set, small and venom-filled. *Get out of my boat* he shouts, doing irreparable damage to his chakras.

Back in Hampstead, the parents, Freya and Humbert, now in their swinging sixties, reminisce about the past, finding it easier to recall the names of favourite pets than of the constant flow of nannies. Aragorn, now simply

Gorn, was last heard of living in a squat in Pimlico. Galadriel squatted also in her birthing pool four times with Moonkettle, Zebedee, Twilight and, strangely, Kevin. But now winter's here, you'll find them of an evening

chuckling over snaps of long-deceased aunts and terriers, wondering what quirky name to dream up for the goldfish (Bilbo, perhaps, or Mr Tumnus) as they enjoy their supper of cracked wheat and mung beans,

or read each other extracts from *The Prophet* and *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull*. Meanwhile, in the real world, Aslan is sharpening his teeth, and the Long-Legged Scissor Man, with glinting hands, waits, nightly, beneath their window

ECLIPSE

Watching the eclipse from Brill Hill, we thought
the encircling movement of the moon across the sun
was like a man and woman embracing. It seemed
as if the moon, the female, moved across
and then moved on, freeing herself from arms
that could no longer hold her. It was as if she took
the diamond ring and hurled it far away across
the strangely coloured valley, while the crowd,
like a bible multitude with anxious faces made
of brass, looked on through triple sheets of cellophane.

POEMS FOR PETER

i. Last Visit

The letter box opened like a slit pod,
and your voice, whispering on airmail,
sounded thin, papery, starved of jokes.

The Spanish idyll, you said, was over:
one tumble too many over the edge
in your off-road vehicle.

Black dog, hair-of-the-dog
and hair-pin bends finally got you.

Back in Belsize Park
it wasn't you I visited, but some
fractious infant in an old man's body,

huddled by the gas fire. The gargling
noise was you trying to say something.
Eventually I made it out.

You were telling Maureen
to send me away.

ii. Losing Your Voice

You started to lose your voice in Spain:
 didn't need it when light slipped, lizard-like
 into a basking heap at the base of walls.

In the mid-distance, bulls stood, monumental,
 waiting their turn in the ring at Ronda.

On a clear day, if they knew it,
 they could see Morocco, or past the ragged
 emptiness to Granada's high sierras.

We avoided views, in the late afternoon
 when the plants in your finca drooped
 against the heat: an intense quiet broken only

by goat bells and cicadas. At dusk,
 in the Bar España, you didn't need words
 for Juan or Cristobal to set up your usual –

cerveza then *vino*, slugs of rough brandy.
 You said nothing, just swerved
 on your way to Bar Flores

which made the locals hail you wildly
 with shouts of *hombre malo!* You responded
 with your clenched-fist salute, and coming home

there was a violent moon. Stags
 strode into our lights, a wild boar
 shook its tusks, then disappeared.

The twisting path seemed ready
 to throw us off at every bend. If only
 you'd gone at a time like that -
 grabbed in a flash by the Spanish night.

iii. Maureen's Story

Walking up Haverstock Hill at 3.a.m., there's no traffic,
no one. Sounds deadened by flakes falling thick and quiet,
the kerb bandaged with white and only your own footsteps
making tracks. It couldn't happen so suddenly, could it?

The phone call waking you, a voice, disembodied, young,
telling you that you needn't come if you didn't want to.
Then getting dressed, alone, walking alone up Haverstock Hill,
the snow falling and everything white; so different from normal

it's like a dream. Nothing prepares you for something
like this, you think: (as if you wouldn't want to come!)
Everything's gowned in white, unreal and empty
as a hospital corridor. No need to hurry, you're already

too late. There's no fear, no tiredness, nothing;
just the strangeness of being out on your own in the dark,
before the milk float. All the dazzle and din of your lives
together tucked in and folded under by this sheet of snow.

Walking up Haverstock Hill at 3.a.m., reaching the hospital,
finding the ward empty, except for him on the bed,
everything else disposed of, shoved into black bin bags.
They give you coffee in a plastic cup. He's still warm

when you kiss him, but there's no Peter any more,
and only the journey home, carrying bin bags, your tracks
covered almost before you make them. Walking back
down Haverstock Hill, blinking away the snowy light.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

What the ice gets, the ice keeps

The ship's timbers cracked like fireworks,
and all we could do was watch,
knowing no-one could reach us until spring.

The man who had to shoot the huskies,
who'd fed and cared for them for eighteen months,
said, sobbing, there were men he'd rather kill.

We ate them. First the pups. Then Mr Chips,
the cat, even though we'd once turned back
for him when he fell overboard near Portsmouth.

We set off for Elephant Island, seven days
in little boats, hands frozen to our oars,
weeping with fatigue, and round us

shoals of killer whales, blowing
harmonica sounds into the blackness,
almost capsized us.

The shore, when we reached it,
was stony. No help, and another voyage
of several miles to reach the whaling post:

the only food was rotting blubber.
Shackleton and the Kiwi engineer
headed for Elizabeth Island -

finally made it, half dead, brought a ship
to pick up the rest of us. It seemed
we were only home for fifteen minutes

before they sent us to Flanders. Most of us didn't
come back. And Shackleton? He died of heart failure,
leading another party to Antarctica.

FATHER

You had to mind
a baby, once –

a fractious,
grizzling creature

that had caused its parents
weeks of sleepless nights.

Your method
was to put some music on
then lie down on the floor

and hold the baby
to your chest

where
like a tiny castaway
on a warm island

with limbs relaxed
and every spasm
of colic gone

it slept, soothed
by your breathing:

how I envied it,
and any other child

that had
such consummate
fathering.

CELIBATE

Pressing his thumbs
into the clay
he feels it giving,
opening at his touch

the wheel spinning it
big-bellied

then the rim coming
smooth and gentle
into his hands.

If a customer waits
he tells her of Christ,
how He too

would have watched
the potter at his task.

This Christ, he says,
threw the usurers
out of the Temple

spoke to people
in a common language.

For talk like this
he could be burned
for heresy

but he has to go on
saying it, go on pouring
his faith into this bowl

making a space
that is perfect

for the Word,
for his wordless love:

perfect
for bread and wine.

DAVID

His mind is a cathedral flooded with saints.
Flaming crimson, gold, purple, magenta,
they stride through his days and nights
pointing fingers, admonishing him.

He hears their voices crackling in the wireless,
buzzing from radiators, trying to get through.
Sometimes they sing down the telegraph wires,
strum them until they shriek skies of bending sound.

He tries to decipher their codes, but it's hard
with that bitch next door banging nails
into coffins all night. She even comes
into his head sometimes, won't leave him be.

He knows he's a bit odd, knows it started
the night his father grabbed a hatchet
and split his mother's skull like a walnut.
Funny there was no blood.

Tomorrow at the day centre he'll be fed buns
by lady volunteers, amaze everyone
with his knowledge of advanced mathematics,
play Bach full volume on Vera's electric organ.

There's a new girl he likes – she has calm eyes
like ponds, a smiling face. But then he remembers
the walk home, the icy roads even in summer,
the men waiting to paint lines over his shoes.

His mum bangs from the next door bedroom
Go to sleep David, it's past midnight!
David turns his face to the wall.
Closes his eyes. Waits for the voices.

ICICLES

Last night, a weapon in the old country,
dark shapes through columns,
a saucer of milk to keep the goblins away.

This morning, raw hands in mittens
curled round a mug, a ringing splash:
church bells like clouds of glass
against the sides of the valley.

CATHAR .

These Languedoc trees to the early Celts, spoke
different meanings, filled the air with warnings,
whispered asides, sharp as an indrawn breath

released close-up and raw. Hawthorn for
cleansing and for chastity, birch for new
beginnings. Those who fled to Puilaurens

sought oak for shelter, but instead they found
blackthorn, death – no choice whatever: one way
only to rebirth, and that through fire.

They writhed on pyres. As matter fell away,
spirit flew as flame, and guiltless trees
were only to blame for being flammable.

Just as earlier wood was forced to stretch
out under a tortured body and nailed flesh.

SAISSAC CASTLE

'Ouvrez votre porte au Christ'

St Thérèse de L'Enfant-Jesus

In the Lady Chapel the village girls look on:
they're saints now, captured by a local Botticelli,
not modest like his Venus, but sure of their own goodness -
some pious, some frank, some shrewd, some curious,
gazing out from roundels among carefully painted stars
at the tourists with expensive cameras and sunburn
and the stained glass window of a Cathar being martyred.

St Thérèse, St Marguêrite, St Hêlène, St Jeâne,
all saved now they've opened their doors to Christ.
He walked with them as they drove home the cows,
as they churned the slapping butter and cleaned the pail,
or, of an evening, as they strolled with their sweethearts
under the gaunt shadow - now a ruin of stones and holes -
that gapes, as if blinded, seeming to stumble and gasp.

BOARDER

May our daughters be as the polished corners of the Temple

i

The Lower Playing Fields are out of bounds.
The bell from the Science Quad chimes seven.
Small girls parade their soiled sheets and shame.
Cloud shadows spread over the rounder's pitch.

She's not chosen to be the point of the compass,
instead, a younger girl, with straighter back, her heels
briskly rapping the parquet, leads the formation
of wheeling girls representing the mason's art.

Orphaned children dressed in blue serge,
utilitarian, as they're told their lives should be,
marching to Colonel Bogey and the Dambusters,
raise arms to their benefactors in dumb salutes.

ii

Each night she dreams she is going home,
following her plait down to the train station,
trains whizz past in their streaming hair of wind,
too fast to catch, and disappear into the night.

The tunnel stretches out as far as London,
to the mansion flat with engraved glass on its door.
Through it she sees the shadow of her grandmother,
approaching slowly, bent by patterns.

If only her grandmother would reach the door
she could go inside and be safe with her mother.
But the bell ringing is the school hand bell: she wakes
cold, curled like a foetus, her hair newly shorn.

PROSPECTS

We lay, a dormitory of ten year olds, deciding which death would be preferable. Our summer skins were watermarked by smears from mushy flannels now stiffening on washroom pipes to pungent, dried marine shapes. With hands that smelt of pencil shavings we proved self-strangulation was impossible, although our gluey fruit-gum mouths ran technicolour trying it.

Burning from the feet up like Saint Joan would be worst, someone suggested. *You'd faint before it got too bad* – the sturdy girl cut out to be a nurse assured us. But until then? Remembering the courage test of fingers over candle flames, we shared the pop and prick of sizzling flesh, the smell of singeing hair, and slowly drew our knees up, hugged ourselves.

Yet drowning would be just as horrible, we knew from when we held our breaths in swimming; a gallery of underwater fossil shapes in black wool costumes, buoyant on our silver strings of seed pearl bubbles, while springboard plunges boomed and banged, swerves of light made wavy lines along the tiled bottom, our lungs cracked and our eyes bulged like onions.

We didn't know, then, about the Viking burials - those skeletons found in funeral vaults in the same positions they'd died in, scrabbling at the walls of their stony tombs – sobbing their need for food and air, girls not much older than we were, no doubt promised a share of glory in Valhalla: fated by their wombs and breasts to be buried, screaming, with the old, dead king.

SURVIVORS

She says the coldness of the water shocked her,
standing thigh-deep in the canal at midnight:
a duffle-coat being the most moisture-absorbent thing
you could possibly wear when trying to drown yourself.

She talks, almost jovially, about how it was too shallow,
how silly of her to think this time she'd succeed.
The woman whose garden it was came out to ask "Why?"
then wrapped her in blankets to await the ambulance.

All I can say is "You shouldn't have done it," knowing,
in all likelihood, she'll try it again; and I will link it to that day
at school, when the two of us moped, homesick, by the pond,
which looked the colour of twice-used bathwater:

and suddenly I snatched off her hairband and ran away
then floated it far out among the reeds and water weed.
She followed slowly with her face down-turned:
and I had no answer when she asked me "Why?"

MASONIC

We knelt beside our iron beds to pray
 to gentle Jesus meek and mild who held
 a lamb and a lantern to comfort us:
 and in assembly, in our smelly ranks
 of blue serge dresses (some with red
 sashes for good deportment) we sang
 of the Carpenter of Nazereth who stands
 close by the heedless worker's side,
 head bowed, showing his pierced hands
 for which we, somehow, were made to feel
 responsible. Just as our fathers' deaths -
 when we failed to learn our logarithms
 and Latin verbs, or practice *Fur Élise*
 before our piano lessons, or eat up
 lumpy stew and tapioca pudding –
 were laid, mysteriously, at our door.
 Although we knew it couldn't be:
 and our mothers' grieving, not our fault.

That first term she walked away
 into the fog, down drooping avenues
 of love-lies-bleeding, saying, later, that
 she couldn't turn to wave because of tears.
 Not wanting to believe she really meant
 to give me up, I tried to follow, struggle
 from the grip of strangers – Matron
 and Headmistress: and inside me, a shift
 of atoms, bent themselves along the warp
 my mind made leaning after her; fog seeped
 into my bloodstream, and the space
 between us turned to no-man's land.

BABOUSHKA

Wherever the Trans Siberian Express stops,
 there they are in their boots and headscarves -
 like shadow puppets against the screen
 of thousand-mile birch forests; pushed on
 from the wings with baskets of home-made pies,
 cold beer and chocolate to sell to travellers.

And the old woman I saw on Komsomol Avenue,
 bent almost double by the weight of her shopping,
 hurrying home along the tracks of the trolley bus -
 she looked like one of those matryoshkas
 they sell for 200 roubles in Arbutt Street:

open them up – you’ll find another
 and another, getting smaller and smaller,
 receding into history, where small girls
 help gather dewberries at their dachas:
 all that jam-making for a teaspoonful
 of sweetness that has to be offered first
 to adults and visitors. These children
 are brought up on grandmothers’ sayings:

Lie down with a dog, you’ll get up with fleas.
The best way to get rid of work is to do it.
Nobody ever got apples from an elm tree.
 Whatever else, baboushka knows best:

like my own grandmother, who told the weather
 from her hands; struggled with us to the ‘gods’
 at the Old Vic and the Aldwych to make sure
 we had an early taste of Shakespeare: gave herself
 the smallest portion so that our plates could be full.

SEEING WITH DHARMA EYES

Before paper there was cloud, air, forest,
and the words we write, made with mind images
and minerals, graphite, something in the ground
reduced to a powder that blows away into cloud
air and forest. The nuns, robed in maroon,
write on cards, teaching us our meditations.

Desire is a torch we hold in our hands.
Its flame burns us as we walk into the wind.
Without desire we can free ourselves.
The nuns and monks put on their saffron robes.
They kneel before the statue of Buddha, chanting.
The Temple is light and scented by orchids.

We walk with our Teacher, holding hands
like children, and the children hold our hands
and walk with us, leading us and our Teacher
through the plum orchards, slowly, each step
is a meditation: we feel with the soles of our feet
the ground meet us with its powdered history.

Before sunrise, the great bell wakes us,
its sound rolls slowly round the lake.
We reach for our clothes, smooth our hair,
and still half asleep, we stumble to the Temple,
kneel together, begin to count our breathing.
We try to see the world with Dharma eyes.

Thousands of sunflowers raise their heads.
We walk up the path to the top of the mountain.
Our Teacher tells us that our lives are like waves,
no birth or death, only altered states of being.
Beside the lotus pond we watch our reflections
like clouds passing over the surface of the water.

SIGN

for Joe Butler

Revisiting a place in France where last time
it was summer, the snap of ice under our tyres
and freezing fog high in the mountains seemed
like an end to August's promises.

It was no surprise, at St Hilaire, that the abbey door
was bolted. On it a note from St Anselm –
*When I despair I remember the friend
who is always with me* - and in the cloister,
a fountain playing to the stones and air.

By Lagrasse Abbey, the little Cathar's Path
was shrouded by oaks, holly and cypress,
all leaning together like conspiring monks.

At St Polycarpe there was no one about, families
indoors celebrating New Year, so we headed back
to Salvetat, through a threadbare landscape
with vineyards badly tailored, lacking buttons,

and at midnight, we stood at the top of the hill and saw
shooting stars; no bells, just owls hooting and the crack
of frosty undergrowth as mice and foxes went about
their business, making tomorrow's tracks.

SWAN LAKE

So this is where they come, the swans -
as many as every swan I've ever seen
here on the lake at Hinksey Park,
hoarding their stories of sylphs,
ice-maidens and sleeping princesses:

there's more of them now, winging
their way across Europe, carrying bundles of gold
spun out of straw and the smell of baking
from gingerbread houses:

and tonight, I know, when the fish are asleep,
the swans will turn back into ghosts of jilted girls
who died for love. And they'll arch their necks
and dance in the moonlight, round the benches and bins,
and the council signs saying *Keep off the grass*.

NATURAL HISTORY

It's shouting from bone,
antlers reared to the roof, and in front
a xylophone of ribs.

The one nearest has a dashed-away
look to its skull, there are bits missing
but still it glares from haunted sockets,

draws back non-existent lips to roar,
the non-sounds gather somewhere dense
like light trying to lift itself.

This motionless stampede of creatures,
giraffe, moose, elk, llama - they're all
asking the same question

*why did you make us of flesh?
why not bronze or gold?
why put us here at all if not to last?*

Notes and Acknowledgements

Pages 16-21: 'Anchoress' – this sequence was inspired by the 13th century text, *Ancrene Wisse: A Guide for Anchoresses* which I studied as part of my degree at St Edmund Hall, Oxford. The lines of text are taken verbatim from the 1993 Hugh White translation.

Page 52: 'May our daughters be as the polished corners of the Temple' was the motto of the Royal Masonic Institution for Girls where I was a boarder from the ages of seven to eighteen. To be eligible for entry to this place of doom your father had to have been a Freemason, and had to have died.

The following poems, or versions of them, were previously published in *Oxford Poets 2000*, by Carcanet Press, which was a Poetry Book Society recommendation: 'Natural History' (p.3), 'Woman Brushing Her Hair', 'Five Billion Years of Secrets', 'Lupins', 'Anchoress iv', 'Balcony', 'Bright Morning', 'Seal', 'Dear Field', 'Aubade', 'Poems for Peter', 'Prospects'.