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ONCE ALIEN HERE: THE POETRY OF JOHN HEWITT

John Hewitt, who died in 1987 at the age of 80 years, has been described as the "elder statesman" of Ulster poetry. He began writing poetry in the 1920s but did not appear in book form until 1948; his final collection appearing in 1986. However, as Frank Ormsby points out in the 1991 edition of *Poets From The North of Ireland*, recognition for Hewitt came late in life and he enjoyed more homage and attention in his final years than for most of his creative life. In that respect he is not unlike Poland's latest Nobel Prize winner in literature. His status was further recognized by the founding of the John Hewitt International Summer School in 1988.

It is somewhat strange that such a prominent and central figure in Northern Irish poetry should at the same time be characterised in his verse as a resident alien, isolated and marginalised by the very society he sought to encapsulate and represent in verse. But then Northern Ireland/Ulster is and was a strange place for a poet to flourish within. In relation to the rest of the United Kingdom it was always something of a fossilised region which had more than its share of outdated thought patterns, language, social and political behaviour. Though ostensibly a parliamentary democracy it was a de-facto, one-party, statelet with its own semi-colonial institutions; every member of the executive of the ruling Unionist government was a member of a semi-secret masonic movement (The Orange Order) and amongst those most strongly opposed to the state there was a similar network of semi-secret societies (from the I.R.A. to the Hibernian society and Knights of Columbanus). This is not a criticism, merely an observation of facts. Until the late 1960s there were many people in the UK who simply did not know where "Ulster" was. Of course this changed when

international media attention was focused on the Province in 1969 when civil violence exploded.

The social atmosphere of this earlier period was not conducive to openness, free discussion or discourse (and of course there are some similarities to Eastern Europe in all of this). A line from a Seamus Heaney poem epitomises the situation, it is a quip which expresses the mind-set of Northern Catholics, "whatever you say – say nothing." A poet from an earlier generation, Louis MacNeice described Ulster as a place where "free speech" was "nipped in the bud."

John Hewitt was a self-styled "freethinker" who saw himself as a radical, a democratic socialist, a man of the Left, and this, inevitably, estranged him from the dominant Conservative and Unionist Party establishment of his day – and from many elements within his own community. As a social and religious agnostic from a Scots Protestant Planter background who was also an Irish nationalist (in the sense of being anti-partitionist) he was never really embraced by either community within Ulster.

In 1978, some years before his death, the Arts Council in Northern Ireland made a documentary film about Hewitt which was entitled *I Found Myself Alone* and the title, taken from one of his own poems was, I think, very appropriate. Hewitt had been Deputy Director of the Ulster Museum and Art Gallery in Belfast but was bypassed for promotion on purely political grounds and so he went into what was a form of exile when he became Director of the Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry. The enforced departure of Michael and Edna Longley from the ruling bodies of the Arts Council and the John Hewitt Summer School itself indicate that Hewitt was not the first or last Ulster writer to be "sent to Coventry" in one way or another.

In his emotive, bitter-sweet poem, "An Irishman in Coventry", he recounts how, by chance, he is concerted "in enclave" (a suitably papal expression) of his "nation" and of how this kaleidoscopic encounter, with its "jigging dances and lilting fiddle" with its "whiskey-tinctured breadth and pious buttons" is deeply evocative of a "rage and pity" within him, a stirring of the blood and the awakening of a "maladie du pays," an unexpected nostalgia for his homeland. This is Goldsmith's "geography of the heart" that we glimpse in *The Deserted Village* a re-imagination of one's place of origin. Hewitt has a longing, like the mythical children of Lir, to return home. Landward bells call them back. This after many years, is what Hewitt decided to do. He returns to his natal city.

The Return, the homecoming, is, of course, one of the oldest themes in European literature, but in the Irish configuration of this experience we usually find a strange admixture of joy, fascination and incredulity mixed with misgiving, reluctance and regret. The element of rediscovery is great.

In his poem "The Return" the Derry writer, critic and poet, Seamus Deane describes his own journey back to his native city of Derry:

In this Irish past I dwell
Like sound implicit in a bell.
... Two hours from Belfast
I am snared in my past.
Amazing! I am in Derry once again
Once more I turn to greet
ground that flees from my feet.

In like manner, Hewitt takes a somewhat fatalistic view of the emotive, resonant energies that persuade or drag him back to his native land and city. From the same poem:

This is our fate: eight hundred years disaster,
Crazily tangled as the Book of Kells;
The dream's distortion and the land's division,
The midnight raiders and the prison cells.
Yet like Lir's children banished to the waters,
Our Hearts still listen for the landward bells.

The tone of each poem and its essential symbolism is similar; the chimes of exile and isolation are rung in Hewitt's verse as they are in Deane's but there is an added poignancy in Hewitt's poem for though he is in an "enclave" of his nation, a Catholic one, Hewitt is significantly apart, a minority of one within a minority (the comparisons with Edward Said, another Protestant, albeit a Palestinian one are inviting).

The Ulster Protestant community from which Hewitt sprang was not one that easily warmed to poetry or enthusiastically embraced the poet – though from the time of Bishop Percy of Dromore in the late eighteenth century there had been a significant number of accomplished Northern Protestant poets. After Hewitt's death a memorial service was held in the Lyric Theatre, Belfast of which he had been a director. People from every walk of life paid tribute to the deceased writer for his contribution to the life of his province as a poet, art historian, educationalist and activist for the Labour Party. The SDLP politician Paddy Devlin told of the subterfuge he was forced to employ in order to obtain the civic honour of Freeman of the city for the Belfast poet. Many of the Unionist councillors present didn't know who Hewitt was for the simple reason that they didn't read poetry. They were furious when they subsequently discovered that they had bestowed this honour upon a radical and anti-partitionist writer. In a way this incident was indicative of the rather quiet, understated and cautious tone of Hewitt's verse and his approach to politics generally and significantly he was first president of the Northern Ireland Fabian Society. In his poem

I Write For he tells us that he writes for his own selective audience, a discriminating lot, a modern clerisy drawn from all classes; an informed readership with a particular sensibility:

I write for my own kind,
 I do not pitch my voice
 that every phrase be heard
 by those who have no choice:
 their quality of mind
 must be withdrawn and still,
 as moth that answers moth
 across a roaring hill.

In conversation with the present writer the poet Craig Raine has queried that last line – how can a hill “roar”. I think Hewitt had a particular local context in mind – the small hillocks or “drumlins” of County Down on which Lambeg Drums have been heard to “roar” during the Orange marching season. The last line is a hint that there is no shortage of rumbustuous rhetoric or loud voice proclaiming staunchly held beliefs coming from Calvinist Ulster. One famous or infamous such preacher was known as “Roaring Hanna.” But Hewitt’s is a quieter, more gentlemanly voice. Some critics may feel that Hewitt lacks the demotic touch but there is a quiet integrity about his verse that suggests that there is much more individuality and creativity within the Ulster Protestant community than is often recognised. That community is one that is in transition and is struggling to redefine and to rediscover itself at every level-politically, socially and culturally. John Hewitt was a pioneer of this process.

In *Station Island* the pilgrim poet Seamus Heaney prays, “Forgive my circumspect involvement, forgive the way I have lived indifferently.” He is absolved from this moral neurosis by the sudden, ghostly, appearance of the assassination victim he mourns; Hewitt suffered from similar regrets but typically, as a “protestant”, albeit an agnostic one, he comes to a reluctant form of self absolution. In “A Local Poet” he attempts to look at himself objectively, “while he mourns for his mannerly verses/ that had left so much unsaid.”

Ironically it is his opposite number, the darkly pessimistic and subversive “Catholic” poet Padraic Fiacca (whose poetry is subversive of both Catholicism and poetry) who **does** speak out, with savage indignation, who is castigated by the literary and cultural establishment. However, all of these poets find their place in “the Republic of Conscience,” if we can borrow a Heaneyism, because each is true to their own vision of life.

Poet and critic Frank Ormsby has pointed out the inevitable tensions that must have arisen in Hewitt’s verse as he contemplated his relationship

to a Province colonised by his lowland Scots ancestors and of his "restless contemplative quest for self definition." In this quest for identity Hewitt examined his relationship to Europe, to mainland Britain, to Ireland, to Ulster and its various communities and finally to the land itself.

At the memorial service for Hewitt Jack McGowran of the Glens of Antrim Historical Society announced that an International Summer School would be set up to honour Hewitt's work and ideals. This Summer School would be held annually at Saint MacNissa's College near Cushendall on the Antrim coast. Hewitt was a life-long Internationalist (he visited Poland in 1972 for National Museum celebrations) and travelled widely but he always had a deep affection for the Glens of Antrim where he spent many summers near the fishing village of Cushendall. The Glens are a beautiful and self-contained region on the North East coast of Ireland and feature prominently in Hewitt's work. Yet the poems which he wrote about that region are fraught with minor frustrations and tensions which testify to the gulf which existed between himself, a city dweller, and the rural Catholic nationalist people of the Glens. Hewitt's longing is for an affectionate familiarity with and acceptance by the people of the hill farms and fishing villages of this area yet it is clear in poems such as *O Country People* that he and they inhabit different mental worlds:

O country people, you of the hill farms,
 huddled so in darkness I cannot tell
 whether the light across the glen is a star
 or the bright lamp spilling over the sill,
 I would be neighbourly, would come to terms
 with your existence, but you are so far;
 there is a wide bog between us, a high wall,
 I've tried to learn the smaller parts of speech
 in your slow language, but my thoughts need more
 flexible shapes to move in, if I am to reach
 into the hearth's red heart across the half door.

With his double-vision Hewitt cannot read this landscape properly – the inner social pieties of the other tribe escape him.

As Tom Paulin has pointed out in *Ireland And The English Crisis* the language of separation characterises some Northern Irish Protestant thought and refers to physical, social, cultural and metaphysical estrangement. Despite Hewitt's intended political ecumenism and reconciliatory gestures there are some negative presumptions (that he alone is possessed of flexibility of thought) and some intrinsic reticences in his patterns of thought that work against any sense of true communion. Inflexibility can take many forms.

John Hewitt uses the symbolism of bogland and of walls (and walls are important in Ulster Protestant folklore) to illustrate this gulf. In ancient Ireland there were secret roads by which one could traverse otherwise impenetrable bogland. Hewitt's verse seems to be a search for this secret artery that would give him access to the heart of the other community; but there are times when he appears to be hesitant about travelling this road.

Subliminal borders that separate individual from individual and community are significant throughout the whole range of Hewitt's verse. Hewitt's co-existent familiarity and estrangement from his own Protestant community is explored in his 1980 collection *Kites In Spring*, a nostalgic evocation of his Edwardian childhood. In an earlier collection *Time Enough* (1976) Hewitt takes a sensitive and sympathetic look at the Belfast Jewish community who were prominent in the North Belfast area of his childhood. Again there is that peculiar sense of the familiar, combined with the exotic and unfamiliar. In these poems doorways and portals are symbolic of an invitation into another world but the author of the poems never seems to take up that invitation or to cross those thresholds. In an Irish context, and indeed in a wider human context, borders are places of danger – but also of opportunity; ones of attraction and repulsion in which the self may be redefined.

In the poem "Strangers and Neighbours," Hewitt records some of the impressions which the Jews of his childhood district had left upon his developing mind and emotions:

The Jews of my childhood were
resident strangers and neighbours;
not like the flash gypsies
once a year with clothes pegs, lace and luck.

... you recognised their features as foreign
and exaggerated their accent,
holding your nose with thumb and forefinger,
knew their names, Weiner, Eban, Lantin,
surprised at some with some off-key names
like Gordon or Ross.

Though you played readily enough
with their youngsters after school,
you did not, as with your best friends,
run in and out of their houses,
which, anyway, smelt of hot olive oil.

The poem is emotionally honest as a retrospective attempt to recapture the immature and instinctual reaction of a child to something out of the ordinary (the olfactory element, the smell of hot olive oil and prejudice is particularly effective). The mature Hewitt paints a portrait (he is always a very visual poet)

of a community in transition. The names evoked, Weiner and Gordon, are a mixture of the alien and indigenous; images of an older world are evoked; the bearded Rabbi, the coffins of the poor made of paper and cardboard and "the dark florid wives of the more prosperous ... demanding and loud in shops." Part of the appeal of this poem is Hewitt's testimony to his own failure of imagination (not an easy thing for a poet to admit): "I could not imagine what a nation of these would be like."

It is interesting that Hewitt's mature understanding and re-evaluation of these people and their religious and cultural tradition comes late in life and outside Ireland; in Auschwitz, in Kafka's Prague and in a Portugese synagogue in Amsterdam. It is also in exile that his emotional connections with the Catholic Irish are stirred, although in his poem "The Irish Dimension" he describes the easy accomodation and life long friendship he came to with Willy Morrissey, the child of Catholic neighbours.

Hewitt's home district was quite a cosmopolitan one during that period and it contained an easy mix of Protestants, Catholics and Jews. Hewitt himself was a self-consciously regional writer but one with broad international sympathies. However one can always discern some form of congenital reticence and a degree of emotional paralysis in some of the painfully restrained poems which explore personal and family relationships. It is possible that Hewitt transferred this personal incapacity to relate into his vision of the "alien" communities which he encountered in his journey through life. In "A Father's Death," he matter of factly records the intensely private, partitioned and solipsistic nature of his father's death. There is nothing here of the passion and rage in the face of death to be found in poems such as Dylan Thomas's confrontation with his own father's death. "O Do Not Go Gentle into the Night." In the final stanza the Ulster poet simply intones, with quiet acquiescence, the salutary facts of this silent and withdrawn death:

It was no vast dynamic death
No nation silent round that throne,
When, letting go his final breath,
A lonely man went out alone.

He admits to a similar failure in his marriage relationship in his "Sonnets for Roberta" (1954) where he confesses "I have let you waste the substance of your summer on my mood; the image of the woman is defaced ... and yet, for all my treason you were true to me, as I to something less than you." It is, perhaps, this authentic self-styled moral probity that has led to Hewitt being called "the last uncompromisingly Protestant poet" in the North of Ireland.

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Hewitt's verse spans a period of over 60 years and presents a view of life in Ulster that is not circumscribed by the immediate experience of Irish history. He lived in Ireland before partition and his verse has evolved, organically from within the life of his own community rather than as an external reaction to it. But Hewitt is also simultaneously, a bemused observer, standing apart, watching the follies of his "fool driven land" and accepting this almost as condition of life. His poem "Conversations in Hungary" (1969) written in the *Annus Horribilis* of 1969 and the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland is one that like Yeats's "Easter 1916" is written in exile and in both situations the poet is taken by surprise by events.

Hewitt is the bewildered apologist for the apparently irrational behaviour of his own compatriots. In a "back garden at Lake Balaton," the poet and his wife spend the evening with their host, "Miklos, a friendly writer" and all watch the "full moon" rise. The connotations of insanity at hand are unmistakable. Their host's "ready English" makes them feel at home, yet the "fresh plucked peaches" and "jar of Cuban Rum" confirms the "alien nature" of the scene. Once more the motif of the familiar and alien is intertwined. The subject of Ulster intrudes violently into the easy conversation:

You heard the bulletin?
And added with no pause for our reply:
Riots in Northern Ireland yesterday;
and they have sent the British Army in.

Here, an indisputable statement; a question containing its own answer and exuding a strong sense of tragic inevitability. The civilized objections of the Hungarians as to why "divergent sects" should put "claim and counterclaim to arbitration of the torch and sword" seem somewhat naive in retrospect given the experience of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere. But we share in the embarrassed rationalisations of the Hewitts.

It is true that Hewitt's verse leaves "much unsaid" but there is a close connection between style and content. The lean armature of his verse is naturally related to his home grown protestant aesthetic tendencies. But this is not minimalism of Beckett. Hewitt seeks to distill the cultural and social essence of his region by a definite selectivity of diction which is intrinsically associated with his "Planter's patois" as he was to call it. The steady measured pace of his verse, very much a "walking" measure is related to his conscious adoption of a peripatetic Wordsworthian style, the incorporation of folk rhymes and the rhythm of ordinary speech. There is

also a natural tendency in his speech towards a narrative verse that has a distinctively conversational approach.

In his poem "Traditions," Seamus Heaney writes of "the furred consonants of lowlanders, shuttling obstinately between bawn and mossland" with reference to the speech of rural Ulster-Scots Protestants. The shuttling rhythm of this form of speech with its expansion and contraction of the line was incorporated into his own verse by Hewitt.

The Belfast poet made a special study of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Scots-Irish weaver poets of Antrim for his MA dissertation at Queen's University, Belfast. His book on these poets was published by Blackstaff Press in 1974.

In poems such as "The Glens," Hewitt can be seen working as an active traditionalist who worked at a renewal of the past – in terms of his poetic method. Sometimes he wrote in the accentual syllabic metrics of Tennyson or used the traditional Scots "Habbe" stanza (a very tight enclosed form) used by Robert Burns, William Orr and other Scots-Irish poets. He showed that new perspectives could be conveyed even when using traditional measures. There is a vigorous sense of flinty individuality and discipline in his carefully crafted poetry yet he also managed to express a social vision within the compact forms in which he worked. In a sense his collections of verse are like the neat patchwork mosaic of well cultivated, clearly defined fields which are so characteristic of parts of his native Province.

Hewitt's verse was intimately involved with the everyday social, cultural, agricultural and to a lesser extent the industrial life of his region but his later political verse seems to have been a compulsory gesture drawn from him against his instincts. "To the Memory of James Connolly," an uncollected poem compares the Irish Revolutionary martyr to Jesus Christ but in the retrospective poem "Nineteen Sixteen," the Republican insurrection in Dublin becomes a "remote ambiguous defeat" and a "rash affair" (but Connolly like Hewitt was a Socialist and a martyr for that cause rather than for Republicanism).

What is even more interesting is that Hewitt contemplated the "Two Nations Theory," promulgated by a tiny, obscure Marxist group the BICO in the early 1970s, in his collection entitled "Out of My Time" (1974). This theory, later adopted by some Unionist intellectuals, took the view that a distinctive Ulster Protestant Nation had arisen in the course of 300 years of colonization and must be recognized as such. It is central to my thesis that Hewitt was subconsciously adopting this viewpoint but his poem "On the Grand Dublin Canal: Musing on the Two Nations Theory" is enigmatic and offers little in the way of clues to his thinking on this subject. At this time Hewitt was anti-partitionist. It is at the sub-conscious

level that this view emerges in his late poem "Jacob and the Angel." His approach to the national question displays a characteristically simple and undemonstrative patriotism which entertains a vague notion of "Ireland" but it is a sane and corrective view which we find in such poems as "Neither an Elegy nor a Manifesto":

Patriotism has to do with keeping
the country in good heart, the community
ordered with justice and mercy;
these will enlist loyalty and courage often.

Hewitt was ahead of his time in acknowledging the different varieties of "Irishness" and the conflicting versions and visions of history to be found on the island. He links his own personal vision to significant events in the past and he does something unusual in Irish poetry – he imagines the future and he imagines peace; this nexus, this connection is instructive. In his poetry Hewitt consistently demonstrated a reluctance to acquiesce in the sort of conditioning by the past that is endemic in Ulster but at the same time he was always ready to admit the reality and the emotive power of myth and legend.

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A major factor in this poetic quest for identity is an engagement with the environment. In the later stages of his career Hewitt wrote that he had turned to the land because people had been a source of disappointment to him. However, In Ireland, the land itself is resonant with tribal and ancestral energies. In the foreword to his study of poets from Ulster, Terence Brown has suggested that a sympathetic reading of their work should illuminate "a central truth about Ireland's northern province – its cultural, social and emotional complexity."

By contrast, a local historian, A. T. Q. Stewart, believes that poets in general simplify the historical realities by using indiscriminate terms to indicate separate cultural traditions. For example, the use of the terms Planter and Gael (the name of a collection to which Hewitt contributed verse). Some "Planters" were in fact of impeccably Gaelic background while some of the "native Irish" were not. Stewart has also emphasised the fact that a major characteristic of the conflict in the North is the nature of the "narrow ground" on which the conflict takes place (this in fact is the name of an historical study of the problem which Stewart has published) and which gives it an almost incestuous character. All of these truisms are, I believe, illustrated by Hewitt's verse. His philosophical strategy was one in which he accepted the contemporary reality of his

society, but at the same time made gestures of independence in response to an imposed identity. The reality which Hewitt willingly embraced was the land itself.

LAND AND PEOPLE; THE GREENSHOOT AND THE WHIN

One approach to the land in Irish literature is to see it as an element of stability and continuity rather than as a source of conflict. Hewitt makes a characteristically "Protestant" response to the land insofar as he treats it as something objective and external to himself (*Natura Naturans*) and eschews the Romantic approach to landscape (*Natura Naturalis*). Nevertheless, while demythologising the landscape he still looks to it as a source of literary inspiration. Like William Allingham, the Victorian poet and water-colour painter from Donegal that Hewitt so admired, he sought an affirmation of his identity, his "Irishness" through an objective link with the countryside.

"I live my best in the landscape, being at ease there" he writes in "The Rams Horn." The word "landscape" is significant because Hewitt was a poet and art historian from the city, not a peasant working the land like Patrick Kavanagh. The latter would never have used a term like "landscape". In the same poem he displays his appreciation of the multivarious levels at which the land might be understood:

For a countryman the living landscape is
 a map of kinship at one level,
 at another, just below this, a chart of use,
 never at any level a fine view:
 ... landscape is families and a lone man boiling a small pot
 ... and life is man and place and these have names.

This is a typical attempt at a refutation of the picturesque approach to the land which evokes the social geography of Estyn Evans rather than the symbolic landscapes of Yeats. To the literal and archetypal boglands of Seamus Heaney, the unyielding clay of Kavanagh and the human Dolmens of Montague, Hewitt tenuously adds the "small hearth stones" of his Planter heritage.

One of the keys to the conflict in Ulster is topography. Those who live there know the exact details of sectarian location and origin to the square inch. In fact, the loyalist political slogan. "Not An Inch" may be found in the fifth century bronze age epic, "Tain Bo Cualigne," where the warrior god Chuchulainn vows that "not an inch" of Ulster will be surrendered to the advancing forces of Queen Maeve of Connacht and her army.

Hewitt catches this notion and traps it in his solidly constructed but wry commentary on ethnic and sectarian prejudice, "For Any Irishman":

Your face, voice, name will tell
 those master of such scholarship,
 as the veins of a pebble
 readily encapsulate
 an exact geology,
 the lava flows, the faults,
 the glacial periods,
 the sediments which formed
 and grip us locked and rocked
 in the cold tides that beat
 on these disastrous shores.

This poem has a compressed, precise, inevitable and tightly locked form. The tone is grim and the imagery is highly suggestive of many of the qualities which one associates with Ulster; the primal precision of the Giant's Causeway, the weight and solidity of Mourne granite, the heavy monolithic inheritance of the past and in that last line with its notion of "cold tides that beat" on the "disastrous shores" of Ireland there is an echo of Yeats. The Ulster poet shows his own skill in the technical construction of poetry here. The word "beat" is suggestive of the crafting of decorative metalwork in Bronze Age Ireland and is preceded by verbs suggesting the vice and other tools of the lock-smith and metal worker.

The "cold tides" are given a solid feel through the combination of metallic and geological imagery which builds up by cumulative power and that final adjective "disastrous" before shores, with its astral connotations conveys a strong sense of fate or pre-destination.

One of the most formidable factors which pervades the context of writing about Ulster is the Plantation of the Province in the seventeenth century. The concept of the "protestantisation" of the land is found in prose fiction, drama and verse. In Protestant eyes it was seen as a process of subduing and civilizing the wilderness: the reclamation and reconstruction of a promised land. Poets such as Hewitt have sought confirmation of their identity through the Biblical notion of the transformation of the land under the hands of their ancestors. Some Ulster protestants, like their Hugenot/Afrikaaner cousins talk in terms of a "beloved country" bequeathed to them by Providence. Country Armagh becomes "Beulah Land" in this scenario.

In the vision of Irish Catholic writers such as John Montague and Michael McLaverty this whole process is seen as one of dispossession and rape given the intimate relationship to the land, always perceived as female, which existed in Gaelic culture. In McLaverty's prose, the plantation and

the growth of urbanisation becomes a form of blight. The expansion of the city of Belfast in the novel *Call My Brother Back* becomes a disease encroaching everywhere. The Calvinists imprint their Puritan culture on the landscape itself. In McLaverty's words, the colonists were responsible for "awful reticences implanted deep as their creed itself."

John Hewitt translates this implantation in a somewhat more positive sense, into verse in his poem "Orchard Country." Armagh is the apple growing region of Ulster where some of his ancestors had settled. In this poem he recognises the changes wrought upon the land and sees them as a source of legitimization. There is a multiplicity of meaning buried under a phrase such as "grave believers" where Hewitt is describing both a literal grave and the sobriety and seriousness of his Puritan Scottish ancestors. Hewitt becomes ware of his family history through his grandfather who opens a door on the family past:

That Armagh orchard country. Yea and Nay
of grave believers. How in those Planter lands
our name is hearth-rolled. Generation, place
he gave you foothold in the human race.

In other words, a local habitation and a name. This is a typical Hewitt miniature, a small field, a little domestic cameo, opening up to wider human perspectives yet full of the gentle ironies that characterise his verse. The "yea and nay" of the first line quoted refers to the Biblical injunction by Jesus – let your yea be yea and your nay be nay, for anything more than this leads to evil.

Finding his roots in that Orchard Country Hewitt is aware of the irony that, like his compatriot Seamus Heaney in South Derry, he is descended from a people known for their hard work, solipsism, silence and linguistic inhabitions. It is typical of Hewitt's response to his inherited tradition that he seeks to express himself within the range of tonal sobrieties and chaste diction of his ancestors. As the example of Heaney's antecedents makes clear, in Scotland and Northern Ireland, even the Catholics are "Calvinist" to some degree, to the extent that they have absorbed this particular ethos.

But even within this paradigm there are a variety of responses. The somewhat eccentric Presbyterian cleric and poet W. R. Rogers reacted against the autistic nature of his own culture by indulging in flamboyant word-play and verbal pyrotechnics. The truth is that Northern Irish Protestantism is a much more varied and variegated phenomenon than it is generally perceived to be and that Hewitt was but one bright and distinctive stone in this cultural mosaic.

The subconscious doubt and mental reservations which Hewitt held concerning Protestant colonization may be glimpsed in those poems where

he vacillates in his attitudes concerning the process by which the Protestants appropriated the land. These poems are in contrast to his poems of colonial justification. In his poem "The Colony" (which was criticised by Thomas Kinsella) the Ulster poet expresses some misconceived notions about the Plantation and attempts some sort of historical rationalisation about the whole process:

We took the kindlier soils. It had been theirs,
We laboured hard and stubborn, draining, planting,
till half the country took its shape from us.

Hewitt is aware of the "ancient rights" of what he calls the "native" Irish, yet he also asserts:

We have rights drawn from the soil and sky;
the use, the pace, the patient years of labour,
the rain against the lips, the changing light,
the heavy-clay-sucked stride, have altered us;
we would be strangers in the Capitol;
this is our country also, no-where else;
and we shall not be outcast on the world.

There is some slight of hand and pen here. The poem is a strange blend of honest confrontation and evasion. In some ways it is a declaration of collective independence. Tom Paine is only one of many radical influences upon the poetic thought of Hewitt.

The poem provides a good description of the hibernicisation of a people by their absorption of the qualities of the land but it includes historical inaccuracies and simplifications (no mention is made of the savage Penal Laws which discriminated against Catholics, of the Ulster Tenant Right which granted economic advantages to the Protestant settlers or that much of the hard physical labour which transformed the landscape was supplied by mercenary and conscript Irish Catholic labour). The rather ambivalent approach of Hewitt to the question of national identity is apparent from a scan of the verse he produced over the years in his *Collected Poems* (1932-1967) anthology.

The confident assertion of the opening poem, "Ireland" is not maintained throughout the collection:

We Irish pride ourselves as patriots
and tell the beadroll of the valient ones
since Clontarf's sunset saw the Norsemen broken.

Although he uses a term associated with the Anglican Bishop Berkeley ("we Irish think otherwise") the Catholic-Nationalist imagery of the poem

is obvious, the telling of the rosary, the invocation of the dead generations and all that that implies. Later Hewitt transfers his Ulster Protestant insecurities (which belie these early, confident assertions of ethnic identity) to the whole of the island in a sort of Pan-Celtic gesture of despair:

We are not native here or anywhere
We were the Keltic wave that broke over Europe,
and ran up this bleak among those stones.

In "Once Alien Here," his perspective changes yet again, as he writes of "the sullen Irish limping to the hills" in the tidal wave of colonisation. Yet here Hewitt proclaims himself "as native in my thought as any here, who now would seek a native mode to tell our stubborn wisdom individual." Hewitt is forging, in the smithy of his soul, not the uncreated conscience of his race as Joyce proclaimed, but his own conscience (in a way this was also true of Joyce).

In this particular poem there is a discernable conflict in the poet's mind as he seeks a new individual native mode which is a synthesis of the two inherited literary traditions which flank him:

The grave English, lyric Irish tongue,
Must let this rich earth so enhance the blood
With steady pulse where is no plunging mood
till thought and image may, identified,
find easy voice to utter each aright.

In terms of his literary style Hewitt seeks a mood of sober joy, a lyrical gravity that evokes the poetry of Samuel Ferguson and the prose of Walter Scott, albeit at a more demotic level. There is the same sense of the restraint of Celtic exuberance and imagination within a British constitutional framework or cultural pattern.

One of the physical representations of this condition of being is the Whin bush which in Hewitt's verse has a symbolic association with his native province. The word itself is Norse in origin but it has become localised through use and now refers to the bright orange-yellow (saffron) gorse bush which grows and proliferates on hillsides throughout the north of Ireland. The word for the bush embodies a linguistic and cultural fusion as is made clear in a poem entitled "Gloss" (translation) wherein Hewitt comments upon a ninth century Irish handbook on metrics which contains "the first written reference" to his "native place." Within the poem he suggests his own strategy for translation:

To begin with, I should
have to substitute
golden for yellow

and gorse for whin
 this last word we use
 on both sides of Belfast loch.

Thus the word "whin" has become a Northern Irish vernacular word by adoption and adaption and these whin bushes seem to spring up everywhere in Hewitt's poetic landscape and the reasons for this may be thematic. There is a notable tension in Hewitt's verse between his creative impulses and the somewhat Puritan constraint of his nominally Methodist upbringing.

At one stage of his career John Hewitt felt obliged to write an apology for the practice of his craft in the poem entitled "Apologia Ars Poetica." The image of the bright fluorescent whin bush springing from the hardier soils of Ulster is surely expressive of this dilemma. This much is evident in the poem "Lyric":

Let but a thrush begin
 or colour catch my eye
 maybe a spring-woke whin
 under a reeling sky,

and all at once I lose
 mortality's despair
 having so much to choose
 out of the teeming air.

The language here almost threatens to break into a dance, a reel, under the open sky; but what is remarkable about it is the sense of balance between form and content; restraint and exuberance (until recently before the onset of the "Riverdance" phenomenon this was also true of Irish traditional dancing) and similar notes of exuberance and touches of colour can be found scattered throughout the rather spare and autumnal nature poetry of Hewitt.

The choice for the Irish writer is not necessarily between Yeats and Joyce as Thomas Kinsella has suggested. Other paths of artistic development are possible including the middle way of John Hewitt. His moderately "sceptic heart" is different to the passionate, "fanatic heart" which was covered by Yeats; his gravity is in marked contrast to Joyce's comic genius. Hewitt's approach is set forth in his poem "Conacre":

Yet this way madness or a cynic mind
 that in Yeats' ditch hears blindman thumping blind
 and laughs because the splashing slime is cool
 on the hot brow.

But neither saint nor fool,
 Rather a happy man ...

I drive sufficient joy from being here alive
 In this mad island crammed with bloody ghosts.

This is my home and country
 Later on perhaps I'll find this nation is my own;
 but here and now it is enough to love
 this faulted ledge, this map of cloud above,
 and the great sea that beats against the west
 to swamp the sun.

Much of Hewitt's philosophy of life is set out here, infused with home grown natural images. His acceptance of "sufficient joy" and his contingent sense of identity which is gained through an acceptance of the "faulted ledge" and an occasional glimpse of the sun is characteristic. But Hewitt was well aware of the dark side of the land and people in the "mad island crammed with bloody ghosts" to which he gave such provisional acceptance. He can also absorb the isolation and sombre mood exuded by "the raw bleak earth beneath cloud-narrowed skies" of Ulster – an observation he makes in the poem "Frost."

The spacial and psychological limitations which are conscribed by the narrow ground of Ulster are suggested by such intricately crafted poems as "The Little Lough" where a personal memory is associated with an insight provided by a vision of a small lake, a symbol of a life-giving source enclosed by a crowded and infertile landscape. Hewitt achieves his effect with careful and economical word choice and the employment of internal rhyme and closely packed alienation:

There in a bare place, in among the rocks
 grey rounded boulders shouldered from the ground,
 where no field's big enough to yield three stacks,
 and corn grows on a fistful of black land,
 is a small narrow lake, narrow and brown,
 with whistling rushes elbowed here and there
 and in the middle is a grassy stone,
 that heron or some other wanderer
 will rest on darkly.

In a strange way this poem is reminiscent of the poem "An Buinn Bui" (The Yellow Bittern) by the eighteenth century Gaelic poet, Cathal Bui MacGiolla where the poet identifies himself with the lone bird by the lakeside. In the small world, the microcosmic organisation of this poem, the "grassy stone" is also suggestive of certain enduring and innate qualities within Hewitt and his native province. Like the Heron resting darkly in this parochial oasis, Hewitt is also something of a lone bird, a wanderer with wider horizons, a concern, as he puts it in "Conacre" with "the great tidal movements round the earth." Here too is a man attaining peace "with outworn themes and rustic images" although "town-bred and timid."

Some of Hewitt's poems such as "Because I Paced My Thought" provide images of an ideal future that is inclusive of the natural world, art, learning, industry, civic duty and religious ritual. In the interim, in the absence of this ideal community, he sought to live and work within a fractured personal and social existence. His poetic striving after coherence was traversed by unavoidable social and cultural barriers such as those he encountered on his walks through the Antrim Glens. From the same work, the poet writes "when I pace these lanes and pause at hedge gaps spying on their skill, so many fences stretch between our minds." There is a touch of Robert Frost about this piece but once more Hewitt presents himself as the amateur countryman, the lonely outsider, an embarrassed voyeur of the people of the hill farms. Comparisons are made between the poor lands of the native Irish and the "promised furrows of the Elect." Hewitt's mind goes back to the "fat country rich with bloom and fruit" of his ancestors yet it is these scraggy acres, the rim of arable on the North East coast of Ireland that is so attractive to him.

Hewitt himself admits that the mental fences are, in part, erected by himself. In "The Colony" he had made some uncompromising generalisations that were indicative of fear and prejudice:

Not these my people, off a vainer faith
and a more violent lineage.
I fear their creed as we have always feared
the lifted hand between the mind and truth.

The phrase "a more violent lineage" provides us with a very selective view of Irish history (or of world history) to say the least. Yet within the same poem Hewitt can also say of this "vainer faith" and of those who hold it:

I find their symbols good, as such, for me,
when I walk in dark places of the heart:
but name them
not
to be misunderstood.

"Whatever you say say nothing" as Heaney says. The combination of moral courage and reticence here is striking and is testimony to the pressures of consensus politics in Ulster and the mental and emotional divisions within Hewitt himself.

An engagement with the land was but one aspect of the search by the Ulster poet to find his true relationship to his community. Hewitt's tendency to approach contemporary problems through historical precedent is highlighted in one of his finest poems, "The Scar", dedicated to Padraic Fiacc. Hewitt's poem drawn from a real life encounter between his great-

grandmother and a Famine victim from the West of Ireland has an eerie archetypal quality to it. It is part of the Hewitt family's domestic mythology. The gaunt figure from the West is, as Padraic Fiacc puts it, "as Irish as the perpetrator-victim." Wandering into the fertile plantation country of Armagh he comes begging food and charity but also brings infection and death. There is a high price to pay for this rare moment of humanity and compassion which the poem records and celebrates. There is something ominous and threatening (almost Oedipal) about the Famine victim. The poem stirs memories of the thousands of Famine victims who flooded into Ulster during the nineteenth century. The "tapping" of the bony finger upon the window shutter is like an insistent stirring of racial memory and conscience—something one would rather shut out of one's mind. But finally there is acceptance:

There's not a chance now that I might recover
 One syllable of what that sick man said,
 tapping upon my great-grandmother's shutter,
 and begging, I was told, a piece of bread;
 for on his breath there hung infection
 rank from the cabins of the stricken west,
 the spores from the black potato stalks, the spittle
 mottled with poison in his rattling chest;
 but she who, by her nature, quickly answered,
 accepted in return the famine fever:
 and that chance meeting, that brief confrontation,
 conscribed me of the Irishry forever.

The act of charity encourages hope, as always, in Hewitt's verse, but the sentiment is undermined to some extent by the loaded word choice of the poet in his last three lines. The word "confrontation" implies veiled hostility and "conscripted" suggests conscription or compulsion but also in a rather clever sense, the act of writing or of becoming a writer. The act of reconciliation and the uneasy acceptance of an "Irish" identity is bound up with Hewitt's vocation as a writer of verse. He adds a significant modification to these sentiments of allegiance with these words:

Though much I cherish lies outside their vision
 and much they prize I have no claim to share.

Always there is that sense of "otherness" that lacks definition. Hewitt exudes and exemplifies many of the essential qualities of his region; its moods and social rhythms, its caustic, bitter sense of humour and its work ethic. The poet Padraic Fiacc's image of John Hewitt as the Jackdaw is an apt one; the Jackdaw is the odd one out in the Crow family; a cunning bird who has the common touch, fond of gathering gems to himself. In

like manner Hewitt's image of his homeland presents it as a hybrid state, a mosaic constructed out of hard, bright, individual stones, taken from many sources.

Another motif frequently employed by Hewitt is "the signature curing back in time," the backward quest for confirmation of identity. The past is always there waiting to receive us. One such poem which illustrates the receptivity of the past, the dour patience and sardonic humour of country people in Ulster is "The Covenanter's Grave." It illustrates a very characteristic device of Hewitt's in which a straightforward prosaic account of an incident is rounded off by a rich, wry insight, usually expressed in astringent colloquial speech. In this poem Hewitt tells the story of a relative who had travelled back to a Country Antrim village graveyard to find the tomb of a 300 year old Covenanting ancestor. The site is discovered but the private pilgrimage is observed by a local resident. Her sardonic comments provide an insight into one aspect of the Ulster character:

He travelled there, and in the churchyard sought
among the stones, aware that someone stared,
a woman from that house beyond the gate
Her peremptory challenge proudly brought
the name for which he searched, deliberate.

"Youse were a long time comin," she declared.

Such skillful use of dry understatement and caustic irony is a marked stylistic feature of Hewitt's work in verse. This irony was often combined with an informed view of history as in such poems as "The Colony" where Hewitt sometimes took an unprejudiced view of some of his ancestors who were part of the first wave of colonisation:

Among this rabble some to feel more free
Beyond the strady whim of Caesar's fist.

The mixed motives and origins of the colonists was updated in Hewitt's bemused observation of a Royal Garden Party at Stormont, the seat of the former Northern Ireland Parliament in the poem "The Lass of Richmond Hill." Here he notes the complicated ambiguities of a situation where the tune "The Lass of Richmond Hill" is played by a Police band because this was a melody composed by Leonard MacNally, A Catholic United Irishman (and subsequent informer) which was sung by Protestant Republicans as they fought English troops in the streets of Antrim during the 1798 Rebellion.

There is a depth of irony here that is difficult to fathom, but the poem is as much a jibe at the posturing of modern day middle-class socialites, Catholic as well as Protestant, as it is a reminder of another forgotten

tradition amongst Northern Protestants. Hewitt provides his readers with many cameos of social life in Ulster in a constellation of poems that show he has the sharpness of perception of a Breughel or a Chaucer in epitomising a people and a country that are more complex and variegated than popular mass media images would suggest.

In his many biographical poems he has made a reconnaissance of the elements that have contributed to the mosaic of his own character and identity. He was aware of the independent sceptic mind inherited from his father. He was an astringent political and social critic in such poems as "Agenda" and "Memorial" where an "opulent bishop" buries a corrupt local politician, "a shrewd and very able fixer" who had understood the labyrinth of local politics. Hewitt was a critic of sectarianism when it was unfashionable to do so and in "The Colony" he was prophetic in his observation that "Caesar's legions" (the British Army) would one day have to intervene in Ulster. An "A Local Poet" Hewitt castigated himself for his own political complacency – but he was, after all a poet and not a politician and his analysis of events was usually accurate and acute. He expressed life as he saw it within his native Province without seeking escape into an ideal world or by retreating into psychological fantasy.

Finally in a late poem "Jacob and the Angel," I think we discover a deep striving for some new form of collective identity which is caught up with Hewitt's search for self identification. The form that the poem takes reveals a great deal about Hewitt's psyche and his subconscious processes but also it provides some clues to the collective soul of the Ulster Protestant people.

I wrestled with my father in my dream,
holding my ground though he strove powerfully,
then suddenly remembered who we were
and why we need not struggle, he and I;
thereat desisted. Now the meaning is clear;

I will not pause to struggle with my past,
locked in an angry posture with a ghost,
but striding forward, trust the shrunken thigh.

Typically, this is a Biblical and Patriarchal incident. The poem is certainly about a personal mental struggle but also, perhaps, it may have allegorical political connotations. In Hewitt's poem the Father figure is not only his literal father but in the past. In the Old Testament myth Jacob (the deceiver) struggles with God and becomes the New Israel (meaning Prince). The wound received in the struggle is also a blessing, a Philoctean wound which is the mark of a new beginning, a new spiritual culture, a new Nation.

Hewitt's choice of this myth is not accidental. Northern Protestants traditionally have seen themselves as a "People of the Book" chosen to play a significant role in history. Hewitt, as we have seen, was aware of the Two Nations theory promulgated in the 1970s by various groups and individuals. Dr Ian Adamson has promoted the idea that the people of Ulster are, in the main, the descendants of the "Cruithin" (the Ancient Kindred) or Picts, the aboriginal, pre-Celtic, inhabitants of Britain and Ireland. These theories are highly speculative and open to racist appropriation (and this has happened) but many Nations have developed a national ideology on the basis of even more dubious myths (the Tudor myth of Elizabeth I for instance). In the course of a long career John Hewitt has sought to explore, in a positive manner, the symbiotic relationships between the peoples who live on the islands of Ireland and Britain. He is a culturally symbolic figure in an evolving situation in which those who are enlightened seek to find healthier and more constructive solutions to collective problems. He represents, as the Scots poet Hugh MacDiarmid once said "the tragedy of an unevolved people" who at the moment are effectively disenfranchised.

In this poem we find the expression of an aspiration that seeks to go beyond personal liberation, independence and growth. It is important, as Hewitt says in the poem, "to remember who we are" and more importantly "who we can be." In this poem he deals with an innate desire to be at home, to end a sense of alienation and exile and to rediscover himself within a people born into a new reality. There is the desire to transcend provinciality and in this Hewitt echoes the lines of another Ulster Protestant, Sir Samuel Ferguson who spoke out of an earlier generation. In Ferguson's poem "The Fair Hills of Holy Ireland" the Northern Irishman in exile expressed his own desire for wholeness and the desire to return to "the land of joy, wherein it is meet for life to be." Perhaps the name of this nation is Ireland, in a new sense, or perhaps it is Ulster.