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**FAULT-LINES, LIMITS, TRANSGRESSIONS:
A THEME-CLUSTER IN RECENT IRISH POETRY**

Lines of history
 lines of power...
lines of defiance
 lines of discord
near the Diamond
 brisk with guns
British soldiers
 patrol the walls
the gates between
 Ulster Catholic
Ulster Protestant...
 lines of loss
lines of energy...

These are the incantatory openings of various strophes in John Montague's *The Rough Field* (1972), taken from the "A New Siege" section of that sombre poem. Looking back now, twenty-five years later, it may not be an exaggeration to suggest that much poetry since 1972 has taken a kind of inner direction, an urgent prompting, from Montague's fierce but elegant analysis of the re-emerging trouble in Ireland in that intensely – orchestrated long work. It is a formal meditation that brings together history, race-memory, politics, the cascade of events as they unfold in the disparity of crisis, biography, family history. The poem creates the "rough field" of living history by means of an individual conscience (Montague's) trying to negotiate its terrain, which is, on the one hand, as familiar as a townland, but on the other, as strange and terrifying as the places and landscapes of nightmare. The *Rough Field* registers, in its nervous syntax, its curt lines stripped down to a kind of bardic? economy, the re-opening of old

wounds, old fault-lines in the Irish psyche and poetry, whilst recognising too that these tears were not unconnected to other fissures and cracks opening up in Europe and America in the late '60s and early '70s:

streets of Berlin
Paris, Chicago
seismic waves
zig-zagging through
a faulty world.

It is one of the achievements of the poem that these broader issues of political and social fissure are integrated into a series of biographical and familial meditations so that the genealogy of public rifts and disruptions is given a personal and intimate stress, a felt interiority. The fault-line is not only between different communities in the North, between North and South, Ireland and Britain, Teague and Prod; it is also within communities, within families, within the Montagues themselves whose town land is the Rough Field of the title, Garvaghey. And it runs, this fault, from father to son, from James Montague, estranged from his family in Tyrone while he works behind a grille in the New York subway, and John Montague, who grows up to be very like his father, "the least happy / man I have known." This is candidly, bravely, recorded in "The Same Fault"):

When I am angry, sick or tired
A line on my forehead pulses,
The line on my left temple
Opened by an old car accident.
My father had the same scar
In the same place, as if
The fault ran through
Us both: anger, impatience,
A stress born of violence.

He goes on, remorselessly, in the following section, to describe, grotesquely, the kind of sound a wound makes, this time the historical wound of the defeat of Irish civilization in the century following Kinsale and after:

who knows
the sound a wound makes?
scar tissue
can rend, the old hurt
tear open as
the torso of the fiddle
groans to
carry the tune ...

The consciousness, the avid and tormenting awareness of loss rises up in bitterness, accusation, anger, hatred, and Montague owns up to the lot in a verse surgical and dignified in its shocking candour:

This bitterness
I inherit from my father, the
 swarm of blood
to the brain, the vomit surge
 of race hatred, –
the victim seeing the oppressor ...

And this is what erupted on the Civil Rights March to Burntollet, on Bloody Sunday in January 1972; and in more recent times, before the cease fire, at Greysteel, when on Hallowe'en Robert Torrens McKnight from Macosquin (with others) walked into The Rising Sun bar, overlooking Lough Foyle, said "Trick or Treat?" and sprayed the bar with automatic fire, killing 13 people. It is what awoke at Drumcree in summer 1996, when the lines "of history" and "of power" stood off against each other, the Orange Order insisting that it follow the old line of its march down a road that (eerily) is called the Garvaghey Road – i.e. "Rough Field" Road. This morning (23 January 1997) the Orange Order announced that they would not agree to meet the Garvaghey Road residents to discuss this year's route at Drumcree, because, they said, there would be no point. Bitterness, "the vomit surge of race hatred."

The significance of Montague's poem, I believe, is that its tense and brilliant force entered into the fissure opening in Irish life again after more than forty years of uneasy, and though not untroubled, relatively stable peace. Its sinuous movement back and forth between public and private carried authority because its attention never wavered; its morality convinced because it worked as testimony, record, rather than accusation; and the chastity of its diction was a kind of earnest of its clarity of virtue, weighing every syllable. We may say that Montague's writing questioned "the distempered part," where the distemper was in fact the old wound; it went into the rift, even recreating out of historical memory and linguistic genealogy, the gaps cut into the tally stick as a whole people moved across the rift between Irish and English in the nineteenth century. This was not just a scar, a cut; Montague's image for this was the "severed head," trying to speak. Although the lines are quite familiar, it is worth quoting them again, so ablaze are they (without loosening that tight geiger-counter economy of regard and tenseness) with shame:

(Dumb,
bloodied, the severed
head now chokes to
speak another tongue –

As in
a long suppressed dream,
some stuttering garb –
led ordeal of my own)

An Irish
child at school
repeating its English.
After each mistake

The master
gauges another mark
on the tally stick
hung about its neck ...

Surely it is possible that a society as much as an individual can suffer trauma? And surely it is not impossible that, as is the case with individuals, if the trauma does not surface to consciousness it may fester, diversify, and undermine the entire collective health? May it not be the case that the loss of a language brings about a profound alienation all the more devastating for being scarcely recognised on the grounds that, to common sense, language is no more than a utilitarian means of communication. But common sense fails when in the presence of stress/distress. And language is more than a means of ready conceptual exchange: it carries the living and changing diversification of culture in its finest most atomic differentiations.

The Rough Field, with the criss-crossings of fault-lines all over its contours that the poetry inscribes, announced a cluster of concerns that were to dominate Irish poetry in English (and also, I believe, in Irish) for the next twenty-five years. In the socio-political sphere these have to do with questions of identity and the form or forms of government, representation, and legislative appropriate to a highly contested set of mutually opposed convictions within the North of Ireland, between North and South, and between Britain and Ireland. Who speaks for whom, and of what? This question maintains its relentless interrogative behind every serious poem written in Ireland since 1972. Never mind if the poem (or the poet) pretends that this contemporary equivalent of "Mac Donagh's bony thumb" "isn't there"; it is. The fault is inescapable. It isn't just that recent Irish poetry (and Irish writing in general) is influenced by Montague's slow, almost syllabic, tracking of this fault-line; it is also the case that *The Rough Field* and the crisis that it registers ("who shall speak for whom and of what?") restores a sense of danger to language itself, because language must needs be forensic with caution as it approaches these "lines of power" and of "history."

And so the second cluster of concerns that inaugurated themselves around these re-opening fault-lines of trauma and memory had to do with language itself. A sense of trouble gathered around the issue of utterance, speech, writing, arising from a particular set of circumstances in the Irish context, with its special sensitivity to cultural identities and the discourses they employ and recall. This cluster of fear, anxiety, risk, insecurity or whether language may be said to have a sponsor at all, thickened just at the time when Giles Deleuze and Michel Foucault had undertaken their profoundly unsettling enquiries into meaning, language, the sign, in which they used terms like "transgression" to describe the nature of a contemporary philosophy which knowingly sought to subvert categorical ways of thinking to bring into play a much more fluid, hectic, and exacting method of procedure in relation to language and its connections with being. In other words the fault line opening in Irish poetry from the early seventies onwards made of it a risky linguistic activity entirely consonant, in its practice, with strange and difficult murmurings in French and German post-Heideggerian philosophy. Contemporary Irish poetry (unlike, I believe, contemporary English poetry, for example) lives along the ruptures and fissures that constitute the intellectual and moral challenges of late-twentieth-century existence. The philosophers, Foucault and Deleuze, had, in a mixture of delight and terror – delight in daring to take thinking about language and its relationship with origins and death, for example, so far; terror at what they were saying, which seemed to set all normal categories on their heads – had thought their way to a pitiless condition of transgression and boldness. In the political sphere this extremem has manifesting itself in ever more ferocious confrontations; while the poets, in Ireland, bore witness to what was unfolding before them with wide awake integrity. They also had the instinct that language was the crux, Brian Friel even saying, in an interview, that the northern "problem" essentially had to do with language. Put simply, Irish poetry of the last twenty-five years represents a high achievement, a great achievement, because it has not shirked its danger and responsibility, and therefore its language is mobile, sudden, shocking, and full of surprises, full of (in the strongest sense of these words) cut and thrust.

Montague has a kind of probing elegance and finesse, a strict and avid intellect, that prevents him from rhetoric and fulmination. This aesthetic vigour gave him the technical capacities to approach the fault-lines opening up, and to throw the rope ladders of his craft across the abyss, below which is "fuming oblivion." As a poet his method is to work his way through a landscape, of memory, but also of trauma as the reality of dispossession enters the soul. The landscape, he writes in "A Lost Tradition," is "a manuscript/we had lost the skill to read."

In the 1970s it became perfectly clear that whatever interpretation one may make of the Irish revolutionary effort of Pearse and 1916, and the founding of an Irish State, the facts of the matter were that Ireland had, in all kinds of ways, entirely ceased to be a cultural entity with any secure retrospective continuity. Synge's Mayo, Hyde's Roscommon, Yeats's Sligo, Lady Gregory's Galway – all retained, in the first quarter of the century, live connections with a nineteenth century Gaelic world, which itself preserved many practices, concepts, habits of mind that went back hundreds, and maybe even a thousand, years. But by the last quarter of this century this way of life was going and, indeed was mostly already gone. The heart-lifting and staggering ambition and vision of Yeats and the Literary Revival was to connect a new and vigorous Ireland to its old energies in folklore, music, myth and magic and thereby transform it, to bring about a new kind of cultural polity vested with dignity, power, authority. It didn't happen; the day-to-day business of politics and government are perhaps grammar more than art-form, but as the Irish State (26 counties of it) strove, in the second and third quarters of the century to consolidate, improve, educate, invest, diversify, modernize, it retained a consoling image of itself as a place apart, enjoying a vital spiritual life, performing modestly on the economic front, but possessed of a powerful imaginative authority driving from a Gaelic past, all the more alluring for being shrouded in vagueness. Yeats *et al* had provided a vital function for the Free State and for twentieth-century Irish nationalism: they offered an attractive set of cultural images based on the nobility of the Gaelic world. It's entirely irrelevant that this immensely popular and flattering self-image had virtually no connection with the harsh geometry of Yeats's exacting thought on culture and politics: this was a convenient and re-assuring stereotype. But by the 1970s it was cracking up, and the major factor in the disintegration of the stereotype was the re-awakened nightmare in the North. Whatever business had been transacted in 1916, whatever settlement was arrived at in the Better Government of Ireland Act (1920), which paved the way for Partition, the story was not over.

It had, of course, to be the north where the fault-line opened again, because that was where the problem was located. Internal pressures in the emotional economy came out. Poetry, when it is functioning in its most characteristic mode, is always searching out privacies and hidden dimensions in personal matters and in public affairs. All poets are, in a sense, public poets, because their special responsibility in relation to language is never to cease trying to make it correspond with the actual nature of situations as they emerge on the cascade of events. This is not to say that the function of poetry is to be clear and dutiful – it may mean the opposite – but it must needs attend to what is happening. Bearing this in mind, it

had to be the case that, for a time, and for most of the last twenty-five years, the centre of gravity of poetry moved north. That this is now beginning to change only confirms the North's pre-eminence over the recent period.

Montague's depictions of the resurrection of the Irish conflict in the north, in *The Rough Field* and in subsequent collections, such as *Mount Eagle* (1989) or the more recent *Border Sick Call* (1995) are carried out in his exact and formal syntax of curt utterance; the philosophical mood is one of resigned acceptance of what he calls the "structure of process." Races and nations are each locked in their own "dreams of history" ("Process", *The Dead Kingdom*, 1984), while generation after generation go to meet their fate of failure, extinction, oblivion. Montague has learnt from Beckett, and there is in Montague (as indeed there was in Beckett) the iron resignation and sadness of a Roman patrician, a Cicero, or better, maybe, a Seneca. There's no point in protest or in prayer, longing and hope are futile, and Montague's verse eschews the comforts of outrage and the satisfactions of blame. This is the way things are, the Tyrone man seems to be implying, and you can't change them by wishing otherwise.

If Tyrone gave the Northern trouble a Senecan stoic then South Derry gave it a Pythagorean or Plotinian oracle, in the form of Seamus Heaney. Foucault, in a dazzling and baffling essay on "Transgression", written in 1963 in homage to the outrageousness and daring of the French eroticist Georges Bataille, hammers out a defiant sentence describing the kind of philosophy he wishes to practice, a philosophy which is "an affirmation that affirms nothing." It is, he says,

a philosophy which questions itself upon the existence of the limit [and] is evidently one of the countless signs that our path is circular, and that, with each day, we are becoming more Greek.

Heaney's poetry returns again and again to limits, lines, the question of the origin, faults, tracks, footpaths, the straight line of a thatcher's cut, and to Greece. At the heart of all these lines and pathways, "stations", turning-points, demarcations, there is an open space, a clearing, a clearance, as in "Station Island" (1984), lines quoted again in "Clearance" in *The Haw Lantern* (1987):

I thought of walking round
and round a space utterly empty
utterly a source, like the idea of sound;

like an absence...

There is, here, a Greek openness, and intransitivity, the "radical break with transitivity" that excites Foucault in the Bataille essay. A source which is like "an ideal of sound" is not a closed origin, the end of a line; it is

a criss-crossing of lines, an original that continually re-starts, a paradoxical interanimation of opposing forces. This deepening of the stress-line takes the fault that opens into the underpaths of consciousness itself to a realm well below the politics of persuasion or amelioration, to the seminary of the real. This isn't "poetry of the troubles"; it is a poetry of trouble, a whole and affirmative response to the fears and fissures of history, of being alive. This opening rupture is everywhere in evidence in Heaney, but one of its potent manifestations occurs in "Kinship", a poem at the heart of Heaney's great collection *North* (1975), in which the Derry Pythagorean takes up the caduceus of Hermes from Montague, and carries it back into the complex dark to point it towards furled and furrowed origins, the "nesting ground," the "outback of [the] mind." Here is the caduceus, masquerading as a turf spade sunk in wet green moss and bracken. He lifts it and the fault-line starts open. Something inaugural and dangerous and transgressive (in Foucault's conception of that word) is going on:

I found a turf-spade
hidden under bracken,
laid flat, and overgrown
with a green fog.

As I raised it
the soft lips of the growth
muttered and split,
a tawny rut

opening at my feet
like a shed skin,
the shaft wettish
as I sank it upright

and beginning to
steam in the sun.

He "grew out" of all of this (in both senses of growing out, of course, in that it sustained him and nurtured him, but also in that because of it he can move onwards, not get stuck in that "tawny rut") he tells us

like a weeping willow
inclined to
the appetites of gravity.

Pause for a moment and delight in the lovely notation in that last line, where "appetites" friskily dances with the sombreness of "gravity" – the words performing a little grace-note that subtly invokes the big interchanges going on between surface and depth, intellect and unconscious. Like a gay

filigree thrown off in a chorale by Bach that summarizes effortlessly the charges running at great depths.

The sunk turf-spade is a sign, a caduceus, that he lifts in order to show that his attention is fixed on opening the line to plumb the depths where reside forms and animations like "the idea of sound." This place is dangerous but also intensely exciting. It is where the fairies gather, but it is also where the goodness of angels may be signalled, invoked. It is a line of awareness that governs speech but that also enables it. It is the limit against which Heaney's intelligence and craft presses, and across which he transgresses, but it is always there. It is there in the recent poem, "Keeping Going" from *The Spirit Level* (1996), a collection named after an instrument used to ensure lines are aligned and level. The poem is dedicated to his brother Hugh, a farmer, who, when they were kids, used to pretend to play the bagpipes with a kitchen chair upside down on his shoulder, keeping the drone going through his mouth in spite of nearly bursting with laughter. The drone being kept going is the idea of sound underneath the appearances, the dark emptiness that groans out of the fault, the opening, that Heaney, now the mature, oracular Nobel Laureate, approaches with his caduceus; and what is it, in the poem, the caduceus? What does this Pythagorean from South Derry wield?

The whitewash brush. An old blanched skirted thing
 On the back of the byne door, biding its time
 Until spring airs spelled lime in a work-bucket.
 And a potstick to mix it in with water.
 Those smells brought tears to the eyes, we inhaled
 A kind of greeny burning and thought of brimstone.
 But the slop of the actual job
 Of brushing walls, the watery grey
 Being lashed on in broad swatches, then dying out
 Whiter and whiter, all that worked like magic.
 Where had we come from, what was the kingdom
 We knew we'd been restored to? Our shadows
 Moved on the wall and a tar border glittered
 The full length of the house, a black divide
 Like a freshly opened, pungent, reeking trench.

Brimstone, burning, the actual job, magic, the kingdom restored, the shadows on the wall, Plato, Poltinus, Hugh his brother, the idea of sound, then the tar, the black divide, the pungent reek of the opened fault-line, the wound, the exhilaration of the opening. It's all there, in the black line along the full length of the house. The architecture is solid and compliant with the actual because of the dark line drawn in tar. It is not as if Heaney is offering any gaunt declaration or anxious solution: he has registered the divide, the problem; vitalised it; turned it towards the dark spaces, the

clearances, gulfs, ruts that are everywhere in his vision; and made the scene resonate with a live animation responsive to "how it is," "comment c'est," in the words of Beckett. We may recall that Beckett's sentences also weave and unweave these dark spaces, these gaps, as the pitiful trajectories his creatures take open up the fault-lines of pain and terror, anticipating what, was to emerge most emphatically throughout the West in the '70s and 80s. Heaney's "pungent, reeking trench," trench being an old word for a cut.

We can discern traces of Platonic or Neoplatonic shadows on Heaney's white-washed wall; with two other, younger Northern poets, each of them inspired by both Montague and Heaney, we may see a Lucretian or Ovidian transformative energy. For example, Paul Muldoon's *The Annals of Chile* (1994) opens with a version of a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book VI. It tells the story of Leto, how she cursed the peasants of Lycia when she arrived there with her newly-born twins on her breast, tired out and exhausted from the heat, her breast-milk dried up. The Lycians are cutting osiers by a pool and will not let her drink the water; indeed to make sure she can not refresh herself they stomp around in the mud, stirring up the silt on the bottom out of pure spite. Her curse turns them into frogs, the pool becomes their trench:

now, as ever,
 they work themselves into a lather
 over some imagined slight, since they continually curse
 and swear their voice are hoarse,
 while their necks, in so far as there's anything between
 their heads and shoulders, are goitred; with their yellow
 paunches set off by backs of olive-green,
 they go leaping about the bog-hole with their frog-fellows.

It would be painful to moralize this scene too strictly, but it must be evident that Muldoon here is mischievously, but also with more than a dash of outrage, mocking those who stir up muck, who revel in the collusions, angers, slights, spite, and nasty triumphs that a fissured society begets. He is also glossing, Heaney's "Death of a Naturalist." And there is a hint, too, in Muldoon, that hankering after the bog-hole of authenticity, or preventing generous access to all who come seeking (including the two divine twins Phoebus-Apollo and Artemis-Diana) refreshment from this source is an affront to humanity that will and must be paid for, terribly. Indeed, much of Muldoon's work involves a kind of incisive cut into the reeking wounds of hate, malice, platitude, and self-regard. His work is always cutting into bodies or material, encrustations of calcified opinion, the *rigor mortis* of received wisdom and history, whether in the philosophic festivity of *Madoc*, or in the wild exercises of wit and eroticism in "Yarrow". His poems are lancings, cleansings, of impacted repression and

tension. Here he is on Yeats's rose, having a go at Yeats's nastier, more brutish side, such as is found in "Hound Voice":

'How dare you suggest that his "far-off, most secret,
and inviolate rose" is a cunt:
how dare you misread

His line about how they "all gave tongue";
how dare you suggest that *Il Duce* of Drumcliff
meant that "Diana Versnon" and Maud Gonne gave good head'.

Muldoon's world is an open space, where the lines of his enquiry can run anywhere, crisis-cross themselves, turn spiral-loops of inventive mischief and interrogation; it is a kind of otherworld of the utterly contemporary: S & M mixes with Patrick Pearse; Sylvia Plath and Charles Manson cross over each other.

Carson's world, from *The Irish For No* (1987) onwards is immersed in Belfast; its limits, lines, crossings, interrogation points, secret meeting-places, conversations that transgress beyond what should be said between people. There is an Ovidian transformative flow in it, and he, like Muldoon, has transformed Ovid into his own crammed and concertinaed syntax. His version of Ovid XIII in *First Language* (1993), an account of the birds of rage that materialize out of the black smoke off Memnon's burning body, conveys the bleak urge to kill and hurt so that the memory of offence, of wrong done be re-called and revenged. The birds metamorphose out of the smoke, and in Carson's abrupt and ferociously urgent delivery they break up into opposing lines of force across an empty division of hatred. They become Stuka dive-bombers, Prods and Taigs, Celtic loops and spirals:

They wheeled
In pyrotechnics round the pyre. The Stukas, on the third approach, split
In two like Prods and Taigs. Scrabbled and pecked at one another Sootflecks. Whirl -
Wind. Celtic loops and spirals charred each other, fell down dead and splayed.

And every year from then to this, the Remember Memnon birds come back to re-enact
Their civil war. They revel in it, burning out each other. And that's a fact.

The "Remember Memnon" birds are Belfast squabs, exploding into difference out of the reek of the filthy smoke. In "33333" in *The Irish For No* someone is trying to negotiate streets where everything can become foreign and dangerous suddenly if you cross the wrong line. The urgency, threat, energy, and, yes, excitement, is there in the bleak vernacular of the transgressor, whoever he is, whatever side he's on. One thing is sure, he has crossed over into somewhere he shouldn't be:

I was trying to explain to the invisible man behind the wire-grilled
 One-way mirror and squawk-box exactly where it was I wanted to go, except
 I didn't know myself – a number in the Holy Land, Damascus Street or Cairo?
 At any rate in about x amount of minutes, where x is a small number,
 I found myself in the synthetic leopard-skin bucket-seat of a Ford Zephyr

Gunning through a mesh of ramps, diversions, one-way systems. We shoot out
 Under the glare of the sodium lights along the blank brick wall of the Gasworks.
 And I start to ease back: I know this place like the back of my hand, except
 My hand is cut out off at the wrist. We stop at an open door I never knew existed.

The passenger carries the absent sign of Ulster, the Red Hand, the severed hand. Derrida says that "signs represent the present in its absence." Belfast is a city of signs, in which that which is absent is continually referred to, until suddenly what is absent is no longer so, but ferociously present. The open door leads to, where? A Romper Room (the terrifying name given by the Shankill Butchers to the room where they tortured their victims before cutting them up)? Or an unlooked – for escape? A sign (and we should remember the sadness of Derrida, his sorrowful acknowledgement of the darkness of our time) resides on the opening line, the rupture, between what is absent and what is not.

But it is time to travel south. And let us, for the moment, by-pass Dublin, and the surgical self-anatomies of Kinsella in *A Technical Supplement*, Brendan Kennelly's evisceration of southern cant and hypocrisy in *The Book of Judas* (1991) and *Poetry My Arse* (1995), and come to Cork. Shortly after Montague published the fault-line-opening *The Rough Field* he moved to Cork to teach at UCC. He encountered there an extraordinary phenomenon, one that no-one could have expected or predicted. I mentioned earlier that this period, late sixties, early seventies, was a time when it became clear that a profound severance had taken place between Irish society, as it was then (registering, albeit distantly, the seismic tremors of radical change as it was taking place in Paris, Berkeley, Berlin, and also absorbing the opening fault-lines in the North), and the vastly different, idealized Irelands of Yeats and Pearse. One clear indicator of that severance was the evident failure to realize an official aspiration of the Irish state since its foundation, the re-establishment of the Irish language as a widely-used medium of communication in society. Not only that, it was now as plain as could be that years of emigration and neglect had all but entirely drained the Gaeltacht (Irish speaking) areas of the western seaboard of their native population. The Blaskets were empty; Dún Chaoin was full of ruined cottages; in the Donegal, Connemara, and Mayo Gaeltachtraí many people lived in what were little better than hovels.

And yet, the entirely unpredictable thing that Montague encountered when he went to Cork was a school of Gaelic poets, some city-bred, others from Anglo-phone parts of Munster, writing fresh, vigorous, and uncompromisingly modernist and contemporary poetry in Irish. These were the

Innti poets, called after a magazine founded by Michael Davitt, Gabriel Rosenstock, Liam O Muirthille, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. There can be little doubt but that these younger writers were inspired by the example of two Cork poets of an earlier generation, Seán O Tuama, a brilliant acerbic, sophisticated lecturer in Irish literature, and the poet whom he gave seminars on that were superb expositions of the craft and aesthetics of poetry, Seán O Ríordáin. Both O Ríordáin and O Tuama have a trace back to Daniel Corkery, exponent of the Gealic tradition of eighteenth-century Munster and Professor of English in Cork.

What is truly remarkable about this flowering of young talent, in Irish, in Cork in the 1970s, is that just when it seemed as if the Gealic tradition had reached an impasse, suddenly it became alive with new energies. Davitt and Rosenstock were reading e. e. cummings and Kerouac, Zen, Bengali love poetry, Beckett and Ionesco. Ní Dhomhnaill was reading these too, along with Jung and Gaelic folklore. She, unlike the other *Innti* poets, was reared in the Kerry Gaeltacht, and she makes of its folklore and heritage of story and custom an entire psychomachia of danger, trauma, challenge. Her poetry engages with a whole nexus of concerns – feminism, gender, anorexia, power, sex – but dominating all is a sense of dismay, rupture, vulnerability. This version of the fault-line is connected to the gulf between the Kerry Gaeltacht world which she grew up in before it began, finally, to founder in the 1960s, and the modern European Ireland that was emerging. But it also has to do with the ferocious anxieties and problems nagging and tearing away in the repressed consciousness of women and men in the capitalist society and the demands and requirements of duty, routine, work, earning a living, keeping the deepfreeze well-stocked. She has, incidentally, a superb and harrowing poem about the chilling plenitude and horn of plenty and terror that a freezer is. She is a poet who confronts the repressed and it may be that women, in our time, suffer from the results of repression more than do men, although perhaps there's not much to choose between them. She writes, about hysteria, anorexia, melancholia. "An Crann", "The Tree", from *Féar Syanthínseach* (1984) is about paranoia, and it carries the theme in a savage collusion between folklore about fairies and fairy raths and Black and Decker chain saws, the shock registered as a kind of numbing paralysis. I think we can all recognise this condition, of exhausted defeat, but the poem goes to these limits and carries us across a threshold of worry and fret by its own brisk and daring energy:

The fairy-woman came
with a Black and Decker.
She cut down my tree.
I watched her like a fool
cut the branches one by one.

My husband came in the evening.
 He saw the tree.
 He was furious – no wonder
 He said: 'Why didn't you stop her
 what's she up to?'

...

She came back the next morning
 I was still breakfasting.
 She asked me what my man had said
 I told her ...

'Oh', she said, 'that's *very* interesting'.
 with a stress on the 'very'
 and a ring from the '-ing',
 though she spoke very quietly.

...

A weakness came over me
 that made me so feeble
 I couldn't lift a finger
 for three whole days.

[Michael Harknett, trans.]

That's it: the terror of the gap between a world of feeling, fear, anxiety, and the terrible remorselessness of the demands of morality. And the poem crosses over, transgresses, the limits of morality to reveal a sorrowful emptiness.

There is no explicit mention of the Northern "problem" in Ní Dhomhnaill's poetry; rather the fault-line there is absorbed into the psychic turbulence that everywhere awakens in her work. We may prolong the classical conceit we indulged in in relation to Seneca, Pythagoras and Ovid with reference to the (male) Northerners, and think of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill as a kind of contemporary Let or Sibyl, bearing witness to the unvisited landscapes of the mind that haunt our contemporary nightmares. The remarkable quality in her work is the clarity with which she defines haunting narrative pictures. "An Bád Sí" ("The Fairy Boat") from *Feis* (1991) describes a mysterious vision, seen by certain women gathering dulse on a shore in Dunquin, of five or six men in a boat "putting in at the women's cliff" – "ag dul isteach go fail na mná."

I shouted out to look below
 under the cliff where, by my soul
 at least three of us had seen them go
 through a place so narrow only a seal

might pass.

But not a trace of them is to be found again:

the men rowing for dear life
 with their blue jerkins and red bonnets
 putting in at the women's cliff.
 [Paul Muldoon, trans.]

The have disappeared in the rift, the split in the women's cliff. The poem holds back from explanation to give the colour of the fear. Something awesome is registered, stated, complete in itself.

It will be evident that this account of certain themes in recent Irish poetry – that of the cut, the thrust, the split, the opening, and the related concerns of lines and limits, transgressions, criss-crossings – neglects many aspects of the poetic achievement of Ireland over the past twenty-five years. There are, for example, the Zen-like balancings of Longley, with his cool and studious appraisals of atrocity and his varied appreciation of the warmth of the natural world; there are the bizarre and often bearing parables of Paul Durcan; the gnomic and brooding intimacies of Medbh McGuckian; the collaboration between fragility and strength in Eavan Boland; the coloratura of perception and the abrupt suddennesses of Vincent Woods; the solar energy and ready Franciscan sweetness of Pearse Hutchinson; the dignified and sad elegance of Thomas MacCarthy; the ambushes of terror and delight in Eileán Ní Chuilleanáin; the varied energy and clear humanity of Greg Delanty; etc etc.

What gives all of this poetry its strength, I believe, is the way it utterly lives out its contemporaneity. It faces the nature of the faults which are surfacing, now, and have been surfacing, for the past twenty-five or more years, in Northern Ireland, Ireland, everywhere. It is a poetry that confronts borders, crossings, limits, all the more forceful in that it has an actual context of a border, a fault-line, in Irish society which had been, to a degree, filmed over by a tissue of lies for a long time, masking the true reek of its corruption and, yes, evil. Now the line opens again and the poetry goes about its business of transgression, going where it shouldn't go, to sense or reason, but where it must go if poetry is to retain its healing function. Foucault again:

The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration ... These elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them. In our day, would not the ... play of the limit and of transgression be the essential test for a thought which centres on the origin.

W. B. Yeats remains right about many things but I will cite two. He said: "We sing in our uncertainty" and that is utterly true of recent Irish poetry. He also made a prediction: he said that Irish thought would, in a generation or two become Druidic, which he defined as "flowing, concrete, phenomenal." That prophesy surely is accurate when we consider the kind of thinking being done in recent Irish poetry?