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Marco Fazzini

AT THE BACK OF MY EAR

Essays on Poetry and Literary Crossings

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AT THE BACK OF MY EAR

Norman MacCaig:  
The Landscape as Other



Norman MacCaig is a master of looking outward. His investigating eye is always at work in order to define what the human relationship with external reality is, allowing the border between Self and Other to transform itself into a creative ground for literary and epistemological elaboration. At the same time, he knows that his verbal inventions can barely capture the essence of that reality. Naming is seen by MacCaig to be one of the primary colonising processes elaborated by humans intervening in Nature and, for this reason, is constantly subverted by him as he works to resist bringing the colonising history of the English language into being. He is always conscious that, "The name of a thing means one thing and / The thing means another: fanfare of the ampersand", interrogating the use of similes and metaphors, and their inevitable reinstatement, "hint[ing] at a Postmodernist aesthetics, which relinquishes Modernism's aim to break with the past and is paradoxically content to highlight what has always been there, what has always been the case" (WHYTE 2004: 105-106).

MacCaig's interest in maintaining a living boundary between individuality and objectivity echoes what Thomas Nagel observed when writing about the option of responding to the world with an ambivalent attitude to affirm the existence of anything in the world. The philosopher notes that the gradual shift from a personal (read: individualistic and particular) point of view of the world's reality to a more and more objective (animals and objects) perception leads to the conviction that the final aim of this process is the consideration of the world as an entity without a centre, and the observer as only one of its various contents (NAGEL 1979: 206). The uncertainty about the poet's role as an interpreter of reality

is reflected in MacCaig's dual attitude towards two opposed theories of language and metaphor: language as unity and language as disjunction, the one expressing the unifying process for human understanding, the other a declaration of difference.<sup>1</sup> Jack Rillie's observation on the matter is acute: "In MacCaig's case we might say it was the Epistemological Spirits who came to give him, like Yeats, 'metaphors for poetry'. It provides MacCaig with a choreography in which a continuous dialogue of the mind with itself and with every otherness links poem to poem and is never closed" (RILLIE 1991: 51). More recently, Christopher Whyte wrote: "If he would like language to be a tool, a set of ultimately self-effacing labels offering direct access to the material world, he is forced to acknowledge that it is instead both dynamic and opaque, a material so all-embracing and impenetrable it may in the end prove impossible to get beyond it, to escape from its toils into a world that is 'real'" (WHYTE 2004: 102). As MacCaig ironically states in his final collection, *Voice-Over* (1988), his whole career has explored the problem of perception of the Other with his 'little torch' of metaphorical creations:

The great thinker died  
 after forty years of poking about  
 with his little torch  
 in the dark forest of ideas,  
 in the bright glare of perception,  
 leaving a legacy of fourteen books  
 to the world...  
 (MACCAIG 1990: 414)

Most of MacCaig's poems can be considered as attempts to approach the world outside, to find a relation with the Other as different from the Self in order to reconcile observer and observed and, also, reverse their respective roles. MacCaig shows an attentive sensibility for what stays outside his personal and national

boundaries, making the border a living threshold of creative exploration. The poet's task consists in accepting that each component of the polarities Internal/External, Self/Other and Subject/Object consumes the other. The creative element contained in the work of art is enlivened by this "coexistence of conflictual points of view which are an irreducible part of human life" (NAGEL 1979: 213). Similarly, the foundation of any individual and cultural identity for MacCaig rests less on a closeness to life than on an openness to it and to the contradictory textures of the world. Styles, points of view, and intentions help in constructing a new idea of Scottish nationality, territory and literary identity through a cross-cultural comprehensiveness of reading, writing and understanding so that the very question of identification, as Bhabha observes, "only emerges in between disavowal and designation. It is performed in the agnostic struggle between the epistemological, visual demand for a knowledge of the Other, and its representation in the act of articulation and enunciation" (BHABHA 1994: 50). This statement introduces us to a new and creative disruption of an exclusive and pure idea of race and culture (MACCAIG 1964: 34). It is not mere chance that the title of 'Compare and Contrast', as many other titles in MacCaig's oeuvre – 'By Comparison', 'All Being Equal', 'Contraries', 'Divider', 'Double Life', 'Equilibrist', 'Hard Division', 'Go-between', 'Give or Take', 'Inside and Out', 'Instrument and Agent', 'Likenesses', 'Other Self, Same Self', 'Thinking of Contradictions', 'Still Two', 'Two Shepherds', 'Two Men at Once', 'Two Ways of It' – recalls the process of comparing, contrasting, or matching two different elements in order to find new similarities, or to let each other be enriched by the other. As Bakhtin points out: "Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture" (BAKHTIN 1986: 6).

Angus Calder, dealing with the problems of perception of real-



ity in MacCaig's poetry, poses the right ontological questions: Is MacCaig's speaker sure that there is a 'real world'? Does it impose itself on us, engross us? Or do we impress ourselves on it, create it? (CALDER 1990: 45). Human perception and interpretation of the world lead us to the crucial aspect of representation. Is it possible to reach any kind of objectivity in our approach to the reality outside ourselves? Are imagination and reality irreconcilable? Can human beings fill the gap between opposing selves and dismiss the dichotomy of Self and Other as trivial? Or, is it more creative and enriching to maintain that living threshold between the two, as Bhabha suggests? This philosophical exploration of what can be done to reality also tries to consider the problem of representation both ways, and examine how much human consciousness distorts reality. Is any detached perspective possible for human beings? Is there a way for humans to imitate the glacier in its respectful preservation of the Other? Let's read what MacCaig proposes in his poem called 'Humanism':

What greed and what  
arrogance, not to allow  
a glacier to be a glacier –  
to humanise into a metaphor  
the long slither of ice – that was no more  
a beaten army than it was a horde  
of Cinderellas, each,  
when her midnight sounded,  
leaving behind her  
a sandstone shoe.

I defend the glacier that  
when it absorbs a man  
preserves his image  
intact.  
(MACCAIG 1990: 145)

This process of getting nearer and nearer to the *quiddity* of external reality, breaking the boundaries of a snug idea of Self to refuse the violence of authoritarian individuality, reveals the paradoxical process implied in the desire to attain, on the one hand, the most objective perception and, on the other, the impossible achievement of improving the particular and limiting human way of expressing reality through language. MacCaig often concentrates on what the right way of approaching the world should be, lifting some crucial questions, such as the following one contained in his poem, 'A man I agreed with':

He wanted to know  
how they came to be what they are:  
But he never insulted them by saying  
*Caterpillar, Loch Fewin, what do you mean?*

In this respect he was like God,  
though he was godless – He knew the difference  
between *What does it mean to me?*  
and *What does it mean?*  
(MACCAIG 1990: 364)

All the questions contained in this poem are serious and treacherous ontological interrogatives. The "five ports of knowledge" (the senses) are for MacCaig both a source of poetic inspiration and a very limiting human way of perceiving the world. MacCaig's use of human senses (especially sight) is what Seamus Heaney stresses in his preface to the Italian edition of MacCaig's selected poems, an essay later reprinted in his volume *Finders Keepers*. In that essay Heaney quotes a Czesław Miłosz phrase that could stand as an "apt commentary upon the MacCaig project: 'I stare and stare. It seems I was called for this: / to glorify things just because they are'" (HEANEY 2002: 399-400). MacCaig is always engaged in a slow process of subtraction of the role played by the ego in every

sensory activity. As Donald Davie observed, “the perceiving subject is no way privileged” even though “the human sensibility is the irreplaceable medium by and through which interactions can be registered” (DAVIE 1989: 19).<sup>2</sup> At times, this idea about the deceitful nature of language when describing the world concerns our linguistic code as the common human means of communication; at times, it says something about the conflict between the English language and the Scottish landscape, or worse, between the English language and the native languages of Scotland, Scots and Gaelic in particular, and their historic and social contexts. So, if on the one hand individuality hides itself behind the imported cargoes of the senses, on the other the presence of a personal and national ‘omphalos’ re-surfaces in every line.

### MacCaig’s Omphalos

MacCaig’s omphalos is made up of the same elements as everywhere else, “but with the proportions”, as he himself states, “so arranged that the result is something individual, idiosyncratic, something, anyway, not anonymous” (MACCAIG 1957: 55). That Highland area in the north-west of Sutherland, where he used to spend all his summers, responds to MacCaig’s classical lust for proportions and harmony; at the same time, it allows man to give that place its own real dimension, especially when human elements intrude in it and give it a final adjustment for the human eye. It happens in the opening lines of his long poem ‘A Man in Assynt’:

Who owns this landscape?  
Has owning anything to do with love?  
For it and I have a love-affair, so nearly human  
we even have quarrels. –  
When I intrude too confidently  
it rebuffs me with a wind like a hand

or puts in my way  
a quaking bog or a loch  
where no loch should be. Or I turn stonily  
away, refusing to notice  
the rouged rocks, the mascara  
under a dripping ledge, even  
the tossed, the stony limbs waiting.  
(MACCAIG 1990: 224-225)

In the middle of that northern landscape the poet feels at home because it is there he belongs: that kind of Gaelic omphalos of the Sutherland area is a natural, cultural, linguistic and historical environment which gives him identity and poetic insight. It is in that place that a confrontation between internal and external realities takes place by means of an apparently adolescent use of sight. The very parameters of that confrontation build the poet’s subjectivity through an attentive recollection of visual sensations and a sense of historical dispossession helping to affirm identity through a politics of loyalty and vindication.

It is in his ‘A Man in Assynt’ that MacCaig, for the first time, deals with the historical events of the Scottish Clearances and with all the tragedies perpetrated in that same landscape of Sutherland that he felt attached to as being a three-quarter Gael. In this particular poem, he lets two different problems meet and clash at the same time: on the one hand, the problem of possession/dispossession opening up a series of historical wounds regarding the relationship between Scotland and England, or coloniser and colonised; on the other, his persistent inquiry into the human attempt to subdue “the experience to the language, the exotic life to the imported tongue” (MAXWELL 1965: 82-83) reminds one of the distance from the primal significance of the outside world:

Who owns this landscape? –  
The millionaire who bought it or  
the poacher staggering downhill in the early morning  
with a deer on his back?

Who possesses this landscape? –  
The man who bought it or  
I who am possessed by it?

False questions, for  
this landscape is  
masterless  
and intractable in any terms  
that are human.  
(MACCAIG 1990: 225)

Even though MacCaig has partly reversed, once more, an historic investigation into an ironic struggle to be fought within the boundaries of epistemology and philosophy, this vision truly engenders, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin observe, “love or hate (or both) with a metropolis which exercises its hegemony over the immediate cultural world of the post-colonial” (ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS, AND TIFFIN 1989: 26). Underlining his own power of vision to subvert the strategy of dispossession, he tries to solve some of the deep problems undermining both linguistic communication and the representation of the world as a geographical and economic battleground. Yet, MacCaig knows that Sutherland was the area where, after the battle of Culloden in 1746, the estates of those who had fought on the side of Prince Charles Edward Stewart were confiscated, commissioners “were appointed to manage them and the new ideas of farming so fashionable on Lowland Scotland were slowly brought to bear on the more pastoral Highlands... Encouraged by tacksmen, who no longer received good rents, emigration became the escape from poverty” (STEEL

1984: 243-244). So, chiefs became caught up in the new Lowland concept of commercial landlordism. Most of the Highlands nobility were educated men, who shared the more polite culture of Lowland Scotland, and many began to better their estates on the Lowland model. Between 1800 and 1806, nearly 20,000 people were evicted from the Highlands and islands of Scotland, especially from the lands of the Countess of Sutherland. So, those parts of her estate that could not provide much of a living were to be given over to sheep, and those who lived there would be moved to the coast. New townships with store-build houses were planned and new industries like fish curing would give the tenants employment. As Tom Steel has observed: “the events in Sutherland at the beginning of the nineteenth century was real enough. Thousands of tenants who felt the land they worked was their ancestral home were forced to leave, their houses and crops burnt so that nothing remained to encourage them to return” (STEEL 1984: 243). In another fragment taken from ‘A Man in Assynt’, MacCaig writes:

Or has it come to this,  
that this dying landscape belongs  
to the dead, the crofters and fighters  
and fishermen whose larochs  
sink into the bracken  
by Loch Assynt and Loch Crocah? –  
to men trampled under the hoofs of sheep  
and driven by deer to  
the ends of the earth – to men whose loyalty  
was so great it accepted their own betrayal  
by their own chiefs and whose descendants now  
are kept in their place  
by English businessmen and the indifference  
of a remote and ignorant government.  
(MACCAIG 1990: 226)

The tragedy of the Clearances led not only to an inevitable clash of cultures, Highland and Lowland basically, with a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of the land. By the 1830s, the composition of the class of Highlands landowners had undergone a profound change: for the first time it had admitted a wave of outsiders, both from the Lowlands and England, people who viewed their estates as commercial enterprises. Consequently, that economic revolution also changed the Highlands landscape in a radical way: large numbers of sheep were introduced; non-original species of trees were imported for the production of timber; several territories (and their waters) were fenced for tourist purposes, mainly for hunting and fishing; new cities replaced the townships where new industries, such as fish curing, gave employment to evicted crofters and cotters:

Fish from the sea, for Glasgow, London,  
Edinburgh. But the land, too, sells  
itself; and from these places  
come people tired of a new civilisation  
to taste what's left  
of an old one. They outnumber  
the locals – a thing  
too easy to do... In Lochinver,  
Achmelvich, Clashnessie, Clachtoll  
they exchange the tyranny of the clock  
for the natural rhythm of day and  
night and day and night and for  
the natural decorum that binds together  
the fishing grounds, crofting lands  
and the rough sheepruns that hoist themselves  
towards the hill...  
(MACCAIG 1990: 228)

Yet, as David Lynch observes in his *Scotland: A New History*, “the Highlands as such did not exist. Macro-economic analyses have their place in the story of the Clearances, but each set of evictions had its distinctive history, its own pattern of cause and effect” (LYNCH 1992: 369). What Seamus Heaney describes as a “sense of place” can also be helpful here. When Heaney observes that poets such as Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill master their own part of the English landscape and create different “Englands of the Mind”, he wants to mingle a traditional idea of geography to the oral and literary heritage of the place (HEANEY 1980: 150-169). Similarly, this “country of the mind” is for MacCaig not only the very character of the Scottish Highlands and its oral culture, but also the Anglo-Saxon patrimony of linguistic and economic impositions, his choice and imposed necessity to use English for his poetry, and his attempts to express, through it, the outside world around him. So, MacCaig’s Scottishness is something quite different from the pure idea of the local cultural identity Hugh MacDiarmid polemically sustained, through the re-use of the Scots language, for the launching of his Scottish Renaissance in the 1920s. The beautiful phrase Douglas Young made up for MacCaig’s poetry, and which remained incomprehensible to MacCaig himself – “It’s a pity Norman doesn’t write in Scots but he’s got a Scots accent of the mind” (DOUGLAS YOUNG, Radio Scotland, 14 Nov. 1980) – can be better understood if read through Heaney’s words. Similarly to his ambiguous position towards language, the questions MacCaig raises about history, nationality and identity have a direct influence on our idea and perception of the Scottish landscape. MacCaig’s “accent of the mind” is not only the Lochinver area where he spent most of his summers, but also the Edinburgh Scots tradition revived by his friends belonging to the First and Second Wave of the Scottish Renaissance, the English of Wallace Stevens and John Donne, Tranströmer’s nature poetry as translated into English by Robin Fulton, and many other influences and readings.<sup>3</sup> It is this

openness of the mind which allowed MacCaig's Scottishness to be always on the threshold between the instinctive and sensuous desire of appropriation and his rational and philosophical act of withdrawal of the Self, so making space for new conceptions about the place of humanity within the natural world and for an idealised overlapping of historical and natural events:

Up there, the scraping light  
whittles the cloud edges till, like thin bone,  
they're bright with their own opaque selves. Down here,  
a skinny rosebush is an eccentric jug  
of air. They make me,  
somewhere between them,  
a visiting eye,  
an unrequited passion,  
watching the tide glittering backwards and making  
its huge withdrawal from beaches  
and kilted rocks. And the mind  
behind the eye, within the passion,  
remembers with certainty that the tide will return  
and thinks, with hope, that that other ebb,  
that sad withdrawal of people, may, too,  
reverse itself and flood  
the bays and the sheltered glens  
with new generations replenishing the land  
with its richest of riches and coming, at last,  
into their own again.  
(MACCAIG 1990: 230-231)

That lost unity that MacCaig forces any reader to perceive leaves the poet in the middle of the mad cross-purposes of Creation ("An immanence is what I want, to be / That Unity, / That transcendental One I don't believe in?") where language can no longer establish a perfect correspondence with reality and his-

tory's wounds can no longer be cured. For a poet who has provocatively defined himself as a "Zen Calvinist", no religion can be satisfactory. Even Wallace Stevens' belief in the poet's linguistic creation as a religious act is useless and ridiculous for MacCaig, but metaphor forces the poet to a deeper linguistic investigation not only of himself but of reality in general, because he seems to be "acutely aware of the almost religious function of metaphor in primitive language, as a factor joining poetry and myth" (NICHOLSON 1992: 45). It is difficult to understand if, as Douglas Dunn says, this direction is one of the most important taken by poetry over the last thirty or forty years, a direction which refuses to excessively praise a poetry written "in worship of itself" or considered "as a faked religion or purveyor of a verbalised deity" (DUNN 1990: 67). Keeping in mind MacCaig's ironic scepticism, it is also easy to infer from Dunn's words that in order to bestow love and concern on its subjects this kind of poetry has to be convoluted, and flippant sometimes. Obviously, a world of perfect correspondences where no contradictions exist is a heavenly place few of us believe in. If that world existed, man would have to abandon the pleasure of 'destroying our own creations, and stop being human':

Only the gods  
could settle as happy natives  
in that place of no contradictions,  
that place of certainty, the place of peace.  
(MACCAIG 1990: 417)

Instead, MacCaig lives in a world where contradiction is the main rule and certainty is rarely achieved. His is an impure world where syncretic values must be accepted both in individual and social terms to afford a poetics of plurality. The ambiguities of the word are for MacCaig also the ambiguities of the world, the ambiguities of our being and the ambiguities of the objects out-

side the self, a vanishing point where chaos is seen at a distance, partly covering its negative unpredictable activity and shoring all history's debris and wounds against 'his timeless wits':

The recording mind goes down. The day goes down.  
The mountain spills down its own side, the bird  
Becomes a purse of maggots. Yet they mean  
And are the ambiguities of the Word,  
That vanishing point beyond which Chaos sits  
    Warming his timeless wits.  
(NORMAN MACCAIG 1990: 80)

## NOTES

1. Of some interest for this linguistic problem are the articles by R.J. Kaufmann ("Metaphorical Thinking and the Scope of Literature", *College English*, vol. 30, 1968) and what Ernst Cassirer affirms in his *Language and Myth* (New York, Harper, 1946). Both critics insist on the joining function of metaphor and on the inevitable and creative process of identification it expresses rather than on the disjunctive quality of language sustained by post-structuralist theorists.
2. For an alternative idea about the role of MacCaig's self in his poetry see the following statement by Hugh MacDiarmid: "Instead of giving the object an individual existence based on its being, he conceives things of the exterior as an aspect of his soul, as a sensible 'complex' of himself. This progressive, ambiguous fusion of the spirit and the world presupposes a certain faculty in the poet for sensing the most delicate reciprocities between the interior and the exterior". See Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The Norman Conquest'. *The Voice of Scotland* (6: 2, July 1955, p. 20).
3. See Tomas Tranströmer, *Selected Poems*, translated by Robin Fulton, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974; and Norman MacCaig's review of *Contemporary Swedish Poetry* (translated by John Matthias and Göran Printz-Pahlson, London, Anvil Press, 1980) in *Cenrastus* (3, Summer 1980, p. 47).

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Lawrence Ferlinghetti @ 100:

'Speak Out'





In one of his most beautiful and moving texts, a recent work entitled *Time of Useful Consciousness* (2012), Lawrence Ferlinghetti uses the rather incendiary phrasal verb 'speak out' to invite his readers not to hesitate and to freely express their opinions in a bold and frank manner. Ferlinghetti often uses this verb in the imperative form to challenge a reticent stance of the petite bourgeoisie or the more bigoted and supposedly right-minded, conformist members of society or to address the indifference and relativism caused by a trivial form of nationalism – when this becomes 'populism' – or to confront the small-minded attitude that may render certain men and women (writers, journalists, politicians, voters, etc.) subservient to the logic of the potentates in our society. In his choice of vocabulary Ferlinghetti reminds us of his work 'The Jack of Hearts', recalling a famous text by Bob Dylan, however we may conclude that ultimately the author presents his own ideas:

The one who bears the great tradition  
and breaks it  
The Mysterious stranger who comes & goes  
The Jack or Queen of Hearts who speaks out  
The Fast Speaking Woman  
and the Slow Speaking Woman  
the one who digs the mystery  
and stands in the corner smiling  
like a Jack or Queen of Hearts [...]  
(FERLINGHETTI 2012: 3-4)

Ferlinghetti uses this particular verb also in the title of one of his highly provocative poems, first published in the form of a postcard in a limited (and signed) edition in 2003. 'Speak Out' may be seen as an outburst opposing the silence of so many inefficient intellectuals after the massacre of the Twin Towers:

So now is the time for you to speak  
All you lovers of liberty  
All you lovers of the pursuit of happiness  
All you lovers and sleepers  
Deep in your private dream  
Now is the time for you to speak  
O silent majority  
Before they come for you!  
(FERLINGHETTI 2003)

Only two years earlier, through a poem which he wrote for the World Poetry Day held at Delphi in Greece in 2001, later published in the work *San Francisco Poems* (2001) and in Italy in a collection of his poetical works entitled *Scoppi Urla Risate* (2014/2019a), Ferlinghetti addressed the Oracle of Delphi. The author reflects on a dark era of Europe now on its knees and states that he comes from a New World Empire – much vaster than any other that ever developed in the past – with its electronic highways, monocultural societies and a linguistic monopoly deriving from the dominance of the English language in the globalisation process and within the commercial sphere. The poet's appeal to the Oracle is quite clear:

O long-silent Sybil,  
you of the winged dreams,  
Speak out from your temple of light  
as the serious constellations  
with Greek names

still stare down on us  
as a lighthouse moves its megaphone  
over the sea  
Speak out and shine upon us  
the sea-light of Greece  
the diamond light of Greece...  
(FERLINGHETTI 2001: 80)

During the course of these early years of the new millennium a desire on his part to denounce unfavourable phenomena in society and to provoke reactions on the part of the public in general has never waned, and the author has also criticised America itself, the country where he was accepted as the son of immigrants: "We're the conquerors / We're the new roman emperors / We're conquering the world / It's the invisible empire / of genial vulture capitalism..." ('Blind Poet'); "A casino culture out of control / A hole in its ozone soul / A sweepstakes Winner Take All / A shooting gallery for masters of war..." ('A Casino Culture'); "In a dream within a dream I dreamt a dream / of all the earth drying out / to a burnt cinder / in the famous Greenhouse Effect / under a canopy of carbon dioxide / breathed out by a billion / infernal combustion engines [...]" ('Cries of Animals Dying') (See FERLINGHETTI 2014: 24, 26, 38). Ferlinghetti reveals a lapidary style also in his curious book *What is Poetry* (2000/2002), a comprehensive overview of epigrammatic reflections on writing, the craft of a poet and on the awareness that should be maintained in social life and in the artistic dimension. Some of the following words and phrases are his key repetitions: "cry", "dissent", "subversive incursion"; "struggle", "the poet is a subversive barbarian"; "status quo"; etc.

Yes, he really does like the semantic field of the verb "speak out". Throughout his long career Ferlinghetti has frequently condoned and stimulated the idea of 'speaking out' and we would suggest that his personality reflects varying degrees of intensity emanating from an array of synonyms and shades of meaning as-

sociated with this verb. It is a question of raising one's voice, not only with respect to recent events and situations but also in order to denounce any cowardly reluctance to call a spade a spade and a passive reticence regarding forms of injustice and populist stereotypes. Stepping back in time for a moment, referring to Ferlinghetti's first book, *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955), Larry Smith already noted that in his writings in the 1950s Ferlinghetti would assume the role of the man in the street who raises his voice – and might “speak out” – commenting truthfully on shared experiences, and often adopting the reflective rhythms of a jazz musician. Adopting an approach akin to that of the poets of today, his aim is to use poetry as an oral art expressing commitment (SMITH, 1983: 200). A decade later, in ‘Bickford's Buddha’, the hours preceding a poetry reading in Boston are described in a poetical manner. Our attention is drawn towards American clichés and stereotypes associated with the settings of cafés and bookshops located close to Harvard University, and Ferlinghetti reviews certain well-known forms of conformism that seem to hold out like obstinate bastions defying any possible change in the status quo:

These are our Revolutionaries?  
 I'll speak out to them at least  
 Well/Later/like the politician say  
 I got more exploratory studies  
 to carry out first  
 before committing myself  
 I got more observing to do first  
 I got my affliction to feed  
 I got my muse to feed  
 before the guns start roaring...  
 (FERLINGHETTI 1969/2000: 21)

In the first poem in the *Populist Manifestos*, an early version of which was broadcast by the author on KPFA/FM in Berkeley in

April 1975 and which Ferlinghetti presented for the first time to a live audience at Rutgers University-Camden on April 23, 1975, he continues his struggle against the intellectual class, and urges poets to descend from their ivory towers and operate on behalf of the people: “Stop mumbling and speak out...”. So, invoking his models-ancestors-companions who similarly used the verb “speak out”, he says: “Where are Whitman's wild children /where the great voices speaking out /with a sense of sweetness and sublimity...”; and, finally, in that same poem he declares: “Poetry isn't a secret society, / It isn't a temple either. / Secret words & chants won't do any longer. / The hour of *oming* is over... Time now to face outward / in the full lotus position / with eyes wide open, / Time now to open your mouths / with a new open speech...” (‘Populist Manifesto’) (FERLINGHETTI 1976/1996b: 286).

Since the very beginning of his career Ferlinghetti has never held back when corrupt people and braggarts, reticent members of society and warmongers, boot-lickers and social climbers have to be denounced, and he intervenes without resorting to the loud response of passionate militants or the arrogance of presumptuous individuals, nor does he seek the praise of politicians, intellectuals and financiers. He acts with the tenacity of a hard worker, with the polite and far-sighted attitude of a publisher, with a linguistic simplicity that only great poets attain in their maturity, and with the visionary experimentation of an artist and designer, these being roles that do not exclude the use of poetic force and provocation as a solution for injustice. As occurs in his paintings, through the observations present in his poetry Ferlinghetti is able to carefully read the reality that surrounds him, being more interested in conveying an idea of the problems of society rather than personal concerns. In fact, human beings and their individual freedom constitute the actual core of his work. People must be free from the constraints imposed by ethics, religion and education to aspire to freedom, abandoning traditional rules and allowing images (in poetry and paintings) to become suspended in a surreal

and often visionary space. Achille Bonito Oliva offers a summary of his observations on the subject, referring not only to Ferlinghetti's pictorial works: "Lawrence Ferlinghetti's invention is set into play through the continuity and the unpredictable juxtaposition of linguistic differences and contrasting assonances which do not cause dissonances or lacerations, they do not determine fields of visual disturbance, but found the possibility of an unexpected emergency, permeated and enlivened by a light sensibility. Lawrence Ferlinghetti's work is a microevent that increasingly departs from within the image, from the center of irradiation of sensibility" (FERLINGHETTI 1996: 50).

Born a hundred years ago, on 24 March 1919, in Yonkers (New York), Lawrence Ferlinghetti attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he graduated in journalism in 1941, and later served in the United States Navy during the Second World War. During the conflict he was assigned to the USS Selinur attack cargo ship in the Pacific and witnessed the terrible destruction of Nagasaki, wiped out by the cruelty of the atomic bomb. This experience underlies his permanent opposition to war. In 1947 he obtained a Master's degree in English Literature at Columbia University and a doctorate from the Université de Paris Sorbonne. When he painted his first work in 1950, he was not yet sure whether he would become a painter, a critic, a teacher or a writer. And yet, one cannot avoid repeating here the obvious and rather banal observation that in the newly-blossomed painter it was already possible to find traces of a famous poet. A poetical leaning may be noted in his first spontaneously created oil painting simply called "Deux". It would be risky, on the other hand, to consider art and poetry – the two main expressive languages of Lawrence Ferlinghetti – on the basis of an arbitrary distinction, and it would appear that our author is well aware that perhaps the combination of these arts might have mitigated their respective limits. As Leonardo da Vinci once ironically suggested, "If you think of a painting as a 'mute' poem, the painter may yet say that

poetry is a 'blind' painting" (DA VINCI 2006: 185). In the case of Ferlinghetti his poetry is always a key to reading his paintings, while his images are a metamorphosis of the written word. If his art may be seen as a driver of social commitment, solicits awareness and is aimed at defeating the immobility of the institutions and the exclusivity of culture, so too is his poetry, through convergences that are often parallel.

In his paintings Ferlinghetti never renounces a radical pacifism and his criticism of politics and, likewise, in his poetry he never refrains from accusations of injustice, especially after having personally experienced the ghostly vision of a devastated Nagasaki. He was certain that he was in love with Selden Kirby-Smith, whom he married in Duval County, California, in 1951. He subsequently began to work as a French teacher, between 1951 and 1953, and became active as a literary critic and painter. However, at that time New York did not represent any avant-garde movements in particular, with the exception of jazz musicians, so Ferlinghetti decided to settle in San Francisco, where he had the idea of founding City Lights, the first American bookshop and publishing house specialising in paperbacks. Concerning his decision, the author stated:

After World War II  
it was as if the whole continent tilted westward  
and the population shifted with it  
and it took almost a decade  
for all the elements of a changed America  
to come together  
to coalesce  
in a radically new post-war culture  
And it happened in San Francisco [...]  
(FERLINGHETTI 2012: 64)

He founded City Lights in June 1953, in collaboration with Peter Martin, the son of an Italian anarchist, Carlo Tresca, who was assassinated in 1943. On the ground floor there was the bookstore, while on the upper floor there was the editorial office of Martin's film and popular culture magazine "City Lights", a title chosen in homage to Chaplin's film. This was a decision that would change his life. He not only decided to sell books but also to publish the first literary works of a new generation of intellectuals and writers whose numbers he saw constantly increasing in the streets of his city: Kenneth Rexroth, Kenneth Patchen and Allen Ginsberg launched the *Pocket Poets Series*, which would soon become a legendary publication. In 1955 he assumed his family's full surname. His father, originally from the Italian city of Brescia and who died six months before Lawrence was born, had abbreviated his surname to Ferling in the 1930s.

When Ferlinghetti published his first collection of poems, *Pictures of the Gone World*, his destiny was marked in the series of poetical works he had created. We do not know exactly when Ferlinghetti met his friend Allen Ginsberg – perhaps in 1954 or early 1955 – despite the fact at that time both of them kept diaries and voluminous notebooks. In any case it appears that Lawrence was already quite impressed by what Allen had showed him and on August 30th, writing to Jack Kerouac, Allen mentioned that the City Lights Bookstore was publishing paperbacks of only 50 pages containing the works of local poets and perhaps he would get his poem *Howl* printed the following year. It was a strategic moment because at that time Ginsberg had finished only the first section of the complete work, and it was at least one month before the famous Six Gallery reading. The rest is history, with rapidly unfolding events and long-lasting impressions. In particular, we should recall Allen Ginsberg's performance at the Six Gallery, where he presented the work he had now completed, impressing both his friends and guests present on that occasion. It is also worth noting the sour reviews that criticised his newly published book, bear-

ing witness to the fact that conservative factions in America had already singled out the poem *Howl*, with bilious rants dictated by their honourable and conformist stance. Claims of obscenity relating to the book were presented and it was banned from sale, resulting in an unexpected marketing scenario and attracting a high level of interest in the work. Finally, the trial and final victory brought fame not only to the poet but also to his publisher, both of whom became protagonists of the movement that lit the fuse of the Beat Generation.

If Allen Ginsberg immediately rose to his position as a leader and star of the new American avant-garde, in 1958 Ferlinghetti also achieved a moment of success with his poetical writings. *A Coney Island of the Mind* is seen as his most famous work and, according to some critics, one of the most significant collections of poetry of the twentieth century. It was later translated into various languages around the world and over a million copies of this book were sold. And yet, if not belatedly, the American and British critics did not seem to be very aware of Lawrence Ferlinghetti. In the voluminous work *A History of Modern Poetry* (written by David Perkins for Harvard University Press) only nine lines are dedicated to Ferlinghetti, and in a chapter entitled "Minor Poets of San Francisco". However, Perkins did offer a specific observation: "Many of his poems attack contemporary American civilization, either in outright denunciation or, more effectively, by focusing on case histories, as in the amusing and deadly accurate 'Lost parents'" (PERKINS 1987: 538).

Even worse was his fate in the United Kingdom because when the historic *50 American Poets* (edited by Peter Jones) was issued in 1979 Ferlinghetti was not included and was recognised only once as one of the members of the Ginsberg Group. Among the more far-sighted critics we should at least mention those who first became interested in Ferlinghetti: M.L. Rosenthal (1958), the well-known poet Kenneth Rexroth (1961), Alan Dugan (1962), the Frenchman Alain Jouffroy (1964) and L.A. Ianni, the critic

who wrote about the notion of the 'fourth person singular' and the relativity of subjectivism in Ferlinghetti's poetry. Generally, and at least until the 1990s, his poetry acquired a higher level of popularity in Europe than in the United States, as occurred in the case of another Californian hero adept at speaking out and voicing his opinions, his friend and follower Jack Hirschman. More specifically, this occurred in France (where his alliance with George Whitman, the founder of Shakespeare & Co. in Paris, had become a historicized myth) and in Italy. Despite great sales and growing fame, and despite being for over sixty years a promoter of poetry, cultural events, book sales and international development, he was often left out of the game by the cultured stronghold of American writers, generally barricaded in New York and Boston, and ignored by their academic and sectoral journals.

In Italy, in the same year (1968) two leading figures within the sphere of English language and literature studies and the translation sector became interested in Ferlinghetti. Romano Giachetti (*Coney Island della Mente*, Guanda, 1968) and Alfredo Rizzardi (*Tremila Formiche Rosse*, Guanda, 1968) produced a series of translations which, in the 1970s, presented to Italian readers the novel *Her (Lei)*, translated by Floriana Bossi, Einaudi, 1970) and a selection of poems, accompanied by a wonderful introduction, edited by the poet Roberto Sanesi (*Poesie*, Guanda, 1976). His political poems (edited by Nat Scamacca, Celebes, 1977) were also published. This was well before Fernanda Pivano presented various important books written by the American author (in 1981 and 1995) and four years after the anthology *Poesia degli ultimi americani* (Feltrinelli, 1964), which drew on the series of encounters and friendships that Pivano had been cultivating in the United States since the late 1950s. Today, various books by Ferlinghetti have been published and are available in Italy, but perhaps the most extensive and authoritative presentation was written by Massimo Bacigalupo (*Poesie. Questi sono i miei fiumi. Antologia personale, 1955-1993*, 1996). Bacigalupo clearly illustrates the particular

style of the poet Ferlinghetti, who, through the use of quotationism, collages and 'spoonerism' (an interchange of the initial letters or syllables of two words), simultaneously revives Pound's invective against usury and Ginsberg's attack on the great Moloch, and finally concluding:

Ferlinghetti was a disciple of both Eliot and Pound, who loved to quote from other writings. However, a difference may perhaps be noted insofar as Ferlinghetti, being a more public poet, refers to a repertoire available to everyone, whereas Pound and Eliot liked to discover and quote from exotic sources and impose them on their intimidated readers. It should be noted that Ferlinghetti followed regular courses of study in American and French universities and therefore gained familiarity in a professional manner with the annals of both ancient and modern literature. As we have seen, he subsequently acquired familiarity with such works also in his professional position as a bookseller and publisher. Finally, it may be noted that quoting explicitly may be likened to declaring a debt while not worrying about it; imitating others or being subject to plagiarism is quite a different matter (as Ferlinghetti points out when he refers to his having been plagiarized by Eliot in his youth) (FERLINGHETTI 1996b: 12).

Ferlinghetti is ironic, sardonic, a protester, elegantly brazen and courageous, a blatantly self-declared thief of quotations from volumes of poetry from the distant and not-so-distant past, and a writer very adept at re-elaborating the content of works by Cecco Angiolieri and Dino Campana, Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Pier Paolo Pasolini, Dylan Thomas and William Burroughs, Woody Guthrie and W.B. Yeats. He employs a grafting technique, much less serious than what had been proposed by the 'high modernism' of Eliot and Pound in the 1920s, but in any case which summarized – *ante litteram* – the witty and swaggering self-irony of the post-modern movement. The latter group

managed to incorporate everything but also feasted on everything, emptying it of any meaning. In his poem ‘Pity the Nation’ (cf. FERLINGHETTI 2014/2019a) it is worth noting the manner in which he rewrites a well-known text by Khalil Gibran and how – although now a centenarian – he continues to be one of the great paladins of freedom and of people’s rights:

Pity the nation whose people are sheep  
and whose shepherds misled them  
Pity the nation whose leaders are liars  
Whose sages are silenced  
and whose bigots haunt airwavers  
Pity the nation that raises not its voice  
but aims to rule the world  
by force and by torture [...]  
(FERLINGHETTI 2014/2019a: 48).

Ferlinghetti manages to avoid any form of superficiality or, linguistically, becoming an end unto himself as occurred in the case of more than one of the Black Mountain poets or in the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E Poets group. His poetry directly touches the sensibility of the reader, on account of both the content and musicality of the verses and also the current relevance of the themes dealt with. He is never content with simply divulging information or writing verses with a jazz-style rhythm. His work falls into the category of a contemporary reformulation of the ‘stream of consciousness’, a technique significantly revived in *Little Boy*, his last prose work. This occurs moreover when it becomes concise and evocative of clear, incisive and memorable visual images, with the coincidence in almost every verse of a new set of images and quotations, so much so that the overlapping of accumulated content often allows for an association with the work of at least two well-known contemporary writers: Bob Dylan and John Ashbery. In an interview with the journalist Rosanna Guerrini, published in the

weekly news magazine “Tempo” (January 18, 1969), answering a question about what he thought about poetry, Ferlinghetti said, “I don’t think we should continue to use the word ‘poetry’; we ought to speak in terms of an ‘oral message for the public’. I think that poems have to be recited very loudly, and perhaps they should be accompanied by jazz and Indian music; in short, we should do everything possible to let these oral messages raise people’s awareness and induce a change of heart”.

His texts always assume the form of an accusation, both when they are largely argumentative and also when they are epigrammatic and present a telegraphic style. With a loud tone they reveal scandalous situations and issue necessary warnings to a humanity now imbued with indifference and subjected to the great power of capital and consumerism, and currently on the brink of drowning in a ruthless quagmire. In this situation the poet (often playing the role of a fisherman, a storyteller or a chronicler) casts out a last line of hope, and questioning the use of his favourite literary genre (in ‘Uses of Poetry’) he states:

And I am a reporter for a newspaper  
on another planet  
come to file a down-to-earth story  
of the What When Where How and Why  
of this astounding life down here  
and of the strange clowns in control of it  
the curious clowns in control of it  
with hands upon the windowsills  
of dread demonic hills  
casting their own dark shadows  
into the earth’s great shadows  
in the end of time unseen  
in the supreme hashish of our dream  
(FERLINGHETTI 1993/1996b: 34).

*(Translated from the Italian by Steve Pastorello)*

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**Edwin Morgan:  
Translator of Un-Realities**

- FERLINGHETTI, LAWRENCE. 2019.b *Little Boy*. London: Faber & Faber.
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For Edwin Morgan, writing was a particular means of exploring reality. In the process of presenting reality in language, he would often employ a technological or science fiction viewpoint from which to observe the effects produced on his characters by alterity. His positive inclination towards a stylistic confrontation of any sort brought new energies to the human mind. The de-familiarisation of language in Morgan's work is often a de-familiarisation of self-identity when the Self is confronted with the Other. Knowledge, thereby, is based not only on the natural facts of reality, but also on our dealings with the other-than-myself. This allows the poet to accept change as an inevitable component of the never-ending transformation of the Self (BAILLIE 1962: 33, 35). Morgan's word-play is primarily a play with the voices of the Other, because the confrontation with other beings circuits the counter-discursive 'alien-ness' of most of his messages. His desire to contaminate the Self is often accompanied by a desire to contaminate languages. In this way, the poet subverts traditional ideas of national identity and local preoccupations, making all sorts of different fields of research form a hybridised and counter-hegemonic discourse: science, literature, philosophy, religion, art and music merge to mount a counterattack against conventional modes of perception. Yet, moving in and out of traditional modes has helped Morgan to avoid being tied to a single form of influence. His determination to consider writing as an exploration has enabled him to compare poetry to a spaceship moving

[...] into new fields of feeling and experience (or old fields which become new in new contexts or environments) [...] I have had a

long and hard search, through my own writing rather than through any conscious apprenticeships to other poets, to find a voice that I could call mine (MORGAN 1972b: 229).

It is this new voice that, far from being the authoritative declaration of a fixed idea about the world and society, declares its openness to other kinds of being and presence:

You can appear to write about yourself directly and not be doing it [...] but I would think that a lot of the poems I write do project either me or a part of me into some other circumstance, and eventually it would be seen that these are all aspects of me [...] So I would project myself into other existences, perhaps other people, like the apple, or even like the hyena or the Loch Ness Monster, or whatever (ASCHERSON 1981: 81).

Morgan's Other, speaking and stating his or her own right to exist, is an entity sharing the political advantages of democracy and the scientific evidence of our chaotic and indeterminate existence. The exploration of as many diverse realities as the imagination can generate has launched Morgan's poetic research into the indefiniteness of outer space in order to cross the borders of the rationally conceivable. In many of his poems, scientific notions are mixed with a fictionalised foreshadowing of the future possibilities of human civilisation. The difficulty of producing such a poetry, Morgan observes, is admitted:

The main problem is how the faculty of imagination is to gain entry to a world of fact. There are two possible approaches: through a science-fiction poetry paralleling the development of science fiction in prose, and through a poetry that selects, juxtaposes, and broods on interesting features of the scientific (factual or theoretical) science and tries to relate these to human experience (MORGAN 1974: 10).

It is particularly in the science-fiction poems that Morgan engages in keeping the worlds of art and science in contact, and in transfiguring both of them. As he shows in the nine-poem sequence, 'Interferences', both the linguistic and the scientific expectations of the two respective systems can be deflected when confronted with alien presences. Here the intrusion of the non-human point of view is reflected in the deflection of the flight of an arrow and in the linguistic deformation of the last line:

not to be deflected  
the arrow, puffed up  
speeding busily  
straight to its  
targix  
(MORGAN 1973: 43)

Encountering the Other is always for Morgan the cause of a linguistic and cultural dislocation when the confrontation leads to an actual dialogic clash. As Alan Bold observes: "In Morgan's poetry there is very little tender human contact between people" (MORGAN 1973: 79). The protagonists of his poems do not have meetings but confrontations. Yet Morgan's peculiarity consists in making each side lose and gain something from the encounter at the same time. All preconceived notions about human or alien life are dashed, so that the whole set of values that human beings usually adopt for judging the aliens, or the aliens (the barbarians, the Mercurians, the mummy of Rameses II, or the non-humans sent to investigate Earth by a mysterious Council from another galaxy, as it happens in 'Memories of Earth') adopt for judging humans, are deflected when Morgan makes them come into contact.

'The First Men on Mercury' (in *From Glasgow to Saturn*) is a dialogue between a member of a human expedition to Mercury and the Mercurians gathered to welcome the strangers. The slow, humorous code switching between English and the Mercurians'

language is a metonymic embodiment of a larger change in their respective social, cultural and aesthetic attitudes. While the Mercurians adjust their language to that of the strangers, the earthmen's aseptic and apparently pacific messages start to be modified by the Other's request for explanation:

– We come in peace from the third planet.  
Would you take us to your leader?

– Bawr stretter! Bawr. Bawr. Stretterhawl?

– This is a little plastic model  
of the solar system, with working parts.  
You are here and we are there and we  
are now here with you, is this clear?

– Gawl horrop. Bawr. Abawrhannahanna!

– Where we come from is blue and white  
with brown, you see we call the brown  
here 'land', the blue is 'sea', and the white  
is 'clouds' over land and sea, we live  
on the surface of the brown land,  
all round is sea and clouds. We are 'men'.  
Men come –

– Glawp men! Gawrbenner menko. Menhawl?

– Men come in peace from the third planet  
which we call 'earth'. We are earthmen.  
Take us earthmen to your leader.

– Thmen? Thmen? Bawr. Bawrhossop.  
Yuleeda tan hanna. Harrabost yuleeda.

– I am the yuleeda. You see my hands,  
we carry no benner, we come in peace.  
The spaceways are all stretterhawn.

– Glawn peacemen all horrabhanna tantko!  
Tan come at'mstrossop. Glawp yuleeda!  
(MORGAN 1990a: 267-68)

The first part of the poem seems to use the same technique adopted by Morgan in his 'Translunar Space March 1972', where the words of the poem go along with the scheme of human civilisation as drawn on a gold plaque ("six inches by nine"). In that poem, the confrontation between the linguistic artefact and its visual translation creates an ironic gap to be filled by the reader.<sup>1</sup> Morgan's verbal denunciation of the anti-feminist prejudices contained in the plaque goes along with ironic criticism of the apparently latent ingenuity of the two characters represented and their human aggressiveness involved in the translunar mission:

Against a diagram  
of the planets and pulsars of our solar system and galaxy,  
and superimposed on an outline of the spacecraft  
in which they are not travelling  
(and would not be as they are shown  
Even if they were) two quaint nude figures  
Face the camera. A deodorised American man  
With apologetic genitals and no pubic hair...

However,  
the male chauvinist pig  
has a sullen expression, and the woman  
is faintly smiling, so  
interplanetary intelligences may still have homework.  
(MORGAN 1990a: 254-55)

In both poems, everything pertaining to the human description of the world's cultural and geographical elements is intended to communicate the peaceful dispositions of the explorers. They show a plastic model of the earth in the first, and a gold-coated aluminium plate in the second. But there is no credulity in the Mercurians, as there is no naivety in Morgan's words. They both soon understand that there is some hidden meaning to be disclosed in the human colonising mission approaching the Other planets. In 'The First Men on Mercury', the Mercurians interpret the human words and tones in a non-referential way: their reply to the fake kindness of the earthmen warns the reader about the conflicting dialogue to come: "bawr" = bar, a joke, a humorous situation, but also, in its first meaning = to bar, exclude. It is impossible to guess whether the Mercurians speak a kind of European language (a Scots dialect with Glaswegian distortions?) or their own idiom which they slowly adjust to the English-language travellers' means of communication in order to speak back to them: the earthmen may not carry a war "benner" (banner) but, for the Mercurians, they deserve a harsh reply: "Glawn peacemen all harrabhanna tantko" which, creatively translated, sounds like: "We have known that all men declaring that they come in peace bring horror to these places, thank you." This anticipates the second part of the poem, which is both amusing and dramatic:

- Atoms are peacegawl in our harraban.  
Menbat worrabost from tan hannahanna.
- You men we know bawrhossopant. Bawr.  
We know yuleeda. Go strawg backspetter quick.
- We cantantabawr, tantingko backspetter now!
- Banhapper now! Yes, third planet back.  
Yuleeda will go back blue, white, brown

Nowhanna! There is no more talk.

- Gawl han fasthapper?
- No. You must go back to your planet.  
Go back in peace, take what you have gained  
But quickly.
- Stretterworra gawl, gawl...
- Of course, but nothing is ever the same,  
now is it? You'll remember Mercury.  
(MORGAN 1990a: 268)

Again, Morgan's conception of change recurs here to show that old systems of social or cultural hierarchy can be destroyed both through language and through revolutionary performance. The earthmen may have gained something from their visit to Mercury, but Colonisation has to acknowledge the Other in the end, and accept possible defeats.

Morgan's projection into unknown areas of knowledge and experience is metaphorically expressed in another of his science-fiction poems, 'A Home in Space'. Here the astronauts travelling to unexplored regions of space decide to cut communication with the earth base and enjoy the beauty and the silences of cosmos. Launching "themselves outwards –/outwards in an impeccable trajectory, that band" perform the unquenchable role of the "tranquil defers" who have discovered that space, time and life can be reconciled by the clarity and cleanness of their minds when absorbed by the blackness of space:

- Nights, days, months, years they lived in space.  
Space shone black in their eyes.  
Eyes, hands, food-tubes, screens, lenses, keys were one

One night – or day – or month – or year – they all –  
all gathered at the panel and agreed –  
agreed to cut communication with –  
with the earth base – and it must be said they were –  
were cool and clear as they dismantled the station and –  
and gave their capsule such power that –  
that they launched themselves outwards –  
outwards in an impeccable trajectory, that band –  
that band of tranquil defiers, not to plant any –  
any home with roots but to keep a –  
a voyaging generation voyaging, and as far –  
as far as there would ever be a home in space –  
space that needs time and time that needs life.  
(MORGAN 1990a: 387-88)

Like Brandan aimlessly travelling north, or the Seafarer condemned to leave behind him the exultations of the earth to follow “the thoughts / of my heart” (see MORGAN 1976: 102), Morgan enacts what he himself observed about Mayakovsky’s ‘A Talk with the Taxman about Poetry’ (1926): “Poetry – all poetry! – is a journey into the unknown” (MORGAN 1974: 60). In this particular poem, Morgan also enacts what Mayakovsky achieved in his brief career:

There was a turning away from nature (which bored Mayakovsky)  
and an attempt to incorporate into verse something of the urban,  
industrial, and technological dynamism of the modern world  
(MORGAN 1974: 60-1).

Morgan looks for the unknown not merely in the strange urban occurrences that startle our everyday life. He loves to imagine challenging situations where human beings can see themselves pushed towards some extreme survival test. Morgan’s typical attitude is to display an optimistic nature that contrasts with the

murky colours of Movement poetry. “Where other writers see only confusion, decay or empty technology, Morgan discovers growth, change, flux and delight”, comments Roderick Watson (WATSON 1984: 439). Asked about his most characteristic feature, Morgan replies: “I like to think of people surviving very difficult things, like the old man in ‘In the Snack-bar’ or the people in ‘In Sobieski’s Shield’. I think the characteristic of these people is that they accept real challenges or real problems but they do manage somehow to come through” (FAZZINI 1996: 50).

In ‘In Sobieski’s Shield’, a group of human beings (possibly an entire family) have been dematerialised just before solar withdrawal from the earth.<sup>2</sup> The rematerialisation “on a minor planet / a sun in Sobieski’s Shield” is the beginning of a new existence, a kind of science-fiction version of Robinson Crusoe. Morgan stresses that the regeneration the whole family goes through is quite successful: the man has only four fingers on his right hand and a curious birthmark, which he later discovers to be a tattoo seen in the past on the dead arm of a casualty in a First World War battle;<sup>3</sup> the woman is hardly altered “apart from that extraordinarily / strange and beautiful crown of bright red hair”; and the boy, with only one nipple, has lost his treble voice “and at thirteen he is a man / what a limbo to lose childhood in where has / it gone between the throwing of a switch and these / alien iron hills across so many stars”. The whole poem insists on the process of change and rebirth: “rematerialised” (l. 7), “reconstitution” (l. 13), “violent change” (l. 18), “being born” (l. 20), “rematerialisation” (ll. 30, and 76), “altered” (l. 34), “second life” (ll. 37, 56, and 96) are only a few marks of Morgan’s philosophy. The stoic and heroic note of the poem obviously derives from Morgan’s Anglo-Saxon readings. Even so, the melancholic tone and the general sense of loss that characterised Morgan’s early writing have vanished by *The Second Life*, in which the three characters show a clear resolve to accept the new life given to them by technology as a sort of extreme way out, put at their disposal for the survival of the hu-

man race.<sup>4</sup> Commenting on the poem 'A Home in Space', Morgan muses:

I take up this idea, that once we land on and eventually, presumably, live in and have children on other worlds, and then look back at earth, will we always be nostalgic for it, or are we ourselves evolving into creatures who can live contentedly on other worlds? I like to think of that process going on as far forward in time as we can imagine (NICHOLSON 1992: 69).

The family's confrontation with an alien space is strongly dramatised in 'In Sobieski's Shield'. Even the transformation of their own bodies is an important component in understanding the moral and technological value of their 'second life':

I don't  
know what made me use that phrase who are we  
if we are not who we were we have only  
one life though we are huddled now in our  
protective dome on this harsh metallic plain  
that belches cobalt from its craters under a  
white-bronze pulsing gong of a sun it was all  
they could do for us light-years away it seemed suitable  
dematerialisation's impossible over short distance anyway  
so let's start moving I can surely get onto my feet  
(MORGAN 1968: 79)

The poem follows the dramatic-monologue technique and for this reason, the reader has to adopt the speaker's point of view. Accepting the suspension of disbelief imposed by the poet, the reader shares the father's science-fictional narrative proffered at the moment of his material reconstitution, just before he decides to exit, with his family, from the 'protective dome'. As Robert Langbaum points out: "By seeing what the speaker sees we are able to

identify ourselves with him, stand in his position and thus inside the poem, where meaning resides" (LANGBAUM 1985: 137). Father, mother, and son (a new 'trio' which reminds one of the homonymous poem 'Trio' contained in Morgan's 1968 collection, *The Second Life*) are caught in the limbo of an in-between world where the memories of their past life are still vivid, albeit blurred, and the expectancies of their future are scary and unimaginable. Yet, the last words of the poem, as Morgan observes, "are acceptance of the environment and going out into it, into further dangers – and a kind of acceptance of the unknown" (MORGAN 1990b: 83). Bodies and minds changed, all three of them step into the 'unknown', thinking about their own changing identity. The poem, in this sense, can be read as a great metaphor for the precious achievement of that process of *ostranenie* (defamiliarisation) that enables the poet both to reflect on poetic artifice and to introduce an "unexpected point of entry into his subject-matter" (GREGSON 1996: 146).

Morgan usually resorts to technology or science fiction to see the effects on his science-fiction characters produced by alterity. Alteration, far from being a surreal and dramatic Kafkaesque metamorphosis, here brings new energies:

we shall live in the rings of this chain the jeremiahs  
who said nothing human would stand are confounded if I cry  
even the dry tear in my heart that I cannot  
stop or if I laugh to think they thought they  
could divide the indivisible the old man's moon in  
the new moon's arms let's take our second  
like our first life out from the dome are the suits  
ready the mineral storm is quieter it's hard  
to go let's go  
(MORGAN 1968: 81)

In 'Home in Space' the astronauts' decision to enter a new life dimension is underlined by a series of anadiploses which, through

doubling and repetition, reflect the surreal and hypnotic condition of the voyagers' minds. In 'In Sobieski's Shield' the uninterrupted and unpunctuated flux of phrases and sentences stands for the imaginary link between dematerialisation and rematerialisation – between world and space. In both poems, the linguistic texture mirrors the process of imagination and its possibilities so that a defamiliarisation of language is also a defamiliarisation of the identity of the Self when it is confronted with another dimension of reality. In these poems, rhetoric occupies the interstices between the real and the wholly imaginative, the liminal space between the end of the humans' first life and their entry into their second life. As Robin Hamilton points out, "identities change and transpose, but not completely: each is infected, interfered with by the other, but as they pass through a central focus of language, they never quite meet, and never quite become wholly the other" (HAMILTON 1982: 37).

'Alien' realities in Morgan's poetry may also be human: this allows the poet to represent the Self/Other or Barbarian/Civilised dichotomy in a very ironic way. All the poems where non-human beings face the human world, and human attitudes and feelings, are characterised by a similar acceptance of change as an inevitable component of the development of the self. As an alien states after visiting the earth and reporting on the human impact on their consciousness: "Since we came back from earth, nothing's the same" (MORGAN 1990a: 330).

If we juxtaposed that sentence with the closing line of 'The First Men on Mercury' ("Of course, but nothing is ever the same, / now is it? You'll remember Mercury"), it is clear that Morgan's idea of change is double-edged: the border between the two conflicting entities is mysterious and indefinable because both are enmeshed in an endless transformation. In the same way, the translation of a perception into a linguistic reality is impossible because language is precisely that border where the mystery of the conflict occurs:

It seems this is a world of change, where we,  
observing, can scarcely fix the observed  
and are unfixed ourselves.

(MORGAN 1990a: 337)

'Memories of Earth' records the playing of two fragments of a tape that aliens, sent to earth by the authoritative Council of a distant world, recorded during their travel.<sup>5</sup> The explorers, whose names (Hlad, Hazmon, Baltaz, Tromro, Erkon, and probably others) are mentioned by the voice that spoke into the tape recorder, must avoid questions and exclamatory utterances in order to offer as objective a report as possible to their authorities:

Keep your report formal, said the Council,  
your evidence is for the memory banks,  
not for crude wonder or cruder appraisal.  
I only report that nature is not the same.

(MORGAN 1990a: 331)

Aware that their encounter with humans has distorted their characters, they admit their difference from their fellows, and from the members of the Council in particular. So, reporting on their voyage, they stare "at the Council / as if they were an alien life form" and question the values of the Council's traditional morality and conventional behaviour. Their contact with the Other has opened new horizons to moral, social and political development, so that a whole set of questions can be raised and accepted by them:

Who told who tell us not to feel?  
tell us love's wrong, leads to suffering?  
hate's wrong, leads to fire and battlefields?  
and questions above all are wrong, lead to  
deflected meditation on the order



we wait to see: who says? What use is order  
to a chained world under a painted sky?  
If any order's there we'd break it like  
a shell to let some living touch emerge.  
(MORGAN 1990a: 340)

In *Sonnets from Scotland*, the whole sequence of fifty-one sonnets is an unstructured report that alien beings have made about Scotland. The sequence offers glimpses into the whole history of Scotland, from the pre-glacial period to a future post-referendum age. Here, again, the alien presences are clearly moved by what they have seen during their visit, and their report covers a large span of time and space in Scottish geography, history, philosophy, and literature ([ROBIN HAMILTON] 1985: 144-147). Everything in the sequence can have a voice, especially those who have been excluded by the discourse of the literary canon:

'If those stones could speak –' Do not wish too loud.  
They can, they do, they will. No voice is lost.  
(MORGAN 1984: 13)

As Morgan states in the very first sonnet of the sequence, "There is no beginning". In fact, there is no linear progression of time in Morgan's treatment of the Scottish historical past, as there is no scientific cartographic representation of the Scottish landscape or of the Scottish urban areas. Adopting the aliens' point of view and making them underline the privileged status of certain events or characters in Scottish culture, Morgan consequently passes over the traditional discourse of the powerful nations. Sharing with Hayden White the idea that historical narratives are "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (WHITE 1978: 82), Morgan allows the aliens to be enriched by a 'barbarous' civi-

lisation which regards both science and literature as regulated by the power of invention and imagination:

James Hutton that true son of fire who said  
to Burns 'Aye, man, the rocks melt with the sun'  
was sure the age of reason's time was done:  
what but imagination could have read  
granite boulders back to their molten roots?  
(MORGAN 1984: 24)

The world, and Scotland in particular, seems to have inscribed a relevant series of emotions and sensations on the aliens' conscience that, like an unwritten page, or a slate, on which something has been scribbled for the first time, cannot be restored to its pristine original state. This technique allows Morgan to under-privilege English culture, thereby showing his openness to other external realities and, at the same time, to underline the importance of the relationship with the Other (= aliens), so that

This lifts us out of the imperialist perspective through which we view ourselves as central and all other history in relation to us, into an awareness that we must be subject to the same criticism and interrogation to which we subject other ages (HOUSTON 1995: 69).

Their strange feelings of fastidiousness and love for the Other enact a personal and enriching acceptance of the hybridisation of the Self:

only now this unforeseen  
reluctance, like a slate we could not clean  
of characters, yet could not read, or write  
our answers on, or smash, or take with us.  
Not a hedgehog stirred. We sighed, climbed in, locked.  
If it was love we felt, would it not keep,

and travel where we travelled? Without fuss  
we lifted off, but as we checked and talked  
a far horn grew to break that people's sleep.  
(MORGAN 1984: 59)

No voice is lost in Morgan's work. It seems easy for him to allow persons, space modules, stones, gulls, an apple and musical instruments to tell their stories and to share a polyphonic sense of Otherness. He likes to recuperate even the voice of the stones, absorbing it into the universal and democratic discourse of the hybrid that is now Scotland. Presenting the resources of Scotland in 1972, the poet affirms:

Within Scotland at the present time, with the desire to gather together rather than to disperse, and with the consciousness of common effort being at last not utterly inconceivable, the inclusiveness of 'yes' – whatever the risk of accusations of chauvinism – would be preferred to the pedantry of 'no' (MORGAN 1974: 164).

Inclusiveness, openness and acceptance of change are the main characteristics of Morgan's writing. The variety of the Scottish linguistic environment, the deformations and incomprehension caused by its unstable cultural system, the presence of translation as the pivotal element of the Scottish tradition – these are some of the main elements in the process of defamiliarisation characterising Morgan's work. His poetry is a constant re-writing and re-reading of the English literary tradition in order to subvert its canon and affirm the postcolonial politics of the dynamic hybrid.<sup>6</sup> Morgan refuses to accept any systematic polarisation. His elusive style and his varied literary production seem to reflect the indefinable field that human linguistic means can approach only through a multiplicity of discourses that construct history through a procession of styles.<sup>7</sup> Following the flashy appearance of the 'whittrick' (MORGAN 1990b: 120) in one of Morgan's childhood memories –

that kind of elusiveness of mind he finds in writers such as Dunbar, Burns, MacDiarmid (all Scottish) – a precise view of reality is forbidden to human senses because there is no clear set of ordered values to guide our perception of the world. In this way, with the help of the whittricks' mercurial potentiality for overlapping worlds, or bringing together different spheres of existence, we can give the "mighty slip to history" (MORGAN 1990a: 82) and finally enable our minds to enjoy a moment of democratically refreshing intrusion into otherness.

## NOTES

1. The visual translation of the poem was omitted by Morgan from his *Collected Poems*. The picture can be seen in GEOFFREY SUMMERFIELD 1974: 254.
2. With regard to the science-fiction theme of teleportation, see, as a possible source for Morgan's poem, the American magazine *Weird Science* (13, July-August 1950), which contains a story that seems to show an amazing similarity with the poem 'In Sobieski's Shield'. See, also, a different use of teleportation, the movie *The Fly* (1958), directed by Kurt Neumann, and its 1986 remake by David Cronenberg.
3. See the precise coincidence with a detail in the teleportation process of the protagonist of the movie *12 Monkeys* (1995), directed by Terry Gilliam.
4. See, for example, the positive note Robin Fulton finds in *The Second Life*, which the critic interprets as a kind of renewal for Morgan: "Renewal (second life) both cosmic, as man reaches into space, urban, as the slums are cleared, and personal, as an individual man experiences and records the simplicities of a close relationship" (FULTON 1974: 30).
5. As a source for the first part of the poem, where Morgan describes the miniaturisation of human beings entering a piece of rock, see the following two movies: *The Chemist* (1936), directed by George Webber, and *Dr. Cyclops* (1940), directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoesack.
6. See Helen Tiffin's suggestions regarding subversive postcolonial manoeuvres: "Post-colonial literatures/cultures are thus constituted in counter-discursive rather than homologous practices, and they offer 'fields' of counter-discursive strategies to the dominant discourse. The operation of post-colonial counter-discourse is dynamic, not static". See HELEN TIFFIN. "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse". *Kunapipi* (9:3, 1987): 18.
7. Speaking of the characteristics of postmodern literary works, Simon During observes: "In this a-historical and ungrounded society the collapse of both reason and history's authority leaves only fragments: a multiplicity of discourses, each incommensurable with the other; a welter of independent, localised micro-narratives; a series of images and the play of Signifiers unhinged from the concepts they once signified and the reality they once referred to". SIMON DURING. "Postmodernism or Postcolonialism?". *Landfall* (39:3, 1985): 367.

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Derek Walcott:

A Sea-Voyage

- MORGAN, EDWIN. 1991. *Hold Hands Among the Atoms*. Glasgow: Mariscat Press.
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“That’s all them bastards have left us: words.” The character Shabine’s curt observation about his linguistic patrimony is the very core of his personal drama both as a seaman and a poet, something Derek Walcott uses both to endorse a geographic and linguistic re-enactment of the Caribbean history and to suggest a possible path through the use of the English literary language for intertextual purposes. Published in his 1979 volume *The Star-Apple Kingdom* – earlier versions had appeared in the *Massachusetts Review* (Winter 1977) and in *Chant of Saints* (1979) and *Trinidad & Tobago Review* (May 1978) – the long poem ‘The Schooner Flight’ is probably the most touching work ever produced by Walcott, a dissertation about a people’s and a poet’s destiny on one of the many Caribbean islands where colonisation had interfered with place, time and people’s lives, causing earthquakes in language, race, power and trade. But let us see first what the poem is about and meet the protagonist of this work, Shabine, and the way in which his life-journey is interlaced with that of Derek Walcott himself.

Shabine is one of the many mulatto inhabitants of the Caribbean islands, a mixed-race outcast who signs on as a seaman on a schooner, definitively leaving his woman, Maria Concepcion, for whom he has earlier left his wife and children. It is clear from the beginning that Shabine’s personal history can stand for all those people whose identity has been obfuscated first by their forefathers’ deportation out of Africa and, secondly, by the post-colonial wrongs perpetrated by the new political classes who took over on the islands. Here is Shabine presenting himself to the reader:

I know these islands from Monos to Nassau,  
 a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes  
 that they nickname Shabine, the patois for  
 any red nigger, and I, Shabine, saw  
 when these slums of empire was paradise.  
 I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,  
 I had a sound colonial education,  
 I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,  
 and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation...  
 (WALCOTT 1979: 4)

In these lines are concentrated several problematic issues, such as: the relationship between race and national identity; the corruption of any once-colonised areas of the world where political and geographical appropriation have determined both ecological and cultural conflicts; the overlapping of the writer's voice with the persona's dramatic voice; and the relationship between culture, language and the many *auctoritates* that form both a literary canon and a personal set of influences on the writer, reminding us his key observation where he states: "...the writers of my generation were natural assimilators. We knew the literature of Empires, Greek, Roman, British, through their essential classics..." (WALCOTT 1970: 4). Walcott, commenting on Seamus Heaney's review of *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, had to recognise that something intertextually relevant filters both into this long poem and, probably, into all of his poetry. Walcott's comment on Heaney's observations is particularly relevant here: "You have your debts to your predecessors; your acknowledgment is a votive acknowledgment. Seamus Heaney recognised in a review that 'The Schooner Flight' opens like *Piers Plowman*. You put that deliberately: 'as this reminded me of that, so let it remind you also'" (BAER 1995: 92).

'The Schooner Flight' is not only a poem about a sea voyage, an escape from a corrupted island (Trinidad in this case) and a flight to some sort of new dimension of the being, but also a meta-

poetical work ("I go draw and knot every line as tight/as ropes in this rigging") – a much earlier poem, 'Islands', read: "I seek... to write/Verse crisp as sand, clear as sunlight,/Cold as the curled wave, ordinary/As a tumbler of island water") –, about writing and poetry. It can be read as a long and scholarly improvisation on English language and literature, so as to show that "a sound colonial education" serves here to construct a refined texture through which we can see both a rhythmical and thematic counter-discursive re-elaboration of sources. So, we perceive here not only the alliterative rhythms of Langland's *Piers Plowman* when, as observed by Heaney, weary of wandering, the protagonist goes for a rest – "In summer season, when soft was the sun, / I rigged myself up in a long robe, rough like a sheep's, / With skirts hanging like a hermit's, unholy of works, / Went wide in this world, wonders to hear. / But on a May morning, on Malvern Hills, / A marvel befell me – magic it seemed. / I was weary of wandering and went for a rest / Under a broad bank, by a brook's side; / And as I lay lolling, looking at the water, / I slid into a sleep..." – but, also, all of the murky atmosphere linked to the *tristesse* of the Anglo-Saxon elegies, especially of the 'Seafarer' when, as a forced exile, the speaker has to move towards a kind of dramatic and final dislocation. 'The Seafarer', like 'The Schooner Flight', works through a soliloquy: a *wraecca* (also meaning 'wretch', 'stranger', 'wanderer' 'pilgrim', 'unhappy man', definitions we could also use and apply to Shabine) that "tells of the many winters (years) he has spent in exile on the sea, and the hardships he has borne. His mind then moves to the future, and his trepidation at the thought of a new sea-journey he has to make" (ALEXANDER 1991: 46): "Driven to talk of myself, a true story, / I have to tell of journeys, and how I / bore the brunt of hard days with bitter/sorrow of heart, and went with my ship / through regions that whiten the hair, and there / felt the terrible under-sway of the waves" (BANTOCK 1972: 20).

Yet, the Anglo-Saxon musical and thematic presence in Walcott's poetry is interrelated with many other intertextual grafts, so

as to render ‘The Schooner Flight’ a real summa of sources and rewritings. Heaney, again, has observed that: “Africa and England beat messages along his blood. The humanist voices of his education and the voices from his elemental inarticulate place keep insisting on their full claims, pulling him in two different directions” (HEANEY 1993: 305). This enables us to go back to the quotation with which I opened: “That’s all them bastards have left us: words.” ‘The Schooner Flight’ is undoubtedly a hybridisation of voices, rhythms and languages as Walcott shows in the sixth section of his poem, a part dedicated to the different names of the casuarina trees and to the process of linguistic mimicry that stands at the very core of the relationship between coloniser and colonised. This kind of double, triple or multi-linguistic bind, responsible for a conflicting alternation between a feeble auditory remembrance of lost languages and the everyday use of the colonisers’ speech modes, determines both a linguistic and political schizophrenia where, after the amnesia of African histories and languages, English must be appropriated and poetry and life must begin again, as Walcott says in a beautiful poem published in *The Castaway*:

Schizophrenic, wrenched by two styles,  
 one a hack’s hired prose, I earn  
 my exile. I trudge this sickle, moonlit beach for miles,

tan, burn  
 to slough off  
 this love of ocean that’s self-love.

To change your language you must change your life.  
 (WALCOTT 1992: 55)

The broken English Shabine uses throughout ‘The Schooner Flight’ wants to be a clear reminder of a people’s linguistic dis-possession, of an unconscious rhythmical pulse which, as Wal-

cott himself has observed, is “a matter of the accent, a matter of the tone” (BAER 1995: 128), coming directly from Africa. Here is Shabine’s voice describing his encounter with some of the great admirals responsible for the colonisation of his land and of the violence perpetrated against all those Shabines who were forced to contribute to the conquistador’s enterprises:

Man, I brisk in the galley first thing next dawn,  
 brewing li’l coffee; fog coil from the sea  
 like the kettle steaming when I put it down  
 slow, slow, ‘cause I couldn’t believe what I see:  
 where the horizon was one silver haze,  
 the fog swirl and swell into sails, so close  
 that I saw it was sails, my hair grip my skull,  
 it was horrors, but it was beautiful.  
 We float through a rustling forest of ships  
 with sails dry like paper, behind the glass  
 I saw men with rusty eyeholes like cannons,  
 and whenever their half-naked crews cross the sun,  
 right through their tissue, you traced their bones  
 like leaves against the sunlight; frigates, barkentines,  
 the backward-moving current swept them on,  
 and high on their decks I saw great admirals,  
 Rodney, Nelson, de Grasse, I heard the hoarse orders  
 They gave those Shabines...  
 (WALCOTT 1979: 10-11)

Yet, this broken English is some sort of English after all, which Shabine calls “my common language”. Having to come to terms with a history of linguistic dispossession, Shabine’s (and Walcott’s) appropriation in ‘The Schooner Flight’ attracts strategic and showy stands against and towards the coloniser’s language. As Ned Thomas has observed, “common” must have “a wider reference to the international currency of English, and ‘my’ must represent the



poet's individual attempt to wrest it to his own purpose, an ambitious, individualist undertaking" (THOMAS 1991: 88).

English cannot be disclaimed in the Caribbean context, as it happens in other post-colonial contexts, so that all the conscious and learned voices appearing in 'The Schooner Flight' clearly reminds one of the 'humanist' side of Walcott, a side made of large quotations and remembrances from Coleridge, Dylan Thomas, Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, Edgar Allan Poe and W.B. Yeats. This intertextual, and often parodic process of re-use and quotation in Walcott's 'The Schooner Flight' has been clearly heard in the previous quotation, where the poet has rewritten the Ancient Mariner's encounter with a ghostly ship when Death and Life-in-Death were casting dice to win the Mariner's soul: "Alas! (thought I, and my heart beat loud) / How fast she nears and nears! / Are those her sails that glance in the Sun, / Like restless gossamers? // Are those her ribs through which the Sun / Did peer, as through a grate? / And is that woman all her crew? / Is that a Death? And are there two? Is Death that woman's mate?" Yet, it is not the only Coleridgean appropriation in 'The Schooner Flight': the storm is a threatening and vivid presence both in Walcott and in Coleridge; in the eleventh section of 'The Schooner Flight', called 'After the Storm', a moment of resolution seems to bring some release to Shabine's peregrinations: despite the decadence of the Caribbean landscape and of its political situation commented by Shabine in the opening sections, he manages to bless "every town, / the blue smell of smoke in hills behind them, / and the one small road winding down them like twine / to the roofs below...", in the same way as the Ancient Mariner's accepts the water-snakes, and blesses them: "O happy living things! No tongue / Their beauty might declare: / A spring of love gushed from my heart, / And I blessed them unaware: / Sure my kind saint took pity on me, / And I blessed them unaware."

There is always in Walcott an alternation between the luscious beauty of the Caribbean islands and the depressing decadence

linked to their neo-capitalist corrupted situation, so as to suggest that any idealised dimension (linguistic, environmental and economic) is not only lost forever but also part of a dreamed past where a personal and national childhood cannot really face this new historic, psychological and economic violence determined by imperialism:

But they had started to poison my soul  
with their big house, big car, big-time bohbohl,  
coolie, nigger, Syrian, and French Creole,  
so I leave it for them and their carnival...  
(WALCOTT 1979: 4)

And again on Trinidad:

I have seen things that would make a slave sick  
in this Trinidad, the Limers' Republic.  
(WALCOTT 1979: 7)

Or on the myth of the western progress:

"Progress is something to ask Caribs about.  
They kill them by millions, some in war,  
some by forced labor dying in the mines  
looking for silver, after that niggers; more  
progress. Until I see definite signs  
that mankind change, Vince, I ain't want to hear.  
Progress is history's dirty joke.  
Ask that sad green island getting nearer."  
(WALCOTT 1979: 14)

On the other hand, through Shabine's "sea-green eyes" we are often offered images from a time when "these slums of empire were paradise", when "emerald water, whose ceiling rippled like

a silk tent” was probably devoid of all the bones of his dead forefathers, and when he could enjoy Maria Concepcion’s “round brown eyes like a marmoset, and / till the day when I can lean back and laugh, / those claws that tickled my back on sweating / Sunday afternoons, like a crab on wet sand.” All this, together with the vista of the Barbados green “casuarinas”, “bracing like windbreaks, needles for hurricanes, / trailing, like masts, the cirrus of torn sails...”, belongs to an Edenic past that Shabine links to his childhood years, using a famous phrase taken from the poem ‘Fern Hill’ by Dylan Thomas: “As I was green like them...”.

So, while losing faith in the love of his woman, Shabine no longer believes in the possibility of a revolutionary change: the only alternatives left are a spaghetti western with Clint Eastwood or the dedication to his poetry, tottering between tragedy and farce (BRESLIN 2001: 202). Now we are approaching the very end of the poem where, after the storm and the realisation of the artificiality of nationality (“I had no nation now but the imagination”), Shabine has decided to accept the history-less reality of his islands and start from there for a new discovery, a new re-thinking of his people’s identity. So, if probably we agree with Walcott when he says that the only epic aspect in ‘The Schooner Flight’ is the width of the sea, where he can still see or dream of “the veiled face of Maria Concepcion, marrying the ocean”, of “the white clouds, the sea and the sky with one seam” that are clothes enough for his nakedness and of a poem where “each phrase go be soaked in salt.” What is more disconcerting here is to discover that Shabine has sung for us (and written for us) from the depths of the sea after a long journey that has led him all through the main islands of this Caribbean sea: Trinidad, Barbados, St. Lucia, Dominica and, finally, Bahamas. Like a new version of Eliot’s Phoenician Sailor (or “drowned sailor”) – several references to ‘drowning’, ‘bathing’, ‘immersion’, ‘diving’ and ‘salvaging’ underwater are scattered throughout the poem so as to invoke a totally new start of a political, moral and social life –, Shabine is, at the same time, both one of the many

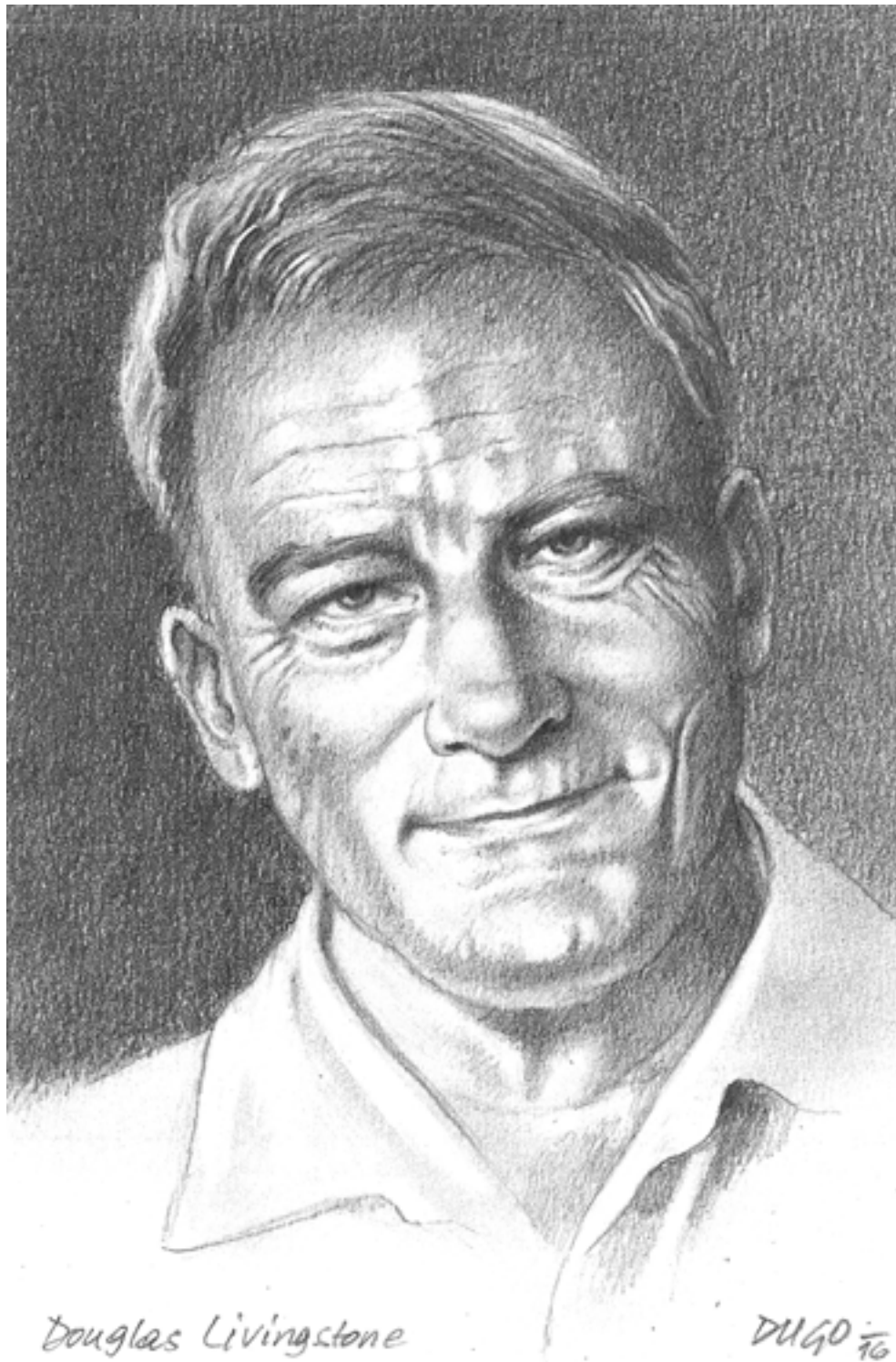
Shabines scattered from Senegal to San Salvador – corkscrewed “to the sea bed of sea worms”, falling in the middle of an inevitable and terrifying eddy, reminding us the one described by Poe in his ‘A Descent into the Maelstrom’ – and a symbolic presence awaiting to bloom with the coming spring to bring regeneration and fertility. The little exercise book where Shabine has written his poetry, defended by him against the derision of the Flight’s crew, is now his only weapon and hope. Against the amnesia of history and a dramatic past made of dislocation and violence, Shabine has to choose between revenge for the past or nothing: “if there was nothing, there was everything to be made” replies Walcott in one of his core critical essays (WALCOTT, 1970: 4). This new beginning comes after love and after war: at a certain stage of human history, they must fall and leave blank pages to be written with the aid of the poet’s imagination, a creative ‘flight’ moving not only ‘from’ a place to be left but also ‘to’ a place to be headed for that can harbour and frame a new life for all the dispossessed, an entire people deserving of a new epic and a new blooming:

But things must fall, and so it always was,  
on one hand Venus, on the other Mars;  
fall, and are one, just as this earth is one  
island in archipelagos of stars.  
My first friend was the sea. Now, is my last.  
I stop talking now. I work, then I read,  
cotching under a lantern hooked to the mast.  
I try to forget what happiness was,  
and when that don’t work, I study the stars.  
Sometimes is just me, and the soft-scissored foam  
as the deck turn white and the moon open  
a cloud like a door, and the light over me  
is a road in white moonlight taking me home.  
Shabine sang to you from the depths of the sea.  
(WALCOTT 1979: 20)

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Douglas Livingstone:  
Sea-Drops for the Third Eye



Much of Douglas Livingstone's writing involved an exploration of the fracture zones of the individual's multifaceted personality. In reading him from that perspective, the reader must engage with a series of dualisms characteristic of the general view of the (African) world. Tony Ullyatt put it this way: "Together, these dualities constitute parts of a much more complex yet cohesive and congruent pattern. Livingstone's is a world of boundaries and littoral zones, situated between the either/or territories of science and art, of compassion and disgust, of celebration and mourning" (ULLYATT 2008: 71).

Africa, then, with its social conflicts and corresponding psychological states, is observed at a distance, with detachment, demonstrating that solitude and corruption are natural prerogatives of man. Livingstone's unease derives from both the sense of exile and alienation that affects many white citizens of South Africa and, in particular, those dramatic historical events such as the bloodshed that characterised the period from the 1960s onwards, most tellingly the loss of life in Soweto in 1976. Even so, he did not allow politics to dominate; Livingstone's extravagant metaphysics went hand in hand with an ironical approach to himself and to his love of writing. Purity was the guiding principle of Livingstone's wit, whether toward writing verse, or involved in his daily round of analysing the water from the Indian Ocean off the coast of Durban, or contemplating the planet in its entirety, which was never far from his thoughts. A typical farewell phrase of his was, "Keep it clean," one he said time and again, and used in his letters. In a poem, Walter Saunders has commented on this phrase:

What clean? Did he mean your head, your  
tool, or the planet earth, or all three –  
the *wry* jester with words? Well, reply,  
if you can, set his laughter crackling  
your headpiece.  
(SAUNDERS 1996: 5)

This ironic ambiguity was deliberate on Livingstone's part, as was his use of masks – Giovanni Jacopo, Mutiswayo Shandu, Jonathan Rich, etc. – and the games of hide-and-seek of which he was a master. His indirect, impersonal, objective approach climaxes in *A Littoral Zone* (1991), his last major collection, combining the explicit autobiography of diary writing, drawing on his daily occupation as a microbiologist, with an oblique approach to art filtered by science and by a tireless commitment to ecological issues. The latter more than once led him to be christened the first 'green' South African poet, long before such concerns reached a widespread public (see EVERITT 2005).

All of Livingstone's poems present a difficulty of a sort. Even his love poems are impeded by physical or psychological restraints that deny a full joy or playfulness, allowing the reader to share with him his insights into the dissociation of modern experience. What probably attracts any reader towards Livingstone's poetry is not only the unavoidable feeling of unbalance provoked by his mixed reactions against reality and the human condition, but mainly his provocative approach to life which, as Christopher Hope has underlined: "broke all the rules about what a poet should be" (HOPE 2008: 58). Opening the poem, 'A Natural History of the Negatio Bacillus', Livingstone says:

*i Definition of Negatio*

The distance between emotion and intellect, or heaven  
and earth, when such a distance constitutes pathogenesis.  
(LIVINGSTONE 1978: 56)

Here the poet's perception of a divided universe in his microcosmic personal environment forces the reader to enter the disorientation of the world's maladies and by his own displacement. "Tension, then," Michael Chapman has noted, "is derived from a clash of scientific and romantic attitudes. Paradoxically, in attempting to define his existence... this lonely individual succeeds only in increasing his own sense of uncertainty" (CHAPMAN 1981: 151). In literary terms, these two polarities reflect a disorientation on the part of the poet who painfully feels the irreconcilable dissociation between Imagination and Will, "trickily embedded in the twin halves of the brain", even though he recognises "the advisability of training and keeping the pair of them (Will and Imagination) in perfect harmony like two perfectly balanced horses, linked or bridled by the corpus callosum" (LIVINGSTONE 1982: 32).

From his first book *The Skull in the Mud* (1960) to the latest haiku poems published in 1995 just before his death, Douglas Livingstone's poetry can be defined as an exploration of individual responses to everyday reality through a dramatic, and often ironic, inwardness. He explores his conflicting feelings concerning man's social roles and, as a South African poet, shows his disenchantment with both a romantic return to the beauties of nature and an exploitative neo-colonial capitalism. Livingstone's sense of the human struggle to attain reliable encounters with others – the feminine figures which hover over his multi-layered poetic narratives concerning meetings and amorous clashes, or the wilderness of the African continent itself – suggests the common uncertainty that much South African writing betrays when it tries to present ideas of uncorrupted beauty beyond the menace of scaring presences. Though his capacity for digging into South African history and sentiment is enacted through an oblique and often ambiguous verbal mastery, his technical gifts are painfully researched and reveal themselves in verse forms which encompass the influences of the English and European traditions, the immediacies of the Southern African experience, and the neo-modernist ges-

ture of fracturing levels of literary and mythical discourse to look for reconciliations, denying neither difficulty, nor even the pervasive threat of dislocation. “Douglas Livingstone,” Guy Butler observed, “has managed to make the great transition: his complexities are the misgivings, dilemmas and insecurities of us all” (BUTLER 1973: 31).

Livingstone’s precision, even in his first slim collection, risks being fastidious in its structural and phonosymbolic disposition of elements which, as Tony Voss has observed in his study of *The Skull in the Mud*, contain “the bipolar image of individual human desire, longing for the ideal effect against grim acceptance of the real” (VOSS 2008: 34). If, on the one hand, in 1960 Livingstone is already obsessed by the scientist’s admiration for the amazing regularity of the table of elements and the general life rhythms of the earth, on the other his mind is equally packed with mythological and literary references which he finds in the worlds of his Mediterranean ‘companions’, such as Ovid, Catullus and Cavafy; in Roy Campbell’s South African modernist bravado; in or in Alan Paton’s liberal and moderate attitudes; in the formal experimentations of e.e. cummings; and in Fernando Pessoa’s playful disorientation of masks. All this contributes to the rich overflow of attitudes and influences enmeshed in his poetic mix, determining that fascinating “change from a youthful bravado about pain and suffering, to an older and wiser man’s sense that compassion is more precious than boasting of your strength and immunity” (MACLENNAN 2008: 15).

Behind the bravura, Livingstone’s desire is the serious one of fixing the meaning of his generation’s mistakes in a vision, an artistic integrity figured through the poet’s imagination. This idea haunts Livingstone. But can a poet in South Africa shift from the ‘gentlemanly pursuits’ to ‘being a poet’ without subjecting himself to ridicule? Possibly, however, political life has also been constricting in its Calvinistic dourness, and Livingstone’s sexually daring poems are also socially necessary activities, as well as his atten-

tion to ‘green’ ideas and to the decadence of Africa. As early as *Sjambok, and Other Poems from Africa*, Livingstone has used the African landscape and animal imagery in such a way that both his juvenile romantic leanings and his non-African readings revealed the uneasiness of a white African in search of a reconciliation between the tangible and the alien, the civilised and the primitive. Yet, despite the fact that his ‘African persona’ is often portrayed as absorbed in the small-minded urban world of greed, which is slowly devouring the mysteries of a great but doomed continent, Livingstone’s bitter discovery that human solitude and corruption are man’s common maladies, and that the world’s imperfection constantly reminds one of the lack of that plenitude that the poet’s art partially redeems: “Essentially it is a vision of plenitude: of life forms, of whatever scale or condition, filled to their limits with dynamic energy. It is Livingstone’s passionate apprehension of the plenitude of creation, however he finds it, that drives his poetic quest for expression” (MORPHET 2008: 104).

It is, indeed, a painful loss that Livingstone describes in his poems. The disappearance of an unspoiled world is often partially cured by his linguistic mastery seeking, as Michael Chapman suggests, “those fleeting moments of redemption, the enriching fragment, the mythic synthesis amid the transient character of personal, social, intellectual and artistic life” (CHAPMAN 2008: 45) in order to redeem the chaotic state of civilisation through the powerful timelessness of an aesthetic revelation, as the poet himself stated:

By not writing poems about politics but by trying to use charged language one is definitely making a political statement even if one is only ‘civilising’ one’s rulers. It may be a more potent – or less potent – way of doing it than the protest poem. But I regard it as valid. I find that the range and resonance and sinewyness of language is a major civilising force (LIVINGSTONE 1983: 11).

Far from sharing its themes with the previous generation as suggested by Stephen Gray (GRAY 1984: 12), and at a certain distance from the language of urgency of the Soweto poets of the 1970s, Livingstone's poetry stands mid-way in the contest between, let us call it, aesthetics/politics or being/action, dichotomies that have challenged more than one contemporary writer's conscience. Referring to the work of the great Polish poet, Zbigniew Herbert, Stephen Watson noted something that may be of relevance for understanding Livingstone's attitude: the difficult dichotomy of art and politics, 'being' and 'action' can find a way of redemption because "aesthetic, that apparently flimsy, most frivolous of all categories, was in reality the ethical, and that choices in the one at least implied if they did not necessarily enjoin choices in the other" (WATSON 1986: 24).

This justifies the radical choice made by Livingstone in 1975 when his new collection, *A Rosary of Bone*, counter-balances and, partly, annuls the political position of all those black poets who are to become the protagonists of a South Africa caught up in the turmoil generated by the student uprisings, even risking, as Duncan Brown underlines, to lead his wariness of political rhetoric and the conformity of the group "into a parodic and inaccurate portrayal of important aspects of black writing" (BROWN 2008: 128). Livingstone's scepticism towards their aesthetic choice is expressed in various forms and in various places, such as at the University of Cape Town's Summer School in 1974: "...modern literature has not changed the heart of even one politician – to my knowledge. Polit-Lit does have one important function, of course: to show the few readers interested that One's Heart Is In The Right Place..." (LIVINGSTONE 1976: 142); in a SABC Radio Documentary in 1979: "Look, I find most politics and all racism just disgusting but I'm not a politician and I suppose politics being the art of survival – they must get on with it." (LIVINGSTONE 1979); and in a more recent interview released in 1990: "...I am not a joiner; I do not belong to any cliques. But I have noticed, generally speaking,

politics tends not to make for good art. How can it? Situations change, therefore the politics changes: it's like attaching one's soul to a cabbage – the cabbage eventually gets either eaten or rots, taking your earnest little soul with it" (LIVINGSTONE 1991b: 361).

In his poem, 'The Sower', about the planting or sowing of poems, also released in 1990, Livingstone questions the validity of 'graffiti', 'slogans' and 'socio-political missiles', and he hopes that the sower's work can attain some kind of moral result, and says:

Secret settlements of dust, rain on the breeze  
 may wake a seed to germinate,  
 to worm in roots while it gropes after  
 the sun, the moon, life and air  
 in that sleepy itinerary of bushes and trees.

Unshelling the nugget – the pristine part –  
 is, of course, hypothetical, especially  
 if the marrowed rock splits gently,  
 as tenderly as any lyrical poem  
 that quietly unshackles one human heart.  
 (LIVINGSTONE 2004b: 396)

I remember hearing Livingstone say that his main desire as a poet was a small, yet unattainable one: to be remembered, after one hundred years from his death, for one single poem which could, as he says in the above-mentioned quotation, "quietly [unshackle] one human heart". He was probably thinking about the success of some of his favourite compositions – a few poems by Catullus, 'To His Coy Mistress' by Marvell, 'Ithaca' by Cavafy, or 'The Zebras' by Campbell, poems that he used to read in private meetings or include in the talks and lectures he released in his country. He also understood that publishing too much was too narcissistic an attitude to be entertained. The over 300 poems, either in fair-copy holograph or typescript, that have been dis-



covered after his death testify to a prolific production but also to a severe attitude towards his involvement with the art of 'making' poetry. The precision and emotional intensity he admired in the poems written by his 'companions' was a measure of his own career, especially during the two decades dominated by major South African historical events, the 1980s and 1990s. Those were the years in which, against the background of the State of Emergency, of the falling Apartheid and of the many expectations of the new South Africa, he went on getting up early and leaving his small flat before dawn, loading his car with all his boxes, sampling bottles, a sampling stick, and a small exercise book, in which he annotated every detail of sampling the ocean waters of a section of African coastline, to the north and south of Durban, later analysing his samples in the laboratory and reporting on them.

Readers familiar with his poetic production will recognise the poet's environmental concern; his exploration of modernism in an African context; his acknowledgement of human joy, sadness and energy; his acute observation of the natural world; his response to the constraints and freedoms of the African city; and the imaginative identification with Greek landscape and cultural heritage. There are many poets in whose work at least some of these elements recur, but from the very start of his production Douglas Livingstone's engagement was distinctive in two ways. The first is his combination of the scientific and poetic imaginations, and the second was his own experience of displacement, his sense of limen (threshold), or litus (littoral). He is thus deeply sensitive to transmutation, the passage from one state, order or condition to another, and he conceived of his own work, as both scientist and poet, as transmutative. His poetry is alive with doorways, beaches, ports, passages, seasonal change, falling in and out of love, and the whole alchemy of scientific and imaginative transformation. In one of his best poems, Livingstone addresses the five seas in a kind of prayer or love petition to stop further violence against a continent already doomed to decay:

*O, Mare Atlanticum,  
Mare Arabicum et Indicum,  
Oceanus Orientalis,  
Oceanus Aethiopicus,*  
save me  
from civilisation,  
my pastory  
from further violation.

Leave me my magics  
and tribes;  
to the quagga, the dodo,  
the sleep of my lions.

Rust me barbed fences.  
Patrol what remains.  
Accept bricks, hunting rifles  
and realists, telephones  
and diesels  
to your antiseptic main.

Grant me a day of  
moon-rites and rain-dances;  
when rhinoceros  
root in trained hibiscus borders;  
when hippo flatten, with a smile,  
deck-chairs at the beach resorts.

Accord me a time  
of stick-insect gods, and impala  
no longer crushed by concrete;  
when love poems like this  
can again be written in beads.  
(LIVINGSTONE 1970: 17)

Livingstone has always refused that politics of remove that afflicted South Africa in the last centuries: a remove that afflicted peoples and races, the management of territory and the inevitable disappearance of a synergic identification between man and nature. Instead, he explored the paradoxes of his position as a white African. In the programme notes for his play, *A Rhino for the Boardroom*, he wrote of his deep sense of connectedness with the place:

My involvement with this continent as a white African is to me a profound and passionate and (I hope) compassionate one. If I could I would heal the very earth on which we stand, the waters I sail on, swim in, work with, look over, drink from; and of course, myself, my fellow humans and the fauna and flora. The only scalpels and medicaments I have are a limited scientific training, a little insight and a small writing talent.

In its literary-cartographic impulse, Livingstone's final collection, *A Littoral Zone*, extends this concern, bearing on its title page a map of the Durban coastline, and at the end, a map of the testing stations that inspired, or are the location for, most of the poems. The exploration of being a white African is bolstered by the commitment of a life dedicated to the health of the sea; but also by a scientific awareness that the variations of differing skin pigmentation to which colonial and apartheid ideologies have attributed such significance are genetically insignificant in comparison with the biological commonalities. For him, in part, what being African or South African means is being open to new possibilities. Livingstone explored kinship at the level of DNA linkages, as well as shared moral responsibility for each other and the planet.

What Livingstone described as his "bread and butter job" (THOMSON 1986: 6) involved monitoring the effectiveness of wastewater disposal off the Durban coastline. In doing this, he

developed a model of microbial testing, using *Escherichia coli* 1, O&P (ova and parasites), *staphylococci*, *salmonellae* (including *Salmonella typhi*) and the salinity of the water as his indicators (LIVINGSTONE 1989: iv) – a model which has since been adopted elsewhere. His research findings were written up in a thesis entitled *A Microbial Study of Water Quality in the Marine Environment off Durban: 1964–1988*, submitted for examination as a Master's thesis in the Department of Biology, University of Natal, Durban, but accepted as a PhD. The thesis contains, as its frontispiece, an aerial photograph of Durban corresponding closely with the map on the title page of *A Littoral Zone*, and includes on page 167 a map of the testing stations almost identical to the one concluding the poetry volume. Indeed, Livingstone said that he wanted the volume and the thesis to be published as companion texts, and that he viewed the thesis as the "hard core version" of the poems. Both represent the culmination of a life, and a life's work. His engagement with the sea combines biological acuity and spiritual devotion with a profound sense of self-irony:

There's work ahead: futile,  
scientifically delivered blows at sullage,  
against the republics of ignorance and apathy,  
with bust lance, flawed shield,  
lamed steed of action; downhill  
past Country Club to Blue Lagoon  
brown with silt hell-bent for the surf.  
Here is my daily bread's commencement.  
(LIVINGSTONE 1991: 10)

The crucial manoeuvre – which is evident in his previous work, but becomes explicit and pervasive here – is to rethink the place of humans in the broader context of biologically conceived, but nevertheless spiritual life. Central to this is the Gaia hypothesis (first formulated by British scientist James Lovelock in the 1960s),

according to which the living and non-living parts of the Earth are seen as constituting a single organism:

(... At present, due to xenophobia, hot racial and tribal hatreds, confrontational politics, such diversities in South Africa are our most formidable threat, our greatest weakness.) With the miracle of tolerance our weaknesses could be transmuted into a mutually enriching strength. South Africa is the world's laboratory: it represents the globe's nations and preoccupations in microcosm. If it fails – and the divergences are enormous – there is no future for humanity at large except the ugly spread of racial and religious wars, the final triumph of evil in pursuit of the devils of materialism, power and mindless destructivity.

In which case we deserve to go, allowing the planet to recover from our hubris, gather its resources to prepare for a more symbiotic and less quarrelsome species (FAZZINI 1991: 144-45).

In this explicitly anti-anthropocentric vision, proper human conduct is defined in terms of biological symbiosis (a word that recurs in the poems): the ability of life forms to co-exist to mutual benefit, so directing South African readers – and not only them – towards a more tolerant approach to life and politics. If this collection, and Livingstone's approach to cosmos manage to send a political message to a particular country, his scientific rhetoric and his environmental ethics are still to be re-discovered and valued today, following Michael Chapman recent approach (MICHAEL CHAPMAN 2016). Livingstone's anomalous use of the sonnet form adds something scientifically larger to love forms of praise and adoration:

Perhaps creationists are nearly right:  
an enigmatic principle formed cells  
– evolving scientific law by night –  
informed with more ahead than heavens or hells.

Irradiating slime-flecks day by day,  
it watched (with love?) rash chromosomal loops  
unwind, reform, transform their DNA  
to struggle up from primed primeval soups.  
Unstrung mutations – random nightmares – made  
headstrong mistakes. Selection took its toll:  
free will incurs some debts. The debts get paid.  
Still, it evades the puppet-master's role.  
Far from its image, vestiges in me  
recall a time I once breathed in its sea.  
(LIVINGSTONE 1991: 18)

One hundred years from his death have not elapsed yet, but many of Livingstone's poems stand out as the work of a particular genius who, even while scientifically analysing samples of the ocean taken from around Durban, managed also to transform what he was doing, seeing and thinking into a muscular yet intricate and empathetic poetry, helping him unveil the meaning and power of the cosmos in the local, and to rise above human violence and environmental corruption perpetrated around him.

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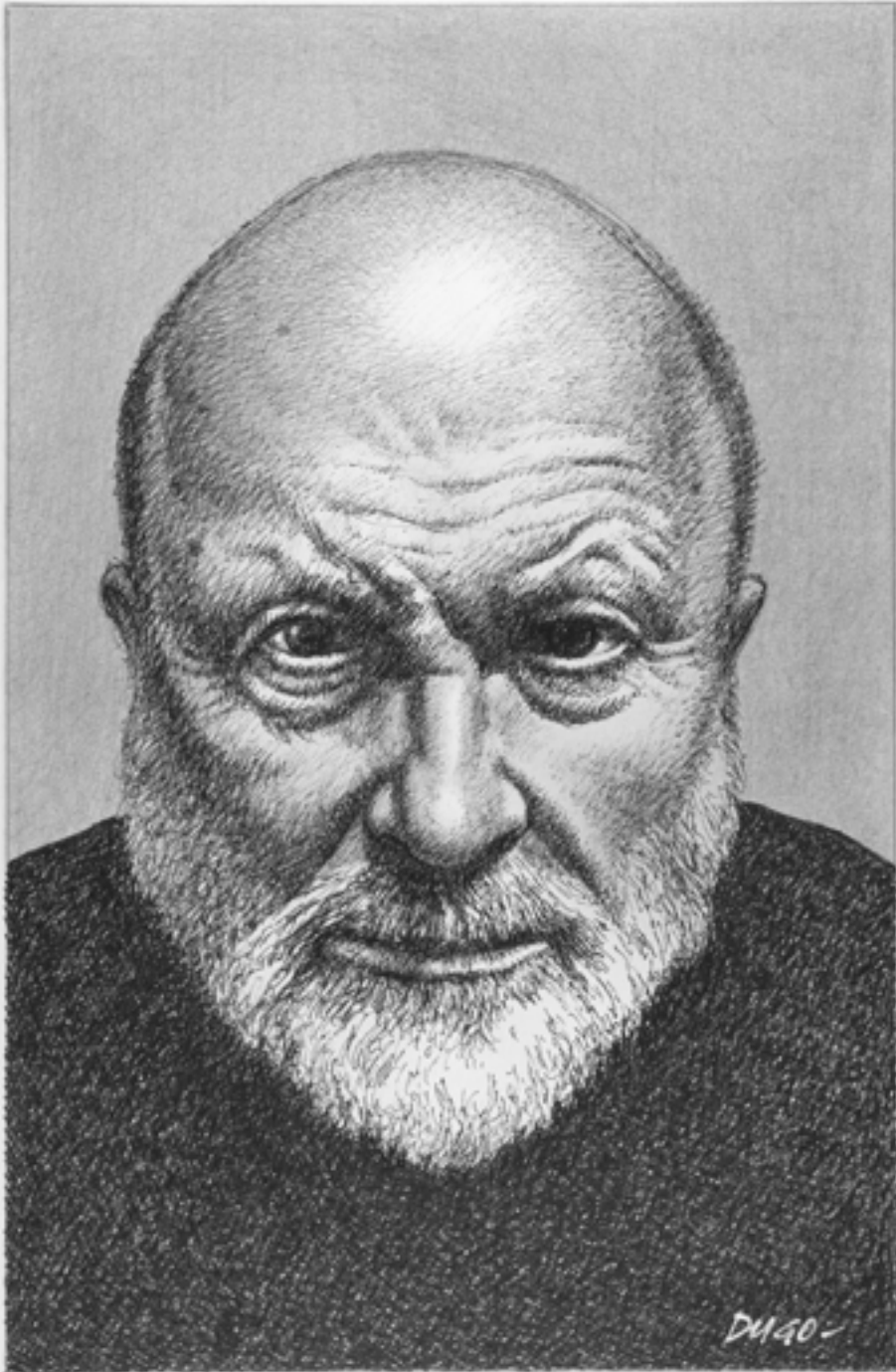
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**Geoffrey Hill:**  
**Water Coming up from History's Well**



The epigraph contained in the American collection of Hill's first three books, *Somewhere is Such a Kingdom*, published in 1975, is taken from Hobbes and says: "Sometimes a man seeks what he hath lost: and from that place, and time, wherein he misses it, his mind runs back, from place to place, and time to time, to find where, and when he had it..." (HILL 1975). Speaking to John Haffenden in an interview in 1981, Hill explained how every "fine poem bears fitness to a lost kingdom of innocence and original justice" (HAFFENDEN 1981: 88). For Hill, that crucial loss, which is theological, historical and linguistic, is responsible for the degradation of the world and for the inevitable exactness of those words. Poetry, which is supposed to be able to enact a partial resistance to that process, should react against that loss and ensure a tradition of historical intelligence. But such aspirations rarely become real achievements. On the contrary, such lost kingdoms are rarely reconquered by art, unless the creative use of history, language and myth is able to find a way of offering a writing of 'atonement' (HILL 1984: 1-18).

Hill's poetry has always aimed at containing and discussing the most atrocious and violent events of human barbarity, giving voice to the dead and provoking an echo of our communal sense of guilt. In the fourth poem of the sequence called 'Funeral Music', a sequence constructed upon the death of three martyrs / poets of the fifteenth century, Hill writes:

Though I would scorn the mere instinct of faith,  
Expediency of assent, if I dared,  
What I dare not is waste history

Or void rule  
(HILL 1968: 28)

Hill's primary thrust is to reflect on history in order to draw the readers' attention toward forgotten or silenced atrocities of our past. He doubted that this process could be transfiguring, in the sense that that past reality could be charged with different connotations when given an artistic or poetical existence. Here is the first stanza of his poem 'History as Poetry':

Poetry as salutation: taste  
Of Pentecost's ashen feast. Blue wounds.  
The tongue's atrocities.  
(HILL 1968: 41)

The positive and redeeming power of poetry is shown here and revealed by the Latin stem *salutare* (to wish health to, to greet); but there is also the bitter taste of the ashen banquet of Pentecost which reminds us of the apparition of the tongues of flame on the Apostles' heads, enabling them to speak in different languages: God's greatness can only be achieved through the babel of tongues and the atrocity that a language commits when it speaks of atrocities. Even so, Hill accepted this challenge: there is no point in his retreating from his treacherous medium so that "it is at the heart of this heaviness that poetry must do its atoning work, this heaviness which is simultaneously the density of language and the specific gravity of human nature" (HILL 1984: 15).

Since his juvenile texts published in Oxford in the 1950s, the attraction of Geoffrey Hill's poetry had mainly come out from his obvious linguistic precision and economy as well as from his semantic irresolution when played upon a multi-layered etymology. All this contributes to see him as one of the followers of a modernist literary style, after T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, David Jones and Basil Bunting; on the other hand, he could also be considered

as an original postmodern writer, diverging from the apparently unavoidable romantic writing of Dylan Thomas or, later on, the group of writers known as The Movement (Larkin, Gunn, Jennings, et al). If Hill's strategy resulted in self-isolation and ambitious presumption, it managed, as was the case with few other British poets during the second half of 20th century, to highlight not only an original lyricism but also the role of memory and commitment when engaged in peoples' or nations' identities, annulling the easy forgetfulness of superficial debasement of linguistic and moral values.

Born in 1932 in Bromsgrove, a small village in Worcestershire, Hill studied in the nearby village of Fairfield and, then, from 1950, at Keble College, Oxford. Here he managed to publish his first poems, both in college journals and in a pamphlet produced by Fantasy Press. Always attracted by the environment of the English landscape – one of the more characteristic elements in his poetry – Hill loved long walks in that rural landscape and carried A.E.Housman's *Collected Poems* with him, as well as the *Little Treasury of Modern Poetry* (1946), a book that he used to the point of destruction. But he also loved reading Allen Tate, Richard Eberhart and Ezra Pound.

In an early mytho-poetic reconstructions of the world in 'Genesis', Hill had already tried to allow the simultaneous presence of his readings and of what later became his opposing set of influences and themes: the strength of blood images as metaphors for life, the violence hidden inside every pulse of that blood, and the fideistic creed of Christ's sacrifice whose blood can provide a means of redemption for human beings. Both in religious and pagan terms, it seemed that no myth could resist time if it was not founded on blood. That happened both in the hungry Leviathan tale and the passionate Swan's lust towards Leda, as well as in Christ's suffering on the cross and in the violent use of strength against the Jews in the Second World War, or in Saint Sebastian's sacrifice and the killings in 16th-century Spain. Hill's

direction of travel in 'Genesis' revealed from the very beginning a scrupulous determination to anchor his creativity in the generous fecundity yet violent indifference of nature; the predatory violence of the animal world and the fear experienced by the predated; and the force of the imagination and the reversion of its moral assumptions. Following ideas and visions taken directly from Blake and from his 'Jerusalem', Hill anticipated some of his most common stereotypes that obtained in his work until the publication of *Tenebrae* (1978), especially in the sequence, 'The Pentecost Castle'.

History and history's barbaric events come up, together with Hill's intertextual play, persist in all his major collections, as if he had followed William Empson's idea that it is not rare that one learns a style from discomfort, such as that which Hill formed and actualised through the sequence-poem rather than through a series of individual and isolated texts. This proves how his poetry needs an internal and broad discourse to deeply investigate historical traumas, even before taking into account his own personal ones. These traumas surface from a generational unconscious that suffered war mingling themselves with the feelings generated by literary memories within poetic traditions, a nightmare where the terrible lesions caused by human violence are committed to an ever-inadequate language. This evolving from a continuously ironic (and even tragic) reversal of roles and dichotomies makes Hill a poet of endlessly shifting intellectual creativity, the scholarly and fascinating inventor of a poetic idea that renders his own writing a singular and purgatorial act. His recurring dualisms, played upon terms such as 'nature' and 'revelation', are the beloved ground where his language has to fight and atone. Jeremy Hooker has observed that Hill's sense of duality – body and soul, beast and angel, appearance and reality, nature and revelation – follows a Dostoevskian intensity even when it is sceptical about the Christian order that he himself pursues insistently, encouraging the clash or the fusion of opposites (HOOKER 1987: 24).

For more than fifty years Hill's tragic lyricism was located on the threshold between state policy and individual emotion when facing history's disasters, between their delusions of earthly love and the metaphysical desire for transcendence; between humans searching to experience a full life and their awareness of mortality; between the idea that poetry can be a proper tool to atone or redeem human mistakes and the writer's scepticism when poetry can so easily descend to cliché or banal rhetorical devices. If it's true that Hill's linguistic and poetical competence leads him to attract his readers into a dangerous area full of interpretative ambiguities, it's also easy to agree with Martin Booth when the critic observes that whenever "Hill writes, even if the meaning is obscure, the poetry is always lyrical and powerful, strangely universal and yet simultaneously very personal indeed" (BOOTH 1985: 205).

In his various collections, Hill has often exploited Christian iconography to interrogate its fideistic values and found his belief in a new epistemology and in a new metaphysics. In fact, Donald Davie has noted that there is in Hill's writings a constant indecision about faith, defining his attitude as "religiose" rather than "religious" (DAVIE 1989: 166), so introducing us to one of the various dichotomies of Hill's research into the unreachable aspirations of writing poetry. Yet, even though on the one hand Hill is a master of the *de contemptu mundi* tradition, on the other he largely used the forms of religious poetry (hymns, sermons, etc.) to re-interpret several themes and subjects from a pagan point of view and achieve fascinating and sensual peaks, especially in his sequence called, 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz' (*King Log*, 1968). In that same book, he also revisited Gerard Manley Hopkins's amorous diction and transformed it into a metaphysical rendition when, ten years later, he wrote 'The Pentecost Castle' sequence and the sonnets, 'Lachrimae'. Both sequences are contained in *Tenebrae* (1978).

It is evident, even in his prose writings, that this process of playing with paradoxical co-existences is directly derived from



Renaissance writing, such as Ben Jonson's optimism and typical desperation: "In Jonson's moral world, also, a stress and counter-stress is evoked from the conflicting connotations of words such as 'liberty' or 'freedom'" (HILL 1984: 40). Or from Shakespeare: "To be left, at the end, with things inexplicable and intractable is a perennial hazard for all artists; but in Shakespeare's last plays an acceptance of this seems to be at the heart of his dramatic vision" (HILL 1984: 62). Or from John Donne: "Donne, for example, freely invents 'paradoxes and problems' but he also has problems that are not paradoxes, that cannot be 'impudently' troped but must be rawly acknowledged" (HILL 1984: 151-152). Or from Robert Southwell: "Southwell is foresuffering his own agony even as he rises serenely above the fear and the violence: 'Our tears shalbe turned into triumphe, our disgrace into glorye, all our miseryes into perfect felicity'" (HILL 1984: 28).

If all these writers are Hill's models and reference points, it shouldn't be passed over that he studied in Oxford in the 1950s, a period in which, as the poet himself admits, you could not overlook the influence of Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, John Gower and Edmund Spenser, but also of some contemporary poets such as Allen Tate, T.S. Eliot (and his *Four Quartets*), William Empson (and his linguistic puns and fascinating theory of ambiguity), Robert Lowell, Dylan Thomas (a poet that Hill echoed in an early poem, 'God's Little Mountain'). Hill's incredible intertextual play, a part of his writing from the beginning, represents both a challenge and a fruitful field of contest for readers and scholars, underlining that particular twentieth-century mode of trying to reach a comprehensive and overarching style that in previous centuries and with different authors had almost exclusively been contained by religion. Moving from Laurence Binyon to Lope de Vega, from Francisco de Quevedo to Osip Mandelstam, from L.L. de Argensola to Andrew Marvell, from Paul Celan to Ronald Blythe, Hill's network of influences and quotations exploits a large and varied texture of fragments, literary works, readings and

memories from the past that constitutes, as C.H. Sisson observes, a "fastidious meticulousness" (SISSON 1978: 467).

It was Michael Edwards, in particular, who deeply explored Hill's imitations in order to highlight some of the intersections between Hill's writing and the whole Western poetical production. He observed that all of Hill's titles for his books, including the one for his American edition, and many of the titles of his poems originate in the work of other writers, showing that Hill's core method of incorporated techniques of imitation and quotation, and that the percentage of that intertextual play becomes more extensive as it progresses through time (EDWARDS 1988: 169). An example would be a passage from *The Triumph of Love* where, together with a freer use of metrics and syntactical construction, Hill gives up his usual footnotes in order to create a dialogue with the reader in the text itself, allowing him/her to read both the poetical texts and the frame of the palimpsests created for each of his poems.

However, it is not only useful to follow Hill's suggested track along the way to his translations, imitations and scholarly uses of quotations. All of those influences, and their respective dates, become an internal part of his fictions. One example for all: in the Sebastian Arrurriz sequence (a name probably derived from 'arrow' and 'root', incorporating both 'the root of the term arrow' and a reference to the curative substance, arrowroot, reputed to draw out poison when applied to arrow wounds), the protagonist's 'voice' is given a precise reference date, 1922, *the annus mirabilis* of Modernism, as the first line states: "Already, like a disciplined scholar, / I piece fragments together, past conjecture..." thereby referencing the primary modernist text, *The Waste Land*, which appeared in 1922). Yet, Sebastian is only one of the many *personae* that Hill scatters along his experimental and joyous path, leading us into a territory of "multiple personalities", as Michael Hamburger put it (HAMBURGER 1969: 110-147), literary and psychological refractions that allowed him to simultaneously hide

and confess, the many pulses of a personality opening itself to a continuously changing and diversified definition of the self.

Various critics have stressed the autobiographical elements through which Hill's poetry functioned over several decades. From the sequences based on Sebastian Arrurruz or on Offa (who is the unique protagonist of his *Mercian Hymns*) to *The Triumph of Love*, in which he deeply engaged himself in a memory work much more personal than *Mercian Hymns* itself, Hill has often played upon a partial (or total) self-identification with the many voices he created. Whoever has read *Mercian Hymns* knows that, after a series of anachronisms of voices, times, places and social classes – all is finally unified or reconciled in the figure of Offa – the penultimate hymn (XXIX) decrees the dependence of the self from his precursors/models (“Obstinate, / outclassed forefathers, I too concede, I am your / staggeringly-gifted child”) in order to unveil the literary artefact and the tragic (and playful) oneirism Hill manages to sustain throughout the sequence:

So, murmurous, he withdrew from them. Gran lit the  
gas, his dice whirred in the ludo-cup, he entered  
into the last dream of Offa the King.  
(HILL 1971: XXIX)

This contributes to create a dreamy and undefinable atmosphere, finding its definition not only through the refraction of Offa's various personalities but also through the dissemination of several micro-narratives, giving that sequence the main characteristics of what William Wordsworth defined as “spots of time”, a phrase Seamus Heaney assumed for himself when speaking about his own *Stations*. We know now that Heaney's book was delayed because of Hill's publication of *Mercian Hymns*, a book that the Irish poet, as one of the first dedicated critics of Hill's poetry, discusses on the basis of those “attempts to touch what Wordsworth called ‘spots of time’, moments at the very edge of

consciousness which had lain for years in the unconscious as active lodes of nodes” (HEANEY 1975: 3). Later on, in *Preoccupations*, Heaney states: “There is in Hill something of Stephen Dedalus's hyperconsciousness of words as physical sensations, as sounds to be plumbed, as weights on the tongue. Words in his poetry fall slowly and singly, like molten solder, and accumulate to a dull glowing nub” (HEANEY 1980: 160).

*Mercian Hymns* was conceived of as a collection in itself, a sequence, a complete volume set in the English Worcestershire landscape. The thirty hymns of Hill's collection are based on the mythic figure of Offa, “a creature of legend”, the presiding genius of the Western Midlands, son to Thingfrith, directly descended by Panda, the king who firstly founded a royal dynasty in Mercia after the forced exile of Beornred in 757. Offa is also the commissioner of the famous dyke (Offa's Dyke), the inventor of an Anglo-Saxon coinage, the sovereign of the then largest kingdom on English soil, the symbol of a character who was both tyrannical and constructive. The plurality of Offa, whose dominion endured “from the middle of the eighth century until the middle of the twentieth,” (HILL 1971) is linked to a natural environment that is, for Hill, the container of both legendary historical details and of Hill's childhood memories. All this creates a mythical, dreamy halo suspended between nostalgia for his native soil and an adolescent anti-conformism. So, landscape is treated here as an ideal place, where childhood can become a useful tool for melding Offa's reign and twentieth-century events, as if remembered by a young Offa (see, for example, hymns XIV and XXII), through a singular language illuminating both public and private life and casting light both on personal feelings and traditional details via history and myth.

Offa, as the “embodiment of the folk” of Mercia, is a myth useful to treat the local details that are progressively enlarged in time and space: so, Offa can be a magistrate (hymn X), a worker (hymn XII), a tourist (hymn XVII), a boy (hymn XXII), but also a king,

a tyrant, Christ. Through the course of the hymns, Hill generates a plurality of voices through a technique that David Trotter calls “dramatic polilogue” (TROTTER 1984: 213), so identifying Offa with whatever can be defined as “significant soil”. In this extreme attempt to appropriate the whole of that local history, Hill attempts to encompass the entire Western culture (see for example all the etymological excursions into Latin, French and Welsh), letting us participate of his vanaglorious proclamation of an omni-comprehensive self that obviously includes the author himself (hymn XXV).

In none of his books does Hill limit himself to a kind of Wordsworthian autobiographic writing – despite the fact that this is one of the main influences on his style, as Harold Bloom observes when he investigates some of the possible sources for his *Mercian Hymns* (BLOOM 1975: xiii-xxv; see also GERVAIS 1996: 88-103). This vertical excavation into the resources and secrets of language, whose reverberations sometimes sparkle with reflected light and are sometimes unveiled with a fastidious diligence, demonstrate Hill’s will to descend into the etymological well of his linguistic toolbox and investigate all those small and bigger calamities encrusted with verbal and memorial accumulation. Hill is not discouraged by this unfaithful medium, and accepts its challenge because he perceives that it is in the middle of this linguistic “heaviness” that poetry can enact its redemptive function, a heaviness which is simultaneously the “‘density’ of language and the ‘specific gravity of human nature’”(HILL 1984: 15). In ‘History as Poetry’, religion, language and history converge and are clotted through the use of more than one possessive case, confirming what, in his chapter called “A ‘Question of Value’”, Williams observes when he tries to summarise Hill’s complex poetical structure and some of his priorities: ‘value’, ‘atonement’, ‘endurance’, ‘patience’, ‘attention’, ‘justice’, ‘grace’, ‘pitch’, ‘common’, and ‘alienation’ (WILLIAMS 2010):

‘A resurgence’ as they say. The old  
Laurels wagging with the new: Selah!  
Thus laudable the trodden bone thus  
Unanswerable the knack of tongues.  
(HILL 1968: 41)

Hill often remarks that every “fine and moving poem bears witness to this lost kingdom of innocence and original justice” (HAFENDEN 1981: 88). That crucial loss, that is linguistic, theological and historical, contains in itself the very seed of the degradation of words to the point of their inevitable inexactness, of the deterioration of a tradition of worship and of the dimming of historical intelligence. To all this, poetry could present the possibility of a final atonement. Yet this is not a certainty, but often mere illusion. That “lost kingdom” is rarely reconquered by art unless the use of history, of language’s history and myth finds a way of reaching some kind of redemption.

Against urbanity and dignity of the Movement, it seems that it was only Ted Hughes, and a few others, including Tony Harrison, who shared this kind of anti-bourgeois stance for correctly interpreting the European catastrophe with Hill. Dedicating his main reflections and productions to foreshadow a future where historical and linguistic stratifications and contradictions interplay, Hill observes: “In a poet’s involvement with language, above all, there is, one would darkly and impetuously claim, an element of helplessness, of being at the mercy of accidents, the prey of one’s own presumptuous energy”(HILL 1984: 146).

This unpredictableness of paths and shortcuts that language imposes upon poetical imagination is also responsible for Hill’s perception of the intricate relationship between conscious will and unconscious impulses that fluctuates within our ability to recollect thanks to imagined or perceived memories. Neil Corcoran has rightly underlined that it is “as though what presses most deeply on the personal life can be allowed to survive in poetry only

almost at the vanishing point of formal complication” (CORCORAN 1993: 124).

Hill’s voices are like angels, sometimes ironic, deeply provocative and touching, and at other times violent and desecrating, yet always elusive. They are barely perceived *personae*, which is just what humans can rightly expect from them. And it is an angel as portrayed by Gauguin in the painting, ‘Vision after the Sermon’, that Hill chooses for the cover of his *Collected Poems* (1985). This is an angel foreboding other and illuminating implications that are religious as well as symbolic, entering into that particular field of those emotive landscapes where all the problems linked with the nature of vision are solved. Even Paul Klee’s ‘Angelus Novus’, as one of the various visited (or re-visited) twentieth-century clairvoyants – Merlin, Cassandra, Sybil, Tyresias, etc. – flies to tell us about evolving facts and feelings, casting a glance at the past in order to learn from its lessons and try to interpret all the messages coming from the decadent wreckage of our times. Yet, a storm, as Walter Benjamin tells us, is coming from paradise, and gets entangled in its wings, blowing so strongly that it is impossible to open them. This is the storm that irresistibly drives that angel towards the future, while all the growing contemporary wreck is rising in front of it in the sky. What we usually call progress is the storm.

In the presence of these angels it is possible to find all the expectations and frustrations Hill’s poetry can contain, because in his books ruins amass upon ruins, dead people are momentarily evoked and then abandoned to their torments, and the storm coming from paradise reminds us of a future with no welcome. Here every reader can spot not only Hill’s particular aims (traditions, schools, influences, canons) but also his linguistic means (etymology and the continuous change of language) and historical targets (his wish to heal, through his un-clichéd words, all the horrors perpetrated by humans during various civilisations); this allows him to state that the long and wished-for work inside poetic language must be done inside words themselves to attain atone-

ment: “...simply this: that the technical perfecting of a poem is an act of atonement, in the radical etymological sense – an act of atone-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony” (HILL 1984: 2). Hill’s ambitious desire is to make this attempt to ‘atone’ be welcomed in our contemporary society so that poetry can supply refreshing water to our historical memory and to our linguistic and religious history, reconstructing, on the very place of an anythingarian and vilified aesthetics, some kind of solid foundation for a new stable and moral building.

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Amiri Baraka:  
The Man Died?



The poet, essayist, teacher, playwright and political activist Amiri Baraka was just short of eighty years old when he disappeared on January 9, 2014. Born in 1934 in Newark, New Jersey, he was officially given the name LeRoi Jones. In the 1950s, he was part of New York's avant-garde, allied with poets and writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, Robert Creeley and Charles Olson, a group from which he subsequently detached himself. In the 1960s, he was the fierce supporter of African-American civil rights, moving to Harlem, arguing against Olson's ideas of projective verse, instead embracing black musicality, which made blues and improvisation a common ground for both the bourgeoisie and the working class, both black and white. In the 1970s, he was clearly a Marxist, favouring the emancipation and decolonising of the Third World. Later, he was embroiled in a controversy, accused of anti-Semitism for his poem, 'Somebody Blew Up America'. Amongst others things, the poem alleges, in the form of pointed questions, that some might have had forewarning of the September 11, 2001 attack on the Twin Towers, and that over 4,000 Israeli citizens had been warned to stay away that day. But he also wondered, "Who have the colonies / Who stole the most land / Who rule the world / Who say they good but only do evil / Who the biggest executioner / Who? Who? Who? ... Who invaded Grenada / Who made money from apartheid / Who keep the Irish colony / Who overthrow Chile and Nicaragua later... [?]" (BARAKA 2001) The catalogue of attacks in the poem is extensive, looking to subvert the values of the good/bad, white/black dichotomies in a rhetorical manner similar to that made famous by Malcolm X, but also resembling that of Aimé Césaire in his

unforgettable extended essay on Colonialism. Baraka wanted to identify exactly what he saw as the Devil – so that this was clearly visible in the world – and that God had never been manifest in this world.

A polemicist *ante litteram* and disillusioned fighter disinclined to compromise, he took it with equanimity when, a year after his appointment as the Poet Laureate of New Jersey, his appointment was quickly withdrawn after the appearance of ‘Somebody Blew Up America’. However, Baraka liked to recite it and a few weeks before his departure, he performed it at his last Italian concert in Milan, on 27th October, 2013, accompanied by jazz musicians D.D. Jackson on the piano, Calvin Jones on double bass and Pheeroan AkLaff on drums.

Even in a cursory review of his work one cannot miss his essays and articles on jazz and jazz musicians, perhaps the greatest passion in his life. But it was through an alliance with Langston Hughes that Baraka discovered the different blues variations and the African roots he needed in order to develop collaborations with jazz musicians. In an interview quoted in the first study of Baraka, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, by Werner Sollors, Baraka confesses that Hughes sent him a letter of appreciation for his first texts, inviting him for a coffee: that was the beginning of an important partnership with Hughes, who had devoted most of his compositions since the 1920s to blues and jazz. In contradistinction to the European aesthetic idea that poetry is an artistic object to be admired, the idea that poetry is life was already contained in his total dedication to blues. In 1963, in *Blues People*, Baraka stated that in African culture there is no separation of music, dance, songs, artisanal products, life and the worship of deities, and that, since all these expressions are a part of life, they are intrinsically beautiful.

His 1964 recordings with the New York Art Quartet, directed by Roswell Rudd, are an important part of the history of the period. He was barely thirty years old, yet they could rightly be

considered among the first experiments of free jazz combined with poetry, coming as it did soon after earlier works by Jackie Maclean, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman and Max Roach. That project was later followed by “Blue Ark” – resulting in *Real Song*, 1994 – and concerts with the William Parker Octet, with whom he had performed several times previously, including in Vicenza, Italy, in 2007, and incorporating rearranged Curtis Mayfield songs. After that came the recordings with Vijay Iyer, and much more. He made no secret of his absolute conviction that music and poetry belonged together, especially on stage. Speaking with Kimberly Benston, he observed that he had always thought of poetry as a form that, more than all others, corresponded to music, both consciously and instinctively, because of the high concentration of rhythm in verse.

There have been endless discussions about the relative values of ‘highbrow’ versus ‘popular’ poetry, and poetry written for the page versus oral performance poetry. The latter often included rhythm, precise timing, musical instruments, and the use of hands, facial expressions and whole bodily gestures, a ‘theatralising’ of the text that is always, when written, ‘dirty’ text, sometimes gross, sharable and shared only at the time of performance. This was a true revolution of style; it was soon named ‘jazz poetry’, and involved several generations up to rap, dub and spoken-word poetry, or various elaborations of ‘performance poetry’. Zumthor comments on this African-American revolution: “One could set up the inventory of these universal ‘Africanisms’, memories of the mythical time when language and music were one. In the most diverse regions of the world, ethnologists have remarked the impossibility for many oral poets to recite one of their texts without singing it. Does not the mystical or communal trance that Rouget describes – sought after and provoked by African cults, but observed also in several Islamic and Christian sects – involve the most formidable effort (even unto death) to erase all distinction between speech, music, and dance[?]”. (ZUMTHOR 1990: 146)



For Baraka, natural alliances and friendships developed with committed jazz players of his time, from Albert Ayler to Sun Ra, Miles Davis to John Coltrane and Archie Shepp, musicians who had deep roots in the avant-garde, and who not only experimented musically but also helped to voice the cry of the oppressed African people, trying to put into play that ‘trace’ of an ancestral past that Édouard Glissant describes when he talks about the Middle Passage and the enslavement of black people in the Americas. These were Baraka’s friends, intellectuals and jazz musicians responsible for a strategy he directly transferred into poetry, as he observes when he states, at the start of his essay on Sun Ra, that some of the things he does in terms of word games and language dissolution, are taken directly from Sun Ra. Thus, Baraka concludes the sequence of *Wise, Why’s, Y’s* by dedicating the text of his poem, ‘So the King Sold the Farmer’, to Sun Ra. The use of precise adverbs, such as “below”, and a series of synonyms, such as “beneath”, “underneath” and “under”, signals the subjugation of black people. They are always relegated to the lower levels, “undercover” and “chained” during the Middle Passage, humiliated, degraded and reduced to the status of goods or garbage when “chained” or disposed of in “wells” or “drains”. They are a people forever condemned to tears, and forever condemned to be prisoners of the clichéd and predetermining dichotomy of angels and demons (which directly alludes to the title of Sun Ra’s musical piece, *Angels and Demons at Play*, to which Baraka refers):

A people flattened chained  
 bathed & degraded  
 in their own hysterical waste

below  
 beneath  
 under neath

deep down  
 up under

grave cave pit  
 lower & deeper  
 weeping miles below  
 skyscraper gutters

(BARAKA 1995: 130)

Jazz is present in all of Baraka’s writing, not just his non-fiction or music. It influences rhythm, punctuation techniques, repetition and variation, use of interjections and capitals, the stretching of vowels and consonants, a persistent parataxis, and the use of parentheses. As he says in ‘Hunting’, poetry stands on its own, is a process, a verb. Each section of *Wise, Why’s, Y’s* refers to a piece of music (and text) as an epigraph, against/with which Baraka plays a continuous counterpoint between poetry and music, between subversive music (“The New Thing”, as he called it) and the writing of struggle, both personal and tribal. Yet, as a writer he never had a great following: in Vicenza, in May 2007, when he took part in the Vicenza Jazz Festival, as opposed to his evening performance at the Canneti Theater (Conservatory of Vicenza), which was completely sold out, he could be found reading to a small group of people in a bookshop – and this was the writer who had written famous plays, such as *Dutchman* (1964), *The Baptism* (1964), *The Death of Malcolm X* (1965), etc.; who had for many years been kept behind bars by CIA and FBI officials because of his poems; who had taught and lectured at State University of New York at Stony Brook, The New School in New York, Buffalo University, Columbia, San Francisco State University, Yale, George Washington and Rutgers; and who had talked at many conferences together with his friends, the Beat generation and those black leaders who were translated and read in Italy a few years later, changing our way of reading and living after the war.

The journey that Baraka made to Cuba in 1959, and his encounter with international writers and poets from the Third World, had already convinced him in his twenties that fighting poverty, wars, famines and despotic governments would have to be his mission in life, even if it meant bearing the costs of swimming against the current, even at the expense of sacrificing a life, and even at the resultant cost of being unpopular. Almost utopianly and naïvely, he continued to write “UNITY + STRUGGLE” in his books as a dedication to the Wobblies of the Twenties, or to Woody Guthrie, or to many working-class blacks, both in Africa and America, or even to the only two white heroes that could fit with Baraka: Pete Seeger in America and Billy Bragg in Great Britain. In this, Baraka was an irreducible idealist, and clearly identified that evil was on the rise today, in large part due to the radical transformations brought about by rampant individualism in transnational and multinational financial and political power. Certainly, he was up to date on the Italian Empire of the last twenty years, and on the connections between high power and its ramifications in the Americas, in the Caribbean, on those islands that are also tax havens for several Italians involved in the recycling of illegal money, that the writer Jamaica Kincaid had attacked in writing to her own personal cost. The soul of the black musician as a saboteur never abandoned him, with his particular way of launching invectives built on direct metaphors, real means of waking up and provoking the listener, both *a cappella* or in collaboration with a jazz band. Among the many invectives, let me present one at random taken from his famous ‘Afrikan Revolution’ (in HARRIS 2009: 245):

No more useless pain  
 We must refuse to be sold out by anyone  
 The world can be changed, we do not have to lick  
     the pavements  
 All over the world the world can be changed  
 No more stupid ugliness everywhere

Death to the vultures of primitive disease +  
 ignorance. America must change or be  
 destroyed. Europe must change or be  
 destroyed. Capitalism must be destroyed.  
 Imperialism will die. Empty headed  
 mummified niggers who support racist  
 rule over black people will be killed too...

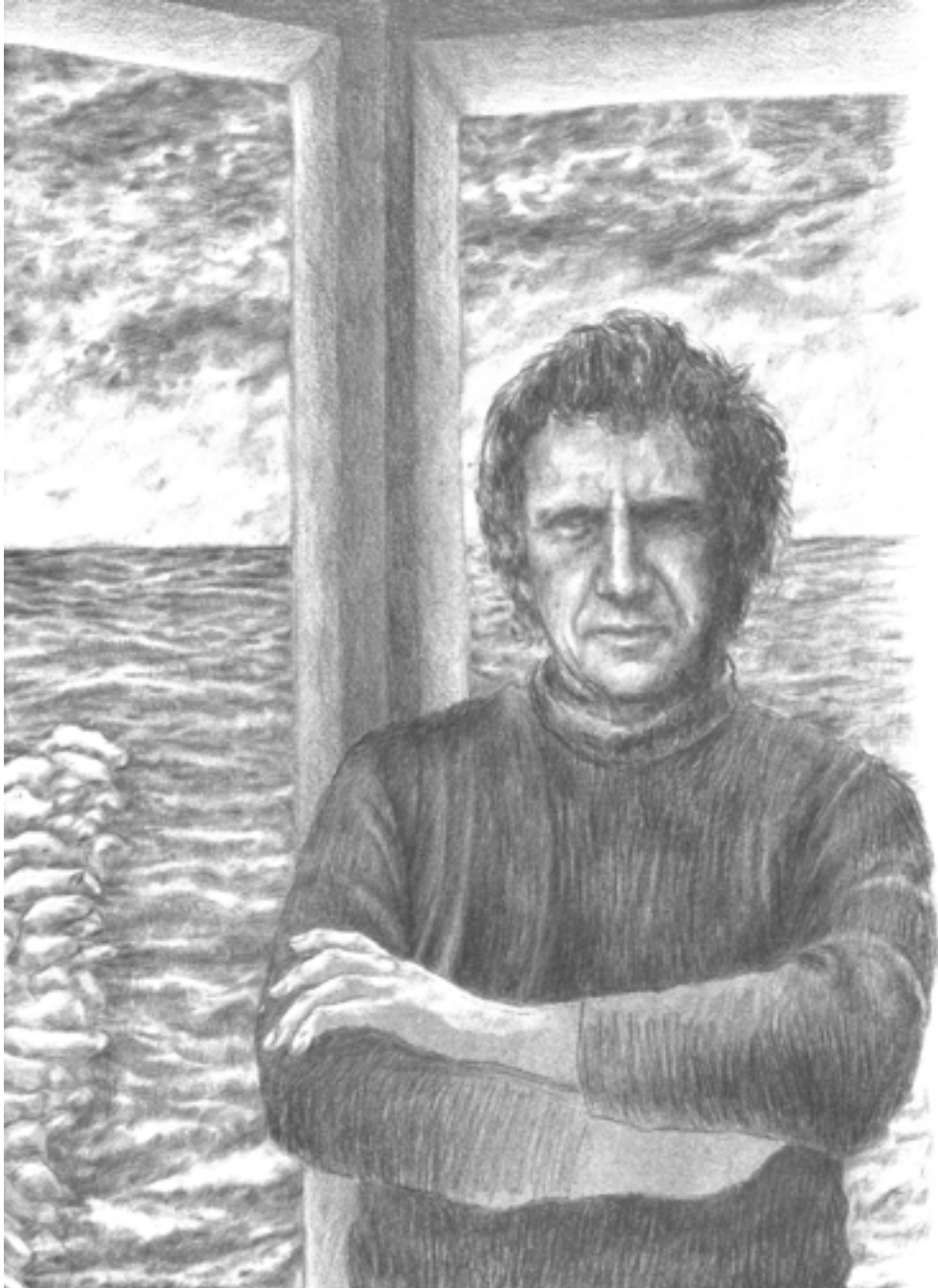
His funeral took place on January 18, 2014 at the Newark Symphony Hall, with an official commemoration. “The man dies in all who keep silent in the face of tyranny,” wrote the African Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka in *The Man Died: Prison Notes*. The loud and penetrating voice that is Baraka reminds us that he never died, that he lives among us in the form of his cries in the ears of an increasingly embattled America (and Europe), yet frustrated dedication to the cause of freedom.

*(Translated from the Italian by Douglas Reid Skinner)*

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**Kenneth White:  
A Difficult Terrain**



Edward Said tells us that the exile is an outcast who is “inconsolable about the past, bitter about the present and the future” (SAID 1994: 35). This statement suggests a strong sense of nostalgia for the abandoned *patria*, a sense of discomfort in the present, and gloominess about the future. According to Said the exile exists in a “median state”, neither fully integrated in the new system or society nor totally relieved of his or her burden of cultural and personal memories. This Janus-like border gives such a figure a dual position, which can afford stimulating advantages. One of the most remarkable figures chosen by Said to illustrate his point is the philosopher Theodor Adorno, whose *Minima Moralia* Said takes as his representative work in this context. Adorno’s life produces a “destabilizing effect” that manifests itself in a series of “discontinuous performances” (SAID 1994: 40-44), and his work must necessarily be “fragmentary first of all, jerky, discontinuous; there is no plot or predetermined order to follow. It represents the intellectual’s consciousness as unable to be at rest anywhere, constantly on guard against the blandishments of success, which, for the perversely inclined Adorno, means trying consciously not to be understood easily and immediately” (SAID 1994: 42). We will see here how Kenneth White attracts all of these characteristics, showing his gifts of enjoying knowledge and freedom, so that his personal trans-cultural creative positions help him move from the local to the international through spacious voyaging and dreamy visions.

Born to a working class Glasgow family, White was quite early disappointed by the English publishing market. So, even though he never actually lost touch with Scotland, in the early 1960s he

moved to Germany and France for long periods before choosing to become a French citizen. He took a lot of Scotland with him, including an extensive Scottish library in his various places of residence (Paris, the Pyrenees, Brittany), and was often over in the country, incognito, moving through cities, towns and villages, along the coasts, into the mountain areas, on the islands. Always with senses wide open and mind alert, he broadly travelled the length and breadth of Scotland. Yet, losing any sense of the straight way, and desiring to show no or few itineraries in his peregrinations (RUBINO 1991: 7-8), this Scottish nomad has kept outside, “with the calling of the navigator-wanderer, the terrain of the difficult territory, and a sense of ongoing itinerary. The intellectual nomad (the term used, in passing, by Spengler in his *Decline of the West*, and whose scope I was to develop), is engaged, outside the glitzy or glaury compound of late modernity, in an area of complex co-ordinates. He is trying to move out of pathological psycho-history, along uncoded paths, into fresh existential, intellectual, poetic space” (WHITE 2004a: vi). As the following short fragment from White’s *Walking the Coast* shows, the intellectual nomad is the one who feels the strength of a gathering force within chaos, without the necessity to surrender to the attraction of any hegemonic target or centre to be reached, or any meaning to be stated. Here his poetic *persona* seems to lose not only his/(her?) control over a geographic itinerary, but also, and mainly, over some of the canonised and expected speculative, epistemological and political horizons:

living and writing at random  
but knowing  
that  
though living at random  
there is a tendency to stress  
the essential in the random  
(WHITE 1989: 68)

White’s intellectual nomad never forgets that he must touch and cross traditions and cultures which he feels to be marginal to the auto-routes of the Western world and of the Western history (WHITE 1987: 10-11). It is widely known that nomads, clochards, the homeless and wanderers have been often considered as representatives of a mode of travelling which is often dangerous, in most cases a real pathology. Yet, what Michel Butor says about nomadism and wandering seems to give a new and dynamic status to this way of being, which may often acquire all the main structural characteristics of proper ‘travelling’, or at least some of its qualities (BUTOR 1972: 7). Nomadism, together with its founding function of any socio-collectivism, can translate the plurality contained in each individual, highlighting the duplicity of existence. At the same time, it can express the violent or discrete opposition against a fixed order, allowing us both to read the latent rebellious feeling of the young generations and to break the obligations linked to residency (MAFFESOLI 1977: prologue).

In White’s context, terms like ‘erratic travel’ or ‘erratic path’ are clearly not only the anti-conformist choice for a geographical move from one place to another but a clear reference to what the Scottish poet decided for himself and his writing when he moved to France for good in the late 1960s. From Paris, and later from Pau and the Breton coast, White has elaborated an intricate and fascinating series of prose books and poetry sequences in which his *personae* experience an alternative and enriching path through nature.

We know that any traditional travel can be easily transformed into an erratic path by a banal or fortuitous accident: a storm can delay or divert a ship from its route; the sight of a huge deer can lead the hunter astray or into a dark wood where he has to face unexpected experiences; or the lack of a detailed map can force the traveller to accept an occasional guide who comes to divert routes and planned experiences. This happens, for example, in White’s *The Blue Road* when the narrator accepts to be guided by

fortuitous acquaintances met on the way to Labrador; or, again, when “By a stroke of good luck that morning I’d come across a taxi-driver who’d offered to take me to a hill-tribe village off the normal circuit” (WHITE 1992: 163). So, even though we have still to distinguish between a traditional kind of travel which, by accident, may be transformed into an erratic one and an intentional pathless itinerary, the two dimensions, like some of the differences existing between the exile and the immigrant seem to blur when one has to admit the possibility of the presence of unexpected or strange events. But what is the relation between literature and travel? What’s the reason of transforming a poem or a prose book (a *way-book*, in White’s case) into a kind of travelling amulet, or of transforming a repeated travel or a definite move (like exile) into a poetic attitude to life? White’s refusal of every sort of classification or category by which one can define literary genres, as well as the intimate essentiality of East and West underlines, once again, the halfway condition of this ‘intellectual nomad’:

walking in the stillness  
 half-way between the Old World and the New  
 trying to move in deeper  
 ever deeper  
 into a white world  
 neither old nor new  
 (WHITE 1989: 187)

The attraction of White’s writing derives, mostly, from his total determination to experience the wilderness on his own terms. His prose writing, but especially his poems, chronicle his emancipation from the category of macho tourism or solitary travelling – “...the pilgrim trip has an aim, the sacred spot. But beyond the sacred, there’s emptiness. I’m not out to cover kilometres, or to reach a particular place, I’m out for a kind of spatial poetics, with emptiness at its centre. And you begin again, for the pleasure, to

get at an even finer sense of emptiness-plenitude” (WHITE 1996: 37). This represents a fine and personal introduction to the final part of one of White’s most famous and philosophical long poems, ‘The Residence of Solitude and Light’:

Thinking  
 of Khalil’s definition of reality:  
 A + A – A – A + A – A + A...  
 maybe that’s what I’ve been working at  
 these last nine years  
 the result being:



– a pleasant sensation of nothingness-potential  
 a breathing space  
 the beautiful breast of emptiness  
 (WHITE 1989: 170)

One of the significant features of poetry is its sacral quality. “While it is important”, Christopher Whyte observes, “to be extraordinarily tentative in ascribing a therapeutic function to poetry, there can be no doubt that, in moments of acute tension, whether this be the first experience of sexual love, a major bereavement, or dizzying ontological uncertainty, again and again isolated individuals have encountered, in a poem, normally within the space of a few lines or even in one single line, a formula, a spell almost, which helped them survive, a sort of talisman” (WHYTE 2004: 27). This is the spell the reader often experiences when reading White’s books. This is the spell contemporary men and women need because of the devalued relationship between human and non-human in our society. This is the talisman which can recall for us ancestral reminiscences and insights, serving as both

a walking and linguistic yoga: writer and reader together become the field of an experimentation where the internal landscape coincides with and faces an external one for an eternal re-symbolization of *being* in the world, so exchanging flux and energy, steps and passages, “*limites et marges*”:

Now I have burnt all my knowledge  
and am learning to live with the whiteness naked

what I call art now is nothing made  
but the pure pathology of my body and mind

at the heart of a terrible and joyous world  
(WHITE 1990a: 52)

In a letter to the author (‘Notes for *Scotia deserta*’, 2 Sept. 1996), White himself comments on the poem in the following way: “This is the poem of the radicalisation process, presenting the attempt to get beyond knowledge *about* things into knowledge with and in things. If it passes through a stage of pathos (*pathos*, *logos*), it moves over into a synthesis of *eros*, *logos* and *cosmos*. Art, then, is no longer simply artefact, more or less attractive, more or less interesting. It comes from a deeper source, opens a larger space.”

Within a space where we have been spectators of the falling of philosophical, ethical, and historical fundamentals, as Lyotard has observed, it is no longer possible to start a new system of values: only a creative crossing can be accepted, a crossing where a poetic erudition and an erratic route mingle and support each other. This is the only way to free our geographical landscape of all its lines encrusted by power and corruption: White’s non-linear and non-logic language-itinerary tries to redeem us in the world, transforming us into active presences whose culture finally interacts with nature, and whose agility of movement and

thought manage to become the burning knot of a new congregation of illuminating trajectories. Gary Snyder, chosen by White as one of his ‘companions’ since his university years in Paris, wrote in 1984:

We can all agree: there is a problem with the chaotic, self-seeking human ego. Is it a mirror of the wild and of nature? I think not: for civilization itself is ego gone to seed and institutionalized in the form of the State, both Eastern and Western. It is not nature-as-chaos which threatens us (for nature is orderly) but ignorance of the natural world, the myth of progress, and the presumption of the State that it has created order. That sort of ‘order’ is an elaborate rationalization of the greed of a few (SNYDER 1984: 24).

On his own experience, Kenneth White has observed:

...I am not suggesting that we celebrate any mountain goddess. I am suggesting that we try and get back an earth-sense, a ground sense, and a freshness of the world such as those men, those Finns, knew when they moved over an earth from which the ice had just recently receded.

This is the dawn of geopoetics. (WHITE 1998: 48)

It seems that moving from America to Europe, and from Europe to Africa more than one eccentric writer has decided not to treat nature as a guest in our world, or act as nature’s superior. Instead, he (always a he in White’s case, so that this gives us the possibility, more often than not, to perfectly identify the author with his poetic voices) has focused on how it can improve the human standard of living. Kenneth White’s poetic *persona* loves the mountains and the deserted areas and feels he must go and live there for short or longer periods. The journey can be difficult (as in *The Blue Road* where White’s protagonist travels through Labrador, slowly moving out of civilisation and the urban areas



of an industrialised society); many efforts are tinged with a certain ascetic quality (like in *The Wild Swans*, where the protagonist slowly moves towards an epiphanic moment of illumination and vision); or an ironic intent is used to guide the reader towards a deeper understanding of our urban western environment (as it happens in many of the stories in *Travels in the Drifting Dawn*). White's *persona* seeks in the wilderness not only a denial of the weakness of the self but emotional experiences and wonderful vistas that become a reward for his attempts to get far enough away from cities and settlements so as to experience nature alone. He is often found in nature where he comes to a better understanding of his place in the world, while seeking a transcendental experience and a contemplation of a cosmic totality. Yet, as an urbanite traveller through the wilderness, he does not enjoy any similar improvement in being a frontier voyager partaking of the commodity development in the West, or the destruction of the geological and biological landscape. His work can be also studied from an earth-centred approach, showing that the French-Scottish poet's world must necessarily include the entire ecosphere where any theoretical discourse based on it must dismantle any remnant of ecological imperialism for a negotiation between the human and the non-human:

...that's what I called 'white world'. But maybe I'd formulate the thing differently: I wouldn't say 'communication between writing and the universe, between literature and the world', but communication between the self and the world. For a great part of the work goes on *outside* writing, outside literature. You have to worldify the self, littoralise (if I may say so) being. Otherwise you remain in the pathetic, the illusory – in 'literature' (or 'poetry'). (WHITE 1996: 34)

Kenneth White's favourite literary *persona*, the so-called intellectual nomad, walks the path that leads away from the motorway

of Western civilisation. Along this path he looks for a power of synthesis which European culture has forgotten since the building of that 'auto route' directed by Platonic idealism, Aristotelian classification, Christianity, Renaissance humanism, Cartesian and Hegelian historicism, and so on (WHITE 1994: 21-42). What Anne McClintock says in her study on race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest has some relevance for explaining the kind of refusal White has maintained during his literary career. She notes that all the terminology that uses the prefix post- in contemporary intellectual life (post-colonialism, post-modernism, post-feminism, post-Marxism, post-structuralism, post-national, even post-historic) is a symptom of a "global crisis in ideologies of the future, particularly the ideology of progress" (MCCLINTOCK 1995: 392). Discussing the totalitarian US Third World policies, the New World Bank projects adopted after the decolonisation of Africa, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its master narratives, and the failure of alternative forms of capitalist or communist progress, McClintock questions the value of that metaphor which has represented Western progress as 'Motorway' or 'auto route' able to guarantee security and development to certain human civilisations. McClintock's desire for a new intellectual era includes the birth and the growth of innovative theories of history and popular memory, something able to replace all the words prefixed by post- with a multiplicity of intents and powers. Similarly, White likes to speak about his poetic purposes in this way:

and when a Japanese literatus  
speaks of the series of *waka* poems  
(sometimes as many as 100 in a sequence)  
written in the Kamakura period  
(13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries)  
saying 'the result  
was often a kind of kaleidoscopic beauty  
with infinite variety

revealed to the reader  
in a slowly evolving movement'

I recognize my aim  
(WHITE 1989: 59)

There is no doubt that the 'auto route' White speaks about in many of his books and articles (WHITE 2003b) is the straight way of the stereotyped values of the violent or debased civilisations of every continent. There is also no doubt that in the last decades the attention paid to travel and to the literature produced around and about it has been broadly enlarged. Obviously, such a phenomenon has been partly produced by both the recent accessibility of travelling and the banality of its use in the politics and economics of mass tourism. This has often caused an impoverishment of the value given to travelling, especially to travelling as a means of acquiring and transferring knowledge. Yet, since the years in which White produced one of his core reflections on the "*nomade intellectuel*" (WHITE 1987: 17-76), he has given this figure the power to transform his exile into a soul-searching investigation through meditation, and attain the last illumination where emptiness ('blankness') and 'whiteness' are reconciled through their etymologies, thus constructing a final (post-modern?) discourse where the sign, in its larger signification, generates an 'atlantic' and 'hyperborean' poetics which contours the world in the circle of an immortalising cosmology, the white shimmering world of "Pelagian discourse/atlantic poetics//from first to last" (WHITE 1989: 127).

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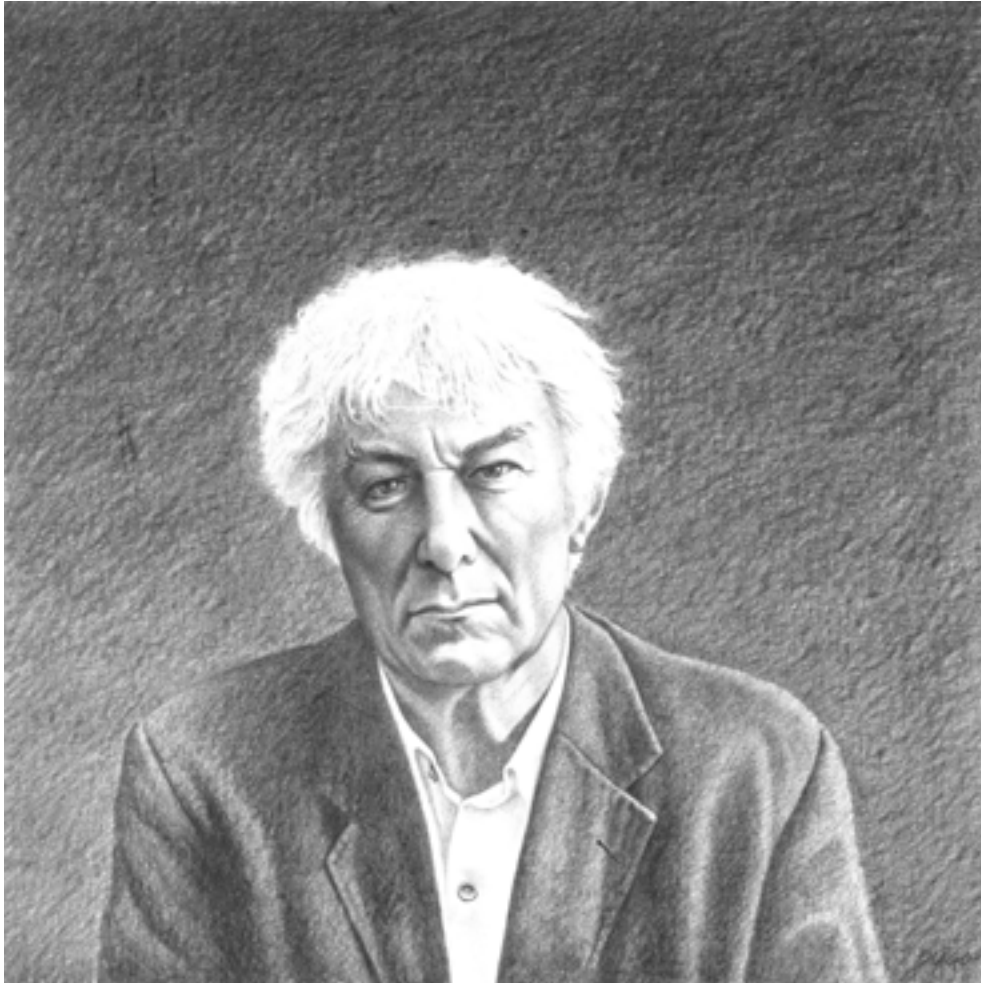
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## Seamus Heaney and Scottish Poetry:

### ‘At the Back of My Ear’



I first came across Heaney's name when I was doing research on the English poet Geoffrey Hill for my degree dissertation at the University of Venice in the middle 1980s. Only a few articles on Hill had been published at that time; one of them was by Seamus Heaney. So, while working on a great English poet, I discovered a great Irish poet. His seminal collection, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, showed me what a refined and deep reader of other poets (Wordsworth, Yeats, Hopkins, MacDiarmid, Larkin, Hughes, Hill and Kavanagh) Heaney could be. It also revealed his versatility and broad range of interests. Summarising the intentions and achievements of such an extensive cultural contribution is both difficult and daunting: there was the Heaney who was fascinated with Brodsky, Milosz and Herbert, as well as the classicist Heaney, a companion to Sophocles, Dante and Virgil; Heaney the poet and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995; Heaney the translator of Anglo-Saxon and Scots poetry, of the Irish legend of Sweeney or of Leon Janacek; and Heaney the teacher at the Queen's University of Belfast, at the Carysfort College, and at Harvard as Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory (for this reason, dividing his life between the Republic of Ireland, where he moved in 1972, and the USA, his second home). Then, there is also the poet who refused the title of Poet Laureate because he felt himself to be 'off-centre', both in nationality and language; the poet-intellectual who, refusing to appear in a famous anthology of British poetry, wrote: "Be advised, my passport's green / No glass of ours was ever raised / To toast the Queen" (HEANEY 1983: 9).

My fascination with Heaney's poems was immediate. I was so attracted to the bog fragments of his *Selected Poems* that I at once

translated some of them into Italian (Heaney's first appearance in Italian). The article was published in 1989, soon after my experience with the Geoffrey Hill dissertation and translation, and the 'bog poems' were published in a literary journal, now defunct, called *Origini*. It was at that time, and mainly because of the translations, that Heaney and I began exchanging letters and messages. The first letter was dated 15 September 1989. Heaney appreciated the journal I sent him, and was honoured despite his (as he put it) minute knowledge of Italian. Having a look now at all the papers we exchanged, I realise that more than 30 years have elapsed, and that a folder has been filled with letters, cards, postcards, faxes, slim pamphlets, manuscripts and greeting cards for Christmas (usually with a fragment of a poem, a quotation, or a phrase).

I remember I was particularly moved by a 1997 pamphlet called 'Would They Had Stayed', which included a poem dedicated to three great poets from Scotland that I knew well, and who all died in 1996: Norman MacCaig, Sorley Maclean and George Mackay Brown. For Heaney, as for everyone interested in contemporary Scottish literature, it was a great loss. His indebtedness to twentieth-century Scottish poetry was evident from the very beginning of his poetic career. Heaney himself pointed to the early influences he felt had shaped him, particularly with reference to Hugh MacDiarmid, MacCaig and, perhaps a bit unexpectedly, the late Medieval poet, Robert Henryson, and the two Gaelic poets, Sorley Maclean and Iain Crichton Smith. In this brief essay I would like to investigate his concern with them, especially with respect to his own critical accounts and poetic practice.

I remember that in 1993, after translating several of Norman MacCaig's poems, I had a chat with Heaney in Bologna. It was after he had launched the Italian translation of *Station Island*. Heaney admitted that he and Norman MacCaig were close friends, and asked me to keep him informed of my work on MacCaig. In one of his letters, dated 6th February 1995, Heaney wrote: "I would love to be connected with this enterprise. Norman is a dear

friend and I have always wanted to do some salute to him. Never somehow managed it. Anyhow, we'll keep in touch." Later on, he agreed to write an introduction to the book, entitled *L'equilibrista*, which included thirty Norman MacCaig poems that I had translated, as well as a preface by Valerie Gillies and my interview with the poet. The introduction, which contains important references and clues to understanding Heaney's early fascinations and influences, was later re-published, first in the *Irish Times* after MacCaig's death (in 1996), and subsequently in his 2002 collection of essays, *Finders Keepers*.

Heaney introduced MacCaig at the Kilkenny Festival in 1975, but the two had met in St Andrews two years earlier. Heaney recalls: "My first encounter with Norman MacCaig's poetry converted me to it. In a BBC pamphlet that accompanied *Listening and Writing*, a Schools Radio series produced in the early 1960s, I came across 'Summer Farm' – 'Straws like tame lightnings lie about the grass / And hang zigzag on hedges.' Brilliant. A unique continuum of wiliness and sensuousness. The minimal and the dotty – 'A hen stares at nothing with one eye, / Then picks it up' – transposed into a metaphysical key." In the next paragraph, he adds: "He was a great fisherman, a master of the cast, of the line that is a lure. And the angler's art – the art of coming in at an angle – is there in his poetry too. He could always get a rise out of the subject. He made it jump beyond itself" (MACCAIG 1995: 10).

One of Heaney's images seems particularly relevant to me: his use of the fisherman's line under the surface of the water hints at the obliqueness of his own technique of in-depth excavation, when it becomes a tool to probe hidden and internal feelings and dreams, either hauled up from the unconscious or taken from history. And history, for Heaney, often means the history of a language or languages, even those lost and forgotten. This is the strategy that he shared with MacCaig, bridging Irish and Scottish traumas and desires. As he himself put it in his essay: "One day at a party in Edinburgh, in a room full of smoke and music and flir-

tation, Norman took me into a corner and began to whistle a totally bewitching air. It was a fragment of pibroch, a few orphaned phrases as piercing as [a] curlew-call, but it was also a melody of the soul's loneliness, a tune that was like a piece of secret knowledge... The filament of sound that unspooled from his lips that day was an Ariadne's thread leading in to the heart of the Scottish Gaelic maze: in there, at the outback of modernity and English, there dwells the foetal shape of defeat and dispersal, language loss and trauma" (MACCAIG 1995: 12-13).

When *L'equilibrista* was finally published in 1995, Heaney, despite a bad cold, wanted to fly to Edinburgh and launch the book together with MacCaig and Valerie Gillies. MacCaig was very frail and unstable due to illness, yet he enjoyed the reading and cherished his friends. Earlier, Heaney had asked me not to show his introduction to MacCaig. Understandably, on the day of the launch, the Scottish poet was deeply moved. I sensed that Seamus was probably thinking that it was the last time he would enjoy Norman's company.

I imagine that Heaney's admiration for Norman MacCaig's poetry was mostly determined by Norman's accurate descriptions of the deceitful nature of language when describing the world, but also by the conflict between the English language and the Scottish landscape or, worse, between the English language and the native languages of Scotland, Scots and Gaelic in particular, a problem he could easily link to a similar situation in contemporary Ireland. Unable to enter the final secret of a landscape that suffers the naming imposed by a colonising language, MacCaig's response to the original native way of talking and naming shows his strong sense of dislocation and regret. So, in the attempt to subdue "the experience to the language, the exotic life to the imported tongue" (MAXWELL 1965: 82-3), the English language here inevitably generates the mystery of a double vision. In one of his most famous poems, MacCaig says: "Who owns this landscape? – / The millionaire who bought it or / the poacher staggering downhill in

the early morning / with a deer on his back? // Who possesses this landscape? – / The man who bought it or / I who am possessed by it?" (MACCAIG 1990: 225). If the problem of possession and dispossession opens up a series of historical wounds regarding the relationship between Scotland and England, coloniser and colonised – such as the tragedy of the Clearances – MacCaig's also gives us an attentive recollection of visual sensations to affirm identity through a politics of loyalty and revenge: "Or has it come to this, / that this dying landscape belongs / to the dead, the crofters and fighters / and fishermen whose larochs / sink into the bracken / by Loch Assynt and Loch Crocach? – / to men trampled under the hoofs of sheep / and driven by deer to / the ends of the earth..." (MACCAIG 1990: 226). The sense of a disappearing Gaelic society is always present in MacCaig's poetry, as well as the disruptive historical references to the Clearances and their consequences. This country haunted by "bog-trotters, moss-troopers, / fired ricks and roof-trees in the black night – glinting / on tossed horns and red blades" / is the violent starting-point of an inevitable shrinking of Gaelic population and their heritage, an issue Heaney particularly associated with what happened in his own country.

Heaney's interest in the Scottish poetry produced by some of his best friends did not diminish through decades. He not only contributed on MacCaig and later on MacDiarmid, but wrote a decisive essay on Edwin Muir for my *Alba Literaria. A History of Scottish Literature* (FAZZINI 2005) – a piece of writing that passed through a seemingly unending series of corrections and drafts. These common friends were very much talked about when we met, be it in St Andrews, Milan, or Mantua. In one of our meetings, in Dublin in 2008, while we were sipping coffee in his large home kitchen next to the Strand, Seamus and I discussed the demonstrations we had participated in the day before at Tara, where he gave a short speech and read a few poems. Supporting a demonstration to save the archaeological site of Tara from the construction of a highway seemed an appropriate stand on

Heaney's side back then, especially if it might help the survival of a place which had served as Ireland's political and spiritual capital up until the arrival of the Normans. Tara was the recognised seat of the kings of Ireland until the sixth century, and a key site in Neolithic times. It interested both Heaney and Paul Muldoon, despite Heaney himself confessing to me to having been somewhat exploited by journalists in certain newspaper articles. And on the day that Heaney and I met, Tara was the main thread of our conversation.

On that afternoon we covered a wide range of subjects. Heaney was interested in the archaeological remains of Offa's period in England, which Heaney appreciated through the partly autobiographical and partly historical reconstruction in Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* – Heaney himself had written that “Offa's story makes contemporary landscape and experience live in the rich shadows of a tradition” (HEANEY 1980a: 160). He also recalled the Bushman rock paintings during his visit to NELM and Rhodes University (Grahamstown, South Africa), where he read and lectured. He was accompanied on a special tour to a famous archaeological site by, among others, one of our common friends, the South African poet Don MacLennan. MacLennan himself, in his *Rock Paintings at Salem*, later wrote: “My companions / photograph the paintings. / I envisage shiny prints / they'll show to relatives back home. / But how can we enter / this other world / of blood-red figures freed / by healing acts / of which we're ignorant, / by hands on back and chest / that redirect or free / the boiling energy? / Dreaming and waking / intermingle here confusedly” (MACLENNAN 2001: 5). We also talked about another major figure in South African poetry, Douglas Livingstone – also of Scottish origins – whom I had known well and whose work I had translated for various publications. Livingstone, a microbiologist, devoted much of his career as a writer to recovering some of the pre-colonial civilisation of a forgotten time, when rock art hinted at the interlacing of animal and the human worlds in a natural pre-

verbal language of a sort. As Livingstone wrote in his ‘Rock Art’: “Times were pitiless, rough. / The code has not changed much. // The series ends with the / beast trampling with its knees / tribesmen in the throes of / worshipping this new god” (LIVINGSTONE 1978: 16).

Livingstone's image is particularly apt because Heaney himself talks of a “pre-verbal register” of the poetic language when referring to MacDiarmid, one of his favourite Olympians. Heaney's attention to and involvement in my translation of MacDiarmid's long poem, ‘On a Raised Beach’ (MACDIARMID 2000: 6-9), was probably suggested by my effort to reproduce that ‘pre-verbal register’ in Italian. As Heaney himself admitted, MacDiarmid had fascinated him since the very beginning of his poetic career and he considered the Whalsay poet “a far-out blethering genius”. In his celebrated essay, ‘A Torchlight Procession of One’, the Irish poet paid further compliments and described MacDiarmid as the writer who “prepared the ground for a Scottish literature that would be self-critical and experimental in relation to its own inherited forms and idioms, but one that would also be stimulated by developments elsewhere in world literature” (HEANEY 2002: 294).

Heaney met MacDiarmid for the first time in 1967, in the house of Kader Asmal, professor of Law at the Trinity College and an anti-apartheid activist, just before a poetry reading to celebrate Human Rights Day. He met the Scottish poet again at his house in Biggar (in Lanarkshire), after having chatted about him with Patrick Crotty, who had written a PhD dissertation on MacDiarmid (O'DRISCOLL 2008: 362-5). It seems that, other than the strength of the first 1922 short Scots lyrics and the 1926 long poem, ‘A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle’, what attracted Heaney to MacDiarmid was the latter's strategic shift from “synthetic Scots” to “synthetic English”. Heaney insists: “MacDiarmid's ambitions are still the right ones. What was great about his effort in Scotland was the inclusiveness of it” (O'DRISCOLL 2008: 363). In his poem, ‘An Invocation’, Heaney calls his Scottish friend a

“catechism worth repeating always” (1996: 28). Earlier, Heaney had addressed MacDiarmid in his first prose book, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (1980). He dedicated several pages to the Scottish poet in one of his Oxford Lectures (published as *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, 1995) and mentioned him in *Stepping Stones*.

On the dust jacket of *Scottish Scene*, a work by Hugh MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassic Gibbon published in 1934, which was also the year of publication of MacDiarmid’s long poem, ‘On a Raised Beach’, a map of Scotland is shown with some of Scotland’s poets occupying the territories related to their works and their lives. MacDiarmid himself stands upright on Whalsay in the Shetland Islands, his hands at his sides, and, slightly bent towards the southwest, surveys the Scottish scene while striking an inquisitive posture, probably making sure that the Scottish Renaissance is safely on course. Heaney may have remembered the map and the long poem when, apparently referring to MacDiarmid’s programme for the re-unification of Scotland and Ireland under the driving force of Gaelic, he wrote his invocation: “Incline to me, MacDiarmid, out of Shetland, / Stone-eyed from stone-gazing, sobered up / And thrawn. Not the old vigilante // Of the chimney corner, having us on, / Setting us off, the drinkers’ drinker; no, / Incline as the sage of wind that flouts the rock face, // As gull stalled in the seabreeze, gatekeeper / Of open gates behind the brows of birds...”

Many details included in Heaney’s poem refer to events, ideas and achievements of some eighty years before when MacDiarmid, aged 41, composed one of the deepest and most stimulating poetic meditations of the last century, ‘On a Raised Beach’. Laid low by a psychological and physical distress, MacDiarmid arrived in Whalsay, Shetlands, hoping to regain energies and the will to write. His stay in Whalsay has in itself something of an act of self-preservation; Heaney speaks of MacDiarmid’s survival that “had to do with his getting down to the bedrock of his own resources,

a bedrock which was reinforced at the time by contact with the stoical fishermen of the Shetland Islands and his at-homeness in the bleakness of the actual geological conditions” (HEANEY 2002: 305). Thanks to the friendship of Thomas Robertson, the Scottish poet learnt about the glaciation of the islands, the formation of rocks in that part of the world, and the West Linga raised beaches. The story that he spent three days on a beach without food, sleeping in a cave, has the air of myth about it. It’s more likely that from his cottage in Sodom he enjoyed the view of the Linga Sound and beyond, and of the island’s raised beach.

Despite being remote from us in time and place, ‘On a Raised Beach’ wins the contemporary reader with its steady yet thrilling voice. In the poem, MacDiarmid used his newly created “synthetic English” and managed to re-emphasise the focus of Scottish literature. The long poem, a complex philosophical and poetical vision, is truly unique in its slowly unravelling argument of the precarious balance of the attentive mind and the opaque matter, pushing the reader into unknown areas of conjecture and insight with an intoxicating mix of linguistic fantasies. The poet’s investigation is vertical: the ambition is to go as deep as possible into the essence of the physical world, to the very *haecceitas* of the stones. This is done mainly through the experimental language which reveals numerous etymological strata and tries to preserve its oral origins or, as Heaney has it, a “phonetic patterning which preceded speech and authenticated it, a kind of pre-verbal register to which the poetic voice had to be tuned” (HEANEY 2002: 301). Incidentally, Heaney is not always enchanted in his final evaluation of the long poem. On one hand, he speaks of a “fine excess” and “unique multitudinous accuracy and psychedelic richness”; on the other hand, such poems as ‘On a Raised Beach’ totter “close to self-parody and only get by through the huge appetite their author displays for matching the multiplicity of the phenomena with a correspondingly cornucopic vocabulary” (HEANEY 2002: 308).

So, what Heaney discovered in MacCaig and MacDiarmid, but



also in the other two major contemporary Scottish poets, George Mackay Brown and Sorley Maclean, was certainly a sense of strong identity rooted in place and dialect. Of the last, he observed that, “He has an epic poet’s possession of ground, founders, heroes, battles, lovers, legends, all of them at once part of his personal apparatus of feeling and part of the common but threatened ghost-life of his language and culture... There is nothing antiquarian or archival about this drive. We need only compare the way the names of mountains, waters, and woods animate his poetry with the way the names of places and characters are put to work in the writings of David Jones in order to see how purely poetic, how non-programmatic, how free from the whiff of the scholars midnight oil are the topographical and mythological elements in Maclean’s work” (ROSS-HENDRY 1986: 5).

The same impulse seems to have informed his reading of Robert Henryson, a late fifteenth-century poet, “a schoolmaster of Dunfermline”. Heaney’s 2009 translation of Henryson’s *The Testament of Cresseid* was a fine culmination of his fascination with the Scottish matter and it impelled the Irish poet to provide some interesting comments. In his conversation with Daniel O’Driscoll, Heaney pointed to “a hidden Scotland at the back of my ear, the Ulster Scots idiom I used to hear from County Antrim farmers at the cattle fairs in Ballymena” (O’DRISCOLL 2008: 365). Almost the same words are used in the introduction to *The Testament of Cresseid and Seven Fables*: “Henryson’s language led me back into what might be called ‘the hidden Scotland’ at the back of my own ear. The speech I grew up with in mid-Ulster carried more than a trace of Scottish vocabulary and as a youngster I was familiar with Ulster Scots idioms and pronunciations across the River Bann in County Antrim. I was therefore entirely at home with Henryson’s ‘sound of sense’, so much in tune with his note and his pace and his pitch that I developed a strong inclination to hum along with him” (HEANEY 2009: xiii-xiv). Much later the Irish poet came across a British Library exhibition which included

an illustrated manuscript of one of Henryson’s fables: “I was so taken by the jaunty, canty note of its opening lines that I felt an urge to get it into my own words” (HEANEY 2009: xiii). It is at this point that Heaney provides us with the already-quoted suggestion of the fable’s language giving him a sense of the “hidden Scotland”, a trace of the repressed linguistic and topographical identity (the Irish variant of this issue is memorably explored in the poems of *Wintering Out*). Emphasised by the poet in his introduction to the Henryson translations is his memory of a sudden discovery of intimacy with a language whose accents, intonations and even words sounded strangely familiar to him: “...the way his [Henryson’s] voice is (as he might have put it) ‘mingit’ with the verse forms, the way it can modulate from insinuation to instruction, from high-toned earnestness to wily familiarity – and it was this sensation of intimacy with a speaker at once sober and playful that inspired me to begin putting the not very difficult Scots language of his originals into rhymed stanzas of more immediately accessible English” (HEANEY 2009: viii).

If we go back to what Heaney wrote about his “sense of place”, we should pay attention to both what he observes of poets such as Larkin, Hughes and Hill – who can master their own part of the English landscape and create different “Englands of the mind” – and to his precise technique of mingling a traditional idea of geography to the oral and aural heritage of a place. (HEANEY 1980a: 150-169) In this way, MacCaig’s, Maclean’s and MacDiarmid’s Scottishness, like Heaney’s Irishness or Jones’s Welshness, is something quite different from a pure idea of a local cultural identity. What Heaney had at the back of his ear was the County Derry dialect, the Ulster Scots idiom he heard in County Antrim, the language of the Irish poem *Buile Shuibhne* which he translated as *Sweeney Astray* (1983); the Gaelic Highlands and the oral Scots culture; the Old English as registered in the epic poem *Beowulf*; the English patrimony of linguistic imposition he could read in Wordsworth, Hopkins and Hardy; the American accents of Eliza-

beth Bishop, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost and Robert Lowell; and the estrangement suffered by the English language when possessed by poets such as Joseph Brodsky, Iain Crichton Smith and Sorley Maclean, or by wonderful translators, whose works were well-known to Heaney, such as John D. Sinclair and Charles S. Singleton, when they sweated over Dante Alighieri's *Comedy*. If you are a reader wanting to get this kind of 'back of Heaney's ear' music, it is advisable that, as MacCaig wrote in a poem referring to MacDiarmid, you "should observe / two minutes pandemonium".

*(Translated from the Italian by the author  
and Douglas Reid Skinner)*

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Douglas Dunn:

‘A Specimen Under Glass’

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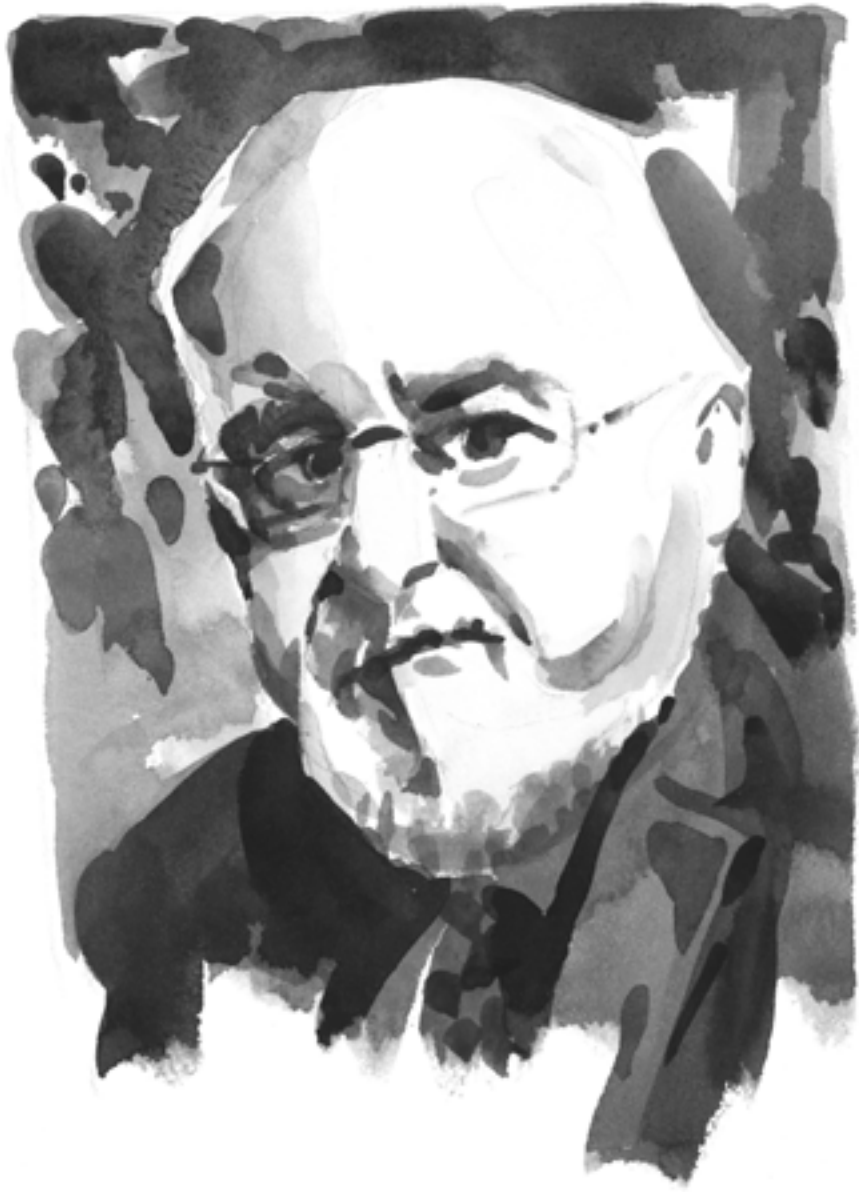
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Douglas Dunn likes to move and write within the uncertain interstices of historical and literary change in contemporary Scotland: within areas of ambivalence between tradition and the new; out of unresolved conflicts between embedded national culture and ideologically conceived class struggle; and from sites where the conduct of governors encounters the conduct of the governed, the individual. As far as his own methods are concerned, he focuses on all the differences that separate person from group, and also those oppositions with which colonial subjects are familiar: Civilised/Uncivilised; Poor/Rich; Self/Other; and Barbaric/Cultured. It is this revealing and potent list of opposites that is the engine behind Dunn's poetry, directing it into the lively ground of dialectics he has sought to exploit and transcend. His sense of the uncertainty of the border is strong, that uncomfortable state of exile that, for a period of his life, made him feel himself to be a part of neither Scotland nor his adopted England. The poet seems to live the endless alienation of a writer whose poetry, as Larkin once remarked, can happen anywhere, even though it is more likely to exploit the local and familiar. Talking about the time he spent in Hull, from 1966 to 1984, Dunn observes: "Never further away than a long morning's train journey from Hull, Scotland has always been accessible and I have travelled back more often than I care to remember. Several years ago, it dawned on me for the first time that these visits home were spent largely in checking facts, feelings and settings for writing, testing the sounds of voices and the cadences of a locality. It was the sort of realisation that can make you feel like an exile when you know that you are not" (DUNN 1984: 5).

To read Douglas Dunn's poetry is to experience the sense of division that prefigures the emergence of a new radical voice in Scottish contemporary poetry. After the strongly nationalistic and revolutionary ideas of MacDiarmid and the attempts of the Second Generation of the Scottish Renaissance to restore the use of vernacular Scots, Dunn is the purveyor of a transitional style that revisits the Larkinian tradition of English poetry and smashes it against the coarsest creativity of the Scottish revival. In most of his poems he may yearn for a social change – "I have written about class and the system of humiliations on which this country and the rest of the world tick over" – yet he restores more convincingly the powers of imagination and intuition as the best English-language contemporary poets have managed to do: "But I don't think I *chose* these subjects. The way I look at it is that my imagination decided that I should show my colours. In retrospect, I think the gesture was necessary, and I stand by it" (DUNN 1985: 44).

Dunn's Hegelianism tries to restore power to Scottish history and his use of the 'I' declares the entrance of multi-faceted *personae* into a revisited history through the use of precise literary masks for a poetical reconstruction of his external reality. In this way, his agonistic method illuminates the cruelty of subjection, slavery, imperial and parochial academicism by confronting the privileged themes of high literature with the low, 'barbaric' intrusion of indigenous culture. Talking about the Humber estuary in Hull, Dunn metaphorises his attraction for the meeting of contrasting elements of reality: "It is so spectacularly grim it is beautiful. Sunlight turns the mud to a silvery grey, the colour of chrome taps" (DUNN 1979: 77). The mixture of colours and feelings is characteristic of Dunn's poetry, much as it is characteristic of Larkin's style. The Humber estuary is beautiful and grim, silvery and muddy at the same time or, as Derek Mahon observed during a walk taken with Dunn, has the "post-Imperial grandeur of a British port in decline" (DUNN 1979: 77). It was in this early post-Imperial period that Larkin wrote his first poems, and it is under

Larkin's influence and encouragement that Dunn shaped his own style and poetics. In those years, the Welfare State failed to live up to its goals, the Vietnam War burst onto the scene with a violence that shocked the young generations of at least three continents, and the decline of the British Empire was undermining the illusions of those who looked back to an earlier historical period. It is in this panorama that Dunn's poetry first appeared, in 1969.

In articulating the idea of class struggle and cultural alienation, Dunn's transgressive vision of truth puts into question the ambition of sharp dialectics: the trite stereotype of the civilised/un-civilised dichotomy; the fear of technological progress guaranteed by advanced neo-colonialist countries; and a traditional conception of the historicist idea of time as a progressive advancement towards an idealised structure of society. Dunn's argumentation operates in the interstitial space between those opposing elements to demonstrate the ambiguities underlying any total theory and to recover the hidden and suppressed voices of both a personal and a common past.

The equilibrium that Dunn has maintained since the publication of his first volume, *Terry Street*, in 1969 is something that Ian Gregson describes in these terms: "Dunn's surrealism deliberately offends against the realist mode whose dominance Larkin helped to establish – where Larkin's was a conservative dialogue with modernism, Dunn's is a subversive dialogue with realism" (GREGSON 1992: 27).

Re-introduced in post-war England by the Movement poets, especially Larkin and Davie, the realism Gregson talks about mainly looked at urban landscapes with urban taste. In order to declare that 'nature poetry' and a Modernist attitude to the world was at that time impracticable, the group of poets Robert Conquest gathered in *New Lines* was perceived to share his question about external reality: "What can a poem do with a landscape?" (CONQUEST 1965: 75; 45; 83). A new general tendency was introduced in contemporary poetry. Against "The debilitating theory

that poetry *must* be metaphorical” (CONQUEST 1965: xii) and the “irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it” (LARKIN 1985: 27), the Movement poets refused the experimentations of Modernism and the richly metaphorical poetry of the new Romanticism *à la* Dylan Thomas in order to inaugurate a poetry of statement, like that written by William Empson but without the notoriously witty ambiguities of his most cerebral wordplay (WAIN: 1950). The programme was based on a general de-emphasising of concern for feeling and on a technique that admitted a slight narrative thread based upon a sheer descriptive listing of all the paraphernalia of post-war urban landscape.

Yet, even though the Movement poets, and Larkin in particular, refused to concede Modernism an eminent place in the development of the English poetic tradition, it seems clear, as the above-mentioned quote by Gregson has evidenced, that a dialogue with Modernism existed and was decidedly productive. Larkin was not indifferent to the poetry of Eliot, Auden and Yeats, as can be observed in his first book, *The North Ship*, or, even better, in his juvenilia (LARKIN 1983: 29; BOOTH 1992: 64-8; LONGLEY 1973/74: 64; TOLLEY 1991: 32-45).

Recent criticism on Larkin’s work has also demonstrated that Symbolism and, by implication, Modernism, were all-important for a book like *High Windows* (LINDOP 1980: 46-54; HEANEY 1982: 131-8; EVERETT 1980: 227-42; MOTION 1982). This partly justifies the idea that Larkin’s poetry was much more about transcendence and human endeavour than has previously been acknowledged, so that the conviction that an unhistorical trend in his work should be brought into focus has become relevant, at least in the last twenty years. Without going as far as to share Barbara Everett’s suggestion that a ‘timeless idealism’ can be seen to define some of Larkin’s poems (EVERETT 1986: 230-244), a serious and well-documented work on Larkin’s engagement with the social attitudes of the post-war years has yet to be produced by

contemporary critics. So, if on the one hand it is certain that the social and historical situation of the late 1940s and 1950s may have influenced Larkin’s general tone – the sense of disillusionment and nostalgia Heaney talks about when referring to Hughes, Hill and Larkin (see HEANEY 1980: 169) – then, on the other, his commitment to the present situation of the British society was always dictated by a general aloofness from contingent matters.

On the contrary, Dunn’s re-visitation of Larkin’s attitudes has always been, contextually and historically, much more open to a direct socio-historical analysis. Dunn’s observing eye is flooded by a series of *realia* that become strong markers of a deepening historical excavation since his poetic debut. If Larkin’s observation was led by a mastering eye that tended to appropriate external reality, and extract from it the meaning of an epiphanic moment, Dunn questions his own realistic techniques in order to open a dialogic relationship with the world and his literary influences. On the topic, Alastair Fowler has observed: “Certainly Dunn owes an enormous personal debt to Larkin, as his master in the vocation and craft of verse. But he no longer aims at the Larkin-like epigram of predefined feelings: rather, at a warmer and more exploratory elegiac form. And he has dared to reopen communicative lines that lead off the modernist map altogether” (FOWLER 1987: 45; see also WHITE 1982: 44).

Since the publication of *Terry Street*, Dunn’s work is crowded with people and their respective and respectable identities. Instead of engaging himself in a ‘colonising’ process of appropriation and subjection, Dunn looks for an enriching relationship with the Other, letting him or her enter his consciousness in a creative way:

I want to be touched by them, know their lives,  
 Dance in my own style, learn something new.  
 At night, I even dream of ideal communities.  
 Why do they live where they live, the rich and the poor?  
 (DUNN 1986: 16)

Here Dunn shifts the axis of his poetical and philosophical attention to a de-centred account of reality in order to open his discourse with the voices and attitudes of the Other. Differently from Larkin, he does not try to generalise about Man, or Life, or Death (see DIXBURY 1979: 59). He locates his work in a particular time and in a particular place. *Terry Street*, for example, insists on a slum street in Hull as could have been observed by the poet in the late 1960s, a few years before it was destroyed. Or, again, the first section of *Barbarians* and a few poems from *St Kilda's Parliament* revisit aspects of Scottish history and compare them to other historical events of the Western colonisation of the world in a way that was always alien to Larkin. Read, for example, the following statement by Dunn: "By the time my book *Barbarians* appeared, which was not, shall we say, right wing, or even tending in that direction, Larkin's influence on my work must have become an embarrassment to him. It was never an embarrassment to me, although it seemed to annoy others who failed to understand how a poet who identified himself through a 'left-wing of the spirit' took hints and examples from Larkin, whose wing was on the other side" (DUNN 1987: 11). So, even though he is often interested in some 'underdog' or victim, as the Movement had already done by recovering the lessons of the Georgian poets (MORRISON 1986: 215), or of Owen, or Hardy in particular (DAVIE 1973), Dunn's aim is not that of showing 'pity' for him or her but that of entering the Other's feelings and expectations to discover a new and unexpected side of truth. With regard to the 'underdog' and his or her intrusion into his poetry, Dunn has observed: "My imagination is drawn to it, it's not a political choice or anything like that. I still have the belief that these people know truths that I don't know, and I'd like to know what they know" (HAFFENDEN 1981: 22).

If the married couples described by Larkin in 'The Whitsun Weddings' remain sheer exteriority to be observed and even ironised ("Struck, I leant/More promptly out next time, more curi-

ously,/And saw it all again in different terms:/The fathers with broad belts under their suits/And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;/An uncle shouting smut..."), Dunn often allows the observed to become observing subjects in their turn, and accepts the need to submit himself to their contemplation and judgments:

This time they see me at my window, among books,  
A specimen under glass, being protected,  
And laugh at me watching them.  
They minuet to Mozart playing loudly

On the afternoon Third. They mock me thus,  
They mime my culture. A landlord stares.  
All he has worked for is being destroyed.  
The slum rent-masters are at one with Pop.  
(DUNN 1986: 15)

Here the poet does not only look for a way of deepening his knowledge through a relationship with the Other; he also tries to feel part of a place, questioning himself and his choosing to live in Hull, wondering about the real existence of an 'ideal community', a 'home' to be created or recovered, and thinking about a possible solution for his condition of exile. In a response to a request to give a brief account of his work, the poet has stated: "It just happened that I wrote a fictionalised version of what was around me. I have never self-consciously chosen to write about a particular subject in my life. An explanation of why I wrote about Terry Street, and a way of understanding the moods of these poems, is that I felt myself a stranger in the street and town in which I lived. In the community of accents and attitudes Hull represents, I still feel as if I'm not at home" (KING 1979: 221).

On the one hand, in that community of working people, Dunn shared their background and ideological convictions; on the other hand, their everyday dramas, idiosyncrasies, and imagined 'ideal

life' were for the poet only a natural subject his imagination improvised in a detached way. Yet, in many of his poems his desire to identify himself with those people is clearly discernible, even though hidden or understated. From a stylistic point of view, his friendship with Larkin made it easier for him to start his career in the typical Movement way:

On a squeaking cart, they push the usual stuff,  
A mattress, bed ends, cups, carpets, chairs,  
Four paperback westerns. Two whistling youths  
In surplus U.S. Army battle-jackets  
Remove their sister's goods. Her husband  
Follows, carrying on his shoulders the son  
Whose mischief we are glad to see removed,  
And pushing, of all things, a lawnmower.  
There is no grass in Terry Street. The worms  
Come up cracks in concrete yards in moonlight.  
That man, I wish him well. I wish him grass.  
(DUNN 1986: 8)

Yet, even in his early beginnings, there is more than a merely realistic technique. First of all, Larkin's inconsolable sense of disillusion has been replaced by an ironic last line that suggests positive, or at least aspirational, possibilities for that class in changing times and historical circumstances. On this last line Dunn himself has commented that the "...last line of the poem is intended as ironic. That man, and his lawnmower, setting off for a new place, perhaps a better place, and perhaps some grass for him to look after, moved me; and yet I also saw the vignette as an image of vanity, of that man's touching faith in progress, and of my own unjustifiable cynicism in an environment which perfectly embodied the shame and wormwood of British society" (KING 1979: 224). Secondly, since the poem rests on the internal division played by the two pronouns 'they' and 'we' – the poet being

a member of the second group and the one who proffers the final wish – it also ironically enacts a confrontation between the poet's 'home' and his sense of alienation in Terry Street. Thirdly, since Dunn is an external observer of other people's removal, he ironically plays on the re-elaboration of the seventeenth-century tradition of Marvell's 'The Garden' in order to underline his distance from that 'lost tribe'. The social and economic improvement he wishes for the man moving out of Terry Street ('I wish him grass') metaphorically implies not only his own longing for the rural landscape he left in Inchinnan, but also a conflicted desire that both 'that man' and he himself could obtain the kind of success and position in life symbolised by owning a lawn. So, even though, as David Montrose observes, the poet has to accept that an "existential choice is necessary between the two cultures, between the working class and the bourgeoisie" (MONTROSE 1980: 72), his irony (grass=dope) holds the choice suspended in the gap created by his own indecision.

His 'home' desire is expressed in another poem called 'A Window Affair'. Here a kind of "flirtation, through the glass" forces the poet to abandon his idealised relationship with the woman living opposite him in order to become aware of his own delusions and frustrations ("But some ideals have passed far out of my reach"). As Linden Peach notes, in Dunn's early work there is "a tension between a realistic, often disillusioned, documentary voice and a poetic imagination which promises, at least for a while, to transform this reality" (PEACH 1992: 141) so that realism and lyricism merge to state a final declaration of belonging to some idea of 'home':

It's come to this, that in this time, this place,  
There is a house I feel I have to leave,  
Because my life is cracked, and in a room

Stares out of windows at a window face,



Thin shifts of dust on the sunning glass,  
And does not want to love, and does not care.  
(DUNN 1986: 19)

We are far from Larkin's unvarnished, "We all hate home/And having to be there:/I detest my room,/Its specially-chosen junk,/The good books, the good bed,/And my life, in perfect order..." (LARKIN 1988: 85). A sense of refusal of his state of 'exile' is evident in Dunn's first sequence, but his desire to see himself definitely detached from Terry Street merges with his fear to be left alone in a solitary world made of art and contemplation. In 'Sunday Morning Among the Houses of Terry Street' he writes that what he sees is "A city of disuse, a sink, a place" but he also says that "Without people it would be like the sea-bottom" (DUNN 1986: 12). Along with their "culture of clothes and little philosophies", Dunn also stresses the importance of that cultural environment for his own literary training, even though it can cost him being identified as one member of that 'barbarian' world. On this point Alan Robinson points out that

Dunn's strength as a political poet lies in his capacity to dramatise this unceasing process of class tensions, ranging from antagonism to embarrassment, which inform one's perception of the Other and one's awareness of the Other's returning gaze. This visual negotiation of deferentiality and mastery epitomises the wider nexus of power relationships in society and is, I shall argue, distinctively relevant to Dunn's situation as a Scottish working-class writer (ROBINSON 1988: 82).

The window (and the recurrent image of a frame) through which the poet observes the external world and the people in it is a continuous presence to be crossed and re-crossed in various moments and situations, a space of exchange and confrontation. That window is not only the place where separation is made pos-

sible, but also the space that the poet's look has to cross in order to guarantee the existence of an interstice of negotiation. As Seamus Heaney observes in his essay, 'Frontiers of Writing', these dividing borders, which are borders between classes, cultures, and nationalities, exist because "within our individual selves we can reconcile two orders of knowledge which we might call the practical and the poetic; to affirm also that each form of knowledge redresses the other and that the frontier between them is there for the crossing" (HEANEY 1995: 203). The Other is always different yet familiar to the poet. So even though Dunn knows that "they all come back,/Mysterious people without names or faces,/Whose lives I guess about, whose dangers tease./And not one of them has anything at all to do with me", he is condemned to share their presence and to accept that the life of Other enters the poet's eye and imagination. This negotiation can happen through the surreptitious framed photograph of a book, the glass of his Terry Street window, or the lenses of his spectacles:

They will not leave me, the lives of other people.  
I wear them near my eyes like spectacles.  
Sullen magnates, hunched into chins and overcoats  
In the back seats of their large cars...  
(DUNN 1986: 47)

Here Dunn's imaginative lyricism meets a realistic way of representing the external world (See DUNN 1988). If the objective mode of his work must acknowledge Larkin's influence (he says that "There are lots of ways in which I'd defer to Larkin – obviously he's a much better poet than I am"), he also thinks that his mentor "might see himself as a traditional lyric poet who's got fucked up on the *realia* of his particular moment of the twentieth century, which has ruined the nature of his lyricism" (HAFFENDEN 1981: 33). Dunn's desire to make lyric imagination coexist with an objective way of representing external *realia* is nothing if not

a merging of Modernist (Imagist and Surrealist) elements with “That gentlemanly verse, towards which poets like Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis have tended”, and give “imagination the spaciousness which it has” (HAFFENDEN 1981: 34) when the authorial voice of poetical and political perspectives are open to the intrusion of an enriching alterity.

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Italy, World War II  
and South African Poetry



It would be impossible for me to describe all the possible routes and secondary paths this topic can lead to, because I would be forced to discuss at least four or five or, possibly, six different South African poets who have had diverse links and influences through and from Italy. I could, for instance, easily refer to F.T. Prince, Guy Butler, Patrick Cullinan, Stephen Watson, Douglas Livingstone and Chris Mann. For example: I recently read Douglas Livingstone's private diary, which he kept during his 1992 trip to Italy to launch a book of his poems translated into Italian, *Il sonno dei miei leoni*. The diary is full of dates, impressions, drafts, poems, descriptions of places and people, and would be a rich source of discussion. But I am not going to write about it, though I'm sure it would be as interesting as, say, Richard Rive's trip to Italy or Guy Butler's autobiographies. There might be similar pages in the diary and notebooks that Stephen Watson produced during his stay in Bellagio. Equally, I shall ignore all the work Patrick Cullinan (the eminent poet and translator) did on Montale – the essay on him and the translations of his work. Then, there are F.T. Prince's writings, amongst which you will find more than one page or thought on places in Italy, especially Venice, Florence and Vicenza; but they, too, must remain beyond the scope of this essay.

Italian literature and culture has had a notable presence in South African contemporary poetry in the last seventy years but I must limit myself here to one or two cases that can illustrate the topic.

The focus of this article will be Guy Butler, Chris Mann and Memory. I will use not only details and texts of poetry, but also fragments of letters, drawings, notebooks, images, photos and a more general visual iconography that I have collected during my

research in private houses and libraries such as the National English Literary Museum (NELM) in Grahamstown. I will present images of some of the key books and documents that I refer to in my piece, so as to enable readers to imagine the larger contexts and bibliographies such a topic might lead to in the future.

The reason why I have chosen the above-mentioned poets is simple: in South Africa Guy Butler has been one of the most famous and most influential poets since the 1930s. Chris Mann, thirty years younger than his master, started publishing in the 1970s and is now Professor of Poetry in the same university where Guy Butler was active as writer and professor. Apart from sharing some personal and professional interests, Butler and Mann also had something else in common: war. Obviously, since their lives are a part of different generations, when I say they shared the experience of war it does not mean that they both fought in Italy. Guy Butler was a part of World War II in Italy, whereas Chris Mann indirectly experienced the conflict in Italy.

When World War II broke out, South African politicians were divided over what decisions to take. “Six ministers, including the

Prime Minister J.B.M. Hertzog, argued for remaining neutral and for upholding National sovereignty, apart from discharging the legal requirement to protect Britain’s Simonstown facility” (NASSON 2012: 55).

Seven other Cabinet members, with Jan Christaan Smuts, the Deputy Prime Minister, prominent among them, pushed for joining the war against Germany as a matter of duty, national interest and security. On the one hand, Hertzog thought that only through neutrality could South Africa preserve its full national independence and the freedom to chart its own destiny; on the other, Smuts was afraid that Germany would demand the return of what was then known as South West Africa (the actual Namibia), so as to open a kind of door into the Union. “By cutting loose from its British Commonwealth friends and allies”, Bill Nasson writes, “it would find itself adrift and alone in an increasingly perilous world” (NASSON 2012: 56).

Let’s have a look at one of Bob Connolly’s cartoons of the period.



Here he celebrates the liberation of Italy as a joint South African-United States enterprise. The Italian Campaign, where South Africans fought as part of the American Fifth Army, cost something like 9,000 casualties out of the more than 200,000 troops involved. Most of these troops were white, but black and coloured soldiers fought (and died) in auxiliary war service (VALE 2011: 20). The image can be comic, and it is certainly an ironic one; yet, as Desmond Tutu observes in his introduction to Peter Vale's book, you can laugh at the cartoons, but "remember, please, that international relations are no laughing matters" (TUTU, in Vale 2011: ix). Both the horrors of war and the pleasures of peace are the main topic here, one which allows us not only to re-live the tragedy of violence but also the ever-present opportunity to show that a longing for life, generosity and humanity can emerge even in difficult times. And this is particularly moving when history, memory and personal experiences are being transformed into literary texts, poems in this case. Let us read what Sampie De Wet (1906-1984) writes about Italy. She lived in Pretoria, writing stories and children's books. In 1956 she published *Nine Stories*, which deals with the themes of death, pain, fear and madness. She served with the South African Women's Auxiliary Services in World War II, and wrote a book about her stay in Italy. This is just one of the many examples we could supply in order to give a stranger's view on Italy during the war:

When new acquaintances used to ask me how I liked Italy, I always answered that what I was seeing was not Italy, but a country in the grip of war, and that is a vastly different matter. I should imagine that Italy, at present, is more like England than either is like its peace-time self. Italy is dirty, walls unwhitewashed and shutters unpainted, the roads bad, and everywhere debris which has not been removed, and damage which has not yet been repaired... It has been a dreadful winter, both for our troops and for civilians, but fortunately the winter is over. When I left at the end of March

it was already much warmer, and light till after seven in the evenings, and food was becoming less scarce. Many traces of the war had been removed... (DE WET 1945: 27)

Guy Butler attended Rhodes University during the 1930s, graduating MA in 1938, and left South Africa to fight in World War II. After the war, he read English Literature at Oxford University, graduating in 1947. He returned to South Africa, where he took up a post lecturing in English at the University of Witwatersrand. In 1951, he left Wits to take up a post as Senior Lecturer at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. A year later, he was made Professor and Head of English at Rhodes, where he remained until his retirement in 1987. Throughout his career, Butler promoted the culture of English-speaking South Africans, which led to the charge of separatism from some critics, although he argued for integration rather than exclusivity. He was influential in achieving the recognition of South African English Literature as a distinct body of work. In his poetry, he strove for the synthesis of European and African elements into a single voice. In his late *Collected Poems* volume, published in 1999, he dedicates a full section to our country calling it "Italy 1944-1945". It contains famous poems such as 'Pietà', 'Giotto's Campanile', 'December 1944', 'Letter from Monte Stanco', 'Before a Dawn Attack', 'From a War Diary: Beyond Verona', etc. Let us read how De Wet's prose description of a destroyed country resonates in Butler's first stanza of 'Pietà':

Tremendous, marching through smashed buildings, trees,  
 a stream of bawdy bubbles from our lips.  
 Dog-eyed he stares from the ruin's lower steps,  
 then frightened fingers flutter out to seize  
 his mother's dusty skirts. She lifts her eyes,  
 straightens, flashes back at bay, and almost trips;  
 then turns, goes out to him, him only, grips

his fear-blind head against her bending knees...  
(BUTLER 1999: 37)

Yet, it is in 'Giotto's Campanile' and 'December 1944' that Butler anticipates what will later become his 'Italian' voice, that particular way of experimenting with the *terza rima* in which he would produce, in a few years, two of his major long poems: 'On First Seeing Florence' and 'Elegy for a South African Tank Commander killed in action in Italy, October 1944'.

The first one, as Butler himself says, was "an attempt to do justice to one such renovating spot of time." It grew from an early-morning view of Florence when units of the 6th South African Armoured Division had advanced to the southern bank of the Arno, on 4th August 1944. The poem went through a series of visions and revisions, until it was finally published in 1968, after the Arno floods of November 1966 and a chance reading of Iris Origo's *War in the Val d'Orcia*.

In the other long poem, called 'Elegy', Butler had to go through an even more complicated period of writing and revision. Of the many war casualties that made an impact on him, there were three that, more than others, impressed him: David Pitman, Willoughby Jackson and (Janson) Breda van Breda, a young relative of his wife. The tank commander killed in his long poem "is an embodiment of many idealistic young South Africans at that time, whose awareness of their African origins and complex heritage were awakened first by the strange world of Egypt and then by Italy."

I will not go through the long line of drafts and revisions he described in his article on 'Elegy'; suffice it to say that there are now four versions of the poem:

1. The so-called 'Third Draft', which is for record purposes only;
2. The version published in the journal *Standpunte* in 1955 (vol. 10, no. 1, August/September 1955);



3. The 'Elegy' (reconstructed and shortened in *Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems*) which dates back to 1959;

4. The so-called post-Peter Sacks Version, which Butler wrote in March/April 1986 after reading Peter Sacks' book, *The English Elegy* (BUTLER 1945-1985).

Here's the beginning of the long poem:

Briefly released from autumn's battle line,  
relaxed as antique shepherds on the sward,  
or lounging like young lords, we'd savour wine,

we'd say the pen is mightier than the sword;  
we'd nag at ironies: of how we'd come –  
white Africans who artlessly abhorred



raw voices screaming from Berlin to Rome –  
only to learn the bitter paradox  
of trouble brewing, terribly, back home:

to help bring Freedom through the storms and shocks  
to harbour in calm waters, victory won –  
and then to run upon the selfsame rocks...  
(BUTLER 1999: 76)

It is worth noting here that, despite his refusal to take part in any operational and fighting actions in war – by which reason he was appointed as a teacher to the troops – Butler was strongly convinced that he, like many South Africans, “did not go off to fight *for* an Empire, but against Nazism – *against* a political creed based on a biological belief in a master race.” “We believed”, he writes, “in democracy, and we thought the Commonwealth a good thing” (BUTLER 1994: 164). Yet, soon after the war, as he tells us in the final volume of his autobiography, *Local Habitation* (1991), apart from the death-camp tragedies and the use of the atomic bombs, he would suffer further difficulties: in 1947, after his graduation in Oxford, he was back in a country where, in 1948, the National Party won at the polls and began the period of apartheid. In his words, we can perceive the final disillusion with humankind and his particular sense of private and public disintegration:

It is very difficult to communicate, at this distance in time, the body blows, and the protracted nausea of disillusionment in the years that followed the 1948 election: the ineluctable implementation of apartheid; the removal of the ‘Coloured’ voters from the common roll; the banning of virtually all black writers; the withdrawal from the Commonwealth; the desperate, sometimes pathetic, sometimes dangerous reactions and conspiracies; Sharpville, the station bomb [...] The result was that, within a decade,

we felt like exiles in our own country. Many of us still do. (BUTLER 1999: 165)

In 1986, when Butler decided to publish the latest and revised version of ‘Elegy’, the State of Emergency had just been lifted, but it was re-imposed in June of the same year and continued to be enforced until 2nd February 1990. The unstable political situation had led to a deep economic crisis in the country. The banning and detention of political leaders left a vacuum in black public life, only filled by church leaders such as Desmond Tutu, Frank Chikane, and others. Nearly 35,000 people were detained during 1986-87. Reports published in the *Weekly Mail* during the period June 1985 to December 1986 reveal that 813 books, objects, and publications were banned, 371 for political reasons. Butler’s lines seem to have been particularly suitable for the war years in Italy, but also for other possible violent contexts and situations, such as South Africa under the State of Emergency in the 1980s. The following lines were ignored by the state police when they were revised and published in South Africa in 1986:

...how can we love  
when every outward gesture, thought or word  
must see itself distorted, relative

and mirrored in the infinite absurd?  
If speech is but a subtle sort of bark,  
and song the pretty twitter of a bird,

why should it hurt to hear a falling lark  
stutter so sweetly? Why do I choke and turn  
to mutter half-meant longings to the dark?  
(BUTLER 1999: 94)

Yet, as Stephen Watson has clearly observed, Guy Butler’s life,

which had its beginnings in what is to us an “almost unprecedented degree of rootlessness in landscapes natural, cultural, spiritual, was precipitated into that condition of uprootedness which has grown to the dimensions of a universal condition in the twentieth century” (WATSON

in “Introduction” to Guy Butler’s *Essays & Lectures* 1994: 4). In more than one critical essay, Butler stressed that traditions must be adapted to new environments, revealing him to be an innovator as well as a conservative, “both radical and traditionalist” (WATSON in “Introduction” to Guy Butler’s *Essays & Lectures* 1994: 4).

While Guy Butler was teaching South African officers in Italy during the war, and also traveling to Rome, Cassino, Florence and other cities, another South

African was in our country, following a different route, mainly made up of prison camps and physical difficulties. Cricketer Norman Tufty Mann joined the 2nd Anti-Tank Regiment during the war, passed through Cairo, Alexandria, and El Alamein, and was captured at the bat-



tle of Tobruk. He was deported to a prisoner-of-war camp near Chiavari, having passed through Benghazi, Tharuna, Sicily, and Naples. Finally, he was driven to Padua, soon after the Italian Armistice at Cassibile, passing through Genoa and La Spezia on the way. Here, rumours of an invasion of Italy were in the air, but Tufty Mann, together with

other prisoners of war, was still in the middle of German soldiers and officers in a camp near Chioggia. Escaping all the checks, one day he visited Venice because, as he says in his diary, “Rumours were falling thick and fast about our ears – that the British Navy was expected in Venice that morning! (Just to show how rumours became distorted!).” On the way back to Chioggia, he saw a violent raid against the town, so his plan to try to escape by boat to Ancona failed, and he had to go back to the port and the mainland, asking for help in a farm. In his diary Tufty Mann says:

“We knocked up the family who had given us food previously when we worked on the farm. Having no male in the household it took them over ten minutes to pluck up courage to open the door. When they did so, this was the beginning of incredible kindness from people so poor, peasants who had so little but gave all. We were taken inside and within ten minutes were drinking very acceptable hot coffee and having a lightly boiled egg which had been cooked by being placed on the ashes of the fire. After a long complicated explanation of what had happened we were glad to doss down in the stable after



such an exhausting day. This was Saturday, three days after the Armistice.”

So, this is the beginning of the story of Tufty Mann who, together with a Durban railwayman, spent 20 months evading the Germans in the northeast of Italy.

By day they lived in a pigsty, hiding behind a false wall; sometimes they hid in reeds, freezing. By night, he was taught Italian, living on polenta and beans. He wrote his diary in those slim notebooks used by Elementary School kids under the Mussolini regime.

Tufty Mann smoked homemade cigarettes, made of whatever he could scrounge from the countryside, and caught malaria near the Po River. He was eventually rescued by Popski's Army, an international band of Allied adventurers. After the war, he played 19 cricket tests for South Africa, touring England in 1947 and 1951. He could have played many more, but died in 1952, aged 32. In his will, Mann bequeathed £200 each to Angelina Armoroli and Cesare Zagato, the Italians who took him in when he was on the run.

Angelina named her daughter Normanna, after Norman. Normanna's son, Alberto, is a friend of Chris and Julia Mann's son, Luke. Both Alberto and Luke live in London and are college friends.

Mann's story is interesting from a number of different angles, with various layers of possible literary texts involved:



a diary, an unpublished autobiographical novel and, finally, a published poem written by his son, Chris Mann, after his visit to the actual spot of his father's hiding place. The poem, published in his book *Heartlands* (2002), is called 'A Field in Italy' and concerns both Mann's actual visit, with the whole family, to Cavarzere and a particular interpretation of memory through the invocation of shadows (or shades) in a landscape. I would like to remember here, as a kind of final observation, the thoughts of Walter Benjamin when he talks about digging and remembering. He says that whoever tries to get closer to his or her hidden past must dig according to a plan. And, in digging, he or she must not be mistaken in thinking that the most important thing is to produce a precise list of found objects. He or she must also remember the exact place where antiquities were lodged. So, memories do not have to be founded on references but they have to point exactly in the place where the researcher has found them.

Borrowing some details from Chris Mann's research, it will be enough here to say that the shades, to apply a neuro-cognitive model of understanding, do not need to be restricted to the biological lineage of an individual nor are they ghostly phantoms that have a separate, perceivable existence independent of an individual's mind-brain. The shades, by this definition, are "episodic memories of other people which, inhabiting the interior life of an individual, contribute to that individual's personal and socio-cultural identity." Recent discoveries show that our personal identity is closely linked to recurrent significant memories of other people. In short, we define who we are by our relationship to our shades. They are the kind of shades that you might find in the poetry of well-known poets such as Homer, Virgil and Dante. Possibly, they include a literary guide in the form of Virgil, or a spiritual guide in the shape of Beatrice, and all the possible presences coming both from the African concept of ancestral shades and the original Catholic doctrine when it brings together the whole company of believers, the living and the dead. This particular form of syn-

cretism reconciles all the imagined, dreamed of presences Mann talks about in his poem and helps him (and us) to fill the gaps of history and the pain of individual and emotional *lacunae* for the re-construction of a distracted subconscious:

I'm standing in a field in Italy.  
A hot summer's day.  
Crows. Tractors.  
Poplars lining in a river.  
Clods and stubble at my feet.

The trees are as in his diary.  
The gravel farm road.  
The narrow canals.  
The soft quick plop of frogs  
arrowing into a ditch.

I'm standing near Venice  
with people in a field.  
The sky is cloudless  
as blue as Giotto's  
frescoed inside a dome...

*'Ma tanti anni fa, sai'.*  
*Signora* Ferro's beside me.  
'The barn was here,' she says.  
'Or maybe closer to the trees.  
It's all so long ago.'

My Italian is rough and slow.  
Her dialect's rapid.  
Our talk leads to guesses.  
Confusion. Laughter.  
Scraps of knowing. Then gaps...

The memory shallows. Fades.  
I hear *Signora* Ferro talking,  
far off, in swirls of words.  
Stocky. Black-haired. Resolute.  
A handbag over one arm...

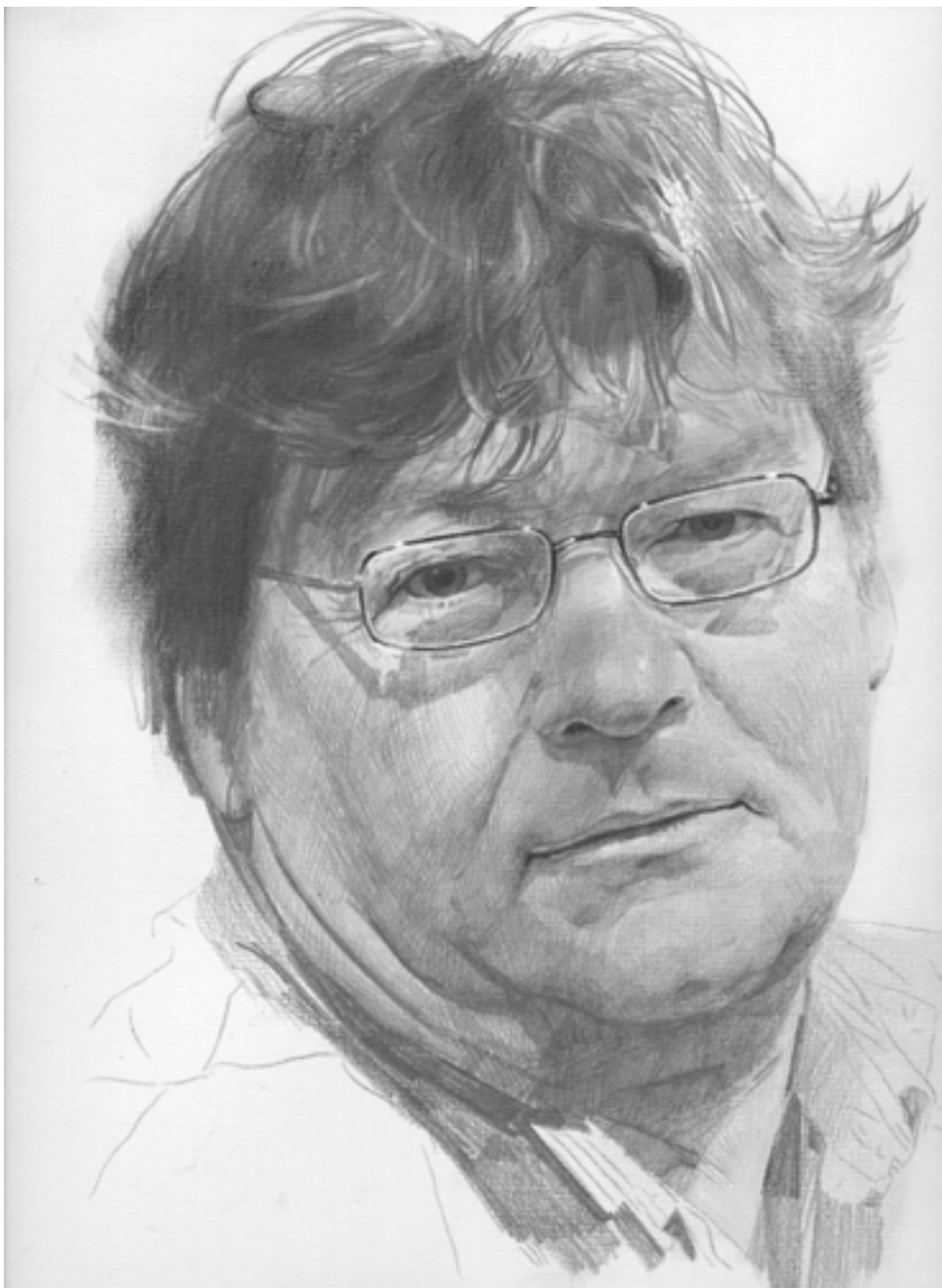
People keep leaving each other,  
the words in Zulu put it.  
Humans keep missing others.  
Dangling raw ends.  
Loneliness. Suspicion. Gaps.  
(MANN 2002: 38-40)

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**John Burnside:**  
**'Living as a Spirit'**



Forced to move from Scotland to England when still a boy, the exiled John Burnside felt “angry, just being there, and wasted huge amounts of energy and time giving expression to that anger...” (BURNSIDE 2008: 95). Yet, exile for Burnside seems to have been not only a personal and geographic trauma, but also something related to the loss of a kind of prelapsarian state, a condition longed for and idealised, especially when he feels frustrated by the industrial/capitalist erasure of the possibility of ‘being’ in the world: “I think exile – from the land, from other animals, from the sensual and truly erotic, from a lived sense of justice, from his/her true nature – is *the* fundamental experience in industrial/capitalist society. I believe that my writing (and the work of those writers who tend to interest me) is an essentially ecological pursuit: ecological in the sense of being a study of the art and science of dwelling meaningfully in the world – or, in a piece of shorthand I have adopted, of ‘living as a spirit’” (BURNSIDE 2008: 96). This kind of exile is the one which moves from no specific state, no specific nation so that, even though Scotland is always in the background, it is an imagined and unspoilt world which has given up to business and corruption, being owned by polluting companies and corporations exploiting and destroying lands, and keeping enormous masses of human beings in enforced poverty.

Burnside has written about all of this from his very first book, *The Hoop*, published in 1988, where he started listening to “the song of the earth” in order to re-attune himself to the “continuum of objects and weather and other lives that we inhabit” (BURNSIDE 2005b: 60). This discipline of the imagination, defined by Burnside himself as a kind of religious enterprise, aims at re-conquer-

ing a oneness, “a renewal of the connection to the continuum of the real, a discipline for happiness” (BURNSIDE 2005b: 61). In one of his juvenile poems, called ‘Out of Exile’, which Burnside had decided not to reprint in his selected poems, the poet is inventing things “as they might have been” if that dreamy desire for home had finally turned into something real:

Driving early, through the border towns,  
The dark stone houses clanging at our wheels,  
And we invent things as they might have been:  
A light switched on, some night, against the cold,  
And children at the door, with bags and coats,  
Telling stories, laughing, coming home.  
(BURNSIDE 1988: 49)

The ‘exile’s return’, instead, is rather different; it counterbalances that mythical idealisation of land and time. The poem that follows ‘Out of Exile’ in *The Hoop* collection is much more realistic and ironic: here, the idealised home has been turned into something like a cliché attraction for tourists who drive through hills or into a fake Scottish identity which is now linked to some combination of colours in a tartan:

Hard to imagine it, lying intact,  
folded into books: identity  
to be assumed like tartan,  
or spelt out on museum clocks  
from heretic stones and peat-blackened pots,  
history by strip light. Do we know  
where we are in these tourist hills?  
(BURNSIDE 1988: 50)

Burnside’s prose experiment, ‘Suburbs’, from his second collection, called *Common Knowledge*, opens the ground to a personal

way of presenting problematic issues, which he later discusses in *Feast Days* in properly structured sequences. Two of these sequences, called ‘Aphasia in Childhood’ and ‘Urphänomen’, insist on the gap between two worlds, symbolised in a series of dichotomies, such as childhood and mature age, or reality and dream, or, better still, here and there, being and non-being. This is a kind of re-visitation of the technique that Geoffrey Hill made use of in *Mercian Hymns* (1971), with the addition of strong personal and autobiographical aspects. Burnside questions issues such as identity and place through the use of the structure of the religious prose hymn style, framing them in a mock-religious structure that reveals his particular way of affording sacredness to a series of philosophical and existential questions:

The questions I asked all the time, but never aloud: where is the soul? What does it most resemble? I had an image of something transparent, a fine yet indestructible tissue of buttermilk or chitin... (BURNSIDE 1992: 3).

That one day I spent in the woods, digging leaf-mould: I kept finding thin silvery threads of mildew that dissolved in the air, and I was sure, if I dug a few inches deeper, I would find a being which resembled me in every way, except that it would be white and etiolated, like a finger of bindweed growing under stone (BURNSIDE 1992: 8).

In these prose sequences, it is through remembrance (mainly of childhood years) that he holds the ground and leaves a foggy tinge to a fading period of existence where a personal recalling of past details is mixed with dream fantasies. They all originate in a mysterious darkness or from a half-waking state, letting memories “form in my skin like a tumour[s]: a quiet, untenable life surfacing through coffee and after-shave when I lock up the house of summer nights, and linger at the door to taste the distance” (BURNSIDE



1992: 27). These are the “mystery years” that enable long-past vistas and half-remembered details to be contemplated “far in light and silence”; here everything lives through a half-perceived distance from a personal time that enlarges together with the awareness of a threshold or a gap space through which we can conjure up the dead and the truths we pursue. This “other country” is the terrain of the difficult territories inhabited by animal presences; it is also the unbridgeable distance between living and dead, self and other, religious values and human doubt, a responsibility to all living things.

It seems to be relevant here to remember what A. Gorz proposes in his *Critique of Economic Reason*, since it will be particularly important for Burnside’s writing after 1992. Gorz says that we need to re-evaluate what he defines as the post-Marxist force in the Western concept of politics and philosophy, and abandon the trite praxis leading to the consideration of the Other as another human being or, worse, as a subject to be subjugated. Instead of insisting on the re-evaluation of the Other as a sensitive subject, Gorz longs for the equation in which the Other = the external environment, replacing the power relationships between two conflicting human beings or social classes with the relationship between human and non-human (GORZ 1988: 91-103). So, in order to annul the power of the *malin génie* that Baudrillard speaks about – a kind of central scrutiniser of all the simulations of the external world (BAUDRILLARD 1993: 255-261) – and fill the gap between Self and Other, it is necessary to attract and destroy what lies at the very base of that misleading mode of perception. This is exactly what Burnside himself has recently stated about the relationship between humans and the rest of the world, not only regarding the ‘Other’ as human, but as the “more than human” other, i.e. all living things, so that our responsibility is “to respect and protect all living things” (BURNSIDE 2008: 98). Burnside’s philosophical reflections on this large aspect of the Alterity issue become particularly strategic for his recent poetic production and help him

discuss the problem of healing as a kind of starting point for a non-belligerent and neo-harmonious co-existence in the world, so that his poetry works at the borderline between Self and Other, partly “undermining the feelings of separateness that make us capable of damaging the world in which we live, the meta-habitat that we must share with all other things.”

This relationship between Self and Other can be explored in many ways: in the so-called nature poem, or in love poems, for example, but always with one aim in mind: the concern of healing oneself in order to “allow for a continuation of meaningful and non-destructive play between self and other” (BURNSIDE 2008: 98). This is the poetics of tolerance issuing forth the unsaid and unsayable details of an-other life. In the depth of darkness, or of unconscious states, we are presented with alternative *personae* or untouched secrets, or with various possibilities of relating ourselves with the Other:

...and someone is having the dream  
I had for weeks: out walking on the beach  
I lifted a pebble and split it  
open, like an apricot, to find  
a live child hatched in the stone...  
(BURNSIDE 1994: 3)

In his 1994 collection, *The Myth of the Twin*, Burnside starts engaging his *persona* in a subtle and painful game of remembrance and invocation of his relatives, as it happens in the poems he dedicates to his grandfather (‘Grandfather’ and ‘A Photograph of My Grandfather’), or to his grandparents (‘My Grandparents in 1963’), or to the drowned children at the pond, or to his sister, or to the dead in general. Liliás Fraser has acutely observed that “Becoming proven... is a process where both poet and reader can describe and recognise their adult responsibility to acknowledge where, when or how they began to grow up. Something which

seems as ubiquitous as motherhood, or looking out at a street, can have all the remarkable familiarity of a 'closeness in the mind', yet it is as much a test, or proof of identity, in these poems for the poet or reader to recognise and reassess how forceful these familiar settings or words can be" (FRASER 2005: 754). While declaring his special way of shaping his own identity, Burnside professes his religious attitude towards all the details of the world and questions if in his secular/agnostic sacrality there is room for an ordinary epiphany that could reveal the very essence of a Deity:

In the morning you would have stood  
alone, at the edge of the world  
with your face to the light,  
and God would become the camphor in a bush,  
the whisper of something local and banal,  
a personal event, which you would grasp,  
inferred from the wind like a shiver of ash or pollen.  
(BURNSIDE 1994: 20)

In one of his essays, Burnside writes of Eluard's secular programme to uncover the *autremonde* ("that non-factual truth of being: the missed world and, by extension, the *missed self* who sees and imagines and is fully alive outside the bounds of socially-engineered expectations") through a radical "illumination, a re-attunement to the continuum of objects and weather and other lives that we inhabit" (BURNSIDE 2005b: 60), a way for him to define what a lyric poem really is: another point of entry to the quotidian, "another source of that clarity of being that alchemists call *pleroma*" (BURNSIDE 2005b: 61):

Consider the body: changeable, incomplete,  
yet still continuous:  
think how it holds the perfect likenesses  
of all the former selves that it is not,

how casually it gathers and renews  
the forms we have scarcely noticed...

and how, on a morning like this, with our everyday lives  
suspended  
in these white parentheses

we start again from scratch: the coming night;  
the ferry that runs to the island;  
the sullen ice;

the shapes we have scarcely noticed, bearing us on  
to all we have yet to become  
to the blank of a future.

(BURNSIDE 2007: 9)

This attempt to glimpse the oneness of the world (Eluard's otherworld, the true Kingdom of Heaven) does not only promise a radical illumination but suggests that we use, as it is presented in many of Kenneth White's theoretical assumptions, a new strategy and a new attitude towards our being into space and poetry:

The lyric offers the same radical illumination that chance affords us when we wander off the map. For poetry works where maps are useless: like a passport, the lyric allows us to enter the otherworld, but is neither road map nor field guide. Upon arrival in Eluard's Kingdom, all we have is imagination and the difficult leap of trusting our own (many) senses; over there, we are not who we are in our public lives, but being there is how we come to be revealed (BURNSIDE 2005b: 61).

This is a new strategy, often unconscious or half-perceived, which allows Burnside to enjoy a passion for sensuality and for an agnostic link between man and nature, enabling the reader to



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Postscript

This is one of those books that require a long gestation, and an even longer meditation. As any reader might realise, it is a continuous overlapping of layers and ideas that have been depositing their residues for more than thirty years. Most of the essays here collected have been moving not only through books, researches and quotations, but also through friendships, meetings and conversations. If memory serves me well, everything started when, without any intention at all of writing and discussing a dissertation on poetry and poets, I ended up writing more than 350 pages on an obscure, mysterious and appallingly difficult English poet called Geoffrey Hill. It was 1985, or possibly early 1986, when I bought some of his books and had the chance, through a friend, to obtain some rare material on Hill from the BBC. The first book on the poet's work, edited by Peter Robinson, was published in 1985, and that helped a lot, even though some of Hill's major works had still to appear. Some of my first published writings on Geoffrey Hill came out in the late 1980s and early 1990s; they were updated and revised later, on various occasions, so that what appears here is something that could represent a kind of presentation of his main ideas and purposes, working as a general introduction to his work.

I talk about Hill's work because it was through him that I came to know some of Heaney's major critical works, especially those articles contained in his *Preoccupations* (1980): his contributions to the poetry of Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill, Philip Larkin and Hugh MacDiarmid helped me to quickly discover some of my heroes and some of the poets I worked on and translated over the years. Heaney himself, when invited, contributed to my volumes

on MacDiarmid and MacCaig, and wrote an elegant essay on Muir for my *Alba Literaria. A History of Scottish Literature*. Yet, the very first poet I really met and conversed with in those years was Edwin Morgan, during one of my early visits to Scotland in 1988. The present article on Morgan is something of a compendium of what I have written about him through the years and decades. Then, as early as 1989, having spent the previous summer in Edinburgh, I decided to seek support for a year's study and research in South Africa. My plan was to translate poetry, especially the work of the man who was then, and continues to be the best South African English poet of the second half of the twentieth century.

There was no particular link between Scotland and South Africa. The whole thing had begun before my departure for Edinburgh when I read Livingstone's brilliant volume, *A Rosary of Bone* (1975), which contains love poems, translations from other poets, and a group of texts using the pseudonym of a mysterious individual, Giovanni Jacopo, whose identity was not made clear. A few months later, while in Scotland, I bought my first anthology of South African poetry – the bulky *A Century of South African Poetry*, edited in 1981 by Michael Chapman – and with that it became clear what direction my work would take. Chapman, one of the main scholars of Livingstone, became the tutor and supervisor for my dissertation on Livingstone, a curious case of crossings of friendships. And then, through Livingstone – who had become in the meanwhile one of my best friends – I came to know his publisher (now a translator of my own poetry) from Cape Town, Douglas Reid Skinner, and all the group of poets and intellectuals who gravitated around the magazine *New Contrast* and The Carrefour Press: Stephen Watson, Patrick Cullinan, Gus Ferguson, Don Maclennan, etc.

Getting to know the poets in this book broadened both my poetic understanding and my scholarly work. When in 1994 I translated Larkin for the first Italian book after the early 1964 Einaudi translation, I had the chance to meet and spend plenty of

time with Douglas Dunn in St Andrews so that both his contribution to my volume and his friendship there added some more crossings to my path: meetings and talks with Robert Crawford, Michael Alexander, John Burnside, Don Paterson, Valerie Gillies, and some of their close friends: Sorley Maclean, Norman MacCaig, Iain Crichton Smith, etc. This, in part, explains the title for this book: it uses not only a quotation from one of Heaney's phrases but it also is a record of the music I heard, both in poetry readings and in private houses, when travelling around Scotland, Ireland, England, South Africa, Australia, etc.

One of my most vivid memories was of a whole afternoon spent in Sorley Maclean's sitting room listening to him reading some of his most famous Gaelic poems. I should have recorded it. But I've no regret: Sorley's voice still resonates in my ear, and the hugs exchanged on leaving still warm my shoulders when I recall his suggestion that we should work together on a large project to translate his poetry for an Italian book. During that afternoon, I did not understand a single word of Gaelic, and when I made that point to him, Sorley replied: "Listen to the music, and try to reproduce that rhythm and those cadences. If you manage to do so, your translations will sound good." I left Sorley's house at a late hour that night, in Skye, with my head full of resonances and guttural sounds, and no petrol in my car, ending up in a pub and begging for some fuel to go back to St Andrews. I was reminded of that feeling when I bumped into Heaney's phrase, "At the back of my ear"; I suddenly understood what kinds of emotion poetic language can generate when produced and read aloud by a gifted poet. We translate a sound, a rhythmic internal language both when we write our own poems and try to render foreign poets in translation. Without that music, understanding poetry eludes us, and it becomes a struggle to write a critical piece on poems or poets. Be aware of this, I would say to both scholars and students who wish to delve into the mystery of writing poetry.

All of the essays contained in this book have been somewhat

written, enlarged, revisited and translated for their new context; all their bibliographies have been updated so that, despite the original layout being only partly faithful to some of their past publications, scholars and young readers might refer to them in order to start new researches and investigations in the new millennium. Some of the recent essays (Ferlinghetti, Baraka, Heaney, and the one on contemporary South African poetry) have been written as tributes or obituaries of those poets, or as contributions to international magazines or books celebrating their poetry. The one on Douglas Livingstone was written in the early 1990s, and it is somehow contemporaneous with the ideas of the one on Geoffrey Hill. Despite the long gestation, it seems that a common thread is crossing all my writings here: a desire to play with the voices of the Other because a confrontation with the other beings and poetic voices activates the counter-discursive 'alienness' of most of these poets' messages. Inclusiveness, openness and acceptance of change are their main characteristics, both when they write about an unstable cultural system and when they try to innovate and subvert a whole literary tradition or a canon. From Livingstone's first contributions to what might now be defined as 'ecocritical' poetry, to Burnside's listening to the "song of the earth", passing through Kenneth White's innovative 'environmental' work on 'geopoetics', or through Morgan's various voices, Dunn's transgressive vision of truth, and MacCaig's insistent dialogue with external linguistic and natural realities (read: the Scottish landscape)—all the poets discussed here have put into question the ambition of sharp dialectics and contributed to let us be nearer to the meaning and the power of the cosmos, even when they 'speak out', beyond the violence and the corruption of a humanity on the verge of disaster, incapable of learning from its own mistakes.

*Marco Fazzini, December 2019*







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