# REPRESENTATIONS OF MIGRANCY IN THE POETRY OF CONTEMPORARY IRISH POETS IN BRITAIN

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## Abstract

This thesis is a work of poetry criticism. It explores the theme of migrancy in the poetry of Bernard O'Donoghue, Peter McDonald, David Wheatley, Caitríona O'Reilly, and Conor O'Callaghan, five contemporary Irish poets who currently live in Britain. My main research question is, how does the theme of migration find expression in the poetry of O'Donoghue et al.? My method is founded on close reading as the principal means to understanding the poem. The context of postnationalism, sometimes termed post-Ireland, is an important cultural context. This is highlighted by critics such as Anthony Bradley, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, and the contributors to the edited volume *Post-Ireland? Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry*. This thesis explores the poetry in light of this context, particularly the ways in which migrancy intersects with this phenomenon. Place and poetic identity are important concepts to all five migrant poets. This investigation into representations of migrancy concludes that, while place and identity are common themes for migrant poets, the way migrancy finds expression is variable. The migrant experience is more of a process than a fixed position, and, therefore, the way that this finds expression in a given poet's work is changeable and, even, contradictory. This study also finds that the poetry of the O'Donoghue group – supposedly 'minor' figures within contemporary Irish poetry – is a significant contribution to the canon of migrant Irish literature.

## Acknowledgments

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## Chapter 1: Introduction: Migrancy in the Poetry of Bernard O'Donoghue, Peter McDonald, David Wheatley, Caitríona O'Reilly, and Conor O'Callaghan

This study is fundamentally a work of poetry criticism. It considers the work of five Irish poets who currently live and work in Britain. My principal aim is to explore the variegated aesthetic representations of migrancy across the work of these five contemporary poets. Bernard O'Donoghue was born in 1945 in County Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland. After his father's untimely death, O'Donoghue and his remaining family relocated to England. Initially schooled in Manchester (from the age of 16), O'Donoghue then attended Oxford where has remained as an academic (excepting a brief and, by his own account, rather unsuccessful stint at IBM before postgraduate studies). Peter McDonald is of a Protestant Unionist background, and was born in Belfast in 1963. He, like O'Donoghue, has lived and worked in Oxford for many years. David Wheatley (b. 1970) currently resides in Aberdeen, although much of his poetry explores Dublin where he was born and the city of Hull where he lived and worked from 2000 to 2012. Caitríona O'Reilly (b. 1973) grew up in Bray, and now lives in Lincoln, having previously studied at Trinity College Dublin for a BA and PhD. Conor O'Callaghan was born in 1968 and grew up in the town of Dundalk on the north-east coast of the Republic of Ireland. He has lived in America, although he now resides in Sheffield. He is a Senior Lecturer in the English Department at Lancaster University. Although O'Donoghue is the eldest poet here, and is eighteen years older than the next oldest poet, McDonald, O'Donoghue came of age as a poet at a similar time to McDonald. O'Donoghue's first full-length collection wasn't published until he was forty-six years old. This was *The Weakness* (1991). McDonald's debut collection, *Biting the Wax* (1989), had already been published by this time. O'Callaghan's first collection appeared in 1993, Wheatley's in 1997, and O'Reilly's in 2001.

I have selected this particular group of poets for a number of reasons: they are contemporary poets in that they are all still living and writing – the eldest is O'Donoghue and the youngest is O'Reilly – and they are all economic migrants to Britain. There is a fairly sizeable pool of contemporary Irish poets living in Britain, which made selection of one group of five quite challenging. John Redmond, Vona Groarke, Sinéad Morrissey, Tara Bergin, and Ailbhe Darcy were additional candidates for inclusion. Yet I found either their respective oeuvres to be too slender (as in the case of Bergin and Cardiff-based poet-critic Darcy), or their residence in Britain too recent to have been adequately reflected in their poetry (as with Morrissey, who only moved to Britain in 2017, and has since returned to Northern Ireland). Both O'Donoghue and McDonald have lived in Britain for most of their adult lives, and have produced the majority of their substantial oeuvres whilst living and working in England. Something similar is true for Wheatley, given his long residence in Hull and now Scotland, two places that he actively engages with in his migrant poetry. O'Callaghan and O'Reilly have also been based in the north of England for a number of years. Vona Groarke fits the criteria for inclusion in that she has taught creative writing at Manchester University since 2007, and has published six collections of poetry. However, there is already a reasonable amount of criticism on her poetry. But, more importantly, migrancy is not a particularly strong theme in her poetry, despite her long residence in England. When it comes to the migrant experience and the extent to which it is registered in the aesthetic work, Maurice Riordan has suggested that 'the degree varies with the writer'.[1] That is, for some Irish writers abroad, the migrant experience may not find its way into their writing to any great 'degree', if at all, and for others, it underscores their entire aesthetic. For all members of the O'Donoghue group, the migrant experience is prominent in their poetry, and – although there are several common themes in their respective migrant poetics – migrancy emerges in their poetry in individual ways.

[1] Maurice Riordan, 'Maurice Riordan on Writing and Living Abroad', *Metre*, 3 (1997) pp. 19–20 (p. 20). I will explore these contributions to the poetry periodical *Metre* in more detail in the next chapter.

When it comes to criticism of Irish poetry, there is a tendency to focus on the likes of Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Eavan Boland and others. Or, otherwise, W.B. Yeats is an abiding subject. As much as these poets are certainly worthy of attention, there are many talented but overlooked and underdiscussed contemporary Irish poets, of which the O'Donoghue group are some of the most accomplished.[2] The O'Donoghue group have not received nearly as much critical attention as the likes of Seamus Heaney and others of his generation.[3] And as far as Irish migrant poets in Britain goes, O'Donoghue et al. are more consistent than Groarke and Redmond (he has had had three collections published, and lives in Liverpool). In other words, I have selected the O'Donoghue five less in the interests of inclusivity – although there is a healthy age range from O'Donoghue, now in his mid-seventies, to the youngest O'Reilly in her late forties, and there is some representation from Northern Ireland in McDonald – than merit. The O'Donoghue group are relatively underdiscussed and have all produced some of the most significant contemporary Irish migrant poetry from Britain in the last twenty years. They are a highly talented and diverse group of poets.

**Migrancy**

Migrancy, put simply, is the condition of moving from one place to another. Since migrancy has long been a fact of Irish cultural life, with many Irish writers settling and flourishing abroad, one would hope to find significant critical attention devoted to its study. This is true, although when migrancy is addressed, a journey westwards, to the United States, rather than eastwards, to Great Britain, is

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[2] I shall refer to O'Donoghue, McDonald, Wheatley, O'Reilly, and O'Callaghan as the 'O'Donoghue group', or 'O'Donoghue et al.' throughout this thesis.

[3] For example, *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets* (2017) includes essays on MacNeice, Mahon, Hewitt, Kavanagh, Yeats, Muldoon, Heaney and Longley. There is scant attention given to anyone outside this much-discussed group, even though it was published in 2017. Its editor Gerald Dawe was also lambasted in the *Irish Times* for his exclusion of women poets and contributors. Mary O'Donnell, 'A prosaic lack of women in the Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets', *Irish Times*, 8 Jan 2018 <A prosaic lack of women in the Cambridge Companion to Irish Poets (irishtimes.com)>.

more often charted by the secondary criticism. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews's book-length study *Northern Irish Poetry: The American Connection* (2014) acknowledges that 'the long history of transnational human and cultural flows between Ireland and America gives "American connections" a special force in the consideration of Northern Irish poetry in its international contexts'.[4] Chapters on the likes of John Montague, Seamus Heaney, and Paul Muldoon rightly explore such connections. We might ask where a related study is on the equally important British connection for Northern Irish poets (and, for that matter, poets from the Republic) when the history of 'transnational human and cultural flows' is even longer between the island of Ireland and Britain.

Robert Faggen's essay in the *Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (2006) is also preoccupied with the American (as well as Eastern European) relationship, and he devotes nearly all of his chapter to the discussion of only one poet: Seamus Heaney.[5] Poet–critic Justin Quinn has an entire chapter on émigré Irish poets in his book-length study of modern Irish poetry, although he chiefly examines the dimension of the Irish writer in America (looking at Eavan Boland and Paul Muldoon in particular). Quinn does allow two pages for the Irish poet in England, but he merely name-checks O'Donoghue and Wheatley, and whilst he does give more attention to McDonald, this still amounts to no more than a single page of criticism.[6] The excellent *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* is seemingly the most wide-ranging examination of contemporary Irish poetry to date.[7] At over seven hundred pages long, it collects essays by nearly all the major critics of Irish poetry. It is

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[4] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Irish Poetry: The American Connection* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2014), p. 1.
[5] Robert Faggen, 'Irish poets and the world', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Matthew Campbell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 229–250.
[6] Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
[7] Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

organised into a series of themes, with several essays collected under each, yet the theme of 'migrancy' (or its variants) is omitted entirely.

However, there have been a number of special issues of journals published in recent years on the theme of Irish migration, notably 'New Approaches to Irish Migration' (2012) in *Éire–Ireland*, 'New Perspectives on Women and the Irish Diaspora' in *Irish Studies Review* in 2013, and, in the same journal, 'Texts and Textures of Irish America' and 'Irishness and the Culture of the Irish Abroad' in 2015 and 2018, respectively. Their contributors come from a range of specialisms, but with a slight emphasis on sociological approaches. There is also a tendency to focus on transatlantic migration (the 2015 special issue of *Irish Studies Review* is devoted entirely to this topic). However, this is not to argue that Irish migration to Britain has been wholly overlooked. Louise Ryan's 'Compare and Contrast: Understanding Irish Migration to Britain in a Wider Context' is a particularly strong example of the kind of sociological research that has been conducted on the Irish in Britain. Ryan argues for the need to resist the temptation to 'ethnic exceptionalism' when examining Irish migration.[8] This is a practice whereby sociologists fixate on the ethnic unit, in this case Irishness, in their analyses. Instead, argues Ryan, we should look across ethnic divisions for comparative inquiries (she compares, for example, Polish immigrants with the Irish, with their common whiteness and Catholicism). Ryan's article forms part of a body of wider research that 'focuses on social networks and the dynamic processes through which migrants access, maintain, and create social ties with different people, generating different resources in particular contexts'.[9] Founded on interviews with migrants, her approach is not dissimilar to Breda Gray's in the same issue, although the latter broadens her perspective to include Irish participants from a range of locales.[10] Piaras Mac Éinri and

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[8] Louise Ryan, 'Compare and Contrast: Understanding Irish Migration to Britain in a Wider Context', *Irish Studies Review*, 21:1 (2013), pp. 6–19 (p. 9).
[9] Ibid, p. 7.
[10] Breda Gray, '"Generation Emigration": The Politics of (Trans)national Social Reproduction in Twenty-first-century Ireland', *Irish Studies Review*, 21:1 (2013), pp. 20–36.

Tina O'Toole's 'Editors' Introduction' to the *Éire–Ireland* issue also shares this sociological focus, whilst providing an excellent overview of the changing nature of contemporary migration for the Irish. In particular, they make the case for correctly assessing Irish migration in the context of the widely discrepant experiences of migration around the world:

> It is difficult to argue that a generation of First World, mostly well-educated Irish, with guaranteed access to the twenty-seven [now twenty-six] member European Union and strong links with destinations such as Canada and Australia, can readily be compared with the impoverished and undereducated earlier generations of Irish emigrants. Nor can these emigrants be compared with the far more marginalized contemporary 'global others' who experience multiple obstacles in their quest to migrate to destinations offering better opportunities than their countries of origin.[11]

White skin and a (Western) European passport certainly make migration easier for the Irish *today*.[12] One detects a sense of guilt in Ailbhe Darcy's admission that 'we, as [Irish migrant] writers, occupy a position of almost unbearable privilege. [We] move through the world as *though* borders were permeable, while others are stopped and turned back'.[13] This also calls to mind Zygmunt Bauman: within globalization, argues Bauman, 'Mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among coveted values – and the freedom to move, […] a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes

[11] Piaras Mac Éinri and Tina O'Toole, 'Editors' Introduction: New Approaches to Irish Migration', *Éire–Ireland*, 47: 1&2 (2012), pp. 5–18 (p. 8).
[12] I emphasise 'today', because whilst migration for the Irish is in some way less challenging than for others, this has not always been the case: 'In the period after independence […] Irish migrants went overwhelmingly to the country of the old "enemy", Britain. Paradoxically, they were, however, less visible than their American–Irish counterparts. The very terms American Irish, or Irish American, have no equivalents in the language used to describe the Irish in Britain. [But] there is ample evidence that the Irish were racialized as inferior and were the objects of prejudice and discrimination'. Éinri and O'Toole, p. 7.
[13] Ailbhe Darcy, 'Dorothy Molloy: Dual Citizenship in the Kingdom of the Sick', in *Post-Ireland? Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Jefferson Holdridge and Brian Ó Conchubhair (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2017), pp. 97–115 (p. 98).

the main stratifying factor of our […] times'.[14] Like the poet and critic Darcy then, O'Donoghue, McDonald, O'Callaghan, Wheatley, and O'Reilly are in this sense part of a privileged group: their migration is enabled by their relative privilege within the global order. But this does not mean that the migrant experiences of O'Donoghue et al. are no less important or valid; it is just that they are different. Whatever the circumstances of one's migration, a new place and culture will always necessitate a certain amount of reorientation and renegotiation.

But this aside, when it come to the literary criticism in these special editions, Tony Murray and Ellen McWilliams's short introductory article to the 2018 issue argues for the need to prioritise analysis of the 'lived experience [of the diaspora Irish] and the cultural and literary responses to that experience'.[15] If we are to take these various special issues as at least partially representative of the field in general, the need for more poetry criticism of Irish poets in Britain becomes clear. Outside the sociological work on the Irish in Britain, there are no contributions on contemporary Irish *poets* in Britain across all four of these editions. Indeed, there is almost no straight-ahead poetry criticism at all.[16] There are, however, a number of contributions of literary criticism with a focus on novels or other prose forms. A particularly good example of some perceptive criticism on this theme is Eve Walsh Stoddard's article on Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* (2006) and Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2009). Both novels explore the emigration of young Irish women to Brooklyn in New York, and their subsequent returns to their home country. Stoddard investigates the dialectic between the protagonists' transatlantic identities and their obligations to 'nationalism, parochialism, or local attachment' to their place of origin.[17] Via Anthony Appiah's rooted cosmopolitanism and the

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[14] Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 2.
[15] Ellen McWilliams and Tony Murray, 'Irishness and the Culture of the Irish Abroad', *Irish Studies Review,* 26:1 (2018), pp. 1–4 (p. 1).
[16] The poetry criticism that there is can be found in Ed Madden's 'Queering the Irish Diaspora', in *Éire–Ireland,* 47:1&2 (2012), pp. 172–200. But this article is divided into two sections: the first is on the novels of David Rees, and the second on the poetry of Padraig Rooney. So, this is really half an article of poetry criticism.
[17] Eve Walsh Stoddard, 'Home and Belonging Among Irish Migrants: Transnational Versus Placed Identities in *The Light of Evening* and *Brooklyn: A Novel*', *Éire–Ireland*, 47:1&2 (2012), pp. 147–171 (p. 149).

Freudian concept of the uncanny, Stoddard establishes an intriguing comparison between the two novels: ‘While O’Brien’s novel inscribes an opposition between homeplace and cosmopolitan experience, Tóibín’s deconstructs such oppositions, tracing a dialectic of parochial sameness in difference’.[18] And where Eleanora, O’Brien’s main character, eventually becomes ‘a global citizen; she doesn’t have to choose one nationality over others’, Tóibín’s novel ‘presents a grim picture of hybrid or multicultural consciousness’.[19] Eilis, Tóibín’s heroine, becomes doubly estranged from both Ireland and America.

Gavin Doyle’s ‘Diaspora Blues: Eileen Myles, Melancholia, and The Loss of Irish–American Identity’ presents the promise of poetry criticism.[20] Eileen Myles is a prolific writer of poetry, yet Doyle decides to focus instead on her two autobiographical novels, *Chelsea Girls* (1994) and *Cool for You* (2000), and their representations of ‘twentieth-century working-class Irish–American ethnicity’.[21] Sharing Stoddard’s penchant for Freudian theories, Doyle views the migration experience as essentially one of trauma and loss (though Myles herself has never emigrated, having been born in America to Polish and Irish parents). Tying this in with Freud’s concept of melancholia, Doyle concludes that ‘Myles’s construction of Irish diasporic and ethnic identity in *Chelsea Girls* and *Cool For You* traverses the spatial, ideal, and bodily remains of histories of loss and produces, in emotional and imaginative forms, the obsessive refusal to leave the dead behind’.[22] Doyle’s heavy use of psychoanalytical terminology – for example, the ‘“character” of the ego is, Freud reveals, “a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes”’ – contributes to the highly esoteric nature of some of

[18] Ibid, p. 154.
[19] Ibid, p. 166.
[20] *Irish Studies Review,* 26.1 (2018), pp. 80–97.
[21] Ibid, p. 80.
[22] Ibid, p. 92.

the argumentation.[23] Its approach, though recherché, still yields a fairly straightforward conclusion: that Myles, or their narrators, is forever haunted by a sense of loss, unable to move on.

Elsewhere, there *have* been shorter articles and chapters on the theme of migrancy in contemporary Irish poetry, such as Ailbhe McDaid's article on Vona Groarke and Sara Berkeley. This article asks and attempts to answer the following pertinent and vexing question: 'How then to discuss Irish poetry written elsewhere, by poets living elsewhere, that takes, for its subject or backdrop, the stuff of elsewhere?'[24] Of course limited by space (of around fifteen pages on two poets), McDaid is unable to develop an analysis much beyond the observation that her poets, having experienced migrancy, now exhibit an equivalent 'creative mobility' in their work.[25] The article is also preoccupied with the American destination, with Berkeley especially having spent considerable time in the USA. McDaid's more recent book-length study, *The Poetics of Migration in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (2017), can be seen in some ways as an expansion of those questions posed in her article on Groarke and Berkeley. In this study, McDaid discusses the poetry of several emigrant poets, namely Eamonn Wall, Greg Delanty, and Paul Muldoon; Vona Groarke and Sara Berkeley; Bernard O'Donoghue, Martina Evans, and Colette Bryce; Harry Clifton and Sinead Morrissey; and finally, Justin Quinn and Conor O'Callaghan. McDaid's study is probably the most wide-ranging examination of migrancy and contemporary Irish poetry to date, looking at poets from a range of different locales. Her approach focusses on the intersection of various types of memory with migration. McDaid is guided (though this is by no means the only theory that she deploys) by Jan and Aleida Assmann's distinctions between 'cultural, collective, and individual memory'.[26] This is a significant and sophisticated intervention on the theme, even though its focus on different formulations of memory diverges from

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[23] Ibid, p. 89.
[24] Ailbhe McDaid, '"I mean it as no ordinary return": Poetic Migrancy in the Poetry of Vona Groarke and Sara Berkeley', *Australasian Journal of Irish Studies,* 13:1 (2013), pp. 38–56 (p. 39).
[25] Ibid, p. 38.
[26] Ailbhe McDaid, *The Poetics of Migration in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017).

my emphasis here. As far as I'm aware, this is the first book-length study to explore the theme of migration in contemporary Irish poetry head-on. Her study shows that the poetry of many supposedly 'minor' poets is fertile ground for discussion. This thesis picks up the thread of McDaid's study, among others, and is in part an attempt to emphasise the importance of the likes of O'Reilly's, McDonald's, and Wheatley's poetry in the canon of migrant Irish literature.

In McDaid's study, the destinations of the poets under examination are various, and in some ways, incidental to her analysis. The elsewhere in question is less a factor than the ways in which migrancy finds expression in the individual poet's work. McDaid's study is not concerned solely with England or Britain as a place of residence for emigrating Irish poets, with Japan, the Czech Republic, and the United States of America (among others) also featuring equally. Tony Murray's *London Irish Fictions* (2012), however, *is* focused entirely on the English destination for Irish writers. Indeed, his focus is narrower still, including only the work of 'London Irish' writers active in the second half of the twentieth century. But as his title may suggest, Murray omits London-based Irish *poets* altogether. He discusses a large number of Irish prose stylists, such as Edna O'Brien, Anthony Cronin, John McGahern, and Donall Mac Amhlaigh, examining their explorations of the novel and autobiography narrative forms. Murray, like McDaid, takes his lead from diasporic theory, particularly the work of Avtar Brah (whom McDaid also draws upon). Brah's theory of 'diaspora space' – whereby the migrant, inhabiting a new space or place, is constantly shaping and re-shaping their identity – is deployed in tandem with Paul Ricoeur's slightly more accessible theory of 'narrative identity'.[27]

My focus is on migrancy as a theme in the poetry of a number of contemporary Irish poets (North and South) who currently live and work in Britain. To date, there has been no single study concerned

[27] Tony Murray, *London Irish Fictions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), p. 3.

specifically with contemporary Irish poets in Britain. McDaid's study looks at Irish poets in various locales, but is not a specific study on poets in Britain. Murray's study is concerned solely with Irish writers in England (that is, London in particular), but his focus is entirely on novelists, rather than poets.

**Methodology**

My analysis of the poetry will prioritise close readings, placing the poetry front-and-centre. My approach is rooted in a kind of practical criticism. It is practical insofar as it emphasises close textual scrutiny as the principal means to understanding the poem. I define my methodological approach to the poetry as essentially formalist. Bernard O'Donoghue, in his perceptive study of Seamus Heaney's poetry, applies a method of formalism which is founded on the belief that 'a sustained focus on language affords an enlightening – indeed, the most enlightening – critical approach to any writing'.[28] O'Donoghue's approach 'move[s] towards a less biographical, more formalist kind of analysis, based on scrutiny of the poetry itself'. His minimisation of the biographical context is justified insofar as critics have tended to interpret Heaney's poetic persona 'too biographically', and that, for Heaney, 'the personality-based criticism has become personal' (O'Donoghue cites attacks by David Lloyd among others).[29] My approach, however, *does* incorporate an attention to the various contexts that find their way into the poetry (be they biographical or historical), whilst also acknowledging that

> whatever else the text is – a play of themes, a historical document, [or] a production of a particular author or era […] – it is fundamentally a structure of language. A proper

[28] Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and The Language of Poetry* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 1.
[29] Ibid, p. 2.

> contemporary formalist analysis, as a result, must show how the text's language is what makes it any of these things.[30]

I am reminded here also of Geoffrey Hartman's succinct definition of formalism as 'a method: that of revealing the human content of art by a study of its formal properties'.[31] And such properties include 'semantics, grammar and syntax, figures of speech, diction and vocabulary, etymology, [and] aural and visual patterns', among others.[32] I am acknowledging the world around each poet and their work, whilst taking the view that when it comes to the 'reading of literature', the critic is not only unable to 'avoid' a 'recognition of its formal arrangements', but is in fact 'compelled' towards such a consideration.[33] Indeed, as Susan J. Wolfson observes (via Tony Bennett), even Marxists such as Louis Althusser recognised that the real difference between art and the sciences 'lies in the specific form' of presentation, and that thus specifying these distinguishing features is as much a matter of paramount concern for the Marxist as any other critic.[34]

O'Donoghue – despite the fact that he places less emphasis on biographical contexts than other critics – makes it clear that 'the idea of examining "the poetry itself" […] is *not* a New Critical claim for placing poetry in a hermetically sealed environment, uncontaminated by non-literary circumstance'.[35] In approaching the poetry of my chosen writers in a formalist way, I am not viewing the text in isolation either, but I am also not reducing the text to 'its ideological or historical context,

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[30] Fredric B. Vogel, *New Formalist Criticism* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2013), p. 4.
[31] Geoffrey Hartman, *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958–1970* (London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 42.
[32] Vogel, p. 8.
[33] Susan J. Wolfson, 'Introduction', in *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 3–24 (p. 8).
[34] Ibid, p. 10.
[35] *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 3. My italics.

or to an exemplar of a prior theory'.[36] My formalism, is, as it were, true to form, or at least is aligned with Wolfson's own understanding of formalism in the twenty-first century as existing free of the constraints of any manifesto pledge, unless we count a devotion to literary form itself.[37] My view is, perhaps surprisingly, not dissimilar to that of Edward Said. Despite Said's unwavering postcolonialism – which is exactly the kind of 'prior theory' that would irritate fogeyish critics – his approach to the literary text was often formalist. Said also argued:

> I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history, but authors are, I also believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure.[38]

My strategy then is a hybrid: I begin with a theme – in this case the overarching theme for all my poets is their actual, we might say material, experience of migration – but the poetry itself is seldom a simplistic representation of a single idea, as formalist analysis reveals. Throughout this thesis, I am ever-conscious of two assertions: the first, from John Hollander, who argues that 'real poetry always presents the paradigm of the general human struggle to make itself understood', and the second from Virgil Nemoianu, who reminds us that 'aesthetic writing incorporates complexity and multiplicity […] multidimensionality, the dialectics of harmony and contradictoriness, [and] the coexistence of displeasure with the pleasures and the hopes of beauty'.[39] And it is the 'great work of poetic criticism', to deploy Hollander's phrase, to be always 'telling the tale of that tale'.[40] When it

[36] Ellen Rooney, 'Form and Contentment', in *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 25–48 (p. 34).
[37] As Wolfson suggests, 'the vitality of reading for form is freedom from program and manifesto, from any uniform discipline' (p. 5).
[38] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. xxiv.
[39] John Hollander, *The Work of Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 6, and Virgil Nemoianu, 'Hating and Loving Aesthetic Formalism: Some Reasons', in *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 49–65 (p. 56).
[40] Hollander, p. 12.

comes to the O'Donoghue group, their poems are representations of migrancy, and thus we gain understanding of the (aestheticized) migrant experience through analysis of the given works. Close reading the poetry reveals to us a frame of mind, or a way of thinking about the migrant condition that varies from poem to poem.

**Contexts: Post-nationalism, Exile, and Diaspora**

What are some of the important contexts that surround the poetic production? Edna Longley surmised in 2003 that, 'owing to restrictive and coercive categories like "exile", "emigration" and "colonialism", the question of Abroad in Irish literature has only been patchily explored'.[41] Even taking into account some of the more recent criticism on this theme, when it comes to the specific category of the contemporary Irish poet in Britain, this observation still largely holds true. There is also another area of debate which potentially opens up fresh perspectives on the Irish writer abroad. This is the debate around the idea of *post-nationalism*, sometimes termed *post-Ireland* in the Irish context. It is discussion in this new area of enquiry which has helped to (indirectly) expose the unsuitability of Longley's categories for discussing Irish writers abroad, especially the well-worn trope of 'exile' in Irish literature and culture. Post-nationalism can be defined, in broad terms, as a general transition away from 'nationalist attachments based on ethnic essentialism' towards 'a global and cosmopolitan commitment to human beings'.[42] However, it is necessary to define the term more precisely. In order to clarify the concept of post-nationalism, we must first begin with a definition of nationalism:

[41] Edna Longley, 'Irish Poetry and "Internationalism"', *The Irish Review,* 30:1 (Spring–Summer 2003), pp. 48–61 (p. 49).
[42] Catherine Frost, 'Is Post-nationalism or Liberal-culturalism Behind the Transformation of Irish Nationalism?', *Irish Political Studies,* 21:3 (2006), pp. 277–295 (p. 279).

> Nationalism has, of course, been a dominant political ideal for a very long time now. The received and still prevalent conceptualization of this ideal is that the state and the nation should cohere within a single, sovereign territory and that the nation-state thereby constituted should express, and ensure the continued expression of, a determinate national culture or identity.[43]

The political entity of the nation state exists in a mutually reinforcing relationship with national culture. For some defenders of the concept,

> nationalism represents not only a functional response to the upheavals heralded by modernity, but also a profound source of meaning for people in the modern age, national culture granting them a feeling of rootedness, a nourishing link to a rich past, and a sense of community.[44]

Nationalism, considered in this way, is a unifying concept, providing a strong, singular sense of identity for all citizens. Benedict Anderson famously defined the nation as an 'imagined community'.[45] The nation is a construct, designed to inspire a sense of mutual belonging and community in its citizens. As John McLeod puts it: 'Nations homogenise: they fashion togetherness and unity'.[46] James Joyce's Leopold Bloom famously declared that a nation is 'the same people living in the same place', which cleaves to the vision of nationalism outlined above. But he complicates the

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[43] Keith Breen and Shane O'Neill, 'Introduction: A Postnationalist Era?', in *After the Nation: Critical Reflections on Nationalism and Postnationalism*, ed. Keith Breen and Shane O'Neill (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1–19 (p. 1).
[44] Ibid.
[45] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 6.
[46] John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 82.

definition by adding: 'Or also living in different places'.[47] This is an allusion to both the Jewish and Irish diasporas. Bloom's utterances highlight the fact that, more often than not, the discourse of nationhood oversimplifies the complexities of human identity. Indeed, there have been many detractors of nationalism, as both a political and cultural entity. However, Keith Breen and Shane O'Neill argue that the recent debates have not focussed on the traditional critiques of nationalism – which decry it as illiberal, exclusive, militaristic, or even hostile to true democracy – but on whether the political unit of nationalism is, in fact, still '*viable*' at all.[48] Breen and O'Neill argue that there is a clear distinction between the terms *post-national* and *post-nationalist*:

> The term 'post-national' may be taken to suggest that the nation-state and national identities no longer matter, that they have no political significance. This is a very strong view to which few subscribe. By contrast, the term 'post-nationalist', which best captures the nature of the debate, does not imply a denial of national identity or its endurance. Rather, the suggestion is that the nation-state and the forms of nationalism that underpinned it, while they have not been dissolved, are being empirically and normatively superseded. This claim of supersession rests on two key arguments which typify the post-nationalist perspective: that the nation-state is being relegated as an effective political institution by processes of globalization, and that national identity is being outstripped and displaced by the rise of alternative forms of identity.[49]

When it comes to the 'processes of globalization', global capitalism rides roughshod over the idea of traditional national sovereignty, and the rise of supranational institutions, such as the European

[47] James Joyce, *Ulysses: Annotated Student Edition*, ed. Declan Kiberd (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 430.
[48] Ibid, p. 2. Their italics.
[49] Ibid.

Union, International Monetary Fund, and others 'increasingly circumscribe the nation state's room for manoeuvre'.[50] And, regarding their second factor of identity, the monolithic national identity of any given country is undermined by what Breen and O'Neill term the 'pluralization of identity' both from within and without: through the 'assertion of minority national and ethnic affiliations', and increased immigration.[51] All these arguments apply to Ireland, as I will explore below. The essence of post-nationalism is the idea that the nation state is becoming weakened as a political entity, and that we are also seeing the erasure of its accompanying nationalist discourse and culture.

A number of critics have explored the idea of post-nationalism in the Irish context. Generally speaking, these different discussions assume the same form: that the set of meanings associated with traditional, post-independence Irish nationalist identity are changing as a consequence of a number of factors. Whether this is viewed as something to be celebrated or bemoaned varies. The editors of *Post-Ireland? Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry* (2017), one of the most recent and thorough interventions on this theme, seem to be neutral in this regard. They suggest (albeit slightly vaguely) that although a 'certain version' of Ireland has disappeared and that 'old definitions' may no longer apply, 'perhaps Ireland can never be left behind because, as a colonial entity, the formulation has always been linked to its possible dissolution and absorption'.[52] Jefferson Holdridge and Brian Ó Conchubhair subsequently deploy what they see as Declan Kiberd's more precise term 'after Ireland' to take account of this position, whilst pointing not to the complete dissolution of Ireland, but to a reconfiguration of Irishness in new contexts.[53] As Kiberd himself puts it: 'in its more familiar guises the national project might be ebbing: but the account of an ending […] always

[50] Ibid, p. 3.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Jefferson Holdridge and Brian Ó Conchubhair (eds.), 'Introduction', in *Post-Ireland? Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2017), pp. 9–25 (p. 10).
[53] Ibid. According to the editors of *Post-Ireland?* Kiberd first coined the term in an article for the *Irish Times*: 'After Ireland?' *The Irish Times*, 2009, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/after-ireland-1.728344>.

contains within itself the narrative of a new dispensation'.[54] Holdridge et al. are gesturing to an important point, namely, that the various cultural and economic changes that have taken place within Ireland over the last few decades have destabilised a certain male, idealised rural, Catholic version of Ireland, and this is broadly reflected in Irish culture and cultural production. But what actually are these *changes*, and how have they damaged nationalist ideology?

The island of Ireland has seen a number of significant shifts in the last few decades, such as economic liberalisation, and increased interconnection with the world, engendered by the virtual networks of the internet and the fact of cheaper air travel; the secularisation of Ireland, evidenced by the recent referenda on equal marriage and abortion rights; and the addition of immigration (to the long-established fact of emigration) as a prominent feature of Irish cultural life (of course, Ireland has always had immigration, but from 1994–2008 Ireland experienced for the first time net immigration). The Republic has also seen greater alignment with the EU (I will return to Brexit). These changes, among others, together form the basis of post-Irishness. Fintan O'Toole has been one of most ardent champions of post-Irishness. He summarises the concept, although he has a tendency to overgeneralise. He describes the 'collapse of Irish nationalism and Irish Catholicism, and […] the context of the Republic's utter openness to global economic and cultural forces'. O'Toole also suggests that it is chiefly 'the pressures of economics' that are to blame for the erosion of the monolithic Catholic 'Irish-Ireland' originally encoded in nationalist discourse.[55] Now no longer defined against the singular Other of England, Ireland's 'cultural distinctiveness' lies not in any fixed inherited tradition but in the way it reacts to an 'overload of global stimuli'. And when Ireland's GDP

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[54] Declan Kiberd, Preface to *After Ireland* (London: Head of Zeus, 2017), pp. ix–xiii (p. xi).

[55] Fintan O'Toole, *The Lie of the Land: Irish Identities* (London: Verso, 1997), p. xvii. John Braidwood has summarised this vision of Ireland in rather critical terms: 'De Valera […] thought that Ireland should be a bucolic earthly paradise for the hardy and deserving peasants of Ireland, with little or no place for industrialisation. Like Douglas Hyde, he believed that Ireland had to be thoroughly de-anglicised by being everything that England was not: unindustrialised and under the full control of the Catholic Church', in 'Dreary Eden: Post-War Ireland and the Irish Experience of English Exile', *Nordic Irish Studies*, 15:1 (2016), pp. 157–168 (p. 159).

(per capita) finally surpassed that of the UK in 1996, according to O'Toole, the very foundation of a fixed Irish identity was washed away: 'after centuries of imagining itself in the shadow of a bigger, more powerful, and above all richer neighbour, it was faced with the necessity, not just to think again, but to find a whole new way of thinking'. Thus, since Irish nationalist ideology is in part defined against Englishness, with the former's recession comes a similar ebbing of the postcolonial mindset. This is, of course, an oversimplification of a complex set of changes and factors. Perhaps, then, it is really a combination of factors, such as the church abuse scandals, as well as the Europeanisation and globalisation of Irish society, that have merely highlighted what has been the case since modern Ireland's inception: 'the only fixed Irish tradition is the Irish tradition of not having a fixed Irish identity'.[56]

Of course, when it comes to nationalist ideology, the Northern Irish dimension is different. The latter is a disputed territory in the way the Republic is not, and thus to live in the North necessitates a living in-between. Both states of mind entail what Seamus Heaney describes as belonging to 'a place that is patently riven between notions of belonging to other places'.[57] Consequently, as Elmer Kennedy-Andrews has noted, unlike the Republic, the 'cultural landscape' of the North has always been a 'palimpsest capable of being read in different ways'.[58] But despite these important differences, like the Republic, Northern Ireland has not been immune to various global shifts, as Kennedy-Andrews explains:

> Ulster has undergone rapid fundamental change in recent years, as evidenced by the unprecedented twentieth-century population shifts attendant on increasing urbanisation,

[56] Ibid.
[57] Seamus Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Reflections on Some Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland', *The Agni Review*, 22:1 (1985), pp. 158–177 (p. 168).
[58] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), pp. 1–2.

> the mobility generated by new technology, the growth of travel and tourism, the influx of foreign investment, the influence of mass communications of TV, film, and the internet. All these developments […] have had the effect of eroding traditional cultural values. Place is increasingly viewed as the product of global, interconnecting flows of peoples, cultures, and meanings – of routes rather than roots.[59]

It is debatable whether the terms of 'routes' and 'roots' are strictly applicable to the experience of white Irish people. But this aside, like O'Toole, Kennedy-Andrews seems to be celebrating a kind of sweeping away of old loyalties and 'traditional cultural values', although these are unspecified. Kennedy-Andrews's summary here is not without foundation. There is an emphasis on the collapse of the old values in the wake of economic change: we have a shift – engendered largely by the forces of global capitalism – from traditional, fixed, place-bound cultural values towards a vision of identity that is more mutable.

The poetry of Wheatley et al. happens in the immediate context of their emigration from Ireland in a material sense, but it also takes place in the broader context of Ireland's own cultural migration away from its pre-existing nationalist framework. Indeed, the transformed nature of migration – both to and from Ireland – is an important element of the post-nationalist context. When it comes to outward migration specifically, Colum McCann has summarised the contemporary experience of migration for the Irish, contrasting it with the historical reality of emigration: 'Of course the nature of migration has changed for all of us – when London is a one-hour flight away from Knock it's hard to say that we've actually emigrated. Not in the same way as people did before – flocks of wild

[59] Ibid, p. 8. These terms are originally Paul Gilroy's, from *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1993).

geese, coffin ships, American wakes'.[60] McCann is perhaps conflating two distinct experiences of emigration to the US and Britain, particularly with his reference to 'American wakes'. In any case, this is also a generalization, especially when we consider that Britain has, for many years, been relatively accessible from Ireland. When discussing migration to Britain in the 1950s – which pre-dates the Ryanair generation to which McCann also alludes – Clair Wills states in her influential study: 'the journey over by train and boat could be done for less than five pounds, so that people left experimentally, planning to see whether prospects were any better across the water. They could always come back'.[61] Notwithstanding this corrective, it is true that – at least for most of the O'Donoghue group – the migrant experience is not represented in exilic terms. As the migrant poet James Liddy has surmised, 'the new emigration is not like the old exile'.[62]

Peter McDonald has suggested that exile is an idea that 'ha[s] been very seriously abused over the years. There's a limit, I think, to what words can go through and survive'.[63] A concept such as exile, McDonald adds, 'strike[s] me as being very close now to the end of the line – intellectually, artistically'. This line of argument recalls Paul Muldoon's famous attack on Seamus Deane in *The Prince of the Quotidian*. The speaker describes how

> In the latest issue
>
> of the *TLS* 'the other Seamus', Seamus Deane,

[60] Dermot Bolger, 'Foreword', in *Ireland in Exile: Irish Writers Abroad* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1993). Bolger is quoting a letter of McCann's (with permission) which accompanied his contribution to the anthology.
[61] Clair Wills, *The Best are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 5.
[62] James Liddy, 'James Liddy on Irish Poetry and the Diaspora', *Metre*, 4 (1998), pp. 93–94 (p. 93).
[63] Fran Brearton, 'In Conversation with Peter McDonald', *PN Review*, (2010) 21:1, pp. 60–63 (p. 61).

has me in 'exile' in Princeton:

this term serves mostly to belittle

the likes of Brodsky or Padilla

and is not appropriate of me; certainly not

of anyone who, with Louisa May Alcott,

is free to buy a ticket to his emerald isle

of choice. To Deane I say, 'I'm not "in exile",

though I can't deny

that I've twice been in Fintona'.[64]

Muldoon makes a fair argument that, for him at least, to be a true 'exile', à la Joseph Brodsky and Heberto Padilla (both forcibly ejected from their home countries by authoritarian regimes), is to have been denied the choice of both migration and return. What this boils down to, as Dermot Bolger suggests, is that '*Exile* and *departure* suggest an out-dated degree of permanency. Irish

[64] Paul Muldoon, *The Prince of The Quotidian* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1994), p. 12.

writers no longer go into exile, they simply commute'.[65] Jerzy Jarniewicz and John McDonagh make this point more forcefully: commenting on the diverse nature of contemporary Irish poetry, they remark how 'the theme of dislocation […] leading to the redefinition of home and national identity, has been severed from the traditional, highly politicized theme of exile'.[66] Exile and exilic literature – which often involves the aesthetic strategy of the 'dhearcas siar', or backward glance – is typically associated with hardship and forced migration. For many Irish migrants today, the circumstances of their migration are not so distressing: this is indicated by Bolger's formulation that Irish writers 'simply commute'. Again, it is the nature of contemporary migration that is driving this change: travelling or living abroad is no longer one of 'political necessity'.[67]

But this is not to argue that exile is now a *totally* redundant term. Ellen McWilliams has given special attention to the variousness of exile with regard to the frequently neglected experience of emigrant Irish women in her monograph*, Women and Exile in Contemporary Irish Fiction* (2013). Exile is, for McWilliams, a multifaceted term. Her deployment of 'exile' as a central pillar of her argument is justified insofar as – despite the fact that it may be outdated for the reasons discussed hitherto – it has also excluded the woman's experience. McWilliams's book addresses this particular lacuna: 'In spite of the fact that the theme of "exile" has near cult status in Irish literature, to the point that Seamus Deane goes so far as to describe it with some chagrin as a "fetish", it seems to be a cultural preoccupation that nonetheless overlooked the experience of the woman emigrant'.[68] McWilliams selects exile as her primary descriptor, because she sets out to explore 'how representations of women and exile in contemporary Irish fiction depart from, as well as appropriate and adopt, the set

[65] Dermot Bolger, 'Foreword', in *Ireland in Exile: Irish Writers Abroad* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1993), pp. 7–10 (p. 7). His italics.
[66] Jerzy Jarniewicz and John McDonagh, 'Scattered and Diverse: Irish Poetry Since 1990', in *Irish Literature Since 1990: Diverse Voices,* ed. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 121–141 (p. 138).
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ellen McWilliams, *Women and Exile in Contemporary Irish Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2013), p. 2.

of meanings associated with exile in relation to formidable forebears and a largely male-centred Irish literary tradition'.[69] Her monograph is an important and necessary feminist intervention into the discourse of the 'exile' within Irish literature and culture. She is amplifying the voice of the Irish woman migrant from within an exilic tradition from which she has been largely excluded. Her focus is on a series of novels that explore emigrant Irish women in both the US and Britain. McWilliams's book is a fine example of how the term exile can still play a part in critical discourse.

It is therefore reductive to categorise the personal experiences of any Irish emigrant – whether they left by steamboat for the US with a slim possibility of return, or they take regular Ryanair flights to and from London – as either 'forced, traumatic and permanent', or, conversely, as 'voluntary, emancipatory and temporary'.[70] Like McCann and Bolger, Ailbhe McDaid makes this similar distinction between the past and present experiences of migration for the Irish. McDaid's first set of terms describes the historical circumstances of Irish migration, which gave rise to the exilic mentality: the sense of trauma and permanent separation resurfaces here. Her second set of terms is the contemporary experience of migration for the Irish: in similar terms to Bolger, the adjectives associated with this experience are essentially antonyms of the first. But these terms are not catch-all, either historically speaking or for contemporary migrants. The second set of terms *are* more generally applicable to the experience of contemporary migrants, but, in the case of Bernard O'Donoghue for example, his biography contains elements of trauma as well.

But what does all this mean for the founding question of this thesis, which is, after all, an aesthetic one: how does the theme of migration find expression in the poetry of O'Donoghue et al.? Anthony

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[69] Ibid, p. 12.

[70] Ailbhe McDaid, '"I mean it as no ordinary return": Poetic Migrancy in the Poetry of Vona Groarke and Sara Berkeley', *Australasian Journal of Irish Studies,* 13:1 (2013), pp. 38–56 (p. 39).

Bradley has identified the aesthetic dimension of post-nationalism, arguing that 'the contemporary Irish lyric registers the time of the postnational'. He describes the 'rupture between literature and the nation state' that has taken place within Ireland in recent years.[71] He elaborates: 'the dominant strain of contemporary Irish poetry now seems, finally, to have become untethered from images of rural Ireland and the discourse of the nation'. This imagery includes 'Yeats's Sligo, […] Kavanagh's Monaghan, Montague's Tyrone, […and] Heaney's County Derry [among others], all of which in different ways have fed into the discourse of the nation'. Having identified several general shifts within contemporary Irish poetry, when it comes to migrant poetry in particular, Bradley suggests that there is 'a strain of cosmopolitan poetry that is about other places than Ireland, that is appreciative of the other culture, and shares in it, without the anxiety of exile'.[72] As McDonald, Bolger and others have argued, post-nationalism also seems to mean post-exile. The concept of exile is bound up with both nationalist discourse and its accompanying national literature: the exile is banished from the motherland, itself a nationalist construction. But given the severance that has occurred between literature and the nation – along with the changed nature of migration – the exilic mode of writing has lost significance: 'the Irish poet absorbs influences from another culture, whether through new ideas or experience living outside Ireland, or both'.[73] Migrant poets are genuinely opening up their poetic identities to the influences of the 'other culture'.

Elmer Kennedy-Andrews identifies a similar set of aesthetic characteristics in a group of Northern Irish poets. Sinéad Morrissey (b. 1972), Alan Gillis (b. 1973) and others constitute a 'third wave [of]

[71] Anthony Bradley, 'Changing Places: Locations of Contemporary Irish Poetry', *New Hibernia Review*, 21:4 (2017), pp. 89–105 (pp. 89 & 90).
[72] Ibid, p. 103. This is not to reduce these poets' work to nationalism, as Bradley explains: 'But it is also true that if one looks backward, there is a sense of place in Carson, Muldoon, Longley, Boland, Mahon, Kinsella, and MacNeice (also, inevitably, Joyce) that has always been engaged in a dialectic with any discourse of the nation. Even Heaney, writing as a critic, acknowledged the different senses of location when he wrote about place and displacement in Irish poetry produced in Northern Ireland', pp. 103–104.
[73] Ibid, p. 92.

young poets […] who made their mark in the 1990s or early 2000s'.[74] Like Bradley's poets, Kennedy-Andrews's Northern Irish generation embodies the 'shift away from Yeatsian notions of rooted identity and the orthodoxy of a closed, unified culture'.[75] This took many forms in Yeats's poetry. Sligo's 'Lake Isle of Innisfree' – to which Yeats had strong familial and emotional connections – is an unchanging rural place: 'for always night and day / I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore'.[76] The father-speaker in 'A Prayer for My Daughter' aspires for her to grow into a 'flourishing hidden tree […] Rooted in one dear perpetual place'.[77] And, in 'The Rose Tree', the tree is a symbol of Ireland and the national revival:

> "It needs to be watered",
>
> James Connolly replied,
>
> "To make the green come out again
>
> And spread on every side".[78]

Yeats is in full nationalist mode here: James Connolly was one of the executed leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising. The strong theme of martyrdom and sacrifice is evoked. Connolly's 'red blood', along with Patrick Pearse's and others', provides the nourishment for the symbolic rose tree. Yeats's own art is inspired by the rose of Ireland, and is written 'to sweeten Ireland's wrong':

> Because the red-rose bordered hem

[74] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), p. 249.
[75] Ibid*,* p. 19.
[76] W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, ed. Augustine Martin (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 35.
[77] Ibid, pp. 185–187 (p. 186).
[78] Ibid, p. 179.

Of her, whose history began

Before God made the angelic clan,

Trails all about the written page.[79]

The visual metaphor of the rose 'hem' bordering his stanzas is a luminous expression of his sincere desire to 'write for you [Ireland]'.[80] The organic metaphor is multifaceted, achieving greater intensity in Yeats's later poetry, especially after Yeats acquired Thoor Ballylee. The Norman tower is close to Coole Park, which was an important place for the Revival.[81] The tower itself is an ancient, rural, rooted place. Yeats combines the symbols of the rose tree and tower in the 'My House' poem from 'Meditations in Time of Civil War':

An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,

A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,

An acre of stony ground,

Where the symbolic rose can break in flower.[82]

The two symbols interact in a kind of mutualistic symbiosis (to deploy another organic metaphor), both embodying Yeats's notion of a rooted identity. And, much later in 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited' the poet-speaker makes his ambition explicit, as he reflects on the exhibited portraiture of various significant Revival figures:

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[79] Ibid, 'To Ireland in the Coming Times', p. 46.
[80] Ibid, p. 47.
[81] Yeats reflects on both places in 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931', ibid, pp. 251–253.
[82] Ibid, pp. 206–213 (p. 207).

> John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
>
> All that we did, all that we said or sang
>
> Must come from contact with the soil, from that
>
> Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.[83]

Synge himself is also celebrated as a 'rooted man' in the following stanza.[84] Such images were bound up with the process of decolonisation in Ireland. There is a strong connection between the search for an enduring national identity and Ireland's topography. As Bradley argues, whether in literature or painting, 'the depiction of place is an essential aspect of imagining the nation; landscape is, as the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha puts it, "the inscape of national identity," and so it has been in Ireland'.[85] Images of rootedness abound in Yeats's poems, with rural subjects, trees, and the tower, and they exemplify these connections between place, landscape, and nationalist discourse.

Many poets continued to draw on this imagery. The earth-grubbing poetics of Seamus Heaney's early poetry is clearly influenced by Yeats. Heaney's 'Anteaus', which is about the Greek mythological figure who derives his strength from his mother Earth, is in dialogue with 'The Municipal'. Heaney's figure, like Yeats's, 'cannot be weaned / Off the earth's long contour, her river-veins'.[86] Indeed, Yeats's influence on Irish poetry is enduring (as well as Bradley's other nationalist poets of Heaney, Kavanagh et al.), but it is this particular nationalist imagery that has lost

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[83] Ibid, pp. 334–336 (p. 336).
[84] Ibid.
[85] Bradley, p. 89. Bradley is quoting from Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 55.
[86] Seamus Heaney, 'Antaeus', in *North* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 12.

significance: ‘something has happened’, Bradley suggests, ‘at first gradually and then, it seems, all at once—to this connection between place and ideas of the nation’.[87] Indeed, as Kennedy-Andrews explains, the ‘third wave’ of talented contemporary Irish poets such as Morrissey and Gillis draws on a different source of imagery:

> While these new young poets may not represent anything as clear-cut as a definitive break with the older generations new directions and emphases may nevertheless be discerned in their work. Received identities and concepts of home continue to be interrogated as these new young poets seek out the fault-lines in familiar terrain, question the official maps, cross borders, break up consecrated ground, take roads less travelled by. Frequently, the desire to belong is in open conflict with the urge to flight. Attention is no longer focussed on ‘one dear perpetual place’, but on multiple other places. Traversing internal, national, and international frontiers, the younger poets are most at home occupying in-between places or inner places […] The home place is viewed from foreign perspectives: the poet can be in several places at one time. These new poets, we could say, represent the first genuinely post-national[ist] generation, less preoccupied with the binary opposition of England and Ireland than their predecessors, as evidenced by their lack of interest in the old colonial theme.[88]

This view is post-nationalist rather than post-national in accordance with Breen and O’Neill’s definitions: it is not declaring a clean break with the past, but is correctly identifying, like Bradley is, the ‘new directions’ of Irish poetry. The O’Donoghue group also ‘made their mark in the 1990s and 2000s’, and although all but one are from the Republic, the five poets here bear witness to both

[87] Bradley, p. 89.
[88] *Writing Home*, p. 249.

Bradley and Kennedy-Andrews's observations in one way or another. Their poetry is not aligned with any prescribed notion of a national literature: each poet charts their own course, aesthetically and geographically. Place remains an important concept within their migrant poetry, but it is divorced from any 'discourse of the nation', as Bradley puts it.

This is not to argue that we can now observe the total 'disappearance of Ireland' – as Justin Quinn memorably declared – from the migrant poetry of these writers.[89] Ailbhe Darcy makes reference to Quinn and others' view that Irish subject matter is disappearing from Irish poetry. She also considers the impact of migrancy on this perception. During the question-and-answer section of a recital she attended with a fellow 'early-career poet' in Liverpool, she was accused by a disgruntled audience-member of not writing about 'Irish themes'. This person essentially rejected her Irishness on the grounds of content, because Darcy was not writing on 'the proper topic' of Irish poetry.[90] She rebuts this dismissal: 'to read a poet born in Ireland but living elsewhere, or not writing about very Irish things, as merely a post-national English-language poet would be to miss the opportunity to fully tease out the different forces that meet, collide, and negotiate in that poet's language'.[91] Darcy is, on the one hand, making her own complaint against what she sees as 'the insistence on a move toward post-nationalism in contemporary Irish poetry', particularly the notion that Irish writers have been 'trapped in an idea of Irishness and are now free of it'.[92] But she is also acknowledging that traditional 'Irish themes' – some of which I have touched on above – *have* changed.

[89] Justin Quinn, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry: 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 194–211 (p. 197).
[90] Darcy, 'Dorothy Molloy', pp. 97 & 98.
[91] Ibid, p. 99.
[92] Ibid, p. 98.

However, as Darcy suggests, to acknowledge the post-nationalist milieu is not to strip contemporary poets of their Irish identity, but it is to recognise that 'old definitions may no longer apply'.[93] Even Quinn, despite his famous declaration, later acknowledges that poets still write about the 'Irish experience'.[94] Indeed, Ireland, in its various guises, is still a source of inspiration for O'Donoghue, McDonald, Wheatley, O'Reilly, and O'Callaghan. But Kennedy-Andrews's 'other places' – or Bradley's 'other culture[s]' – also play an important part in their migrant poetry; and the 'home place' is often viewed from 'foreign perspectives', to varying degrees. Some poets, such as Wheatley, don't dwell on Ireland as much as McDonald and O'Donoghue, for example. 'Concepts of home' are central to McDonald's migrant poetry, and 'tak[ing] roads less by travelled by' is a concern for Wheatley. O'Donoghue's speakers often find themselves 'in-between' different places. But the poetry of O'Donoghue et al. also exemplifies the diversity of Ireland and Irish identity in the twenty-first century. These five migrant writers each represent a different kind of equally valid migrant identity in their poetry. These identities, having been forged abroad, are examples of myriad kinds of Irishness that extend beyond the island itself.

Mary Robinson, the President of Ireland from 1990 to 1997, stated that 'The concept of "Irishness" is not defined by territorial boundaries. Nor is there a singular definitive variety of Irish identity'.[95] Indeed, in a much more famous speech on the subject of migration, she said:

> Diaspora, in its meaning of dispersal or scattering, includes the many ways, not always chosen, that people have left this island. [...] I am also aware of the creative energies of those born on this island who are now making their lives in the United States and in so many

[93] Holdridge and Ó Conchubhair, p. 10.
[94] Quinn, p. 197.
[95] Mary Robinson, 'Address by the President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, at Dinner Hosted by the Irish Immigration Centre', *President of Ireland* <https://www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/address-by-the-president-of-ireland-mary-robinson-at-dinner-hosted-by-the-i> [accessed 20th May 2022].

> other countries. We need to accept that in their new perspectives may well be a critique of our old ones. But if cherishing the diaspora is to be more than a sentimental regard for those who leave our shores, we should not only listen to their voice and their viewpoint. We have a responsibility to respond warmly to their expressed desire for appropriate fora for dialogue and interaction with us by examining in an open and generous way the possible linkages. We should accept that such a challenge is an education in diversity which can only benefit our society.[96]

The poetry of O'Donoghue et al. is part of this 'diversity', as much as it is part of the richness of the Irish story. Robinson evokes one meaning of 'diaspora' here: O'Donoghue et al. are all diasporic poets in the essential sense that they have left the island of Ireland and resettled in Britain, and have produced migrant poetry from here. The corollary of this is that their migration to different parts of Britain precipitates their varying degrees of engagement with the island. Diaspora therefore denotes a process of engagement with the host culture. It involves the interaction with, and absorption of, the new place and its culture into the identity of the migrant. It also emphasises flux, because it describes a condition of constant change and evolution. Identity – or the individual poetic identity of each poet – is constantly shifting. Indeed, O'Toole's suggestion that Irishness is no longer 'fixed', but composed of 'provisional, contingent identities' is, fundamentally, a description of the long-established experience of diasporic subjects. Migration has always challenged previously accepted – or 'fixed' – notions of identity, demanding adaptation to new circumstances. It also invites the subject to renegotiate their relationship with their place of origin. To be a diasporic subject is to already embody a 'provisional' and 'contingent' identity. As O'Toole argues: 'There is a sense of moving back to the future, of the newest and most astonishing changes – mass media, virtual reality,

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[96] Mary Robinson, 'Address by President Mary Robinson on a Matter of Public Importance, 2 February 1995', *President of Ireland* <https://president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/address-by-president-mary-robinson-on-a-matter-of-public-importance-2-febru> [accessed 20th May 2022].

the fusion of cultures – being a repetition of what is, in the history of emigrants, old hat'.[97] The post-nationalist trend is, in its essence, already mirrored in the lives of migrants.

The editors of *Redefinitions of Irish Identity: A Postnationalist Approach* (2010) explore some of the aesthetic representations of Irish post-nationalism, which they see as being born of Ireland's increased integration with Europe, and increased immigration to Ireland. This is summarized as 'the pressures of globalization', necessitating a 'redefinition of the nation state'.[98] Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Carmen Zamorano share O'Toole's view that Irishness is now an identity understood in increasingly diverse ways. Nordin and Llena also take their lead from Richard Kearney. In *Postnationalist Ireland* (1998), Kearney argues that 'contemporary Ireland is in historic transition and calls for new modes of self-definition in keeping with an overall move towards a more federal and regional Europe'.[99] As this sentence suggests, Kearney's is fundamentally a work of politics, pushing for the increased federalization of the UK and Ireland via the European Union, and thus the transcendence of old narrow nationalisms (with their competing, and, in the case of Northern Ireland, mutually irreconcilable claims of national sovereignty). Kearney's argument largely falls within the 'processes of globalization' aspect of post-nationalist thought identified by Breen and O'Neill. Kearney places his faith in the EU project, and outlines a vision for Britain and Ireland to become part of a wider British and Irish archipelago within the EU. Nordin and Llena's edition is more concerned with cultural expressions of post-nationalism than its political applications, although they share Kearney's view that 'postnationalism is not understood as a phenomenon that silences the past. Rather, it is characterised by a re-examination of previous constructs of national

[97] O'Toole, *The Lie of the Land*, p. 165.
[98] Irene Gilsenan Nordin and Carmen Zamorano (eds.), 'Introduction', in *Redefinitions of Irish Identity: A Postnationalist Approach* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), pp. 1–17 (p. 2).
[99] Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 15.

identity'.[100] In this sense, Kearney, as well as Nordin and Llena, as celebrants of the post-nationalist trend, is keen to disavow the charge of ahistoricism which is sometimes levelled at them.[101]

Kearney himself is an exponent of the idea of a 'post-nationalist archipelago', which is another important area of study.[102] *Postnationalist Ireland* is a spirited defence of his position, and particularly of the supranational EU. The fraught question of Northern Ireland is given special attention, and the EU is seen (as I suggested) as one of the political structures essential to dissolving the mutually irreconcilable claims to sovereignty in the region. Six years later, after the dust had settled on the Good Friday Agreement, Kearney doubled-down on his original position, hailing the EU and Tony Blair as important players in establishing peace in the region. 'The zero-sum game of exclusive "national identities" is over', he declares, adding:

> The emerging post-nationalist scenario allows, for the first time in history, that citizens of Northern Ireland can owe differing degrees of allegiance to an expanding range of identifications: from regional townland, parish, or province to national constitution (British or Irish or both) and, larger still, to the transnational union of Europe.[103]

[100] Ibid, p. 3.
[101] By Declan Kiberd among others, see below.
[102] Richard Kearney, 'Britain and Ireland: Towards a Post-nationalist Archipelago', in *Contextualizing Secession*: *Normative Studies in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Bruno Coppieters and Richard Sakwa (Oxford: OUP, 2003) pp. 97–111.
[103] Ibid, p. 98.

Kearney is perhaps guilty of entirely understandable (and somewhat premature) over-excitedness, especially if we consider the effects of Brexit on the region. And to assert that national identities are simply 'over' and that the 'post-nationalist scenario' enables the dissolution of old animosities 'for the first time in history', is overstating it. Indeed, although Kearney labels the situation a post-nationalist one, his position here – which seems to have hardened since he wrote *Postnationalist Ireland* – is essentially a more extreme post-national one, in accordance with Breen and O'Neill's definition. He also makes statements that, in the context of Brexit, seem almost comically naïve: '[Margaret] Thatcher's last stand to revive Tory nationalism [with her involvement in the Falklands and other conflicts] was just that, a *last* stand'.[104] But if this is true, then Brexit – occurring almost twenty-five years after Thatcher left power – could be described as nationalism's last *gasp*; a final heave or wheeze before its ultimate demise. In this context, it's difficult to wholly agree with Kearney's pronouncements about *English* nationalism at least.

Kearney provides a whistle-stop tour of British and Irish nationalism from the fourteenth century up to the present, arguing that both nations have essentially defined themselves in relation to each other. An Orientalist Othering of Ireland (à la Edward Said) – mixed with Homi K. Bhabha's theory of *ambiguity*, and elements of *unheimlich* – is what explains the historical evolution of the two national identities:

> The very difference from Irishness became part and parcel of English–British identity. Their Hibernian Other was uncannily mirrored in themselves, the familiar spectre hidden in strangeness, the original double they had forgotten to

[104] Ibid, p. 106.

> remember, the threatened revenant of their own repressed political unconscious.[105]

But this is no longer the case. Ireland and Britain or England have achieved a new kind of relationship. Or at least, Kearney's argument is convincing. Islands and the water between them embody the interconnectedness and commonality between the inhabitants of Ireland and Britain, rather than their differences:

> What the transnational model effectively recognizes is that citizens of Britain and Ireland are inextricably bound up with each other – mongrel islanders from East to West sharing an increasingly common civic and economic space. In addition to the obvious contemporary overlapping of the sports and popular cultures of the two islands, the citizens of Ireland and Britain are becoming ever more mindful that much of their respective histories were shared during centuries when the Irish Sea served as a waterway connecting the two countries rather than a *cordon sanitaire* keeping them apart.[106]

Kearney ends with a rallying call, pithily summarising the archipelagic concept: 'Citizens of these islands might, I suggest, do better to think of themselves as mobile mongrel islanders than as eternal dwellers of two pure, god-given nation-states'.[107] Even in the context of Brexit, the archipelagic concept does continue to hold water. Kearney hints here at the inclusivity of this vision particularly for diasporic identities ('mobile mongrel islanders'). He also describes several archipelagic modes of identification, which includes the 'Irish and British diasporas'.[108] Caitríona O'Reilly embraces the

[105] Ibid, p. 102.
[106] Ibid, p. 106.
[107] Ibid, p. 110.
[108] Ibid, p. 111.

possibilities presented by an archipelagic outlook in her migrant poetry. I will therefore explore some of the aesthetic applications of the archipelagic in my chapter on her poetry.

But it has not been all plain sailing for exponents of archipelagic post-nationalism, or simply post-nationalism in general in the Irish context. Declan Kiberd, writing after the 2008 recession, berates liberal intellectuals (which would include those mentioned above) who have declared their 'embarrassment in the face of simple-minded notions of nation, faith and fatherland; and have helped to erode these forces. But in the collapse of all other "isms", the market itself has become the sole remaining ideology'.[109] Conor O'Callaghan has poked fun at such fogeyish nay-saying. In his Blakean 'Tiger Redux', about the post-Celtic Tiger economic slump, the speaker remarks:

> Truth? Though you were mighty strange –
>
> So *laissez faire*, so *keep the change* –
>
> spare us from the dope who (bore)
>
> digs the hole we were before.[110]

O'Callaghan's speaker is presenting one side of the argument (Kearney and O'Toole are also on this side), and Kiberd another. Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons, and Anthony Cronin seem to be in the Kiberd camp. In their introduction to *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and The Global Economy* (2002) they take turns to 'dig the hole we were before'. Their chapter is bleak and pessimistic. Of course, predating the global financial crisis of 2008, their chapter bemoans almost everything about the

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[109] Kiberd, 'After Ireland?' *The Irish Times*, 29 Aug 2009, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/after-ireland-1.728344>.
[110] In *The Sun King* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2011), pp. 18–21 (p. 18).

Celtic Tiger boom. They can at least avoid the charge of hindsight. Kirby et al. display a similar fogeyism to Kiberd, taking up much of their chapter with whimpering about how 'Faith and Fatherland' have been consigned to the 'trash-can of late modernity' in the interests of neo-liberal growth.[111] They argue that the ethic of neoliberal economics has infected culture, with its discourse of 'individualism, entrepreneurship, mobility, flexibility, innovation, [and] competitiveness'.[112] These qualities that emphasise change and verve they contrast with the (apparently) more favourable and more static values of 'family, self-sacrifice, self-sufficiency, and nationalism'.[113] There is evident conservatism here: does their concept of the 'family' denote a very specific heterosexual, Catholic one, and their 'nationalism' a kind of illiberal, masculinist one, for example? Additionally, it is often argued that developing countries can abandon the past or overlook other political challenges (such as the pursuit of democracy), in the interest of economic growth.[114] This common 'fetishization of growth' argument seems to be behind some of Kirby et al.'s complaints here. But this begs the question: what is more important to people in their everyday lives, nebulous concepts such as 'nation, faith and fatherland' (with all their problematic associations), or financial security?

Kirby's chapter from the same book is concerned with countering the common claim that pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland was 'a relatively closed, Catholic, homogenous culture', whereas modern Ireland is, in contrast, 'open' and 'pluralist'.[115] He seems very nostalgic for an older Ireland: this pre-Celtic Tiger nationalist Ireland 'offer[ed] a sense of belonging, a cohesive identity to which the majority could owe allegiance'.[116] Kirby is ventriloquising the typical pro-nationalist argument that the nation

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[111] Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons, and Michael Cronin (eds.), 'Introduction: The Reinvention of Ireland: A Critical Perspective', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society, and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 1–21 (p. 14).
[112] Ibid, p. 13.
[113] Ibid.
[114] See: China!
[115] Peadar Kirby, 'Contested Pedigrees of the Celtic Tiger', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society, and the Global Economy*, ed. Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 21–38 (p. 34).
[116] Ibid.

promotes 'unity' among its people. But what about homosexuals, women, and transgender people within this nationalist discourse? Kirby is accommodating of these divergent sexualities and identities: 'outsiders' may have found themselves 'chaffing a bit at times against some of its wilder rhetoric' – which is to put it both mildly and somewhat indifferently – but they were nonetheless 'fundamentally at ease' with the sense of 'identity' that Ireland offered. This is a generalization, that seems to gloss over the real struggle of 'outsiders' against the kind of ultra-conservative cultural values disseminated by the Catholic Church. (As Michel Peillon makes clear in his essay, 'for a very long time […] the Catholic Church occupied a strategic position within the cultural and political spheres', mainly by exercising 'very tight control over schools').[117] But for Kirby, it is neo-liberal society that is the real enemy: he describes the new Ireland as like a 'foreign country' to him.[118]

A particular bugbear for Kirby et al. is what they perceive as the almost reckless disregard for traditional values by those who embrace neoliberalism. Kirby, Gibbons, and Cronin are frustrated by the urge for a clean post-national break with the past. This trend towards cultural and historical amnesia, they argue, should be resisted: 'The profound changes taking place in Irish society undoubtedly call for images and modes of presentation that extend beyond the past, but this is only because the past itself is not over, and still awaits its defining moments in the future'.[119] Indeed, Gibbons in his own chapter puts it slightly better. Discussing the future for a cosmopolitan Ireland, with an international as opposed to insular focus, Gibbons is keen to question the view of de Valera's Ireland as entirely inward-looking. Irish 'neutrality', for example, a de Valerian stance, is also a key feature of a cosmopolitan outlook (the most famous example of neutrality in action being the Irish stance in World War Two). This has been jettisoned as a political position in recent years, in

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[117] Michael Peillon, 'Culture and State in Ireland's New Economy', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society, and the Global Economy*, ed. Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 38–54 (p. 42).
[118] Kirby, p. 34.
[119] Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin, p. 12.

favour of a more pro-American stance. And this of course for Gibbons came along with the acceptance of American investment in Ireland post-1959. Gibbons concludes:

> For many cultural commentators, Ireland's recent economic boom is perceived as bringing Ireland out of an antiquated nationalism […] However, […] the ability to look outward, and particularly to identify with the plight of refugees and asylum seekers [this seems as relevant today as it was in the early 2000s], may be best served by reclaiming those lost narratives of the past which generate new solidarities in the present.[120]

This argument entails the acknowledgement of change, whilst understanding that history still influences each present moment. Kirby et al. are somewhat more wistful for a bygone age than either Kearney or Nordin and Llena. And although some of Kearney's own 'wilder rhetoric' may find him calling for the wholesale sweeping away of the nationalist project, it is still acknowledged by all these commentators that only a crude post-nationalist mentality would seek to *completely* renounce the 'prevailing ideas and images' of the past.[121]

When it comes to criticism that connects the dots between migration and post-Irishness, *The Leaving of Ireland: Migration and Belonging in Irish Literature and Film* (2015) is perhaps the best example. Katherina Doudou and John Lynch, in the introductory chapter, situate the book in the context of the various cultural and economic changes that have taken place within Ireland over the last few decades, such as the Celtic Tiger economic boom and the subsequent crash, and the Church

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[120] Luke Gibbons, 'The Global Cure? History, Therapy and the Celtic Tiger', in *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society, and the Global Economy,* ed. Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 89–109 (p. 105).

[121] Kearney, p. 15.

abuse scandals. The essays contained therein seek to flesh out 'the ways in which Irish literature and film have sought to represent and negotiate these challenges'.[122] These chapters by a range of contributors take the work of an individual artist as their subject (a so-called micro approach), but there are also two chapters that take a macro approach to the analysis, exploring the broader cultural and economic shifts outlined above. The book's title, *The Leaving of Ireland*, is freighted with two meanings: the first highlights the post-nationalist context, and the second interrelated definition concerns contemporary migration practices: 'The title of this collection […] refers to the idea of departure as both a physical movement and a temporal category that points to the quite different country that exists today in contrast to the Ireland of the twentieth century'.[123] The leaving of Ireland is not just migration to (and from) the country, but that migration in the context of a transformed Ireland. In this sense, the emphasis of this collection converges almost precisely with my own.

Of its fourteen essays, there are two on poetry, the most significant being 'The Importance of Elsewheres and Cities in Paul Muldoon's Poetry'. Ruben Moi picks up on the idea 'of always being in transit between several cultures, times and places, of always being betwixt and between' as 'the importance of being elsewhere'.[124] And it is these elsewheres in Muldoon's poetry that Moi explores. In a particularly clause-and hyphen-heavy sentence, Moi lays out his stall:

> The Hiberno–Anglo–American poet, playwright, children's writer, librettist, pop lyricist, translator of Gaelic, editor, Oxford Professor of Poetry 1999–2004, and present Princeton

[122] Katherina Doudou and John Lynch (eds.), 'Introduction', in *The Leaving of Ireland: Migration and Belonging in Irish Literature and Film* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 1–9 (p. 2).
[123] Ibid, p. 1.
[124] Ruben Moi, 'The Importance of Elsewheres and Cities in Paul Muldoon's Poetry', in *The Leaving of Ireland: Migration and Belonging in Irish Literature and Film,* ed. Katherina Doudou and John Lynch (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 241–253 (p. 242). Philip Larkin's 'The Importance of Elsewhere' is behind Moi's phrase here, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 2003), p. 105.

> Professor of Creative Writing and Poetry Editor of *The New Yorker* presents in his creative and critical idioms the imaginative elsewheres that challenge determination and social conditions.[125]

Potted resumé aside, Moi's short article offers careful readings of Muldoon's poetry from *New Weather* (1973) to *Maggot* (2010). It is Belfast – or the 'cities of Belfast', a phrase denoting the multiple literary imaginations of the city – that Moi explores in Muldoon.[126] Despite the latter's extended residence in the United States, Belfast continues to feature prominently in his poetry. After a brief tour of only a handful of Muldoon's oblique, direct, and allegorical evocations of Belfast, Moi concludes, 'The cities of Belfast range wide and far in Muldoon's poetry, but Belfast also blends with other cities in other places and in other times'.[127] This is an intriguing exploration of Belfast in Muldoon's work, and highlights how a migrant writer may engage with their place of origin from afar in an entirely un-exilic way, but it is ultimately marred by its brevity. This thesis then implicitly picks up the thread of *The Leaving of Ireland* – as well as other important studies, such as McDaid's *The Poetics of Migration in Contemporary Irish Poetry* – seeking to flesh out the criticism on this theme, but with a more precise focus on contemporary Irish poets in Britain.

**The Brexit Saga**

There are various factors that make contemporary Irish migration to Britain different from similar journeys to the other anglophone countries of the United States, Australia, or Canada. There is the old colonial relationship and its complex and troubled history, for example, between Britain and Ireland. But as the likes of Kearney has suggested – although history will not be forgotten – the

[125] Ibid, p. 244.
[126] Ibid, p. 245.
[127] Ibid, p. 251.

relationship with Britain has changed significantly. Britain is also geographically closer than North America, which makes frequent returns to Ireland easier. And for the Northern Irish there is a sense of greater political and economic integration with Britain than other destination countries like the US, at least pre-Brexit.[128] Brexit is also specific to the United Kingdom, and it has uniquely affected the relationship between Northern Ireland, the Republic, and Britain. This is an extra-literary context which may not necessarily feed into the poetry of O'Donoghue et al. in an explicitly identifiable way, but it is nonetheless significant.

McWilliams and Murray point to Brexit as a significant change in the 'global political context', and one that is worth addressing in 'any study on Irish migration'.[129] And since migrancy is my theme, we might then briefly consider the Brexit dimension, particularly in the context of post-nationalism. In 2016, Prime Minister David Cameron decided to offer a referendum to the UK electorate on European Union membership. (This was the second such referendum, after Harold Wilson's in 1975 which returned a strong 67 per cent majority for remain). Cameron, himself an avid Remainer, presented the vote in order to placate the increasingly vociferous Eurosceptic right-wing in his own party. He was also seeking to fend off the encroachment of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which had recently surged to victory in the European elections. Hitherto, Cameron's fervently European Liberal Democrat coalition partners had blocked any attempts to deliver a referendum.[130] But following his attainment of a slender majority in the 2015 General Election, Cameron decided to swiftly deliver on one of his many manifesto pledges: to offer a vote to the people on whether to stay or go. In the advisory plebiscite that followed on 23 June 2016, the UK voted narrowly to leave by 51.89% to 48.11%. This emphatic triumph for the forces of Brexit caused the Westminster

[128] It is ironic for fundamentalists in the DUP that a long-term consequence of Brexit may in fact be closer alignment with the Republic of Ireland for Northern Ireland, rather than Britain.
[129] Ellen McWilliams and Tony Murray, 'Irishness and the Culture of the Irish Abroad', p. 1.
[130] Indeed, it is arguable, given Cameron's own Remainer views, that he welcomed this.

Parliament to trigger Article 50, and thereby commence the lengthy extrication process.[131] The political ramifications of this act are significant. Simson Caird hyperbolically suggested that the withdrawal of the UK from the EU after over forty years of membership is 'one of the largest legislative projects ever undertaken in the UK'.[132] Following the triggering of Article 50, there were several years of political instability: many respected political and intellectual figures suffered a great loss of dignity with the intensity of their reaction to this issue.[133] There were denouncements from both sides, and much political wrangling, before the UK quietly exited on 31st January 2020. It is puzzling why such an issue was so exciting to so many people, when billions of people continue to live under dictatorship or other forms of repressive or backsliding regimes, must endure human rights abuses almost daily, or otherwise struggle to make ends meet.[134] The fervour of the Brexit debate on both sides exposed the utter self-obsession of many Europeans, who remain totally blind to the real issues of world politics.

There has since been a deluge of frantic scholarship on Brexit and its aftermath, the majority of which seems to adopt a fairly soft pro-EU stance. The general attitude is one of bemusement, particularly regarding the working-class vote. Why did many poorer communities vote to leave the EU, when these very constituents are some of the people who benefit most from EU investment?[135]

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[131] That is, after the legal challenge of Gina Miller, which forced Parliament to legislate and vote on the issue.

[132] Benjamin Martill and Uta Staiger (eds.), 'Introduction: Brexit and Beyond', in *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe* (London: UCL Press, 2018), pp. 1–18 (p. 1).

[133] The respected philosopher and extremist Remainer A.C. Grayling once referred to several prominent Brexiteers as 'vermin'. He confirmed this in his infamous interview with Andrew Neil on *This Week*.

[134] Freedom House currently categorises sixty-four countries and territories as 'unfree', including China. https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores Some other examples of more important issues than Brexit include, in no particular order: the ongoing struggle to end world poverty, the brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine, Covid, the plight of the North Koreans, the plight of the Uyghurs, the trampling of Hong Kong's political and personal freedoms by the increasingly expansionist Xi Xinping, the growing threat to Taiwan, the destruction and violence wreaked by Islamo-fascists in the middle east, the proxy war in Yemen, the migrant crisis, women's reproductive rights, and gay rights.

[135] As Timothy White suggests: 'It is the English regions where we find the highest levels of political disenchantment. It is these parts of the UK which have suffered disproportionately as a consequence of the demise of Britain, its empire, economy (specifically its industrial sector), and its political dominance'. Neal G. Jesse, Timothy G. McMahon, Mary C. Murphy, Gillian O'Brien, and Timothy White, 'Ireland and Brexit: A Roundtable', *New Hibernia Review*, 20:4 (2016), pp. 17–43 (p. 25).

This question has many answers, but perhaps the most compelling is to situate Brexit in the context of the financial crisis of 2008, and the economic austerity enacted by successive Tory-majority governments from 2010. As Mary Gilmartin, Patricia Burke Wood, and Cian O'Callaghan put it:

> For many commentators, states had played a central role in the intensity of the global financial crisis because of their lack of regulation of markets and capital in their support of neoliberal capitalism. Yet, rather than directly address this issue, politicians and political parties sought other explanations for the economic difficulties that their citizens were experiencing. In particular, the attention shifted to the role of migrants in many Western liberal democracies.[136]

There seems to be some veracity to this claim, as immigration was a central issue among many leave voters (a prejudice often stoked by UKIP).[137] Often entwined with this distrust of immigrants was an equivalent suspicion of metropolitan 'elites', meaning EU representatives and their allies, whom Nigel Farage and others constructed as being the enemy of 'normal working people'. Farage seized upon and amplified working class disaffection with the privileged in society whom they saw as benefitting from the current status quo. Additionally, the spectre of national sovereignty was often invoked within England, with disputes over whether the EU undermines the 'god-given' authority of nation states, or if it is in fact perfectly compatible with traditional notions of sovereignty.[138]

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[136] Mary Gilmartin, Patricia Burke Wood and Cian O'Callaghan, 'Conclusion', in *Borders, Mobility and Belonging* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2018), pp. 81–86 (p. 82).

[137] As White also suggests, 'Early research has demonstrated that concerns about immigration and the long-term decline in manufacturing and other sectors played an important role in deciding the referendum outcome'. Ibid.

[138] Of course, Kearney would argue that quibbling over sovereignty is exactly the problem: it's the wrong emphasis, a kind of fogeyish obsession with an outmoded concept. 'The nation-state has become too large and too small as a model of government. Too large for the growing needs of regional participatory democracy; too small for the increasing drift towards transnational exchange and power-sharing'. He argues for 'the necessity

But aside from these interminable ideological and identity-political arguments, what might Brexit mean for Ireland, and how does this impact on the post-nationalist trend that I have been discussing so far? Certainly, when it comes to Northern Ireland and Brexit, or even the island of Ireland and Brexit, an Anglocentric view of Brexit doesn't apply by definition. After all, Northern Ireland voted to remain by 55.8% to 44.2%.[139] This is likely related to Northern Irish voters wanting to protect the frictionless trade they have with the Republic, the hard-won peace of the Good Friday Agreement – the now invisible border between the two states is a visual reminder of this peace, with a hard border a thing of the past – and the investment of the EU in the region. Nicholas Wright reminds us, for example, that 'EU subsidies provided through the CAP [the EU's Common Agricultural Policy] currently represent 87% of income for Northern Irish farmers compared with 53% for the UK overall'.[140] Additionally, Northern Ireland's trade with the Republic of Ireland accounts for 33% of its total exports. This is annually worth 'around £2.7 billion'. 'The Republic is Northern Ireland's single largest export destination, worth around £800 million more in 2016 than its goods sales to the rest of the EU (not including the UK) combined'.[141] This trade is facilitated by the open border between the North and the South. The economic consequences of Brexit for Northern Ireland are still not yet fully understood. It is a testament to the dominance of Anglocentrism in the Leave campaign within

of separating the notion of *nation* (identity) from that of *state* (sovereignty)', 'Britain and Ireland', pp. 108 & 110.

[139] Breaking this figure down reveals another layer of complexity: 'Nationalists overwhelmingly supported "Remain", while Unionists were more reticent. One third of Unionists, it is estimated, voted "Remain". The vote, however, reflects nationalist support for the EU, and their preference to remain in the EU alongside the Republic of Ireland. For Unionists, the practical challenges associated with leaving the EU were apparent, but for a majority, loyalty to Britain trumped concerns about the impact of Brexit'. 'Ireland and Brexit: A Roundtable', p. 26. Additionally, in the Republic, enthusiasm for the EU remains reasonably high. A 2016 poll suggested that '58% of Irish respondents have a positive image of the EU, the highest satisfaction rate of any EU member state'. Ibid, p. 18. It's also worth mentioning Scotland here too, where the picture is less complicated: Scotland voted 62 per cent to remain, with not a single constituency returning a majority for leave.

[140] Nicholas Wright, 'Brexit and Ireland: Collateral Damage?', in *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe,* ed. Benjamin Martill and Uta Staiger (London: UCL Press, 2018), pp. 105–113 (p. 107).

[141] See: https://fullfact.org/europe/irish-border-trade-checks/

England that the complexities of the Northern Irish situation only came to light in the chaos after the referendum was returned.[142]

In part in response to the difficulties facing Northern Ireland, the idea of Irish reunification initially resurfaced after the referendum result, although it is unclear how much traction this idea has gained.[143] Additionally, the position of Irish citizens living in the UK – which includes the five poets in this thesis except McDonald, who already holds a British passport – has remained the same. The UK government and the EU reached an agreement in 2017 that 'EU and UK citizens resident in each territory at the date of withdrawal will be entitled to remain and apply for permanent residence if they do not already hold it'.[144] But it is credible that the terms of the Common Travel Area, which predates the inception of the EU as an entity, will remain in place after the UK's exit from the Common Market. Membership of the Common Market entails the free movement of people and goods between the member states, but this is not to be confused with the Schengen Agreement that both the UK and Ireland opted out of. The Common Travel Area already enabled the free movement of all citizens in the UK and Ireland between their various regions, in a similar way to the Schengen Agreement for its signatory countries.

But, like many aspects of the Brexit saga, there are still many questions to be answered. And most of these questions are decidedly *political* in nature, necessitating solutions via policy intervention. How we might think about Irishness post-Brexit is a more general *cultural* question. Since Brexit, there

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[142] By this I mean that, hitherto, those obsessed with framing Brexit as a purely English matter had ignored Northern Ireland. Northern Irish politicians and campaigners were no doubt well aware of the impact of a potential Brexit on the North, which probably explains why Northern Ireland voted to Remain.
[143] Writing in 2016, Mary C. Murphy suggested that: 'In Ireland, the suggestion that Brexit provides a strong rationale for Irish unification has been disputed by all but Sinn Fein. There is no strong and irrefutable appetite for Irish unity right now'. 'Ireland and Brexit: A Roundtable', p. 40.
[144] Mary Gilmartin, Patricia Burke Wood and Cian O'Callaghan, 'Belonging', in *Borders, Mobility and Belonging* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2018), pp. 57–80 (p. 68).

has been an upsurge in interest in Irish citizenship from UK residents, mostly from those seeking to preserve their EU membership rights (so-called 'strategic pragmatism'), but also from those proud of their Irish heritage.[145] Gilmartin et al. note that '[t]hose claiming citizenship via Irish ancestors are likely to be white and Catholic. Will this be reasserted as a more "authentic" Irishness?'[146] This is an interesting question, and points to how the politics of Brexit may influence notions of Irish identity. But perhaps this is premature, since 'belonging' for all Irish people continues to denote a process rather than a fixed position:

> [W]e must remember that Ireland and Irish identity are not singular or static identities. For example, the success of the 2015 same-sex marriage referendum, in the context of increased urbanisation and secularism, reflects a modernisation that is shifting what it means, in practice, to be Irish in Ireland. The globalisation of its trade since the 1990s, and the shift in migration, particularly newcomers to Dublin, have also introduced a new diversity and sense of cosmopolitanism, even as the 2004 referendum restricted the ability of non-ethnically Irish people to claim citizenship for their Irish-born children. Legally [...,] socially [and culturally] 'Irishness', like any national identity, remains in flux.[147]

This flux has perhaps only been emphasised by Brexit and its aftermath, rather than undermined by the perceived resurgence of narrow nationalisms. And, as Gilmartin et al. remark, this sense of mutability is 'most visible in the adaptations of those who acquire a new sense of belonging in a new place'.[148] This of course includes the migrant poets under examination here. Their sense of 'Irishness'

[145] Gilmartin et al. point out that there were 64,996 applications for Irish citizenship by descent in 2016, followed by 81,287 in 2017, whilst 'only 16,500 people were granted Irish citizenship by descent in the 50 years from 1936 to 1986'. Ibid, p. 66.
[146] Ibid, p. 68.
[147] Ibid, 69.
[148] Ibid, p. 60.

may be 'durable', but is at the same time 'never fully stable and secure'.[149] Ireland itself is still committed to Europe on a political level, and at the level of culture, it seems that the language of post-nationalism is still as relevant as ever. As David Wheatley himself put it to me in an exchange of emails:

> I feel myself newly sensitized to questions of transnationalism and the porousness of identities. One thing I can say pretty confidently is, in answer to the question "Do you feel yourself more Irish nationalist than before?" – no I certainly don't! Why should I have to come out as an Irish nationalist, just because England is having a political nervous breakdown.[150]

**Direct Commentary**

To begin this thesis, I will be including a chapter that considers the idea of the Irish migrant writer in Britain. How does migration to Britain specifically impact on the given writer's experience and aesthetic representation of migrancy? By way of answering this question, I will examine the migrant poetry of two notable forebears to O'Donoghue et al., John Hewitt (1907–1987) and Louis MacNeice (1907–1963). I also consider the various contributions by Irish migrant poets to the special issue of Wheatley and Justin Quinn's poetry periodical *Metre*, and the more recent issue of *Agenda*, published here in Britain. The chapters on O'Donoghue, McDonald, Wheatley, O'Reilly, and O'Callaghan will follow. MacNeice and Hewitt are Irish poets who lived for many years in England. Many of the social and political contexts that feed into the poetry of the contemporary group of writers are different from those of MacNeice and Hewitt's time. But I have selected these two poets

[149] Ibid.
[150] Personal correspondence from 22/07/2019, reproduced with permission. He asked that I stress that this was an off-the-cuff opinion, and that he doesn't walk around all the time screeching about Brexit.

to begin this thesis because they are major Irish writers whose experience of migrancy formed their art. In this sense, they are a useful precursor to the contemporary group of Irish writers in Britain.

There is significant criticism devoted to these two major poets; particularly of note is Peter McDonald's own study of MacNeice.[151] However, as I previously intimated, when it comes to direct commentary on O'Donoghue et al., there is very little. I have unearthed one article of academic criticism on Wheatley's poetry, and nothing on McDonald's, but with slightly more on the other three. Yet the most pertinent piece of criticism on Wheatley seems to be by Wheatley himself: an essay exploring the poetics of a group of Hull poets.[152] With McDonald, the interview with Fran Brearton has proven to be an effective starting point. The most thorough examination of O'Callaghan and O'Donoghue's poetry is to be found in Ailbhe McDaid's short chapter sections in her *Poetics of Migration* book. There are also two shorter articles on O'Donoghue, one being Michael Parker's review article of O'Donoghue's *Selected Poems*.[153] When it comes to O'Reilly, who is in some ways the most accomplished and arresting of the poets under consideration here, there are two essays in *Post-Ireland?*, including an article by Eric Falci.[154] I will integrate a more detailed review of this small pool of direct criticism on O'Donoghue et al. within each of the main chapters. That way, I am able to make the most of what little criticism there is, by engaging with the specificity of the arguments in question. Weaving this criticism into the weft of my own thus strengthens the overall structure.

[151] Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts* (Oxford: OUP, 2001).
[152] David Wheatley, '"Dafter than we can care to own": Some Poets of the North of England', in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, ed. Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 407–424.
[153] Michael Parker, 'Neither Home nor Away: Place and Displacement in Bernard O'Donoghue's Poetry', *Irish Studies Review*, 17:4 (2009), pp. 513–518**.**
[154] Eric Falci, 'Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Problem of the Subject', in *Post-Ireland? Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Jefferson Holdridge and Brian Ó Conchubhair (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2017), pp. 55–77.

I would like to end briefly by returning to first principles. Ultimately, the question that is at the foundation of this thesis is simple, although the argumentation surrounding it is complex: how do these five poets represent migrancy in their poetry? We are concerned, fundamentally, with developing an understanding of the representation of migrancy in the aesthetic work. Images of the archipelago, dislocation and diaspora, post-nationalism, stasis and mobility, and the idea of variable modes of identification versus fixed, place-bound ideas of identity – all inform my readings of the poetry. They will surface throughout this thesis. But especially with a rollcall as diverse as O'Donoghue et al., their poems are far too involute to be easily reduced to mere expressions of this critical terminology. This is why a formalist approach to the poems must remain front and centre, because this method – when applied effectively – can reveal all the shades of meaning that make up the individual poem. The challenge is, then, to adequately articulate the intricacy of the migrant poems, and with it, to provide answers to my founding question. In a sense, this is a problem of language, a case of doing justice to – of shedding light on – the poem via the other linguistic work of criticism.

## Chapter 2: 'The Importance of Elsewhere': Irish Poets in Britain

It may seem strange to begin a chapter on Irish diasporic poets with a discussion of a poem about a morose Englishman in Ireland. Yet Philip Larkin's 'The Importance of Elsewhere' is an instructive migrant poem, even if the perspective is reversed:[1]

> Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home,
> Strangeness made sense. The salt rebuff of speech,
> Insisting so on difference, made me welcome:
> Once that was recognised, we were in touch.
>
> Their draughty streets, end-on to hills, the faint
> Archaic smell of dockland, like a stable,
> The herring-hawker's cry, dwindling, went
> To prove me separate, not unworkable.
>
> Living in England has no such excuse:
> These are my customs and establishments
> It would be much more serious to refuse.

[1] For context, between '1950 and 1955' Larkin lived in Belfast, as he 'held the post of sub-librarian at Queen's University, Belfast'. This poem is generated by his experience there as an emigrant from England. John Goodby, '"The importance of Being Elsewhere", or "No Man is an Island": Self, Selves, and Social Consensus in the Poetry of Philip Larkin', *Critical Survey*, 1:2 (1989), pp. 131–138 (p. 132).

Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.[2]

The speaker of this poem is 'lonely in Ireland'. They find, paradoxically, a kind of comfort in their 'strangeness' in, and the 'strangeness' of, the place (even if it is not 'home'). It is the 'salt rebuff of speech' which insists on the speaker's difference that makes them feel 'welcome'. Ironically, the recognition of his Otherness is both succour for the speaker – who seems to relish their liberation from the obligations of culture – and a means to become 'in touch' with his hosts. There is a slight echo of a very recent O'Donoghue poem in this celebration of detachment. 'The Thaw' laments the recent 'thaw' in the relations between the speaker and their (presumably) romantic partner, and the speaker is desirous instead for the 'kind frost' to return in place of the current 'yielding slush'.[3] This 'kind frost' is what is being endorsed – albeit in non-romantic terms – in Larkin's poem: Ireland, with its 'draughty streets, end-on to hills', and 'the faint / Archaic smell of dockland', 'prove[s] me separate, but not unworkable'. The speaker is separate from, yet part of, this place. Separateness from the people and the ethnic practices gives legitimacy to the speaker's own wilful solitariness and non-participation.

The final stanza reveals that England – the speaker's home country – involves a set of discomfiting cultural obligations. For the speaker in England, it is 'more serious' to decline to perform than it is when they are abroad. Indeed, being abroad or 'elsewhere' becomes the preferable condition for the speaker for precisely this reason. The migrant condition is, therefore, affirmed in the poem's ultimate line. The speaker's awkward relationship with England is simplified or even resolved when they are 'elsewhere'. Ireland is the 'elsewhere' that 'underwrites' the speaker's 'existence'. But

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[2] Philip Larkin, 'The Importance of Elsewhere', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 2003), p. 105.

[3] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'The Thaw', in *The Seasons of Cullen Church* (London: Faber, 2016), p. 37.

England, too, is the 'elsewhere' to the migrant speaker in Ireland. The 'elsewhere' is thus ambiguous, but in any case, it is the fact of the existence of an 'elsewhere' to define himself in relation to that is enabling. The negative definition of England as a place where 'no elsewhere' underwrites the speaker's existence presents a counterargument to the prevailing discourse about migrancy being destabilising or displacing. Larkin's poem also undermines the idea of England as the static, stable, and natural home for the Englishman. Ireland – and particularly Ulster, a mere province in the obnoxious view in which England is the centre and all else the periphery – becomes much more of a 'home' than England.[4] Being elsewhere, then, can be as much validating as disorientating. A comforting and healthy detachment is legitimised for Larkin's diasporic speaker who never felt at ease within an English milieu.

Larkin's poem is, therefore, an exemplary poetic artefact of the 'importance' of migrancy for the writer. Migrancy is confirmed as a significant and generative process by this poem. But it also makes the case for the uniqueness of the migrant experience: migration has its own particular bearing on Larkin's poetic identity, as it does with any migrant writer. Indeed, when it comes to the specific category of the Irish poet in Britain, or even more specifically, the contemporary Irish poet in Britain, it is immediately apparent that there is no 'school' of such poets, nor is there a single poetics or aesthetic. The ways in which the theme of migration takes shape in the poetry of any given writer are various. A migrant poet may represent the migrant experience in many ways. Equally, the poet's formal approach is variable, that is, the way they write *about* migration may change. This variety, I maintain, is due to the individual poetic personality within and behind the poems. Although all five of the main poets in this thesis are contemporary white Irish poets in Britain, the truly engaging feature of their poetry is the individuality of their respective migrant aesthetics. Yet it is worth taking

[4] As Peter McDonald argues: 'It has always been easy to complain about the English habit of considering everywhere other than England provincial', in *Mistaken Identities* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), p. 193.

the time to consider the features of Irish diaspora poetry in general, before considering the specific idea of the Irish poet in Britain.

There has been a significant amount of sociological and historical research conducted on the Irish in Britain. Indeed, Ellen McWilliams's study makes reference to much of the research within this area, some of which I have discussed in the previous chapter.[5] I have also explored some of the critical discussion around terms such as 'exile', 'diaspora', and 'post-nationalism'. But while these terms should necessarily be foregrounded, ultimately, my founding question is an aesthetic one, concerned with understanding the ways in which migrancy emerges as a theme in contemporary Irish poetry written from Britain. In order to establish some of the common concerns of the Irish diasporic writer, I will explore the contributions of nine Irish emigrant writers to two special issues of poetry periodicals: the now-defunct *Metre*, titled, 'Irish Poetry and the Diaspora' (1997), and the 2021 issue of *Agenda* on Irish migrant poets. The former publication burgeoned under the stewardship of David Wheatley and Justin Quinn, both of whom are Irish diasporic poets (although Wheatley only left Ireland in 2002). *Metre* ran from 1995 to 2005. It was published and printed in Ireland, but from the outset, it had an international, or even an internationalist, focus. It published poems, reviews, and essays from America, Australia, Ireland, and Britain, among other places. It also printed poems in translation. The essays included in the issue on Irish poetry and the diaspora are particularly significant because they are explicit reflections, by such writers, on their condition. As such, they are highly instructive for the task of trying to understand how diasporic writers themselves think about migrancy. The 2021 issue of *Agenda* – which has run for many years in Britain – was published on the narrower subject of 'Irish Poets in the UK'. In both issues, the contributors are engaged with the idea of the experience of migrancy, and, importantly, how it feeds into their aesthetic production. In other words, these writers are concerned with what it means to

[5] Ellen McWilliams, *Women and Exile in Contemporary Irish Fiction* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2013).

be a diasporic writer. Patrick Warner, James Liddy, John Redmond, Maurice Riordan, Fergus Allen, Harry Clifton, and Sara Berkeley contributed to *Metre*. They are all emigrant writers who are contemporaries of the O'Donoghue group, and their essays are brief, but illuminating of the degree of difference between the way migrancy may be experienced for people of otherwise similar ages, and cultural and ethnic backgrounds.[6] Most of these writers are resident in North America, which is not my focus. But these are anglophone countries, and, in any case, given the relative lack of such examples of discussions by contemporary writers, they are very valuable. The *Agenda* issue contains far fewer contributions, although Peter McDonald and Bernard O'Donoghue submitted short essays on the subject of migrancy. It is a pity that Conor O'Callaghan, Caitríona O'Reilly, and David Wheatley haven't (as far I'm aware) written any essays on the same theme as the other contributors collected here.[7] However, the nine essays still offer a broad spectrum of opinion on the aesthetic dimension of migrancy. I will discuss the *Metre* essays first. Taken as a whole, these nine short pieces establish some differences as well as some common features of Irish diaspora poetry. All the essays attest to, in one way or another, the 'Importance of Elsewhere'.

Patrick Warner (b. 1963) is an emigrant to Canada, where he has lived for forty years. He asks the general question, 'So what can an Irish poet, writing in the so-called diaspora, expect?'.[8] Warner frames his answer in literary terms: one might have one's style as a poet dismissed for its conventional formalism, for example, which imparts the feeling that 'meaning might be little more than convention'. The stock forms and images of his originary literary culture that he once held to be sacrosanct, when viewed in the light of the new culture, are suddenly exposed as mere conventions. Consequently, the very culture that he has left behind might 'appear to have provided an inadequate education'. This is an expression of the problem of simultaneously finding a poetic voice whilst also

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[6] Liddy's essay was accidentally omitted from the issue in question, but appeared in the following issue.
[7] The introductory essay to the *Metre* issue was written by Quinn, not Wheatley. I will explore this particular essay in my chapter on Wheatley's poetry.
[8] Patrick Warner, 'Patrick Warner on Irish Poems Abroad', *Metre*, 3 (1997), p. 22.

having to reorient oneself within a new literary culture. And it is, in more general terms, an articulation of how migrancy can unmoor the migrant. The sureties of culture are brought into question by the migrant's exposure to another, with its own distinct and contrasting norms. This leads Warner to conclude, 'The diaspora, then, is a mental state. It is nothing, or nowhere, an in-between. It is as much suspicion as possibility'. He finally poses the intractable question, which is an expression of the disorientation that he previously described: 'How do you speak with any degree of confidence about the culture you still call home when its present incarnation is only an echo of what you remember?'.

Of course, Warner's question contains within it the assumption of emigrant status. It also assumes that the migrant writer will mostly draw inspiration from their originary country. James Liddy (1934–2008) – a long-time resident in the US – ponders a different, and in some ways more fundamental question: 'Should I declare myself an emigrant? Changes in Ireland have come so fast that I do not find them enchanting […] If the new emigration is not like the old exile, perhaps I appear in the twilight zone between them'.[9] This is, he suggests, a reformulation of the Joycean formula, 'have I ever left?', or some wisdom imparted by John Montague to Liddy himself: 'you grow old in the same city wherever you voyage, your hair whitens in the same street'. Warner and Liddy share a view about the continued significance of their originary place, and its importance as a source of material. Liddy finally inclines towards something akin to Warner's idea of 'possibility': 'One advantage of *abroad*, *overseas*, is to be able to play with the matter of Ireland'. The material of the past can be refashioned into 'unfamiliar patterns'. Warner's position diverges from Liddy in one essential way, however. If Liddy savours the possibility of creating fictions, Warner is much more concerned with the idea of 'fidelity'. And where Liddy highlights the importance of Irish subject matter in his writing, Warner also takes his subjects from his new country. But his writing always bears the stamp of its

[9] James Liddy, 'James Liddy on Irish Poetry and the Diaspora', *Metre*, 4 (1998), pp. 93–94 (p. 93).

origins: Warner asks how he can write with 'depth and comprehension' about his *current place*, when his stock of metaphors, ideas and images is drawn from the place 'you have been away from half your life'.[10] This notion of fidelity extends to evocations of Ireland as well, as his question about 'confidence' suggests.

John Redmond (b. 1967), however, is rather more pessimistic and is dismissive of even the idea of the migrant writer. Despite having lived in Britain for a number of years, he states: 'I don't have much faith in the notions of a "diaspora writer" or an "*émigré* poet"'.[11] Adopting the pose of the guardian of literariness, he proceeds to list a series of 'clichéd positions' within contemporary poetry that simply cannot be countenanced. The '*émigré's* poem' is one of these, although he does concede, belatedly: 'of course this isn't to say there is no value in writing poems along such lines. I am merely recording my weariness with the question and the usual answers to it.' Redmond then resolves to avoid in his own poetry 'the patterns' – whatever these are – of the *émigré* writer.[12] This is a curious position, given that he himself has gone on to produce what can be labelled *migrant poetry*. Redmond's rejection of this idea is rather cursory (indeed, his essay is one of the most brief), especially if we consider the more earnest meditations of Liddy and Warner.

Indeed, Maurice Riordan's essay is more insightful still, confirming the important notion that 'where one lives affects one's poetry', although he adds, magnanimously, 'but the degree varies with the writer'. For Riordan, an 'intense allegiance' to Ireland is not the defining characteristic of his poetry, although he does admit that he possesses a residual 'loyalty to, and a more intangible and cherished, attachment to [sic] the place where I grew up'. This place emerges in 'polarities' of space and time in

[10] Warner, p. 22.
[11] John Redmond, 'John Redmond on Writing and Going Abroad', *Metre*, 3 (1997), pp. 18–19 (p. 19).
[12] Ibid.

his poetry: 'here and there, then and now'. Riordan is, however, 'wary' of the idea of Irishness, or, rather, it is a vision of Irish identity that is singular that he resists. He favours an idea of identity that is instead 'open-ended' – whilst still being located within 'a coherent history, with trustworthy coordinates of geography and ancestry' – an 'Afro-Austral-Argo-Irishness maybe'.[13]

Fergus Allen (1921–2017) opens his essay with an intriguing question:

> To guard against sentimentality and self-serving intuitions, I'll respond to the question by first turning it on its head. Would my written work have been significantly different if, given the same parents, the first third of my life had been spent in England and the remainder in Ireland, instead of the other way round?[14]

In response to this question, Allen responds in the positive because it is the 'early imprinting' of Ireland – its 'society and townscapes and landscapes and weather' – that is formative in the writer. Like Warner, it is the 'deep memories' of this place from which the writer 'draws the images' for their work. His recent work (at the time of writing) draws more and more on the images of the past in Ireland. Additionally, the 'cadences' of the English language that he heard spoken in his youth in Ireland 'run' in his head as he writes. The cadences and images of his formative years are the most nourishing to his art, whereas the subject matter of the 'English' seems to lack the requisite animation, unless it is 'perfused with stuff that gushes up from earlier strata', meaning precisely

[13] Maurice Riordan, 'Maurice Riordan on Writing and Living Abroad', *Metre*, 3 (1997) pp. 19–20 (p. 20).
[14] Fergus Allen, 'Fergus Allen on Irish and English Origin', *Metre*, 3 (1997), p. 8.

those images from Ireland. Allen still inhabits an Irish world, similar to Liddy, and stakes a firm claim to be an (un-hyphenated) 'Irish writer'.[15]

Harry Clifton (b. 1952) has travelled widely, to Paris, the American Midwest, and Nigeria, among other places. He has begun to recognise the universality of the human experience in all these places, to the extent that 'local reference' all but disappears from his thinking. There are two lines from Kavanagh that resonate with Clifton: 'I turn away to where the Self reposes, / The placeless heaven under all our noses'.[16] He also cites one of his own poems about the Swiss sculptor Giacometti, which describes his wandering through the streets of Paris: 'Humanity dissolving into shapes / At the ends of avenues, at the ends of rhymes.' As these two quotations suggest, '[p]lacelessness' is the ideal for Clifton: the experience of many places evokes in him the desire to transcend place altogether. Clifton also plays up to the trope that migrancy can be a means to self-discovery. The leaving of Ireland was necessary, he felt, for emotional growth: 'to remain faithful to one's own self, however small, it seemed better to be away'. Ireland is finally about 'complexity', whereas elsewhere is about finding an 'ideal distance'.[17] For Clifton, migrancy is an experience that is developmental and broadening – of the mind, of the self, and its expression in art.

The poets discussed hitherto are based in Canada, the US, and Britain, which are places with their own histories of migration. Taken as a whole, the essays reveal a plethora of attitudes. I have discussed these six male writers to illustrate how the experience of migrancy can vary, as Riordan suggests, 'with the writer'. Sara Berkeley's contribution gives us the perspective of an Irish emigrant woman (although again, this is to the US). Berkeley provides a subtle meditation on the very idea of

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[15] Ibid.
[16] This is from Kavanagh's 'Auditors In', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 179–183 (p. 182).
[17] Harry Clifton, 'Harry Clifton on Ireland and Travelling', *Metre*, 3 (1997), pp. 11–12 (p. 12).

'Irishness' for her. Being in California gives her time to 'learn slowly what being Irish meant to me'. And then, her return to Ireland for a funeral one year suddenly awakened in her the desire 'to talk about my city [Dublin] with authority and love'. 'Dublin', she adds, 'is always the first city to me':

> I sometimes fight the urge to write yet another emigrant poem or story, and yet, that is my world. That's what I'm given, as powerful and potent a subject as I could wish for. Why fight it? There's always something new to say. No one else ever left Dublin in 1989 and wound up living two miles north of the tiny village of Inverness, forty miles up the coast from San Francisco.[18]

Berkeley clearly feels like an emigrant, and it is an aesthetically productive experience for her. She highlights also how – despite the fact that migrancy takes place in broader social, cultural and historical contexts – it is always unique to the individual. And, accordingly, her aesthetic representations of that specific experience are also unique. The need to 'keep learning about my Irishness' is a central motivation in her own writing, as it hovers between her life in the 'New World', and 'gently probing how it feels to have the left the old, with no plan to return'.

Berkeley's profession that only by being abroad is she able to ponder her Irishness is Joycean in origin:

> James Joyce had his Stephen Dedalus write that the shortest way to Tara, the epicentre of ancient Gaelic Ireland, was through Holyhead, the port of disembarkation for Irish

[18] Sara Berkeley, 'Sara Berkeley on Irishness', *Metre*, 3 (1997), p. 9.

> immigrants to Britain. This was more than just a characteristic witticism about the difficulty of reviving cultural traditions; it was a recognition that Irish people discover themselves to be such only on the streets of some foreign country. Before emigrating, a person might be known as a Kerry woman or a Wicklow man. In the precincts of London or Boston, however, such persons learn what it means to be Irish, for nobody ever knows what his country is like until he has been out of it, experiencing the life of another for the purpose of contrast and comparison.[19]

Joyce spent years living and working abroad, and famously declared that he wrote his masterwork, *Ulysses* (1922), in 'Paris-Zurich-Trieste'. For Joyce, emigration was formative, providing the means to reflect on his own identity and the country where he was born. We can see with these seven contributions, as well as with Joyce, how the idea of the migrant writer is, ultimately, open to interpretation. Migrancy is both experienced and registered in the aesthetic work in different ways for these writers. As my discussion of the different group of O'Donoghue et al. will show – whilst there are certain aesthetic and attitudinal commonalities between them – the representation of the migrant experience is very much unique, we might say personal, to each poetic personality. The experience of migrancy is not a static phenomenon, but more of a process – at least in aesthetic terms – of continual (re-)formulation.

I would now like to address the much more recent special double-issue of *Agenda* published on the topic of 'Irish Poets in the UK' in 2021. It follows a similar pattern to the much earlier *Metre* issue. The latter is the more comprehensive publication when considering the aesthetic dimension of

[19] McWilliams, p. 211. This was originally published in an article on Irish migration, co-authored by Michael D. Higgins (then Minister for Arts) and Declan Kiberd, in 'Culture and Exile: The Global Irish', *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 1:3 (1997), 9–22 (p. 9). There is also an echo here of Rudyard Kipling's question, 'And what should they know of England who only England know?', from 'The English Flag'.

migrancy, but the *Agenda* issue is still significant. Patricia McCarthy is its editor, and she is a 'half-Irish', England-born poet 'in the UK', who spent her early life in Ireland. In her introduction, she admits that she feels 'more Irish than English'. Her early poetry tended to be published and situated in Ireland, although, given her long residence in rural England, 'my poems have [now] been adopted here'.[20] However, rural Irish subject matter is evidently important to McCarthy. She reprints an elegy of hers that recently appeared in the *Irish Times.* It has a rather conventional opening clause: 'Along the rush-lined boreens of Brackloon / I see you still'.[21] In her opening essay, McCarthy also acknowledges the problematic nature of her chosen title for the *Agenda* issue: it 'threw up quite a few complexities'.[22] The confusion precipitated by the acronym 'UK' in 'Irish Poets in the UK' is evident in the different groupings of Irish migrant poets that McCarthy delineates. There are:

> Irish poets brought up in Ireland but who came to reside in the UK, poets brought up here [in Britain] but whose parents were migrants of one sort or another. And then, of course, there is the great band of Northern Irish poets who are differently Irish in the UK, since Northern Ireland remains part of the UK.[23]

Peter McDonald (b. 1962) was born in Northern Ireland but has lived most of his adult life in mainland Britain. If we follow McCarthy's argument, the emigrant McDonald and others who have never left Ulster are 'Irish poets in the UK' in similar terms. This is obviously problematic, because it overlooks the significant fact of migration from Ulster to England, which is puzzling for a special issue dedicated to Irish migrant poets. The phrase 'Irish poets in *Britain*' that I have decided on here is more precise, since it allows for a distinction to be made between the important experience of

[20] Patricia McCarthy (ed.), 'Introduction', *Agenda,* 54:3–4 (2021), pp. 6–11 (p. 7).
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid, p. 6.
[23] Ibid.

migrancy for poets such as McDonald, and the experience of other Northern Irish poets who have remained in Ulster.

McDonald and Bernard O'Donoghue (b. 1945) each contributed a short essay to the *Agenda* issue on the subject of migrancy. The theme of their essays broadly overlaps with the earlier contributions to *Metre*. After revisiting his rejection of identity politics in *Mistaken Identities* (2002), McDonald explores his idea of Irishness. Significantly, he deploys the more precise formulation when he considers his position as a migrant: 'Am I "Irish" (which, if I want to be described as an *Irish poet in Britain*, I would have to be)?'[24] He explains the development over time of his sense of Irishness, which has been clearly affected by his long residence in England: 'I grew up thinking of myself as Northern Irish, Unionist, British, (and Protestant), not as Irish, nationalist (and Catholic)'. But now, he admits that as he nears the age of sixty, 'I feel more definitely Irish than I ever did when living in Belfast all those years ago, in that lost and frightened time'.[25] It is his exposure to England, and especially Oxford, that has contributed to this: 'to the English, I'm as Irish as makes no odds'. And at Christ Church, where he has worked for over twenty years, he has received 'anti-Irish remarks from people in positions of authority'.[26] When it comes to his poetry, McDonald suggests that his 'voice' is very specifically 'from Belfast – east Belfast […] This is how I hear the rhythm of a line, the pitch of its diction, the timing and direction of its syntax: it won't change'.[27] This is akin to Fergus Allen's argument in his *Metre* essay, where he describes how the 'cadences' of the English he heard spoken in his youth also 'run' in his head as he writes. Both Allen and McDonald speak of the formative influence of language itself on their poetry, with its regional inflections and rhythms. This is unsurprising, because poetry is a linguistic medium in which the 'voice' of the poem is founded on

[24] Peter McDonald, 'Abroad Thoughts, From Home', *Agenda*, 54:3–4 (2021), pp. 18–23 (p.19). My italics.
[25] Ibid p. 20.
[26] Ibid p. 19.
[27] Ibid, p. 21.

the author's own. As my chapter will show, Belfast isn't simply the place where McDonald's poetic voice is located, but his relationship with the city is the most significant aspect of his migrant poetry.

O'Donoghue's essay largely restates the positions he has espoused in previous interviews (O'Donoghue is often more forthcoming than McDonald). He opens with a typically modest disavowal of the idea of the Irish 'poet' in the UK: it 'seems an unduly grand definition for me'. He opts for the simpler 'Irish person in the UK', a status he attained 'in 1962', following his father's premature death.[28] He describes his contented upbringing in Cullen before his bereavement, his subsequent schooling in Manchester, and his career at Oxford. His poetry is mostly about 'County Cork, present and, more commonly, past': his 'real life in the modern world stood at a distance both from Ireland and from the Middle Ages [the era of O'Donoghue's academic specialism] – a distance which I think may be salutary in operating between two polarities'. We can see with O'Donoghue that the notion of 'polarities' is shared (perhaps unconsciously) with Riordan. His distance from his home country in terms of both time and space is creatively enabling: his distance from Ireland prompts him to imaginatively reinhabit the place of his childhood. This is summarised as 'The "here nor there" principle', which 'still applies'.[29] This phrase is the title of O'Donoghue's 1999 collection and was derived from one of his more well-known poems, 'Westering Home'. Its final line is, 'Neither here nor there, and therefore home'.[30] That O'Donoghue still deploys the term some twenty years later is telling. The principle of 'here nor there' is multifaceted. In O'Donoghue's description, it concerns the opposition between Ireland and Britain: he maintains a psychological and geographical distance between his Irish subject matter and his current habitation in England. O'Donoghue's material – and thus where his poetic identity is located – is drawn from Ireland. But as my chapter will demonstrate, the 'here nor there' expression can also be interpreted differently, since the

[28] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'An Irish Poet in the UK', *Agenda,* 54:3–4 (2021), pp. 23–29 (p. 23).
[29] Ibid, p. 27.
[30] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Westering Home', in *Here Nor There* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), p. 51.

speaker is acknowledging that his definition 'home' is essentially a migrant one: it is generated by *both* Britain and Ireland, thus transcending the polarity.

It is significant that despite the twenty-four-year gap between the *Metre* and *Agenda* issues – and the diversity of the responses contained therein – there is some continuity: wherever they end up, the relationship with the writer's place of origin, as well as their new place, is important, along with the idea of identity (or Irishness) and what this is and what it means to the individual writer. Indeed, as the Joycean witticism suggests, it is migration itself that prompts these concerns, due to the linguistic, literary, and cultural reorientation that migration abroad demands. With the exception of Redmond – who rejects the very idea of the '*émigré* writer' – the migrant experience is significant, and it is clearly aesthetically productive. Place and identity, then, emerge as key ideas for this contemporary group.[31] And we are able to understand the important precedence of such ideas via the example of Joyce. The same concerns with place and identity are also present in Larkin's 'The Importance of Elsewhere', which seems to confirm the universality of these preoccupations for the migrant writer. These essential features remain a constant, although the particular aesthetic dimension of these preoccupations is unique to each poet.

But how might these preoccupations find expression in the poetry of some writers who came before the present contemporary group? This is a question worth asking because, by exploring some of the prior poetic responses to migration to Britain specifically, we might begin to get a sense of the particular resonances and impulses generated by Britain for the Irish poet. Having considered some contemporary writers abroad, as well as Joyce – as a means to establishing some general

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[31] And by 'identity', I mean in terms of a distinct 'literary identity' that emerges from the poetry: identity as 'the sheer individuality of experience, its unrepeatable particularity'. Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), pp. 30 & 7.

preoccupations of diasporic poetry – we are now narrowing our focus to the history of Irish writers in Britain. In discussing the poetry of Louis MacNeice and John Hewitt, we might begin to answer the corollary question: can it even be argued that there is a diasporic aesthetic that emerges from Irish migration to Britain specifically?

A great many Irish writers – both pre- and post-partition, Protestant, Catholic, and Presbyterian, Ulsterman, Republican, Anglo-Irish aristocrat and rural farmer alike – have made the short journey across the Irish Sea to Britain.[32] W.B. Yeats, it is sometimes forgotten, lived for most of his adult life in London.[33] His background was Protestant and Anglo-Irish, and it is from this cultural background that Yeats emerged as one of the central figures of the Revival. Or as Edward Said puts it, Yeats was a 'poet *of* decolonization'.[34] It is, however, difficult to think of Yeats as a migrant writer, in the sense that the personal experience of migration is not a defining feature of his poetry.[35] For the Ulsterman Louis MacNeice, born in Belfast in 1907, migrancy is clearly a more urgent subject. MacNeice maintained a troubled relationship with the region of his birth, a fact compounded by his extended residence in England. MacNeice was born in Belfast, but his family relocated to Carrickfergus (also in

[32] When it comes to migration patterns, Mary J. Hickman suggests that from '1949–89 800,000 people left Ireland', and that although America was the main destination for Irish emigrants, 'After 1920 […] 80 per cent settled in Britain'. Mary J. Hickman, 'Migration and Diaspora', in the *Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, ed. Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 117–137 (p. 117).

[33] From 1867–1881, during which Yeats attended the Godolphin School, the Yeats family lived in London. And from 1887 Yeats returned to London, where he founded The Rhymers' Club (a loose poetry collective) in 1890. He maintained a permanent home in England for much of his adult life. Yeats did retain a strong imaginative link with Ireland, particularly Sligo. He founded the Abbey Theatre in 1899, and from 1919, Yeats spent ten summers at the Norman tower he purchased, Thoor Ballylee, which became an important symbol in his later poetry. He also served two terms as an Irish Senator.

[34] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage: London, 1994), p. 278. My italics.

[35] It is possible to consider the influence of England and Ireland on this vision in a different way, however. Seamus Deane has argued (controversially) that Yeats imported the idea of 'Merrie England' into an Irish context, and that this was a colonial act: Yeats deployed his 'Romantic conception of […] Englishness […] to give an edge to his own concept of an Irishness that had always been opposed to the empirical tradition'. But by importing this Romantic ethic into Ireland, Yeats is ultimately guilty of a colonial act, since 'Merry England' merely becomes 'Merry Hibernia' or 'Merry Ireland' in the Irish context: 'When transferred to Ireland, such a search for a national signature becomes colonial, on account of the different histories between the two islands [of England and Ireland]'. Seamus Deane, 'Yeats and the Idea of Revolution', in *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature* (London: Faber, 1985), pp. 38–51 (p. 39).

Ulster) in 1909. MacNeice's father was a Church of Ireland pastor, and had taken up a new position in the town. MacNeice lived there until 1917, when he was then sent to England to attend Sherborne Prep School in Dorset, before going on to Marlborough School in 1921. Then he progressed to Oxford in 1926, where he studied Greats. Following graduation, he lectured in Classics at Birmingham University, then Bedford College, London, and from 1941–1961, worked as a 'Features producer' for the BBC.[36] So MacNeice spent much of his life in Britain.

Britain gave MacNeice the perspective to reflect on Ulster, and he often did so with exasperation. MacNeice was born pre-Partition, and his father, despite his Protestantism and English cultural links, was a nationalist and home-ruler. MacNeice was just a young teenager when the North took the opportunity to politically detach from the main body of the newly-independent Ireland. Considering all these complexities of culture, politics, and identity, it is unsurprising that much of MacNeice's poetry is generated from an unresolved feeling of indeterminacy. As Tom Paulin, another Irish poet abroad in Britain, argues:

> MacNeice is always crossing the water, and the feeling of unease and displacement, of moving between different cultures and nationalisms, which he paradoxically returns to in his poetry, means that his imagination is essentially fluid, maritime and elusively free.[37]

[36] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland 1968–2008* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), p. 37.
[37] Ibid, p. 38. First published by Tom Paulin in *Ireland and the English Crisis* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1984), pp. 75–76.

The term ‘maritime’ is ill-defined here, although Paulin may be gesturing towards the archipelagic aspect of MacNeice’s poetry that has been recently explored by such critics as John Brannigan.[38] It is ‘unease and displacement’, however, that are the more dominant features of his migrant poetry. I would like to examine some of the poems of MacNeice’s that explore this tension.

There are two key long poems by MacNeice that reflect on his relationship with the region of his birth, and these are ‘Valediction’ (published in 1934) and *Autumn Journal* (published in 1939). Their approach is often direct, and so they serve as a useful point of departure for this discussion of MacNeice. Formally, ‘Valediction’ is one long stanza, composed in a slack iambic pentameter. Its title means the act of bidding farewell, which is exactly what the speaker professes to be doing in the poem: saying goodbye to Ulster from Britain. Yet the poem ultimately steers away from such a final departure, revealing a deeper and more interesting ambivalence. The poem begins by acknowledging the parentage of Belfast, difficult though this is to admit:

> See Belfast, devout and profane and hard,
>
> Built on reclaimed mud, hammers playing in the shipyard […]
>
> This was my mother-city, these my paps […]
>
> I can say Ireland is hooey, Ireland is
>
> A gallery of fake tapestries,
>
> But I cannot deny my past to which myself is wed,

[38] See John Brannigan, ‘“Felt Routes”: Louis MacNeice and the North-East Atlantic Archipelago’, in *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, ed. Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom & Jos Smith (Oxford: OUP, 2017), pp. 94–110. I will return to this aspect of MacNeice’s poetry in my chapter on O’Reilly.

> The woven figure cannot undo its thread.[39]

The metaphor here of the 'woven figure' is a continuation of the tapestry idea of the penultimate line. It also invokes the history of the linen industry in the region: the speaker is inextricably entwined with the very history and culture of their originary place. As Heaney elsewhere puts it, these lines conjure the sense of 'me in place [sic] and the place in me'.[40] Yet, as is characteristic of MacNeice's poems of renunciation, such statements of belonging are then almost immediately contradicted:

> I will exorcise my blood
>
> And not to have my baby-clothes my shroud
>
> I will acquire an attitude not yours
>
> And become as one of your holiday visitors,
>
> And however often I may come
>
> Farewell, my country, and in perpetuum.[41]

Despite acknowledging in the previous passage that Belfast is an inextricable part of himself, now the speaker desires to purge Ireland from his identity. Again, the notion of genetic parentage is invoked, but this time to signal conscious estrangement. The line, 'And not to have my baby-clothes my shroud', gestures to the intellectually and artistically stifling 'attitude' of Belfast. As the speaker later suggests: 'no abiding content can grow out of these minds / Fuddled with blood, always caught

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[39] Louis MacNeice, 'Valediction', in *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber, 1987), pp. 52–55 (p. 52).
[40] Seamus Heaney, 'A Herbal', in *Human Chain* (London: Faber, 2010), pp. 33–44 (p. 43).
[41] 'Valediction', p. 53.

by blinds'.[42] And the message is clear: 'Farewell, my country, and in perpetuum'. Yet, again, despite the speaker resolving to 'go east [to England] and stay, not looking back', this is contradicted: 'But being ordinary too I must in course discuss / What we mean to Ireland or Ireland to us'.[43]

This last sentiment is borne out in the later long poem, *Autumn Journal*, which addresses exactly this question. The poem itself comprises twenty-four entries, each a lengthy poem quite structurally similar to 'Valediction'. MacNeice himself provides a useful introduction to the poem, describing it as 'honest', though eschewing scientific objectivity (which would have necessitated revisions), and as 'half-way between the lyric and the didactic poem'.[44] Section XVI deals with Ireland from the perspective of Britain, and is the apotheosis of MacNeice's up-front treatment of the migrancy theme. The impassioned articulate rant or diatribe, as opposed to elusive obliquity, is a general strategy of MacNeice's:

> Kathaleen ni Houlihan! […]
>
> we love her forever and hate our neighbour
>
> And each one in his will
>
> Binds his heirs to continuance of hatred […]
>
> Such was my country and I thought I was well
>
> Out of it, educated and domiciled in England,
>
> Though yet her name keeps ringing like a bell

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid, p. 54.
[44] 'Autumn Journal', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 101–157 (p. 101).

In an under-water belfry.[45]

The speaker dissects what he sees as Ulster's mindless sectarianism: the directness of his address contributes hugely to the success of these lines, since it provides clarity where obfuscation usually reigns. The speaker offers no respect to the divided politics of the region, and his contempt highlights perfectly the banality and superficiality of the divisions. And the diatribe continues, addressing Belfast and Northern Ireland as a whole:

A city built upon mud;

A culture built upon profit;

Free speech nipped in the bud,

The minority always guilty.

Why should I want to go back

To you, Ireland, my Ireland?[46]

Again, the pattern of contradiction emerges, as in 'Valediction': there is a statement of disavowal of his region of birth, either followed or preceded by a profession of belonging. Or if not belonging, then at least a sense of duty in some way to the region. In the same few lines, Ulster is described as mindless and unlettered, and gladly left behind, yet its name 'keeps ringing like a bell'. And then in the next quoted passage here, the question is asked: 'Why should I want to go back / To you,

[45] Ibid, p. 132.
[46] Ibid, p. 133.

Ireland, my Ireland?'. This rhetorical question isn't an obvious renunciation of Ireland either. It appears to be a simple rejection of Ireland, but the expression 'my Ireland' betrays the speaker's enduring loyalty to their country of birth. The fact that it is framed as an interrogative is also indicative of the speaker's ambivalence towards Ireland: the relationship is unresolved and open-ended. This section of *Autumn Journal* as a whole also embodies MacNeice's ambivalence towards Ireland: Ulster is a major subject and preoccupation of its speaker, despite their claim to have forsworn the place.

Though MacNeice often criticises Ireland from Britain, and professes himself to be 'well out of it', he is apt to voice an equivalent distaste for England. In section XVIII of *Autumn Journal*, he describes England specifically as 'a dwindling annexe to the factory, / Squalid as an afterbirth'.[47] This is a hateful depiction, and somewhat contradicts the implied contrast between grotesque Ulster and the England in which he is 'educated and domiciled'. The attack on England intensifies in a wonderfully luminous few lines. England is 'tight and narrow' (in attitude, perhaps?), a place of neglected orphans, 'teeming with unwanted children', all of them 'alone.' England is presented as a place of 'spiritual sloth', which seems a fairly typical modernist complaint: 'the church bells brag above the empty churches'. England is a thoroughly 'grimy' place, stewarded by a hoard of 'hack politician[s]'.[48]

MacNeice also attacks obstinate nationalism: 'the Union Jack / Thumps the wind above the law courts and the barracks'.[49] The 'law courts' and 'the barracks' embody the ideological and repressive state apparatus: they act to extend and defend the influence of 'the Union Jack', itself a symbol of nationalist ideology. There is something in the adjective 'thumps' here, in its bluntness or

[47] Ibid, p. 137.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.

imprecision, which implies mindlessness. This is reminiscent of the criticism in ‘Valediction’ of the violent defences of the different versions of ‘Kathleen ni Houlihan’ in the Irish context (‘we love her forever and hate our neighbour’). In both cases, nationalism is presented as essentially illiberal and unintelligent. This is an intriguingly modern distaste for nationalism, which may well emerge from MacNeice’s acquaintance with the less pleasant aspects of Ulster’s divided politics, and his situation betwixt two different nationalisms as a migrant. What emerges from both ‘Valediction’ and *Autumn Journal*, then, is that ‘unease and displacement’ which characterises MacNeice’s migrant poetics. Ireland, Ulster or Belfast is often assailed and set against England, but then England is depicted as equally flawed.

John Hewitt (b. 1907) was a direct contemporary of MacNeice but outlived him by 24 years. Hewitt was also like MacNeice a writer born in the north of Ireland before Partition. He spent considerable periods of his life in England. For Hewitt, though, the move happened later. It was not until 1957 that Hewitt moved to Coventry to take up a post as Director of the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. Hewitt was to remain in Coventry for the next 25 years until his retirement in 1972, when he returned permanently to Northern Ireland. Hewitt found the experience in Britain creatively enabling: Coventry was ‘cosmopolitan’, in marked contrast to the ingrown ‘parochialism’ of Ireland.[50] Coventry certainly chimed with Hewitt’s socialist ideals, as he saw it as a place of progressiveness and inclusivity. It is immediately clear that the personality of Hewitt’s migrant poems is more genial towards his new city and Ulster than MacNeice is in poems such as *Autumn Journal*. But like with MacNeice, the home place and the new place, and the relationship between them, is considered along with questions of identity. Many of Hewitt’s migrant poems bear titles that explicitly allude to his own identity as an Ulsterman, or Irishman, for example, thus confirming the Joycean adage that migrancy abroad intensifies one’s consideration of these ideas. Where

[50] Kennedy-Andrews, p. 30.

MacNeice's migrant poetics could be described as essentially ambivalent – with his placeless speakers professing a kind of love-hate relationship with Ireland, and a general distaste for Britain – Hewitt in Britain is open to the possibilities of exposure to the different cultural and political currents of Coventry especially. The attitude that emerges from their poetry is thus fundamentally different, even if – as ever – the preoccupations of place and identity are inherent to their respective migrant aesthetics.

The idea of Hewitt's regionalism is problematic, and it has been the focus of much of the analysis of his poetry.[51] As Peter McDonald has convincingly argued, the contrasting theme of Hewitt's poetry – that of 'placing and displacement' – ultimately won out over the tropes of 'stability [and] rootedness', for example.[52] But in any case, my focus here is on his migrant poems, rather than the often discussed regionalist poetics. When it comes to migrancy, there are a number of significant poems of Hewitt's written from Britain which take Ulster as their subject (these poems were all composed and published after Hewitt's relocation to Britain in 1957). How do these poems that were written from Britain feed into Hewitt's particular migrant aesthetic? 'Exile', 'A Belfastman Abroad Argues with Himself', and 'An Ulsterman in England Remembers' are poems of an exilic or displaced perspective. The distance afforded by residency abroad in Britain stirs bittersweet remembrances: a familiar sense of longing for the place left behind is apparent, commingled with frustration with the schismatic elements of Ulster's public and political life. 'Exile' is self-explanatory: having outlined how he does not wish to 'shuffle through the rubble of my dreams' (literal and figurative rubble in this case), the speaker asks: 'how can I return to that city / from my exile among strangers?'.[53] 'A Belfastman Abroad' is equivalently exilic, setting up a dialogue between the

[51] Kennedy-Andrews provides a good example of this kind of criticism: 'In place of exclusive nationalism, he [Hewitt] proposes an inclusive regionalism. The driving force of Hewitt's thinking was a practical desire to side-step the age-old problems of religious and sectarian conflict, and to re-direct the question of belonging away from the abstract idea of nation and towards the concept of an inherently pluralist region', pp. 22–23.
[52] Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), pp. 21 & 24.
[53] John Hewitt, 'Exile', in *Collected Poems 1932–1967* (London: McKibbon & Lee, 1968), pp. 141–142.

speaker, who has fled the bounds of their ruined city, and their conscience, which is berating them for having departed. 'Admit the fact', it demands, 'you might have stood your ground / and kept one corner clear for decency'.[54] But only now, 'from safe distance', the speaker 'assert[s]' their 'right / to public rage'.[55] And the charge of hypocrisy is added to the charge of cowardice, since the speaker has also kept company with the culpable: 'I knew its crooked masters well by sight'.[56]

Similarly, like many of the poems written from Britain, 'An Ulsterman Abroad Remembers' does not deal directly with British subject matter, but keeps its gaze firmly on Ireland. With 'An Ulsterman Abroad', it is again the separation of the speaker from their native place ('Here at a distance', it begins) that sparks a long description of various images of sectarian violence.[57] And the history of violence in the region macabrely prefigures violence throughout Europe in the early twentieth century. Having once alarmingly encountered a paramilitary soldier on a Belfast street with a concealed rifle, the speaker concludes:

> At Auschwitz, Dallas, I felt no surprise
>
> when violence, across the world's wide screen,
>
> declared the age imperilled: I had seen
>
> the future in that frightened gunman's eyes.[58]

[54] 'A Belfastman Abroad Argues With Himself', in *Collected Poems*, p. 142
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] 'An Ulsterman Abroad Remembers', p. 133.
[58] Ibid.

This last poem has a more developed argument that the first two, particularly in the way it exhibits an intellectual's international gaze, situating the history of sectarian violence in Ulster in the context of a wider world in constant ideological and economic competition.[59] Yet these three poems are still essentially variations on the exile theme, which is their limitation.

Other poems of Hewitt's written in Britain move beyond the exilic tendency displayed in the poems discussed hitherto. 'An Irishman in Coventry' develops a more complex vision. Coventry is engaged with and absorbed into the speaker's vision of their home place. The poem is comprised of two stanzas: the first deals with Coventry, the second develops from the speaker's experiences of Coventry to reflect on the region of Ulster. The poem begins:

> A full year since, I took this eager city,
>
> the tolerance that laced its blatant roar,
>
> its famous steeples and its web of girders,
>
> as image of the state hope argued for,
>
> and scarcely flung a bitter thought behind me
>
> on all that flaws the glory and the grace
>
> which ribbons through the sick, guilt-clotted legend
>
> of my creed-haunted, godforsaken race.
>
> My rhetoric swung round from steel's high promise

[59] This must be an allusion to the earlier history of violence in the region with the War of Independence, Civil War, Partition, and its aftermath.

> to the precision of the well-gauged tool,
>
> tracing the logic of the vast glass headlands,
>
> the clockwork horse, the comprehensive school.[60]

Coventry is presented as an 'eager city', a place of 'tolerance', the 'image of the state hope argued for'. During his initial year in this city, the speaker embraced its tolerant and forward-thinking atmosphere, its 'high promise', and scarcely 'flung a bitter thought' towards Ulster, the place of the speaker's 'creed-haunted, godforsaken race'. This first stanza lauds Coventry, the progressive Labour-led city rebuilding after the devastation of the second world war, in a utopian rhetoric. The speaker especially enjoys the practical applications of old-Labour socialism, such as Coventry's co-educational non-denominational comprehensive schools (a certified means of bridging divides), and its enthusiasm for cutting-edge methods of building construction (the 'well-gauged tool' and 'vast glass headlands').

But then the second stanza finds the speaker glancing inevitably back across the Irish Sea to Ireland. The tone of the poem then shifts, as Ulster 'stirred the old rage and pity in my heart'.[61] Its people (as a collective, non-sectarian whole) have been 'endlessly betrayed / by our own weakness'.[62] This is the weakness (or weaknesses) of ignorant tribalism, of 'poisoned memory', of 'poverty corroded into malice', and 'faith which had no charity to offer'. It seems that the contrast between Hewitt's sainted Coventry and his originary region serves to heighten his frustration. But, evidently, here this English city provides a model for Hewitt of what could be in Ulster: a place of peace and progressiveness. And it is thus with a sense of hope that the poem ends, offering a glimpse of light in

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[60] 'An Irishman in Coventry', in *Collected Poems*, p. 97.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.

the gloom of Ulster: ‘Yet like Lir’s children banished to the waters / our hearts still listen for the landward bells’.[63]

Kennedy-Andrews dismisses Hewitt as a mere ‘minor’ poet, whilst identifying some aspects of his style:

> With its strict poetic decorum, its quiet tones and plain style, its distrust of freedom and extravagance, its technique of careful observation and concern for form, Hewitt’s is not a poetic equipped to probe the dark recesses of the Ulster conscience […] His are the poetics of homestead, disturbed by fears of homelessness, but reluctant to penetrate the dark facts of hatred and division.[64]

Kennedy-Andrews is comparing the psychological archaeology of Heaney’s *North* here with Hewitt’s less ambitious poetry. This is also another example of how Northern Irish poets are often conscripted into the agendas of identity politics: Hewitt is read only in the light of ‘hatred and division’ and is considered something of a failure – in terms that blend the political and aesthetic together – for not having overcome these problems. And this paragraph as a whole amounts to an unfair dismissal of Hewitt and his work. What I hope to have shown here in my (albeit relatively brief) analysis of some of Hewitt’s poems, is that Hewitt was capable of complex meditations on place and identity within his migrant poetry. It would, however, still be accurate to describe Hewitt’s particular migrant aesthetic as fundamentally political in character: his speakers are often found to be engaging in what might be termed cultural politicking. Open to the possibilities of the migrant

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Kennedy-Andrews, p. 33.

experience, Hewitt's poetics evolve from his initial poems of displacement – wherein distance from his home place invites comparisons and offers the opportunity to reflect on ideas of place and identity – and towards the incorporation of Coventry into an inclusive vision. Coventry, through its shining example, ultimately validated Hewitt's egalitarian politics and poetics. The pattern of disavowal and reclamation isn't present in Hewitt's migrant poems in the way that it is in MacNeice's: Northern Ireland is always, as it were, home, despite its flaws, for Hewitt's Ulsterman abroad. Ireland is, contra MacNeice, 'never disavowed'. As the speaker declares, with characteristic directness and rhythmic control, in the final stanza of 'An Ulsterman':

> Though creed-crazed zealots and the ignorant crowd,
>
> long-nurtured, never checked, in ways of hate,
>
> have made our streets a byword of offence,
>
> this is my country, never disavowed.
>
> When it is fouled, shall I not remonstrate?
>
> My heritage is not their violence.[65]

Migration to Britain produced a range of aesthetic and intellectual responses in these poets. Even with Hewitt and MacNeice, who lived in different eras from the contemporary group, it is evident that the fundamentals previously identified in the *Metre* and *Agenda* poets are still present: place and identity resurface again and again in their poetry. And as we have seen, especially with the brief comparison between these two poets, it is possible that Britain can prompt very different aesthetics and attitudes, even if the essential concerns of place and identity remain the same. Thus, whilst

[65] 'An Ulsterman', in *Collected Poems*, p. 132.

Britain as a destination *does* have its own particular bearing on aesthetic production, it remains an open question as to how a given writer will respond to migrancy in their poetry.

There are many driving factors behind Irish emigration, and these have changed over time. For the *Metre* and *Agenda* poets, as well as MacNeice, Hewitt, and the present O'Donoghue group, work and study were the principal motivations. But in any case, my focus here is not on why these Irish citizens migrated, but on what they do as *poets* in Britain. Breda Gray has argued that

> the Irish diaspora is inhabited and lived by people in a variety of ways and with multiple and contested relationships to Irish identity, so that lived experience always exceeds discourses of the diaspora and kinship.[66]

This unique 'lived experience' feeds into the aesthetic works, although we should remind ourselves that the poem is always a kind of half-fiction, with its own constructed lyric 'I'. The poet's experiences are their own, as much as their 'I' is their own. So even if the 'discourses of the diaspora' are an important backdrop to the migrant poetry, the poems themselves are also capable of exceeding, or we might say resisting or transcending in their own way, these broader discourses. My concern is specifically with the variegated aesthetic *representations* of migrancy, in all their richness and diversity. And it is only through a sustained formalist critique – whereby the critic enters into a dialogue with the poem – that we are able to get to the heart of the poets' diasporic aesthetics. So, to restate the founding question of this thesis: how does the O'Donoghue group represent migrancy in their poetry?

[66] McWilliams, p. 17. Breda Gray, *Women and the Irish Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 152.

## Chapter 3: 'You Know the Way': Dislocation and Diaspora in Bernard O'Donoghue's Poetry

### I. Introduction

Bernard O'Donoghue was born in 1945 in the village of Cullen into a family of Catholic, small-scale farmers. 'My mother took to farming like a native, / as if she'd not grown up by city light', the speaker in 'Farmers Cross' reveals. His mother, Irish by birth, but raised in Manchester, had 'married into it'. O'Donoghue's father was from Cork, but 'hated farming: every uphill step / on the black hill where he'd been born and bred'.[1] Such a background – rural, Catholic, and agricultural – was not untypical for the time. But this was to change with the sudden death of O'Donoghue's father at the age of fifty-two, when O'Donoghue was only sixteen years old. O'Donoghue occasionally hints at this trauma in his poetry. The very early poem, 'Father Christmas', is ostensibly about the habit of the speaker's father of dressing up as Santa out of season: 'In he blunders with his awful timing, / Red suit pulled over his dustcoat any old how'.[2] But the 'awful timing', it is implied, is really that of his death, described with 'policeman's words' as 'Stroke; violent; massive; laboured; and arrest'.[3] Following his father's premature death, O'Donoghue's remaining family sold the farm and relocated. They ended up in Manchester in England in 1961, where O'Donoghue's mother had some family connections. In 'Horses for Courses', the speaker alludes to the fact of a death prompting the family to migrate to Britain, when he describes 'our father clutching his chest before he fell / and our own

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[1] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Farmers Cross', in *Farmers Cross* (London: Faber, 2011), p. 11. O'Donoghue was something of a late bloomer as a poet. His first pamphlet, *Razorblades and Pencils*, appeared in 1984, when he was thirty-nine years old. Two more pamphlets followed before *The Weakness* (1991), which is his first full-length collection: *Poaching Rights* in 1987 (his only publication with Gallery Press), and *The Absent Signifier* in 1990. These three short pamphlets contain some duplicated poems: for example, 'Father Christmas', 'Morning in Beara', 'Holy Island', and 'St. Brigid's Night' appear in both *Razorblades and Pencils* and *Poaching Rights*. And of the fifty-five poems included in the three pamphlets, twenty-five of them are omitted from *The Weakness*. But of this twenty-five, 'Killing the Pig' from *The Absent Signifier*, and 'Aurofac 20', 'Nel Mezzo del Cammin' and 'Heather' from *Razorblades and Pencils* are collected instead in O'Donoghue's second full-length collection, *Gunpowder* (1995). Additionally, 'Father Christmas' is eventually included in *Farmers Cross* – so only twenty poems can be found solely in their original pamphlets. O'Donoghue has not revised any of these poems (the only revision I have found across his entire oeuvre is the addition of a stanza break in 'Nel Mezzo del Cammin' between the penultimate and ultimate line).

[2] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Father Christmas', in *Razorblades and Pencils* (Oxford: Sycamore Press, 1984), p. 2.

[3] Ibid.

particular wanderings across the seas'.[4] The enjambment here reinforces the link between these two events. And in 'Farmers Cross', the speaker relates in stanza four how their mother, following her husband's death, 'flew out for good and back to England, / from the new airport near Cork'.[5]

'The Youngest in the Class' from *Gunpowder* has an obvious autobiographical foundation. It reveals the nexus of conflicting emotions that surrounded the speaker's sudden relocation to Britain from Ireland. Being a poem that charts the speaker's initial migration from Ireland, it is thus a perfect starting point for this discussion. Like many of O'Donoghue's migrant poems, it was written in Oxford – although the place does not explicitly feature in the poem – from the distance of thirty years after the event in question. From being the youngest in his class in Ireland, his family locally well-known ('"They all had great brains, the Donoghues"'),

> When I changed nations, suddenly
>
> I became the oldest: I don't know how.
>
> And now there is only one category
>
> In which I can hope to be surprisingly young:
>
> "He can't have been fifty. But they all
>
> Died young, the Donoghues. If his father
>
> Was fifty, he wasn't much more than it."

[4] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Horses for Courses', in *Farmers Cross*, p. 7.
[5] 'Farmers Cross', p. 11.

Thirty years back. By now his being dead

Is by no means prodigious, after he

Changed states that cold March. And whether

This maturing should make us

More reconciled or sadder

Is extremely hard to say.[6]

The speaker has ‘changed nations’, moved from Ireland to Britain. This hugely important event is understated here. It is strange that the somewhat trivial detail – of having been the youngest in his class in Ireland and then suddenly being the oldest in his class in Britain – is foregrounded, with the more significant context of the speaker’s migration as background. But we can glimpse the young speaker’s bewilderment too – they ‘don’t know how’ they became the oldest or even, perhaps, how their circumstances changed so rapidly with their migration. The trauma that sparked this chain of events is clear. The reported tactless gossip of former classmates and neighbours replays in the speaker’s mind (‘“they all / Died young, the Donoghues”’). Perhaps it is a relief to have escaped from such petty provincialism?

In the final stanza the adult speaker pauses to consider the effect of the family death on their life: by now, thirty years after the event, ‘his being dead / Is by no means prodigious’. His death was ‘prodigious’, an adjective that signals the lingering bitterness that the speaker harbours towards certain small-minded individuals for whom the death was no more than sensational, or fodder for rumour. There may also be a more archaic definition of the word, meaning *portentous*; the father’s

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[6] Bernard O’Donoghue, ‘The Youngest in the Class’, in *Gunpowder* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995), p. 38.

death foreshadows the son's, or otherwise triggers great upheaval for the remaining family. We are told that now his father's death is less shocking, yet its impact is lifelong: the description of the father having 'changed states' (from life to death or from the bodily to the ethereal) aurally and semantically echoes the description of the speaker, who 'changed nations' as a consequence. The speaker has matured, in both years and in his attitude to grief, but they are still unsure of whether they 'should' be 'reconciled or sadder'. It is intriguing how the pronoun shifts here, from an initial personal 'I', to an 'us' at the poem's conclusion: this suggests that O'Donoghue is both appealing to a collective human 'us', and diffidently dodging the very personal 'I' that is really at the basis of this revelation.

The biographical is a relevant context to all migrant poetry: the material experience of migration feeds into the aesthetic works in different ways. But for O'Donoghue – given the particularly traumatic reasons for his initial departure from Ireland – this is especially relevant. They underscore his aesthetic as a poet. It might therefore be inaccurate to describe O'Donoghue as purely an economic migrant. O'Donoghue's family migrated for financial reasons, but it was a painful bereavement that was the catalyst. O'Donoghue's example complicates Ailbhe McDaid's neat distinction between the 'forced' and 'traumatic' nature of historical migration, and the 'voluntary, emancipatory and temporary' nature of contemporary migration for the Irish.[7] O'Donoghue's was evidently 'traumatic' ('The Youngest' gives voice to this trauma). Yet in his adult life, O'Donoghue has been able to frequently return to the very village that he left behind. He admits this in an interview: 'I think our generation are lucky in that we don't have to make a once-for-all choice:

[7] Ailbhe McDaid, '"I mean it as no ordinary return": Poetic Migrancy in the Poetry of Vona Groarke and Sara Berkeley', *Australasian Journal of Irish Studies,* 13:1 (2013), pp. 38–56 (p. 39). Indeed, this distinction has also been complicated by Clair Wills in her study on Irish emigration to Britain during the 1950s: 'It would be foolish, and insensitive, to deny that real feelings of anxiety and alarm were at play, and that for many of these young emigrants leaving home was, at least initially, experienced as "tragedy". Yet there were also migrants who made the journey in various degrees of excitement and anticipation of adventure. There were parents who accepted without question that emigration meant profit'. *The Best are Leaving*: *Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 2–3.

salute Michael O'Leary and Ryanair!'[8] So O'Donoghue's migration is also 'temporary'. It was also, in a sense, 'emancipatory'. On moving to Manchester, O'Donoghue was enrolled in St. Bede's College Grammar School, and he was later accepted to Lincoln College, Oxford. He has since enjoyed, as he put it himself, the 'pretty privileged and happy teaching life' of an Oxford don.[9] The strenuous farm-life that contributed to the death of his father and that perhaps awaited him was thus left behind. So, emigration, though traumatic, nonetheless precipitated an entirely different and more comfortable course of life for O'Donoghue. He has now lived in Britain (and Oxford in particular, as an academic at Magdalen and now Emeritus Fellow at Wadham) for over fifty years.

There are numerous ways in which a given migrant Irish writer – wherever they may end up living – may aestheticize the migrant experience. There is no determinate way of writing about migration. As Scott Brewster and Michael Parker have argued of contemporary Irish poetry in general, diversity is the watchword.[10] Some migrant writers may even quibble with the migrant label, despite their long residence abroad. I am reminded here of James Liddy's important question that he posed in his contribution to the special issue of *Metre*: 'Should I declare myself an emigrant?'[11] Where Liddy wonders whether he should even identify as an emigrant at all, O'Donoghue's very modus operandi is engendered by migrancy: 'I always wrote [sic] from Oxford – almost never in Ireland – about the experience of Cullen, old and recent'.[12] O'Donoghue has published six main collections of poetry, beginning with *The Weakness* in 1991, with *The Seasons of Cullen Church* appearing in 2016.[13] Given

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[8] 'Interview with Bernard O'Donoghue', *Poetry Ireland Review*, 109:1 (2013), 86–94 (p. 93).
[9] Ibid, p. 86.
[10] Michael Parker remarks, for example: 'Given the variety and energy of Irish creative and critical writing and its contribution to re-thinking relationships, histories and futures within and beyond Ireland, the first decade of the twenty-first century seems an opportune moment to examine and evaluate the literary voices that continue to enhance and enrich contemporary Irish culture'. 'Changing History: The Republic and Northern Ireland since 1990', in *Diverse Voices: Irish Literature Since 1990*, ed. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 3–15 (p. 3).
[11] James Liddy, 'James Liddy on Irish Poetry and the Diaspora', *Metre*, 4 (1998), pp. 93–94 (p. 93).
[12] 'Interview with Bernard O'Donoghue', *Poetry Ireland Review*, p. 89.
[13] O'Donoghue has also published *Gunpowder* (1995), *Here Nor There* (1999), *Outliving* (2003), a *Selected Poems* in 2008, and *Farmers Cross* (2011).

his long residence in Britain, they all contain migrant poems. It is precisely the distance, both physical and psychological, between the composition and setting of many of O'Donoghue's migrant poems that is enabling. There is also something of Maurice Riordan in this: he revealed that Ireland, the place that he has a 'cherished' attachment to, emerges in 'polarities' of time and place in his poetry, such as 'here and there', and 'then and now'.[14] For O'Donoghue, Oxford is frequently the implicit 'now', the remove from which Cullen's 'then' is evoked.

Ireland is more accessible to O'Donoghue than it is to Liddy or Riordan: O'Donoghue can easily return to County Cork from Oxford, whereas physical returns are more problematic for the US-based Liddy, for example.[15] Yet it is O'Donoghue who embraces the migrant identity more readily. But despite the clear differences in attitude and circumstance between Liddy and O'Donoghue in this regard, the former's subsequent suggestion that, 'If the new emigration is not like the old exile, perhaps I appear in the twilight zone between them', does have some pertinence to this discussion of O'Donoghue's migrant poetry.[16] O'Donoghue's poetry is, in an essential sense, in two minds: it gives expression to a yearning for his Cullen roots most frequently, but there are also diasporic poems which celebrate geographical and cultural mobility. O'Donoghue's poetry is, therefore, in a kind of 'twilight zone' between different representations of migration: in his poems of dislocation, a place fixed in time remains the sole locus of his poetic identity, and in his diasporic poems, Ireland is one strand of this same identity, along with Oxford and other locales.

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[14] Maurice Riordan, 'Maurice Riordan on Writing and Living Abroad', *Metre*, 3 (1997), pp. 19–20 (p. 20).
[15] O'Donoghue has a house in County Cork, and he has only written about this home for the first time very recently. A very brief lyric titled 'Rough Plaster' begins: 'We spend our summers in a house once owned / By a couple who never spoke a word / To each other.' It appeared in *The Yale Review* in 2019 and is uncollected. See: https://yalereview.yale.edu/rough-plaster.
[16] Liddy, p. 93.

The duality in O'Donoghue's poetry between dislocation and diaspora is born of the events that precipitated his initial migration, as well as the very different life he now leads in Britain. He left for Britain in 1961 in traumatic circumstances, and he now revisits County Cork by Ryanair jet on his summer vacations from Oxford. His age too is a factor: O'Donoghue has described the rural, agrarian life in his Cullen poems as decidedly 'pre-modern'.[17] This is Ireland as O'Donoghue knew it in the 1950s: 'The Ireland I grew up in was not cosmopolitan, it was unduly monochrome', he revealed in a recent interview. However, he has since embraced the more 'globalised, internationalist' view of the world that has taken hold.[18] O'Donoghue is ideally placed to have witnessed these cultural shifts within Ireland and elsewhere, which have been influenced by changes in the nature of migration, among other factors. O'Donoghue's poetry is therefore the perfect starting for this discussion of migration in the work of five contemporary poets, because his poetry contains some well-established tropes of Irish migrant literature, but it also reflects the modern experience of migration for the Irish.

This calls to mind Elmer Kennedy-Andrews's discussion of Paul Muldoon's poetry as increasingly exhibiting a 'diasporic, as opposed to exilic, subjectivity'.[19] The distinction between the exilic and diasporic is an important one, which I will return to. But when it comes to 'exile', this term is problematic, because it carries connotations of forced migration. The editors' introduction to a recent intervention on this theme also cleaves to this definition. Asher Z. Milbauer and James M. Sutton describe 'stories of banishment' that arise from the experiences of 'those impelled – by state or fate – to flee their native shores, those citizens of countries so harassed and battered that

[17] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'An Interview with Bernard O'Donoghue', *The London Magazine*, 9 Aug 2016, <https://www.thelondonmagazine.org/interview-bernard-odonoghue-2/> [accessed on 9 May 2022].
[18] Ibid.
[19] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*: *Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland, 1968–2008* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2008), p. 19.

"staying put" becomes impossible'.[20] Many of the contributors to their collection (or the subjects of their essays) have suffered. There are Jewish people who escaped the Holocaust only to discover that their entire extended family had been massacred by the Nazis, and writers and academics who fled Cuban, Chilean, and Ghanaian authoritarianism. These are people for whom 'staying put' meant persecution, imprisonment, or death. These extreme circumstances are not shared by the five migrant poets included in this thesis. This is not to minimise the painful beginning of O'Donoghue's own emigrant story, but it is to supply some necessary context. I am reminded of Paul Muldoon's rebuke to Seamus Deane, who described him as being 'in "exile" in Princeton': 'To Deane I say, "I'm not in exile"'. The term exile is 'not appropriate' of O'Donoghue either.[21]

O'Donoghue does write poems of what I term *dislocation*, in which Cullen is eulogised. The speakers of these poems maintain a singular attachment to this specific place. O'Donoghue himself has confirmed this strong sense of rootedness: 'I never feel at home anywhere else like I do in Cork and Kerry […] some of my very happiest moments have been touching down back in Ireland'.[22] Gregory Schirmer has argued that for Ulster poet John Montague (1929–2016), 'culture and identity are immanent in place, and dislocation is the source of a profound anxiety, indeed, dislocation and loss are the conditions of his poetry'.[23] To dislocate is to put out of place, or otherwise disrupt the usual relationship between two things. The poetry of both Montague and O'Donoghue is broadly an expression of the idea that, in Ireland, 'cultural identity has often been interpreted as bound up with place', such as 'through notions of local culture (the parish, the region, for example)'.[24] For Montague, his dislocation is linguistic and cultural. He is technically an Irish Catholic migrant *to*

[20] Asher Z. Milbauer and James M. Sutton (eds.), 'Introduction: The Overarching Arc of Exile', in *Exile in Global Literature and Culture: Homes Found and Lost* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 1–15 (p. 1).
[21] Paul Muldoon, *The Prince of The Quotidian* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1994), p. 12.
[22] 'Interview with Bernard O'Donoghue', *Poetry Ireland Review*, p. 93.
[23] Gregory Schirmer, *Out of What Began: A History of Irish Poetry in English* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 349.
[24] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home,* p. 1.

Northern Ireland, having been born in America and been taken to live with an aunt in Garvaghy in County Tyrone aged four. 'A Lost Tradition' makes clear his feeling of displacement: the landscape of the north is 'a manuscript / We had lost the skill to read, / A part of our past disinherited', its inhabitants severed from the Gaelic language:

> The last Gaelic speaker in the parish
>
> When I stammered my school Irish
>
> One Sunday after mass, crinkled
>
> A rusty litany of praise:
>
> *Tá Ghaelige againn arís…*[25]
>
> [We have Irish again]

For O'Donoghue, however, dislocation describes a more personal experience. O'Donoghue is not concerned with the wider ambition of relocating any kind of 'lost Gaelic past' within Ulster, which has been described as an essential feature of Montague's poetry.[26] This cultural and literary aim is obviously less resonant with a writer born in the Republic. And O'Donoghue's evocations of Cullen are frequently personal explorations of his own childhood. His dislocation is born of his physical separation from Ireland, or more precisely, his distance from the specific place where he lived until his departure at the age of sixteen. I am reminded of Justin Quinn's suggestion that what characterises the poetry of many Irish poets today (whether they live on the island or elsewhere) is

[25] John Montague, 'A Lost Tradition', in *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1995), pp. 33–34.
[26] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, p. 76.

that their poetry no longer 'move[s] in concert with the larger nationalist objective'.[27] This is true of O'Donoghue's poetry, although I am not arguing that his originary place is no less important. Looking back to the originary country, and attempting to reconnect with the place left behind, is a typical feature of the migrant experience. In aesthetic terms, it can involve evocations of the place: O'Donoghue's Cullen poems exemplify this strategy. Fergus Allen's description of his own migrant aesthetic – from his contribution to *Metre* – shares much with O'Donoghue's: the 'deep memories' of Ireland are a rich source of subject matter, whereas Britain lacks the necessary 'animation'.[28] The remembered Irish past is an essential resource for both poets. For O'Donoghue, Cullen is especially important because it was where he lived when both parents were alive. Bereavement is therefore an additional factor in his Cullen poems. The significance of Cullen for O'Donoghue is therefore deeply personal rather than national.

O'Donoghue's diasporic poems, however, complicate this view of O'Donoghue as a poet whose identity is immanent in one place. The diasporic subject, as Kennedy-Andrews has argued, 'mediates between the memory of the prior homeland and a sense of attachment to the adopted country'.[29] Mary J. Hickman has discussed the two different definitions of diaspora. The first is quite similar to the term 'exile': there is 'a traditional paradigm which sees diaspora as produced by some form of coercion that leads to the uprooting and resettlement outside the boundaries of the homeland of large numbers of people'.[30] The second, however, sees diaspora 'as expressing modes of "hybrid" consciousness and identity'.[31] This definition of diaspora involves identity-formation which 'transgresses the boundaries of ethnicity and nationalism', and is quite distinct from 'exile'.[32]

[27] Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry: 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 195.
[28] Fergus Allen, 'Fergus Allen on Irish and English Origin', *Metre*, 3 (1997), p. 8.
[29] *Writing Home*, p. 19.
[30] Mary J. Hickman, 'Migration and Diaspora', in the *Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, ed. Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 117–137 (p. 118).
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid, p. 119.

Kennedy-Andrews is evidently cleaving to the second definition of the term here, although he is exploring its aesthetic dimension. The poetic identity that emerges in O'Donoghue's poems of dislocation draws on the formative influence of Cullen. It is located in this one place, which provides aesthetic and emotional nourishment. The diasporic poems – although they are less numerous in O'Donoghue's oeuvre – are significant because they articulate a different kind of poetic identity that is truly receptive to the influences of Britain and elsewhere. These diasporic poems fall under the auspices of Hickman's second definition of diaspora. O'Donoghue's 'Westering Home' and, especially, 'You Know the Way' are both diasporic poems, although they differ significantly in tone: in essence, the migrant speaker in these poems recognises that their poetic identity is located in both Ireland *and* Britain, rather than holding the two places in opposition. O'Donoghue's speakers are either 'homesick / For Ireland',[33] or they may express a rather different, and more philosophical, sentiment: 'Unhappy the man who keeps to the home place / and never finds time to escape'.[34] I aim to give equal weight to both these categories of poem.

**II. The Poems of Dislocation**

Cullen is the subject of at least half of all O'Donoghue's poetry, and 'Aurofac 20' is the epitome of this poetry of dislocation: it is about the 'pre-modern', agrarian life of the speaker's youth in Ireland, it is written from present-day Oxford some years hence, and it is deeply nostalgic. It harks back to Cullen as a sure locus of belonging. It is a very early poem, first appearing in *Razorblades and Pencils*. It was also chosen by O'Donoghue for inclusion in his *Selected Poems* (2008), which suggests a

[33] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Nechtan', in *Here Nor There* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), p. 1.

[34] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Emigration', in *Farmers Cross*, p. 12. This resembles Heaney's 'A Daylight Art', which begins, 'Happy the man, therefore, with a natural gift', in *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber, 1987), p. 9. O'Donoghue has described this as 'one of [Heaney's] greatest poems', in *Seamus Heaney and The Language of Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. vii. Incidentally, 'Nechtan' and 'Emigration', appearing fifteen years apart, are a good indicator of a small stylistic evolution in O'Donoghue's poetry: his earliest collections retain the capitalised first letter of each new line of poetry, whereas from *Farmers Cross* onwards, he eschews the capitalisation.

certain fondness for this brief lyric. Its title betrays O'Donoghue's farming roots, as it is the name of a popular treatment administered for calf scour. Here is the poem in its entirety:

The chemist's perfect hair and her scent of roses

As we drudged in on our farmer's errand,

Coughing inferiority. Pink lipsticks,

Sunglasses, kiss-curls on cards of hairgrips:

Exoticism, sweetening the imagination

In a wet March when stogged wellingtons

Were welded to mud: "The calves have scour, ma'am."

The smell of hayseed; thinking the echo

Of the hayfloat's stammering ratchet

Tuning in, then fading over the air.

That station, quick, again; lavender, pine

And blue-flush our stale reflections in the days

Of sprays of the scent of roses.[35]

[35] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Aurofac 20', in *Razorblades and Pencils*, p. 4.

There is an element of the anti-pastoral to the images of muddy and arduous farm-work in stanza one, but this is counteracted by stanza two. This is founded on the memory of a scent, that of 'hayseed'. Clearly the speaker is in the middle of the haymaking season: they can hear the 'stammering ratchet' of the 'hayfloat' (which is a kind of horse or tractor-drawn platform used to transport hay) '[t]uning in, then fading over the air'. This speaks of contentedness. This particular sound is recalled with evident affection, even tenderness. Its tone is soft, and is a good example of what Patricia Coughlan has described as O'Donoghue's frequent '*sotto voce*'.[36] The final three lines of the poem are a chain of sights and smells. 'That station, quick, again', is a strange phrase. The speaker is striving to recover their honeyed childhood vision as it fades. The speaker finally expresses their desire to 'blue-flush' their reflection 'in the days / Of sprays of the scent of roses'. Blue is a colour associated with serenity and calm. These are emotions that are bound up with O'Donoghue's evocation here. And the 'scent of roses' returns at the conclusion, bookending the poem. Its recurrence confirms that the entire poem is a rose-tinted reflection on the speaker's pre-migration youth.

Many of O'Donoghue's migrant poems tread this aesthetic ground. Cullen is the subject matter, in which the child speaker is centred, or a different character is rendered. They are gentle and wistful homages to family and community life. There are poems about 'Educated Flanagan', who 'had books to beat the band, / and he carried them around in cardboard boxes',[37] or, from an earlier collection, 'Timmy Buckley Observes the Pleiades': 'They're hiding in North Cork / In '53, observed by Timmy Buckley'.[38] There is a poem about an unmarried brother and sister who farmed together their whole lives, 'never touching once',[39] and a similar poem about three siblings, 'The Din Beags', 'childless all

[36] Patricia Coughlan, '"Taking real things for shadows": Selected Poems by Bernard O'Donoghue', *The Irish Review*, 41:1 (2009), pp. 182–185 (p. 183).
[37] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Educated Flanagan', in *Farmers Cross*, p. 35
[38] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Timmy Buckley Observes the Pleiades', in *Here Nor There*, p. 22.
[39] Bernard O'Donoghue, '*Ter Conatus*', in *Here Nor There*, p. 52.

three'.[40] And, like 'Aurofac 20', 'Passive Smoking' takes as its subject the work of the family farm. This poem is from *Gunpowder* (1995), O'Donoghue's second major collection. Unlike 'Aurofac 20', however, this poem begins in the morning:

> The cows' repulsive body-heat
>
> Kept the car warm through frosty nights,
>
> Masking it easier to start
>
> For its spattering push up the passage.
>
> Even so, my father sat for minutes
>
> Every morning and stared out
>
> With the engine running
>
> And the carbon monoxide folding
>
> Into the blackthorn mist.[41]

The child-speaker gleefully joins with their father as he begins the dawn chores: 'I loved it. I stood at the back, / Breathing deep the scented poison / While his gaze travelled up Murt's field'.[42] This is one of a number of O'Donoghue's poems to feature the child-speaker and their late father. The speaker finds himself grasping for more details: 'what he saw nearer I don't know', perhaps 'a pheasant sometimes in November', a 'cold fox', or a neighbour spraying a 'grey liquid' across the hedge? Like 'Aurofac 20', this Cullen poem is affectionate, drawing on what O'Donoghue has

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[40] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'The Din Beags', in *The Seasons of Cullen Church* (London: Faber, 2016), p. 6.
[41] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Passive Smoking', in *Gunpowder*, p. 6.
[42] Ibid.

described as his 'very contented childhood there'.[43] The poem ends with a simple image: 'But always the inexorable / Brown-green, rain-infected mound'.[44] The speaker is able to find solace in the slow pace of his daily chores, and the quiet beauty of the natural world. Yet the comforting sense of constancy evoked by these lines – the unchanging routine, topography, and weather that the speaker remembers – is ultimately undercut by the attendant sense of loss. This place has disappeared, just as his father has passed away, and this poem is an attempt to construct a stay against its erasure in memory.

There are poems that have a slightly different aesthetic strategy to the majority of O'Donoghue's other evocations of his originary Ireland. 'Robbing the Orchard' – from his latest collection, *The Seasons of Cullen Church* – has a dual perspective: it is likewise founded on a memory of the speaker's childhood in Cullen, but it also describes the speaker's return to the scene as an adult. The poem comprises two eight-line stanzas, and a shorter triplet stanza, and is typically founded on highly localized subject matter. The initial stanza describes the first robbery by the child speaker and their accomplices: 'Her house was hardly more than fifty yards / from the old school by the bridge / and it was easy to run away'.[45] The mischievous youths of the poem 'scurried' away from the grove with their loot (a bag of 'stolen apples'), which roused the ire of the provincial landowner. She vows to enact her rather tame retribution: '"When the fine weather comes / I'll get new clothes in town and go to all / your houses and complain you to your fathers" [sic]'. The poem then shifts in time to the more recent past, with one of the offending youths now an adult having returned to the scene of the crime: 'We went there last week / with the half-hope of giving something back'. Moved by a karmic urge, and in a wry inversion, the speaker attempts to 'hang apples back on the trees'. But this act is fruitless, as it were, yielding instead to bathos:

[43] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'An Irish Poet in the UK', *Agenda*, 54:3-4 (2021), pp. 23–29 (p. 23).
[44] 'Passive Smoking', p. 6.
[45] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Robbing the Orchard', in *The Seasons of Cullen Church*, p. 38.

> But we found no bough with strength enough to bear
>
> even a crab apple, fighting a lost cause
>
> amid the bitter green and bullying alders.[46]

These three lines are separated from the other two preceding stanzas, forming a pained coda. Though the speaker is literally present in the very place that they have left behind, the feeling of dislocation is not tempered in any way. If anything, it is intensified by the knowledge that what was lost was not just a place, but a particular place in a particular time, that is, the speaker's *childhood* in their region of birth. Time has changed this place, once so bright in the poet's imagination. It is now a near-ruin, reclaimed by the anthropomorphized 'bitter green and bullying alders'. 'Robbing the Orchard' may present a slightly altered perspective on O'Donoghue's main theme – and this is because the speaker both reimagines and physically returns to Cullen in the same poem – but the results are largely the same: the speaker finds his originary place to be just out of reach. Despite the fact that Cullen sustains so much of O'Donoghue's poetry, and the place is where his speakers are most at home, his evocations of the place often find his speakers unable to fully reconnect. The attempt to remedy his past wrongs in 'Robbing the Orchard' is, in the end, a 'lost cause', just as the visions in 'Aurofac 20' and 'Passive Smoking' ultimately fade.

[46] Ibid.

**III. On Form**

O'Donoghue's poetic style should be described as conversational or anecdotal, although not strictly confessional.[47] O'Donoghue is not metrically strict, given his preference for an informal and sometimes colloquial mode of expression, but his poems often conform to iambic stress patterns. He tends to avoid inherited verse forms altogether. O'Donoghue instead often composes short narrative poems, with a moral at their conclusion. In 'The Youngest in the Class', with which I opened this chapter, the moral is overtly signalled in the final stanza, with the phrase, 'And whether / this maturing should make us […]'. The 'moral' here might be that the distance from a bereavement that time brings does not necessarily deliver either reconciliation or greater sadness. This is hardly conclusive, but that is deliberate, since the discourse of 'closure' around grief is entirely nonsensical. And although it assists our reading of the poem to know the circumstances of O'Donoghue's migration, it is not essential for grasping the emotional or intellectual insight that the poem arrives at. O'Donoghue deploys the lyric 'I' in this poem, but he is equally inclined to centre other protagonists, with the poet-speaker himself as a heterodiegetic or homodiegetic narrator. Patricia Coughlan has likened O'Donoghue's storytelling mode to the *seanchas* tradition within Ireland. The 'frequent naming of mountains, townlands, and other places' gives the poetry

> an affinity with *seanchas*. Sometimes the *seanchai* (a role usually played by men) rehearsed exploits by hero-figures or local 'characters' from previous generations: O'Donoghue's recurrent celebrations and commemorations of men and places seem to continue this tradition organically; in this they diverge from the rather different inheritance of the post-Romantic English lyric, with its characteristic focus on an individual subjectivity in crisis.[48]

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[47] O'Donoghue disowns the label of 'confessional', because it sits uneasily with the inherently private ritual of the Catholic confession. 'Interview with Bernard O'Donoghue', *Poetry Ireland Review*, p. 87.
[48] Coughlan, p. 183.

Coughlan does identify some important aspects of O'Donoghue's poetry, particularly his 'recurrent celebrations and commemorations of men and places', and the 'local' nature of his subject matter (I will return to this aspect of his poetry). But O'Donoghue's poems do not dispense with the lyric 'I' altogether: the speaker in 'Passive Smoking' confesses, 'I loved it', and, in 'The Youngest in the Class', the speaker remarks, 'suddenly / I became the oldest, I don't know how'. Indeed, a different explanation of his style was revealed in an interview with *Irish Studies Review*. Suggesting an altogether more English influence than an Irish one, O'Donoghue states:

> I like telling jokes and anecdotes, which I think don't have a particular audience in mind. Or do they? I like moralising poems, like the Old English Elegies. I read recently C. Day Lewis's remark, 'I have a preference for poems that are about something'. So I like the anecdotes and descriptions of experience to have a packaged moral at the end. Very medieval of course: Chaucer's 'Taketh the moralitee, good men'.[49]

This quotation of Chaucer's comes from the closing passage of 'The Nun's Priest's Tale' from *The Canterbury Tales*:

> Lo, swich it is for to be recchelees,
>
> And necligent, and truste on flaterye.
>
> But ye that holden this tale a folye,
>
> As of a fox, or of a cok and hen,

[49] 'Interview with Bernard O'Donoghue', *Poetry Ireland Review*, p. 87.

Taketh the moralitee, good men.[50]

This tale is perhaps clothed in a layer of irony and mock-heroism, and O'Donoghue, in his own half-serious way, is striving for a poetry of moralism.[51] These 'anecdotes and descriptions of experience' that 'have a packaged moral at the end' are everywhere in O'Donoghue's poetry, from his very first poems to his most recent. O'Donoghue is a medievalist by trade, and was drawn to this specialism because of his strong cultural Catholicism: 'the Catholic background meant you were halfway there already', he reveals in the same interview.[52] O'Donoghue's poetic style has then evolved from his academic interest in the old medieval texts of Chaucer and others. At the level of form, O'Donoghue's poetry owes as much to his present English milieu – although, admittedly, this is a specifically medieval influence – as his Irish origins.

O'Donoghue's 'anecdotes and descriptions of experience' continue to be mostly founded on Cullen, as my discussion of 'Aurofac 20', 'Passive Smoking', and the more recent 'Robbing the Orchard' demonstrates. Indeed, the blurb of *The Seasons of Cullen Church* identifies this aspect of O'Donoghue's poetry: 'This new collection of expert lyric poems from Whitbread Poetry Award winner Bernard O'Donoghue movingly animates the scenery and characters of his childhood in County Cork'. This summary is rather like the synopsis provided on the cover of O'Donoghue's *Gunpowder* – 'he draws once more on incidents and episodes from his upbringing in County Cork' – and *Here Nor There* (1999), which describes O'Donoghue as 'mining the memories of his rural upbringing in County Cork'. The blurb of *Farmers Cross* reveals that 'the poems rarely stray too far

[50] Chaucer, 'The Nun's Priest's Tale', in *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 596–622 (p. 620).
[51] Barbara Newman writes of this tale, in which Jack Straw – one of the rebel leaders of the peasant's revolt – is described: 'the context in this tale is mock-heroic, and it's hard to know what to make of it'. '"Kek kek! kokkow! quek quek!"', *London Review of Books,* Nov 2019, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n22/barbara-newman/kek-kek!-kokkow!-quek-quek!> [accessed 9 May 2022].
[52] 'Interview with Bernard O'Donoghue', *Poetry Ireland Review*, p. 87.

from the Ireland of the author's upbringing', and his *Selected Poems* finds him 'often recalling the rural Cork of his upbringing'.[53] The 'deep memories' of Ireland, as Allen puts it, remain fertile ground for O'Donoghue.

Caitríona O'Reilly rather amusingly critiques this tendency in O'Donoghue's poetry. She takes issue with his almost obsessive 'summoning up' of the 'textures of life in 50s rural Cork' in her review of his *Selected Poems*:

> What is curious is the persistence of such revenants in O'Donoghue's imagination. He is by no means alone; his preoccupations place him firmly in a long tradition of writers for whom Ireland is largely a "state" of mind – indeed contemporary Ireland, even in rural Cork, is almost laughably at odds with the largely fictional but weirdly persistent national construct posited by "strong" (in the Bloomian sense) writers such as Yeats, Joyce and Heaney. It is, to quote Sean O'Brien, an Ireland "where nobody lives".[54]

O'Reilly seems to be implying that O'Donoghue should be writing about 'contemporary Ireland', rather than '50s rural Cork'. Indeed, there *are* poems by O'Donoghue that do have a more contemporary focus. These are his diasporic poems that I will come to. But why should O'Donoghue be conscripted into writing about what O'Reilly deems an appropriate subject? In any case, Cullen for O'Donoghue is not a 'nationalist construct'. He is not 'summoning up' a version of Yeats's 'one

[53] Bernard O'Donoghue, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 2008).
[54] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'Going Back', *The Guardian*, 19 April 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/19/featuresreviews.guardianreview23> [accessed 17 August 2022].

dear perpetual place', for example.[55] Indeed, Gregory Schirmer has described a tradition in Irish poetry that is 'centred on locality'.[56] Highly localized poetry – such as Patrick Kavanagh's 'bleak hills in Co. Monaghan', or John Montague's Tyrone – can be configured to represent 'community', and, by extension, 'nation', with the poet a spokesman for both.[57] However, Schirmer suggests that some local poetry was also antithetic to the dominant discourse of Irish nationalism: he argues that Montague's preoccupation with localizing history, and reading a deeply personal narrative into his local region, was a means of counteracting the 'national, often mythic terms of the revival'. Where Yeats et al. mythologised the Irish peasant and the Irish character,[58] Montague sought sustenance in the real world of his local place.[59] O'Donoghue's own evocations of Cullen are part of this tradition of 'locality' in Irish poetry, although unlike these other poets, his Cullen poems have a migrant dimension. Cullen was formative for O'Donoghue, and this is why the images and experiences of this place dominate his poetic imagination. Formative experience has a particularly strong influence on the imagination of any writer, and for O'Donoghue his Cullen poems are also generated by the equally potent experience of migrancy.

Indeed, the dislocation in O'Donoghue's Cullen poetry is born of the contrasting circumstances of rootedness *and* deracination, rather than the sureties of a particular rural, nationalist vision of Ireland. His speakers are rooted in Cullen, but they are also living elsewhere. The painful irony of his

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[55] W.B. Yeats, 'Prayer for my Daughter', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Augustine Martin (London: Vintage, 1992), pp. 185–187 (p. 186).
[56] Schirmer, p. 348.
[57] Ibid, p. 348. Like Kavanagh's 'Monaghan Hills': 'you have made me the sort of man I am', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 17.
[58] As Edward Hirsch argues: 'it was in this period [of the Revival] that the Irish peasant was fundamentally "created" and characterized for posterity. By placing the peasant figure at the heart of their enterprises, key Revival writers such as W. B. Yeats, John Synge, George Russell (AE), Isabella Augusta Gregory, and Douglas Hyde were participating in a complex cultural discourse motivated by crucial economic, social, and political needs, as well as by pressing cultural concerns', in 'The Imaginary Irish Peasant', *PMLA*, 106:5 (1991), pp. 1116–1133 (p. 1116).
[59] Schirmer, p. 349. He argues: 'At times, Montague engages in a satiric debunking of romanticized Ireland, as in "The Siege of Mullingar, 1963", a parody of Yeats's "September 1913" that dismisses both the revival's Ireland and de Valera's Irish Ireland that followed in its wake'.

condition is the foundation of O'Donoghue's best poems. 'Any Last Requests' first appeared in *Outliving* (2003), a collection which contains many elegies. Written in memory of a friend, this poem finds the Irish speaker in Britain on the day of their friend's funeral in Ireland. The poem is not rooted in childhood, but it still professes dislocation. As his friend's hearse is being driven to the church in Cullen, the speaker laments that 'I'm not there':

> I should be driving with you
>
> past your untended loganberry beds,
>
> to negotiate the dangerous northern turn
>
> by the forge.[60]

The first line here establishes the speaker's distance from Cullen in geographical terms. He is elsewhere, a fact that he finds discomfiting. Yet the following three lines contain local details: the speaker has a deep knowledge of the place. He is a member of the small community, and he knows its byways and characters, such as the 'dangerous northern turn / by the forge' and his friend's tendency to leave his loganberry beds 'untended'. There are other highly local references in the following lines. His friend is being driven 'past the ditch' where 'on party nights it was so dark / the shushing visitors couldn't find their cars'. He also recalls how 'the wind gets through the broken panes' of his late friend's greenhouse, although he always had 'better things to do' than fix them.[61] The poem ends with the speaker imagining his return to Ireland to visit the empty house of his friend. He asks a question, pointedly, in both Irish and English: 'Bhfuil tú sa bhaile a Phádraig? / Are you home?'.[62] These lines embody the simultaneous detachment from – and rootedness in – Cullen

[60] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Any Last Requests', in *Outliving* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), p. 53–55 (p. 53).
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid, p. 54.

that we find in many of O'Donoghue's migrant poems. 'Aurofac 20', 'Passive Smoking', 'Robbing the Orchard', and 'Any Last Requests' were published over a thirty-year period, but they all ultimately represent this feeling. In their explorations of Cullen, they are elegiac in tone: they represent loss and sadness, as much as they express rootedness.

### IV. The Diasporic Poems

I have focussed so far on the poems by O'Donoghue that evoke the Ireland that he left behind. And, as I have shown, these types of poems are present in his very earliest collections, and his very latest (with some notable aesthetic differences). As Michael Parker has argued: 'While repeatedly [O'Donoghue's] poems revisit and celebrate early experiences and encounters in his originary community and region, many voice a profound uncertainty over questions of identity and belonging'.[63] O'Reilly has criticised this aspect of his poetry, whereas Parker is more favourable in his review of O'Donoghue's *Selected Poems*: 'like his invaluable interventions as a critic and commentator, [O'Donoghue's poetry] enhances literary life and debate in Britain and Ireland'.[64] Cullen is the dominant subject of O'Donoghue's migrant poetry, but there are also a handful of O'Donoghue's poems that diverge from an exclusively Irish setting. These poems – although still bearing all the hallmarks of O'Donoghue's storytelling style – are quite different from O'Donoghue's Irish poems. Might this complicate the view of O'Donoghue as a poet who only dwells on his 'originary community' in his migrant poetry? Indeed, if Cullen is a place that is often remembered in O'Donoghue's poetry – even when this is considered alongside a return in poems such 'Robbing the Orchard' – then his diasporic poems shift tense to the present. The view of O'Donoghue's migrant poetry as essentially concerning imaginative reconstructions of the past is, therefore, a partial one.

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[63] Michael Parker, 'Neither home nor away: Place and Displacement in Bernard O'Donoghue's Poetry', *Irish Studies Review*, 17:4 (2009), pp. 513–518 (pp. 513–514).
[64] Ibid, p. 518.

In ‘Stigma’ – from *The Seasons of Cullen Church* – O’Donoghue’s speaker berates himself for obsessing over the material of the past. It begins with a typical recollection of his childhood farm life. It is a story of an incompetent farmworker named ‘Con’ who ‘came to work on the farm for us’.[65] The poem is intertextual with Robert Frost’s ‘The Death of the Hired Man’, with the character of the itinerant farmworker a feature of both poems.[66] But midway through O’Donoghue’s anecdote – about ‘Con and his feckless family’ – a different voice interjects to ask: ‘But / why do I keep on returning to that time’?[67] The speaker is voicing exasperation with his typical aesthetic mode, asking himself: ‘Why not stay with the poverties of our present time?’ There is an ethical dimension to this question: the poet’s ‘Stigma’, his mark of shame or discredit, is his relative indifference to the tribulations of contemporary human experience, which includes homelessness (‘beggars on bridges for us to trip on’), and the migrant crisis (people ‘drowning / in their hundreds in the Med’).[68] The speaker of ‘As if the Hare’ remarks – in a similarly knowing way to the speaker of ‘Stigma’ –

> I always seem to be returning
>
> to those few fields, few years of long ago
>
> as if there’d been nothing in the interim.

The slightly odd formulation, ‘few years of long ago’, epitomises the aesthetic strategy of many of the poems that I have discussed. ‘As if the Hare’ deviates from this formula, however, to describe an event that ‘only happened yesterday’.[69] It’s a poem generated by one of O’Donoghue’s vacations to

[65] Bernard O’Donoghue, ‘Stigma’, in *The Seasons of Cullen Church*, pp. 12–14 (p. 12).
[66] Robert Frost, ‘The Death of the Hired Man’, in *The Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Connery Latham (London: Vintage, 2013), pp. 34–40.
[67] ‘Stigma’, p. 12.
[68] Ibid, p. 13.
[69] ‘As if the Hare’, in *The Seasons of Cullen Church*, p. 53.

Cullen, and so it is still founded on the place: ‘We walked / by Julia’s well in the fading light / and saw a hare come up the road towards us’.[70] ‘Julia’s well’ is the kind of local detail that O’Donoghue often records in his Cullen poems, like the ‘old school bridge’ in ‘Robbing the Orchard’, ‘Murt’s field’ in ‘Passive Smoking’, or the ‘northern turn / by the forge’ in ‘Any Last Requests’.[71]

Despite the self-aware voices of ‘Stigma’ and ‘As if the Hare’, O’Donoghue still writes Cullen poetry. He contributed two poems to the recent special issue of the poetry periodical *Agenda* in 2021. Both poems are about the ‘few years of long ago’. ‘Cargo Cults’, for example, begins: ‘We crossed the steps to take the milk to Nora / every evening’. Again, the speaker records another local detail of rural life: they imagine a fox on its ‘careful exploration’ of ‘the ditch by the hens’ field’.[72] Indeed, the titular poem of his latest collection is about the Catholic Church in Cullen. Its five stanzas take in events in the liturgical calendar, such as ‘Easter’, ‘New Year’, or elements of ritual, such as ‘Benediction’. There are ‘Angels on permanent watch’ above the door as the speaker enters the church to dip a ‘reverent finger’, and they recall a ‘cycle past the field dew’ on their way to Mass.[73] The speaker of this poem is entirely deferential to Catholic doctrine. The ‘permanent watch’ of the angels connotes the immovable nature of church dogmas. The advice given by the speaker in O’Donoghue’s ‘The Wanderer’ is particularly relevant to this poem: ‘place your trust in the god in the heavens / where alone is stability, if it is found anywhere’.[74] ‘The Seasons’ is one of O’Donoghue’s less complicated Cullen poems, because the speaker derives a clear sense of ‘stability’ from Catholic values. Despite the loss that frequently attends O’Donoghue’s evocations of Cullen, here the church

[70] Ibid.
[71] ‘Julia’s well’ is also mentioned in ‘Aisling’, from *Farmers Cross*, in which the speaker describes his many dreams about ‘the unmetalled roads of childhood’: ‘And then I’m back out on the roads again, / at the turn by Julia’s well’, p. 23.
[72] ‘Bernard O’Donoghue, ‘Cargo Cults’, *Agenda*, 54:3–4 (2021), p. 66.
[73] ‘The Seasons of Cullen Church’, in *The Seasons of Cullen Church*, p. 48.
[74] Bernard O’Donoghue, ‘The Wanderer’, in *Farmers Cross*, pp. 26–30 (p. 29).

building stands, symbolically, as the source of the speaker's poetic identity, with its static Catholic values and village situation.

Occasionally, however, O'Donoghue's speakers may alight on a different (and arguably more profound) realisation. Namely, that their poetic identity is in fact located somewhere *between* Ireland and Britain, whilst not being firmly anchored in either territory. This insight leads the speaker to conclude in O'Donoghue's 'Westering Home' that 'the whole business' – of the migrant experience – is 'Neither here nor there, and therefore home'. This poem, which first appeared in *Here Nor There*, is not an evocation of Cullen, but is instead situated in present-day Wales. As Ailbhe McDaid observes, this poem 'tracks the familiar journey west to Holyhead to take the ferry to Dublin, a well-trodden emigrant route', and it finds O'Donoghue's speaker 'searching for commonalities' between the Irish and the Welsh countryside.[75] As the speaker travels further west, they are suddenly reminded of Ireland:

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

The speaker puzzles over where exactly this realization 'sets in': could it be with 'the chapels with their clear grey windows', the 'buzzards', or the 'blurred blackthorn hedges'? Perhaps it's the 'houses' with their 'masoned gables'? Beyond 'all of this, / It's the architecture of the spirit'.[76] From

[75] Ailbhe McDaid, *The Poetics of Migration in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), pp. 98 & 99.
[76] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Westering Home', in *Here Nor There* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), p. 51.

the details of flora and fauna, and physical architecture, the speaker then posits a metaphysical source for their perception. It's this sense of the 'spirit' that leads the speaker to the 'here nor there' conclusion:

> It's the architecture of the spirit;
>
> The old thin 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.

McDaid, in perhaps the most thorough examination of O'Donoghue's poetry to date, has described the 'exquisite irresolution' of 'Westering Home'.[77] She also identifies how O'Donoghue is instigating a 'poetic conversation' with Seamus Heaney's 'The Tollund Man'.[78] In Heaney's poem the speaker anticipates feeling 'lost, / Unhappy and at home', where O'Donoghue's is '[n]either here not there, and therefore home'.[79] Yet as McDaid suggests, '[u]nlike Heaney's narrator who can deftly define the characteristics of feeling "at home", O'Donoghue's speaker identifies home with elision ("the whole business") and repression ("neither here nor there")'. The consequence of this, McDaid argues, is that O'Donoghue's speaker 'thereby avoids defining the term [home] at all'.[80] However, O'Donoghue's speaker *does* define home. Indeed, his final line can also be interpreted ambivalently: the poem either ends on a note of pathos, or quiet hopefulness.

[77] McDaid, *The Poetics of Migration*, p. 99
[78] Ibid.
[79] Seamus Heaney, 'The Tollund Man', in *Wintering Out* (London: Faber, 1972), pp. 36–37 (p. 37).
[80] McDaid, p. 99.

In the latter interpretation, the speaker is reconciled to their ontology of indeterminacy. Equally, the poem's final clause, 'and therefore home', does in one sense support the view that the whole poem is a bleak reflection on the speaker's homelessness. The speaker is not fully part of either Ireland or Britain: the speaker finds himself in 'neither' location. He is describing a similar condition to the speaker of 'Nechtan', who is 'fated / To sail forever in the middle seas' and is 'outcast / Alike from one shore and the other'.[81] However, O'Donoghue's speaker is also acknowledging that it is possible to locate one's identity somewhere on the continuum of Ireland and Britain. His 'home' is, essentially, a diasporic one: his poetic identity is poised between both places. The speaker ultimately finds his 'home' in this in-between place. O'Donoghue's speaker is becoming reconciled to a kind of diasporic identity that is – to return to Kennedy-Andrews's discussion of Muldoon and others – born of his 'mediation between the memory of the prior homeland and a sense of attachment to the adopted country'.[82] Despite the fact that this identity is negatively defined by migrancy, it is not an experience of trauma. 'Westering Home' does not represent a perfectly harmonious relationship between the British and Irish aspects of his migrant identity, but the resultant sense of home is, more or less, habitable: at this stage of his life, it is a 'thin ache', 'less tears than rain'. The final lines of 'Westering Home' therefore provide a hint of an emerging diasporic perspective. However, there is no aesthetic evolution in O'Donoghue's poetry from early poems of dislocation to later diasporic poems. Rather, these two aesthetic strands coexist, which is itself evidence of the conflicting and contradictory emotions that surround the migrant experience.

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[81] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Nechtan', in *Here Nor There*, p. 1.
[82] *Writing Home*, p. 19

Kennedy-Andrews has discussed the importance of 'home' for diasporic subjects. It is the nature of migrancy – which involves finding a new 'home' elsewhere – that necessitates a reconsideration of the concept. This is because, for the geographically mobile diasporic subject,

> 'Home' is not [in] any one place, language or tradition; it cannot be reduced to unitary notions of Ireland. Rather, 'home' is produced out of the encounter with other places, languages and histories, in the process of which the opposition between home and away, self and other, rootedness and itineracy, is inevitably revised.[83]

O'Donoghue has described himself as 'operating between two polarities' in his poetry: the opposition between Ireland and Britain – which is equivalent to Kennedy-Andrews's dichotomy of 'home and away' – is an essential feature of his migrant poetry.[84] But the common definition of home as a single place of origin is also redefined by migrancy, as Kennedy-Andrews explains: '"home" can become even more of a shifting signifier, no longer simply equatable [sic] with birthplace, or family place, or even the place where one was reared and spent most of one's life'.[85] Home for the diasporic subject becomes open-ended, as it is 'inevitably revised'. If 'Westering Home' bears witness to this process of revision, then 'You Know the Way', from *The Seasons of Cullen Church*, represents a more enthusiastic embrace of the possibilities engendered by migration. It's a poem which celebrates geographical mobility. It also represents the speaker's receptivity to 'other places' than Ireland, and it finally incorporates these places into the speaker's diasporic poetic identity. It is worth quoting in full:

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[83] *Writing Home*, p. 18.
[84] 'An Irish Poet in the UK', p. 27.
[85] Ibid, p. 3.

You know the way how, crossing Central Park,

trying to get to the West Side from the east

or to the East Side museums from the west,

you stray off line –

I'll start again. You know the way how,

driving into Millstreet, you must decide

at the top of Lislehane whether to go

west to Ballydaly or east by Coalpits –

I'll start one last time: you know the way

how, when you get the Oxford Tube, you

must decide whether to get off at Notting Hill

or stay on till Marble Arch or Victoria –

well, that is how it is at this stage of things:

no right or wrong way, not much turning

on which you choose, or how far the decision

will take you from the straight and narrow.[86]

[86] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'You Know the Way', in *The Seasons of Cullen Church*, p. 19.

It is typical of O'Donoghue to begin the poem's narrative with a disarming colloquialism. Parker highlights 'O'Donoghue's tendency to buttonhole the reader with a colloquial introductory phrase'.[87] This feature is as essential to O'Donoghue's poetic mode as what Coughlan terms his *sotto voce*.[88] Yet in this poem there is little more than a touch of sprezzatura and lambency. The opening vernacular phrase assumes an especial significance beyond drawing the reader in. It is a pun, not just nudging the reader with the easy opening gambit, 'you know the way', so as to suggest familiarity; it is also ironic, as this profession of knowing the way is contradicted by the speaker's description in the poem of being unsure of which route to take. Yet, at another level, the expression is hinting that the speaker really does *know* the way, confident in the cultural routes that they have charted over the years. The emphasis here would be on 'know' (both in the title and the body of the poem), and the 'You' is really an 'I': 'I *know* the way', the speaker is slyly asserting. The 'I' in this poem is thus a suppressed or latent one. This phrase, 'you know the way', serving as both the title of the poem and its refrain, perfectly captures the speaker's new-found worldly confidence.

Despite O'Donoghue's usual lack of adherence to strict stanza structures, this poem is divided into four discrete quatrains. Each stanza (apart from the last) deals with a different place: the United States of America (specifically New York), Ireland (specifically County Cork), and Britain (specifically Oxford: the 'Oxford Tube' is, slightly confusingly, an affordable bus service than runs between Oxford and Victoria in London). The whole poem is one sentence, with caesuras marking the pauses, rather than full-stops. This is taken from the classical tradition: Michael Longley frequently deploys caesuras for this reason. Combined with enjambment, these features enact the continuity between places, collapsing the spatial distances. There is no centre against which the speaker's identity is

[87] 'Neither home nor away', p. 516.
[88] Coughlan, p. 183.

defined, but instead we have a constellation of places that together constitute the speaker's poetic identity. Equal space within the poem is given to the three places, indicating their equivalent weighting in the speaker's mind. The speaker is, in effect, in three places at once, incorporating them all into their single imaginative moment.

The volta of this poem occurs in the final stanza: 'well, that is how it is at this stage of things: […there is] no right or wrong way'. The stress on the initial 'well' here, which is used colloquially as an interjection to indicate the resumption of speech following the previous caesura, signals this turn. There are two meanings to this sentence. One alludes to the speaker's old age. As an elderly man athwart the grave,[89] there is not much riding on his major life decisions, and how far it will take him from the 'straight and narrow'. O'Donoghue has expressed a similar sentiment in the earlier poem 'Nel Mezzo del Cammin', from *Gunpowder*. Its title betrays O'Donoghue's medievalism and is taken from the first line of Dante's *Inferno*, 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita'. This can be translated as: 'Half way along the road we have to go',[90] or, less vaguely, as 'in the middle of the journey of our life'.[91] O'Donoghue's 'Nel Mezzo' has the speaker reflecting on their middle-age. They are slightly self-pitying and are uncertain (a typical trait of O'Donoghue's speakers) of whether they have made the correct life-choices. 'This road I had taken for a good byway / Is the main thoroughfare', they lament, 'and even that / Now seems too costly to maintain'.[92] This poem is also intertextual with Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken'. The themes and sentiments expressed in these poems are remarkably similar. Indeed, the easy colloquial style of O'Donoghue's poem also bears the influence

[89] À la Pozzo: 'They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams in an instant, then it's night once more', Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber, 1978), p. 89.
[90] Dante, *The Divine Comedy,* ed. David H. Higgins and trans. C.H. Sisson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 47.
[91] Dante, 'Canto 1', in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume 1, Inferno*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 26–34 (p. 27).
[92] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Nel Mezzo del Cammin', in *Gunpowder*, p. 15.

of Frost. Frost's poem opens with, 'Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, / And sorry I could not travel both', before ending:

> I shall be telling this with a sigh
>
> Somewhere ages and ages hence:
>
> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
>
> I took the one less traveled by,
>
> And that has made all the difference.[93]

Frost's speaker is poised between a melancholy and philosophical state of mind. They are half-disappointed and half-happy about the route they have taken through life. That it has 'made all the difference' could be interpreted both ways. O'Donoghue's 'Nel Mezzo' ends somewhat cryptically, however, and with an appreciable impression of doom: 'Soon we'll be counting razorblades and pencils'.[94] The road metaphor from this earlier poem of the speaker's middle years is recalled – via Dante and Frost – in O'Donoghue's 'You Know the Way', which now finds the speaker in the autumn of their life. The journeys that the speaker describes are metaphors for decisions that the speaker is asked to take in their *journey* through life. But where anxiety pervades 'Nel Mezzo' ('Too many holes to fill, not enough time / To start again'), the looming presence of death lends the speaker a healthier sense of perspective in 'You Know': now there is 'not much turning / on which [route they] choose'.

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[93] Robert Frost, 'The Road Not Taken', in *The Collected Poems* (London: Vintage, 2013), p. 105.

[94] There is an echo of Yeats's 'Vacillation' in O'Donoghue's poem too. Its middle-aged speaker – 'My fiftieth year had come and gone' – meditates on their life: 'Things said or done long years ago, / Or things I did not do or say / But thought that I might say or do, / Weigh me down'. In *Collected Poems*, pp. 257–261 (p. 259).

The line, ‘you stray off line –’, from the ultimate line of the first stanza, is formally perfect, and prefigures the second definition of the phrase, ‘no right or wrong way’. The form carries the sense of the poem: the speaker is deciding which direction to go as they cross Central Park in New York, and ends up heading the wrong way. The line stops abruptly with a caesura, and is picked up again in the next stanza. Thus, the line of this poem halts midway, mirroring the speaker in New York who strays off course and then, realising their mistake, stops to consider a change of course. It rests on the two senses of the word ‘line’: the line of text within the poem, and ‘straying off line’, a colloquial phrase meaning to get lost or go wrong. Stanzas two and three describe the speaker in a similar predicament in different places: on the bus to London deciding where to alight, or in County Cork wondering which way to turn at a junction. This is a poem all about routes and directions, literal and imaginative, and the speaker has arrived at a ‘stage’ where what their younger self may have perceived as having gone wrong, is for the mature speaker quite the opposite: for the diasporic subject, there is ‘no right or wrong way’ to go in a cultural sense, with cultural identity itself being formulated from its various encounters with other cultures. Thus, the various *routes* that the speaker is literally taking in this poem also become metaphors for the various *cultural routes* that they have happily taken. O’Donoghue’s speaker here is, in his own way, professing a poetic identity that incorporates two, or even three, cultures. ‘You Know the Way’ articulates a different kind of poetic identity to many of O’Donoghue’s poems of dislocation: its vocabulary of motion, migration, and multiple places speaks of a diasporic sensibility, which transcends the oppositions between ‘home and away’, and Oxford and Cullen that have proved so aesthetically productive for O’Donoghue.

The ostensible simplicity of O’Donoghue’s poems belies their complexity. On the one hand, O’Donoghue’s poetry is dislocated. O’Donoghue’s speakers frequently look back to Ireland from

abroad, evoking the people of his originary place. The tone of these poems is very often pained or mournful: the speaker is forever suffering the pain of detachment, having experienced the loss of migration. And this loss is not tempered by his actual return to his place of origin, as poems such as ‘Robbing the Orchard’ reveal. Yet such a view of O’Donoghue’s poetry is incomplete, because there are some (particularly recent) poems by O’Donoghue that are far more reconciled and even celebratory of the flux that characterises the condition of migration. If poems such as ‘Aurofac 20’ can be described as finely wrought expressions of dislocation, then ‘You Know the Way’ is the apotheosis of the diasporic O’Donoghue, whose speaker is happily hybrid, and is geographically, culturally and imaginatively mobile. He embraces a mode of being that is not allied to his single place of origin indefinitely, instead accepting adaptation and change. O’Donoghue is, therefore, ultimately as much a poet of dislocation as diaspora.

## Chapter 4: 'Braniel falls below / my feet': Home in Peter McDonald's Poetry

### Introduction

Peter McDonald was born in Belfast in 1962. He is a member of the generation that is positioned between the so-called Ulster renaissance group of Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley and others that Heather Clark has so eloquently discussed,[1] and the later-dubbed 'post-ceasefire generation' of Alan Gillis and Sinéad Morrissey et al.[2] McDonald is also younger than the likes of Paul Muldoon (b. 1951). McDonald has spoken warmly of Muldoon's aesthetic openness and also Mahon's musicality as influences on his own poetry, but these qualities are not immediately apparent.[3] Although he does seem to aspire, fundamentally, to a delicate musicality in his poetry, the aural texture of McDonald's poetry is different to Mahon's. McDonald's style is plainer than Mahon's. As one reviewer put it, McDonald doesn't 'strain for effect or resort to gimmickry. He trusts the language' (although this is not to argue that Mahon strains for effect, either).[4] The subdued voice of 'The Mild Autumn' is exemplary of McDonald's style: 'But this year we are having a mild autumn, / and I am home to see you in October'. Returning home (and this is an operative word for McDonald) is a prominent theme in his migrant poetry. The poem finds the speaker wishing he could delay his departure:

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[1] Heather Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962–1972* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[2] Fran Brearton, 'Fran Brearton in Conversation with Peter McDonald', *PN Review*, 39:4 (2013), pp. 60–63 (p. 62).

[3] McDonald seeks to emulate in some way Muldoon's 'predisposition to openness in an aesthetic sense, or an avoidance of the too obviously final and decided in poems', and of Mahon's *Courtyards in Delft* (1981), McDonald remembers 'reading the poems, reading some of them again aloud, and realising that this was in every sense the real thing poetically, utterly true, completely musical, and what I wanted somehow to be able to do myself'. Ibid, p. 63.

[4] Dennis O'Driscoll, from the blurb of *Biting the Wax*. This echoes Auden's sentiment: 'Only tuneless birds, / Inarticulate warriors, / Need bright plumage'. 'Thanksgiving for a Habitat', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1994), pp. 687–716 (p. 694).

Suppose I may stay here, or might never have gone,

where the trees with all their leaves in flood

are never stripped.[5]

The first subjunctive clause ('suppose I may stay here') has a hopeful timbre that is tempered slightly by the half-hopeful, half-wistful tone of the following clause (the past participle 'gone', on which the line falls, is also both mournful and hopeful). Rather than any sudden key change or crescendo, McDonald is particularly adept at these subtle modulations in the voice of the poem. McDonald mostly favours a natural iambic stress pattern (with the usual variations), pitched in an accessible, although not strictly colloquial, register. McDonald is also disinclined to write in Muldoon's riddling and highly allusive style. Indeed, there is a singularity of vision within McDonald's poetry.

In any case, McDonald is much better known as a critic than as a poet. He has written, *inter alia*, significant criticism on Louis MacNeice, as well as an excellent refutation of Northern Irish identity politics.[6] It may be a consequence of his long residence in Britain, and his stature as a critic – which perhaps obscures his other output – that causes McDonald's poetry to have been largely overlooked. There is a dearth of direct criticism on his poetry, and McDonald is frequently omitted from anthologies of Irish poetry: he does not appear in Wes Davis's otherwise very inclusive *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry* (2013), for example. But McDonald is a graceful and nuanced poet, who has been consistently producing intelligent poetry since the 1980s. He has had seven main poetry collections published, with *Biting the Wax* appearing in 1989, and *The Gifts of Fortune* in 2020. He also found time to publish a translation of the ancient Greek *Homeric Hymns* in 2016.

[5] 'The Mild Autumn', in *Pastorals* (London: Carcanet Press, 2004), p. 50.
[6] These are: *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), and *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford, OUP, 1997).

McDonald was born into a Protestant, working-class family, and as a child lived mostly in Braniel – a council estate in east Belfast – and later in Gilnahirk, another suburb close by.[7] Within the group of O'Donoghue et al., the Northern Irish McDonald thus occupies an important position. But like the other poets in this thesis, work and study were the reasons for his initial migration to, and his continued residence in, Britain. McDonald first lived in Oxford when he was a student in the 1980s, and he has resided in Cambridge (from 1988–92), Bath (whilst working in Bristol University's English department in the 1990s), and just north of Oxford since 1999, having been appointed the Christopher Tower Student and Tutor in Poetry in the English Language at Christ Church in that year. Given McDonald's long residence in England, the country already features in his earliest poems, such as 'A Gift' from his debut collection. Here, the speaker details their journey home from a jeweller, having purchased a necklace of 'hand-worked silver, pebbles black to the core', for their partner. They speed through the English countryside:

> In the car doing ninety,
>
> England is peaceful, the past
>
> no more than a minute's sky,
>
> neutral, nothing to do with us.
>
> We stop to the smell of petrol
>
> and hot rubber, home at last.

[7] In a rare interview with Fran Brearton, he describes 'a ground floor council flat in the Braniel (a housing estate to the east of Belfast), where my parents and I lived from when I was about two years old until I was twelve or thirteen'. He also describes 'Gilnahirk' as the other important place in the same interview. Braniel often appears in his poetry. In Fran Brearton, 'In Conversation with Peter McDonald', *PN Review*, 39:4 (2013), pp. 60–63 (pp. 60 & 61).

With my one hand holding a glass,

the other ponders the intricate

weight of your necklace.

For a moment, I hesitate

before I speak, at one almost

with the heat of four black tyres,

the sky, the smell of petrol[.][8]

This could be read, rather straightforwardly, as a poem about retail therapy. The speaker attains a momentary state of utter delight having made their purchase. This may also be because the necklace is a symbol of the speaker's eternal love for their partner: they are perfectly content in the world with their spouse. This is also, therefore, a love poem. But it is also a migrant poem. The speaker is clearly at one with England: 'England is peaceful, the past / no more than a minute's sky, / nothing to do with us'. What is 'the past' here? Is this the speaker's personal past which may contain trauma from which they desire escape (perhaps a lovers' tiff), or is this a comment on the historical past, such as the relationship between Northern Ireland and England? This isn't clear, but the past does not affect the speaker and their spouse: they occupy an ahistorical position in the poem. The past is merely 'neutral', or, even, irrelevant. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews suggested that one feature (of many) in the poetry of the new 'post-national generation' of Irish poets who came to prominence in the 1990s and 2000s is that 'concepts of home continue to be interrogated', but not in terms that play

[8] Peter McDonald, 'A Gift', in *Biting the Wax* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1989), p. 22.

upon 'the old colonial theme'.[9] This is evident in McDonald's poem. The semantic field of this poem is one of contentment, with adjectives such as 'peaceful', and with the speaker 'at one' with their surroundings, as they return 'home at last' to their Cambridgeshire abode. The speaker of 'A Gift' conveys their affiliation with England. England is, quite simply, the speaker's country of residence, and they are happy there.

Despite the fact that McDonald has recently described himself as an 'Irish poet in Britain' – and that his experience of migrancy has contributed to his sense of Irish identity – he has also rejected the idea of his emigrant status.[10] He explicitly disavows the highly politicized concept of exile, remarking: 'Oxford is a place I work in. The Government of Great Britain has not forced me to leave the country and go into exile. It's really just that simple: no theories required'.[11] In his contribution to Wheatley and Quinn's special issue of *Metre* that I previously discussed, McDonald further explores his attitude to living abroad. Reflecting on his embrace of the term 'mainland' – which does have some controversial Unionist resonances in the Northern Irish context – McDonald reveals:

> I don't consider myself to be living abroad, though I might do so if I found myself to be holed up in Berlin, or Tokyo, or Dublin. Then again, I might love it in those places, and decide that they could be added to the expanding catchment area (where, in my experience, poems happen) that I like to think of as a kind of personal Greater Belfast.[12]

[9] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), p. 249.
[10] 'To the English, I'm as Irish as makes no odds', he remarks. Peter McDonald, 'Abroad Thoughts, From Home', *Agenda*, 54:3–4 (2021), pp. 18–23 (p.19). McDonald's title draws our attention to the significance of the word 'home' in this writing.
[11] 'In Conversation with Peter McDonald', p. 61.
[12] Peter McDonald, 'Peter McDonald on Being Irish and Living Abroad', *Metre*, 3 (1997), pp. 16–17 (p. 17).

This may seem like a contradiction, especially given his recent remarks about being Irish in Britain, and how migration has contributed to his identity. But for McDonald, there is a distinction to be made between being an Irish poet in Britain, and being a fully-fledged *migrant*, which seems to carry a slightly different set of connotations. McDonald thus occupies the strange position of being a migrant who doesn't consider himself to be living abroad. This raises some corollary questions: why might this be, and how is this registered in his poetry which has been primarily written from Britain? It would be tempting, given McDonald's admission above, to read these poems as straightforward representations of his unencumbered attitude towards his migration. We might, therefore, argue the following: unlike a poet such as Bernard O'Donoghue, there is no sense with McDonald of great anxiety and feeling out of place, and of feeling in-between or liminal. Migration is not an intense experience of deracination for McDonald. His poetry is suffused with a strong sense of belonging. McDonald brings to his migrant poems a refreshing sense of openness, and this is demonstrated by the idea that he desires to include his new place in the expanding catchment area of Belfast. We might further argue that this attitude is perhaps at least partially reflective of his Unionist background, with the idea that he – in one way or another – already belongs in Britain. Of course, Northern Ireland is not England, but McDonald states clearly that living on 'mainland' Britain doesn't feel like living abroad.

A poem such as 'A Gift' *is* a good representation of this attitude in general terms, but it is far from the whole picture. McDonald's rather contrarian stance on the traditional language of the diasporic (with its vocabulary of displacement and deracination) isn't necessarily borne out in his poetry. Indeed, 'A Gift' is a significant poem in the way it exemplifies McDonald's post-national, personal explorations of home (I will return to this idea), although it also goes *against* the grain of the majority of McDonald's migrant poems. This is because, more often than not, it is *Belfast* that the speaker evokes, and it is Belfast that is their home, not England. More specifically, the defining

characteristic of McDonald's migrant poems is the relationship with Belfast. The city is central to his migrant poems, and it often appears as a highly specific, familial place of origin. It does aid our understanding of the poetry to know the personality behind it, but ultimately, this personality and the speakers of the poems have their own connected but separate lives. That is, although the lyric 'I' emanates from the author behind it, it is also always a kind of fiction. We should therefore resist formulating prescriptive readings of McDonald's migrant poems based on his own personal statements. His more numerous Belfast poems, such as 'Eclogue' and others that I will discuss shortly, do not represent a relaxed attitude towards the condition of migration.

'The Overcoat' is rather more typical of McDonald's migrant poems in this regard. It is a Belfast poem which enacts an imaginative return: 'On business now, and going home, / I'm no more than a few steps from / Belfast in 1972', the speaker reveals in the second stanza. The speaker is on a train returning 'home' (the word surfaces again here) when they are suddenly gripped by a potent recollection of their own father in Belfast doing the same. They imagine their father catching 'the number 24 or 32 / home, back over his own traces'. This describes the very process at work in the poem itself. The speaker is himself going 'back over his own traces' towards his true 'home' in Belfast: their own commute in the present time in Britain is a mirror image of their father's, and in a different way, the speaker enacts a fanciful return 'home' to Belfast in the poem. The poem hinges on the image, and the thermosensory resonances, of a coat: as his father comes in to the 'ground-floor / Braniel flat', 'he hangs up his overcoat / and the cold begins to radiate'. This is evoked by a similar sensation in the present: 'Beside me, a grey overcoat / in the train here is sending out / a smoky aura of sheer cold'.[13] The child speaker would often receive gifts from their returning father, bought with pre-decimal currency – 'some toy bought from a closing shop / for a shilling or for one

[13] There is a clear echo of O'Donoghue's poem, 'Gunpowder', here. This poem, written after the speaker's father's death, is evoked by the smell of his father's jacket, which was 'hung / Behind the door in the room we called / His study […] The sleeves smelt of gunpowder, evoking… / Celebration – excitement – things like that', in *Gunpowder* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995), p. 36. W.B. Yeats's 'A Coat' also lurks behind both poems.

and six' – where now the adult speaker does the same for their own children: 'I come home late, / weighed down with chilly racing cars / and with brittle plastic soldiers'. These are the poem's closing lines. There is a sense of imperfect representation suggested here: the speaker's present life is an imitation of a 'place lost in an infinite / line of shapes: indistinct, frail'. The sensation that founded the poem returns to signal this: the 'cold that presses past me / here is maybe a ghost's trail'.[14] Belfast is increasingly becoming a 'place' that is 'lost', it is irrecoverable: this is the essence of McDonald's changing relationship with Belfast. Separation from the city is registered as a kind of loss in many of the poems – even those in which the speaker travels home – but their attitude towards this bereavement changes. It is the evolution of this more significant relationship that I will explore.

McDonald's migrant poems always fall into one of two categories: they are either set in Britain (usually Oxfordshire), or they are set in Belfast. These Belfast poems always describe a return – either imaginative or physical, or both – to the city. McDonald's best Belfast poems are concentrated in his latest four collections, *Pastorals* (2004), *The House of Clay* (2007), Torchlight (2011), and *Gifts of Fortune* (2020).[15] The longer McDonald is away from Belfast – that is, the longer he is based in Britain – the more the city features in his poetry. It may also be that age and the loss of loved ones strengthen the emotional pull of Belfast in his most recent collections. Accordingly, some of McDonald's most successful and poignant migrant poems describe an actual return to Belfast, and seem to be written in the aftermath of a bereavement. There are no great stylistic evolutions in McDonald's poetry, although, in general, his style becomes more colloquial and less formal in his later poetry, particularly in *The House of Clay* and beyond. There is also a slight shift in attitude towards Belfast in particular that occurs after his third collection, *Pastorals*. From a desire to

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[14] Peter McDonald, 'The Overcoat', in *The House of Clay* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2007), pp. 28–30 (p. 29).

[15] McDonald's second collection, *Adam's Dream* (1996), for example, does not contain any poems that reflect on migrancy, either obliquely or directly. Its title poem is a long sequence which is written from the perspective of the 18th Century Scottish architect Robert Adam, as he imagines the reconstruction of Lisbon following an earthquake. There is also a lengthy reworking of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Orchard Pit*. These are some of McDonald's less successful poems. McDonald is at his best in the briefer, sparser lyric forms.

reconnect – 'I'm lost to home / and home is lost to me' – the speaker moves towards acceptance: 'now Braniel falls below / my feet; the houses start to go'.[16] I will explore this change in perspective, via my discussion of the different varieties of migrant poem outlined above. McDonald's migrant poems are scattered throughout his substantial oeuvre, and I will give adequate representation to all the collections that feature migrant poems, rather than prioritizing one collection over another.

**II. What do you mean by 'home'?**

The word 'home' appears extensively in McDonald's poetry – it is the operative word in 'A Mild Autumn', 'A Gift', 'The Overcoat', and many others – which makes it necessary to define clearly. As John Hollander has argued, home is a very resonant word in English in general: 'the semantic energy of the English word *home* has been charged particularly in the last three centuries by the interanimation of the various instances of "what you mean by home"'.[17] Home therefore has many meanings. Michael Fox Allen argues that the fundamental definitions of home are:

> The place from which I originate (homeland). The place where I discover who I am, have my strongest emotional ties, and am anchored by memories essential to my life-narrative. The place where my ethnic, national, religious identity is most strongly affirmed and reinforced. The place where I have my spiritual, ancestral, or other special roots (my country, where I grew up). The place where I belong, feel safe, and am valued.[18]

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[16] Peter McDonald, 'Eclogue', in *Pastorals* (London: Carcanet Press, 2004), pp. 62–65 (p. 62), and '44A', in *The House of Clay* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2007), pp. 60–62 (p. 61).
[17] *The Work of Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 72. He takes his quotation from Robert Frost's poem, 'The Death of the Hired Man'. Hollander's essay from *The Work of Poetry* is titled, 'What you mean by Home'.
[18] Michael Fox Allen, *Home: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), p. 112.

Allen's definitions all begin with the noun 'place', which highlights the fact that 'home' is closely connected to place. The importance of these terms to 'who I am' are also described. Identity is therefore interlinked with both place and home. However, McDonald's home is not bound up with exclusive ideas of 'ethnic, national, or religious identity': it is a personal, familial home that is conjured in his poetry (I will explore this further below). The vast majority of McDonald's migrant poems are generated by Belfast as a place of 'emotional ties' to which he is 'anchored by memories essential to [his] life-narrative'. Belfast is where he 'belong[s]' in this sense. McDonald himself has discussed the resonances of home for Irish poetry. When considering Derek Mahon's, Seamus Heaney's, and W.B. Yeats's deployment of the term (in 'Afterlives', 'The Tollund Man', and 'Under Saturn' respectively), and the concept within Michael Longley's poetry, McDonald makes a series of pertinent observations; and these are as much relevant to Irish poetry in general as they are to McDonald's own poetry:

> 'Home' means a place of origin, and so may be the concrete site in which a poetic voice locates itself […] Of course, like many potent words, 'home' as often carries overtones of banality, and is thus a word in poetry that brings with it certain risks. The resonance of 'home' in Irish poetry has to do with these risks, and would not be possible without them; this is owing partly to the word's long-running potency in the discourses of sentiment and nostalgia[.][19]

Despite the risks, McDonald's own poetic explorations of the various resonances of home are successful. His 'poetic voice' is located in the home of Belfast, and the city is bound up with the key theme of belonging in his migrant poetry. Hollander also suggests that an essential definition of

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[19] *Mistaken Identities,* p. 112.

home is '"a place of origin returned to"'. Indeed, it is often the departure from home that imbues the concept with extra intensity and complexity. The notion of returning home – whether it is imagined or real, and McDonald's poetry enacts both types of return – is inherent to the migrant experience. This also happens to be at the very foundation of Western literature. Homer's *Odyssey* describes a *nostos*, 'meaning a homeward journey', and this word 'probably derives from an Indo-European base that means only "a safe return"; it survives on loan to English only through the interestingly distorted "nostalgia"'. The latter term describes a longing for both a place and a time and is related to the idea of homesickness. Hollander connects *nostos* with home in our modern lexicon: 'we are led to observe here that the sense of *nostos* as a return to a point of origin inheres in some of our modern derived uses of our word [home]'.[20] He observes the troubling fact that, more often than not, 'one returns to a slightly different sense of *home* from the one that one ventures forth from' (as Odysseus himself finds on his return to Ithaca).[21] This observation is particularly pertinent to McDonald, because the definition of home that emerges in his poetry is modified and complicated over time. In this sense, the line from Robert Frost's poem that founds Hollander's essay, 'It all depends on what you mean by home', is also a kind of touchstone for a great deal of McDonald's own poetic explorations of the subject.[22] Frost's formulation gestures towards the heterogeneity of home: home not only means different things to different people, but its definition also varies for the individual.[23] It is an idea that is constantly being renegotiated. For McDonald, with each return to Belfast, the meaning of his home changes.

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[20] Hollander, pp. 66 & 68.
[21] Ibid, p. 68.
[22] Hollander, p. 64.
[23] In Frost's poem, the farmer and wife have this exchange, predicated on the farmer's utterance, '"It all depends on what you mean by home"'. They suggest alternative (or 'profoundly complementary', as Hollander argues) definitions of home. The husband says, '"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in"' (which Frost himself termed 'masculine'), to which his wife replies, '"I should have called it / Something you somehow haven't to deserve"' (which Frost termed the 'feminine'). Robert Frost, 'The Death of the Hired Man', *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Connery Latham (London: Vintage, 2013), pp. 34–40 (p. 38). And Hollander, p. 65.

There is one poem in particular from *Pastorals*, 'Eclogue', that is significant in this regard. 'Eclogue' is overtly personal and familial in outlook, and finds its speaker revisiting Belfast. It is therefore a *nostos* poem of a kind, exploring the migrant speaker's changing relationship with his home city. This poem is an excellent example of the earlier (pre-*The House of Clay*) strain of McDonald's Belfast poems, in which the speaker still desires to reconnect with the city. A pastoral is a verse form first developed by the likes of Theocritus and Virgil. It can be broadly defined as an idealization of rural, usually shepherd, life. There is a rich pastoral tradition in English, and it has assumed various guises at the hands of different poets. J. A. Cuddon describes the pastoral as a display of 'nostalgia for the past, for some hypothetical state of love and peace which has somehow been lost'.[24] Its dominating theme is 'the search for the simple life away from court or town, away from corruption, war, [and] strife'.[25] This, in broad terms, captures some of the chief themes of McDonald's aptly titled collection.[26]

The eclogue is a kind of pastoral, and it has its own tradition in Irish poetry. W.B. Yeats wrote the elegiac 'Shepherd and Goatherd' about Major Robert Gregory (the only child of Lady Gregory) who was killed in action in the First World War (a man 'Most courteous to slow age and hasty youth, / Is dead').[27] This poem takes inspiration from Virgil's fifth Eclogue, and Edmund Spenser's poem about Sir Philip Sidney.[28] Yeats's poem first appeared in *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919). The eclogue as a

[24] J.A. Cuddon, 'Pastoral', in *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, 1998) pp. 644–649 (p. 647).
[25] Ibid.
[26] Peter Didsbury's 'Pastoral' is an amusing parody of the form: 'Steaming cattle stand and dream in the byre. Lofts groan / with meat and bread, berries, polished fruit. [… /] And all things / are content, all are at rest', in *Scenes from a Long Sleep: New and Collected Poems* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2003), p. 23.
[27] W.B. Yeats, 'Shepherd and Goatherd', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Augustine Martin (London: Vintage, 1992), pp. 140–144 (p. 140).
[28] Bernard O'Donoghue quotes from a letter from Yeats to Lady Gregory. Yeats writes that it is '"modelled on what Virgil wrote for some friend of his"', which O'Donoghue identifies as 'the fifth Eclogue: itself probably an imitation of Theocritus' Elegy on Daphnis'. Yeats also told Lady Gregory that the poem was based on 'Spenser's "A pastoral Aeglogue upon the death of Sir Philip Sidney Knight etc."', in 'Heaney, Yeats, and the Language of Pastoral', in *Seamus Heaney and the Classics: Bann Valley Muses*, ed. Stephen Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2019), pp. 147–159 (p. 155).

form is usually dialogic, and dialectical, as it is with both Yeats's and McDonald's poems. Seamus Heaney made grand claims for the verse form, describing it as inviting the reader 'to enter in and to stand back, to regard it as both a revelation and an intervention, a *locus amoenus*'.[29] The eclogue then provides safety or solace from the 'legions and locomotives', that is, the violence of the world and the oppressive trappings of the urban.[30] Heaney firmly believes in the potentially transformative nature of the form, inasmuch as he is making a case for the efficacy of poetry. But McDonald's eclogue is more personal, and is akin to Iain Twiddy's description of the form as about 'things passing', such as the seasons, love, 'dispossession', or nature itself, and that it shows that 'things can be given up and that it is possible to be reconciled to substitutes'.[31] McDonald's poem lacks the range, and broader political and historical scope, of Heaney's own from *Electric Light* (2001), and also the similarly political perspective of MacNeice's 'Eclogue from Iceland'.[32] Such MacNeicean diatribes as 'I come from an island, Ireland, a nation / Built upon violence and morose vendettas' are wholly absent from McDonald's eclogue.[33] The tone of McDonald's poem is closer to Yeats's, as the theme of grief runs through both poems. The speaker's past and present, his place of birth and his current habitation in Britain, and the relationship between them, are pondered in McDonald's quiet poem.

'Eclogue' takes the form of a dialogue between the speaker and an unnamed interlocutor who is perhaps their conscience. It is a long poem of six stanzas of varying lengths. 'It's as though the fields around these parts / had been written over as well as worked / for generations', the main speaker

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[29] Seamus Heaney, 'Eclogues *in extremis*: On the Staying Power of the Pastoral', in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature* 103:C (2003), pp. 1–12 (p. 7).
[30] Ibid.
[31] Iain Twiddy, 'Seamus Heaney's Versions of Pastoral', *Essays in Criticism*, 56:1 (2006), pp. 51–71 (p. 51).
[32] J. A. Cuddon mentions MacNeice's poem in his entry on the Eclogue, but seems to imply that it doesn't adhere particularly closely to the customs of the form. It is instead merely 'the medium for any ideas the poet feels a need to express', p. 248. McDonald's poem is more conventional.
[33] Louis MacNeice, 'Eclogue from Iceland', in *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds, pp. 40–48 (p. 41).

begins. They are in semi-rural Belfast, and draw on the conventional rural imagery of the eclogue form. The landscape is a palimpsest, which is a common description of Northern Ireland, with its many identities. The speaker is preparing to depart for Oxford: 'This time tomorrow, I'll be gone / – or back to where I'm gone from now – / and the light and drizzle', and the 'baffling wind / that come[s] and go[es] on the Castlereagh Hills / […] will come and go again, without me'.[34] The speaker is sad that they are to leave, that they will pass away from this place. Their interlocutor then interjects with an antithetical position: '*you know rightly now* / *it's time for you to be away*', they insist, '*it's not the best place, not the worst*'. There is no need to mourn his departure, they suggest, because there is nothing particularly spectacular about this place. The first speaker then confesses a kind of dispossession (another of Twiddy's themes) as he sighs: 'I'm lost to home, as home is lost / to me, and there's no going back'.[35] The concept of 'home' suddenly takes on new import in this poem. Migration has introduced an irreparable severance between speaker and place. Such an attitude is indeed rather conventional, perhaps befitting the tropes of the eclogue itself that McDonald is adhering to. The speaker confesses to being doomed to 'just visiting and visiting', unable to reconnect with their place of origin.

But again, their interlocutor interposes with a counterargument: '*You're hypnotized by the stupid past*'. This preoccupation with the past and what is lost is the source of the main speaker's gloom. The interlocutor urges their morose companion to look instead to the future. This future, which is really a reflection of the present, is an existence of financial security, and '*the normal mix* / *of family, routine, good times*'. And contradicting their confidante's insistence that there is, indeed, peace in the north now, the main speaker personalises this, declaring: 'I'm never at peace, for it's one thing / or another that distresses me'. They feel separated from the home they once knew, but they still

[34] Peter McDonald, 'Eclogue', in *Pastorals* (London: Carcanet Press, 2004), pp. 62–65 (p. 62).
[35] Ibid, pp. 62–63. The conscience's contribution is italicised.

desire to reconnect. Of his family in Belfast, the speaker declares that even when they are away, 'I keep on looking out for them / or listening for their voices in mine'.[36]

The death of the speaker's father is perhaps the reason for their return to Belfast in this poem. Their father is in the cemetery at Gilnahirk, and this bereavement seems to have stirred in the main speaker their pining for their happier past:

> [...] a boundary
>
> between our steps and the graveyard,
>
> keeps watch over the newly dead
>
> and my own father now, a guest there.

The image of ghosts appears in the poem several times: the people of Belfast – including the speaker's father – are mere 'thin ghosts' in his absence, and the landscape becomes a site where the speaker projects 'a shadow', peopling the place with dim recollections from afar. And, at the close of the poem, when the speaker realises that the time has truly come to venture back to Britain, their partner offers to travel together. Here the spectral image returns, but it is redeployed in description of the now-departing protagonists: '*our two* / *thin shadows have begun to stretch* / *into each other along the road*'.[37] A close family death throws into relief the arc of the speaker's own life. The hushed funereal tone of this poem complements the theme of grief that binds the speaker's thoughts together: they have lost childhood, their father, and their past and its home with its easily

[36] Ibid, p. 63.
[37] Ibid, p. 64.

navigable coordinates. Their melancholy is slightly alleviated as they begin to make their return, but the essential realisation of the fading away of these once corporeal and stable facets of the speaker's existence is no less apparent. The dialectical, dialogic structure that is inherent to the eclogue is the perfect formal representation of the 'processing' of these events in the speaker's mind.

The problematic identification with Belfast as home when you reside in Britain is an aesthetically productive quandary for McDonald. Operating within the conventions of the form, McDonald's 'Eclogue' articulates a troubled sense of home. Kennedy-Andrews has described the frequent aesthetic constructions of home in the Northern Irish context as being acts of 'imaginative repossession', and that these 'recreation[s] of community' are often 'synonym[s] or synecdoche[s] for the nation'.[38] He identifies this feature in 'the older generation of poets' in his study, which includes John Montague and Seamus Heaney, and others he describes as coming from a 'Catholic, nationalist, rural background'.[39] He suggests that this goes both ways: 'Confronted with the exclusivist, Gaelic, Catholic myth of home, explored by writers like Heaney and Montague, Protestant writers have sought to stake their own claim to an Ulster homeland'.[40] Such characterisations are reductive. As McDonald argues, Heaney moved away (especially after *North*) from the 'earthed certainties' on which his 'popular appeal was founded': *Seeing Things* (1991) 'represents the poet's most sustained attempt to achieve imaginative lift-off into a kind of poetry less constrained by identities (Irish or otherwise) and more openly metaphysical in its concerns'.[41] This is the 'secular mysticism' that Bernard O'Donoghue has identified in the same collection.[42] In any case, McDonald does not invoke any kind of 'sacramental, essentialist sense of place' in

[38] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, pp. 4 & 5.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid, p. 7.
[41] *Mistaken Identities*, p. 14.
[42] Bernard O'Donoghue, *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 128.

'Eclogue', or other poems that explore his concept of home.[43] His sense of home is not nationalist and 'exclusivist'. Indeed, the opening image of 'Eclogue' ('It's as though the fields around these parts / had been written over as well as worked / for generations') makes reference to the many (compatible) ways in which Northern Ireland can be thought of as home.

The sense of home that emerges in 'Eclogue' is not the cultural and political home which is embodied most famously in the lines, 'I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home' from Heaney's 'The Tollund Man'.[44] Despite the similarities in Heaney's and McDonald's formulations – home is 'lost' to McDonald's speaker and Heaney's speaker is 'lost' yet 'at home' – the sense of home in 'Eclogue' is closer to O'Donoghue's declaration that he is 'Neither here nor there, and therefore home' that I previously discussed.[45] The concept of home lurks behind some of O'Donoghue's poems, but he seldom deploys the term directly ('Westering Home' is a rare example). These poems by O'Donoghue and McDonald explore a distinctly *migrant* conception of home. But where O'Donoghue's speaker moves towards an acceptance of the migrant's ontology of indeterminacy – with his poetic identity located somewhere on the continuum of Ireland and Britain – McDonald's speaker is, at least at this stage in his poetry, still preoccupied with reconnecting wholesale with Belfast.

Indeed, O'Donoghue makes for an interesting comparison with McDonald. I have suggested that McDonald occupies the space between the Northern Irish generation of Heaney et al., Muldoon, and the later post-ceasefire generation of Morrissey and others. However, another way to situate McDonald is as an Irish poet in Britain, and more specifically, as an Irish poet in Oxford (Oxford is the

[43] Kennedy-Andrews, p. 7.
[44] Seamus Heaney, 'The Tollund Man', in *Wintering Out* (London: Faber, 1972), pp. 36–37 (p. 37).
[45] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Westering Home', in *Here Nor There* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), p. 51.

city that, outside Belfast, has featured the most in McDonald's life). This is a significant category, with a long history. Of the poets under discussion in this thesis, both McDonald and O'Donoghue can be classified in this way. Both poets have come from humble backgrounds to forge successful careers at Oxford. McDonald and O'Donoghue have also been associated, in varying degrees, with *Oxford Poetry*, and in the case of O'Donoghue, Sycamore Press, the small-scale Oxford publisher founded by John Fuller (I will return to this in my discussion of McDonald's 'Oxford Poetry' below). Yet, their cultural backgrounds are quite dissimilar: O'Donoghue is a Catholic from a rural area in the Republic, and McDonald is a Protestant from Belfast. The attitude to migrancy that emerges from their poems is, nonetheless, similar: for O'Donoghue, Cullen is an important and nourishing place in his poems, in the same way that Belfast is for McDonald. Ultimately, it is migration from a formative place that generates O'Donoghue's Cullen poems and McDonald's poems about Belfast. This has less to do with religion, and much more to do with a shared experience. In this sense, it is no surprise that these two poets frequently write about their originary place in a similar way. The aesthetic strategy may be broadly comparable, but their subject matter is also highly individual, because it is born of their own unique experiences and memories. Thus, despite the importance of Belfast and Cullen for both McDonald and O'Donoghue respectively, there is a key difference between their migrant poetry. I have described the duality in O'Donoghue's poetry between dislocation and diaspora: the poems of dislocation give expression to a poetic identity that is located in one place (Cullen), where the diasporic poems incorporate Britain and other places into this same identity. There is no clear transition from one type of poem to the other in O'Donoghue's poetry, but instead a kind of coexistence of these two different varieties of poem. For McDonald's migrant speakers, however, no other place ever supplants Belfast, or has the same significance. Although the relationship with Belfast changes over time in McDonald's poetry, it is never fully *replaced*, as it were, with anywhere else.

Going back a generation or two, perhaps a more obvious comparison is with Louis MacNeice, a poet who shares McDonald's cultural (if not class) background, as well as the Oxford connection. MacNeice was born in Belfast in 1907, but lived much of his adult life in Britain. In his migrant poems, MacNeice frequently reflected on Belfast from Britain with exasperation. His attitude towards Northern Ireland was ultimately marked by its contradictoriness, however. In section 'XVI' of *Autumn Journal*, the speaker is forthright about Ulster, asserting that 'The blots on the page are so black / That they cannot be covered with shamrock. / I hate your grandiose airs', despite admitting that Ireland still calls to him: 'her name keeps ringing like a bell / In an under-water belfry'.[46] MacNeice's tendency for self-contradiction is best embodied in 'Valediction', one of his greatest poems from his fertile early period: 'hooey' Ireland is a place of 'inbred soul', 'climatic maleficence' and 'drug-dull fatalism', and so the speaker resolves to 'acquire an attitude not yours', before declaring, with some melodrama: 'Farewell, my country, and in perpetuum'. But this follows an earlier statement: 'But I cannot deny my past to which myself is wed, / A woven figure cannot undo its thread'.[47] Each of these statements undercuts the other. McDonald's poetry does not record such intense vacillations in attitude. His poems about Belfast, when they do appear, are rarely so critical either. Yet, as McDonald himself has argued of MacNeice, 'It is important that, from the beginning, "home" for MacNeice was always somewhere else'.[48] This statement is equally true of McDonald's own poetry. McDonald does not express the same exasperation with his home country as MacNeice, but home is always in Belfast.

Belfast is not just his originary homeplace, but it is the place where McDonald spent his childhood. In this sense, it is especially important. As McDonald has argued: 'In poetry, formative experience is nearly everything: it's not just the imaginative fuel of a lifetime's thinking and writing, but the

[46] Louis MacNeice, 'Autumn Journal', in *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber, 1979), pp. 133 & 132.
[47] Louis MacNeice, 'Valediction', in *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber, 1979), pp. 52–54 (pp. 52 & 53).
[48] Peter McDonald, *Louis MacNeice: The Poet in his Contexts*, p. 203.

definitive test and conditioning of the poetry's voice'.[49] It is therefore no surprise that McDonald draws more and more on autobiographical material in his poetry. It has always been a feature of his poetry, and it is arguable that all his poems that draw from the well of personal experience are biographical in one way or another. But the material of childhood in particular increasingly features in his poetry, from *Pastorals* and beyond. McDonald spent his entire childhood in Belfast, and has lived most of his adult life in Britain. The speakers of the autobiographical poems clearly reflect on this, which makes these poems implicit reflections on the migrant experience. McDonald's childhood poems are concerned, in part, with examining the past from the present. Home remains an important concept in these poems, as it continues to be renegotiated. They are also poems of return: the speaker is literally revisiting Belfast, as well as imaginatively returning, sometimes enacting both types of return in the same poem. '44A', from McDonald's fourth collection, *The House of Clay*, and one poem from his most recent collection, *The Gifts of Fortune*, exhibit this strategy.[50] With their foundation in childhood, these poems present a more complex network of ideas and experiences than 'Eclogue'. What might these more aesthetically involute poems – with their shifting temporal landscapes – reveal about the familial home of Belfast?

'44A' represents an evolution in the relationship that McDonald's migrant speakers have with the home of Belfast. The poem takes its title from the house number of McDonald's first childhood dwelling on the Braniel estate. The MacNeicean influence on this poem is not immediately obvious, particularly for the reasons above. Yet we might consider '44A' to be a kind of valediction in the MacNeicean vein, although without the elements of diatribe and contradiction present in MacNeice's famous poem. McDonald's might be dubbed a *gentle valediction* by comparison, a kind

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[49] 'In Conversation', p. 61.

[50] McDonald usually derives the titles of his collections from a short phrase buried deep within a poem from the book in question, such as *Biting the Wax*, *The House of Clay*, *Torchlight*, and *Gifts of Fortune*. *Pastorals* is an exception to this rule, which makes it McDonald's most unified collection for this reason: all of its poems are pastorals in one way or another. *Adam's Dream* is another anomaly, because it takes its title from one of the collection's longest poems.

of bittersweet farewell to his Braniel home and everything it represents. The house can be synonymous with the home (although, as Hollander has argued, there is also a clear distinction between these terms), and Lucy Collins has suggested that the aesthetic space of the poem is symbolically linked to the idea of the house: 'Like the poem itself, the house in its accretion of layers of meaning, in its ghosts of previous inhabitants and remembered experiences, facilitates the inter-relationship of past and present'.[51] The house/home in McDonald's poem functions in exactly this way. The register of this poem is more colloquial than the other poems examined thus far. The speaker of this poem, and others in *The House of Clay*, has relaxed into a more conversational style. '44A' comprises twenty-four-couplet stanzas. The simple full and half rhymes, with their end stresses, aid the briskness of the poem. In fact, the twenty-four couplet stanzas are subdivided into six discreet poems that together form a sequence in '44A'. They do not bear individual titles, but are separated with an '*' each time. The poem is a series of tableaux, both remembered and in the present. The poem is the means by which the speaker can structure their remembrances as they briefly surface in their mind, before fading. The central, unifying force in the poem is the speaker's childhood home, but we begin in Oxford via the house in question:

> I was trying to recall, and finds words for,
>
> the heavy sigh of our front door
>
>
> pulling shut on its air-spring,
>
> the small, mosquito-high ringing

[51] Lucy Collins, 'Architectural Metaphors: Representations of the House in the Poetry of Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and Vona Groarke', in *Diverse Voices: Irish Literature Since 1990*, ed. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 142–159 (p. 142).

of a timer-light out in the hall,

and the ox-blood colour of the tiles;

all from my narrow perch abroad

at the very hour you died.[52]

Here, we are reminded of the highly personal nature of McDonald's home. The scope is narrowed to within the walls of his childhood house, and the speaker is recalling minute details: they are 'trying to recall' the 'heavy-sigh' of their front door as it closes, from their 'narrow perch abroad'. We are also informed that the speaker's remaining parent has now passed away. Another mundane detail is recorded, that the speaker was in the 'optician's chair' on the day they died, but couldn't relax enough for the optician to take a photograph of their back of their eye. This is conveyed in the second poem. The third poem describes the speaker as now having returned to Belfast (presumably for the funeral), and as walking along the very road, 'Woodview Drive', where their childhood dwelling is situated: 'A winter's day in Woodview Drive, / much like the days when you drove / home through twilight in a Ford'. The house and the 'home' in this line are clearly synonymous. The chain of associations continues to be triggered in the speaker, who is in a wistful mood. The 'you' is the speaker's mother, who has died.

The fourth poem is another tableau from childhood, but this time it is the speaker himself who features. They are astride some 'crazy paving, a foot wide' in their back garden, and here the

[52] Peter McDonald, '44A', in *The House of Clay* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2007), pp. 60–62 (p. 60).

speaker found 'their balance on one stone, and stood / poised'. This image of composure and balance prefigures the images of the final poem in the sequence:

> Dead pieces of my life begin
>
> to join up, one by one,
>
> and now the Braniel falls below
>
> my feet; the houses start to go,
>
> as I keep steady in a place
>
> made out of distances and space;
>
> a prodigy of balance, where
>
> the last breath is a breath of air.[53]

The Braniel house/home is the organising principle against which all subsequent experience is measured. But this anchor, which is embedded in childhood, is now being weighed on the death of the speaker's second parent. The speaker is orphaned from this parental place. We shift in the final stanza away from a focus on the temporal – that is, on the process of remembering – to a focus on the spatial. The Braniel house/home is no longer a physical or psychological anchor-point for the

[53] '44A', p. 61.

speaker; instead their sense of home is now composed of 'distances and space'. Yet, despite this sudden disorientation, the speaker is able to maintain formal and psychological control. They are 'steady', and, as if their childhood back garden recreation was a rehearsal of future coping mechanisms in adulthood, they are able to maintain a similar composure, as 'a prodigy of balance'. The couplet structure of the poem is maintained, mirroring the sense of control that the speaker still possesses over their life. This is another of McDonald's Belfast poems. But unlike 'Eclogue', in which the speaker confesses to still needing to be nourished by the people and the place, '44A' moves towards a relinquishment of this attachment. This poem is deeply conventional in one way, in that it is a place poem of a kind. But its vocabulary is, finally, different: a place of 'distances and space', a formulation which suggests vacancy and emptiness, even remoteness, is where the speaker now belongs. This is a process of letting go via a return to Belfast, rather than an expression of homesickness.

*The Gifts of Fortune* (2020), McDonald's latest collection, finds him delving further into biographical material. There are childhood poems, and others such as 'Career' that reflect on his trajectory from his schoolteacher's prediction of his prospects – '*he'll end up sweeping the streets*' – to where he reached the heady heights of poetry criticism: 'the truth is, I skivvy and clear away mess / after the poets, invisible beside them'.[54] This poem is its own kind of return – whilst being comically self-effacing – and there are other such revisitations in this collection. This suggests that, despite the gentle valediction declared in '44A', Belfast remains an important place in McDonald's poetry. This is also a version of MacNeice's 'Valediction': McDonald's speaker declares his farewell (albeit in kinder terms than MacNeice) in '44A', before being drawn back to Belfast in subsequent collections. But although it continues to feature in even his most recent migrant poetry, the relationship with Belfast is more fraught. Thirteen years separate the publication of *The House of Clay* and *The Gifts*, yet there

[54] Peter McDonald, 'Career', in *The Gifts of Fortune* (London: Carcanet, 2020), pp. 25–26 (p. 25).

is a poem from the latter collection, ‘Gilnahirk Road’, that is best read in tandem with ‘44A’. This is because ‘Gilnahirk’ is also a poem that describes a return to Belfast, and it is founded on a childhood reminiscence. Gilnahirk Road is in Belfast, and it is the road on which Gilnarhirk Primary School is situated. This is where the speaker went to school, as he reveals in the poem, ‘Finity’: he recalls being in ‘Gilnahirk in Primary Two’.[55] McDonald has also disclosed the particular significance of Gilnahirk:

> I have more than one suburb: on the one hand, there’s the Braniel; but on the other – in fact, less than a mile up the road – there’s Gilnahirk. This second place has always been every bit as important to me, imaginatively, at any rate, as the first. My mother was born in Gilnahirk, and grew up there; partly for that reason, I went there to primary school.[56]

‘Gilnahirk Road’ is therefore a complement to ‘44A’, even though the two poems were published years apart (in 2007 and 2020, respectively). These poems are founded on the two most important places in McDonald’s childhood, and have a broadly similar aesthetic strategy and foundation. The later poem draws initially on a childhood memory, although the images are less specific than ‘44A’. The earlier poem is written via a series of childhood images drawn from Braniel, whilst also describing a return to Belfast for the funeral of the speaker’s remaining parent. ‘Gilnahirk Road’ finds its speaker returning to the grave of his parents in Gilnahirk, some years hence. The speaker’s disposition is very different in ‘Gilnahirk’, however, and so it is both a complement and a counterpoint to the previously discussed ‘44A’:

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[55] Peter McDonald, ‘Finity’, in *The Gifts of Fortune*, pp. 61–62 (p. 61).
[56] ‘In Conversation’, p. 61.

A whole month's rainfall in one day:
I remember when I could fly
weightless up this hill, all the way

to where I stand now, heavy, wet,
with breath gone in the air, and not
able to budge from where I've set

my two feet in the grass and loam,
while strict rain lashes me like time
that eats away the marks of home,

and whittles everything I have
down to this age, sopping the twelve
white roses I brought for their grave.[57]

The image of the speaker's youth opens the poem: 'I remember when I could fly weightless / up this hill'. This is bittersweet, because it is a happy recollection, but it also confirms the ravages of age to the speaker in the present. Now, implicitly, they are less mobile. The past and the present collide in stanza two: the speaker is in the exact spot that they had been before as a child. We have pathetic

[57] Peter McDonald, 'Gilnarhirk Road', in *The Gifts of Fortune*, p. 59.

fallacy in the poem too: the heavy, saturating rain reflects the bleakness of the speaker's mood. The rain is also figuratively eroding the speaker's sense of home, as, like time itself, it 'eats away the marks of home'. There is a shift in attitude from '44A', in which the speaker is losing their attachment to their place of origin, but is philosophical about their rootless existence. Here, the slow annihilation of their Belfast-derived sense of belonging is a cause for lamentation. This is especially painful given the morbid cause of the speaker's return in the first place: they are visiting their parents' joint grave to deliver a drenched bouquet. The poem becomes its own act of remembrance, therefore, since the speaker is remembering their upbringing in Belfast, as well as their parents, who were an inextricable part of that existence. But equally, the poem is a kind of memorial to the belonging, or the sense of home in Belfast, that is now indefatigably diminishing. In its brevity, and with its simple rhyme scheme, it reads like a short, piquant eulogy of its own. For the speaker, it is time that is the greatest factor in their loss of identification with this place. As they age, having lived abroad for so many years, the vestiges of this previous life are withering sadly away. This is perhaps McDonald's most pessimistic migrant poem, shot through with an acute feeling of loss. Both '44A' and 'Gilnahirk Road' (and, for that matter 'Eclogue') represent migrancy as a kind of loss, but the speaker's attitude towards this bereavement is different in each poem.

I have emphasised the significant MacNeicean influence on some poems, as well as McDonald's similarities with O'Donoghue, but there is an echo of two other poems that describe returns to Belfast in 'Gilnahirk Road'. These are Derek Mahon's 'Afterlives', and Sinéad Morrissey's 'In Belfast'. The spectre of Troubles violence haunts Mahon's well-known poem – 'I scarcely recognise / The places I grew up in, / The faces that try to explain' – and has contributed to the disfigurement of the city he forsook. This has ramifications for his sense of home:

> Perhaps if I'd stayed behind

And lived it bomb by bomb

I might have grown up at last

And learnt what is meant by home.[58]

The operative word here is 'Perhaps': a sure and stable sense of home was maybe never apparent, even before he left. This is essentially an expression of detachment from Belfast, as the poetic voice struggles to locate itself within the city. This sense of disconnection has only been worsened by the speaker's voluntary emigration. Morrissey's poem seems to be in direct communication with Mahon's. Her poem has a similarly detached tone, replete with a tourist's observations of Belfast: 'Here the seagulls stay in off the Lough all day. / Victoria Regina steering the ship of the City Hall / in this the first and last of her intense provinces'.[59] (The legacy of sectarian violence is present in Morrissey's poem, but without the immediacy of Mahon's). Morrissey's speaker has 'returned after ten years', as Mahon's steps 'ashore in a fine rain / To a city so changed / By five years of war'. Morrissey's migrant speaker has slept in 'twenty other corners', and she consoles herself that her city of origin is 'as real' as anywhere else she has been. She declares, contra Mahon: 'In its downpour and its vapour I am / as much at home here as I will ever be'.[60] This is still open-ended since it isn't clear how 'at home' she really feels. Unlike Mahon's speaker, however, Morrissey's is more reconciled to the sense of home that Belfast represents. The Belfast rain is present in all three poems, although it operates in a more obviously figurative way in McDonald's (symbolising the erasure of Belfast from his life). McDonald's 'Gilnahirk Road' also maintains its personal-familial scope: politics doesn't intrude into his speaker's thoughts, but the loss of his parents and sense of home still dominates. The 'home' articulated in the three poems is different: for Mahon's speaker,

[58] Frost's phrase also lurks behind this poem. Derek Mahon, 'Afterlives', in *New Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2011), pp. 57–59 (p. 58).
[59] Sinéad Morrissey, 'In Belfast', in *Between Here and There* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2002), p. 13.
[60] Ibid.

internecine warfare impinges on his sense of home, leaving him estranged; for Morrissey's, migrancy has allowed her to accommodate Belfast as one place of many, while McDonald's speaker is now disconnected from home. Migrancy is enabling for Morrissey, and sadly disabling for the idea of home for McDonald in this poem.

The poems I have discussed so far describe a shifting and often nuanced perspective: the speaker still pines for nourishment from Belfast in 'Eclogue', before relinquishing his ties to his home place in '44A'. The speaker is happy with his new ontology of 'distances and space', whilst also lamenting the loss of his fixed idea of home in 'Gilnahirk Road'. The primary concern in poems such as '44A' and 'Gilnahirk Road' is less with relocating Belfast as it is in 'Eclogue', but rather with the fading away of Belfast in the speaker's life as they age. These later poems chart the loss of Belfast as a locus of belonging. There is a perceptible, if subtle, shift in the speaker's attitude towards the condition of migrancy between McDonald's first three collections (such as *Biting the Wax* and *Pastorals*), and his later four (such as *The House of Clay, Torchlight*, and *Gifts of Fortune*), in this regard. As the speaker remarks in 'The Hand', another poem from *The House of Clay* that describes a return to the city, and that takes the Ulster hand as its founding image: 'Leaving means going away for the last time // […] I forget more than I remember'.[61] Indeed, as we have seen with other poets included in this thesis, there is no one single, unchanging attitude to migrancy in McDonald's poetry. The picture is not clear-cut: McDonald's speakers are not happy in Britain, feel indifferent to migrancy, are homesick for Belfast, or indulge gleefully in multiple affiliations to places and cultures. Instead, the poems present shades of meaning, distinction, and mood. What these poems seem to demonstrate, in general terms, is that migrancy can provoke both multiple aesthetic responses – that is, the way McDonald writes *about* migrancy in his poems – and attitudes: that is, how the experience of migrancy is *represented* in the poems from Britain, or of return, or autobiography.

[61] In *The House of Clay,* pp. 11–13 (p. 12). This sentiment is also shared with Mahon's 'Afterlives'.

*Torchlight* (2011) is McDonald's fifth major collection, and – like the other collections that I have discussed so far – it contains a number of childhood poems, particularly about Braniel. There is, for instance, a long sequence of twelve poems – the fourth of which McDonald takes his title from – entitled 'Childhood Memories'. It is positioned near the end of the collection. The poems are situated in and around Belfast, registering familial events alongside the wider goings-on in the area. Belfast is a feature of *Torchlight*, therefore, but like in the poems of *The House of Clay* and *The Gifts of Fortune*, when it does appear, it is memorialised as a place that is lost. For example, with the 'solitary night-watchman' that the speaker is remembering in the first poem of the 'Childhood Memories' sequence, the speaker finds himself unable to recall his soubriquet: 'a name that I've forgotten, / but get back, nearly, sometimes'.[62] The place and the people of Belfast are slowly evanescing. But *Torchlight* is also a significant collection because it includes one of McDonald's most successful Oxford poems. Such poems, although less numerous in his migrant poetry, are as important as his poems about Belfast. This is because the Oxford connection for McDonald is a long-standing one, and the city (and broader county of Oxfordshire) is the principal *other place* in his migrant poetry.

The Oxford poem in *Torchlight* is entitled 'Oxford Poetry'. This is, punningly, about the speaker's literary and academic life in the city. It is a significant poem because it allows us to glimpse the other half, as it were, of the speaker's migrant experience. The concept of home also surfaces in this poem, but in a slightly different way to his previous Belfast poems. Given its Oxford setting, this poem invites another comparison with O'Donoghue. Although there are clear differences in their respective migrant aesthetics, there are similar patterns in their migrant poems: Cullen and Belfast feature heavily, and, occasionally, Oxford is the direct situation of a poem. McDonald has said that

[62] Peter McDonald, 'Childhood Memories', in *Torchlight* (London: Carcanet, 2011), pp. 95–105 (p. 95).

'Oxford is a place I work in […] no theories required', whilst O'Donoghue has described his happy teaching life in Oxford. But other than 'You Know the Way' and a handful of others, many of O'Donoghue's Oxford poems are the backdrop to meditations on Ireland: in 'Any Last Requests' we find the speaker creosoting their 'English garden fence' – which is stated somewhat deliberately to signal their discomfort – whilst their friend from Ireland (presumably Cullen) is being 'driven for the final time, / down past Eagloune' in the back of a hearse.[63] Likewise, there is the beautiful elegy (arguably O'Donoghue's best poem) to his colleague Andrew Glyn (1943–2007). It is drawn from O'Donoghue's academic life (Glyn was an economist at Corpus Christi), and the setting is Oxford. Yet the only obvious reference is to 'the tall trees at the summit of South Park' (which is a green space off Headington Road).[64] McDonald's poem is rather more direct. In this way, 'Oxford Poetry' owes more to MacNeice, particularly poem 'XIII' from *Autumn Journal*: 'Oxford crowded the mantelpiece with gods – / Scaliger, Heinsius, Dindorf, Bentley and Williamowitz – / As we learned our genuflexions for Honour Mods', or, 'Having once been to the University of Oxford / you can never really again / Believe anything that anyone says and that of course is an asset'.[65] MacNeice acknowledged the 'privilege' of attending Oxford, although he also made reference to the snobbery of his Classics education at Merton: 'We learned that a gentleman never misplaces his accents'.[66] This is presumably an allusion to the practice of reading accentual poetry, but this may also be a comment on MacNeice's anglicisation of his Northern Irish accent whilst at Oxford. The theme of accents also surfaces in McDonald's poem, which falls within this 'Irishman at Oxford' poetic tradition.[67]

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[63] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Any Last Requests', in *Outliving* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), p. 53–55 (p. 53).
[64] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'The Year's Midnight', in *Farmers Cross* (London: Faber, 2011), p. 55.
[65] Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 126 & 127.
[66] Ibid, p. 125.
[67] Oscar Wilde is another significant forebear.

We might ask, therefore: if Belfast is increasingly fading away in the speaker's mind, does McDonald's Oxford poem demonstrate an embrace of the city as the speaker's new home? Does the speaker belong in Oxford, any more or less than MacNeice before him? 'Oxford Poetry' is dedicated to an 'M.I.', who is likely to be Mick Imlah. Imlah was an Oxford poet from Scotland, who passed away from motor neurone disease in 2009. Educated at Magdalen College, Imlah was also closely associated with the famous periodical of the poem's title. The Oxford connection is, then, the very foundation of this poem. 'Oxford Poetry' is an excellent example of the Oxfordshire strain in McDonald's migrant poetry. Its three stanzas are interrelated by the different connotations of Oxford poetry.

Imlah was at one time heavily involved in the editorial process of *Oxford Poetry*, and we commence with the 'typescript' for the latest edition being bussed up Cowley Road to the printers. And when finally it is produced, 'The finished magazines would be wheeled down in a shopping trolley all the way to Magdalen [College]'.[68] The speaker, presumably M.I's co-editor, is known for missing errors in the final proofs: 'I was the careless one, and still am careless'. These initial images establish the working and personal relationship that the speaker has with their friend. M.I.'s affectionate soubriquet for the speaker is 'Supermac', for example (this is possibly a pun on the McDonald surname, and is also related to an anecdote the speaker has told their colleague about Harold MacMillan).[69] The image of the speaker's editorial oversights leads into a different kind of misperception that occurs when both the speaker and M.I. are off duty in the Chequers pub. The two friends are joined by a garrulous Glaswegian who 'talked rubbish for an hour', and then the speaker's 'accent softened', and their friend's 'open smile'

[68] Peter McDonald, 'Oxford Poetry', in *Torchlight* (London: Carcanet Press, 2011), pp. 26–29 (p. 26).
[69] He says: '(I'd told you about how I sent the real / Harold Macmillan gently off to sleep / by spouting verse in the Sheldonian)', ibid, p. 27.

broadened and shone, accepting, that I knew

my stupid blunder in taking you for English.

We weren't in Oxford, even though we sat

in High Street – not *that* Oxford, anyway,

where power hatches and speaks to itself:

we were at home in feeling far from home,

and listening to a voice that wasn't ours,

while in the sunlight I could see you make

connections and corrections both at once.[70]

The speaker recognises, belatedly, that their companion is in fact Scottish. The two protagonists are then able to share their experience of migrancy. Initially, the speaker has taken the Scottish M.I. for an Englishman. This 'stupid blunder' is experienced as embarrassment for the speaker, although it is registered with amusement in their friend. The Northern Irish speaker and his Scottish companion realise that they are aliens in Oxford, meaning both the city and the institution. They share a mutual understanding, and inhabit their own small enclave in the pub. The speaker dismisses the insularity of the Oxford old-boys club, and both the speaker and M.I. are now 'listening to a voice that wasn't ours'. It is not clear what this means, especially as the speaker describes their own accent – which is a clear marker of their cultural and class background – as having 'softened'. Does the speaker's accent soften into the 'ripe Oxonian vowels' that are satirised in 'Sunday in Great Tew', or does his

[70] Ibid, p. 27.

accent slip away from its Oxford inflection and back into a full Belfast brogue?[71] Either way, this is a touching scene, as these two outsiders find a sense of affinity, a kind of home from home in Oxford. Ironically, the speaker's sense of belonging is generated by their acknowledgment of their being different. They both identify a kind of sameness in being strangers to the fusty Oxford setting. Ultimately, then, Oxford does not replace Belfast as home for the speaker. Indeed, they are not anxiously out of place in Oxford, but it certainly isn't a place where they necessarily fit in. Nonetheless, an alternative meaning of belonging is described in this poem. Oxford is, even if for a brief moment, a *kind of* home.

The concept of home – as a person's locus of belonging – is especially problematic for the migrant. This is well-established in critical discourse. McDonald himself has renounced the concept, declaring in an interview that it has been 'seriously abused over the years'.[72] He is dismissive of 'exile', 'home', and 'origin' as terms: 'Sloppy thinking, like poor art, tends to lean on them', he announces.[73] It is true that 'exile', with its connotations of forced migration, is not relevant to McDonald. Yet the idea of 'home' surfaces again and again in his poetry. Even in his British poems, the word 'home' is central: 'home at last', the speaker announces in 'A Gift', to signal their contentedness. But it is the speaker's first home, Belfast, that is their greatest preoccupation: 'home is lost' to the speaker in 'Eclogue' (it is significant that this is the mirror image of the phrase from 'The Gift'), the speaker imaginatively revisits the 'home' of Belfast as they travel home in 'The Overcoat', '44A' is about his childhood home and its various emotional and psychological resonances, 'the marks of home' are eroded from the speaker in 'Gilnahirk Road', and now the speaker in 'Oxford Poetry' casually deploys the term to describe a peculiar, and very personal, feeling of belonging. In this Oxford poem – in

[71] In this poem, the speaker is spending a 'sober afternoon' in the English village, where they describe 'a conversation jumping from one silence to another / in ripe Oxonian vowels, two figures on their own // in some pretend backwater with picture-postcard views'. Peter McDonald, 'Sunday in Great Tew', in *Biting the Wax* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1989), pp. 58–61 (p. 60).
[72] 'In Conversation with Peter McDonald', p. 61.
[73] Ibid.

which a partially formed sense of home from home is generated – it is only made possible by the speaker's acknowledgment that their *real* home is in Ulster ('we were at home in feeling far from home'). It is a gravid term in McDonald's migrant poetry, and in each of these poems, the concept takes on a slightly different inflection. In this regard, there is another parallel with MacNeice that McDonald himself has described. He discusses the closing lines of MacNeice's 'The Left-Behind': 'And the night is old and a nightbird calls me away / To what now is merely mine, and soon will be no one's home'.[74] McDonald argues that in this poem, 'home' is 'functioning as a problematic and alluring word, one which eludes the attempts of the poetic voice to possess it […] Coming home […] is at some level impossible for an imagination that exists by virtue of its difference from what "home" represents'.[75] MacNeice has his own unique relationship with 'home' in his poetry, yet this observation also broadly applies to the instances of home in McDonald's poetry, particularly post-*Pastorals*.

There is another poem in which the idea of home is also explored. 'As Seen' describes a 'house' that is 'no home to us // now home is gone'.[76] This poem is describing a real, physical building – thereby collapsing the distinction between house and home – but the term 'home' is also deployed to suggest belonging and safety in an abstract sense. This poem is from *The House of Clay* and it is the poem from which McDonald derives his title. The very idea of a 'house of clay' – which is the final line of 'As Seen' – has two meanings: it suggests that home is ephemeral – which accords with the sentiment expressed in '44A' for instance – but it also suggests that the idea of home is a malleable construct.[77] Clay is able to be worked and refashioned. It is thus also concerned with representation, because McDonald's poems, as we have seen so far, rework the ideas of home and belonging.

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[74] Louis MacNeice, 'The Left-Behind', in *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber, 1987) p. 449.
[75] *Mistaken Identities*, p. 114.
[76] Peter McDonald, 'As Seen', in *The House of Clay*, pp. 13–15 (p. 13).
[77] Ibid, p. 14. This is also possibly a Biblical allusion. The idea of man having been made, figuratively, out of clay by a god, suggests our vulnerability. Such as Job 4:19: 'How much more those who dwell in houses of clay, / Whose foundation is in the dust, / Who are crushed before the moth!'.

McDonald's migrant poetry is also playing out another essential definition of home in this way: as Hollander remarks, 'The world of nature does not necessarily owe us homes. We must in fact *construct* them'.[78] Thus, home, at least for McDonald's speakers, is not simply the place where they live, and it is not a term that is so easily disparaged and disregarded. Home possesses genuine import. As Fintan O'Toole puts it: 'home is much more than the name we give to a dwelling place. It is also a whole set of connections and affections, the web of mutual recognition we spin around ourselves and that gives us a place in the world'.[79] He adds, with pertinence to the migrant experience: 'the further away "home" is, the larger it looms'.[80] This is borne out in McDonald's poetry.

McDonald has made the case that, given his cultural background, he does not want a stake in the 'Irishness' debate.[81] But he has also subsequently declared: 'insofar as I'm a poet at all, I'm an Irish one'.[82] He states that he is not interested in contributing to the ongoing debate about what Irishness in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries denotes, although he later reclaims the moniker of the *Irish poet*. Intriguingly, he does not add the prefix of *Northern* here, but affirms the title of *Irish* fully. McDonald's Northern Irishness is its own version of the now many Irishnesses that make up the island as a whole, and these multiple modes of identification also include those who have left. McDonald does not seek to contribute to any particular religio-political vision of Ulster in his poetry. He tends to avoid making generalised statements about the characteristics of any given culture. McDonald, on the whole, does not indulge in cultural politicking, and nor is his poetry involved in any broader political or national ambitions. He has moved beyond such well-worn themes. His poetic identity – which is also a migrant identity – is a highly personal one. McDonald

[78] Hollander, p. 73. My italics.
[79] Fintan O'Toole, *The Lie of the Land: Irish Identities* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 167.
[80] Ibid, p. 165.
[81] 'Peter McDonald', in *Metre*, 3, p. 17.
[82] 'In Conversation with Peter McDonald', p. 61.

has discussed the idea that poems – being born of experience – are records of the ‘unrepeatable particularity’ of a given moment.[83] Migrancy is one such experience, that gives rise to different ways of thinking. Home is the dominant theme of McDonald’s migrant poems. I opened with ‘A Gift’, which is a poem that professes to belong in England. Belfast does not feature either as a backdrop or a setting to this poem. Yet, such features, of an England setting without Belfast, and the speaker’s confessing to be in-place in England, are the exceptions to the rule. The majority of McDonald’s migrant poems have Belfast or Northern Ireland as, at least, the latent backdrop, as we have seen with ‘The Overcoat’, ‘Eclogue’, ‘44A’, ‘Gilnahirk Road’, and ‘Oxford Poetry’. Even the latter poem, with its description of the speaker being ‘far from home’, is acknowledging the important Belfast connection in the speaker’s life. Belfast, then, is the epicentre of the speaker’s life, and it remains so. Yet we can see how migrancy is experienced as a loss in these poems, especially as this feeling of loss is intertwined with another bereavement: the death of the speaker’s parents. These events, in conjunction with the speaker’s ever-lengthening time abroad, is experienced as the slow severance of their connection to Belfast. The ‘marks of home’ are being steadily eroded with each futile return, as ‘Braniel falls below’ the speaker’s feet. In ‘44A’ the speaker maintains their composure, adapting to their new experience of placelessness, whereas in ‘Gilnahirk Road’ they are in a more pessimistic mood.

In the following chapter I will discuss the migrant poetry of David Wheatley. O’Donoghue and McDonald are poets of their originary place (mostly, but not exclusively, especially given the former’s diasporic poems): but their migrant poetry presents a personal vision of the place they have left behind, rather than aligning with any broader discourses of the nation. Wheatley’s poetry embodies a different post-nationalist quality. Wheatley is a poetically nomadic poet: he desires to belong to his new places, which are for him Hull and Aberdeen. Many of his migrant poems are

[83] Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), p. 7.

concerned with absorbing these places into his poetic identity. Having left Dublin, Wheatley has largely left it behind in his poetry. With McDonald, Oxford does not instil such a desire to belong. Belfast is his home, and his poems are mostly generated by the complexities and ironies of this relationship. Indeed, as I previously suggested, it is with MacNeice (and O'Donoghue in a different way) that McDonald shares this trait. McDonald is a first-rate critic, although he has been relatively overlooked as a poet. Compared to the other poets examined thus far, he has received the least amount of critical attention. But I have shown how the simplicity of McDonald's poems belies their impressive aesthetic complexity. McDonald's poems are a significant contribution to the canon of migrant Irish literature.

## Chapter 5: 'More turns off the beaten track': David Wheatley's Poetic Journeys

### I. Introduction

Hitherto, there has been little criticism published on David Wheatley. This may be because of the fact that he has lived abroad for many years, and has produced the majority of his poetry whilst living overseas. Indeed, what Michael Parker has argued of Bernard O'Donoghue is relevant here: 'Perhaps to some Irish eyes his long residence in England […] somehow make[s] him "less Irish"'.[1] But by writing from abroad, Wheatley extends the range of contemporary Irish poetry to include new vistas and encounters. Wheatley is one of the most accomplished and engaging poets in contemporary Irish poetry: he is highly ambitious and adventurous, and he is adept at writing in an array of voices, styles, forms, and subjects, although we often find him in a buoyant vernacular. The readers of Wheatley's poems often find themselves carried along by the lightsomeness of the speaker's imagination.

'Weekend Driving', from Wheatley's debut collection, exhibits these qualities. Its speaker describes a brief excursion to the Irish countryside. 'Cresting the hill, slipping the clutch, / I find a lay-by to pull into', it begins. At rest, and largely alone, they observe the vista of 'fields and ditches'. Stanza three, however, captures Wheatley's sense of adventure:

> Behind me the bend in the road I'll take
>
> to exchange this valley for another,
>
> and more turns off the beaten track

[1] Michael Parker, 'Neither Home Nor Away: Place and Displacement in Bernard O'Donoghue's Poetry', *Irish Studies Review*, 17:4 (2009), pp. 512–518 (p. 513).

I'll follow to end up wherever.[2]

This idea of journeying – of the search for new places and experiences – is at the core of Wheatley's aesthetic. Within his migrant poetry, many journeys are enacted: identarian, aesthetic, linguistic, and geographical. Accordingly, Wheatley makes himself a poet of the places he has known. I deploy the plural deliberately here, because each new place prompts an evolution in Wheatley's poetry.

These places are Hull and Aberdeen. Wheatley was born in Dublin in 1970 (although he spent some of his childhood in Bray in County Wicklow), and attended Trinity College, but moved to Hull for a job in the English Department of the university in 2002. He lived and worked in Hull as an academic until 2012, before he relocated to Scotland to take up a position at the University of Aberdeen. He has lived in rural Aberdeenshire since 2012. In his Twitter biography, he self-identifies as an '[e]conomic migrant'.[3] At the time of writing, Wheatley has lived in Britain for twenty years. His main collections take a place as their foundation. Beginning with his originary Ireland in *Thirst* (1997) and *Misery Hill* (2000), we then find ourselves in Hull in *Mocker* (2006) and *A Nest on the Waves* (2010), before alighting in Aberdeenshire in *The President of Planet Earth* (2017). Wheatley has three migrant collections, therefore. He first explores migrancy in *Mocker*, while *The President* registers the influence of Scotland.

Wheatley is a poet and an academic, but he was also an editor for a time. He was a founding editor of *Metre*, edited with Justin Quinn (b. 1968). Quinn, a contemporary of Wheatley's, is also an Irish diasporic poet, having lived in Prague for many years. In the special issue of *Metre* titled 'Irish Poetry

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[2] David Wheatley, 'Weekend Driving', in *Thirst* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1997), p. 40.

[3] david wheatley @nemoloris ʹEconomic migrant. "Doyen of debris". Also available in flesh-eating bacterial form. Gaeilge Sruth na Maoile agam. Novel, Stretto, published by CB Editions'.

and the Diaspora', Wheatley himself does not directly comment on his own attitude to migrant poetry (perhaps because he was not a migrant at this time). However, Quinn's introductory essay, which considers the multiple ways in which different poets can experience and write about their condition of migration, does raise some interesting points that are directly relevant to Wheatley and his aesthetic outlook. For instance, Quinn observes a difference in attitude between that of the renowned essayist Hubert Butler (1900–1991), and those writers of Quinn's generation:

> Introducing *Escape from the Anthill*, Hubert Butler comments that 'even when these essays appear to be about Russia or Greece or Spain or Yugoslavia, they are really about Ireland'. Does this remain true of contemporary writing by Irish authors? Perhaps the poems now about Japanese, Argentinian, or Asian experience really are about that experience.[4]

Butler's essays are avowedly always about his home place, despite their heterogeneity in terms of subject matter and locale.[5] Butler is still bound – imaginatively and intellectually – to his place of origin: residence abroad is a means to ruminate on what might be called the 'matters of Ireland'. He is an Irishman abroad in an essential sense. Quinn's corrective, however, suggests that *some* contemporary migrant poetry now 'emerges from a considered engagement with the alien culture'.[6] And thus the poems 'really are about' the author's experience there. Quinn quotes Harry Clifton, who writes, 'the concept of Ireland and what constitutes Irish poetry has been radically changing in the last five or eight years', and that 'now both in poetry and fiction it is entirely acceptable for writers to write out of Japanese, Argentinian, or Asian experience and for all that to be included in their Irishness'.[7] This shift takes place in the context of both migrancy and post-nationalism: there

[4] Justin Quinn, 'Irish Poetry and the Diaspora', *Metre*, 3 (1997), pp. 6–7 (p. 7).
[5] Hubert Butler, *Escape from the Anthill* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1996), p. 1.
[6] Quinn, p. 7.
[7] Ibid, p. 6.

was 'a time when poets tended to stay put and often defined themselves in relation to nationalist aspiration (whether accepting or rejecting it). But this is no longer the case'.[8]

These statements hold true for Wheatley in particular. In *Mocker* and beyond, he embraces his new location, its culture, and its inhabitants, incorporating them into his ever-evolving aesthetic. The new place and its inhabitants are often subject matter, and the poems are a site where Wheatley's originary culture interacts with his host culture. But it is also about poetic identity: the poems are frequently about trying to engage with and in some sense genuinely belong to the new place, rather than only really belonging to Ireland. The migrant speaker is trying to fit in with their new surroundings. Where we might think of Bernard O'Donoghue and Peter McDonald as migrant poets who often but not always take the places of Cullen and Belfast as their foundations – they are often viewing the 'home place' from 'foreign perspectives', as Elmer Kennedy-Andrews has argued elsewhere – Wheatley will often take his *new* place as a point of imaginative departure.[9] This is not to argue that Wheatley will completely ignore Ireland as subject matter, now that he no longer permanently lives there. Indeed, some of the most arresting poems of *A Nest on the Waves* are prompted by Ireland.

As we have found with O'Donoghue, he will often re-tread the same aesthetic ground in his migrant poetry (albeit very effectively). O'Donoghue will evoke the Ireland he left behind. His migrant speakers are bound to Cullen and feel the pain of separation. Yet Britain also features in his poetry, and he too describes a kind of multilocational identity, notably in the poem 'You Know the Way'. Thus, the terminology of dislocation *and* diaspora is applicable to O'Donoghue. O'Donoghue fits the mould of Butler in some ways – always writing about Ireland, wherever else he may be – whilst also

[8] Ibid, p. 7.
[9] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), p. 249.

embracing in other poems the idea that he belongs equally to different places. What separates Wheatley (and others such as Quinn) from O'Donoghue and McDonald is that these poets do not display Butler's tendency at all in their poetry. Ireland will feature as subject matter, but in an entirely different way. Wheatley's poetry is concerned with the post-nationalist quality identified by Anthony Bradley (and this unconsciously echoes Clifton's statements): 'there is a strain of cosmopolitan poetry that is about other places than Ireland, that is appreciative of the other culture, and shares in it, without the anxiety of exile'.[10] Wheatley's speakers are genuinely 'appreciative' of Hull and Aberdeen, particularly their respective literary traditions.

Indeed, Ellen McWilliams, in a recent summary of migration in Irish literature, has commented on a tendency, albeit in the work of some Northern Irish poets such as Muldoon, towards 'poetic nomadism'.[11] She discusses their 'fluidity and multiplicity of identity' that has the effect of 'destabilis[ing] some of the more familiar co-ordinates of Irish literary culture; in one strand of their work, these poets transcend the story of the nation as one defined by colonial and postcolonial conflict and divine creative possibilities for seemingly remote places'.[12] This relationship with place transcends the traditional dichotomy between exile and home, as well as the postcolonial 'story of the nation'. Wheatley is, in his own way, poetically nomadic, and he has explored a sense of multiple identities in his poetry. The connection between place and identity is still evident here, but in the sense that Wheatley has now lived in a number of places, rather than one, so his poetic identity evolves with his migration. Wheatley's migrant poetry, in this way, is characterised by its receptivity. He shares these characteristics most closely with Quinn. In an untitled poem from Quinn's collection

[10] Anthony Bradley, 'Changing Places: Locations of Contemporary Irish Poetry', *New Hibernia Review*, 21:4 (2017), pp. 89–105 (p. 89).
[11] Ellen McWilliams, 'Relocations: Travel, Diaspora, Migrancy', in *Irish Literature in Transition 1980–2020*, ed. E. Falci and P. Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 168–181 (p. 178).
[12] Ibid.

*Fuselage* (2002), for example, the speaker describes '"the relentless dissolution of forms and the commingling of / identities"'.[13] Wheatley has also described the accretion of multiple 'dead selves'.[14]

Wheatley's migrant poems are always expressions of his poetic nomadism – his constant journeying as a poet[15] – as much as they reflect in some way on his *current* place and his experience there. The poems are also motivated by the humane desire to belong and to connect with different people and places. In his Hull and Aberdeen collections, his poetic imagination is located – or is attempting to locate itself – within these places. Migrancy – which exposes the imagination to new literary currents – enriches Wheatley's aesthetic. And through this engagement his speakers can connect with their new places. Wheatley's principal qualities of nomadism, an attention to place, and the urge to belong give rise to multiple perspectives and aesthetic strategies. In *Mocker*, his loco-descriptive poem of place, 'Bankside-Wincolmlee by Instamatic', represents a strategy in action: to genuinely immerse himself in the 'alien culture'. There are also linguistic poems in *Mocker*. 'A Backwards Glance' and 'Mocker/*Magadh*' probe the interstices between the Irish and English languages, seeking to find commonalities via the interaction. In his next Hull-based collection, Wheatley's migrant poems directly address migrancy, notably in 'A Fret' and 'The Shadow Life'. So, there is a shift between these two collections in the way Wheatley writes about migration: from poems of place and language, to poems of a more self-reflective bent. Place and journeying still undergird these poems, but the speaker's perspective is different.

Wheatley's latest collection is even more diverse than his previous two collections. The migrant poems of *The President* are self-reflective, whilst also exploring place and language directly. The

[13] Justin Quinn, *Fuselage* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2002), p. 37.
[14] David Wheatley, 'A Fret', in *A Nest on the Waves* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2010), pp. 12–13 (p. 12).
[15] There are journeys described within the poems themselves, there are the actual journeys that Wheatley has taken, first to Hull, and then to Aberdeen, and there is the broader aesthetic journey of his poetry, from *Mocker*, through to *The President of Planet Earth*.

latter is evident in the Scots poems, such as ‘Sonnets to Robert Fergusson’ (which is the Scottish complement to ‘Bankside’), and the former aspect can be seen in ‘A Bittering’. Although the migrant poems – in broad terms – fall into one of these two categories, there is also nuance and contradiction within the poems themselves. To put it very plainly, Wheatley’s migrant poems are often doing different things in an aesthetic sense. They are also saying different things about migrancy. The challenge with Wheatley’s poetry is to adequately represent the migrant poems in all their aesthetic involution. Beginning with *Mocker*, we will then trace the evolution of Wheatley’s migrant poetry through *A Nest on the Waves* and *The President of Planet Earth*. Recurring themes include identity and home (both as potentially highly changeable constructs), as well as place, language, and memory.

## II. *Mocker*

As Maria Johnston has suggested, Wheatley is part of the tradition of chroniclers of the urban realm, of which Thomas Kinsella is a notable exponent. She argues that ‘Kinsella is rightly regarded as the quintessential Dublin prowler-poet and his most agile younger followers through the city include David Wheatley and Peter Sirr’.[16] This is especially apparent in Wheatley’s previous Dublin-based collection, *Misery Hill* (2000). James Clarence Mangan and Samuel Beckett (the latter was the subject of Wheatley’s doctoral thesis) are additional influences on *Misery Hill*, and Wheatley includes a long sequence of sonnets ‘for’ Mangan in the collection. Johnston argues that ‘*Misery Hill* is haunted by the presiding spirits of Mangan and Beckett’.[17] The Beckettian influence on Wheatley’s poetry is debatable. Wheatley’s poems from *Misery Hill* that find him exploring Dublin specifically are

[16] Maria Johnston, ‘Walking Dublin: Contemporary Irish Poets in the City’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 492–513.
[17] Ibid, p. 502.

influenced *in part* by Beckett's own explorations of the city.[18] However, Beckett's rather austere style is different from Wheatley's expansive vernacular mode. But in any case, Wheatley, the nomadic and restless poet, is off in search of new influences in *Mocker*. In other words, the Dublin 'prowler-poet[s]' that Johnston has identified are not the 'presiding spirits' of *Mocker*. Wheatley instead looks to Hull's poets for nourishment. This, on an artistic level, is suggestive of his desire to genuinely belong to his new place.

In a rather disgruntled review of *Mocker* for *Poetry Ireland Review*, Peter Denman spends most of his time taking issue with Wheatley's poem about a jet that crashed in the Humber in 2002. 'Riptide' opens with, 'When the Hawk jet came down in the Humber'.[19] Denman criticizes Wheatley for his choice of plane: 'Is it appropriate to point out that the RAF aircraft that crashed in the Humber near Hull in May 2002 was not a Hawk – a fast-jet trainer – but a Tornado, a front-line fighter-interceptor?' Denman's pedantic objection prompts him to ask: 'at what point does a poem drift free of the historical and personal conditions that produce it, so that imaginative truth takes over from any irritable reaching after fact?' The implication of this rhetorical question is that Wheatley's poem lacks the imaginative force to engender the requisite transformation, so the reviewer finds himself quibbling with the 'circumstantial detail[s]'.[20] There is a sense that this commentator has an axe to grind. Wheatley's 'Whalebone Haiku' – which is reprinted in *Mocker* – is a series of poems that Wheatley had printed on beer mats for the Whalebone Pub in Hull. Denman asks, somewhat ungraciously, 'I wonder were they watermarked?' (This is also possibly a rather weak pun on his part). Denman concludes that *Mocker* is more of an 'interim gathering'. On the contrary, *Mocker* is one of Wheatley's most cohesive collections.

[18] Johnston suggests that 'Beckett is the trailblazer that Wheatley pursues' in some of his Dublin poetry, ibid, p. 503.
[19] David Wheatley, 'Riptide', in *Mocker* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2006), p. 14.
[20] Peter Denman, 'Early In: *The Instruments of Art* by John F. Deane; *Artichoke Wine* by Macdara Woods; *Mocker* by David Wheatley', *Poetry Ireland Review*, 91 (2007), pp. 72–76 (p. 75).

Denman is, however, right to identify that Hull is the primary subject of the collection: 'With Wheatley we are out nearer the ring road, in the estates with their speed bumps or down in the docks by the river'. He also asserts that, as a location for poetry, 'Hull has been a stamping ground as far back as [Andrew] Marvell'.[21] Wheatley himself has written an essay on a number of Hull's poets, although his focus is more contemporary. He begins with Philip Larkin, before moving into discussions of Douglas Dunn, Peter Didsbury, and Sean O'Brien. He pays particularly close attention to Didsbury. This essay gives an insight into Wheatley's fascination with the literary tradition of his new city. And it seems that its modest tradition is more receptive to new participants, in a way that other cities with much weightier traditions are not. Wheatley argues, for example, that 'one distinction between Hull and a metropolis such as Dublin or London is the extent to which the writer tackling it encounters a blank slate, or if not a blank slate exactly then a more adaptable palimpsest'.[22] This may explain Wheatley's fascination with Hull in *Mocker*: unlike Dublin which has its own perhaps overbearing tradition, the relative blankness of Hull in an aesthetic sense enables the post-nationalist Wheatley to chart new territory.

Thus, *Mocker* is also about journeys. This nomadism takes several forms in the collection: with routes through Hull itself, voyages into and between languages, and also broader geographical journeys. These different examples of voyaging are united by an overarching sense of aesthetic discovery in *Mocker*. This is prompted by the actual journey that Wheatley has made to Hull. In other words, the aesthetic experimentation of this collection is engendered by migrancy itself. Wheatley is creating a kind of migrant poetry that incorporates the new: fresh aesthetic influences, as well as

[21] Ibid, p. 76.
[22] David Wheatley, '"Dafter than we can care to own": Some Poets of the North of England', in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, ed. Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 407–424 (pp. 407 & 409).

new places and subjects for him. This is evident in 'Bankside-Wincolmlee by Instamatic', a long sequence of poems which dominates the collection. Its twenty-seven prose poems are introduced as an 'homage' to Didsbury (b. 1946), a Lancashire-born poet who has lived in Hull for many years. What Wheatley terms the 'loco-descriptive' aspect of Didsbury's own place poetry in his essay, I see as being emulated in Wheatley's poem. As he suggests: 'at their most direct, [Didsbury's] loco-descriptive poems can be entirely straightforward, or straightforward-seeming'. He adds, quoting one of Didsbury's poems: 'what ideas are there in the nothing-but-thinginess of a description such as: "Bright green: / silent stock-car 33 / lies rotting in its acid"?'.[23] These lines are from the first poem in Didsbury's 'Three Lakes by Humber', which first appeared in his collection, *The Butchers of Hull* (1982).[24] This is a short sequence of three poems founded on the river in Hull. This specific poem is evidently the aesthetic touchstone for Wheatley's 'Bankside'. Wheatley is emulating his direct style and is exploring the same subject matter as Didsbury. The simple numbering of the poems in 'Three Lakes' – with the titles '1', '2', and '3' – also appears in Wheatley's longer poem. Additionally, the phrase 'loco-descriptive' – which emphasises the naturalistic rendering of the speaker's immediate locale – and the construction, 'nothing-but-thinginess', are apt for Wheatley's poem. Indeed, Wheatley is also alluding to the concrete imagery of imagism here, and particularly the famous quotation of William Carlos Williams: 'no ideas but in things'.[25] The desire to starkly record the visual is a clear ambition of Wheatley here, via both Didsbury and, less directly, Williams. 'Bankside' is a hyper-local place poem, maintaining an intense gaze on its strange inner-city subject matter. The sequence also describes a journey: the speaker is recording their walk beside the Hull river via the

[23] Ibid, p. 412.
[24] Peter Didsbury, 'Three Lakes by Humber', in *Scenes from a Long Sleep: New and Collected Poems* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2003), p. 176. The title of Wheatley's essay is also from a Didsbury poem about Hull, titled 'Daft': 'Even the river mud is dafter than we care to own', ibid, p. 199.
[25] The speaker says: 'Say it, no ideas but in things – / nothing but the blank faces of houses / and cylindrical trees'. This is repeated several times: 'Say it! No ideas but in things.' William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions Books, 1992), pp. 6 & 9. The idea of identifying a man with a city – or with man and city being symbolically interlinked – has some relevance to Wheatley's Hull poetry, since his speakers are also connecting to the city.

photos they have taken along the way. Indeed, the epigraph, which is a quotation from David Jones, confirms this: ‘Making a work is not thinking thoughts but accomplishing an actual journey’.[26]

Poem ‘1’ is typical of the sequence as a whole. For example: ‘Behind B&Q three teenage boys are fixing their lines and casting into the puddle of sludge between the river’s cowpat banks’.[27] The focus here is on mimetic representation, the speaker offering nothing but the bare visual details, only slightly stylized as ‘sludge’ and ‘cowpat banks’. Occasionally, however, the speaker will enrich the picture with a figurative device, which breaks with the otherwise flatly descriptive style of the poem. ‘18’, for example, personifies the river: ‘A bend in the river, heavy and lutulent: the fetid brown gums of the Hull bared in a vacant smile’.[28] ‘Lutulent’, a strangely formal adjective, means turbid. This is supported with the image of the river’s ‘fetid brown gums’. Ugliness and pollution are suggested. But even with the figuration, we are left wondering, what ‘ideas’ are there in these lines? We see poverty and urban decay, but such trivial local details merely documented seem to lack, at first glance, emotional depth or feeling. What does such an approach yield for the migrant speaker? In ‘10’ the speaker achieves something slightly different. Hitherto, an active voice in the present tense delivers the mostly plain descriptions, but now we shift in time:

> A car battery of a mill, other side of the river from behind a high wall, narrow corridor of a road, lorries thundering past, the A in the circle on their bonnets just like the one I used to play with in my back garden twenty-five years ago: just like the A in the circle I used to see on the back of parka jackets. A for Atkinson, A for anarchy.[29]

[26] David Wheatley, ‘Bankside-Wincolmlee by Instamatic’, in *Mocker* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2006), pp. 15–21 (p. 15).
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid, p. 18.
[29] Ibid, p. 16.

This stanza begins with the same photographic technique as before, although the sight of the bonnet emblem of a passing lorry triggers a memory. We are back, suddenly, in the speaker's Irish past. A childhood reminiscence of parka jackets and, presumably, a toy vehicle that the speaker used to play with is conjured. 'Atkinson' is possibly a manufacturer of parka jackets, and the A symbol enclosed in a circle also denotes the anarchist ideology. Why, amongst the debris and apparent ugliness of this inner-city space in the speaker's adopted city, are we suddenly transported back to Ireland? Psychologically, this is a quite common event, because memories can be easily triggered, and a chain of associations can lead one to numerous places. But in the context of this migrant poem it holds a special significance. This poem, to paraphrase Quinn, *really is about* Wheatley's experience in Hull, but it is also haunted by the ghost of his origins. Wheatley is creating a fascinating kind of migrant poetry that is keenly attuned to Hull, whilst – through the instant merging of time and place in the aesthetic space of the poem – creating linkages between past and present, and Ireland and Britain. The connections are deeply personal, rooted in childhood. Both places are held together equally, momentarily, within the space of the poem. And it is only through the intensely close engagement with place that these associations are made. The loco-descriptive strategy both anchors the speaker to his current place, and gives rise to unexpected resonances for the speaker, that then re-connect him to his Irish past.

The sequence then returns to its established hyper-local focus for the final poems. It ends with the river: 'mudbanks ascendent, supreme, the sky wispless, all else buried, face down in the shit the vision at last: drowning, drowned, perfect'.[30] The poem culminates with the speaker's vision immersed 'in the shit', as if to affirm the earthy engagement that the speaker has with his subject matter. This poem, as the last lines confirm, is deeply immersed in place. It is thus a specific kind of

[30] Ibid, p. 20.

urban place poem: it gives the impression that the subject matter is not idealized in any way. Instead, we have a speaker observing and recording all the unlovely aspects of their surroundings. Migrancy for Wheatley is about the incorporation of his new place into his sense of identity, and for him, this seems to necessitate this kind of poetry.

Wheatley then moves from the urban space of 'Bankside' and into the slippery world of language in 'A Backward Glance' and 'Mocker/*Magadh*'. Here, he explores the interaction between the Irish and English languages. Language itself is a subject of these poems. By moving away from an emphasis on the tangible spaces of Hull and into a linguistic plane, Wheatley is able to explore another important aspect of his experience. Language – the medium of poetry, and the means by which we structure our understanding of the material world – is as important as place to the migrant experience. This can often result in an experience of estrangement for the migrant, but this is not the case with Wheatley's speakers. Like 'Bankside', although in a different way, the linguistic poems become a site of interaction between two aspects of the speaker's identity and experience: the Irish and the English. They are about journeys, both aesthetic and linguistic, and, in the case of 'A Backward Glance', geographical as well:

> He mishears 'Yorkshire':
>
> *dhearcas siar*.
>
> His own small teary
>
> *Dialann Deorai*.[31]

[31] David Wheatley, 'A Backward Glance', in *Mocker*, p. 38. This poem is also possibly a parody of Muldoon's 'The Mist-Net': 'he caught only two tiny birds […/] their tiny sobs were his mother's dying words: / *You mustn't*, *you mustn't*', in *Meeting the British* (London: Faber, 1987), p. 10.

This is a poem which hints at the historical crossovers between the North of England and Ireland, whilst simultaneously exploring the speaker's own sense of belonging to both these places. This is emphasized here by the linguistic similarities between spoken English and spoken Irish. The word 'Yorkshire' is near-homophonous with the Irish phrase '*dhearcas siar*', which means 'backward glance'. The final two lines of the poem reinforce this, with their half rhyme between the English 'teary' and Irish '*Deorai*'. The phrase '*Dialann Deorai*' means 'Exile's Diary' and is taken from the title of a mid-twentieth century memoir written by an Irish labourer living in the North of England.[32] This allusion to the 'Exile's Diary' acknowledges the history of Irish migration to the North of England, in particular the history of economic migration, a state Wheatley's speaker shares with the worker they evoke. But the evocation of the 'Exile's Diary' is also ironic, as Wheatley's speaker does not speak in yearning exilic tones about the Irish motherland, but is instead happy to dwell in both languages, and both cultures and traditions. The 'backward glance' of the poem may therefore be freighted with a double-meaning: the speaker slyly satirising the trope of the Irish 'exile' looking wistfully across the water to the motherland, and also the speaker who is looking back through history towards their navvy antecedent.

If 'A Backward Glance' playfully adopts the émigré's pose, then 'Mocker/*Magadh*' avoids the trope entirely. Again, the Irish language sits happily alongside the English, but there is no sense in 'Mocker' of estrangement from either culture or language; instead, the speaker holds them both together. The poem comprises two stanzas, one in English and one in Irish. The poem's setting is a beach

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[32] Clair Wills provides some useful context for this: 'Donall Mac Amhlaigh's *Dialann Deoraí* (*An Irish Navvy: Diary of an Exile*) was published in Irish in 1960 and in an English translation by Valentin Iremonger in 1964. Mac Amhlaigh left Kilkenny for Britain in 1951, first to work as a hospital orderly and later as a labourer at various sites in England, particularly around Northampton, where he eventually settled. *Diary of an Exile* is the story of his first seven years in England'. *The Best are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 115.

(possibly near to Hull), with the speaker observing the steady rhythm of the breaking waves on the shore. ‘Mocker/*Magadh*’ is ultimately about, to quote Quinn, the ‘commingling of / identities’. This theme is chiefly at work on a linguistic level within the poem: the speaker’s Irishness, which is represented by the Irish language, as well as their exposure to Englishness, which is represented by the English language, interact in the poem. The poem is a kind of exploration of the Irish and the English aspects of the speaker’s identity. Migrancy as well as hybridity is suggested by the imagery of the poem: the beach is a place where people may arrive and leave, and its sand itself is formless. The sea blurs the boundaries between land and sea, becoming silted with sand as it reaches onto the beach and retreats. The poem’s stanza structure mirrors the movement of the sea.[33] Initially in English, the poem begins:

The beach’s naked

then clothed again

*maja*,

white-into-brown,

brown-into-white

again mocha:

the waves’ kiss

forever short

[33] The so-called ‘staircase / lineation’ of ‘Mocker/*Magadh*’ is actually derived from the poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov, from whom Wheatley takes inspiration for the title of his latest collection. ‘The President of Planet Earth’, in *The President of Planet Earth* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2017), pp. 59–67 (p. 61). This is yet another example of the breadth of influences of Wheatley’s poetry.

of the machair.[34]

The brine changing colour from 'white-into-brown' and then from 'brown-into-white' suggests interfusion as it breaks onto the sand and becomes silted before washing away. This effect is like the milking of a coffee, in particular the 'mocha'. The first three lines allude to Francisco Goya's two paintings, *La Maja Desnuda* and *La Maja Vestida*, depicting a woman reclining on a bed of pillows both naked and clothed. The sea washing onto the beach figuratively *clothes* the beach, and its recession unclothes the beach, calling to the speaker's mind the two works by Goya. The speaker's aural receptivity is signalled by the linkage between the 'maja' and 'mocha'. The following stanza bears the title '*Magadh*' (meaning 'mocker'), indicating the start of the Irish poem. This is a loose translation of the preceding English (or the English poem is a translation of the following Irish):

Idir nocht

agus feistithe

ta an tra ina *maja*,

curach idir

ban agus donn

ar nos mocha,

pog na dtonn

gan teagmhail riamh

leis an machaire.

[34] David Wheatley, 'Mocker/*Magadh*', in *Mocker*, p. 49.

The initial clause, 'Idir nocht agus feistithe ta an tra ina *maja*', translates almost precisely to the corresponding lines of the English 'Mocker' above, with 'tra' meaning 'beach', with 'nocht' meaning 'naked', and 'feistithe' meaning 'clothed'. The other lines in the poem enact a similar linguistic echo, a sort of call and response across the linguistic divide. The 'Mocker' of the poem's title thus signals the linguistic mimicry at work in the poem. That the noun 'machair', a slight anglicization of the Gaelic word 'machaire' (meaning a fertile grassy plain), is retained in stanza two along with '*maja*' and 'mocha' is significant: unlike the rest of the poem, these words resist translation, representing an etymological and thus cultural *common ground* between England and Ireland. Might 'Mocker/*Magadh*' also be an example within contemporary Irish poetry of a non-ideological stance on what Quinn calls the classic 'postcolonial dichotomy of writing in the oppressor's tongue'?[35] Wheatley may be an Irish poet in Britain, but, as a poem such as 'Mocker' demonstrates, he transcends Quinn's opposition. It might be tempting to deploy Heaney's adjective 'bilocation' here, but without the portentous sense of cultural burden with which he uses it: Wheatley is light-footed in 'Mocker', slipping deftly between the Irish and English languages.[36] These linguistic poems, as well as the place poem of 'Bankside', reveal that in *Mocke*r as a whole, Wheatley seems to be enjoying the interaction with Hull, as he emphasises the connections and continuities between his own background and his adopted city. The character of Wheatley's migrant poetry is firmly established in this collection, in poems that attend to the milieu of the new place, whilst enacting, in various ways, the very idea of migrancy as a kind of journey.

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[35] Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 198.

[36] Heaney is analysing Derek Mahon's 'Penhurst Place', where he argues that the poem 'contains Mahon's sense of bilocation, culturally in love with the Surrey countryside where he was living with his family when the poem was written, but domestically and politically entangled with the country of his first nurture'. Seamus Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Reflections on Some Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (London: Faber, 2003), pp. 112–134 (p. 124).

**III. *A Nest on the Waves***

*A Nest on the Waves* (2010) is Wheatley's second Hull-inspired collection. The notion of inscribing his own poetry onto the 'palimpsest' of Hull, as well as the desire to position himself within the tradition of Hull poets, is equally pertinent to this collection. But unlike *Mocker* that preceded it, there are no loco-descriptive poems, and the playful linguistic poems of 'Mocker/*Magadh*' and 'A Backward Glance' are also left behind. In *A Nest*, the experience of migration is addressed more candidly. There are still Hull poems, as we shall see, but the speaker's attention is ultimately less concerned with the external than with developing a more introspective perspective. Ireland also features as subject matter. The voice of the poems of *A Nest* is more mature on the whole. The subject matter is also more various than *Mocker*, although Hull is still a prominent subject. There is a lament for the great Malian blues guitarist Ali Farke Touré, and a poem about the American jazz pianist Brad Mehldau, among poems about birds, the M62, bridges, and other areas of Hull. The general themes of the collection are travel and migration, which confirms the centrality of the idea of journeys, migrations, and voyages in Wheatley's poetry. One reviewer noted Wheatley's variousness: he describes his 'uncertainty and sheer possibility; jumping from place to place, idea to idea, the real to the imagined'.[37] Wheatley's poems are rich and diverse, with a (mostly) *vivace* tempo.

'A Fret' comprises ten quatrain stanzas, and is the second poem of the collection. It is yet another poem that records a journey through Hull. Didsbury again provides the blueprint for this poem. His 'Eikon Basilike' (which is an allusion to the autobiography of King Charles I published after his execution) begins: 'During the late and long continuing cold / I went for a walk in the empty heart of the city'.[38] This poem first appeared in Didsbury's second collection, *The Classical Farm* (1987). The

[37] Ben Wilkinson, 'A Nest on the Waves by David Wheatley – Review', *The Guardian*, 4 December 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/dec/04/nest-on-the-waves-david-wheatley-review> [accessed July 16 2022].

[38] Peter Didsbury, 'Eikon Basilike', in *Scenes from a Long Sleep: New and Collected Poems* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2003), pp. 126–128 (p. 126).

'city' in Didsbury's poem is Hull, and although Wheatley's poem is not introduced as an homage or a response to any particular Didsbury poem, his speaker is evidently following in Didsbury's footsteps in 'A Fret'. Didsbury's speaker describes 'disgruntled buildings' and 'dereliction' – the same post-industrial decline that we find in Wheatley's evocations of Hull – before he, semi-ironically, is suddenly moved: 'I thought I might begin to weep and yet I scarcely knew why'.[39] Wheatley reads 'Eikon Basilike' as 'a critique of the Romantic imagination, written at its late, postmodernist fag end, and of the recourse to theology as a vain and desperate attempt to regain this disappeared majesty'.[40] Wheatley's 'A Fret' also contains a sense of epiphany, although Wheatley's migrant poem is not concerned with Didsbury's theological themes.

'A Fret' may have two meanings, suggesting an expression of anxiety, and that the poem is a record of the speaker's wandering through Hull to pass the time. The subtle half-rhymes in Wheatley's poem have the effect of emphasising the fleet-footedness of the speaker. Despite the gracefulness of the poem, there is an undercurrent of insecurity, as the speaker engages with the theme of identity as a migrant. There is an attention to place here, with a suggestion of strange goings-on in the city. But the attention to the city-life prompts a sudden moment of lucid self-reflection. It begins:

> The coal merchant shoulders a nimbus of smuts
>
> down a street that insists you've been here before
>
> and recognize the urchin – you – that sits
>
> and stares at his shoes in an open front door.

[39] Ibid, pp. 126 & 127.
[40] '"Dafter than we care to own"', pp. 117–118.

Don’t buy it. The air is thick with the sloughed

skin of dead selves: they fall and settle,

a load too imperceptible to shift,

but sickly and adhesive, mute and subtle.

Let them not expect grief. You dodge and move

through liquid fixities of past and present,

steer by a river whose mudbanks leave

you tidal, bogged down and imprisoned.[41]

From the initial images of working class, inner-city life that recall the technique of ‘Bankside’, such as a ‘coal merchant’ shouldering his ‘smuts’, and an ‘urchin’, an explicit reflection is prompted. This poem differs from ‘Bankside’, however, because the speaker is not so intent on immersing himself in place, but rather, the images of Hull become the basis for more general reflections on their condition of migration. ‘Don’t buy it’, the speaker insists, because ‘the air is thick with the sloughed / skin of dead selves’. The migrant speaker’s identity is both mutable and multiple, the opposite of a fixed, singular, place-bound sense of self. The common opposition then arises here between the latter, more traditional conception of rootedness, and, for the geographically mobile migrant, a kind of identity that is subject to change and mutation. But how does the speaker feel about this new reality, or this new ontology? It is invisibly oppressive. This feeling, that is expressed in the medium

[41] David Wheatley, ‘A Fret’, in *A Nest on the Waves* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2010), pp. 12–13 (p. 12).

of language, is experienced in physical terms: the speaker's identities 'fall and settle', forming 'a load too imperceptible to shift'. It is 'sickly and adhesive, mute and subtle'. Paradoxically, it is not the weight of these multiple, decaying identities that is overwhelming the speaker, but the fact of their very ephemerality and subtlety. But in any case, the variability of identity is not liberating, but dumbfounding. The speaker's insecurity is derived from the strangely manifold nature of identities that now define the migrant speaker's existence. Identity, then, which is a typical preoccupation of the migrant – with the related questions of who am I, and where do I belong? – clearly surfaces in Wheatley's poem.

In the following stanzas the speaker more fully explores the temporal dimension of this identarian anxiety. The speaker refuses to mourn the loss of their 'dead selves', instead being compelled – via a kind of lyric 'you', which is substituted for the usual 'I' – to 'dodge and move / through liquid fixities of past and present'. This is an obvious riff on Zygmunt Bauman's concept of 'liquid modernity', which is in some ways equivalent to the 'dead selves' of the previous stanza: in our globalized world, the dissipation of stable forms of identity elicits a constant feeling of anxiety and instability in the subject.[42] Identity itself embodies all the qualities of a fluid, being changeable and capable of constant motion. And especially for Wheatley's geographically mobile migrant speaker, this fact is thrown into sharp relief. Wheatley modifies Bauman's formulation, however, presenting a kind of paradox in the idea of 'liquid fixities'. What is fixed cannot be liquid by definition, but with regard to the abstract notion of time to which this idea pertains, it represents the constant transformation of the present moment into the past in a constant cycle. This continual motion and change, of both time and identity, is 'tidal', like the river in the following image. Its chief effect on the migrant speaker is to leave them feeling – and again this is described in physical terms – 'bogged down and imprisoned'. Contrary to the notion of being stifled by an erstwhile monolithic conception of

[42] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

'Irishness' – the kind now left behind as Ireland and the nature of migration has evolved – the contemporary experience of many Irishness(-es) is constricting in its own way.

The poem then develops beyond this initial feeling, as we follow the speaker on their journey through the urban centre of Hull. There are seven further quatrain stanzas. We pass the 'stadium' of Hull City F.C. before arriving in a 'scrapyard sculpture park', 'whose remaindered / Edward VII accepts a vain salute // from a yawning Ford Fiesta's bonnet'. Wheatley will rarely evoke the old colonial relationship between Ireland and Britain, but he does so here in a witty image that satirizes the idea of British post-imperial decline. Then we head for a 'beer' in a 'backstreet pub', before finally venturing homewards. The final two stanzas are dominated by a description of late-evening 'fog' that has descended on the city:

> and fog on the way home, fog all round
>
> so I can't see you who are a shadow away,
>
> and there are no shadows and there is no ground
>
> underfoot for me to feel give way,
>
> and what kind of weather is this when all I want,
>
> all that I imagine, touch and see
>
> finds, not loses, itself in all I cannot
>
> grasp, in a fog drifted in from the sea?[43]

[43] 'A Fret', p. 13.

Bewilderment pervades these final lines, as embodied in the dense mist. When read in the context of the migrant experience, and as a return to the preoccupations that found the poem, the speaker's sense of being groundless is significant: the migrant is unable to feel any 'ground / underfoot to give way'. There is a sense of present danger here, with the risk that they might stumble, but in figurative terms, this is a comment on the speaker's lack of identarian sure-footedness. The final stanza is posed as a question. The fog, initially ushering in a sense of bemusement or rootlessness, eventually engenders a startling visual, physical, and imaginative discovery: the realization is derived precisely from this confusion – it 'finds […] itself in all [the speaker] cannot / grasp'. What this great insight is is left unstated, for we can only glimpse the process of discovery. This poem is thus an intriguing aestheticization of, in a number of ways, the migrant experience. The speaker, in their new city, wanders the street in search of fresh perspectives, recording what they find as they go. The speaker finds himself suddenly inclined to lucid introspection, and they are finally left on the cusp of an epiphany.

I have argued that Wheatley's migrant poetry is one of nomadism, as much as it is attuned to the different places that he has known. 'A Fret' describes both literal and identarian journeys, and is situated in Hull. But it represents a departure from the poems of *Mocker*. 'A Fret' is a vehicle for a kind of theorising of migrancy on behalf of the speaker: it develops beyond the desire to simply engage with place in 'Bankside' and towards a more sophisticated conception of his condition. So, what is migrancy, according to the speaker of 'A Fret'? It is principally an experience of multiple identities and places, a fact that is bewildering and oppressing. The certainties of home have been upended. The speaker of 'A Fret' is quite despondent, at least initially. *Mocker's* migrant poems are more exuberant and are about the celebration and exaltation of the migrant experience. The poems of this collection convey a sense of a speaker who wants to, and indeed does, really belong to their

new place. 'A Fret' complicates this perspective. Yet, the sense of epiphany at the end of 'A Fret' introduces further complexity, because it counteracts, or even contradicts, the initial expression of dejection. 'A Fret' is ultimately left open-ended and unresolved.

The poems discussed so far have either been explicitly set in Hull, or are generated by the migrant speaker's engagement with his new place. 'A Shadow Life', however, is situated in Ireland. Of course, the implicit starting place is still Hull, because this poem is about the speaker's migration. But its overt situation is Ireland. It is a fascinating meditation on migration, on the concept of home, and on the passing of time. It takes the form of a deeply personal reminiscence. 'A Fret' and 'The Shadow Life' are both poems of self-reflection. 'The Shadow Life' attempts to conceptualise migrancy, and as such, it is a complement to 'A Fret'. Both poems are also about identity and journeys: a short walk through Hull in the former, and a longer spatial-temporal journey through and from Ireland in the latter. But whereas the speaker of 'A Fret' is initially anxious about the migrant experience – particularly the conflict of identities that it creates – the speaker of 'The Shadow Life' is able to arrive at a kind of reconciliation. So, Wheatley's speaker is both anxious and, ultimately, content, across these two self-reflective migrant poems.

'The Shadow Life' is a significant poem, because it embodies Wheatley's nomadism, and his desire to belong to place, whilst explicitly ruminating on these ideas and themes. It is written in apostrophe to Raymond Magee, presumably a close friend or acquaintance, although it also addresses close family. It has the same structure as 'A Fret', with ABAB half-rhymes within its quatrain structure. I will reproduce it here in its entirety:

I would have been at the garden centre

on some deathly Sunday outing

and you at the rifle range a saunter

away in uniform sharp-shooting,

blind to the thought of your parents’ house

a few fields down, say, one crack shot,

but further off than Congo or Cyprus

and reachable by no known route.

I would have been on the Belfast train

and missed you by no more than decades

when you took your Northern turn,

on the first of two one-way tickets –

Dublin-Belfast-Dublin again,

doubled back but to no return

to, not a home, but a place found gone,

a town of roots unbound and thrawn.

(Home, if we must say home, being what

but a word we use.) You and your brother,

that stranger, might have swapped his commute

to Tallaght, all that ring-road bother,

and your outings to Bray promenade

and up Bray Head, through all those years,

and swapped but still not met the need

for the other life: not his or yours,

but both, neither, all through the 40s,

60s, 80s, when you were, Dad

was, I was…when we crossed on forays

to and from Dublin, on the road

to Tallaght, to Bray, and overlapped

in ignorance, in strangeness shared,

but mutely as the pulse that throbbed,

then hammered, turning into the yard

of a Templeogue pub this spring, where you,

somebody's uncle, brother, son,

sipped a coffee, and that was our shadow

life, here and this one all along:

all the years' false trails unspooled;

lost and found, wrong our whole lives,

but returned to ourselves, grateful, appalled,

how the road decides where the road home leads.[44]

It begins in retrospection, with the speaker in a 'garden centre', and their friend, who is a serving solider, away somewhere 'unreachable'. The idea of journeys is established here in the first two stanzas, as the speaker sets the scene. In the third stanza the temporal, rather than spatial, dimension of separation is emphasised in the lines 'I would have been on the Belfast train / and missed you by no more than decades', as they took their 'Northern turn', that is, migrated to the north of Ireland. The speaker and their addressee are presumably separated by age: they have embarked on a similar journey over the same ground, but many years apart. There is a wistfulness here, as the speaker desires to connect with their friend across the years. Internal migration is addressed in the following stanza. This person has made a round trip – over a long period of time – between Dublin and Belfast, but on their return to Dublin, has been left bereft of connection to their old place of habitation. This is 'not a home, but a place found gone, / a town of roots unbound and thrawn'. The speaker and their established 'roots' – and here Wheatley evokes the familiar linkage

[44] David Wheatley, 'The Shadow Life', in *A Nest on the Waves*, pp. 49–51.

between people and place in the idea of rootedness – are now disintegrated and in disarray, which is suggested by the phrase 'unbound and thrawn'. Now conscious of this feeling of deracination, the speaker parenthetically scrutinises the very concept of home for the migrant: '(Home, if we must say home, being what / but a word we use)'. For the speaker, home as an idea has become emptied of meaning. Home, which can mean one's place of origin, one's habitual place of residence, and one's own country, is often a problematic concept for the migrant. In my chapter on McDonald, I have argued that home is a central concept in his migrant poetry. Migration modifies how McDonald's speakers relate to their home of Belfast, but it remains an important – although loaded – term in his poetry. Wheatley's speaker jettisons home altogether, realizing that for him it is impoverished. This is because home often implies stasis, whereas migrancy is a condition always in flux, a condition of mobility and change. Thus home – at least in the traditional sense – is something that is not easy to identify for Wheatley's migrant subject.

The following stanzas return to the idea of separation. The different protagonists of speaker, Magee, and the speaker's father are all journeying from place to place, ignorant of each other's existence. They each move through their own pre-determined routes, autonomous and alone: they 'crossed on forays / to and from Dublin', and 'on the road // to Tallaght, to Bray, and overlapped / in ignorance'. These are literal journeys being described here, actual 'commute[s]', but they are also figurative routes through life. The final six stanzas of the poem (following on from the parenthetical declaration about the concept of 'home' in stanza five) are one long sentence. The grammar mirrors the journey being described, and the logic of the speaker's thoughts, with one leading to the other. They describe how the routes of the protagonists all eventually converge, as they are reunited in 'a Templeogue pub this spring'. This reacquaintance then leads the speaker to reconsider their idea that return to a stable home is impossible. The speaker describes a 'shadow' life, which are the lives of mobility lived hitherto. All the other voyages have been mere 'false trails unspooled'. But this

poem does not establish a clear stasis versus mobility and roots versus routes dichotomy. It transcends these divisions to reveal a complex representation of the experience of migration. The speaker and their kin are not really rootless at all, because their journeying is ultimately formative, leading the protagonists back to themselves: 'lost and found, wrong our whole lives, / but returned to ourselves, grateful, appalled, / how the road decides where the road home leads'. The route and root intertwine in the final line here. The speaker feels rooted in 'home', which, significantly, is redeployed with its original meaning restored. But it is their experience of nomadism, the apparent opposite of the fixed 'home', that engenders this. There is a kind of *routedness* professed here. The note of fatalism is particularly intriguing: 'the road decides where the road home leads'. We are all in a sense migrants as we move through our lives, and having been compelled to embark, we are ultimately only passengers. 'Home', then, is a product of this very process of emotional and physical voyaging. The two poems I have discussed from *A Nest* exemplify the growth of Wheatley's migrant aesthetic towards conceptualisations of migrancy that are rooted in personal experience. These two poems convey two divergent perspectives: if the speaker's nomadism can engender a feeling of disorientation, it can also produce a different kind of relationship between speaker and place. The very concept of home, of belonging, is redefined in 'The Shadow Life'.

***The President of Planet Earth***

We have seen with 'A Fret' and 'The Shadow Life' the new tendency in Wheatley's migrant poems of *A Nest* for explicit meditations on migrancy. The experience of multiplicity – of identity and place – can be disorientating. But, conversely, this mobility and change is somehow formative. Hull prompts all the poems discussed so far, in one way or another, and they are all poems that describe journeys

of various kinds. *The President of Planet Earth* (2017) is Wheatley's first Scotland-inspired collection. Its poems chart the latest stage in Wheatley's poetic journey, as he moves to Scotland and into its culture, its language, its geography, and its literature. This collection – which is as long as both *Mocker* and *A Nest* combined – is very diverse. Its title is derived from Velimir Khlebnikov, a Russian Futurist poet who declared himself the President of Planet Earth. This worldly perspective perhaps influences the heterogeneity of Wheatley's collection. Formally, the collection is wide-ranging, with sonnets, free verse, elegies, and a long sequence of concrete and monostich poems written for Ian Hamilton Finlay, among others. There are translations of Irish poems, and poems in Scots, alongside the English-language poems. However, I will only focus on two poems, 'A Bittering', and 'Sonnets to Robert Fergusson'. These are significant poems in distinct ways. The former is one of self-reflection. It is a highly personal poem, anchored in an experience of adolescence. It is a curious journey through time and place. Although it is akin to 'A Fret' and 'The Shadow Life', its aesthetic strategy is quite dissimilar to these other poems of self-reflection. 'Sonnets to', however, is more akin to 'Bankside-Wincolmlee by Instamatic', in that Wheatley, principally through emulation and an engagement with Aberdeen itself, is seeking to connect with his new place. His poetic identity evolves in this poem, as Scottishness is assimilated for the first time. Ultimately, in *The President*, we are reminded of the multifariousness of Wheatley's poetry, with its numerous languages, styles, themes, and subjects. This, in itself, is suggestive of the multiplicity of the migrant experience.

'A Bittering' is not only one of Wheatley's best poems but also an excellent example of the personal, self-reflective strain of his migrant poems. It contains the themes of memory, identity, time, and place. Unlike the regular quatrains of 'A Fret' and 'A Shadow Life', 'A Bittering' comprises long stanzas of up to twenty-seven lines. There are three stanzas in total, although they are not separated with line breaks. Instead, the final line of each stanza is lineated part-way. Combined with the iambic pentameter, this poem has a natural, narrative style – the largely unbroken blocks of text give the

poem a prosaic appearance on the page. The poem bears an epigraph in Irish, 'Bíonn an fhirinne searbh', which translates as: the truth is bitter. This is a pun on the brewing process that the speaker participates in. It is also about being honest, and facing reality, however uncomfortable this may be.

The poem, then, combines these two senses of the epigraph. The initial stanza establishes the physical process of the brewing and fermentation of hops as a complement to the psychological process of remembering. The interaction of these two ideas is like that of a tenor and vehicle throughout the poem. These lines from stanza one establish the process of figuration: 'The malt in the vat / hides in its bubbles and froth, and memory / that intoxicant stirs in the mash tun'.[45] The metaphor emerges with subtlety in the second half of the sentence here. The next lines extend this figurative interaction. As the process of brewing evolves, so does the act of reminiscence: 'words / strain through a sieve in the mind [.../] converting, unselving me too'. The last phrase returns to the idea of the speaker's accreted multiple identities from 'A Fret': 'the air is thick with the sloughed / skin of dead selves'.

But unlike 'A Fret', the speaker is not lamenting the accretion of multiple identities, so much as they are shedding these identities. They are becoming 'unselve[d]'. This undoing of identity opens up a strange achronological perspective. This poem represents a process of temporal fragmentation, with the speaker able to discover in these moments an understanding of their condition. In stanza two, the speaker is suddenly 'a child again', and the beer is linked this time to a place, 'the contents of Bray harbour'. And – again extending the ale metaphor – 'a long finish / from the dregs of childhood' is described (the speaker is also now leafing through an album of black and white photos). And then

[45] David Wheatley, 'A Bittering', in *The President of Planet Earth* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2017), pp. 42–45 (p. 42).

we're back in the 'brew's present continuous: / I enter future memory, sharp and bitter, now'.[46] This notion of the continuous present is intertextual with Seamus Heaney's 'At Toomebridge' from *Electric Light* (2001). This place poem is about a weir in Lough Neagh, whose waters fall 'shining to the continuous / Present of the Bann'.[47] This much shorter poem also establishes an achronological point of view, with the speaker able to have ready access to a kind of personal and cultural history. Wheatley's poem achieves a similar feat, although his imagery is drawn strictly from the well of personal memory. This is signalled by the paradoxical phrase, 'future memory', in stanza three of Wheatley's poem: the speaker is looking back from the future, but from the continuous present. The theme of migration also surfaces explicitly here:

> years of this, gone and to come, remembered
>
> from what other country, at what remove,
>
> with what taste left in my mouth? Peering
>
> into the barrel I find its contents already
>
> ebbing to empty, sluiced like memory
>
> along the drains and sewers of obsolescence[48]

The poem builds to this central question about the migrant experience. What do they really feel about being at a 'remove' in time and place? An *emotional* aftertaste is sought here. The speaker is writing from the 'other country', yet within the shifting chronology of the poem, they are left unsure. The image of the ale suddenly fails to satiate the speaker, at exactly the time when it is most

[46] Ibid.
[47] Seamus Heaney, 'At Toomebridge', in *Electric Light* (London: Faber, 2001), p. 2.
[48] 'A Bittering', p. 43.

needed to deliver insight, because the barrel ebbs 'to empty'. The question is left unanswered. But this is deliberate, because the complex network of memories and experiences described in the poem is bewildering. There is no easy conclusion. Indeterminacy is a valid response. This final truth is, then, bitter for being unresolved. What the migrant speaker feels is precisely irresolution. Conscious of some sadness, the speaker professes to desire 'dull amnesia, needing the past but not me who was there'.[49] They now want to forget, not remember. But despite this, the poem ends hopefully. As the brewing process reaches its end point, so does the poem itself. 'The beer is brewed', the speaker declares – echoing Ted Hughes's line, 'The page is printed', from 'The Thought Fox' – 'the future drinks deep, / decanting us into […] the promise of next year's / hops'.[50]

In 'A Bittering', the speaker poses and attempts to answer a very personal question that is fundamentally about trying to get to the heart of what they really *feel* about the migrant experience. Is it loss or hope, fulfilment or unfulfillment that this geographical mobility engenders? It is curious that the vehicle for this process of working out – the procedure of beer brewing – does not enable the speaker to formulate a clear perspective. But really the messiness of our life-events – with emigration being one of them – is confirmed by this poem. 'A Bittering' introduces yet another perspective to the self-reflective strain of Wheatley's migrant poems. The speaker in 'A Fret' experiences the 'drunkenness of things being various',[51] 'The Shadow Life' finds the speaker glad in their journeying, where 'A Bittering' is irresolute.  All the poems examined thus far embody migrancy for Wheatley: as much as he can be an earthy celebrant of cityscapes, or a linguistic adventurer, migrancy is also a complicated experience of mobility, discontinuity, belonging, and bewilderment.

[49] Ibid.
[50] 'A Bittering', p. 44, and Ted Hughes, 'The Thought Fox', in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* Fifth Edition, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (New York: Norton, 2005), pp. 1810–1811 (p. 1811).
[51] Louis MacNeice, 'Snow', in *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber, 1979), p. 30.

Indeed, ‘Sonnets to Robert Fergusson’ finds Wheatley attuned to another cityscape (other than Hull) in Aberdeen. The strategy is not a strictly loco-descriptive one in this poem, but the speaker is attentive to Scotland’s history and politics, past and present. As representations of migration, ‘A Bittering’ and ‘Sonnets to Robert Fergusson’ are very different. The significant aesthetic differences between these two migrant poems are further evidence for the diversity of *A President*, and of Wheatley’s poetry in general. ‘A Bittering’ is more direct, building up layers of figuration around the themes of memory, place, and identity. ‘Sonnets to Robert Fergusson’, situated in Aberdeen, does not directly address migration, but, like ‘Bankside’ from *Mocker*, engages with place from within. So, even though Wheatley is now more inclined to write migrant poems of self-reflection, he still creates poems of place with the earnest intention to belong. The rhyme scheme of the fourteen sonnets is inconsistent, but there are fourteen lines in each poem. The speaker is very much in-place in this poem, which contrasts with the ambiguity of ‘A Bittering’.

‘Sonnets to Robert Fergusson’ is, as the title suggests, written in apostrophe to the eighteenth-century Scottish poet, Robert Fergusson (1750–1774). A significant influence on Robert Burns, Fergusson is an important Scottish poet, who composed in both English and Scots. Wheatley’s poem is also written in a mixture of the latter – a language that Fergusson is especially famous for having written in – and modern English. Scots is related to English, but split off from its sister tongue during the Middle Ages.[52] It contains many dialect words that are unintelligible to English speakers. Wheatley’s dual languages of English and Scots in his poem are directly emulative of Fergusson, and Wheatley is therefore contributing to the Scottish tradition that Murray Pittock terms ‘“double-voicedness”, particularly in the construction of poems in both English and Scots’.[53] This strategy can be a means of subverting a particular Anglocentric hierarchy of language, which privileges English

[52] See: ‘History of the Scots Language’, *Scots Language Centre*, 2021, <https://www.scotslanguage.com/articles/node/id/117> [accessed 27 March 2021].
[53] Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 136.

and denigrates dialects such as Scots. Fergusson himself often wrote in a form of 'synthetic standard' of Scots, rather than in a specific regional variation.[54] Wheatley's Scots is drawn from this standardised lexicon.

Wheatley, the Irish migrant to Scotland, is engaging in a dialogue across centuries, cultures, and languages with Fergusson. This particular practice of interacting with his poetic forebear is perhaps MacNeicean in origin. Louis MacNeice's 'Memoranda to Horace' is written in apostrophe to the Roman poet:

> […] It looks as if both of us
>
> Met in the uniqueness of history a premise
>
> That keeps us apart yet parallel,
>
> The gap reducible only by language.

MacNeice's speaker is comparing the different cultural and linguistic milieux that the poets found themselves in: Horace lived in 'a pagan' epoch mostly under the reign of Augustus, and MacNeice was raised within 'a Christian framework'. MacNeice also comes from a country, Ireland ('my far-near country, my erstwhile'), that 'Rome never bothered her ponderous head about'.[55] Despite these differences, MacNeice's speaker directly communicates with Horace, and it is poetry that facilitates the interaction. MacNeice was a Classicist, and his interaction with Horace is intellectual and artistic. He seeks to follow Horace's example:

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[54] Ibid.
[55] Louis MacNeice, 'Memoranda to Horace', in *The Burning Perch* (London: Faber, 2001), pp. 38–43 (pp. 38 & 39).

Though elderly poets profess to be inveterate

Dionysians, despising Apollonians,

I find it, Flaccus, more modest

To attempt, like you, an appetitive decorum.[56]

Wheatley's speaker is communicating with Fergusson in a similar way: by writing in Fergusson's 'language', Wheatley is connecting with his forebear. However, there is a particular migrant dimension to Wheatley's engagement with Fergusson: he aims to find a place within Scotland's literary tradition, and he is also incorporating Scotland into his poetic identity. Fergusson is most closely associated with Edinburgh. As Pittock argues, 'Fergusson advanced Scotland, and Edinburgh in particular, as a worthy *locus amoenus* in its own right, a source of alternative value expressed in alternative language'.[57] Wheatley's speaker is also advancing Fergusson's view, but via Aberdeen. Wheatley's engagement with Aberdeen is, therefore, multidimensional in 'Sonnets to Robert Fergusson'. It is linguistic and aesthetic, because Wheatley is writing in the local dialect and incorporating it into his poetry in a new way, whilst also conversing with an important local poet. He is contributing to a particular tradition of Scottish poetry. If Wheatley sought to contribute to the smaller (and in its own way 'alternative') tradition of Hull poetry in *Mocker* and *A Nest on the Waves*, in 'Sonnets to Robert Fergusson' Wheatley is finding his place within another 'alternative' – that is, non-Anglocentric – tradition. Wheatley's engagement with Aberdeen is also cultural and geographical: he is writing from Aberdeen and is engaging with its history and politics. Entering the culture and the local language, Wheatley seeks to embed himself in Aberdeenshire.

[56] Ibid, p. 40.
[57] *Scottish and Irish Romanticism*, p. 120.

Initially, the poem becomes a means by which the speaker can truly connect with their new place. Poem one of 'Sonnets to Robert Fergusson' begins by addressing 'Rab' directly: 'Fegs, Rab, fa's thon gowk stravaigin / doon the road, clarty locks shakin / and wheemerin o' his spaul-banes achin?'[58] I translate this as: Truly, Rab, who's the fool wandering / down the road, dirty locks shaking / and complaining of his back-bones aching? A fight or argument then begins – a 'stramash' – so speaker and Fergusson 'jouk' – duck – into a pub. Here Wheatley's speaker remarks, 'Some het aquavit'll wet yer thrapple' (some hot whisky will wet your whistle), as he begins his lengthy one-sided dialogue with his interlocutor. Poems two, three, and four take in contemporary politics, among other topics. The question of Scottish independence is broached, with the speaker asking, 'But what is our nation?'[59] This is an allusion to Leopold Bloom's conversation with the bigoted Citizen in the pub in *Ulysses* (1922).[60] Despite the fact that this references a discussion about Irish national identity specifically, Wheatley's speaker asks this question in the context of Scottish nationhood. The speaker is clearly positioning himself within the Scottish nation, from a pro-independence perspective.[61] It is 'our' nation. There is a sense here of Wheatley very much writing within not an Irish national literature, but a Scottish one. Wheatley is therefore modifying the utterance to incorporate his altered sense of identity: the nomadic post-nationalist speaker is sincerely positioning himself within the Scottish tradition, especially by writing in Scots. His desire with his two Hull-based collections was to contribute to the local tradition of Hull, and here in this poem, it seems Wheatley is desirous of a similar kind of acceptance. The cultural links between (Northern) Ireland and Scotland are also explored via the question of Scottish separatism in poem four. After accusing Gordon 'Broon' of spooning up 'Tory porridge', and Jim Murphy of doing 'a turn as Harry Lauder', the

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[58] David Wheatley, 'Sonnets to Robert Fergusson', in *The President of Planet Earth*, pp. 123–130 (p. 123).
[59] Ibid.
[60] James Joyce, *Ulysses: Annotated Student Edition*, ed. Declan Kiberd (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 430.
[61] This anti-Unionism is redolent of Fergusson's 'Ghaists: A Kirk-Yard Eclogue': 'Black be the day that e'er to England's ground / Scotland was eikit by the Union's bond; / For mony a menzie of destructive ills / The country now maun brook frae *mortmain bills*'. In *The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, ed. Matthew P. McDiarmid (Edinburgh: The Scottish Text Society, 1954), pp. 141–145 (p. 143).

stanza ends with a list of other unionists: ‘and, what’s this, Tony Blair, Bob Geldof, George / Galloway, marching wi’ the Orange Order!’[62] The speaker is against these ‘dowie’ (dismal) people (indeed, the Orange Order did campaign against Scottish independence in 2014).

Poem five moves away from politics and into language:

> But aa Scots sloch aits, scrieved Samy Johnson.
>
> He’ll be a lang time ficklin o’er his brose
>
> afore yer haemil leid stairts mouin prose
>
> the like o’ whilk the doctor hings his rants on.
>
> Grub Street’s ‘lexipharian’ non-pareil!
>
> Ye didna wiss the Doc tael ear the Scots
>
> mair fantoush, gawsy weys tae dink their thochts,
>
> wi’ aye sae mony gleg tongues on the payroll.
>
> There’s bings o’ Pictish stanes in Auld Brythonic
>
> and Arthur Johnston’s Inverurie Latin;
>
> MacDiarmid made his Shetland stanes speak Norn
>
> and Gaelic corrieneuchs are aye a tonic.
>
> But o’ aa’s a tongue mair aften shat on:

[62] Ibid, p. 124.

this throughother speech, this Scots, in which we're twan.[63]

I translate this as:

But all Scots eat oats, wrote Samuel Johnson.

He'll be a long time puzzling over his porridge

before your homely tongue starts mouthing prose

the likes of which the doctor hangs his rants on.

Grub Street's peerless 'lexipharian'!

You did not need the Doc to teach the Scots

more pretentious, showy ways to adorn their thoughts

with still so many smart tongues on the payroll.

There's heaps of Pictish stones in Old Brythonic

and Arthur Johnston's Inverurie Latin;

MacDiarmid made his Shetland stones speak Nord

and Gaelic conversations are always a tonic.

But queen of all is a tongue more often shat on:

this pell-mell speech, this Scots, in which we're twinned.

[63] Ibid, p. 125.

The product of this entering into a new dialect by the speaker is an experience of hybridity, of an Irish-Scottish dualism. The Irish speaker and the Scottish Fergusson are now 'twinned', brought together through language. The speaker, whose identity is forever permeable and subject to change, is adopting Scottishness thorough his immersion. This is signalled, for example, by his rejection of Samuel Johnson's essentialising of the Scottish people: the refinement of the Scots is clear, particularly in the richness of their languages.[64] The particular linguistic immersion here gives the migrant speaker a special access to place, therefore. As the next poem, number six, confirms: 'Gies your gab' (talk to me), 'I might say', 'I've couthied [cosied] up across the decades'.[65] He can speak directly to his forebear.

The final poems take in history and place: 'Bill Wallace' and 'Dunnottar Castle' where 'hundreds birned and stairved and drouned in keech' (hundreds burned and starved and drowned in shit).[66] Fergusson's untimely demise in an institution is described as well: 'your final tumble ends / not on a stairwell but a Bedlam ward'.[67] There is attention to place as speaker and interlocutor finally depart in the last poem:

> Ettlin tae souch fareweel I'm drooned
>
> oot by the traffeck soothwart-boond,
>
> an Aberdein is dreich, dreich grund

---

[64] This is also intertextual with Ferguson's own contemporary attacks on Samuel Johnson. Fergusson was an alumnus of St. Andrews, and he wrote the satirical 'To the Principal and Professors of the University of St. Andrews on their Superb Treat to Dr. Samuel Johnson': 'Mind ye what Sam, the lying loun! / Has in his Dictionar laid down? / That Aits in England are a feast / To cow an' horse, an' sican beast'. In *The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, pp. 182–185 (p. 183).

[65] 'Sonnets to Robert Fergusson', p. 125.

[66] Ibid, p. 128.

[67] Ibid, p. 129.

fer a gaun-aboot

(Trying to sigh farewell I'm drowned

out by the traffic southward-bound,

and Aberdeen is tedious, tedious ground

for a wanderer).[68]

Past and present merge here in the final stanza, as the conversation comes to a close. The poem is both a product of Wheatley's energetic engagement with place, and a site where this occurs: because language is central to this process, the poem, as a linguistic work, enables Wheatley's deep engagement with place. It is a record of his absorption of Scotland into his poetic identity. And where the loco-descriptive poem of *Mocker* was about adopting a new style – of dialoguing with Didsbury through emulation of his style, and thus engaging with Hull – 'Sonnets' is about adopting a whole new language. It is thus a much more ambitious and far-reaching poem.

The character of Wheatley's migrant poetry is various. He is a poet of place, not only of Ireland, but of both Hull and Aberdeen. 'Bankside-Wincolmlee by Instamatic' and 'Sonnets to Robert Fergusson' are examples of this tendency: Wheatley is seeking belonging within these communities. This has a personal and aesthetic dimension: the speaker desires to connect with England and Scotland, and on a poetic level, Wheatley is trying (in a modest way) to find his own place within their respective traditions. Didsbury and Fergusson act as interlocutors and guides for this process. This is the post-nationalist inclination in Wheatley: he has a place within the Irish canon, but he is also equally

[68] Ibid.

identifying with Hull's poets, as well as Aberdeen's. This evolution in his poetry is an example of his poetic nomadism: having left Ireland for Hull, and Hull for Scotland, he now desires to embed himself in the latter place. The self-reflective strain of his migrant poems provides us with a counterpoint to the poems of place. They are prompted by place as well, but it is not their direct subject. These poems conceptualise migrancy. They reveal a perspective that is shifting: celebrating the plural and partial experience of the migrant, whilst also lamenting it. So, there is a sense of both belonging and not belonging in his poetry. But Wheatley ultimately succeeds in extending the range of contemporary Irish poetry, by creating a complex kind of poetry that is generated – in its essence – by his very experience of nomadism. Indeed, Wheatley is a modern migrant poet in the way that his poetic identify is forever permeable and subject to mutation. The journey of his poetry is, therefore, at its midway point, and presents the promise of even greater aesthetic diversity to come.

## Chapter 6: 'The sea's of mobile feature': Caitríona O'Reilly's Poetics of Water

The islands of Britain and Ireland have complex and deeply intertwined maritime histories: both countries, with their extensive coastlines and detachment from the European mainland, have often looked to the seas for transport and trade. The seas around Ireland were the major thoroughfare for Irish emigrants to various destinations around the world until the supersession of the aeroplane. In more recent times, refugees fleeing war zones for safety *in* western Europe have made the perilous journey across vast distances, often in ill-equipped vessels, which brings into relief the fact that the sea remains a vital, if still hazardous, artery. Globally, the oceans are essential for the exchange of goods, with container ships accounting for approximately 90% of all non-bulk cargo transported worldwide. Seas also sustain many maritime cultures, with various peoples still relying on the sea for their sustenance (despite the growing problem of industrial overfishing). The concern with such spaces within the so-called 'blue humanities' is a burgeoning area of interest, as Lucy Collins explains:

> Increasing recognition of the complex relationship between human aspiration and the ocean is reflected in contemporary critical approaches. The ocean can be understood, in William Boelhower's words, as 'a space of dispersion, conjunction, distribution, contingency, heterogeneity, and of intersecting and stratified lines and images'.[1]

Aside from the more ecocritical methodological approaches – that are bound up with the desire to conserve the oceans and protect them from human harm – Nicholas Allen has discussed the

[1] Lucy Collins, 'Observations at the Surface: Contemporary Irish Poets and Marine Life', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies,* 40:1 (2017), pp. 174–193 (p. 174).

importance of shorelines, watery spaces, and islands for the literary sphere specifically. He outlines the idea of a 'grammar of liquidity', and describes islands and their shores as 'places of transition'. The resultant 'fluid thinking' that is prompted by myriad artistic engagements with the sea is 'unmoored' from the constraints of national, intellectual, identarian and temporal boundaries.[2] But as Allen has argued, this is not to reduce this to a mere 'juxtaposition between fluidity and form':

> Liquidity is a condition of continual engagement, surface and depth, volume and elevation, the dimensions of a literature that can hold a multiple consciousness in mind, the art work an astrolabe, not a map, its contours marked by soundings, its horizons by visions, the moment-by-moment record of this journey caught in minute attention to the fabric of the everyday.[3]

Water engenders openness, multiplicity, and mutability via a 'continual' process of aesthetic exploration and discovery. Allen's description of a 'journey' and the notion of an 'astrolabe' rather than a map signal the relevance of the grammar of liquidity for migrants. It concerns the breaking down of borders and divisions, and place-bound ways of thinking, in favour of a continual process of change and innovation. It is aurally, visually, and intellectually receptive. Caitríona O'Reilly frequently draws on the figurative and imaginative resource of watercourses and littoral zones in her migrant poetry in this way: bays, harbours, rivers, seas, islands, and beaches, among other places, are a constant presence in her three collections.[4] The sea is a means of conveyance, a kind of ancient

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[2] Nicholas Allen, *Ireland, Literature, and the Coast: Seatangled* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 4, 5 & 3. Allen also quotes Hester Blum, who argues that 'Planetary and oceanic shifts are invested, in part, in recognising the artificiality and intellectual limitations of national, political, linguistic, psychological, or temporal boundaries in studying forms of literary and cultural influence and circulation', in 'Terraqueous Planet: The Case for Oceanic Studies', in *The Planetary Turn: Rationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), p. 26.
[3] Allen, p. 191.
[4] I have counted fifty-two references to such watery spaces across her entire oeuvre, which is approaching one half of all her poems.

highway, and quays, docks, and beaches are sites of departure and arrival. They represent the confluence of various currents. The transitional spaces of the archipelago, and the protean forms of the sea and rivers, are apt for exploration by migrant subjects for whom the fixities of nation and identity are brought into question by their mobility. For O'Reilly, such spaces are the means to creating a kind of migrant poetry that, by being alive to the figurative possibilities of water, transcends the strictures of land and place. As the speaker states in 'The Harbour in January': 'the sea's of mobile feature. Any ship's legacy / is a smile that widens and complicates / and gapes to take in all the bay and me'.[5] The idea of the 'mobile feature' of the sea is equivalent to Allen's idea of a 'multiple consciousness'. Migrancy can be thought of as a complicated process. This is especially true when the migrant conceives of their identity as being inextricably entwined with place. O'Reilly's poetry of water supersedes such identifications, along with their associated anxieties and conflicts. Her poetry thus represents a different kind of migrant identity. There are three forms of water in O'Reilly's migrant poetry: the thalassic realm, rivers, and the smaller seas, coasts, and islands of the archipelago. There is a particular set of meanings associated with these different bodies of water, although the desire to migrate from ideas of place underlies all of O'Reilly's explorations.

O'Reilly was born in Dublin in 1973 and is the author of three collections of poetry: *The Nowhere Birds* (2001), *The Sea Cabinet* (2006), and *Geis* (2015). She grew up mostly in County Wicklow, before returning to Dublin to study at Trinity for a BA, followed by a PhD on H.D., Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath that she completed in 2002. O'Reilly is now a long-term resident of Britain. Several poems from *The Sea Cabinet* take in the areas around Hull, in the northeast of England. By the time *Geis* was published, O'Reilly had been living in Lincoln, in the East Midlands, for a number of years. O'Reilly has worked as an Associate Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University. At the time of writing, alongside

[5] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'The Harbour in January', in *The Nowhere Birds* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2001), p.28.

her freelance work as a writer, she is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at Kings College, London. O'Reilly, then, like a number of the other poets included here, is an economic migrant to Britain. *The Sea Cabinet* is the collection in which her first migrant poems appear. I will primarily focus here on her two migrant collections, *The Sea Cabinet* and *Geis,* that I will discuss in order of publication.

Water and the seaside also appear early in O'Reilly's poetry. 'Autobiography' is a poem from *The Nowhere Birds* that inaugurates her poetic voice and signals the beginning of her fascination with the figurative possibilities of water. It is thus essential to understanding O'Reilly's later migrant poetry of water. It is situated in and around Bray – the speaker's coastal hometown – and this place poem is keenly attuned to the maritime histories as well as the figurative resonances of its beaches, harbour, and coast. Eric Falci has read this poem against the conventions of the autobiographical lyric that the poem clearly adheres to. The essence of his position is that this poem isn't really the speaker's autobiography, 'even though it includes material that relates to her life'. Part of his argument is that the poem is 'presenting something like an "objective" autobiography, a somewhat contradictory entanglement', in the way its speaker evokes, among other things, 'generic experiences'.[6] He also reads the shifting tenses of the poem between past and present ('I live', 'I've watched', for example) as evidence of a divided or split subject: an 'I' who no longer lives in Bray, and an 'I' who still does, 'but who recalls the past from the position of a lyric present'.[7] But the changes in tense that do occur in the poem are not evidence of any drastic fracturing of the subject.[8] The autobiographical 'I' of the poem is anchored in the coastal spaces of Bray, and its appeal is as much to the collective history of the place – in all its variety – as to the personal. The speaker is,

[6] Eric Falci, 'Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Problem of the Subject', in *Post-Ireland? Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Jefferson Holdridge and Brian Ó Conchubhair (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2017), pp. 55–77 (pp. 69 & 70).
[7] Ibid, p. 70.
[8] It is true, as Falci has argued, that 'the stability […] of a coherent "subject" in and of a poem' is a concern in *some* of O'Reilly's poetry, 'Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Problem of the Subject', p. 55. Her poems 'Lag' and 'Persona' from *The Sea Cabinet* do explore these issues, but such subjectivity poems are in the minority in her oeuvre.

entirely congruously, recalling the past whilst also inhabiting the present. The ‘I’ is as much personal as collective, which is a common reading of Seamus Heaney’s place poems, for example.[9] But in any case, ‘Autobiography’ speaks of the formative influence of the littoral in O’Reilly’s poetry. The coast is a much a liminal site for O’Reilly as a place of origin.

This poem is a single stanza with no rhyme scheme or regular line-lengths. It lacks the curt and concentrated forms that O’Reilly more frequently deploys in her subsequent collections. Its pattern of unbroken text bears a closer resemblance to prose – perhaps befitting the autobiography form – although it retains O’Reilly’s characteristic stylistic density. We begin in the present: ‘Here the weather has its own spectrum, / a seemingly limitless palette’. A litany of visual descriptions of the geographical features of Bray are then recorded: ‘to the north’ there is a ‘chain of swollen, dark green mountains’ that are mostly ‘stippled with heather’ and sometimes ‘snow-capped’. The mountains end with the ‘seaward drop’ of Bray Head’s ‘ponderous mossy forehead’.[10] There are also ‘miles of salty fields’ in which graze ‘miserable cattle’, and meadows that, in summer, ‘burn with gorse’. The speaker lays claim to the town of Bray: with the authority of a naturalist, the speaker frequently prefaces their descriptions with the phrase, ‘I’ve seen’, and Bray is also declared to be ‘my town’.[11] After these opening lines – approximately one third of the poem – that find the speaker mostly gazing inland, the rest of the poem is focussed on the littoral features of the place:

> I live between three Victorian piers on the bay’s industrial side.

[9] An example of such evocations of place is Heaney’s poem, ‘Anahorish’, although he is cleaving to the specific tradition of *dinnseanchas*: ‘My “place of clear water”, / the first hill in the world / where springs washed into / the shiny grass’. In *Wintering Out* (London: Faber, 1972), p. 6. Incidentally, Heaney deploys images of fluidity with his anglicization of the Gaelic etymology of the place name.
[10] A significant precedent to the Bray setting comes from James Joyce. The Christmas scene from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) is set in Bray.
[11] This is redolent of Heaney’s ‘My “place”’ in ‘Anahorish’.

> The bay smiles, it is full of flattened shiny water
>
> sucking quietly at the shore and piers. All night
>
> I adjust my own breath to its eternally regular breaking.[12]

There is an evident synchronicity between the speaker and their town, which is embodied, crucially, in the shoreside. The bay is associated with happiness through its personification as 'smiling'. The speaker adjusts their own breathing to harmonise with the humanised breaking of the waves on the shore. The speaker is keenly attuned to the natural rhythms of their hometown. They have also absorbed much of Bray's maritime history and lore. We are told how, 'Less frequently now' – presumably because of the decline of the significance of the port – 'a cargo ship sets up / a prehistoric rumble in the waters of the bay', and how the speaker lives near 'an ancient castle keep / of blackest rock' that abuts the sea. It is on the 'dark beach in the lee of the castle' where 'Saint Patrick put ashore', only to be repelled by the 'natives' epic unfriendliness'.[13] The final section of the poem confirms the significance of the littoral and the sea for O'Reilly:

> But still there is the bay's omega, its theatre of weather,
>
> a glass bowl for the sky to play in. The sea has no colour
>
> save what the weather brings. I've watched the sky and sea
>
> go up in flames at dusk, though mostly they're an angry grey.

[12] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'Autobiography', in *The Nowhere Birds* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2001), pp. 26–28 (p. 26). Eavan Boland's poem, 'Our Origins are From the Sea', lurks behind these lines: 'I live near the coast. On these summer nights / the dog-star rises somewhere near the hunter', in *New Selected Poems* (London: Carcanet Press, 2013), pp. 178–179 (p. 178).

[13] Ibid.

Now any horizon of mine must be nine-tenths sky.[14]

Falci quibbles with this final line, suggesting that the visual details that have been described hitherto – 'mountains, fields, meadows, and beaches' – 'can't possibly take up only the one-tenth of the total view that isn't sky'. Thus, the poem's final line is the expression of a 'counterfactual desire': the kind of horizon 'she must have "now" is precisely the kind of horizon she didn't experience as part of her "autobiography"'.[15] This is an oddly literal interpretation of these lines. Falci approaches the poem as if he were a geographer, cataloguing what should and should not be included in certain categories of imagery. Clearly, the final image becomes a kind of touchstone for the future. The land, the beach, the sea, and the horizon are all part of the speaker's world. Indeed, this last line confirms a seaward perspective: situated on the beach, the speaker is looking out to sea and the vast, unbroken horizon it generates. Outward-looking, the speaker is also gesturing to a migrant future, with the landless, nine-tenths horizon finally suggesting possibility and receptivity.

David Wheatley was born in Dublin, and his pre-migration collections (particularly *Misery Hill* [2000]) are often attuned to the cityscape. Wheatley also spent a period of his early life in Bray, and some of the poems from his debut collection *Thirst* (1997) take in the town. 'Bray Head' bears comparison with O'Reilly's 'Autobiography', because both poems fall within the modest tradition of Bray poetry. In particular, the geography of Bray's coastline (as his title suggests) is also the subject of Wheatley's poem. 'Bray Head' is Wheatley's own version of a sestina: the end-words 'gorse', 'shadow', 'sea', 'air', 'mountain', and 'scene' recur in a pattern. The sestina is a kind of rite of passage for many

[14] Ibid, p. 27.
[15] Falci, p. 70.

young poets, and Wheatley's own attempt is successful.[16] His most skilful arrangement is in stanza four:

> I feel on the point of vanishing into the air:
>
> I want to rise like the crow in the gorse,
>
> sheer above its earthbound shadow
>
> and silently as the thousand-feet-below-sea,
>
> dwindle to a tinier mark on the scene
>
> than the footprints I leave on the mountain[17]

If the end-words as they appeared in order in the first stanza are assigned a number, the pattern here is 4, 1, 2, 3, 6, 5. (Technically speaking, Wheatley's poem isn't a 'true' sestina, since the pattern of the end-words in stanza four should be 5, 3, 2, 6, 1, 4. None of his stanzas conforms to the pattern found in Ezra Pound's 'Sestina: Altaforte',[18] for example, or Algernon Charles Swinburne's double-sestina, 'The Complaint of Lisa' – both of these poems share the same configuration of end-words). Wheatley's poem is mostly focussed on the features of Bray Head, especially its gorse and 'mountain'. The sea itself – and the coastal prospect in general – is more often backdrop: it is 'the thousand-feet-below-sea', 'somewhere the mountain meets the sky and sea', or, 'Further off a ferry

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[16] O'Reilly has written her own modified sestina consisting of a series of quatrains with a similar pattern of repeated clauses but no envoy, called 'Persona', which is collected in *The Sea Cabinet* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2006), p. 14. It is a more successful poem than Wheatley's. The poem's formal arrangement complements the frustration entailed in the speaker's futile search for subjectivity. She is a mere simulacrum of the human: 'I cannot get these wooden limbs to work' is a recurring line.

[17] David Wheatley, 'Bray Head', in *Thirst* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1997), pp. 14–16 (p. 14).

[18] This was written before Pound became what Christopher Hitchens rightly terms an 'obsessive crank […] barking obscenities and gibberish over Mussolini's radio', 'Ezra Pound: A Revolutionary Simpleton', in *Arguably* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011), pp. 222–228 (p. 222). Hitchens's title is taken from Wyndham Lewis's characterisation of Pound.

scabs the sea'. The speaker's terrestrial gaze is confirmed several times: they are 'tracing a line over the mountain', and 'Walking over the brow of the mountain', and the details of the crow and gorse occur most frequently.[19] Even in stanza four, in which the speaker affects a kind of neo-Romantic epiphany – as they become overawed by the grandeur of the natural world – the sea is distant, but the mountain is where the speaker leaves an impression. Wheatley's speaker isn't as fixated on the littoral and coastal features of the area as O'Reilly's, although they are still present in Wheatley's poem. O'Reilly's poem culminates in an affirmation of the importance of the littoral in personal and poetic terms, whereas Wheatley's envoy contains no references to the sea:

> The last fog-wisp lifts above the mountain.
>
> One scald crow alighting in the gorse
>
> is suddenly enough to complete the scene.[20]

As this comparison between these two poems about the coastal geography of Bray demonstrates, Wheatley is much more a poet of *terra firma* than O'Reilly. Indeed, even in a poem such as 'Autobiography', which was written before O'Reilly migrated to Britain, we can see that the sea is a particular fascination for her. Unlike with Wheatley, two-thirds of her poem is engaged with images of the sea and the coast: intriguingly, this otherwise conventional poem of place finds its speaker more fascinated with the features of the sea and the coast than those of the land's interior. Far from being a collection of 'generic experiences', the genesis of O'Reilly's poetics of water can be glimpsed in 'Autobiography'. And in O'Reilly's subsequent migrant poetry, watery spaces supply the images

[19] 'Bray Head', p. 14.

[20] Ibid, p. 15. This envoy does not conform to the sestina pattern either, since the envoy (technically) should contain all six end-words, two per line, in the arrangement of 6-2, 1-4, 5-3. However, Pound's poem also deviates from this pattern.

that are adequate to her 'predicament' as a migrant subject.[21] The evocation of the migrant's country of origin – with a particular attention given to the features of the land or its inhabitants, which is common in the poetry of Bernard O'Donoghue, or the imaginative and physical returns to Belfast that are frequently enacted in Peter McDonald's poetry – is not a major concern in O'Reilly's poetry. The thalassic and the riverine are far more fruitful sites of exploration. Ireland and Britain are present in O'Reilly's migrant poetry, but the speaker's perspective is more often turned towards bodies of water within the land, or at its edge. In other words, other than in 'Autobiography' – and I have shown that even this place poem is mostly gazing seawards – O'Reilly's speakers aren't hankering after place per se, so much as they are drawn to the water that laps at its perimeter.

O'Reilly is forever conscious of this, even within a poem such as 'Electrical Storm'. This is about a sexual awakening and is founded on an image of the ocean: 'And like everything it began with the sea' (which is an allusion to the hypothesis that biochemistry originated in the saline ocean, and also the reproductive act).[22] Similarly, in 'The Avenues', which is a poem about the speaker's suburban house in Hull, it nonetheless begins with an image of the estuary: 'The gleam of new snow // enters my room like the sound of a horn / on the fog-bound Humber'.[23] And in the poem about 'A Deserted House', wind whistling through its ruined flue reminds the speaker of the 'deep boom sea makes in a cavern'. In the sixth stanza, a similar association is suggested: 'There is just a noise like the sea gnawing at the distant edge of / England'.[24] Even in a poem about a house that is far inland, the sea seems to beckon. This attention to water over the land is the major difference between the migrant

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[21] Heaney describes the 'search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament', which is an allusion to W.B. Yeats's 'Befitting emblems of adversity'. Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber, 1980), pp. 41–61 (p. 56), and W.B. Yeats, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Augustine Martin (London: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 206–213 (p. 208). I'm aware that in both cases, the poet is bearing the weight of ethical and artistic responsibility in a time of conflict, but the idea of a search for appropriate images is also generally applicable.

[22] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'Electrical Storm', in *The Sea Cabinet* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), pp. 57–59 (p. 57).

[23] Ibid, 'The Avenues', p. 34.

[24] Ibid, 'A Deserted House', p. 37.

poetry of O'Reilly and the rest of the O'Donoghue group. David Wheatley's migrant poetry is concerned with connecting with Hull and Aberdeen: Wheatley is a poet of place, although he is poetically nomadic, incorporating the new places that he encounters into his poetry. Wheatley seeks to embed himself within his new communities and contribute to their respective poetic traditions. O'Reilly, unlike Wheatley, finds herself stepping off into various aquatic realms. Her poetry embodies this different post-nationalist quality. It is water and the sea, and what they engender in an aesthetic sense, that continue to enthral O'Reilly.

Indeed, what Charlotte Mathieson categorises as 'sea spaces' – which incorporates quays and docks and other points of contact between land and sea, as well as the sea itself – are especially important to O'Reilly. Sea spaces, Mathieson argues, can become 'liminal sites' where 'ideas are projected and coalesce into new discursive configurations'.[25] Mathieson is highlighting the potential of 'sea spaces' as a figurative resource in similar terms to Allen's 'grammar of liquidity'. Coastal and island zones, as well as the sea and rivers, can be seen to blur boundaries, inviting the interfusion of different perspectives. The emphasis here is on exceeding received categories of thought and identification. And, just as sea spaces are liminal, liminality is a defining characteristic of the migrant condition. Leaving one's place of birth – such as O'Reilly's Bray – however short and simple the journey may be, often stirs emotions of homesickness. The migrant may often feel that they have lost their originary community and may not feel truly integrated into their new one. They are caught in a transitory state. This can carry negative connotations of disorientation and displacement. But such emotions are nourished by various attachments to place, which, for O'Reilly, would include Ireland and Britain. Indeed, Scott Brewster has identified various 'dichotomies' in 'Irish cultural life', some of which are often associated with migrancy: 'exile and rootedness', 'flight and fixity', and we might add, place

[25] Charlotte Mathieson, 'Introduction: The Literature, History and Culture of the Sea, 1600–Present', in *Sea Narratives: Cultural Responses to the Sea, 1600–Present* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), p. 3.

and displacement, stasis versus mobility, and Ireland versus Britain.[26] Brewster has described these supposed binaries as more often being in a kind of 'productive tension' than in stark opposition.[27] But for O'Reilly, her investment in sea spaces enables her to transcend these place-bound binaries altogether. In other words, the liminal quality of sea spaces, which is congruent with the migrant condition, is explored for its possibilities. Liminality becomes an enabling state of mind. Her poems represent the attempt to find 'new discursive configurations' that move beyond received tropes. In this way, her migrant poems are highly original, in that they imagine identity – via water – in a new way.

Her speakers are often refreshingly free, and it is images of water that, time and again, prove invaluable. This is evident in the strange poem from *The Sea Cabinet*, 'Shortcut to Northwind'. In the fairytale world of this poem, the speaker has been 'snatched' by some strange mythical creature and carried away from her home place on the land. This is an allegory of her search for a water-borne ontology. The speaker is dropped into the sea, and ends up 'breathing water', but she is 'without fright'.[28] There are some beautiful images here to describe her habitation in the sea: 'It was like sliding down the surface of a jade, / like entering the glossy throats of flowers […/] A galley's nutmeg turned mother-of-pearl / pale in the descending light, all rippled and restive'.[29] 'I could have rested there', she says, 'It would have been / a salty sleep on the tongue of a mollusc'. But she is eventually disturbed and 'lifted bodily', 'out of the sea and into the chill of the air'.[30] Images of saltwater

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[26] Scott Brewster, 'Flying high? Culture, criticism, theory since 1990', in *Irish Literature Since 1990: Diverse Voices*, ed. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 16–39 (p. 17).
[27] Ibid.
[28] There is possibly a Plathian origin to these lines. The final line of Sylvia Plath's 'Full Fathon Five' ends with the phrase, 'I would breathe water', in *The Colossus* (London: Faber, 1960), pp. 46–48 (p. 47).
[29] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'Shortcut to Northwind', in *The Sea Cabinet*, pp. 26–28 (pp. 26 & 27).
[30] Ibid, p. 27.

transition into images of freshwater in the final stanza, as the speaker yearns to return to her watery abode:

[…] I dream

now of getting back to my resistless life,

to music like river-water makes in a gourd,

those plunging harmonies, myself a leaf

drunk on the surface tension and singing aloud.[31]

Here, the speaker is 'drunk on the surface tension' of the water, and they are able to go with the flow, as it were. Harmony is the pleasing arrangement of certain musical notes. It is a process of perception, involving the study of the relationship between pitches. The word also suggests a sense of unity and congruity between various parts of a whole. The speaker imagines herself utterly content in this way, like a leaf on the surface of water. Their existence is entirely 'resistless', as they revel in their sensitivity and fugacity. They are free in how they identify from one moment to the next.[32]

Indeed, it is the fundamentally fluid character of watery spaces that make them 'difficult to demarcate as singular possessions', unlike the land.[33] An Irish migrant to America, Sara Berkeley (b.

[31] Ibid.
[32] There is something of Eavan Boland in this too, for example in her poem, 'White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland' where she describes 'water, able / to re-define land. And free to seem to be', in *New Selected Poems* (London: Carcanet Press, 2013), pp. 156–157 (p. 156).
[33] Allen, p. 7.

1967) has also explored this in her poetry, for example in 'Poles' from her aptly titled collection, *Facts About Water* (1994):

> The mind runs north to south
> the weirs in the river of thought turn round
> the rivers in the heart's valley turn;
>
> heading west
> I lose my sense of self,
> of home, and how the land lies.[34]

The speaker has headed west, both from her native Dublin, and also to the west coast of America, where she lives in California. Here the speaker is indulging in a kind of 'fluid thinking' that is emancipatory. The 'river of thought' and 'rivers in the heart's valley', two fluvial metaphors, suggest this. The speaker loses her sense of identity and home, two forms of identification that have their source in the land. There is an evident connection between Berkeley's migrant poetry of water and O'Reilly's own in this regard. 'Shortcut to Northwind' owes a particular debt to Berkeley's 'Slender Girls', which is also from *Facts About Water*. In Berkeley's poem, the speaker is heading out from the

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[34] Sara Berkeley, 'Poles', in *Facts About Water* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 66. There is also another poem of O'Reilly's that represents the river in psychological terms. 'The Servant Question' is about the speaker's mother, who worked as a servant in her youth. The final stanza likens memory to the riverine: 'Bluish and rain-glazed, these objects / cast up like the river's bleached tenants / into a level landscape / are not my memories, / yet they move in me continually / with a river's moment'. In *Geis* (Eastburn: Bloodaxe Books, 2015), pp. 39–42 (p. 41).

'beach' and into 'the small choppy waves'. She then ventures further and further out into the thalassic realm:

> she'll swim like this
>
> on the last day in the first sea,
>
> exulting in
>
> the sweet milk of being alone in it,
>
> and when the water calls
>
> for a change of element,
>
> she'll breathe it in
>
> and that
>
> will be easily done.[35]

In the open sea, the speaker is even more free to explore multiple affiliations simultaneously, without being bogged down in land-based thinking. It is emancipatory because the speaker is 'exulting' in her perfect solitude and contentment. Like O'Reilly's speaker in 'Shortcut', Berkeley's also desires to 'breathe' in the sea, to inhabit its free world in a similar way.

[35] Ibid, 'Slender Girls', p. 78.

For Berkeley, the land is often associated with the strictures of gender identity too, as in the poem 'Fault' from the same collection. This poem is founded on the image of the geologically active San Andreas fault, in Berkeley's long-time state of residence. The fault is personified: she 'sniggers beneath the highway' and 'cracks her knuckles publicly'. And such tremors indicate the great eruption that is to come, where she will 'burst her corset of rock / and take the air'.[36] The connotations of the 'corset of rock' are obvious. O'Reilly's poems are rarely as overtly feminist, but both poets evoke images of water as a means of escaping land-based identity in different ways.[37] But where the strength of Berkeley's poetry lies with her supple, or even 'fluid', and accessible style, the force of O'Reilly's poetry lies with the high intelligence of her poetic voice. There is a heavier verbal texture to O'Reilly's poetry, as she thrives on the 'trickery of constructions', as she writes in 'Bee on Agastache'.[38] Indeed, Jefferson Holdridge, in an early review, praised the 'intellectual variety' of her poetry.[39]

## I. *The Sea Cabinet*

The central motif of *The Sea Cabinet* – the collection which 'Shortcut' and others are from – is derived from the sea. 'The Sea Cabinet' is also a sequence of poems about a series of objects in the Maritime Museum in Hull (which was called the Hull Docks Museum at the time of the collection's publication). The museum has exhibits on various nautical activities that are historically associated with the port in Hull, such as whaling and trawling.[40] These poems pay attention to the specific maritime history of Hull, particularly its role in colonial expansion and exploitation.[41] The idea of

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[36] Ibid, 'Fault', p. 76.
[37] The exception to this is O'Reilly's 'Autonomy', in which the speaker protests against the 'continual atrocity' of 'tongue-cut women', in *Geis* (Eastburn: Bloodaxe Books, 2015), p. 48. This is about the silencing of women and alludes to the figure of Philomela from Greek mythology, herself a silenced woman.
[38] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'Bee on Agastache', in *Geis*, p. 55.
[39] Jefferson Holdridge, 'Review of *The Nowhere Birds*', *Irish University Review,* 32:2 (2002), pp. 377–380 (p. 377).
[40] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'The Sea Cabinet', in *The Sea Cabinet*, pp. 38–44.
[41] Lucy Collins discusses these poems in 'Observations at the Surface: Contemporary Irish Poets and Marine Life', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 40:1 (2017), pp. 174–193.

scrutinising artefacts born of the interaction between our species and the sea is apposite to the collection as a whole. Beyond 'The Sea Cabinet' sequence itself, many of the poems are generated by the speaker's myriad engagements with the sea and its affluent freshwater. O'Reilly is also more ambitious in *The Sea Cabinet* than in her debut, as one thoughtful reviewer noted: 'new forms go hand in hand with the trying out of new voices'.[42] There is a sense of experimentation, of voice and form, in this collection: there are the poems about artefacts within the Hull museum, and other close-up poems about small objects (such as 'Netsuke'), as well as place poems. But the aquatic remains the most important vehicle for the speaker's search for new discursive configurations. In *The Sea Cabinet*, O'Reilly's poetry of water develops beyond her initial explorations in her debut, towards a more fully developed migrant aesthetic. Aside from the thalassic imagery of 'Shortcut to Northwind', there are two forms of water that are explored in this collection: the inland freshwater of the river, and the islands and coasts of the archipelago.

'Six Landscapes' contains the best examples of O'Reilly's 'fluid thinking' in the collection. This sequence of six poems is the centrepiece of the collection. Two of the poems are set explicitly in the northeast of England ('The Avenues' and 'On Beverley Common'), one in Spain ('In Aragon'), two in Ireland, and one in an unnamed place. These poems reflect O'Reilly's experience of migration to Britain from Ireland (with the Spanish poem written, most likely, after a sojourn in the country). Despite being ostensibly founded on landscapes, however, most of the poems take rivers and the seas as their foundation. This is the case with 'The River' and 'Uggool'. The latter poem describes a visit to the coast in Louisburgh in County Mayo, where the speaker becomes fascinated with Clare Island that sits at the mouth of Clew Bay. Both of these poems deploy images of the archipelagic and riverine to different effect. In 'Uggool', coastal and island imagery is the way to circumvent the

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[42] Miriam Gamble, ''Shaping itself in Shadow'': *The Sea Cabinet* by Caitríona O'Reilly', *Fortnight*, 441 (2006), pp. 26–27 (p. 26).

strictures of traditional conceptions of place (and, by implication, its associated identities), and in the former poem a watercourse is the means by which the speaker articulates a particular migrant identity. It is an identity that is defined by both mobility *and* stasis, two contrasting states that the speaker attempts to reconcile via the figure of the river. In both of these poems of water, this medium is the crucial aesthetic component of O'Reilly's innovative explorations of migrancy.

Inland waterways have their own unique histories, but much like the sea, they are a route and a source of sustenance. A river is also pliable, because it is amenable to innumerable interpretations. There is the impressive free verse feminist exploration of the Liffey in Eavan Boland's 'Anna Liffey' ('A river is not a woman'),[43] or Heaney's beautiful evocations of the Moyola River (within a broader celebration of freshwater) in 'Gifts of Rain'. Here, drawing on *dinnseanchas*, the speaker declares: 'The tawny guttural water / spells itself: Moyola / is its own score and consort'.[44] In these two examples, the riverine is imbued with very different meanings. For Boland, the Liffey serves as the vehicle for an extended meditation on womanhood – which is, in part, a story of exclusion – whereas the Moyola is an intrinsic part of the speaker's stable, known world in Heaney's poem. And there are also Berkeley's migrant explorations of rivers that are often concerned with identity. O'Reilly's 'The River' falls within this tradition of river writing in Irish poetry. But for O'Reilly, the river has its own particular nexus of connotations. In a way that is characteristic of O'Reilly's most significant poetry, the unnamed river of the poem becomes a point of abstraction. This migrant poem is, in part, concerned with the river as a site of arrival and departure. O'Reilly's poem isn't obviously situated in Britain or Ireland: its speaker does not ally herself to any particular place. The river may be entirely

[43] This is also a riposte to Joyce's character of Anna Livia Plurabelle (ALP) from *Finnegans Wake* (1939), who embodies the river Liffey. As Melissa Dinsman argues: 'Boland re-imagines the famous ALP as Anna Liffey, an historical woman and struggling poet, and in the process, empowers the female poet'. She also terms Boland's poem 'a reclaiming of the woman from the myth of nation', in '"A River Is Not a Woman": Re-Visioning *Finnegans Wake* in Eavan Boland's "Anna Liffey"', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 7:2 (2013), pp. 172–189 (pp. 174 & 175).

[44] Eavan Boland, 'Anna Liffey', in *New Selected Poems* (London: Carcanet Press, 2013), pp. 220–229 (p. 223). Seamus Heaney, 'Gifts of Rain', in *Wintering Out* (London: Faber, 1972), pp. 13–15 (p. 15).

imagined, or it may have its source in a real place that O'Reilly has known. But in any case, the river is not obviously bound up with a specific place like Heaney's Moyola. As Andrew McRae has argued: 'Rivers are figures of mobility mapped onto the landscape, at once evocative of places yet curiously placeless'.[45] In O'Reilly's poem, the unnamed river is both of, and not of, place, becoming a space that is rich in interweaving figuration. It begins:

> The coming night breathes an atmosphere
>
> of childhood October in crisp light and wood-smoke,
>
> and the guy ropes
>
> sway in the harbour
>
> while the black river pauses
>
> between two tides,
>
> shaping itself in shadow.[46]

This first stanza begins with a reference to 'childhood', but the poem's images soon become unmoored from this anchor point in time and space. The speaker observes the 'harbour' and the 'black river'. This is a stark and abstract image. The river itself 'pauses / between two tides, / shaping itself in shadow'. This river is established here as a liminal space, but it also possesses a strange kind of agency. It shapes 'itself in shadow'. Suspended between the push and pull of the changing tides, the river fashions itself. The second stanza begins with a paradoxical statement: 'It is never changing, never the same –'. The river is both changing and unchanging in character, it is both mobile and

[45] Andrew McRae, 'Fluvial Nation: Rivers, Mobility and Poetry in Early Modern England', *English Literary Renaissance*, 38:3 (2008), pp. 506–534 (p. 508).
[46] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'The River', in *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 30.

immobile. The caesura at the end of this line interrupts the rhythm, before the eye is drawn to the final, largely unbroken sentence of the remaining lines of the stanza. As a textual juncture, it enacts a pause like the river's own brief cessation, but is also intrinsic to the forward motion of the stanza. The caesura, therefore, formally gestures towards the *simultaneous* mobility and stasis of the river. The next lines read: 'the ancient trees of the rookery in silent commune / with the river's / different darkness'. The trees are static and long-rooted and are in 'silent commune' with the river. But the river is, at the same time, ever-changing, possessing a 'different darkness' each time 'we pass'. The river itself is migrant in the way it embodies two different states. The river is not simply peripatetic, and it is not only fixed in its course, either. The apparent contradiction between a constant sense of motion and a kind of embeddedness is resolved precisely through O'Reilly's evocation of the liquid character of the river. The river is both connected to the land and place, and it is separated from it: its water is forever *en route* along its established course. It is not like the Yeatsian tree 'rooted in one dear perpetual place' (which is perhaps being gestured to with the phrase, 'ancient trees'). O'Reilly's speaker is not the 'flourishing hidden tree' of that poem, but much more akin to the river itself.[47]

The final stanza gestures towards the idea of departure and arrival, before culminating in another highly abstract image:

> We wonder how will the river change, escape
>
> development, or work its careless necromancy
>
> on the next ones

[47] W.B. Yeats, 'A Prayer for my Daughter', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Augustine Martin (London: Vintage, 1992), pp. 185–187 (p. 186). There is also the 'ancestral trees' of 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 251–253 (p. 252).

to come here –

and who will watch its black dreams

shatter into figments

skulled and crossboned in light?[48]

The river is a space of transition, as people shift through or past its space. It is, again, both static and moving. It is described, finally, as conjuring a kind of 'necromancy', the occult practice of communicating with the dead. This is a strange term to deploy here since, hitherto, the poem has been concerned with the river's strange liminal quality. Yet necromancy is also about transformation, about the shifting between alternative states in its own way. It is concerned with crossing thresholds or borders and communing with the other. The final question here is puzzling, however, and seems deliberately obfuscating. It is strangely at odds with the rest of the poem.

Despite the less than successful ending of this poem, it still offers an intriguing meditation on, among other things, migrancy. The watery form of the river that is at once bounded and flowing embodies a curious migrant ontology, that is both stable and changing at the same time. It is both static and mobile. 'The River' develops, from its initial stanza, into a curious expression of the migrant condition in this way, albeit in rather abstruse terms. But aside from the river, which has its own specific network of meanings and significations, islands, the sea and its points of contact with the land in the littoral are the most frequent types of images that O'Reilly evokes in her migrant poetry of water. These zones have their own character from the riverine. So, with this in mind, I will

[48] Ibid.

focus on one other poem from the 'Six Landscapes' sequence, 'Uggool', before discussing the later littoral and island poems from *Geis*.

Rivers always lie *within* the land, even if they eventually flow out to sea. Thus, they are always in some way bounded by *terra firma*. O'Reilly's 'The River' explores this boundedness, whilst also seeking to outstrip it. The littoral on the other hand, as well as islands, is open to even freer interpretations. Indeed, with her desire to migrate from ideas of place, O'Reilly generally looks to water as an alternative space. 'The River' explores this in fluvial terms. But, in a different way, images of the archipelago seem to resonate with O'Reilly most strongly. John Brannigan has argued of Louis MacNeice, particularly in reference to some of his poems of the 1930s that are concerned with islands and shorelines: 'Migration is a persistent theme and trope in MacNeice's poetry, but it is always a migration *from ideas of place* as much as a migration from places themselves'.[49] O'Reilly's littoral poems – whether at the edge of the Irish or British islands – enact a similar process: the land itself often disappears, along with its troublesome associations. Some of the poems of the 'Six Landscapes' sequence bear witness to an emerging archipelagic aesthetic in O'Reilly's poetry.

The idea of escaping concepts of place, which, with their competing nationalisms, can give rise to exclusivity and conflict, has an important political dimension. Envisaging the islands of Ireland and Britain as part of an Atlantic archipelago inaugurates a new vocabulary that highlights that which is shared (such as history), rather than disputed, between the inhabitants of these isles. As Allen

[49] John Brannigan, '"Felt Routes": Louis MacNeice and the North-East Atlantic Archipelago', in *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, ed. Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom & Jos Smith (Oxford: OUP, 2017), pp. 94–110 (p. 98). My italics. The phrase 'Felt Routes' is from the final stanza of MacNeice's 'Ode': 'Must become the migrating bird following felt routes', in *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber, 1979), pp. 54–59 (p. 58). O'Reilly's title poem from *The Nowhere Birds* seems to gesture to this line from MacNeice's much longer poem. O'Reilly's poem is concerned with migrating birds too, venerating their placeless, air-borne existence: 'There is no leaving for them / in such shifts south, // best weather is their territory', in *The Nowhere Birds*, p. 62.

suggests, the ‘archipelago’ is ‘a form of attachment that sails around the territorial demands of nation and state’.[50] But this idea also appeals to the migrant. As Brannigan has argued elsewhere: ‘To think of the archipelago as a maritime space, in which lie a group of islands, places emphasis on how the seas and oceans surrounding the islands connect them to each other and to other land masses’. Conceptualising the islands of Britain and Ireland in this way means that ‘we can see ports and coasts as conduits rather than borders, and that we can perceive islands as anything but insular’.[51] It is islands, coastal spaces, and the sea itself that are the three main components of the archipelagic concept. Brannigan also draws attention to the association between such spaces and ‘migration’, with the sea being a means of transport.[52] To think of coasts and ports as ‘conduits rather than borders’ also establishes the link between these zones and migration, whilst stressing the interconnectedness, rather than disconnection, between peoples. For the geographically mobile migrant, therefore, an archipelagic way of thinking is fundamentally inclusive, rather than displacing. The migrant may find themselves unburdened of the complex and confusing feelings bound up with place, particularly their country of origin. The perceived severance from one’s country of origin that can arise on one’s departure for elsewhere is diminished. Instead, for an Irish migrant to Britain such as O’Reilly, the England–Ireland binary, with its associations of rootedness and displacement, can be transcended in favour of a different kind of ‘attachment’. This is especially apparent in the third poem of the ‘Six Landscapes’ sequence, ‘Uggool’. Here, whilst visiting the coast at Louisburgh, O’Reilly’s speaker finds herself open to inhabiting the more inclusive spaces of the archipelago. ‘Uggool’ contains manifest postnationalist resonances. We find its speaker on the brink, about to take an imaginative flight to the sea.

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[50] Allen, p. 10.
[51] John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism: Literature in the Irish and British Isles, 1890–1970* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 9 & 10.
[52] Ibid, p. 10.

Edna Longley has discussed the rich tradition of Irish writing about Irish and Scottish islands, which ranges from John Synge's non-fiction journal account in *The Aran Islands* (1906), through Louis MacNeice's poems about the Scottish Hebrides, to Derek Mahon's 'Recalling Aran' ('A dream of limestone in sea-light / Where gulls have placed their perfect prints').[53] Although of course each island is 'locally distinctive', with its own specific cultural and linguistic heritage, Longley observes that 'certain [North] Atlantic conditions, and hence images, are common to all this island poetry: oceanic vistas, wind and rain, cliffs, rocks and hard places, bogs and moors, seabirds and seal [sic]'.[54] For instance, Michael Longley's 'The Hebrides', which is in part a dialogue with MacNeice's earlier poem with the same title,[55] begins: 'The winds' enclosure, Atlantic's premises, / Last balconies / Above the waves'. The speaker also records the 'bright continuum of gulls', 'bracken', and 'air and ocean', which are all features of his 'island circumstance'.[56] Longley's speaker has ventured to the 'edge of [his] experience' for nourishment and self-reflection: 'on my own, I have lost my way at last, / So far from home'. Through his visit to the islands – with which the speaker also has a religio-cultural ('Presbyterian') connection – he seeks 'a journey back from flux to poise'.[57] O'Reilly's 'Uggool' finds her speaker drawn to Clare Island in Clew Bay in County Mayo. Her poem represents a similar process of disburdening, while also drawing on the typical imagery of island poetry.

Edna Longley argues that '[a]s cultural signifiers [...] Irish and Scottish islands more often symbolise national separatism than archipelagic commonalities'.[58] The islands in the west of Ireland and Scotland can be configured as representing an enduring national identity, but in 'Uggool', O'Reilly

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[53] Derek Mahon, 'Recalling Aran', in *Night-Crossing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 28.
[54] Edna Longley, 'Irish and Scottish "Island Poems"', in *Northern Lights, Northern Words: Selected Papers from the FRLSU Conference, Kirkwall 2009*, ed. Robert McColl Millar (Aberdeen: Forum for Research on the Languages of Scotland and Ireland, 2010), pp. 143-61 (p. 146).
[55] MacNeice's poem begins: 'On those islands / The west wind drops its message of indolence'. Louis MacNeice', 'The Hebrides', in *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber, 1979), pp. 64–69 (p. 64).
[56] Michael Longley, 'The Hebrides', in *Selected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), pp. 14–18 (pp. 14 & 15).
[57] Ibid, pp. 14 & 16.
[58] Edna Longley, p. 146.

explores the contrasting archipelagic way of thinking. Longley also identifies three categories of island poem, 'the "docu-poem", the "holy island" poem, [and] the "parable island" poem' (albeit with some overlap between them). The 'docu-poem' is 'spoken in the voice of someone who reports and comments from outside: visitor, returning native, journalist, sociologist, anthropologist, writer, or various blends'.[59] 'Uggool' falls into the category of the 'docu-poem': O'Reilly's speaker is a visitor to Louisburgh, and she gazes across the bay at the island. The speaker in O'Reilly's poem is not any kind of amateur ethnographer, however, as her focus is not on the inhabitants of the island, but on its appearance, and what its geography suggests in figurative terms.

'Uggool' is relatively succinct, comprising four sestets and no rhyme scheme, but it is one of O'Reilly's strongest poems. 'It was only when the road ended / and the engine stopped ticking', it begins, 'that we noticed the silence / that was of space unfolding'.[60] Here, the 'road', the embodiment of the land, has ended. And 'space' begins to unfold, as the seascape emerges into view and widens. The speaker pulls her car over, and instantly becomes 'absorbed' by the island. A 'strand' and an island feature in this poem, combining the similar resonances of the two topographical features. 'Clare Island' arrests the speaker's gaze. Observed 'from the hill', it 'hung between identical elements, / neither air nor ocean, and a list / of islands ran to the curve of the world'.[61] There is an artistic evocation of islands that is echoed in these lines. This is Jack Yeats's expressionistic *Many Ferries* (1948) which is the artwork that features on the cover of *The Sea Cabinet*.[62] This oil painting depicts a seascape, with a group of islands off the coast of Connemara

[59] Edna Longley, p. 147.
[60] This is reminiscent of a Heaney poem. 'Ballynahinch Lake' begins: 'So we stopped and parked in the spring-cleaning light / Of Connemara on a Sunday morning / As a captivating brightness held and opened / And the utter mountain mirrored the lake'. In *Electric Light* (London: Faber 2001), p. 26.
[61] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'Uggool', in *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 33.
[62] The brother of W.B. Yeats, Jack Yeats was '[a] one-time commercial illustrator, a playwright and a fiction writer', who 'spent much of his early adult life in England, and in particular in Devon, where he lived before he moved to Greystones, County Wicklow, in 1910. He loved to swim and to sail, and the characteristic he valued most in all his subjects was a wildness that he associated with a natural freedom'. Allen, p. 76.

that Yeats visited with John Synge in 1905. The perspective is from behind a hatted ferryman – the man who took Yeats and Synge to the best vantage point atop a hill – who is looking out over a series of chained islands that extend far into the distance. We can see the ferryman in the foreground, the green edge of the hilltop, and the top third of the painting is an overcast sky. The majority of the painting comprises the green islands and the blue sea surrounding them, and the focal point of the frame is the furthest island that meets the horizon. There is a slight outward curve apparent in the horizon in Yeats's painting, indicating the vastness of the sea and the islands within it. These islands too run to the 'curve of the world'.

Although she is evoking a different island in the west, O'Reilly's speaker is akin to the ferryman, gazing out away from the land towards the islands from a hill. There is a sense of transition and migration suggested: it seems as though the speaker is desirous to depart on a journey across these very islands. The islands themselves are also 'between' things, being 'neither air nor ocean'. The island resists being neatly demarcated or categorised. This idea stirs in the speaker a peculiar emotion: 'I recognised the feeling: / we brought the weight of us to leave // at the rim of perfect water'. They have come to escape the 'weight of us', the heaviness of various human anxieties. It is a personal disburdening that is initially described, whereby the speaker leaves their worries behind 'at the rim of perfect water'. Freedom begins here. The speaker also becomes unfettered from 'the senile thorn tree', which is perhaps an allusion to W.B. Yeats's 'The Rose Tree'. The tree in Yeats's poem is a nationalist symbol of Ireland, with Patrick Pearse uttering: '"There's nothing but our own red blood / Can make a right Rose Tree"'.[63] O'Reilly's speaker is rejecting these nationalist images derived from the land. It is with the strand and islands that the speaker identifies, in a postnationalist way, finally taking an imaginative flight from the 'country's vanquished edge'.[64] The

[63] W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, ed. Augustine Martin (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 179.
[64] 'Uggool', p. 33.

adjective ‘vanquished’ here has two meanings: it suggests that the speaker is alive to the postnationalist possibilities of the archipelago, while also acknowledging the colonial relationship between Ireland and Britain. ‘Vanquish’ denotes military defeat, and O’Reilly’s deployment of the term gestures towards the violent history of British expansion into Ireland. But ‘vanquished’ also has postnationalist connotations. In O’Reilly’s poem, it is not just the land, but the ‘country’ – as a site of human conflict between mutually exclusive constructions of identity – that is ‘vanquished’, reaching the point of ruin in the very last line of the poem. ‘Uggool’, in this way, stands as a forceful and hopeful valorisation of the archipelagic vision.[65]

### II. *Geis*

The poems of *The Sea Cabinet* are the high water mark of O’Reilly’s oeuvre. The watery theme permeates this collection, as O’Reilly explores the possibilities of such spaces with intensity and fervour. Yet despite the promise of the postnationalist archipelagic idea that a poem such as ‘Uggool’ establishes, in *Geis* there is a sea-change. The littoral and islands are again very prominent images in this collection, but the tone of the poems is markedly different. In other words, whilst O’Reilly retains her investment in water and the archipelago – indeed, even the overall style of the poems remains the same – the speaker’s voice is mostly modulated in a minor key. Many, but not all, of its poems are inflected with a kind of post-traumatic quietude. They read like they were composed in the calm following an incredibly emotionally intense period. O’Reilly has revealed that the nearly decade-long gap between *The Sea Cabinet* and *Geis* was the result of a ‘depressive illness’

[65] We might contrast O’Reilly’s poem with Heaney’s ‘Lovers on Aran’, another island poem. For Heaney’s speaker, the sea is ultimately given meaning *by* the land – ‘Sea broke on land to full identity’ – whereas O’Reilly’s poem finds possibility in the sea itself. Seamus Heaney, ‘Lovers on Aran’, in *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber, 1966), p. 47.

hampering her creativity.[66] The central motif of this collection attests to this, as O'Reilly herself has revealed in a rare radio interview:

> 'Geis' [pronounced approximately as 'Gesh'] is a word that exists in English. It's from Gaelic mythology and it means a taboo generally. It's a compulsion to behave in a certain way given a certain set of circumstances. Cuhullin, for instance, was under a 'Geis', or to not do certain things [sic]. And I was interested really in the, sort of, psychological ramifications of that.[67]

Writer's block may be one meaning that is evoked with 'Geis' here. It may also hint more generally at the mental strain she was under when she was writing many of the poems that eventually formed *Geis*. The sense of feeling psychologically enclosed or even imprisoned informs some of the poems. O'Reilly is fond of sequences of poems, and *Geis* is no exception. There are several such poems in this collection, but, in particular, the 'Geis' sequence bears witness to the perception of stultification associated with the word 'Geis'. It contains eight poems on an array of subjects. 'O', the fifth poem, is typical. It is highly symbolic and perplexing, deploying images of water to strange effect. From an initial point of abstraction – it begins with the image, 'is getting the cramped brain / to release its grip, // is prising open its fingers' – the poem then becomes more cryptic, concluding with a series of vivid visual images:

> Morning bruises the horizon;
>
> pain departs like a ship.

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[66] RTÉ Radio 1, 'Caitríona O'Reilly, poet', *rte.ie*, [online] 18th May 2016, <https://www.rte.ie/radio/radioplayer/html5/#/radio1/20990768> [Accessed 18th May 2021].

[67] Ibid.

And the drug is almost love

as the day is almost blue:

veins glisten with slippery balm.

Then I am spilled scatheless

from the casing dark:

as the river splits itself on a stone;

as the tree swallows a stone

and in greenness continues.[68]

The image of the 'horizon' recurs in O'Reilly's poetry. There is the 'fold of the horizon' in 'The Avenues', and the declaration in 'Autobiography': 'Now any horizon of mine must be nine-tenths sky'. The sunrise 'bruising' the sky also recalls the 'bay's omega, its theatre of weather' in 'Autobiography'. But 'O', with its concentrated and highly suggestive imagery and short lines and stanzas, lacks the expansiveness of O'Reilly's earlier poem. Much is held back in 'O' as the speaker embarks on the slow and steady process of psychological convalescence. The complex simile that

[68] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'O', in *Geis* (Eastburn: Bloodaxe Books, 2015), p. 27. There is an echo of Philip Larkin's first collection in these concentrated, vivid, short stanzas. 'XIII' from *The North Ship* (1945) begins: 'I put my mouth / Close to running water: / Flow north, flow south, / It will not matter, / It is not love you will find'. The hushed and anguished tone – as well as the watery theme – is also shared by both poems. Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 2003), p. 17.

follows is a nautical one. As a ship migrates, so does the speaker's discomfort. It is unclear what the cause of this is. The second stanza is similarly impenetrable, although perhaps pain-relief or psychotropic medication – whether real or imagined – is being administered. The speaker herself then assumes a liquid form. She is 'spilled scatheless'.[69] This is a psychological figure: it is dredged from the speaker's troubled subconscious, but what it connotes is not clear. The speaker – or their consciousness – has escaped the confines of their body. Such images are symbolically charged, especially the river splitting itself 'on a stone'. The instances of sibilance here – 'spilled scatheless', 'casing dark', 'splits itself on a stone', 'swallows a stone', 'in greenness continues' – all gesture to the riverine, with the water lisping as it flows.[70] The dreamlike incoherence of this poem also represents an attempt to give shape to the very strangeness and disorientation that a severe lapse in mental wellness can create. It is significant that aquatic forms surface in this peculiar vision, because it highlights their continued importance in O'Reilly's poetry. Indeed, water still presents the promise of freedom, but the emphasis in this poem at least is on psychology.

By the time *Geis* was published in 2015, O'Reilly had been living in Lincoln for a number of years.[71] Lincoln itself does appear in this collection in the form of a 'Triptych' about Lincoln Cathedral. However, this poem is fairly perfunctory and has the character of a commissioned piece. Aside from these poems, place (and especially Lincoln itself) is more often ignored in favour of abstract psychological subject matter, such as the poems of the 'Geis' sequence. But when place does appear, it is mostly – like with 'Uggool' – considered in light of its subsidence at the extremities. In other words, O'Reilly is still drawn to where land ends and the sea begins. It thus still presents the

[69] This is redolent of Heaney's 'The Grauballe Man': he 'seems to weep // the black river of himself', in *North* (London: Faber, 1975), pp. 35–37 (p. 35). Heaney's speaker is positioned outside his subject, whereas O'Reilly's speaker is herself the subject of her poem.
[70] Like Heaney's 'Kinship', also from *North*: 'the bog floor shakes, / water cheeps and lisps / as I walk down / rushes and heather', pp. 40–46 (p. 40).
[71] In her radio interview with RTÉ in 2016 she is introduced as calling directly from Lincoln.

promise of migration from ideas of place, even if the overall tone of this collection is more melancholy than *The Sea Cabinet*. There is one poem that is highly significant in this regard: 'August on Dungeness' from *Geis* contains littoral subject matter. 'August' might be best read as the British complement to the Irish 'Uggool', although Britain is not set against Ireland. Rather, the speaker is drawn in both poems to different coastlines within the archipelago. In keeping with the bleaker tone of *Geis*, the speaker is attracted to the more barren and arid Dungeness.

For O'Reilly, water can represent a kind of freedom of identification, as a poem such as 'Shortcut to Northwind' makes clear, which is a poem that configures the open sea (via the river) as engendering the freedom of identity for the speaker. And 'Uggool', which is an archipelagic poem, gestures towards a similar kind of migration away from place and towards a different form of inclusive 'attachment' to the archipelago. In 'August on Dungeness', O'Reilly's speaker is still escaping from place, but this time she is seeking out a postnationalist space at the extreme periphery of England. 'August on Dungeness' is, therefore, a significant poem in the way it draws on images of the English coastline. In this poem, the littoral space is accessed for its figurative resonances, like with 'Uggool': in how it connects with the amorphous sea, and represents a kind of breakdown or blurring of neat boundaries and distinctions, the littoral is a site of 'momentary, and […] tragic, abstraction from the everyday'.[72] In 'An Idea of Iowa', another poem from *Geis*, the speaker reveals: 'We live in a place where everything leans in // as if to confide in us, and learn, too late, it is a trick: / the frieze, the whole entablature must topple'.[73] The littoral zone in 'August' is an escape from this 'place', as much as it embodies a particular kind of psychology.

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[72] Allen, p. 8. Allen is discussing Synge's dramas of island life, but this is also directly pertinent to O'Reilly's poem.
[73] 'An Idea of Iowa', in *Geis* (Eastburn: Bloodaxe Books, 2015), p. 53.

The focus of 'August' is not on both the littoral space and an island like 'Uggool', but simply on the beach itself. But this space is also a part of the archipelagic concept, as Brannigan has suggested. Dungeness is an area of cuspate foreland on the coast of Kent. The wider area encompasses a mire, Romney Marsh, a nuclear power station, and the hamlet of Dungeness. It is a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest, given its large expanse of shingle and very high level of biodiversity. Topographically, it is a flat, arid, and littoral space. There is a kind of temporary internal migration described here: from her new place in the midlands, the speaker has fled south. She has headed to the coast. The extreme that Dungeness represents – uncharacteristically dry and hot, and largely unpeopled – serves to heighten the contrast between the (implied) inland and the end point of Dungeness. Dungeness becomes its own kind of postnationalist space in this way: by the end of the poem, the shore of Dungeness becomes emptied of national and political meanings. Arranged in simple, clipped quatrains, the poem begins: 'Everything inclines upwards / this solar month –'. In the part of the year with the most hours of sunshine, 'even the sunflower's face / is exhausted'. Flora is personified to represent, in this instance, the speaker's own acute fatigue. The 'I' of this poem is suppressed in favour of a collective 'our'. The speaker is on a getaway with her partner. The final stanzas of the poem read:

> the blood behind our eyelids
>
> like murex-dipped cloth
> darkens against the glare;
> in days named for conquest
> the printed shadows of leaves

shiver and burn

and the sea-kale and sea-poppy

vulcanise among the shingle

on the hot shore;

inside its silent shell, the reactor

follows a chain of consequence

down to the end,

to the very end of the land,

a burnout; a culmination:

it is a desert station

it leaves the taste of its salt wind

on our lips and on our skin.[74]

*Prima facie*, this poem has a fairly cold, detached tone. It is also slightly programmatic, in that it reads initially like an exercise in the tourist poem. The guidebook details are all recorded: the reference to the nuclear reactor, the famous vast shingle, the arid local climate, and in the line 'in days named for conquest' we have an arcane allusion to the Battle of Dungeness of 1652, a naval encounter that took place near the aforementioned headland during the first Anglo–Dutch War. The

[74] 'August on Dungeness', in *Geis* (Eastburn: Bloodaxe Books, 2015), p. 59.

noun 'conquest' may also refer more generally to the strategic importance of the area. The headland juts out into the English Channel, and so it is well-placed to detect incoming aircraft from mainland Europe. Acoustic mirrors (that are still present today) were placed there for this purpose, although they were supplanted by radar in World War II.

These subtle allusions to human history and politics then subside into the non-human topography of the shore. The 'burnout' of the land is an embodiment of the speaker's own mental burnout. It becomes a projection of the speaker's psychology. The desert-like images of Dungeness – of the leaves that 'burn', the 'hot shore', the 'vulcanis[ing]' sea plants, and the 'burnout' and 'culmination' at the edge of the land – become in the aesthetic space of the poem symbols of emotional stagnation and sterility. The 'very end of the land', its 'burnout' and 'culmination', is also redolent of the 'country's vanquished edge' of 'Uggool'. The speaker here is again escaping place by seeking out the extreme periphery of England. But where 'Uggool' leaves open the possibility of imaginative flight, in 'August' the speaker departs only partially refreshed. The encounter has left its mark, as it 'leaves the taste of its salt wind / on our lips and on our skin'. The beach at Dungeness succeeds in only reflecting back at the speaker the sense of lassitude that founds the poem. In 'August', the speaker finds herself ultimately thwarted by her own psychological and imaginative stultification. 'August' is significant in the way the littoral space provides the fertile ground for the speaker's abstractions, but it lacks the imaginative freedom of 'Uggool' and others. This is entirely in keeping with the connotations of the 'Geis' of this collection. 'August' is a less successful poem than 'Uggool', but, when considered together, both poems affirm an archipelagic aesthetic in the way their speakers are drawn for nourishment to the coast and island vistas.

The material experience of migrancy undoubtedly underlies O'Reilly's particular migrant aesthetic. She has left Ireland, and has now lived in Britain for a number of years. It would, therefore, be

explicable if place itself were a preoccupation for O'Reilly. Our culture and place of birth are formative. To leave these behind, whatever form this takes – whether we frequently return, depart for forever, go to a nearby country, or a distant one – has consequences for who we are and the way we think about our place in our world. The poem can be a specific representation of this. Yet for O'Reilly, her emigration seems to precipitate her renunciation of place altogether. 'Autobiography' is O'Reilly's only conventional poem of place, and Bray has not been a prominent subject of her poetry since her debut collection. Instead, O'Reilly's speakers inhabit the archipelago. Rivers too, as well as the open sea, have their own status in O'Reilly's poetics of water. The archipelagic, river, and thalassic poems speak of a particular poetic identity that is unencumbered by place. For the migrant, an identification with sea spaces is fundamentally emancipatory. It is not to configure migrancy as an experience of loss (of the home place), but often as a process discovery and possibility. 'Viaticum' is a poem from the 'Island' sequence of *Geis*. The first two of its three poems have an overtly romantic theme, but 'Viaticum', the final poem, is different. In its deployment of the Latin term meaning 'provision for a journey' alongside yet another image of the coast, the sea, and an island, this poem confirms the connection in O'Reilly's poetry between migrancy and, especially, images of the archipelago:

> Still it hums along my veins –
>
> a view I took from the hill
>
> that to you was usual –
>
> beaches gleaming with northern birds,
>
> the wing-bones and skulls
>
> of the waves' whitest outcasts.

It is bread for the hungry road.

The island is a flower head,

and the swaying sea its stem.[75]

[75] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'Viaticum', in *Geis*, p. 14.

# Chapter 7: 'Such exiles as one becomes an epicurean of': Conor O'Callaghan's Post-Irish Migrant Poetry

## I. Introduction

From Conor O'Callaghan's second collection, *Seatown* (1999) – largely centred on his home town of Dundalk on the north-east coast of the Republic of Ireland – 'East' is a kind of personal *ars poetica* in the vein of Seamus Heaney's 'Digging'.[1] Contra Heaney, however, O'Callaghan's speaker sets out to avoid any kind of aesthetic archaeology. O'Callaghan's subjects are urban, not rural. He has revealed in an interview that he considers 'East' to be one of his 'best accomplishments', and that it is '[d]eliberately intended as a personal manifesto'.[2] Its second stanza reads:

> But give me a dreary eastern town that isn't vaguely romantic
>
> where moon and stars are lost in the lights of the greyhound track
>
> and cheering comes to nothing and a flurry of misplaced bets
>
> blanketing the stands at dawn is about as spiritual as it gets.[3]

This is a place that is not even 'vaguely romantic'. Set against the 'moon and stars' and the 'spiritual', we have the real life of the 'greyhound track'. This recalls the work of Revivalist and post-Revivalist writers such as W.B. Yeats who frequently romanticised rural Ireland, and particularly the peasantry

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[1] 'Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it', is the conclusion of Heaney's poem. Seamus Heaney, 'Digging', in *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber, 1966), pp. 13–15 (p. 15).
[2] Conor O'Callaghan, 'Conor O'Callaghan: It's a foolish idea that poets should be broke', *The Irish Post*, August 2013 <https://www.irishpost.com/entertainment/interview-conorocallaghan-its-a-foolish-idea-that-poets-should-be-broke-10365> [accessed on 2 January 2021].
[3] Conor O'Callaghan, 'East', in *Seatown* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1999), pp. 42–44 (p. 42).

in the west of Ireland, as embodying the 'uncontaminated essence of the Irish character'.[4] Opposed to this 'elemental guff' (as it is described in the opening stanza) are the images of modern, urban Ireland, such as the dog-racing venue described above. Stanza three elaborates by describing Dundalk as a place 'where back-to-back estates are peppered with satellite discs / and the sign of the *Sunrise Takeaway* doesn't flick on until six'.[5] Reflecting this 'warts and all' depiction of Dundalk is the deliberate ugliness of the rhyme between '[d]iscs' and 'six'. Here, amongst the symbols of modern life, the thought of 'smoking seaweed doesn't enter your head', a sly allusion to the old peasant cottage industry of kelp production.

The speaker then continues his strategy of demystifying Ireland or Irishness in the following stanzas, where he examines the theme of emigration. Migration has long been a fact of Irish cultural life, but the speaker is candid here, displaying no deference to sacred cows:

> And while it's taken for granted everyone has relatives in Chicago
>
> who share their grandmother's maiden name and seasonal lumbago,
>
> it's probably worth remembering, at the risk of committing heresy,
>
> as many families in Seatown have people in Blackpool and Jersey.
>
> My own grandmother's uncle ran a Liverpool snooker hall
>
> that cleaned up between the wars and went, of course, to the wall.

---

[4] Gregory Schirmer, *Out of What Began: A History of Irish Poetry in English* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 268.
[5] 'East', p. 42.

I must have a clatter of relatives there or thereabouts still

who have yet to trace their roots and with any luck never will.[6]

Irish migration to Britain, the sometimes-overlooked destination, is addressed here. America is often seen as the great centre of the Irish diaspora, but there are probably as many Irish in England, particularly the north of England, as there are in North America. Given the old colonial relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom, it may complicate the picture to suggest that many Irish have happily settled in places such as Blackpool and Liverpool. The speaker is thus risking 'heresy' in drawing attention to this history. He also subverts with a sort of low-level misanthropy the Catholic idea of the tight familial bond. Of those members of the extended family scattered around the north of England, he expresses his keen desire to never see them, hoping that 'with any luck' they will never trace their roots. The speaker then continues to relate his family history in the following stanza. They have a 'dubious aunt' in Blackburn and 'a colony' – a noun deployed to obvious provocative effect – of their mother's family in Bury. The result of this straight talking is to position the speaker away from what he terms those who are 'playing Gaelic', that is, subscribing to inherited, and by implication hackneyed or essentialist, views on Irish identity. For the speaker, his sense of identity is his own and is shaped by his own experiences of the contemporary world, rather than any romanticisation of what it should be. The next two stanzas of 'East' are a fitting précis of this argument:

If it comes down to allegiance or a straight choice between

a trickle of shingly beaches that are slightly less than clean

[6] Ibid.

and the rugged western coastline draped in visionary mystique,

give me the likes of Bray or Bettystown any day of the week.

If it's just a question of water and some half-baked notion

that the Irish mind is shaped by the passionate swell of the ocean,

I align myself to a dribble of sea that's unspectacular, or flat.

Anything else would be unthinkable. It's as simple as that.[7]

The crudeness of the simple AABB rhymes throughout ('Discs' / 'six', 'Jersey' / 'heresy', 'at'/ 'that'), combined with its unashamedly colloquial register, give this poem the rhythm of doggerel. Perhaps this is deliberate, since 'East' is concerned with counteracting the fustian style of Yeats and others. He then subverts the 'half-baked notion' 'that the Irish mind is shaped by the passionate swell of the ocean': if their Irish mind is shaped by the ocean, then they align themselves with one which is 'unspectacular, or flat' (such as that around Dundalk). This is a conscious refusal to indulge in grandiloquent afflatus. To be anything else would be literally 'unthinkable': this would be a betrayal in some way of his artistic principles, so it is 'unthinkable' in the sense that it would constitute a kind of moral breach, but it is also inconceivable, meaning that the speaker cannot even compute such an idea in the first place. What we have here from O'Callaghan is a very frank rumination on what it means on one level to be an Irish poet, and also what it means to be simply Irish in modern Ireland. It seeks to cleave through a certain outdated version of Ireland, as he sees it.

[7] Ibid, p. 43.

I have chosen to begin with 'East' because it is a rare poem, rare in that it is a very direct and political, even polemical, take on what being Irish means to the speaker. 'East' serves as a useful way into O'Callaghan's thinking on this point. O'Callaghan is very clear about wanting to avoid depictions of what he sees as an imagined rural ('rugged') Ireland, a kind of Ireland that he does not inhabit. This place of 'visionary mystique' is an invention. He is instead keen to celebrate the urban realm that he knows so well: Dundalk, the place of his birth. Regarding O'Callaghan's keen embrace of the local in 'East', this also recalls Kavanagh's famous distinction between the provincial and the parochial: the parochial recognizes and takes pride in the *authenticity* of local experience, where the provincial unthinkingly takes its lead from the cultural and political centre of power. 'Parochialism and provincialism are opposites', argues Kavanagh: 'the provincial has no mind of his own, he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the great metropolis […] has to say on any subject'. The 'parochial' person, conversely, 'is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his own parish'.[8] Refuting the aestheticization of rural life of the Revival, Kavanagh seeks to record the reality of rural life.

O'Callaghan is very sure about representing the authenticity of local experience in 'East'. Yet with its urban setting, O'Callaghan is diverging from Kavanagh's often rural County Monaghan. Perhaps a more obvious connection can be drawn between the likes of Thomas Kinsella, or more recently, Peter Sirr and David Wheatley. These are poets who have all been in different ways chroniclers of the urban realm. Their settings, however, are often either Belfast or Dublin. As Maria Johnston suggests: 'Kinsella is unquestionably the pre-eminent poet of modern Dublin'.[9] David Wheatley and Peter Sirr – in their Dublin poetry – have sought to emulate Kinsella, although, as I have argued, Peter Didsbury is the main influence on Wheatley's Hull poetry. It is Wheatley's urban mode that

[8] Patrick Kavanagh, *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose*, ed. Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003), p. 237.
[9] Maria Johnston, 'Walking Dublin: Contemporary Irish Poets in the City', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 492–513 (p. 498).

poems such as ‘East’ bear the most resemblance to. The poems of *Mocker* (2006), situated in Wheatley’s then place of residence in Hull, rather than the Dublin of *Misery Hill* (2000), share O’Callaghan’s fastidious attention to and veneration of the everyday qualities of the speaker’s immediate locale. A common strategy of Wheatley’s migration poems is not to look back to Ireland, but to have the speaker immerse himself in the minutiae of his surroundings. Wheatley’s speaker thus seeks to root himself in Hull. *Mocker* opens with ‘City’, a poem with its eye on what Wheatley has elsewhere described as the ‘unregenerate’ qualities of the Humber city.[10]

The speaker is travelling through the metropolis, and this is mirrored in the poem’s snaking stanza structure: the various urban phenomena that the speaker documents are all contained within this single, unbroken stanza, as if all witnessed in a single car journey that begins ‘from the moment / [they] come off the ringroad’.[11] The speaker observes the ordinary elements of life: adolescents ‘disappearing down / the embankment or slouched / in the tattooist’s door’, and a ‘line of unfortunates’, ‘the dispersed ones, queueing / on sufferance for / their coupons and stamps’.[12] The subject matter and style of these lines is similar to O’Callaghan’s, ‘where back-to-back estates are peppered with satellite discs / and the sign of the *Sunrise Takeaway* doesn’t flick on until six’. Having depicted the poverty and decline of Hull, Wheatley’s poem ends:

> [W]e blink at our good fortune,

[10] David Wheatley, ‘“Dafter than we can care to own”: Some Poets of the North of England’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ed. Peter Robinson, pp. 407–424 (p. 407).
[11] David Wheatley, ‘City’, in *Mocker* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2006), pp. 11–12 (p. 11). This poem is intertextual with Philip Larkin’s ‘Here’, which is about Hull. Its third stanza opens with: ‘A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling / Where only salesman and relations come / Within a terminate and fishy-smelling / Pastoral of ships up streets’, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 2003), p. 79. Larkin is another important Hull poet to Wheatley, although Didsbury is his main influence.
[12] Ibid.

pushing open the front door

we never bother to lock,

raising one foot above the other

at the foot of the stairs and already

standing on top of the world.[13]

This playful tone is typical of Wheatley, who often falls back on black humour and irony. The great roster of the city's 'unfortunates' is directly contradicted by the phrase 'we blink at our good fortune', with the obvious semantic linkage between 'fortune' and 'unfortunates' only highlighting the contradiction. The tone is mocking – perhaps fitting of a collection entitled *Mocker* – but there is a real sense of solidarity here, with the speaker, like O'Callaghan's, part of the world they describe, not loftily condescending to the proles. This is signalled by the collective pronoun, 'we': had Wheatley employed 'they', the tone would have shifted to something more sneering and classist. Evidently, the speakers in O'Callaghan's 'East' and Wheatley's 'City' are seeking to root themselves in the urban world, exalting its ugliness.

*Seatown* as a whole explores this: its very title is an affectionate soubriquet for Dundalk, and the poems therein take the town as their subject matter. The two 'Seatown' poems in the collection eulogise the urban realm in a similar vocabulary to 'East'. The first poem, which opens the collection, remarks on the 'reclaimed wad of bins left out a week and dogs in heat / and the fragrance of salt and sewage that bleeds / into our garden from the neap-tide of an August night'.[14] Of their

[13] Ibid, p. 12.
[14] Conor O'Callaghan, 'Seatown', p. 9.

hometown, the speaker concludes: 'May its name be said for as long as it could matter'.[15] There is some mock-portentousness here commingled with genuine affection for Dundalk. The second 'Seatown' poem sets the scene in much the same way, with images such as 'pubs shut early midweek / and snooker halls half empty', and 'a smattering of traffic with the Chinese and the dog track'.[16] This is the same *Sunrise Takeaway* and dog-racing venue described in 'East'. The conclusion of 'Seatown' Mark Two more explicitly describes Dundalk as offering the 'hope of belonging if only once' to the speaker. It also concludes with the same declarative tone of the previous 'Seatown' poem: 'May the length it takes to leave go some distance to explain / a sense of marking time and that gradual ache inside, despite / a pile of boxes undiminished in the hall, which says, "I could go on"'.[17] This second poem depicts the strong pull that their originary place exerts on the speaker, as well as gesturing to migrancy. It is not clear, however, what the source of the speaker's 'gradual ache' is. Is this a longing to leave that is hindered by the speaker's loyalty to their place of origin, or is their discomfort born of their not yet fulfilled sense of belonging? This complicates the view of *Seatown* as a simple collection of rooted place poems, but in its semi-ironic celebration of Dundalk, it is still, as O'Callaghan has himself phrased it, at least 'pretending to be rooted'.[18]

Despite in some ways writing a kind of poetry of place in *Seatown*, O'Callaghan is keen to argue that this does not fall within what Justin Quinn has elsewhere called the 'larger nationalist objective'.[19] O'Callaghan has said as much in an interview: 'Sometimes, as an Irish poet, one is expected to write an Irish landscape; to conveniently inhabit an interpretable version of Ireland […] I assert the right to

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[15] Ibid.
[16] O'Callaghan, 'Seatown', p. 36.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Conor O'Callaghan, 'Looser, Freer, and a Bit Wilder: An Interview with Conor O'Callaghan', *Wake Forest University Press*, 2016 <https://wfupress.wfu.edu/interview/looser-freer-and-a-bit-wilder-an-interview-with-conor-ocallaghan/> [accessed 25 March 2022].
[19] Justin Quinn, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry: 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 197.

write about my life, its various settings and concerns'.[20] This 'interpretable' poetry is partly founded on Yeats's oeuvre. There is his overwrought celebration of the 'woven world-forgotten isle / Where people love beside the ravelled seas',[21] or the later rural simplicity of 'The Wild Swans at Coole': 'The trees are in their autumn beauty, / The woodland paths are dry'.[22] Then there is the allure of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' – which is a kind of island poem situated in the west of Ireland – with its 'lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore'.[23] Ireland itself is also symbolised as a rose tree in Yeats's poetry.[24] O'Callaghan disavows these images in which national identity is so often bound up with images of rural Ireland.

His attitude is in line with what Anthony Bradley describes as the recent 'rupture between literature and the nation-state' within Ireland.[25] As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, this is, in essence, a post-nationalist shift in the relationship between literature and the nation state. Bradley is taking his lead from Quinn, who observed how Irish poets are no longer interested in the 'matters of Ireland'.[26] What Bradley and Quinn mean is that poets are now uninterested in writing within the bounds of a prescribed nationalist image of what Ireland should be. This image, Bradley suggests, 'almost always used to refer to rural landscapes and settings, from Yeats's Sligo, to Kavanagh's Monaghan, Montague's Tyrone, to Heaney's County Derry, all of which in different ways have fed

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[20] Conor O'Callaghan, 'The Importance of Breathing: An Interview with Conor O'Callaghan', *Wake Forest University Press*, Jan 2014, <https://wfupress.wfu.edu/conorocallaghan/ocallaghan-shines-light-on-the-sun-king/> [accessed on 9 January 2020]. This sentiment is echoed in the deliberately titled 'Landscape' from *The History of Rain*, which begins sarcastically: 'It's a view that seems too familiar'. Conor O'Callaghan, 'Landscape', in *The History of Rain* (Loughcrew: Gallery Books, 1993), p. 26.

[21] W.B. Yeats, 'The Man Who Dreamed of Fairyland', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Augustine Martin (London: Vintage Books, 1992), pp. 39–41 (p. 39).

[22] Ibid, 'The Wild Swans at Coole', pp. 129–130 (p. 129). Heaney's 'Exposure' is intertextual with Yeats's poem: 'Alders dripping, birches / Inheriting the last light, / The ash tree cold to look at', in *North* (London: Faber, 1975), pp. 72–73 (p. 72).

[23] Ibid, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', p. 35.

[24] In 'The Rose Tree' and 'To Ireland in the Coming Times', ibid, pp. 179 & 46–47.

[25] Anthony Bradley, 'Changing Places: Locations of Contemporary Irish Poetry', *New Hibernia Review*, 21:4 (2017), pp. 89–105 (p.90).

[26] Quinn, p. 197.

into the discourse of the nation'.[27] Bradley's 'rupture' followed the deaths of two elder statesmen, Seamus Heaney (in 2013) and John Montague (in 2016): 'Especially after the deaths of Seamus Heaney and John Montague – whose works are haunted by the idea of a hidden, pastoral, and Gaelic Ulster', argues Bradley, 'the dominant strain of contemporary Irish poetry now seems, finally, to have become untethered from images of rural Ireland and the discourse of the nation'.[28] Of course, Bradley is consciously overstating the case, and is using the deaths of the two poets as a shorthand for describing a general shift in attitude among the newer generation of Irish writers.

Bradley is, however, keen to correct Quinn's assertion that we can now observe the total 'disappearance of Ireland' in contemporary Irish poetry:[29]

> Ireland, as a place, has not simply disappeared from recent Irish poetry. What has happened, rather, is that we have cityscapes of Dublin and Belfast, occasionally the suburbs, taking the place of landscapes, and with this shift a corresponding prominence of the flâneur figure, the replacement of outer landscapes with psychic, inner landscapes, and a strain of cosmopolitan poetry that is about other places than Ireland, that is appreciative of the other culture, and shares in it, without the anxiety of exile.[30]

Bradley is slightly simplifying matters here, because there is an extant tradition of urban poetry within Ireland (Johnston identifies several such writers of Dublin-specific poetry), but it is true that this has often been subordinated to poetry with rural subjects (especially by Yeats, Kavanagh, and

[27] Bradley, p. 89.
[28] Ibid, p. 91.
[29] Quinn, p. 197.
[30] Bradley, p.103.

others). In another sense, the poems of *Seatown* exemplify the idea that within Ireland, cultural identity has historically been strongly nourished by place. 'East' and the two 'Seatown' poems are still essentially place poems. But they are also evidence of Bradley's 'rupture', since O'Callaghan is consciously eschewing an 'interpretable' poetry of 'landscape' along with its associations with 'nationalist discourse'. 'East' especially is thus a post-Irish poem, because it is an example of a particular well-established Irish poetic mode (the place poem), and its speaker and its subject matter are Irish, but the poem also represents O'Callaghan's desire to refashion the place poem tradition in such a way that transcends the literature–nation state relationship. This poem is a touchstone for O'Callaghan's subsequent poetry. The *Seatown* collection was, however, written before O'Callaghan's migration. He, like the other poets included in this thesis, is now a long-term economic migrant. O'Callaghan is from Dundalk, has lived and worked in the United States, but has spent most of his migrant life in Britain, where he lives in Sheffield. With his experience of multiple migrations, O'Callaghan moves away from a poetry of one place entirely, to a poetry of multiple places. Many of the poems of *Fiction* (2005), *The Sun King* (2013) and *Live Streaming* (2017) are about 'other places than Ireland', and thus conform even more closely to the trend that Bradley describes.

To pick up on Bradley's use of the term 'exile': as a noun, it describes a period of forced absence from one's originary country, and its attendant homesickness. There is a strain of exilic writing that is pithily summarized by Wheatley in his poem, 'A Backward Glance', from *Mocker*. The speaker mishears the word Yorkshire as '*dhearcas siar*. / His own small teary / *Dialann Deorai*'.[31] The word 'Yorkshire' is near-homophonous with the Irish phrase '*dhearcas siar*', which means 'backward glance'. The phrase '*Dialann Deorai*' means 'Exile's Diary' and is taken from the title of a mid-twentieth century memoir written by an Irish migrant to northern England. This allusion to the 'Exile's Diary' acknowledges the history of Irish migration to England, in particular, the history of

[31] David Wheatley, 'A Backward Glance', in *Mocker,* p. 38.

economic migration. There has been much critical attention given to the concept of exile with Irish literature and culture. And while Ellen McWilliams has shown that it is still an important term,[32] the concept does not apply to a voluntary emigrant such as O'Callaghan.

Indeed, more pertinent to O'Callaghan's poetry is Ailbhe McDaid's argument that migration is an act of fleeing 'the inherited boundaries of Ireland', and as such, migrant poets bring a new-found 'geographical and creative mobility' to their work.[33] McDaid's observation is similar to Bradley's description of 'cosmopolitan' poetry, about 'other places than Ireland'. O'Callaghan's is a poetry that avoids depictions of an Ireland cowled in 'visionary mystique', whilst also being strongly influenced by his experience of migrancy, frequently taking 'other places' as its backdrop and subject. O'Callaghan's poetry exhibits a post-Irish migrant aesthetic, both conforming to and resisting the trends identified by Bradley and others. The poems from *The Sun King* and *Live Streaming* (but also a handful from his previous collections) explore multi-locatedness and reveal the speaker's shifting and multiple poetic identity. The voice of some of these poems also expresses a counter-desire for a return to a specific place and time: they often seek to arrest, or else they lament, the indefatigable passing of time. The idea of 'home' is thus important to O'Callaghan. He has said in an interview: 'I love Ireland, but I do take it with a pinch of salt […] I can't wait to go home and I can't wait to leave'.[34] The particular resonance of 'home' here is significant: it functions as both a place of origin and a point of departure. 'Home' in this instance therefore assumes a dual, migrant definition: it is somewhere to be left behind as well as returned to. The intense and complicated resonances of home in Peter McDonald's poetry are less in evidence in O'Callaghan's poetry, although the gravitational pull of his first 'home' is an important aspect. Dundalk as his place of origin is significant

[32] See Ellen McWilliams, *Women and Exile in Contemporary Irish Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2013).
[33] Ailbhe McDaid, '"I mean it as no ordinary return": Poetic Migrancy in the Poetry of Vona Groarke and Sara Berkeley', *Australasian Journal of Irish Studies,* 13:1 (2013), pp. 38–56 (p. 38).
[34] O'Callaghan, 'The Importance of Breathing'.

and poetically formative, but it also becomes, for better or worse, one of many ‘homes’ in O’Callaghan’s poetry.

**II. O’Callaghan’s Other Places**

*Fiction* (2005) is O’Callaghan’s third full-length collection, appearing after *Seatown.* Its title is a metapoetic reference. The collection as a whole is about the creative process, and the inherent artifice of writing. Whilst this is the overarching theme, the collection is also very diverse in subject matter. It is here that O’Callaghan’s first migration poem appears. ‘The Burbs’ (a contraction of suburbs) exhibits a migrant aesthetic. This poem is situated in America, where O’Callaghan previously lived. It begins on a university campus where the speaker is teaching. Formally, this poem lacks the experimentation of the later poems of *The Sun King*, with its simple quatrain structure. There are ten stanzas in total, each with very long lines of fifteen or twenty syllables. It is a reasonably relaxed structure in terms of syllable count at least, despite its strict strophic arrangement, which aligns with the informal register of the speaker. ‘Campus is a morgue’, it begins, indicating that the speaker is now on their summer break. This is likely to be Wake Forest University in North Carolina, where O’Callaghan taught for some years. The poem is situated at a crossroads, after a period in the United States, but just before a return home to (presumably) Ireland: ‘Our sticks and stones are being shipped home / surface, piecemeal, with our accents’.[35] One’s accent, a marker of one’s class and cultural background, is evoked here to suggest a kind of homecoming. Evidently, America at this time is not a true ‘home’. The key lines occur in stanzas four and five, and confirm the migrant theme:

> We live in central air and shades,

[35] Conor O’Callaghan, ‘The Burbs’, in *Fiction* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2005), p. 3.

skittish with heat, the release of feeling neither here nor there

between several raisons *d'etre* and the breezy self each impersonates,

blasting 'The Wind that Shakes the Barley' to smother

another gospel a cappella 'Star-Spangled Banner' climaxing on the PA.[36]

This is an intriguing stanza and a half. It celebrates 'the release of feeling neither here nor there'. On one level, this is the speaker enjoying their time off work, or exalting in the fact of having completed, or nearly completed, a block of teaching. The speaker is also relishing the clement weather: in the 'central air and shades' they are 'skittish with heat'. They are 'between *raisons d'être*', with few duties to fulfil. Equally, in this poem's more significant context of migrancy – the Irish speaker having temporarily migrated to America and now on the cusp of a departure back to Europe – these lines enjoy the itinerant mode of being. The migrant subject is liminal, they are betwixt and between, with an identity that is protean: they 'impersonate' a number of different 'breezy sel[ves]'. This poem is post-nationalist, although the speaker clearly retains a sense of their Irish identity. 'The Wind that Shakes the Barley' is the name of a nationalist ballad from the nineteenth century (as well as the famous Ken Loach film). As the embodiment of the speaker's Irishness, this tune is deployed to counteract the bullish Christianised American nationalism with which the speaker is continually bombarded (the version of the national anthem is 'gospel', indicating the frequently unconstitutional unity of Christianity with nationalism in the American context). This poem is thus a clear example of O'Callaghan's post-Irish migrant aesthetic: the speaker is celebrating his imaginative and geographical freedom, whilst at the same time still acknowledging his essential Irishness. The allusions to Joyce's short story 'The Dead' (from *Dubliners*) within the poem ('I have

[36] Ibid.

[…] a flotilla of trial assignments on "The Dead"', and 'In the elevator, softly falling through its shaft from class, I eavesdrop "snow"') confirm the speaker's debt to their cultural and literary origins.[37]

The speaker of 'The Burbs' is seemingly much more at ease with that sense of being in 'several places at one time' than the speaker in the poems of *The Sun King*.[38] The speaker in the latter collection is generally more insecure about their relationship with the multiple places they have known and settled in. *The Sun King* as a title has numerous connotations: it could refer to the absolutist Louis XIV's self-given title of *Roi-soleil*, itself an allusion to Apollo, the Greco–Roman Sun God or God of Light. The title instead is rather more humble in origin, as O'Callaghan discloses: 'The "sun king" was our family nickname for a handyman who converted an annex of our NC [North Carolina] house into a sunroom'. He was called "Roy"'. The name 'derives from the Gaelic for "red": "rua". He insisted we thank Jesus when the work was done: I scoffed, and then found myself unexpectedly moved'.[39] The collection captures in its vision the eight years prior to O'Callaghan's geographical 'movement, a lot of it painful' between Ireland, America, and England.[40] This origin story for its title speaks of O'Callaghan's accompanying sense of loss. It also speaks of his still-strong sense of Irish identity. O'Callaghan's sneer at the display of simple-minded Catholicism is soon checked by sadness. Perhaps the Irish handyman's piety evoked a kind of philosophical (or metaphysical) certainty that O'Callaghan now lacks. This small anecdote seems to capture perfectly the despondency at the heart of *The Sun King*.

[37] Ibid.
[38] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), p. 249.
[39] 'The Importance of Breathing'.
[40] Ibid.

Place in *The Sun King* is often shifting and multiple. The dizzying 'Lordship' which opens the collection establishes this trend. The Lordship in question is the name of a small and relatively anonymous townland near Dundalk. It is here in the speaker's writing retreat that this poem begins:

> He assembled a console inside the stable's glass doors
>
> and had his narrator come this close to banging
>
> his own mother in half-light in the late '70s.[41]

The writer is here in his writing retreat, diligently working at his 'console' (or desk) on his latest novel. The somewhat crass image of near-incest is an odd way to begin, but it does establish the idea that the reader is absolutely at the behest of the speaker's peculiar and restless imagination. It is a surreal journey across places and times. From this initial locale, situated firmly in the past (the speaker is describing himself in the third person and the past tense), we then veer without warning to a city, probably London. Here the speaker (again with an eye for the messiness of human sexuality) relates an affair or tryst of some variety. Stanzas ten to thirteen (of a total of twenty-two loosely iambic and irregularly-rhymed triplets) describe various sexual encounters: 'Twice on the square of two mattresses dragged together' is one of O'Callaghan's more refined formulations. The inclusion of a specific place name, 'Kings Cross', in this section, helps to anchor this sequence in a particular place. A district in central London, it is also the site of London's main terminus, with the speaker's partner having 'tubed first thing from A to B'. So we have moved from Ireland to London within a stanza. Then we are uprooted again within the same stanza, this time twice, to Belfast and

[41] Conor O'Callaghan, 'Lordship', in *The Sun King* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2013), pp. 11–14 (p. 11).

then to Hope Valley in Derbyshire, England. The speaker is in Belfast, talking to or texting their partner in England:

> It's pissing on Belfast City's solitary terminal,
>
> he buzzed to tell you and got lost in the patchy coverage
>
> of Hope Valley your express was chuntering east of
>
> and heard next to nothing the guts of August.[42]

This is a free-roaming imagination at work and recalls McDaid's suggestion that the work of Irish poets who have 'fled the inherited boundaries of Ireland' (physically and imaginatively) is imbued with a new-found 'geographical and creative mobility'. This geographical mobility at least is evident in 'Lordship'. This is also Bradley's 'other places'. Following the swift shifts in time and place in 'Lordship', there is a sudden moment of lucidity in stanza sixteen, when the speaker pauses to reflect: 'There's no return route, is there? You sussed that too? / The truth, much as time does, vanishes behind'.[43] *There is no going back* would be an equivalent phrase. We have the memory of our past selves, but we cannot ever return to the times and places to which we were once wed. The speaker is desirous of a return to the past, and to origins, but is despairing of the futility of such a desire. Truth, then, like identity, merely 'vanishes behind', it is protean, de-centred. It is this insight that underscores almost all the poems of *The Sun King.*

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[42] Ibid, p. 12.
[43] Ibid.

'Lordship' registers a chronophobic desire to relocate a particular place in time: the speaker of this poem finds himself present in several locations simultaneously, whilst at the same time recording his despair at the loss of fixity. He is caught uneasily between several positions. 'Emergency', from the same collection, is also a representation of this post-nationalist multiplicity, which is both celebrated and lamented. 'Emergency' is the apotheosis of this particular tension in O'Callaghan's poetry, introducing greater formal experimentation. It begins amongst the images of suburbia: 'This Tecsun transistor propped / among lavender pots and hostas / buzzes close-of-trading stats'.[44] There is a strange image of a 'yard-sign shrine' in a neighbour's back garden. This is a shrine to their eldest child who was killed in combat overseas. Rain from 'March's cloudbursts' has 'seeped under' the laminate of his photo, 'camouflag[ing]' his face 'with freckles like coppers in a salsa jar'. This image leads to one of a shop worker counting out change, before leading back to Ireland: every time she 'tips them in her scales / they are rust scraps of some GI carrier / come unstuck in Free State fog'. From here during 'the week of Dresden' in the Second World War, where the speaker's father's friend pilfered a 'charred Zippo' from the wreck (presumably washed up on a nearby beach), we move 'onto a mountain track where Bashō suffers / the entreaties of two fallen concubines'. There is also an allusion to the French '*tricolore*'.[45] We are in Britain, Ireland, France, and then Japan in the space of three short stanzas. Formally, this poem is very disorganized, comprised of a mixture of triplet stanzas, longer quatrains, and strange line-lengths, sometimes with phrases isolated between stanzas. For example, the previously quoted lines are arranged on the page in the following disjointed way:

> they are rust scraps of some GI carrier
>
> come unstuck in Free State fog

[44] O'Callaghan, Emergency', in *The Sun King*, p. 38.
[45] Ibid.

the week of Dresden

from which my old man's oldest

drinking crony looted a charred Zippo

that flicks petals to this day

with the *tricolore* of one

blown from the gingko over my head

onto a mountain track where Bashō suffers

the entreaties of two fallen concubines.

The initial two lines here form part of a quatrain, but with the final line lineated mid-way to produce two lines out of one, thus forming a quintuplet stanza. The second stanza here is a quatrain, and the last a more regularly structured triplet. Ian Hamilton suggested that many poets in Britain and elsewhere now avoid received verse forms in favour of free verse because of their lack of philosophical certainty: 'The idea of shapeliness and regularity in poetry has been dissonant with loss of belief and scepticism'. He adds, exempting Auden's strict control of form from this trend, 'He's almost saying: "I have controlled my experience and I am in control of this"'.[46] I wonder whether this is what is at work here on some level: the migrant speaker, ranging freely between

[46] Alan Jenkins, 'Appendix 2: "Strange Meeting" by Edward Pygge (and I.H. on traditional forms and free verse)', in *Ian Hamilton: Collected Poems*, ed. Alan Jenkins (London: Faber, 2013), pp. 129–131 (p. 129). This interview conducted by Gerry Cambridge was first published in *The Dark Horse* No. 3 in 1996. It was subsequently included by Alan Jenkins as an appendix to Hamilton's *Collected Poems*.

times and places, but who is, in any case, lacking sure-footed rootedness, chooses to arrange their thoughts to reflect this spatially on the page. The speaker's lack of formal control reflects their lack of external control. Indeed, the poem's very title, 'Emergency', suggests a lack of control of one's circumstances.

'Emergency' has some of the surrealism and uncertainty of 'Lordship', from which emerges a similar conclusion about the contemporary experience of migrancy:

Tomorrow

will be wisteria vines far off the beaten path.

Follow, by all means, if you must.

This goes only one direction

and we are veering years from a return.

This final image is ambivalent. This has a personal dimension for sure: the breakdown of the speaker's relationship with his wife seems to be the source of the underlying sense of tragedy in many of the poems. Equally, a poem such as 'Emergency' is about the modern experience of migrancy. It captures the unmoored nature of the speaker's identity, their itinerant or nomadic nature. The final stanza invites us to follow the speaker, if we must insist, on their one-directional journey. Like 'Lordship', we are left aching with the loss that the speaker continually experiences, and the impossibility of any kind of return to origin: 'we are veering years from a return'.

My readings of ‘Lordship’ and ‘Emergency’ show that there is a dialectic in O’Callaghan’s migrant poetry between multilocatedness and a desire for fixity. ‘Lordship’ and ‘Emergency’ formally represent multilocatedness: they collapse vast distances between several places into the single imaginative moment of the poem. It is precisely the experience of multiple migrations – of travelling freely between several countries, as O’Callaghan has done – that gives rise to these particular formal properties. Fear of time passing – a kind of chronophobia – is so often expressed alongside the formal representations of multilocatedness. The former theme is present in O’Callaghan’s debut collection. Its opening poem, ‘September’, begins with:

> It must be a cliché to think, however brief,
>
> that light on a wall and our voices
>
> out in the open are the pieces
>
> we shall look upon in retrospect as a life.[47]

The speaker is pensive, conscious of the ‘impending doom’ of September ending, with the ‘afternoon’ that the poem captures merely ‘an example of decay’.[48] O’Callaghan has always been concerned with the passing of time, but the theme is invested with greater intensity in his later poetry. This is likely because O’Callaghan has left Dundalk. We may have memories that tie us to our home place, and we may resent the inexorable process of decline (or ‘decay’ as O’Callaghan puts it) that time enacts. We are forever travelling away, temporally, from each moment and each new experience. O’Callaghan’s experience of geographical mobility – migrating to Britain and the United States, for example – is a simulacrum of this same process. In other words, O’Callaghan’s speakers

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[47] Conor O’Callaghan, ‘September’, in *The History of Rain* (Loughcrew: Gallery Books, 1993), p. 9.
[48] Ibid.

have lost both time *and* place: there is an attendant and mutually reinforcing loss to both experiences. Chronophobia has long been a preoccupation of O'Callaghan's, and it is this particular fixation on the temporal dimension of migrancy that sets him apart from the other poets in this thesis.

However, O'Callaghan's other preoccupations do bear the influence of Wheatley most obviously. Stylistically, the poets share a penchant for dazzling lines often written in a lithe vernacular. Wheatley's 'A Fret' from *A Nest on the Waves* (2010) is a one example of his verbal virtuosity. A poem situated in Hull's docklands, it is much more restless and searching than the poems of *Mocker*, conjuring up strange images such as in stanza six: 'Here the last of empire has meandered / past the fag-end of the North Sea fleet / to a scrapyard sculpture park', whose 'remaindered / Edward VII accepts a vain salute / from a yawning Ford Fiesta's bonnet'.[49] There is a sense of immediate discovery in these lines, as if the speaker is being borne along by the spontaneity of language. In the same poem, though, this lightsomeness is tempered by the way in which '[t]he air is thick with the sloughed / skin of dead selves: they fall and settle, / a load too imperceptible to shift', and how the speaker is apt to 'dodge and move / through the liquid fixities of past and present'.[50] In both 'Emergency' and 'A Fret', the speaker is striving for the precise formal representation of the disorientating multiplicity of the migrant condition. O'Callaghan, like Wheatley's speaker, also tends to be mournful of his transience: where O'Callaghan is unsettled, Wheatley's speaker describes the 'liquid fixities' as leaving him 'bogged down and imprisoned'.[51] O'Callaghan's earlier poem 'The Burbs' seems more at ease with these 'breezy sel[ves]', where 'Emergency' is much more anxious. But Wheatley's poem here only captures part of his overall migrant aesthetic. More often than not, Wheatley is a celebrant of his poetic nomadism. O'Callaghan's vision is more uniformly bleak.

[49] David Wheatley, 'A Fret', in *A Nest on the Waves* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2010), pp. 12–13 (p. 12).
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.

O'Callaghan's poetry is also more formally experimental, and even more kaleidoscopic in terms of imagery than Wheatley's. The restlessness of O'Callaghan's speaker, their jumble of images, places, and times in 'Emergency' – in conjunction with their disjointed stanzaic arrangement – reflects their sheer rootlessness. O'Callaghan here creates a vocabulary – and a form – befitting the diversity of his migrant experience.

'Lordship' and 'Emergency' can be grouped together as poems that represent essentially the same tension in O'Callaghan's poetry. They represent his experience in pessimistic terms. But elsewhere in the same collection, there are poems that capture a lighter mood. 'Required Fields' is a significant poem in this regard, and so it is worth setting this against the previous two poems. Like 'Emergency', this poem is founded on a similar sense of *no return*, but it ends on a different note entirely. Instead of existential distress, the speaker becomes more reconciled to the inescapable facts of his particular migrant condition. Here the speaker asks a series of questions about origin and homecoming. At first, the speaker posits an easily solvable personal-historical question: 'The number and month between "Hey Jude"/ and the student riots that a corridor in El Paso / was filled with yelps on your behalf?' [sic].[52] As strange and obscure a line of questioning as this is, finding its answer is 'no sweat' for the speaker. Even stranger is the following question: 'A combination of the last four digits in a line / long disconnected and the name of the border terrier / that met its maker under an artic?'. This is an inaccessible and highly personal image, but it is also answerable, although this time with more difficulty, 'at a stretch'. As we move through the poem, the questions posed about roots or origins become harder and harder to solve, leading the speaker to conclude, somewhat bleakly:

Perhaps at times it's better

[52] O'Callaghan, 'Required Fields', in *The Sun King*, p. 40–41 (p. 40).

to submit to the pin-drop of forgetfulness,

accept that there are questions of provenance

no amount of empty boxes can hope to answer,

leave the past to time itself back to a Square One.[53]

The initial bleakness of these lines is tempered slightly by the ultimate line. The speaker is letting go of that which has vexed them, though there is still a residual tone of resignation here. Of these actual or imagined 'empty boxes', elsewhere described as 'outsized plywood cubes', which are the vessels of memory and the symbols of origin, and that contain the 'flotsam of an old life', the speaker finds nothing which will 'translate'. That is, nothing of this old self and this old life in a particular place can be carried over into the new place. All these images of the old life 'belong to a blank we are moved too far from now to fill'.[54] 'Required Fields' then develops beyond the chronophobia of previous poems, accepting that, for the migrant subject, multi-locatedness is the new ontology. If our origin, the specific place where we are from, is difficult to recover, we can try and make our home in the places to which we travel, however temporary these may be. As if to confirm the poem's departure from a preoccupation with the erstwhile self, 'Required Fields' culminates with an observation of someone else, 'a chap from Blackpool', also a migrant. We are told how 'this side of the water, whenever he can't sleep, / he stocktakes stars above the Turf Road, the Windy Gap'.[55] It is not entirely clear which 'side' of the water we are on in this poem, but we are in a place other than the speaker's, and the man from Blackpool's, place of origin.

[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid, p. 41.

**III. *Live Streaming***

*Live Streaming* (2017) is O'Callaghan's most recent collection. He has talked about *Live Streaming* in a recent interview for Wake Forest University Press. Following *The Sun King*, where he felt that he had 'maxed out' as a poet, O'Callaghan vowed that he was 'done with poetry'.[56] It took his publisher to gently cajole him into a collection's-worth of poetry to get him to write again in earnest. This suggests that the poems of *Live Streaming* were something of an afterthought. The poems that appear each side of the longer collage poem in the collection were '15-odd poems that I had written in the margins of the novel'. This is *Nothing on Earth* (2016), which O'Callaghan worked on from 2012 to 2016. The novel is a medium he confesses to have been more happy in than poetry. 'His Last Legs' – the long poem that dominates *Live Streaming* – was composed because O'Callaghan 'sat down and […] had 20 to 25 pages to fill out to make it an average book-length of a poetry collection'.[57] O'Callaghan's title would suggest that the phenomenon of the internet would feature prominently, as to live stream is to broadcast on the internet in real time. The collection is instead more preoccupied with the speaker's relationship with his alcoholic, absentee father. Felix O'Callaghan, as he was known, died in 2013, as 'His Last Legs' reveals: 'Our father died in June 2013. I saw him in a coma a week before. […] There is nowhere to put grief. I leave it here, for the time / being'.[58] This poem, in particular, is doing precisely this, working through this grief in often confused terms.

The title poem of the collection also takes as its subject the speaker's father, hinging on an 'inkling' of their presence post-mortem: 'Late father, / better than never, / come to life', it concludes.[59] The

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[56] O'Callaghan, 'Looser, Freer, and a Bit Wilder'.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Conor O'Callaghan, 'His Last Legs', in *Live Streaming* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2017), pp. 29–49 (pp. 32 & 33).
[59] Ibid, 'Live Streaming', p. 17.

collection as a whole is haunted by the speaker's father, but the experience of migration is still a prominent subject, as O'Callaghan reveals:

> I think there's a sort of, a placelessness and a rootlessness to my poetry. […] I live in England, my mother lives in my hometown of Dundalk, I own an apartment in Dublin, my son lives in Moscow, and my daughter lives in New York. And I'm very tired most of the time because I tend to find myself moving between the two. […] I feel from Dundalk [sic] but I haven't lived there in 30 years, and I don't think I'll ever live there again really. And I think in many respects that informs the poems, […] there is a sense of displacement in the poems.[60]

O'Callaghan's first home, Dundalk, still has a bearing on his poetry. *Seatown* – which is an extended homage to the place – confirms Peter McDonald's adage that 'in poetry, formative experience is nearly everything: it's not just the imaginative fuel of a lifetime's thinking and writing, but the definitive test and conditioning of the poetry's voice'.[61] But there are also at least three other significant places for O'Callaghan: Britain, Russia, and America. The anglophone countries are the principal 'other places' in his migrant poetry, with the largest number of poems being set in Britain. O'Callaghan also records his fatigue with his frequent, short-term migrations, and describes a homesickness precipitated by his experience of migrancy. However, O'Callaghan's poetry isn't strictly placeless, but is instead founded on the experience of multiple places. And if O'Callaghan's poetry doesn't always celebrate multiplicity, poems such as 'Lordship' and 'Emergency' formally represent this dizzying experience. 'Emergency' also finds its speaker desiring a return to a single point of origin, although the speaker of 'Required Fields' is much more accepting of the forward motion of time and the speaker's transient connection to various places.

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[60] O'Callaghan, 'Looser, Freer, and a Bit Wilder'.
[61] Fran Brearton, 'In Conversation with Peter McDonald', *PN Review*, 39:4 (2013), pp. 60–63 (p. 61).

'Required Fields' may have presented the promise of acceptance, but O'Callaghan's grief draws him back into a sombre mood. In *Live Streaming*, O'Callaghan's principal themes and preoccupations remain broadly unchanged: bound up with the complex emotions of bereavement is O'Callaghan's more familiar concern with the confusing experience of multiple migrations and the indefatigable passing of time. Homesickness, a result of migration, is also a kind of grief. Many of the poems of *Live Streaming* explore the double homesickness of losing a parent who had remained in the speaker's originary Ireland. This is apparent from the outset in the strange migrant poem 'Two Thousand and Nine'. The speaker seeks to recapture the atmosphere of yesteryear. He is also imaginatively restless, whilst being uneasy about this nomadism. It begins:

> The purchase of a triplex repo goes through.
>
> The postgrads upstairs worship *Remain in Light*.
>
> My father has four years still to squander.
>
> 'And the beat goes on, and the beat goes on…'[62]

Situated four years prior to the speaker's father's demise, this poem is evidently looking back. Despite the speaker's long-term estrangement from his father, even in 2009 there is some hope for reconciliation perhaps. *Remain in Light* is the title of a 1980 Talking Heads album. The concept of this album is driving rhythms over which David Byrne, the lead singer and creative force of the band, chants and croons disconnected lyrics. The final line of the first stanza here is a purposeful misquotation of a refrain within the album's initial track, 'Born Under Punches (The Heat Goes On)'

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[62] Conor O'Callaghan, 'Two Thousand and Nine', in *Live Streaming*, p. 18.

(this is also possibly an allusion to the arguably more famous song by The Whispers, 'And the Beat Goes On'). O'Callaghan is drawing the reader's attention to the steady beats that underscore the album as a whole, but he is also drawing the reader's attention to the steady iambs of his poem. The refrain of the song becomes, in modified form, its refrain, appearing twice. This refrain may also serve as a way of marking the passage of time throughout the year 'Two Thousand and Nine'.

The poem comprises eight loosely pentametric quatrains. It is composed of fragments of disjointed remembrances, as stanzas two and three confirm:

> There's a mattress on cement painted cream.
>
> There's comfort in the chants and footfalls
>
> of away fans from Bavaria, the Basque,
>
> like horses wild in the lane beside my head.
>
> At any one time I've a rice kilo, a cider flagon.
>
> I've stopped hearing the extractor vent
>
> of the dim sum buffets and teppanyaki grills.
>
> My son and daughter wish to be told the truth.[63]

[63] Ibid.

Whilst the year in which the poem is situated is clear, the place is not. These seemingly unrelated images only contribute to this confusion. What, for example, is the significance of 'a mattress on cement painted cream'? Is the speaker in northern Spain, southeast Germany, or east Asia? What is the 'truth' that the speaker's offspring are desirous to learn? Stanzas four and five are equivalently obtuse ('Our early bird is black […] I must wait to be contacted […] Bank or flight crashes? […]'), before the relative clarity of six and seven emerges:

> Like one interrupted repeatedly midstream
>
> I say 'Where was I?' to reduced-to-clear shelves,
>
> parking spaces, the letterboxes' pigeon traps,
>
> the map of a campus farce on my big wall.
>
> Such exiles as one becomes an epicurean of,
>
> industrial backwaters as one seems drawn to,
>
> hurt no less for having no one else to blame![64]

Is the fragmentariness of this poem's content a reflection of the speaker's ontological insecurity? A migrant, 'interrupted repeatedly midstream', forever mobile and deracinated, the speaker enquires "Where was I?" in a kind of existential angst. Stanza seven deploys the noun 'exile' with marked irony, for their geographical mobility is not forced. Indeed, the speaker (again with irony) seems

[64] Ibid.

drawn to 'industrial backwaters' out of an innate 'epicurean' tendency. The poem 'East' is an elegy to the backwater of Dundalk (as the speaker describes it). Perhaps there is a kind of warped homing instinct at work here: since a simple return to their actual place of origin is troublesome, the speaker is instead seeking out new places that remind them of home. The fractured and disparate images of this poem thus serve as an apt representation of the speaker's experience with their multiple 'exiles'. The poem then strikes a poignant note at its conclusion: 'My past life was in town and asking for me'.[65] The nagging need to return to a sure-footed place-in-time resurfaces here, along with the confused and jumbled imagery of 'Emergency' and others. In 'Two Thousand and Nine', however, the speaker is more self-consciously ironic in his treatment of these themes.

There are no significant aesthetic and stylistic changes in *Live Streaming*; instead, there is a sense of a poet working within an established poetic mode. The ironic voice of 'Two Thousand and Nine' represents a slight modification, but this poem still fits the mould of 'Emergency' and 'Lordship': in addition to the thematic similarities between these poems, the early stanzas of 'Two Thousand' also record a jumble of images, before a clearer voice emerges in the final stanzas to offer an elucidation of the speaker's state of mind. Chronophobia is again a particularly strong theme. There is a Shakespearean influence on O'Callaghan's consistent complaints against the entropic action of time:

> O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
>
> Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days,
>
> When rocks impregnable are not so stout,

[65] Ibid, p.19.

Nor gates of steel so strong, but time decays?[66]

The speaker in Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 65' arrives at a resolution – which is introduced at the volta – that poetry itself can provide the stay against the 'decay' of time: 'That in black ink my love may still shine bright'. Yeats too, sensing the same 'wrackful siege', finds 'peace' in art and love – 'Poet's imaginings / And memories of love' – and the metaphysical framework of Christianity: 'Now I shall make my soul […] / Seem but the clouds of the sky'.[67] O'Callaghan's speakers – post-Christian as well as post-nationalist in orientation – are rarely so sanguine. 'In Memory of the Recent Past', also from *Live Streaming*, is O'Callaghan's most explicit rumination on his theme of *no return* since 'Lordship' ('there's no return route, is there?', was the lucid conclusion of that poem). The more recent poem avoids the opacity of these earlier poems. It succeeds in being both direct and abstract and is thus one of O'Callaghan's most successful poems on this theme. It is the distillation of the theme of chronophobia, a culmination of all his creative exertions hitherto. The speaker is, however, ultimately thwarted by their subject, and is unable to arrive at any kind of Yeatsian or Shakespearean resolution. 'Think of it like this', 'In Memory' begins:

If antiquity is

an elevation in silhouette

on the horizon,

and what we pause on

as one might a scenic overlook at evening

[66] William Shakespeare, 'Sonnet 65', in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry Fifth Edition*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 263.
[67] W.B. Yeats, 'The Tower', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Augustine Martin, pp. 200–206 (pp. 205 & 206).

is present,

then past must form

the vale that falls between

in grades of recentness.

Most recent is nearest.

Too near to see,

it recedes from us as noise.

We hear it.[68]

It seems that O'Callaghan is seizing on and amplifying the theme of chronophobia, then abstracting it. This figuration is attempted as a way of resolving the speaker's persistent neurosis. 'Antiquity', the distant past, is represented as 'an elevation in silhouette / on the horizon', where the present is a 'scenic overlook'. The '[p]ast', therefore, is what falls between in 'grades of recentness'. It is close, but too near to see, so, shifting senses, we can only 'hear it'. Stanza two elaborates on this. The recent past is not yet 'sufficiently distant / to laugh about'. It is the 'traumatic quotidian / of yesterday'.[69] The speaker describes the trauma of the everyday, or, perhaps, everyday trauma. This is an intriguing shift for a poet who had previously been so preoccupied with exalting the quotidian in his surroundings. The bleak reality of their displacement, out of time and place, sees the 'recent past' say '*I want us back*' in the 'same breath / with *This can be undone* / (but never how)'. Its promise of stability is, however, false. It is illusory. Going back is not only impossible, but its motive is nostalgia for something unreal. Its pretty-seeming 'fruit' is, on closer inspection, 'blown with flies'.

[68] O'Callaghan, 'In Memory of the Recent Past', in *Live Streaming*, pp. 52–57 (p. 54).
[69] Ibid.

This is a macabre metaphor. The speaker's dream is tainted and corrupted, inherently. The impossibility of return is seemingly the cause of trauma: it 'haunts' the speaker, its 'horrors are / of small hours'.[70] These are the early hours of each morning where the speaker is awake and alone and is ruminating on their condition. This is a very candid depiction of the speaker's latent anguish. O'Callaghan has described his 'permanent sense of displacement', and this poem seems to be the most direct representation of this feeling, as the ultimate stanza makes clear:[71]

> Just there, even,
>
> in a place we're no longer.
>
> You smiled. I smiled too.
>
> As if we both could hear,
>
> amidst us, a thing,
>
> that must remain implicit
>
> to cling to living, dearly.
>
> At the core of every waking moment
>
> is slippage
>
> so granular, so infinitesimal,
>
> to be as near inaudible
>
> as makes no difference.
>
> We still hear it.

[70] Ibid, p. 55.
[71] 'Looser, Freer, and a Bit Wilder'.

The trick is not to listen.[72]

The spatial dimension is again entwined with the temporal: the ebbing of time is considered alongside an equivalent loss of place. The speaker mourns for a place that '*we're* in no longer [my italics]', where both protagonists 'smiled' with contentedness. There is a 'slippage' at the 'core of every waking moment'; this is the passing of time. It, like time itself, is abstract yet 'granular' and 'infinitesimal', ungraspably small, yet tangible, nonetheless. It produces a feeling, an ever-present ache or yearning. Still unmoored, the migrant speaker seeks an imagined place of peace. If 'Required Fields' from *The Sun King* concludes that it may well be a healthier strategy to submit to the 'pin-drop of forgetfulness', and let bygones be bygones, 'In Memory of the Recent Past' only reverses this progress. The speaker is no closer to reconciling with this uncomfortable fact, because his conclusion is familiarly bleak: 'We still hear it. / The trick is not to listen'. This poem then ends with the speaker back where they started, no further towards resolving his persistent sense of displacement and chronophobia.

O'Callaghan's earlier poetry, particularly the collection *Seatown*, sees the poet attempt a kind of rootedness in place. The likes of *The Sun King* and, latterly, *Live Streaming* more honestly reflect O'Callaghan's experience of migration, to and from various elsewheres. They chart O'Callaghan's very modern experience of migration in aesthetically similar ways. Far from being the relatively sure-footed elegies to Dundalk that characterise *Seatown*, these later poems reveal a speaker who is now uprooted and homesick: this finds expression in the looser, freer forms of these poems, their swift shifts in time and place, and their overall uncertainty. Where 'East', with its simple pentametric quatrain structure, and regular AABB rhyme scheme, concludes with a clear statement of loyalty to

[72] Ibid, p. 56.

Dundalk – 'I align myself with a dribble of sea that's unspectacular, or flat […] / it's as simple as that' – O'Callaghan's poems of migration frequently end on a note of indeterminacy. Whilst O'Callaghan's poetry is now frequently located in many places, and sometimes delights in its lack of in-placeness and its intellectual and geographical freedom (most notably in 'The Burbs'), it frequently expresses a yearning for a stable sense of home as well (as in 'Lordship', 'Emergency', and 'In Memory of the Recent Past'). This is ultimately why O'Callaghan's aesthetic is best described as post-Irish migrant, for this term embodies the complexity of his poetry: its multiple influences and allegiances to place, and its formal diversity, which is so often set against the desire to return.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion: 'Telling the tale of that tale'

John Hollander reminds us of the genesis of poetry, and of the familiar origin story of the poet:

> The education of a poet often begins with a certain kind of estrangement from his or her language itself, dialectically coupled with a certain kind of deepened attachment to it. Art in general grows out of a development of – rather than maturation *out of* – certain aspects of childhood. Just so with poetry and the language games children play: in growing up we all learn more and more how to work with language, and words become utensils for us. But for poetry, the words become, as I have suggested, a little more like people, certainly like literary – as well as written – 'characters'. It is not in an early love for truth [or beauty], nor for persuasion, nor even for order, that poets emerge, but in a love of language. […] 'True art', wrote Proust, 'has nothing to do with proclamations and is accomplished in silence'.[1]

In précis, poetry often emerges from quiet contemplation, and the poet is initially inspired by a personal sense of kinship with his or her language. Conor O'Callaghan echoes the Proustian argument when he states: 'Poetry continues to happen, as it should, in silence and solitude'.[2] For any poet, preceding any awareness of theories of the aesthetic is the allure of language itself. In this sense, O'Callaghan, O'Donoghue, and the other poets included in this thesis all share the same origin story: it is ultimately their love of language that motivates their 'craft or sullen art', as Dylan Thomas put it. Thomas also echoes Proust in his famous description of poetic production: 'Exercised in the still night / When only the moon rages'.[3] We might also paraphrase W.B. Yeats's aphoristic

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[1] John Hollander, *The Work of Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 8.
[2] Conor O'Callaghan, preface to *The Wake Forest Series of Irish Poetry,* 3:1 (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2013), p. xiv.
[3] Dylan Thomas, 'In my Craft or Sullen Art', in *Collected Poems: 1934–1952* (Letchworth: Aldine Press, 1974), p. 120.

opposition here, that it is from the argument with others that we make rhetoric, but from the quarrel with ourselves that we make poetry. It is also, to paraphrase another great poet, borne of the pleasure of ulteriority, saying one thing and meaning another. Hollander further reminds us of the role of criticism in this regard:

> The great work of poetic criticism is, I think, always to be telling the tale of that tale. It starts from the first bit of impassioned and indubitably loaded retelling or recitation of what the reading eye has seen and heard [sic]. From the point of view of humanistic scholarship this is rather like the best sort of art historian's engaged and caressing ecphrasis, or verbal description of a painting. And it remains in part estranged from the writing it attends to and in part in kind, in the best of ways like poetry itself.[4]

Or as Hollander phrases it in another essay:

> Criticism is not parasitic upon literature. The relation is rather symbiotic; true criticism is written out of the greatest literary sensibility, with an intellectual agenda, whether theoretical, moral, aesthetic, or sophisticatedly political, an agenda that supports it but does not smother it.[5]

As these excerpts from Hollander confirm, the work of criticism is, in one sense, a companion to the 'work of poetry'. This is perhaps why the moniker of 'poet-critic' is applicable to all the poets here:

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[4] Hollander, p. 12.
[5] *The Work of Poetry*, p. 148.

Peter McDonald and David Wheatley are working Professors of English (at Oxford and Aberdeen respectively), Bernard O'Donoghue is an Emeritus Fellow at Oxford, Caitríona O'Reilly has taught Creative Writing at Kings College, London, and Conor O'Callaghan is now a Senior Lecturer in the English Department at Lancaster University. Poetry criticism involves shedding light on the first and most important medium of poetry. Or as McDonald puts it – in a rare species of poem that is about the craft of poetry criticism – 'I skivvy and clear away mess / after the poets, invisible beside them'.[6] McDonald's formulation contains something of Hollander's dual sense of estrangement from and engagement with the 'writing' in question.

At its heart, this thesis has been concerned with 'telling the tale' of O'Donoghue's, McDonald's, Wheatley's, O'Reilly's, and O'Callaghan's poetry. I have sought to cleave to a formalist method that is, in essence, about 'revealing the human content of art by a study of its formal properties', as Geoffrey Hartman so memorably expressed it.[7] This method involves keeping the poetry front-and-centre, rather than subordinating the aesthetic work to doctrine or ideology. Indeed, as Theo Dorgan has suggested, 'it is the nature of poetry to be always mutating beyond the circumscriptive capacities of any one theory'.[8] Dorgan takes issue with much 'theory-driven criticism', as he describes it, and calls for more inclusivity.[9] His culprits include 'Marxist, post-Marxist, post-structuralist, [and] post-modernist' theories, among others. He does concede that these theories have been 'extraordinarily useful, helpful even, in challenging us to think about poems in fresh and productive ways', although too often 'the tail soon begins to wag the dog'.[10] In other words, poetry

[6] Peter McDonald, 'Career', in *The Gifts of Fortune* (London: Carcanet, 2020), pp. 25–26 (p. 25).
[7] Geoffrey Hartman, *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958–1970* (London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 42.
[8] Theo Dorgan, 'Southern Wind', in *Post-Ireland? Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Jefferson Holdridge and Brian Ó Conchubhair (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2017), pp. 289–307 (p. 289).
[9] Ibid, p. 305.
[10] Ibid, pp. 289 & 291. This is a familiar complaint, as Peter McDonald made a similar observation at least fifteen years earlier: 'the agenda is set outside the poem, and the poem has to conform to what the agenda requires', in *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), p. 6.

that cannot be easily read within the *a priori* theoretical framework is often downgraded or disregarded. Dorgan suggests that one reason that some poets are 'alienated in and by and through the habitual critical discourse of our time' is because 'the prescriptive term "Irish poet" negates more complex transnational identities'.[11] Dorgan's anti-theory argument has some validity (although he is perhaps overstating the case), and this thesis has discussed five Irish poets who themselves represent 'complex transnational identities' in their poetry.

'I assert the right to write about my life', O'Callaghan has said, 'Its various settings and concerns'.[12] With O'Callaghan's declaration in mind, I have maintained an open-ended definition of 'Irish poet' in my arguments, allowing space for each poetic identity to emerge on its own terms. Although my focus has been on only one aspect of the O'Donoghue group's poetry – namely, the migrant experience – I have also tried to represent the 'complexity and multiplicity, […] multidimensionality, [and] the dialectics of harmony and contradictoriness' that are inherent to all aesthetic works.[13] My founding question – how do O'Donoghue et al. represent migrancy in their poetry? – has guided my argument. This question can also be expressed in a slightly different way that highlights the poem-centred approach: what does the *poetry* tell us about migrancy?

In a review of two collections of poetry (a *Collected* and *At Least for a While* [2008]) by the Irish poet Pearse Hutchinson (1927–2012), Philip Coleman praises his '"poetic transnationalism"'. Coleman derives the phrase from the critic Jahan Ramazani. Coleman argues that Hutchinson's poetry

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[11] Ibid, p. 298. This is one example of a list of nine different reasons why certain poets are 'alienated'.
[12] Conor O'Callaghan, 'The Importance of Breathing: An Interview with Conor O'Callaghan', *Wake Forest University Press*, Jan 2014, <https://wfupress.wfu.edu/conorocallaghan/ocallaghan-shines-light-on-the-sun-king/> [accessed on 9 January 2020].
[13] Virgil Nemoianu, 'Hating and Loving Aesthetic Formalism: Some Reasons', in *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 49–65 (p. 56).

conforms to Ramazani's vision of a kind of poetry that represents a world in which '"cultural boundaries are fluid, transient, and permeable"'. Coleman adds:

> Not all poetry imagines such a world, and a great deal of Irish poetry may be said to fixate on the idea of place in ways that make it difficult to think of the writing outside of its local contexts. The pull of home is perhaps always present in poetry, but in Hutchinson's work the attraction of what Gerald Dawe once termed a "real life elsewhere" seems to exert a greater force over his imagination than it has over many poets of his own and later generations. The work of his contemporaries John Montague [1929–2016] and Thomas Kinsella [1928–2021] certainly engages with "elsewhere" at important junctures, but they are ultimately poets of particular places and their Irish origins (even in Montague's case – he was born in Brooklyn) have had a pervasively powerful effect on their work's thematic development.[14]

Coleman concludes that Hutchinson's 'aesthetic and political integrity as an artist [has] not been determined or compromised by narrow national determinations of what he should or should not say in his art'.[15] This statement unconsciously echoes Justin Quinn's and Harry Clifton's arguments that there was 'a time when poets tended to stay put and often defined themselves in relation to nationalist aspiration (whether accepting or rejecting it). But this is no longer the case'.[16] Quinn also argues, in the same issue of *Metre*, that a feature of migrant Irish poetry is that it *really is about* the experience of 'elsewhere', rather than simply fixating on the originary Ireland.[17] The concepts of postnationalism and migrancy (with the latter defined as both an abstract and a physical crossing of borders and boundaries) are embedded in these analyses, and the trends that both commentators

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[14] Philip Coleman, 'At Ease with Elsewhere', *Dublin Review of Books*, Sep 2009, <https://drb.ie/articles/at-ease-with-elsewhere/> [Accessed 12 Oct 2022].
[15] Ibid.
[16] Justin Quinn, 'Irish Poetry and the Diaspora', *Metre*, 3 (1997), pp. 6–7 (p. 7).
[17] Ibid.

describe are broadly accurate. However, Coleman's implied contrast between 'place', 'local contexts', and 'the pull of home' (all of which can have 'national' and political significance in poetry), and the '"real life of elsewhere"' is a false one. For all poets, their 'origins' – the location of what Peter McDonald terms 'formative experience' – are always important, whether they are migrants or not.[18] And in any case, writing about elsewhere may also involve 'place', which has its own 'local contexts'. It is true that home and elsewhere are important subjects in migrant poetry, and they energise much of the poetry of the O'Donoghue group. Yet it is possible to write highly local poetry, as O'Donoghue does, that doesn't necessarily subscribe to any programme of 'narrow national determinations'. And we also find in O'Donoghue's oeuvre poetry which considers the 'elsewhere' on equal terms with his originary local place. McDonald often writes about the 'pull of home' – which is as valid as any subject in migrant poetry – but there is nothing 'narrow' in his constructions and explorations of the concept. O'Callaghan has consciously reworked the place poem in terms that are not explicitly ideological (notably in 'East'), and his later poetry finds cause for lamentation *and* celebration in his '"real life elsewhere"'. Wheatley's speakers are often absorbed in the 'local contexts' of Hull and Aberdeen, as much as they may revisit Ireland. Wheatley's nomadism as a poet entails what he himself termed a 'porousness' of identity, that is constantly alive to influences. O'Reilly is principally interested in the water that surrounds the archipelago of the British Isles and Ireland. Indeed, as much as Anthony Bradley and others (such as Quinn and Elmer Kennedy-Andrews) have correctly argued that the 'contemporary Irish lyric registers the time of the postnational', this does not mean that poets are now being pigeonholed into a different category.[19] Within the broader cultural context of postnationalism, the migrant experience is a complex (and personal) process – and thus the ways in which this is 'registered' in poetry is provisional, rather than definitive. The migrant experience is something with which each poet is continually negotiating. Thus, the migrant aesthetic more generally is an evolving one, constantly reshaped from poem to

[18] Fran Brearton, 'In Conversation with Peter McDonald', *PN Review*, 39:4 (2013), pp. 60–63 (p. 61).
[19] Anthony Bradley, 'Changing Places: Locations of Contemporary Irish Poetry', *New Hibernia Review*, 21:4 (2017), pp. 89–105 (p. 89).

poem. O'Donoghue's speakers may continue to reinhabit Cullen, but they also find their poetic identity located somewhere on the continuum of Ireland and Britain. Home in McDonald's poetry does not have fixed significations: its definition shifts and evolves in his poetry. O'Reilly's archipelagic poetry is fluid by definition, and her speakers inhabit the littoral spaces of both Ireland and Britain.

As Ruben Moi has argued, migrant literature often has a 'spatial-temporal' dimension.[20] Self-evidently, the migrant condition involves the relinquishment of one place for another, and we find in O'Donoghue's, McDonald's, and Wheatley's oeuvre poems about a particular time and place. Retrospection can be a way for the migrant to reinhabit the place left behind. But O'Callaghan has a particularly acute sense of chronophobia, and it is the defining characteristic of his migrant poetry. His speakers seek a return to a stable sense of belonging, and have grown tired of the changeability of the migrant condition: 'This goes only one direction / and we are veering years from a return', the speaker laments in 'Emergency'.[21] O'Callaghan's migrant poems can, therefore, reveal a poetic identity that is happily located in many places at once, whilst simultaneously registering a desire to reverse the mutually reinforcing loss of place and time that attends his migrant experience.

There has been no single study of contemporary Irish poets who currently live in Britain. This thesis has gone some way to addressing this particular lacuna. As I suggested in the introduction, there are currently a plethora of contemporary Irish poets in Britain. I therefore had to be selective in my inclusion. Migrancy had to be a significant feature of their poetry, and they had to have produced a large amount of their poetry from Britain. An obvious extension or expansion of this study would be

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[20] Ruben Moi, 'The Importance of Elsewheres and Cities in Paul Muldoon's Poetry', in *The Leaving of Ireland: Migration and Belonging in Irish Literature and Film,* ed. Katherina Doudou and John Lynch (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 241–253 (p. 241).
[21] Conor O'Callaghan, 'Emergency', in *The Sun King* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2013), p. 38.

an exploration of the poetry of Tara Bergin, John Redmond, Matthew Sweeney, Vona Groarke, Ailbhe Darcy, and some of the many more Irish poets who continue to settle and thrive in Britain. All of the above poets have produced poetry from here, and are at different stages of their careers. Sweeney, a long-time resident of London, has passed away, leaving behind a vast oeuvre, where Cardiff-based Darcy and Yorkshire-based Bergin have both had two main collections published so far. They are migrant poets, although, in general terms, migrancy is a less prominent theme in their poetry than it is for the O'Donoghue group. This, in conjunction with the particularly slender oeuvre of Bergin and Darcy, was the reason behind their exclusion from this particular study. But they are, nonetheless, significant contemporary Irish poets who live in Britain.

We could also look to other anglophone countries, such as contemporary Irish poets in America, or Canada, or Australasia. Sara Berkeley is a notable example of a prolific contemporary poet in the US. The North American connection is given slightly more attention in general in studies of migration, but there is certainly room for examining the connections and discontinuities between Irish emigrant writers in North America, and those in Britain. Indeed, the contributions to Wheatley and Justin Quinn's *Metre* from both North America and Britain suggested, paradoxically, that the migrant experience is both highly personal and culturally and historically specific, whilst also involving some shared preoccupations, such as place and identity. There is also the parallel tradition of poets who have made their home in numerous non-English-speaking countries, such as Harry Clifton, who contributed to the special issue of *Metre*, declaring that the resultant '[p]lacelessness' has become his ideal mindset.[22] Sinéad Morrisey has written migrant poems about Japan, most notably in *Between Here and There* (2002).[23] And, perhaps more famously, Quinn himself has lived in Prague for many years. The language barrier necessitates a different kind of readjustment and

[22] Harry Clifton, 'Harry Clifton on Ireland and Travelling', *Metre*, 3 (1997), pp. 11–12 (p. 12).
[23] Sinéad Morrisey, *Between Here and There* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2002).

renegotiation, but Quinn's success in Czechia bears witness to Mary Robinson's argument – from her famous speech on the subject of the Irish diaspora – that migrancy 'is not just a chronicle of sorrow and regret. It is also a powerful story of contribution and adaptation'.[24]

The unifying theme of this thesis was migrancy, and the variegated aesthetic responses of O'Donoghue, McDonald, Wheatley, O'Reilly, and O'Callaghan to this experience in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The sub-themes of this thesis are place and identity – which are also connected to the concept of home – since they remain important concepts in migrant literature in general. I have shown that these five poets all have their own perspective on migrancy: the way that the above themes find expression in their poetry is subtly different, and, ultimately, personal. I have also shown how, within a given poet's work, the attitude to Ireland or Britain or elsewhere, the relationship with place, and the poetic identity that emerges from this interaction, are not static. The speaker of each poem is always slightly modified from the last, the poem representing a given mood, or tone, or idea. Thus, especially for the younger poets in this group, the migrant theme will develop further: it may become more prominent, or recede from view (which is significant in itself), or the formal properties of subsequent migrant poems will be different in character from the earlier ones. This, as I have argued, is already apparent in the poetry of these writers, which bodes well for future critics of these poets' work. Indeed, migrancy is only one major theme in the poetry of the O'Donoghue group. We could consider the influence of medievalism on O'Donoghue's poetry, for example, or the significance of birds in his poetry (he has written many ornithological poems). O'Donoghue is also a fine elegist. McDonald has explored classical influences in his translations of the *Homeric Hymns* (2016). He has written poems on obscure subjects, such as the title poem of *Adam's Dream* (1996), from the perspective of Scottish architect, Robert Adam (1728–1792). Within

[24] Mary Robinson, 'Address by President Mary Robinson on a Matter of Public Importance, 2 February 1995', *President of Ireland* <https://president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/address-by-president-mary-robinson-on-a-matter-of-public-importance-2-febru> [accessed 20th May 2022].

this same collection, there is a long rewriting of 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Victorian fantasies'.[25] McDonald remains committed to the craft of poetry, and he has recently revealed that he is pursuing his Classical influences. Having written *The Homeric Hymns*, he remarks: 'I think having seen that through […] my old daydream of one day having a crack at the *Odyssey* had to be realised, one way or another'.[26] The Classical McDonald is, as yet, an entirely unexplored dimension of his poetry.

Wheatley is relentlessly ambitious, and continues to produce poetry on a huge variety of subjects, also exploring many voices, styles and forms. He is a restless poet, and it is likely that he will continue to chart new territory in his poetry. In particular, the Scottish element of Wheatley's oeuvre merits further discussion. Wheatley has also recently had his first novel published. Titled *Stretto*, it was published in the Summer of 2022. Its blurb suggests that the novel is a further exploration of some of Wheatley's major poetic themes: '*Stretto* is both a story of travel and migration, moving between Ireland, England and Scotland over a twenty-year period, and an exploration of the nature of self and reality'.[27] Wheatley's novel, especially given its migrant themes, is an obvious subject for further discussion. The natural world is a significant source for O'Reilly's poetry. The archipelagic element of her poetry falls within this broader preoccupation. Elsewhere, her poems also examine subjectivity itself ('Lag' and 'Persona' from *The Sea Cabinet* are excellent examples of this aspect of her poetry).[28] O'Reilly is not a prolific poet, but is still producing poetry. She had three beautiful poems published in *Agenda* recently, on natural themes. 'Fireweed and Mullein' opens with: 'A thousand flowers on a screed of ground / described in silk and wool;

[25] Peter McDonald, *Adam's Dream* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1996). From the blurb.
[26] 'Matthew Campbell Interviews Peter McDonald', *Agenda*, 54:3–4 (2021), pp. 94–110 (p. 98).
[27] David Wheatley, *Stretto* (London: CB Editions, 2022).
[28] Eric Falci has discussed this aspect of O'Reilly's poetry, in his contribution to *Post-Ireland? Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Jefferson Holdridge and Brian Ó Conchubhair (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2017).

botanically exact / as in herbaria or *hortus siccus*'.[29] O'Reilly is a very gifted poet, and these three poems offer a glimpse of a further refinement of her precise and rich style.

For O'Callaghan, memory is a particularly strong theme in his debut collection *The History of Rain* (1993), where later collections comprise poems about the internet and digital identities (most notably in *The Sun King* [2013]). *Fiction* (2005) explores the artifice of the creative act. O'Callaghan has also published a novella about a wrongly accused priest (among other things), called *Nothing on Earth* (2016). Its narrative seems designed, like John McDonagh's film *Calvary* (2014), to push back against the wave of anti-clerical feeling in Ireland.[30] O'Callaghan seems to have moved away from poetry for good and has committed to the parallel profession of 'novelist' (alongside his academic work). His second novel titled *We Are Not in The World* was published in 2021. It's a road-trip novel, involving a father and daughter who *find themselves* on the journey. One English reviewer glibly summarised its plot: 'On this literal and metaphorical journey poor old Paddy is "forced incrementally to the core of this nothing that I increasingly feel". It's Beckett, on wheels'.[31] The same reviewer makes an observation that has some connection to O'Callaghan's migrant poetry: 'He is both running away and in the process of returning: to his country, to his family, and indeed to his sanity'.[32] O'Callaghan is versatile, finding arguably greater success as a novelist than as a poet. His novels are an avenue for further critical exploration.

[29] O'Reilly, 'Fireweed and Mullein', *Agenda*, p. 60.
[30] We could contrast this attitude with the brilliant lines voiced by Frances McDormand in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing*, *Missouri* (2017). This was directed by the more successful McDonagh brother. Her character calls out the moral hypocrisy and bankruptcy of the Catholic clergy. She says, on encountering a self-righteous priest in her house: 'I don't care if you never did shit, and you never saw shit, and you never heard shit. You joined the gang, you're culpable'.
[31] Ian Sansom, 'We Are Not in the World by Conor O'Callaghan review – Beckett on wheels', *The Guardian*, 18 Feb 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/18/we-are-not-in-the-world-by-conor-ocallaghan-review-beckett-on-wheels> [accessed June 17 2022].
[32] Ibid.

One of the most important contexts for this thesis was the concept of postnationalism, or 'Post-Ireland', as it is sometimes called. The editors of *Post-Ireland? Essays in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (2017) deliberately added a question mark to the term. This signifies the live nature of the question: the island of Ireland, and what constitutes Irish identity in the twenty-first century – both at home and abroad – is in flux. The notion of change and transition is accepted by both celebrants and denouncers of the phenomenon. As Omar Hena argues: 'In my eyes, "Post-Ireland" functions less as a descriptive reality […] than as an open-ended question, a horizon of possibility, even an ongoing problem for mediating difference and alterity'.[33] Hena's final clause here makes reference to Ireland's changing demographics, as it has welcomed many immigrants in recent years. But this is also relevant to the longer history of Irish emigration. Hena suggests that the negotiation with 'difference and alterity' – which is really two sides of the emigrant/immigrant coin – is constitutive of an Irish literature that is increasingly 'criss-crossed through other times, other places, other influences and confluences'.[34] He concludes on a hopeful note:

> Given Ireland's increasingly cross-cultural constitution in the present century, I delight to imagine how future Irish poetry will become transformed yet again to take on new voices, new idioms, and new ways of writing the complexities of being in the world.[35]

Migrancy can be an enriching and enabling experience. It may represent – whatever the circumstances of one's migration – a 'horizon of possibility'. In this view, contemporary Ireland and

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[33] Omar Hena, 'Ireland's Afterlives in Global Anglophone Poetry', in *Post-Ireland? Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Jefferson Holdridge and Brian Ó Conchubhair (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2017), pp. 339–369 (p. 362).
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid, p. 364.

its cultural production are ultimately enriched by migration – both inward and outward bound – and the O'Donoghue group's poetry bears witness to this fact.

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