

SAILING TO AN ISLAND

Contemporary Irish Poetry visits the Western Islands

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Abstract

The islands off the west of Ireland have always been regarded as a sanctuary of Irish identity. Having escaped the worst of Cromwellian despoliation, and untainted yet by what Yeats calls the “modern filthy tide” (1974: 196), the *Gaeltacht* or Irish-speaking areas are invoked by the Literary Revivalists as a site of Irish authenticity. But they seem like another country and are irreducibly other, their alterity testing the coherence of the mainland. My paper explores the trope of the island in the work of contemporary Irish poets. Although rejecting the nationalist appropriation of the western landscape, these poets are drawn to what MacNeice calls “island trauancies” (1949:28). If the islands are no longer emblems of origins, they provide the distance from which to survey the twin issues of self and home. Physically and psychologically, the crossing to the islands is a journey into another country. In visiting these satellites that seem so much like home and yet are formidably alien, the tourist-poet negotiates the threshold between home and abroad, inside and outside, self and other.

Keywords

Irish islands, poetry, Aran, Blaskets, Heaney

Introduction

In countries with a history of colonial dispossession, place, history and politics are inextricably intertwined, and as Ireland had long successive waves of invasion, space is territorialised to a greater extent than most. Places are invested with competing narratives, saddled with ethnic, linguistic, cultural and sectarian divisions. Belfast, Dublin, Boyne, Aghrim and many sites in Munster and Ulster are inscribed with reminders of crisis and conflict. In contrast, the west of Ireland, in particular the islands, is regarded as a pristine site where a pre-colonial Gaelic wholeness is still intact. In the 1890s, the Literary Revival, led by J.M. Synge and W.B. Yeats, and the Gaelic League, founded by Douglas Hyde, envisioned it as a place where a sense of Irish roots and origins could be rediscovered.

This romantic, nationalist imagining of the western islands, though discredited since the works of Patrick Kavanagh and Flann O’Brien emerged in the 1940s to debunk the ideal of rural Ireland, still draws the imagination of contemporary Irish poets.¹ The islands’ remoteness echoes the ambivalence of the poets’ relationship with the mainland, and provides a distance from which the idea of home and the relationship

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between self and politics can be contemplated. For Anglo-Irish poets like Louis MacNeice and Richard Murphy the islands reflect their ambivalent identity and troubled sense of belonging. For the later Northern Irish poets whose emergence coincided with the onslaught of sectarian violence in the 1960s – Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley, the islands are a refuge from the violence in Belfast. In the poetic cartography of women poets like Eavan Boland, Julie O’Callaghan and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, the islands have become gambits to unsettle the masculine and nationalist notion dominant in Irish society and literature, and map out a more inclusive, pluralist vision.



Figure 1 – Ireland and its main offshore islands

Westward-Bound

In Brian Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee*, three couples arrive at the Ballybeg pier in Donegal, Ireland's northernmost county, hoping to find *Oileán Draíochta*, the "Island of Otherness; Island of Mystery" (1993: 28). Urban beings suffering from the malaise of alienation and identity loss, they are trying "To be in touch again – to attest" (ibid: 31). For them the Donegal coast and the island embody an Otherworld, around which a host of meanings constellate. It is Arcadia, the world of instinct, the remembered world of childhood, a pilgrimage island and "Whatever it is we desire but can't express" (ibid: 52). Remote and yet so like home, the landscape secretes a sacramental sense of place that seems to answer the characters' longing for roots and origins.

Friel's play unmask the romantic and literary myths which have shrouded much of the celebrated West of Ireland, in particular the islands awash in the Atlantic: Achill, Aran and the Blaskets. These myths could be traced back to the *immrama*, medieval accounts of voyages undertaken by saints and mythical questors which identify these islands as either the Otherworld or the threshold beyond which one passes into a transcendental realm. There are other impulses behind the mythologisation of the western landscape. The West, as Luke Gibbons reminds us, is where the imagination inclines in its quest for paradise that appears in various guises: the Land of Cockaigne, Atlantis, El Dorado (1993: 23). Also, the West of Ireland has escaped the worst of Cromwellian despoliation, with the *Gaeltachtaí* or Irish-speaking areas surviving as the stronghold of Irishness; indeed, they are synonymous with Irish roots and origins, yielding a foundation myth for the Nationalist dream. In the campaign for autonomy from the colonisers, a locus of origins is crucial, a place which sponsors a sense of national and cultural unity to counter the colonial culture. The West of Ireland became a place of Irish authenticity, a pristine contrast to the rest of the country and Dublin, the centre of colonial administration. The periphery is thus annexed in the decolonisation process as a site of roots and identity, providing a transcendental source affirming ethnic and cultural solidarity to counter the postcolonial crisis of fragmentation and heterogeneity. Often depicted as an *illo tempore* or a past that is inviolable and stable, the western landscape is the *locus classicus* of Nationalist nostalgia, the place of homecoming.

The nostalgia arises from centuries of colonial dispossession and displacement, but it is also an indication of the homelessness of the urban mind. Fintan O'Toole comments that, "the notion of the peasant and of the country which the peasant embodied was not a reflection of Irish reality but an artificial literary creation, largely made in Dublin, for Dubliners" (1985: 12). The rural ideology underpinning the Nationalist revival promulgates a return to the land, to a coherence that the peasant's life embodies. Looking westward from Dublin and London, writers like Yeats and Synge discern in the littoral and the islands vestiges of a past that can be resuscitated in the campaign to stem the "filthy modern tide" (1974: 196). Like travellers who seek in the Orient or other remote regions liberation from the shackles of the home, Yeats and Synge seek in the Western landscape a panacea for the ills of modern society. For them, islander life abounds with spontaneity and wholeness. In the 1930s, the writings of Blasket islanders like Tomás O'Críomhthainn and Peig Sayers were appropriated as evidence of indigenous culture, exemplifying the peasant vision that constitutes authentic Irishness.

But if the west coast and the islands in the Atlantic seaboard are regarded as a spiritual home, it is telling that the poets find themselves like tourists in their own country.

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MacNeice himself debunks the myth of rural solidarity by describing the Irish as “islanders whose hearts themselves are islands” (1949: 250). Declan Kiberd remarks on “the number of poems set on the Aran Islands, or in West Kerry, or on the coast of Donegal – all written by artists who act like self-conscious tourists in their own country” (1996: 1315). This reveals a split consciousness in which the identification with the landscape is accompanied by an awareness of the self as an outsider. The Irish looking westward are like tourists seeking a place where the sense of loss and discontinuity characteristic of metropolitan modernity can be overcome by signs of continuity and rootedness. Remote landscapes like County Mayo in the west and the islands in the Atlantic are converted into a stable past, where sacramental ways can be relived. But as the past is a foreign country, the islands, though just a boat-ride away, are a separate country. Invoked as a site of origins and home, they are equally a site of alienness, irreducibly Other, a site of difference and alterity defying representation. MacNeice declares: “The west of Ireland/ Is brute and ghost at once” (1949: 279). Often depicted as illusory, veiled or invisible, and inaccessible, they do not so much form a periphery to the centre as challenge the polarised idea of centre and periphery. Landing at Dunquin, Tomás Ó Criomhthainn cannot but feel he is in another country. The same sense of alienation seizes Muiris Ó Súilleabháin as he crosses over to the mainland. For the Blasket Islanders, America is more familiar territory than Ireland or England. What the islander and mainlander have in common is the feeling of mutual estrangement and the history of emigration; the islands have become haunting reminders of absence and fragmentation rather than origins and plenitude.

Anglo or Irish

Anglo-Irish poets often reveal unease about their sense of belonging, and what Terence Brown calls the “topographical imperative”, manifested in “insecure assertions of an Irish identity established through association with place that a man or woman of Catholic nationalist stock feels no need to make” (1988: 189). Louis MacNeice is an exception. An Ulsterman trained in Oxford, an Anglo-Irishman who spent most of his working life in London, he embraces the contradictions and impulses of his origins and career, rather than subscribe to any political creed. Casting himself as “neither Brendan/ Free of roots nor yet a rooted peasant” (1949: 279), he maintains a neutral and ironic tone in poems about Ireland and his relationship with it. Derek Mahon aptly calls MacNeice “a tourist in his own country” (1996: 25). His detachment is instructive for later Northern Irish poets who, confronted by the sectarian violence in the 1970s, adopted MacNeice as an exemplar in handling the claims of politics on poetry.

In ‘Western Landscape’ MacNeice sees himself as a “visitor” who is “disenfranchised/ In the constituencies of quartz and bog-oak/ And ousted from the elemental progress” (1949: 279). Having chosen an expatriate life in a London, he is “a bastard/ Out of the West by urban civilization” (ibid: 279). He feels no sense of belonging or patriotic fervour, but is duty-bound to acknowledge the hold that Ireland has on him. The western islands are a fitting embodiment of MacNeice’s neutral stance, and together with the littoral form a liminal zone that is neither land nor sea, but both, shifting, contingent, elusive:

*But for us now
The beyond is still out there as on tiptoes here we stand
On promontories that are themselves a-tiptoe
Reluctant to be land. Which is why this land*

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*Is always more than body. The west of Ireland
Is brute and ghost at once. Therefore in passing
Among these shadows of this permanent show
Flitting evolving dissolving but never quitting – (1949: 279)*

There is a willingness to dispense with certainties and fixed categories. The perceptive self resists fixing the landscape, and accepts flux and contingency as givens.

The island trope captures the sense of detachment but is also a very real representation of the neutrality MacNeice projects, and the neutrality of Ireland during the Second World War. In 'Neutrality' there is an identity between "The neutral island facing the Atlantic" and "The neutral island in the heart of man" (1949: 224). At the same time, the island is always pictured as longing for something beyond, an unreachable mainland, an elusive half or Other that will complete its being:

*But then look eastward from your heart, there bulks
A continent, close, dark, as archetypal sin,
While to the west of our own shores the mackerel
Are fat – on the flesh of your kin. (ibid: 224)*

There is no resolution, no alignment that will connect the neutral insular self with a final sense of home and belonging.

MacNeice's depictions of the western littoral are often distant, detached, erased of spatial identifications. The overall effect is of emptiness and absence. 'Last Before America' captures distant, fragmentary glimpses of an island that mourns and longs for those who have left:

*A spiral of green hay on the end of a rake:
The moment is sweat and sun-prick – children and old women
Big in a tiny field, midgets against the mountain,
So toy-like yet so purposed you could take
This for the Middle Ages.*

*At night the accordion melts in the wind from the sea
From the bourne of emigrant uncle and son, a defeated
Music that yearns and abdicates; chimney-smoke and spindrift
Mingle and part as ghosts do. The decree
Of the sea's divorce is final.*

*Pennsylvania or Boston? It was another name,
A land of a better because an impossible promise
Which split these families; it was to be a journey
Away from death – yet the travellers died the same
As those who stayed in Ireland.*

*Both myth and seismic history have been long suppressed
Which made and unmade Hy Brasil – now an image
For those who despise charts but find their dream's endorsement
In certain long low islets snouting towards the west
Like cubs that have lost their mother. (1949: 249)*

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The island seem to belong more to what lies further to the west, be it America or *Hy Brasil*, a mythical island explorers thought they had found when they touched South America, than to the Irish mainland. Ireland is shown to be longing for another, for a lost mother, as much a metaphor as a fact brought about by emigration. MacNeice's blending of spiritual compulsion and social insight brings the mythical quest into alignment with the present, the spiritual wandering illuminating and contrasting with the escape from economic hardship. Desolating reality coexists with a pastoral dream of escape. MacNeice acknowledges the disparity between the harsh realities of rural life and the mythologised vision of communal vitality but he cannot resist the allure of the islands. In rare moments of paradoxical abandon and equilibrium, he is able to "undo/ Time in a quintessential West" (ibid: 278).

Unlike MacNeice, Richard Murphy evinces a need to validate his presence in the landscape and reconcile the conflicting strands of his Anglo-Irish inheritance. His genealogy is complicated by the fact that he has forbears who fought on both sides, the English and the Gaelic, as he discloses in 'The Battle Aughrim', in which he identifies his ancestors in both camps at that decisive scene in Irish history. In 1958 he moved to Cleggan in Connemara on the western coast, where his grandmother was raised. There is a sense of homecoming, as Murphy taps into the ancestral legacy and also the untamed spirit of the place, but there is also an unsettling feeling that he is an intruder, his Protestant history rendering him a marginal figure in the landscape.

'Sailing to an Island' invokes the island *topos* in an attempt to secure a sense of identity. The painstaking evocation of the crossing in formal stanzas reflects not only the urge to give shape to the visually chaotic, but also betrays a need to control the anxiety arising from the encounter with the Other. Even though the islands are just offshore, they are *terra incognita*, as Murphy's Anglo-Irish background renders him alien among the Gaelic tongues. Hence Murphy's poem is more than just a "parable of another journey between cultures" (Heaney, 1977: 22). It is a journey fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity. John Wilson Foster detects "the conscious Protestant reversion to an honorary native Irishness and it is appropriately hazardous, there being no convenient causeway between these two cultures" (1996:162). The rocky rhythm and kinetic verbs ensure no easy passage. Indeed, the crossing to reach Clare is storm-thwarted, landing Murphy instead on the sobering reality of Inishbofin:

*The bows rock as she overtakes the surge.
We neither sleep nor sing nor talk,
But look to the land where the men are mowing.
What will the islanders think of our folly?*

*The whispering spontaneous reception committee
Nods and smokes by the calm jetty.
Am I jealous of these courteous fishermen
Who hand us ashore, for knowing the sea
Intimately, for respecting the storm
That took nine of their men on one bad night
And five from Rossadillisk in this very boat?
Their harbour is sheltered. They are slow to tell
The story again. There is local pride
In their home-built ships.
We are advised to return next day by the mail. (1963: 14-15)*

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The equanimity of the locals and their harbour accentuates the tourist's anxiety. Their calm is born out of an intimacy with the environment from which Murphy is excluded. As with Mahon, there is a disabling sense of unease.

Conscious of his tourist and outsider status, Murphy feels threatened by the islanders' silence. This gulf between the perceiving self and the Other is exacerbated by knowledge that the natives inhabit a different world, one for which he harbours a longing. Like Synge, Murphy covets the natives' proximity to nature, but he acknowledges the darker aspects of their lives. He is also discomforted by the returning gaze of the native. His cultural dislocation is intensified by an old man's presence, a returned native from America who "has lost his watch, an American gold/ From Boston gas-works." The myth of rootedness is thus dispelled; the islanders are equally rootless, many of them "retiring from America/ With enough to soak till morning or old age." Recoiling from the old man's touch, Murphy retreats into the enclosure of self. On *terra firma*, in the local pub, he is seasick as "the floor/ Drops, and the words depart, depart, with faces/ Blurred by the smoke." He is unable to fix the Other within the bounds of language, unable to find anchorage on alien ground:

*I slip outside, fall among stones and nettles,
Crackling dry twigs on an elder tree,
While an accordion drones above the hill.*

*Later, I reach a room, where the moon stares
Cobwebbed through the window. The tide has ebbed,
Boats are careened in the harbour. Here is a bed. (1963: 15)*

Here, the persistent seasickness is real and symbolic; it is indicative of Murphy's disorientation in a terrain where he can find no stable purchase. The accidentally penitential position in the penultimate stanza suggests atonement for his ancestors' imperialist plunder and thus explains the temporary accommodation in the last line. The complex sentences pervading the poem now resolve into a four-word sentence of exhaustion. However, the bed is not an image of arrival; Murphy does not find an easy accommodation. The undertow of anxiety is not exorcised, and the self is unable to find stable ground in the encounter with its Other.

For Murphy, the western islands represent a spiritual hinterland where he can reconcile the opposing strands of his inheritance. However, he feels excluded and this feeling of isolation is conveyed in 'The Poet on the Island' and 'The Philosopher and the Birds'. In the first, Murphy recounts Theodore Roethke's visit on Inishbofin. The American poet tries to "be loved by the people" but remains a "stranger" and had to leave after a breakdown (1963: 53). The latter poem reconstructs Wittgenstein's sojourn in Connemara. Both are surrogates for Murphy's solitary and islanded self. In his later island poems, Murphy provides accounts of Crusoe-like acts of homebuilding and going native on the islands and the littoral around Galway, the port-city of Galway County in the west of Ireland. 'Tony White at Inishbofin' recalls Murphy's dead companion, who, like him, was an outsider but who managed to go native. Significantly, Murphy's most intimate friendship is with another displaced person, not with the natives. Celebrating the life of one who renounced the comforts of civilisation for an ascetic life on Inishbofin, Murphy is at the same time recounting his own pastoral retirement. Discarding an inauthentic life for one shorn of disguise, White is "Reborn as a fisherman whose craft he learned". Unlike 'Sailing to an Island,' this poem performs

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an easy transition from outsiderhood to becoming native, pointing to the fact that Murphy can only project homecoming onto another:

*With a lobster pot for a chair
And a fishbox for a table
He'd sacrificed a plausible career
On the London stage to live near
The sea in a bare room
Far from home
To become on the lips of islanders a fable.* (1985: 31)

White was one who built with his hands and lived as the natives, and was thus able to cross the threshold of strangeness. The story of a foreigner turned native demonstrates how tenuous the distinction between local and abroad is, subverting the idea of the fixity or permanence of identity. Indeed, the apotheosis of White, his transfiguration into local legend, illustrates how local mythology is invaded by foreign presence.

The Belfast Group

Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley comprised the Belfast Group that was to put contemporary Northern Irish poetry firmly on the British literary map in the 1960s. The group began meeting at Queen's University in 1963 and were published before 1969, but after the start of the Troubles that year, their work took on a new urgency and energy. Derek Mahon and Michael Longley's urban Protestant background inclined them towards an exemplar like MacNeice in reviewing their relationship with their community, adopting a distant and ironic perspective. Heaney's rural Catholic upbringing favours Patrick Kavanagh as a model, digging back into his roots for affiliations with the land and community. Only Michael Longley stayed in Belfast through the worst years of the Troubles, while Heaney moved south for a few years before going to the States.

Of the three, Mahon reveals the most acute sense of displacement. Following in MacNeice's footsteps, he spent long years in London before moving to the States, where he recounts his émigré experience in *The Hudson Letters* (1995). Like MacNeice, he often acts like a "tourist in his own country" (Mahon, 1996: 25). But unlike MacNeice, he seldom finds celebratory release in the western landscape. An unbridgeable gulf separates the self and the encompassing landscape, and island sojourns like 'Aran' and 'Achill' end in images of desolation and entrapment. Indeed, Mahon's poetry possesses an insular shape, despite the "internationalism" that has become his signature. An intense self-consciousness blocks any communion with the landscape, reinforcing the sense of displacement. Ironically, the islands suit Mahon's poetic consciousness down to the ground, the *topos* corresponding to the trope of isolation governing his relationship to his country. In 'Aran', the opening image of a singer "earthed to his girl" while performing is succeeded by a bleak and inhospitable landscape, the warm environs of the pub replaced by the outdoors which does not provide any visual solace. While the singer-poet enjoys a harmonious relationship with his companion and the tradition he celebrates, Mahon finds himself alienated, envying his friend. The last stanza is typically devoid of human presence; even the "I" is effaced:

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*The long glow springs from the dark soil, however –
No marsh-light holds a candle to this.
Unearthly still in its white weather
A crack-voiced rock-marauder, scavenger, fierce
Friend to no slant fields or the sea either,
Folds back over the forming waters. (1993: 31)*

The self chooses as its emblem an itinerant bird, unable to find anchorage in a hostile landscape. The “crack-voiced” bird in flight contrasts with the singer in the embrace of his song and audience. It is an image of transit and nomadic restlessness.

‘Achill’ continues the mood of isolation, with Mahon again unable to conduct any dialogue with the Other. His sojourn on the island seethes with restlessness. Far from feeling at home, his mind wanders to the Greek isles, where his family is vacationing or residing. He imagines his son as a “dolphin in the Aegean,” and his daughter “at work on her difficult art.” The sense of family and belonging are displaced and Achill is eclipsed by the Aegean:

*The young sit smoking and laughing on the bridge at evening
Like birds on a telephone pole or notes on a score.
A tin whistle squeals in the parlour, once more it is raining,
Turf-smoke inclines and a wind whines under the door;
And I lie and imagine the lights going on in the harbour
Of white-housed Náousa, your clear definition at night,
And wish you were here to upstage my disconsolate labour
As I glance through a few thin pages and switch off the light. (ibid: 178)*

The expansive heptametrical octet evokes the encompassing gloom. As in so much of Mahon’s work, the formal patterning keeps at bay the threat of chaos. But it also impedes any possibility of connecting with the Other. The island trope in Mahon’s work embodies the isolation of the writing self locked in exile from family, country, and inevitably itself.

But the proclivity to distance is tormented with a longing for home, however displaced it may be in time and space. In ‘Thinking of Inis Oírr in Cambridge, Mass.,’ Mahon has a vision of home as Inis Oírr from across the Atlantic; only from a spatio-temporal distance is he able to experience homecoming:

*A dream of limestone in a sea-light
Where gulls have placed their perfect prints.
Reflection in that final sky
Shames vision into simple sight;
Into pure sense, experience.
Atlantic leagues away tonight,
Conceived beyond such innocence,
I clutch the memory still, and I
Have measured everything with it since. (ibid: 25)*

The postcard or photographic image isolates the moment from the temporal flow, conferring on the poem a haiku-like ambience. Imagined from a safe distance, the island becomes a photographic image for Mahon. Tellingly, it is almost abstract, erased of human references. It is a memory shorn of incident or particulars. This

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signals a withdrawal from history, with the self finding a compensating equilibrium in the imagination. Far from suggesting any fixed abode or coherent whole, Mahon's vision of home consists of isolated fragments, suspended images floating free of locality.

In contrast, Heaney's 'Lovers on Aran' offers a distinct sensing of the island off the Galway coast. The poem enacts a reconciliation of the opposites that galvanise his poetry: Ireland/Other, colonised/coloniser, the feminine/masculine, unconscious/literate. The vision of plenitude betrays a nostalgic approach that Heaney has been criticised for:

*The timeless waves, bright sifting, broken glass,
Came dazzling around, into the rocks,
Came glinting, sifting from the Americas*

*To possess Aran. Or did Aran rush
To throw wide arms of rock around a tide
That yielded with an ebb, with a soft crash?*

*Did sea define the land or land the sea?
Each drew new meaning from the waves' collision.
Sea broke on land to full identity. (1966: 47)*

Unlike Mahon's vision of fragmentation and disillusionment, the mood here is one of consummation. The lovers' erotic union is sublimated in the elemental embrace. Heaney's lovers are allegorised into an interplay of land and sea, the human love translated into geographical manifestations. The orchestration of the elements, playing fluidity against solidity, recalls MacNeice, exploring on many planes, metaphysical, sexual and political, the dialectic of contraries. But the completion is too easily achieved, the last line with its attainment of "full identity" leaving no room for MacNeice's ambivalence.

Heaney's early island poems suffer from a nostalgic formulation that involves a too easy identification with landscape. 'Synge on Aran' for instance conflates the islanders' character with the wind-sculpted landscape while Synge's presence, with "the nib filed on a salt wind/ and dipped in the keening sea" is compared to the elemental forces acting on the island (ibid: 52). The island and the islanders are thus passive materials for the literary imagination to act upon. In the 'The Given Note', Heaney again gives us a version of the iconic West. The singer from "the most westerly Blasket" personifies the spirit of place:

*So whether he calls it spirit music
Or not, I don't care. He took it
Out of the wind off mid-Atlantic.*

*Still he maintains, from nowhere.
It comes off the bow gravely,
Rephrases itself into the air. (1969: 46)*

The fiddler, like so many of the folk figures inhabiting Heaney's pastoral vision, is attuned to the promptings of the land. His music exemplifies oneness with nature. Heaney's poem captures a passing music, a spontaneous sound that is given rather

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than composed. The chord is one of immediacy, unmediated presence, a merging of the land and the singing self.

In poems celebrating and memorialising the emblems of tradition, Heaney reveals an essentialist notion of place that affirms the intimate connection between landscape and identity. But Heaney's mid-career work indicates that the nostalgia has entered a revisionist phase. Haunted by the motifs of disappearance and illusion, the islands now resemble the mythical islands of the *immrama* (Irish tales of voyages to the Otherworld). The islands are translated into tropes of uncertainty; any attempt to situate them becomes merely an allegory of interpretation that underlines the futility of interpretation. Turning to the allegorical mode, Heaney invokes the *immrama* but at the same time gives them a postmodern twist. The visible landscape is no longer anchored by a transcendental invisible but gestures to an absence that renders the nostalgia futile and poignant.

'Parable Island' marks an astonishing departure from Heaney's poetics of place. No longer are there the etymological excavations exploring the meanings of place through sensual grasp of their names. Now the place is placeless, assumed into a parabolic realm. No longer do the linguistic counters suffice in capturing the contours of the landscape. The names are floating signifiers that fail to encompass the reality of the island. This is *terra infirma*, the island eluding all efforts to name and control it. For a land of "shifting names," all conventional cartographical aids are irrelevant: "To find out where he stands the traveller/ has to keep listening – since there is no map/ which draws the line he knows he must have crossed" (1987: 10). Meaning changes according to where one positions one's self. The natives, the colonisers, the many camps of archaeologists, try to impose their version on the land but end up "like the subversives and collaborators/ always vying with a fierce possessiveness/ for the right to set 'the island story' straight." Heaney's design in the parable is clear; identity is a linguistic act rather than a given. Stan Smith observes that the poem deconstructs "those blarney-laden tales of nativity," driving home the point that "there are no authenticating origins" (1992: 46). Smith adds that Heaney even derides his own etymological procedure in recounting how "those old revisionists derive/ the word *island* from roots in *eye* and *land*". The island becomes a figure of absence, even its insularity is in doubt, a point delivered in the elders' story of the man who was convinced "the ocean would drain away/ and the island disappear by aggrandizement." In contrast to his earlier island poems like 'Lovers on Aran', with its promise of "full identity", Heaney's vanishing tricks now 'test and transcend the limits of Irish insularity,' and by that token, the coherence of Irish identity (Smith, 1992: 45).

The *immrama* motif in the last section of 'Parable Island,' with its dream of "boat-journeys and havens," returns to conclude *The Haw Lantern*. Heaney's 'The Disappearing Island' draws on the voyage of Brendan to emphasise the illusory nature of the quest:

*Once we presumed to found ourselves for good
Between its blue hills and those sandless shores
Where we spent our desperate night in prayer and vigil,*

*Once we had gathered driftwood, made a hearth
And hung our cauldron like a firmament,
The island broke beneath us like a wave.*

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*The island sustaining us seemed to hold firm
Only when we embraced it in extremis.
All I believed that happened there was vision. (1987: 50)*

Again the island eludes definition. The monks' search for haven underlines the fact that home is imagined rather than actual, that the invisible is more stable than the visible. In a rather ironic move, Heaney seems to retreat from the postmodernist view of relativity underpinning 'Parable Island,' affirming trust in a transcendental "vision." However, the persona of the monk and the *immram* framework distance Heaney from the poem's mystical vision.

Heaney's next book, *Seeing Things*, expands the mystical vision but deploys it as an optic through which to view the phenomenal world. Events are viewed in retrospect, and imbued with meanings possible only from what Vendler calls "an almost posthumous perspective" (1998: 136). Here, events and things are pervaded with Heideggerian insight, accentuating their ontological relation to the ideas of being and existence. 'Seeing Things' is a triptych which begins with a departure from 'Inishbofin on a Sunday Morning'. The day of the week, the recitation of nouns "Sunlight, turfsmoke, seagulls, boatslips, diesel," lend the boat trip a spiritual resonance, which is expanded in the other two poems. The memory of the boat trip gestures not only to *immrama* of medieval monks but to the journey of life itself:

..... *All the time
As we went sailing evenly across
The deep, still, seeable-down-into water,
It was as if I looked from another boat
Sailing through air, far up, and could see
How riskily we fared into the morning,
And loved in vain our bare, bowed, numbered heads. (1991: 16)*

The aerial boat anticipates Poem viii in 'Lightenings', where the monks of Clonmacnoise see a ship sail into their cloistered air. Heaney superimposes the terrestrial event on a miraculous template, recharging the past with visionary freshness and altering the perceptions of time and space. The two planes of seeing, the child looking into the water and glimpsing another journey, and Heaney tracking the child's eyes across time and space, reflect a dichotomous way of being or a split vision which paradoxically brings about reconciliation and equipoise. Inishbofin becomes a "hieroglyph for life itself" (ibid: 16).

The dual or multiple perspectives in later Heaney are in part inspired by MacNeice's pluralist vision. MacNeice's obsession with the archipelagic landscape reverberates in Heaney, though in MacNeice the relationship between place, myth and self is more unstable and tenuous. MacNeice's Protestant background and displaced childhood forbid the experience of place as something lived in. Therefore, the nostalgia is more metaphysical; it is, MacNeice confesses, "nostalgia for somewhere I had never been" (1965: 217). Abstract it may be, the nostalgic pull is not the less sensual or intense. Edna Longley comments: "By laying out dialectical perspectives from which the landscape might be conceived or imagined – permanent residence, expatriation, holiday visits – MacNeice recognises the potential of western pastoral to explore the metaphysical as well as cultural problematics of 'home'" (2000: 126-27). A poet closer to MacNeice's approach to the western landscape is Michael Longley, who shares an Ulster Protestant background. Longley has inherited MacNeice's preoccupation about

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home or the idea of home from home, a phrase MacNeice uses in 'Day of Returning', and which haunts Longley's own poems. Peter McDonald observes that for Longley, as for MacNeice, "islands in the West, or places on the very edge of the ocean, are the counterparts to a family origin islanded in history" (1997: 122). In Longley's work, the perception of home is neither as a physical setting nor as an organic notion guaranteeing community and belonging. Like Murphy, he wavers between being outsider and native, his right to the land not inherited but stemming from his making a home there. But by situating himself in the landscape, and dispersing his consciousness among the objects inhabiting it, he achieves a merging of self and Other. Longley's chronicling of minutiae, his concentrated gaze travelling from detail to detail, is part of a dialogue with the landscape and at a same time creates a home from home, a place between reality and imagination.

'Leaving Inishmore', like Heaney's Inishbofin boat trip, is an act of memory but differs in its spatial and temporal orientation. It also begins with departure and is also flooded by the same light but here the sun and rain combine to destabilise the visual planes:

*Rain and sunlight and the boat between them
Shifted whole hillsides through the afternoon -
Quiet variations on an urgent theme
Reminding me now that we left too soon
The island awash in wave and anthem.* (1985: 54)

The impressionist touches impart to the landscape a shimmering quality, undermining any stable vantage. Inishmore dissolves into almost abstract shapes and sensations, which Longley is unwilling or unable to resolve into an identifiable emotion. Accompanying the spatial uncertainty is the mutation of tense, the preterite yielding to a timeless present ("I hear") and then succeeded by the modal. This registers the sensation of total immersion in the moment and the concomitant distance from it. As with MacNeice, Longley refrains from rounding off the experience and resolving the contrary sensations of the moment. The sense of motion in the poem is counterpointed by a desire to transfix the moment:

*Summer and solstice as the seasons turn
Anchor our boat in a perfect standstill,
The harbour wall of Inishmore astern
Where the Atlantic waters overspill -
I shall name this the point of no return...* (1986: 54)

McDonald criticises Longley's stance as being "too secure," approaching a place in a self-interested spirit" (1997: 127). But the last stanza disproves this, unsettling the modal "shall" with its residue of seasickness and fractured perspective. The poem's closure is aesthetic rather than thematic, hesitant rather than confident, as the inscribed moment is resistant to any spiritual transubstantiation.

In 'Letters' Longley addresses a verse letter to Derek Mahon that records their journey to Inisheer or Inish Oir, a place recollected in Mahon's poem explored earlier. While Mahon's image is distant, Longley details their encounter with the islanders. The poet-friends were "tongue-tied/ Companions of the island's dead," "strangers in that parish." Gathering driftwood and cutting the sod, the visitors experience a fleeting moment of identification and become "islanders ourselves." However, the gap between the visitors and the natives reasserts itself. The mainlanders' urban roots and troubled

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sense of history (“The stereophonic nightmare/ Of the Shankill and the Falls”) mark them apart from the islanders, who seem to inhabit a separate country far from troubled Ulster:

*That was Good Friday years ago –
How persistent the undertow
Slapped by currachs ferrying stones,
Moonlight glossing the confusions
Of its each bilingual wave – yes,
We would have lingered there for less...
Six islanders for a ten-bob note
Rowed us out to the anchored boat. (1985: 83)*

The tourist-poet hovers between wanting to be accepted as part of the island community and a sense of outsiderhood. There is a moment when identification seems possible, with the moonlight erasing differences, but the gulf reinstates itself. They remain tourists and have to pay to return to the anchored boat, an image encountered in ‘Leaving Inishmore’, suggesting an unsettled state between the mainland and the island.

Longley’s island poems, in their exploration of the meaning of home, often lean towards the allegorical, thus sharing a common ground with Heaney’s ‘Parable Island’. Though grounded in the empirical, the lyric is laced with a surrealist touch that gives it a narrative undecidability. In ‘The Island’ Longley imagines himself as one of the islanders who “have set up house in our own fashion.” The island is unnamed and rather than provide topographical details Longley dramatises the physical process of constructing a home, eschewing any ideological notion of home. The inhabitants construct their flimsy home from the remains of shipwreck, but do not exhibit any sense of community or attachment to place. Home is a precarious affair, and the ties between land and identity are at best imagined:

*We count ourselves historians of sorts
And chronicle all such comings and goings.
We can walk in a day around the island.
We shall reach the horizon and disappear. (1985: 93)*

The last two lines, disparate sentences, contain a paradox that reflects the difficulty in encompassing the reality of the island. As in Heaney, the motif of disappearance underlines the elusive and contingent nature of the islands and its inhabitants.

Longley’s poems illustrate how place defeats any attempt to frame it. Far from asserting any theory of place and identity, he dramatises the complexities involved in the situating of self to landscape. In its layering of perspective, the insular meditations incorporate antithetical elements and patterns of contingency inherent in the imagining of place. ‘Ferry’, with its magical realism, mirrors the pun in the title:

*I loop around this bollard
The beeline of cormorants,
The diver’s shifts in air
And secure my idea
Of the island: rigging*

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*Slanted across the sky,
Then a netting of sunlight
Where the thin oar splashes,
Stone steps down to the water
And a forgotten ferry. (1985: 130)*

What comes through is the enigma of home, the curious blend of peace and unease culminating in the image of the forgotten ferry. This final image subverts the attempt to secure any idea of the island, confirming how difficult it is to circumscribe the meaning of place.

The islands, with their topographical isolation, are tempting images of tranquility. Seen from afar, they resemble the ideal getaway, the perfect home for the besieged self:

*I have heard of an island
With only one house on it.
The gulls are at home there.
Our perpetual absence
Is a way of leaving
All the eggs unbroken
That litter the ground
Right up to its doorstep. (1985: 143)*

Such a metaphysical or platonic conception of home gains in unreality or vulnerability when placed in the context of the violence of Irish history. On the one hand, it calls into question the platonic notion of home, subverting by staging the quintessential West; on the other, it articulates the longing for a home safe from political tumult. The human absence recalls Mahon's withdrawal from history, minus the existential anguish. It is not a transcendental place, as Heaney's invisible places are, but vulnerable, poised on the edge of history, as the trail of eggs seems to invite the tread of human steps.

Longley's western pastoral is infiltrated with the echoes of finitude and death. But it is also a place of renewal. In 'The Pleiades', the elegy for a friend turns to the western islands for assurance of continuity and meaning:

*But when I knew that he was dead I found this memory
For Oisín of stars clustered on Inishbofin or Inishturk,
A farmstead out in the Atlantic, its kitchen door
Ajar while somebody turns on lights in the outhouses,
As though the sounds of pumps and buckets, boots and bolts
And safe animals - as though these sounds were visible
And had reached us from millions of miles away to sparkle
Like the Pleiades that rise out of the sea and set there. (1995: 47)*

The western islands, with their sense of timeless and peace, offer solace for loss and grief. The household lights are in unison with the celestial illumination, signalling harmony of the human and the natural worlds.

The West, for Longley, yields abundant ecological miniatures the perfection of which castigates human ignorance and waste. Unlike Heaney, whose pastoral incorporates man into the natural environment, Longley gives us an ecopoetry unimprinted by

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human presence. It is unburdened by history and images of the past, its capacity to renew stemming from a focus on the immediate present and its grasp of biodiversity.

The Women Poets

While the western islands provide a refuge for Ulster poets, their remoteness and peace providing a counterpoint to the turbulence of Belfast, they become a platform for contemporary Irish women poets like Eavan Boland, Julie O’Callaghan and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill to challenge the patriarchal voice in Irish society and literature. By deploying and then subverting the West of Ireland tropes underpinning romantic nationalism, they seek to redress the reduction of women to passive and ornamental roles. In poems that provide alternative readings of the landscape that is dominated by masculine perception and imagination, they create an imaginative and discursive space where women’s voices can be heard and represented.

Eavan Boland grounds much of her work in the suburban milieu, valorising the figure of the Irish housewife quietly performing her chores, and in doing highlights the silencing of women’s voices in a male-dominated society and literature. In a sequence of poems called ‘Outside History’ she also harnesses the western littoral to her feminist politics. In *Object Lessons*, she traces the inspiration for the first poem ‘The Achill Woman’ to an encounter with an old woman. During her short stay on Achill, Boland, then a university student studying the Silver Age poets for her examinations, received a revelatory lesson in history from the old woman who was “the first person to talk to me about the famine” (1996: 124). To Boland, the Achill islander represents a lost world; she “came from a past which affected me” (ibid: 125). She is a stark reminder of the defeat of the Irish women in history, their untold agony during the Famine, and the fact “that Irish poetry should defeat them twice” by excluding their voices (ibid: 137).

The old woman’s ordinary appearance belies her revelatory portent: “She came up the hill carrying water./ She wore a half-buttoned, wool cardigan,/ a tea-towel round her waist” (1990: 35). In contrast to her taciturnity, Boland is all talk, steeped in the decorous courtly language of the Silver Poets, a language and literary tradition belonging to the colonisers. In view of the colonial subtext, Boland’s academic pursuit becomes a guilt-ridden business:

*but nothing now can change the way I went
indoors, chilled by the wind
and made a fire
and took down my book
and opened it and failed to comprehend*

*the harmonies of servitude,
the grace music gives to flattery
and language borrows from ambition -*

*and how I fell asleep
oblivious to*

*the planets clouding over in the skies,
the slow decline of the Spring moon,
the songs crying out their ironies. (ibid: 35-36)*

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The silent strength of the Achill Woman shames Boland's garrulity and the eloquence of the Silver poets. Boland reproaches herself for being ignorant then, for failing to respond adequately to the history lesson and not least, for immersing herself in the tradition which had so oppressed her people.

Boland's 'Achill Woman' can be seen as re-visioning of *aisling* tradition so popular in Irish writing, where the woman is reduced to a mythic emanation. Boland castigates this mythologising impulse that effectively silenced women and excluded them from a rightful place in history. Sharing a common agenda in reclaiming a place for women in Irish culture and history is Julie O'Callaghan's 'The Great Blasket Island'. However, women are conspicuously absent in the poem, as it follows the return of male emigrants, more as tourists than natives: "Six men born on this island/ have come back after twenty-one years". The men mourn the dilapidation they see and disappearance of the old ways of life:

*One says, 'Ten of us, blown to the winds -
some in England, some in America, some in Dublin.
Our whole way of life - extinct.'
He blinks back the tears
and looks across the island
past the ruined house, the cliffs
and out to the horizon.*

*Listen, mister, most of us cry sooner or later
over a Great Blasket Island of our own. (1991: 68)*

The poem updates MacNeice's 'Last Before America' with its theme of emigration. But the nostalgia is the object of its scathing satire. The returned natives have become tourists, collectors of a past that they were in a hurry to escape. The documentary-like scene, with its panning shot of the natives' return, and the still frames of the deserted huts, build up a mood of nostalgia, only to be overthrown by the irreverent reproach in the last two lines, standing apart from the rest of the poem. The voice excoriates the masculine nostalgia that omits the memory of women on the island.

O'Callaghan herself gives a new twist to the tradition of Irish emigrant. An American of Irish descent, she has settled in Dublin and made of it a home from home. For one whose background is constituted by crossings, identity is never a given but entails negotiation of boundaries and border zones where cultures and languages overlap and interact. In a world of increasing mobility, cultures are neither contained nor contiguous but constantly altered by the Other's presence. 'Misty Island' exemplifies the interpenetration of self and Other:

*Sei Shonagon's Pillow Book tells
how the smell of pine torches
wafts through the air
and gets into your carriage
when you're travelling through the dark
in a procession someplace.
Here on this island in the fog,
I'll have to take her word - 'delightful' - for it.
As I read the part where she says*

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*'is wafted through the air and pervades
the carriage in which one is travelling',
'Down by the Salley Gardens' starts playing on the radio. (1991: 77)*

Ireland is perceived in relation to a nation of islands, Japan. The cultural texts of two countries with seemingly nothing in common are united in a text of floating sensations. 'Misty Island' becomes a metaphor for the liminal zone where identity is constituted by the process of reading one's face in the image of the Other.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's work also uses the western landscape to challenge the patriarchal order. Brought up in the Dingle Gaeltacht, she is a fluent Irish speaker who has chosen to write in Irish. Her linguistic choice is as much determined by her fascination with the vitality of the language as it is by her equation of its treatment with the treatment of Irish women. She explains:

Irish in the Irish context is the language of the Mothers, because everything that has been done to women has been done to Irish. It has been marginalized, its status has been taken from it, it has been reduced to the language of small farmers and fishermen, and yet it has survived and survived in extraordinary richness. (1990: 154)

By writing in Gaelic and drawing on its elements of folklore and mythology, Ní Dhomhnaill echoes the nostalgia of Revivalists like Synge but her agenda and strategy differ vastly. The surreal subversions in her work undermine the romantic, masculine and nationalist portrayals of the western landscape and promote a more contingent and fluid reading.

Ní Dhomhnaill's poem-sequence 'Imram' employs the figure of the island as a trope of narrative undecidability. The strategy nods to Paul Muldoon, who significantly was one of the first to translate Ní Dhomhnaill's work. In his own 'Imram' (1990) Muldoon exploits the original meaning of "rowing around" in the Gaelic word and sets his quest narrative in urban, postmodern terms, giving it a discontinuous, hallucinatory feel and trajectory. Likewise, Ní Dhomhnaill gives her poem an unpredictable, surreal itinerary; the voyage lacks any definite destination, and even the places themselves are adrift.

Drawing on the *imram*, it departs from the traditional quest in its erratic itinerary, its parodistic procedure undermining its own narrative continuum with sudden diversions and departures. Mythical and folkloristic narratives are interspersed with hallucinations, a newspaper report, eyewitness accounts, social commentary, and a postcard home. The shape of the island is protean, and its coordinates shift with perspectival play. In the first poem, it is "that heavenly Jerusalem" which brings redemption to those whose faith has been challenged by the Jewish and Cambodian holocausts. However, its location is uncertain. Sometimes it is "at the very horizon/ like an island where no one has ever set foot" and sometimes it is sighted in the desert "somewhere in South Dakota or Nevada or Wyoming" (1992: 73). This spatial ambiguity of place is intensified in the succeeding poems where the sustained infusion of foreign places threatens the sense of locality. The text becomes saturated with surplus meanings. The island shifts through a series of manifestations: it is "the Isle/ of Enchantment" (ibid: 77) promising respite from worldly care; it is a folkloristic place where bizarre or fabulous events take place; it is a drug-induced hallucination, a tropical island, Atlantis, a heritage site or an invention of the tourist industry. Although the carnival of voices precludes any

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dominant geographic referent, it hovers around the Blaskets and the tourist industry generated there.

The Otherworld, a leitmotif in Celtic literature, is conscripted ironically to demythologise the Otherworld image of the islands and emphasise the resistance of the landscape to meanings imposed on it. The postmodern possibilities in the compound word are unleashed through a rewriting of the mythic trope. Instead of using myth to reinforce the link between place and identity, Ní Dhomhnaill's deploys it as a means of liberating place itself into new readings. The Otherworld myth is staged in a series of sightings and vanishings. *Hy Breasil*, the mythical island thought to exist west or south-west of Ireland and which MacNeice invokes in 'Last Before America' as a place of unattainable longing, occurs twice in the sequence. In the first instance, a voice from the Isle of Enchantment sings of rest and salvation. 'The Testimony of the People of Dunquin' has the anthropologist or sociologist asking: "Does Hy-Breasil exist at all, dear? What do you think?" The native replies "Maybe so", furnishing a story of how a father and son found themselves drawn to an island "where nothing had been before" (ibid: 89). There they met the daughter who had vanished years before. When the interviewer presses for the story's end, asking if the girl returned, the native responds: "I don't think so. She had to stay put". The native's hesitancy bespeaks a reluctance to assert the validity of the legend. It is the outsider who demands narrative closure.

The Otherworld surfaces again in 'The Wave', which erases the line between dream and reality, stressing the fictionality of all narratives. The speaker is caught in some heroic drama in the land of Celtic lore, until she finds herself in hospital pumped "full of pills" (ibid: 97). In 'First Sight' the speaker was "spaced out on Valium" and "caught sight/ of the island from my Zeppelin" (ibid: 79), her hallucinatory state erasing the boundary between myth and reality:

*As we studied the patchwork
of farms and village streets
the islanders came out in currachs
with their arms full of treats.*

*This island has flowers and plants
and exotic nuts galore
and moves swiftly about the planet
from Alaska to the Azores. (ibid: 79)*

The semantic topography alters with the invasion of exotic Pacific flora and fauna and the Irish island suffers a seachange, becoming unmoored from a fixed geographical identity and afloat in a globalised context. 'Latitude and Longitude' also carries on the disruption of the familiar as the mist-enveloped terrain again yields to a tropical infusion:

*It changes from day to day:
sometimes it lies within a mile and a half
of the Great Blasket, sometimes in the middle of the bay.*

*Then again
it comes so close you'd think you've
only to reach out and touch it: this is a sure sign of rain.*

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*It has a tropical look on occasion:
the first time its palms and banana-trees hove
into view in my telescope, it seemed to lie in the Indian Ocean. (ibid: 83)*

In activating the tropes of tourism and investing the western littoral with tropical tints, Ní Dhomhnaill exposes the Blasket as a site of representation, its semantics invented chiefly for the tourist consumption.

The Great Blasket becomes a collage of signifiers, a landscape simultaneously empty and overflowing with imaginary burden. 'Publicity' attacks the commodification of the island:

*They had to build a new car-park
on the edge of the cliff
to cope with the number of tour-buses.
There are new toilets as well, for ladies and gentlemen,
in the Heritage Centre:
you pay two pounds (half-price for kids and OAPs)
to see an exhibition
about a non-existent island,
its mythology and natural resources,
its exports and fauna. (ibid: 85)*

The island is dressed up for tourist consumption, and the costs are the destruction of landscape and the corruption of the authentic, if it existed in the first place. Treated as an object, the island is also converted to political use. It is promoted by the *Taoiseach* (Irish for Prime Minister) as a symbol of nativity, restoring "a political unity/ that would be advantageous to all concerned".

Though aware of ideological underpinnings in the depictions of the western landscape, contemporary Irish poets are still drawn to what MacNeice called "island trauancies" (1949: 248). If the islands are no longer emblems of origins, they still provide a physical and psychological distance from which to survey the twin issues of self and home. In MacNeice's work, they embody the detached and elusive aspects of self and nation that are the opposite of the Revivalist idea of roots and origins; in contrast Murphy is anxious to ground his sense of self in the landscape and validate his Anglo-Irish heritage with acts of home-building. For the Belfast poets confronting the sectarian violence from the 1960s to the early 1990s, the islands beckon like an alternative home, answering the need for peace and transcendence. And for the Irish women poets battling to dislodge the patriarchal hierarchy of Irish politics and literature with a more inclusive and pluralist vision, the islands are used to dislodge the essentialist notions of place and identity. In Ní Dhomhnaill's work, the islands have metamorphosed into metaphors of displacement; the intervening space between the islands and the mainland serves to unsettle the assumptions about identity and politics.

The journey westward, particularly the crossing to the islands, is in many respects a journey into another country. In visiting these satellites, the tourist-poet negotiates the threshold between home and abroad, inside and outside, self and Other. Abandoning the moorings of nationalist assumptions, he or she is compelled to rethink these divisions. The islands' isolation reflects the insular shape of the mainland, and indeed questions the idea of the entire British archipelago. Their alterity tests the coherence of

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the mainland, making it stranger to itself. Satellites of alienness and yet resembling home, they suggest the interwovenness of self and Other and that any exploration of the idea of Ireland must lie in a passage through otherness.

Endnotes:

¹ Patrick Kavanagh's eponymous long poem in *The Great Hunger* (1942) excoriates the rural pieties celebrated by the revivalists and the nationalists, unveiling the torpor and ignorance of rural Ireland. In *The Poor Mouth* (1941), Flann O'Brien (alias Brian O'Nolan) reveals the grinding poverty of the peasants. Written in Gaelic, it satirises the spiritual emptiness of urban visitors who take on spurious Gaelic names and the pretension of natives who call themselves Bonaparte and Ferdinand.

² *Oileán Draíochta* is more correctly translated as 'island of magic'. Friel's translation evokes an aura of mystery and otherness, and at the same time updates the myth of the Otherworld prevalent in the medieval Irish tales of the *echtrae* (adventure) and *immram* (voyage). *Tír na nÓg*, invoked by Yeats in 'The Wanderings of Oisín', is one such Otherworld, believed to be located on a remote island to the west of Ireland. It is a 'land of eternal youth', where sickness and death do not exist.

³ The *Gaeltacht* was created in 1926 as part of the attempt of the newly established Irish Free State to revive and promote the Irish language. The political act was informed by the Anglo-Irish Literary Revivalist agenda around the turn of the century, which saw writers like J.M. Synge, W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory turn to the Gaelic-speaking areas on the western seaboard in their quest for Irish authenticity. Areas where at least 25% of the population spoke Irish were designated a *gaeltacht*. 15 out of the 26 counties in the Irish Free State were identified as *gaeltachtaí* in a bid to promote it as a national language in the nationalist attempt to forge a unitary cultural and national identity.

⁴ J.M. Synge turned the Aran islands into one of the key sites of Literary Revivalism, where a vibrant Gaelic culture could still be observed. In *The Aran Islands* he casts himself as an interloper, taking notes of the islanders' dialect, their intimate connection with the land, their customs and crafts, while also acknowledging the precariousness of their existence.

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