Beyond Divisions: The West in Contemporary Irish Poetry

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The predominantly rural world of the West of Ireland functions as a special location in Irish literature and culture. The usual political division of the island into South and North is at once nullified by the concept of the West – though part of the Republic (the simple fact is that Northern Ireland is the north-eastern part of the Irish Isle), the West appears frequently especially in the poetry of the North, often, though not always, with a deliberately post-divisionary purpose, or at least generously forgetting about the fact that the West is part of the southern state.

The political division of South and North reflects something of an economic one as well, though it has become less dramatic due to the spectacular development of the Republic and the joining of the European Economic Community (now European Union) of both the Republic and the United Kingdom in 1973. This notion of division corresponds to general common belief in a difference between north and south in a global context too. Yet the principal division reflecting difference in economic and cultural development is more easily discernible in the context of the modern world of Europe along the East-West axis. East in the European environment means a time lag, a less developed world, whereas the West is the embodiment of the modern and the latest, it is generally the most highly developed part of the continent. In the Irish context, however, the situation is just the reverse of the general pattern: the East, located closer to the mainland of the United Kingdom, is the developed part, and the West, facing the Atlantic Ocean, is the backward region – and perhaps in many ways it is also the backyard of the island as well. By its very nature of being isolated, coupled with its harsh physical conditions, the West is the place that has preserved the most of the world of the previous centuries and it is therefore seen as the 'authentic' Irish world. Traditions which survived in the West were idealised by the Romantic agenda of the Revival, and the counter-move to demythologise the very same traditions was also played out in the course of the 20th century.

For the present poets the place becomes what it is: a repository of values from another world, a world that is a simple and old one where life is neither

black nor white but a fine gradation of greys coalescing into one another – life as it is in any place in the world, not worse or better but different, and this very difference is the basis of its inspiring powers. The natural dimension of the West is a hauntingly beautiful landscape which is at once hostile in many of its physical features – harsh climate and poor soils make life particularly difficult in the region. The beauty and the harshness combine to forge a sublime world, the sublime as real landscape, which is richly captured in the work of several contemporary Irish poets. The cultural dimension of the West offers an experience of traditional Irish life, in many ways a very distant one for modern poets. The distance can function as a finding of roots for some and the recognition of its essentially alien nature for others; such profound experiences single out the West for several poets as a region apart and independent of the internal divisions of the island.

The poet who has discovered a second home in the West is Michael Longley. His favourite County Mayo has featured significantly, together with other western locations, in his poetry from early times on, acting not principally as an escape but rather as an alternative to his Belfast home. Though Mayo is a part of the Republic, Longley identifies it as the West, by which move he transcends the usual division of the island into South and North, attaching no significance to the border in the process, so much so that journeys to the place are never mentioned, it is only the destination that is focused upon, as if the speaker of the poems were a resident of the place rather than a visitor.

Longley's long-standing concern with the West is first demonstrated in the poem "Leaving Inishmore." The location, one of the Aran islands, is the place to leave on the occasion; what is usually a destination elsewhere is the point of departure here, though it turns out to be the end of a holiday, so the leaving is in fact a return to the usual place of habitation for the speaker. The island is seen in the frequent associations of the western off-shore territory of Ireland – quiet alternation of "Rain and sunlight" (Longley 54), a place undisturbed by events outside it, it is peacefully locked into the natural cycle with nothing to endanger it. Apart from the change of seasons and the subsequent waves of visitors time is suspended, it is a world of "a perfect standstill" (ibid), nominated "the point of no return" (ibid) by the speaker to make it immune to change, to turn it into an enclave that serves as a refuge from the quotidian and the general pattern of mutability.

As Robert Welch notes, Longley approaches the west in a double perspective:

> The west in Longley is linked to the puritan attitude to landscape, which has two aspects. On the one hand there is the 'good place', the locus amoenus where human and natural worlds are in accord […]. On the other hand there is the sense that landscapes, even beautiful ones,

> may be false, lures to trap the sensitive mind, weakly seeking rest, relief from tension. (Welch 58)

Implications of this are already present in this early poem, yet the wonder outweighs the suspicion. In the course of later poems the duality takes the form of an image of a visitor gradually growing familiar with the place yet remaining a visitor – frequent returns to western locations gift the speaker with an intimacy that prompts him to regard the place as his second home yet he never forgets that 'second' never functions without a 'first.'

The first part of the poem "To Derek Mahon" is set in Belfast, as the point of departure for a memorable outing in the West. The nightmare of Belfast finds its antithesis in the peace of the West though the speaker is aware of their status as strangers in that land. The two Belfast-born Protestants find a place in the West at once exotic and alien, they are "Eavesdroppers on conversations / With a Jesus who spoke Irish" (Longley 82). Yet as time passes something alters, they recognise some ground on which they feel attached to this island location and perhaps the date is not insignificant in this change as "That was Good Friday years ago" (Longley 83). Despite the strangeness of the place it acquires a magic dimension to exert a haunting effect on the visitors; the simplicity of the old ways and the exoticism of the bilingual environment keep them momentary captives of the island, momentary only since the time comes when they have to leave.

The experience of the West in such circumstances leads to the transformation of the place into something profoundly important for Longley. The proper significance of the West is demonstrated in the short poem entitled "The West," which depicts an intensely private world where the major experience is facing oneself. The persona is either engaged in the activity of listening to the radio for "news from home" (Longley 94), or observes himself in a strangely duplicated form as he walks up to the cottage functioning as his "home from home" (ibid). The details of the cottage and the surrounding world imply a simple place with a rather frugal degree of comfort yet this is to the advantage of the persona as introspection is facilitated and encouraged in such an environment. The place gives the impression that the passing of time has been suspended, the two activities are basically static and contemplative, opening a dimension to life which is unimaginable in the city. This is the poem which then becomes Longley's milestone in his treatment of the West: the later poems return to this kind of destination, turning the speaker into a familiar face in the region, slowly shedding his visitor-image. The shift from "news from home" to "home from home" contributes to this 'rite of passage,' with the first "home" of the latter phrase receiving increasingly more emphasis – the visitor has taken up home in the destination, the exotic has become a part of the normal.

"Carrigskeewaun" is a set of pictures from life in Longley's West, providing a kaleidoscopic account in five sections, each with its own title. The details captured are almost all natural ones, there are only few man-made elements mentioned. The opening sections evoke a place in which human presence is an intrusion. It is "ravens' territory" (Longley 96) with the corresponding relics of death and decay, the speaker is only a visitor there, standing still. His first movement disturbs the birds of the place and makes them fly away, only a swan decides to remain on the spot. Other human presences are discovered in the form of traces – "cattle tracks," "footprints of the children and my own" (ibid); these are memorials of the previous day found on the strand. The human construct of the "dry-stone wall" (Longley 97) leads the speaker to reflection and turf-smoke evokes the image of a home: "Steam from a kettle, a tablecloth and / A table she might have already set." (ibid) The closing image of the poem is that of a lake, having the power of mirroring the world around it and an even more extraordinary feature: "For a few minutes every evening / its surface seems tilted to receive / the sun perfectly" (ibid).

The world depicted in the poem is one out of time, dominated by representatives of nature, virtually excluding human civilisation. Though Carrigskeewaun is a reference to a human place, apart from the turf smoke the human presence associated with settlements is basically missing. That it is a world where time appears suspended is supported by the image of the "cattle tracks" and "footprints" on the strand – normally these would be erased by the water in its constant interaction with the shore. The suspension of time is not the only appearance in this place: the lake's mirroring of the "sheep and cattle that wander there" (ibid) creates a duplication, on the level of reflection, of reality, and the special power of the water surface "to receive / The sun perfectly" also "seems" to do this. Despite the implication of 'seeming' the unlikely event of the tilting of the water surface is still a possibility and this vision is facilitated by the location itself.

"In Mayo" provides details of life in a small town in the West, thus it complements the perspective of the previous poem. The approach, however, is a rather interesting one: the speaker's attitude reveals intimacy with the place yet he also offers a glance of himself from the point of view of the natives of the place, thus his status as a stranger in the location is also expressed, which reasserts the double perspective hinted at in the poem 'The West'. The place seems to escape the passing of time – both the natural world and the human population are engaged in the routine of life lived in a place detached from the outside world, undisturbed by a wider context. The visitors, though feeling intimacy towards the place, remain essentially strangers, their movements are riddles for the local people, their actions are "episodes" (Longley 118) in the history of the place and sometimes even approximate miraculous dimensions such as "the mushrooms / That cluster where we happen to lie" (ibid).

Life is easily imagined in such a location for the speaker as the generalising vision is outlined in section IV. From among times of the day "Dawns and dusks" (Longley 119) are pointed out, mysterious intersections of day and night, and there is an image of "swans / That fly home in twos, married for life" (ibid). This image has its own fine reverberations suggested by flying home and life-long marriage, and also enters into a relation with the solitary swan of "Carrigskeewaun" and the numerous flock of Yeats, and Heaney's swan-covered lake is not an alien allusion here either.

"Landscape" is set in an unidentified location, the only point of reference is its proximity to the sea, yet the terms of the poem firmly associate it with the West. It is a place of high winds, a "place of dispersals" (Longley 126), where cloud shadows possess the power of clothing and unclothing the speaker and where the wind is more a destroyer than a preserver – it "fractures / Flight – feathers, insect wings / And rips thought to tatters" (ibid). Yet there are moments of insight, though they may be rare and short-lived: "For seconds, dawn or dusk, / The sun's at an angle / To read inscriptions by" (ibid). The visionary moments are confined to the natural world, yet the closing image is a potent one concerning mediation: "A mouth drawn to a mouth / Digests the glass between / Me and my reflection" (ibid).

For Longley the West is a curious place at first, a destination for outings, which occasionally possesses revelatory potential. Frequent returns familiarise the place with the speaker of the poems yet a double perspective prevails – the speaker remains a stranger who is increasingly more intimate with the destination, and the West becomes his "home from home". Growing familiarity with this particular world allows more profound observation of its reality: Longley's West appears a place out of time in which only the cycles of the natural world hint at an awareness of the temporal dimension of existence yet even this implies permanence rather than mutability – routine thus becomes the unspectacular embodiment of the otherwise visionary intersection of the timeless with the temporal.

Richard Murphy's relation with the West is more intimate due to biographical reasons: he was born in the West and lived there for a long time. His perspective accordingly is that of the inhabitant with a thorough knowledge of the place; whatever magic is there is considered an integral part of a known and lived environment, thus its observation is all the more significant in the way it happens since either proximity or familiarity could reduce its potential yet neither of them actually does so.

The telling name of a promontory in "Little Hunger" indicates a shoreline eroded by the sea. The speaker wants to find proper pink stone to construct his own house out of old ones, "roofless homes huddled by the sea" (Murphy 84). It is a strange mission to collect items from abandoned and disintegrating houses to construct a new one out of them, and the idea of 'recycling' is reinforced by the

speaker's assertion of his work being the "dismemberment" (ibid) of others, with the nearly paradoxical idea of a "fragment" bringing it all to completion, "To make it integral" (ibid).

Granite boulders prompt the question of the poem "Omey Island": what purpose left them stranded where they are, whether it was nature or man preparing the scene. The land contemplated is reminiscent of a stone quarry and thus the image of an abandoned place fits it well, yet equally possible is the purely natural way of its formation, with the sea as its only agent. The last stanza tilts the balance towards the sea, its impersonal waves are fully ignorant of human purpose but at the same time generous enough to provide help: "the ocean / Explodes at the quarry-face of the shore / Without a notion of hearths, lintels, and tombstones" (Murphy 87) yet it has the power "to disgorge / Enough raw granite to face a whole new town."(ibid)

The seeming separation of nature and the human world and the implication of nature's indifference towards the human being create the image of the West as a frontier, a world that calls for human ingenuity to overcome the obstacles to be encountered in the place. Though Longley's accounts of the West occasionally also include elements that recall the harshness of the environment, he does not allow these to dominate his vision of the place. Murphy calls attention to the difficulties of *constructing* a home whereas Longley focuses on *finding* one, which indicates the main difference in their approach to the place.

Eavan Boland's poem "On Holiday" has a destination in the West, yet it is no longer seen as a mystical and magic place but rather a backward world with unfavourable physical conditions and which has lost its cultural rituals. The place evoked is Ballyvaughan, it is defined by "Peat and salt" (Boland 84) yet water could easily be added, as the "sheets are damp" (Boland 85) and this creates the impression that this damp would penetrate to the bones. The old beliefs are no longer a practice, there is now no milk left on the windowsill against "the child-stealing spirits" (ibid). The peculiar situation of the speaker, however, recreates something of the old tradition: it is a holiday with a child, and a "superstition feast / of wheat biscuits, apples, / orange juice" (ibid) are left instead of the milk, just to be found eaten later. The 'revision' of the old tradition in a harmlessly mocking form means that something of that tradition is still preserved, therefore some form of continuity is established; this is reinforced by the context of a holiday with a child, suggesting the passing on of knowledge.

For other visitors the West becomes a reminder of the category of elsewhere apropos of their visits. Even family history may prove weak in the face of expectations during a visit to the place, as it is communicated by Paul Durcan's poem "Going Home to Mayo, Winter 1949": the West of Ireland does not turn automatically and magically into a real home for Durcan despite his family ties in that region. The poem has a title which marks its subject with

Wordsworthian precision, locating the action in space as well as in time. Journeys of the indicated type raise a number of expectations in the reader, especially when the word home is explicitly featured, yet the division of the poem into two sections suggests something of the ambivalence of the concept itself in its mid-twentieth century Irish context.

The point of departure is "the alien, foreign city of Dublin" (Durcan 34) with the immediate aim of offering one part of the contrast to be elaborated in the poem, the place which is left behind in favour of another called "home." The distancing of Dublin from the speaker along the axis of affection prepares for a peaceful arrival at a country place verging on the legendary and therefore something very close to essential human experience. The futile race with the moon on the way is easily forgotten as the destination is being approached, and the magic of the Irish countryside overwrites the quotidian memory of Dublin: "Each town we passed through was another milestone / And their names were magic passwords into eternity." (ibid) The climax of the arrival is expressed in a language at once eloquent and profound, with the deeply human vision of father and son walking by the river talking to each other, "an unheard-of thing in the city" (ibid).

The vision, however, has its own cracks woven into it. "Life's seemingly seamless garment" (ibid) opens up the ironic distance between the real and the apparent, thus the liberating environment is soon found alien too. The second section of the poem begins with a strong "But" (ibid) and the almost idyllic picture comes to an end: "But home was not home and the moon could be no more outflanked / Than the daylight nightmare of Dublin city" (ibid). The speaker leaves it unspecified, though, whether this recognition comes because of the inevitable temporariness of the visit or because of a general feeling of anxiety. The return to Dublin reawakens the "mutual doom" (ibid) of father and son, on another level, of one human being to another – the curse of modern city life expressed best by the commonplace word 'alienation.' All the landmarks of the city function as reminders of this isolation of one person from another, thus the speaker of the poem, in the final analysis, remains without a home by the end of the journey: neither the city nor the country can function as a place which embraces and sustains him in a context which would deserve the warm designation of home – the former is his present habitation and the latter preserves the family ties, so the conclusion of the poem is all the more uncomforting. The West, then, for Durcan is just another place where he is reminded of the modern plight of not feeling at home anywhere, thus it is a universal enough place to be regarded beyond division of any kind.

Though Derek Mahon, unlike some other poets, does not approach the West with a peculiar expectation of a place possessed by magic, one particular western location has a lasting effect on the speaker of the poem "Thinking of Inis Oírr in Cambridge, Mass." Though the title appears to embody dislocation itself – a

Northern poet in the United States recalls a place in the West of Ireland – the poem stands on firm ground as it presents the perfect picture preserved in the memory of the speaker. The location possesses sublime powers as "Reflection in that final sky / Shames vision into simple sight; / Into pure sense, experience" (Mahon 29). The scene is conjured in a dream which at the beginning does not make clear whether it is based on actual experience or a simple fantasy; the end of the poem, however, provides the missing piece of information in relation to the basis of the dream: "I clutch the memory still, and I / Have measured everything with it since" (ibid).

The "final sky" is the experience that awaits the speaker in the West and which provides him with something of an etalon. The usual cultural significance of the Aran destination is not hinted at: the experience is purely contained within the confines of the physical environment as it is the sky that provides the reflection. Yet the vision is received and this event is only possible in this particular place, which singles out the West as a location with its own imaginative appeal.

The West of Ireland does not leave these poets without a lasting effect on them. At the same time the image of the West does not escape the effect of the poets either – the former associations of the West as the scene of genuine Irish life and culture are evaded, and in most cases the place becomes a location with particular physical dimensions – the West is principally regarded as a landscape which occasionally accommodates human communities as well. The harshness of the landscape itself is not overlooked yet it is the wild and fascinating beauty of the place which rules the perspectives – the power of the sea and of the wind is translated into a sublime dimension rather than into the depressing reality of a hostile environment. Natural and human communities live out their life against this background, yet the temporal dimension is lulled by the motif of cycles and routines which combine to create the sense of the suspension of the passing of time and by this a glimpse of the timeless in the temporal is allowed. This suspended temporality becomes the most apparent distinct feature of the 'modern' West.

This modern West with its seemingly timeless reality, however, does not retain its earlier virtually equivocally accepted ideal status. The earlier association of the West with the desired ideal state of innocence gives way to a more ambivalent image as the place with its human community becomes a "home from home" for one poet but it remains just another alien place for another, which is all the more telling as the former poet is stranger to the West whereas the latter has family ties in the region. Nevertheless, one common denominator exists for all these poets – their meeting with the West provides them with a profound experience which points beyond any division of the island into distinct units, thus the West manages to retain something of its traditional image as the repository of genuine values yet these are essentially general in

their nature, without any further political or territorial qualifications. That these are part of the aura of the West and their experience is conceived in the region is due principally to the fact of the strangeness of the place – the perspective of the visitor calls for alertness and this facilitates discoveries that would not occur otherwise. The imagination is simultaneously aroused and lulled, and the "Reflection in that final sky" indeed becomes "pure sense, experience" (Mahon 29).

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