

# A Consideration of Artistic Truth

by

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Supervisor: Janice Fitzpatrick Simmons

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All for my family past and present

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A special word of thanks to poet Rita Kelly and Edel Connolly for planting the seed for the idea and setting me on the road to Waterford in August 2007. I wish them both the happiness and success they deserve in life.

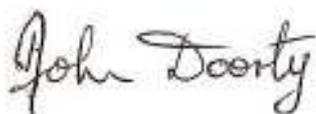
To Clare County Council, its staff in the Finance Department in Ennis, for the Higher Education Grant that helped in giving me the time and freedom to pursue my studies.

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Finally, my thanks to all the poets and writers whose work has inspired me down the years to write, be creative, and to try.

## Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation, *A Consideration of Artistic Truth*, is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for any other qualification.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Doorty". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and a distinct 'D'.

John Doorty  
May 25, 2009

## Notes

I declare that the poems in the thesis, *A Consideration of Artistic Truth*, namely all the poems in the Poems section, are my original creative work in which I retain copyright. These poems may not be copied or published in any form whatsoever without my prior written permission.

The poems “Horse Fair”, “On a birthday”, and “Wall Builders” were first published in *Windows Publications: Introduction Series* No. 9 in October 2009

The poem “What’s the Moon Like?” was first published in *The Shop* A Magazine of Poetry No 31 Autumn/Winter 2009.

The poem “A Flowing Speech” was first published in the collection *Into the Heart of It: Daley Dialogues and Other Poems*, Rathbane Publishing/Cló an Rátha Bháin, 1997.

The Dissertation, “A Consideration of Artistic Truth” has been formatted in the MLA style in accordance with the guidelines in Gibaldi, Joseph. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. 6th ed. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2003.

*At the best, all that is realized in Time (all Time produce), whether in Art or Life, can only be possessed successively, by a series of partial annexations – and never integrally and at once.*

Samuel Beckett on Proust

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## INTRODUCTION

The choice of subject or theme, “A Consideration of Artistic Truth”, for the dissertation and the parallel poetic endeavour is discussed in detail in the “Background” section of the dissertation later. Suffice it to say here that it has come out of my experience and knowledge of poetry and literature and the writers whose work has influenced and inspired me, my personal situation and motivation for writing at that moment, my past experiences - successes and failures – and the reason for the crossroads I felt I was at in terms of the need for change and direction in writing.

The thesis begins with a selection of poems all of which were written and workshopped during the postgraduate MA in Creative Writing programme in WIT as part of the structure of the course. Feedback from my supervisors and fellow students in the workshop class, whose invaluable suggestions have no doubt influence the rewriting process, sometimes forms part of the reflection in the dissertation. Though naturally they are not responsible for any mistakes or errors in judgment I might make about my own work.

I have written the dissertation in the form of a “reflective journal”. I wrote it between September 2007 and March 2009; keeping a notebook in longhand as a way of developing an awareness and insight into the creative process in my writing. My hope was that this approach to the thesis, that is the creative work combined with a reflection on the creative process, would both bring me to a deeper awareness and exploration of the theme and that it would also be important for me to see and reflect on how, what, and where this seeking for artistic truth would bring to the process of writing a new body of poetic work.

I am conscious that I am sharing here some of my raw creative material. To this end, I decided to include some of the poems or early drafts in the text, so as to make them immediately relevant and accessible to the flow and discussion of my thesis, when and if that happened. Obviously, all my writing is not relevant to the main thrust of the thesis, but where

major changes or departure points are marked in the discovery process of writing, these are illustrated by the work it produced.

Looking back over the work of the past two years and the work on the Reflective Journal in particular, certain observations are better made now. The discipline of keeping a reflective journal did prove challenging from the point of view of controlling the spontaneity and avoiding reworking as much as possible apart from editing. Where a theme such as a discussion of another writer's work became interesting to me, then the framework for the research and the reflective writing on it tended to take up the same timeframe, as experienced in "real" journal writing. Sometimes, the poetic work came first and the reflection later or vice versa. This allows the reader to see sometimes as much if not more than I see, as I have not drawn conclusions in a way which will make my reflection mean only what I want it to mean.

Overall, the Consideration on Artistic Truth consists of subtle insights which came only after I had begun to discover, if only at an intuitive level, how my writing process works. This can be seen possibly in the way in the Journal it brings me back to reflecting on some of my earlier work, and discussing related matters such as giving and attending readings, and the politics of reviewing work. In that way I am repeatedly reconsidering and making new connections with the theme, perhaps in the light of new reading, discussions with fellow writers and classmates, and then coming to a new synthesis which explains the writing process over and over again.

**POEMS**

***Father and Son***

When the currach took you over to Aran  
to meet your futures, you brought home  
two sisters.

Oh what possessed you to marry sisters?  
Did you not realise how complicated  
it would make relations?

Which of you was the more reckless?  
You perhaps; grandfather and uncle-in-law  
at the same time to your son's children.

And how did you take to being  
brother to your wife's sister's  
son, like you, your father's child?

Moving down the generations,  
it gets even more complicated. First cousins all;  
some nieces and nephews, others their uncles and aunts.

Try drawing that family tree with its puzzling branches.  
Try unravelling its riddle over a pint or two; not now,  
but when you have time to wonder about next of kin.

## ***Belfast August 2007***

*For musician and friend Peter Maguire*

Showing me the city that was lost to you in youth  
Under the Black Hill where you might have played.  
Driving down the Andersonstown of your memories  
blacked out by fear under constant surveillance.

Revisiting those early years in the Black Road –  
homes abandoned on all sides,  
where the roofs now slate by slate slip away.  
The joys of that home were forgotten by seven.

You are telling me the story of the fourteen  
year old school pal killed by the plastic bullet in Glendoon.

Turning down the Falls Road, you are my tour guide.  
I am like MacNeice - visitor but more like a voyeur.  
We are driving parallel to the peace line with its gates open  
at every intersection with the Shankill.

Slowing down at the gates of the Milltown Cemetery,  
you name the “Grave Diggers” pub across the road  
from the triangle of wasteland where the army barracks  
once stood billeting a regiment - we wonder at the real size.

Before the dark sets in I am photographing  
the Bobby Sands mural - painted by the artists wearing  
*balaclavas* - with its trade marks of broken chains,  
risen phoenix, and harp: ‘It’s newly strung and it shall be heard’

But here finally is the mural to the fiddle player  
Seán Maguire you wanted to show me.

## **Company**

*In memoria Michael John Glynn*

I

Today the hound of heaven  
is at *my* door. And I am  
fleeing from him and him from me.  
Did you ever find the labyrinthine ways  
to your mind? The way you could  
quote from it. From whatever  
source if I could find these words  
today that would launch  
me out of this indifference.  
Had I not these notebooks  
I would have even much less.  
Almost twenty years ago,  
whatever I recorded  
then is much more  
than what I can record today.  
Today, what has brought you here?  
So that I would keep my word?  
God knows I was often enough at your door.  
Today is as good a time as any.

## II

### *Young Rebel*

From the black spine copy  
of August 1988 I am in your company  
again in Marrinan's. I read

this was one of my totally  
original nights in Ennistymon,  
as much stimulation for me as you.

I diverted you - heading in home  
after a long day on the road chasing a story  
in the Kilkee direction -

for a drink. When a man walked in  
white jacket, shirt, and matching shoes,  
black trousers, this was trouble in black and white.

He recognised you but eyed me with suspicion.  
His grey eyes keen and alert  
belying his slurred speech and poor reflexes.

You introduced him as a violent man,  
living by the sword and out in the cold –  
accepted as though it were a compliment.

Your talk with him was a tension of riddles,  
the no-mans land of clichés  
and common ground.

Non-silence was in my thoughts.  
I am not here to talk now  
but to record – make drama of life.

A young rebel's challenge or supplication.  
Not the black and white I expected  
but the forty shades of grey.

For the short hand and shape  
their phrases made, I turn to the black  
spine copy of August 1988 and read

...and saying how he hated  
And would cut a right-wing throat.  
Hate a wasted emotion you said.

And talk of death too,  
you don't take anything seriously.  
Oh but I do death you said.

Marrinan is telling us he's closing  
but he's really refusing our company  
drink and tactfully showing him the door.

He's gone now into the night. And relieved we are  
thinking even though it does not matter to us  
what is going to become of him.

I am putting down here now  
from the black spine copy of August 1988  
something of what it was like in your company.

## III

***Amongst Friends***

Another year on the notebook pages  
I come across your story of the *man*  
*of Orleans* touching on your war; stages  
in the RAF and home in Ennistymon  
on leave. Who was this German escapee?  
Nerves shattered by the war, met teetering  
on the brink in the Underground, safely  
taken outside London, before smuggling  
him to the West. Intrigue to this very day.  
Blending him into a society  
of strangers, conspirators, friends to lay  
low amongst in the big house Reveille.  
The war in Ennistymon took its toll  
in the woods felled for firewood, not this mole.

## IV

***What's the Moon Like?***

Your half-serious question, "What's the moon like?"  
 Is not heard above the drunken noise  
 in the pub, there is too much else though there is no return  
 to dancing with the neighbours to the sound  
 and rhythm of the piano, but there are around us the drunk  
 conversations - a source of entertainment.

I can't pretend to be detached from this entertainment  
 tonight as for now it is part of some great scheme of things like  
 the poor market price of cattle or the drunk  
 concern for the next pint heard above the barroom noise.  
 It is on nights like this only your words are sound,  
 like *triangle, the strongest shape in the universe*, and they return

to me here now to weigh up our lives like a river of no return  
 cascading over falls as our entertainment  
 flows on into the small hours till the sound  
 of dawn is heard waking to the raucous noise  
 of crows in the trees. Perhaps like  
 the others it is the drunk

we are waiting to hear from because the drunk  
 has something painfully honest to say about his disappointing return  
 on love, his son's rejection of him at his wedding, loud above noise  
 of calls for a song and the entertainment  
 of slugging and the like.  
 He is filling an embarrassed silence; no talk, no sound

that holds our attention until he is calmed, comforted, made sound  
 again, not morbid, alright, loved again, not drunk  
 not saying as much in public as he'd like  
 to regret in the morning, when all this may return  
 to haunt him. And last night's fun is not entertainment  
 anymore. And you're promising never again over the noise

of an inner voice saying yes, always yes; the static noise  
 of no willpower weakening to the sound  
 of the river, the crows, the moon. Let's have entertainment.  
 Strike up the piano and get drunk  
 like there's no tomorrow, no going back, no return  
 journey, only madness and what's the moon like.

There is nothing after all like the noise  
 of your slow return to a sound  
 mind drunk on life's entertainment.

V

**Mr Gold**

Why did I choose those years?  
 1988 and 1989 – ten years later  
 you would be dead.  
 And ten years after that I would  
 be plumbing these notebooks  
 for words – every  
 page in this landscape  
 is a poem. I didn't  
 notice it till now.  
 Who said the past  
 is another country?  
 And memory, no mistaking,  
 is a poor medium between this  
 and the real thing.  
 “You must understand”  
 why I've brought you here.  
 There are unanswered  
 questions of course.  
 Like why you stopped  
 writing. Or is it perhaps  
 no longer relevant?

These are challenging  
 times, though the needs  
 are the same as then –  
 somebody to talk to  
 about more than the price  
 of cattle. A war story maybe.  
 You, Mr Gold, are gone.  
 and Mr Flake - I wonder  
 who was who. Puffed  
 up in a donkey and cart  
 bringing Beamish  
 instead of Guinness  
 back to the Well.

Jo has been waiting  
 your return.  
 She is in my thoughts too.  
 I am keeping my word  
 to her making myself  
 a self-fulfilling prophecy  
 being a writer.  
 I have suspected  
 that love stopped you.

*cont/d without break*

Like you had lost faith  
or a point of reference  
on the road from  
St Brigid's Well.  
I dared not ask.

You roll your own cigarette  
Mr Gold and listen and hum  
to what I have to say.  
You told me I would  
find it in my own  
people. I have  
found a lot of it  
in you, your words,  
your prayer of  
compassion for  
*Bridget Mary whom  
Down the town they'd  
Scarcely recognise.*

Life for the poet  
becomes its own  
reference. Love is but  
one place to find on the way.  
It is love  
that tells us so.

Of course, it comes time  
to move on, push on  
to where I am going  
outside the past and  
these years of record.  
I am going it alone now –  
knowing that I will be back  
to set out again.

## ***Christmas Star***

A star woke me, light's falling feast  
so bright it might even be man-made  
a Christmas star in the southeast.

It was much too early to rise, at least  
too dark to be cheated of sleep, betrayed  
by a star that woke me, light's falling feast.

It startled me conscious, as clear as a priest  
and the dream I was dreaming weighed  
down by a Christmas star in the southeast.

Should I consider it some kind of beast?  
staring, keeping an eye, this masquerade  
star that woke me, light's falling feast.

Or is it in fact just a star long deceased?  
hopelessly glimmering like white jade  
as a Christmas star in the southeast.

And though the light that you give is leased  
glint and make me believe – not afraid  
of the star that woke me, light's falling feast.  
A Christmas star in the southeast.

## ***I'll Find You***

One day last autumn  
I found your "Bruce Lee" poem  
among papers to be shredded.

I read it, not sure if I had  
ever read it before—  
the poem to me that made  
men uncomfortable at readings

and that I was not meant  
to see. Could I, like Lowell,  
revisit the old flame,  
rekindle antique feelings,  
stare through the window

at the new like a ghostly  
lover, and write to you  
about it? No more exchanging verse  
now. I remember your reaction  
to the sonnets I wrote in Mojacar.

When I returned from Spain,  
you sat reading them and looking away -  
seeking a way out -  
though "the great escape"  
was my joke back then.

Back then we were still in Cahruduff,  
the house warmed with paints you chose,  
hot colours, to keep out the draughts.  
We made love  
above the eave in the attic.

Of course, it came to an end,  
somehow, as everything does.  
New unspoken affirmations replaced old.  
The expanding foam  
did not shut out the draughts either.

Poor us, hanging on,  
abandoned to our love,  
its worried intensity.

One day a furry little field  
mouse drifted in the open door.  
Ross, our retriever puppy, grabbed  
it in his mouth.  
But when we asked him  
he dropped it at our feet  
and let it go.

## ***The Swallows***

You have filled your nest to bursting  
with your cream yellow breasts  
and your dark heads peer  
down on the open porch at us.

Your silence is your presence  
this late summer's evening.  
From up in the gods you watch  
me putting down the dogs' bowls  
under the window.  
Ross and Trigger  
are eager to settle in to taste  
what's nice in their food.

I feel your presence  
just feet above my head  
but I am afraid to look up  
as though a look could kill  
or this uncertain summer end.

Since the day you arrived  
I have watched you make a home-  
the bricks and mortar stuff,  
the mud and dog hair -  
and then you filled your nest  
to bursting with your offspring.

Making better progress than me.  
Here is some kind of permanent;  
a settlement for what might have been.

One evening at dog feeding time  
I missed you, you weren't home,  
I thought you had flown.  
But two nights later you were back.  
this was your farewell to us,  
a final reckoning for the journey.

## ***The Swallows Return***

When I was seven or eight  
I took the longest pole I could find  
and poked my curiosity  
at the scabrous crust  
of mud in the rafters  
in the cow house.  
It fell whole and intact  
To the ground.

I panicked  
when the fledglings  
sprawled and squirmed  
onto the floor.

My aunt picked up  
the nest and young,  
placed them in a tin can  
with hay and put them  
on the hob by the fire.

For days they stayed  
with me and my guilt,  
all gaping mouths  
and nothing else,  
a feeding hole  
that I can never nourish.

## **Love**

I

Love, what can we do with it? Put it in words? Yes!  
Words that will later use us or be used against us.  
Yet love is not enough word for some;  
*I lurve you, you know, I loave you, I luff you,*  
as Woody Allen says to Annie Hall

II

There are no superstitions about love.  
It has to be felt deeply – perhaps more than once.  
Nothing like an infectious disease is passed on  
in memory, as it would only be a half measure  
anyway, that is how I feel, and there is no cure

III

Love gives  
us blind courage  
but it teaches nothing at all  
about surviving the journey  
to Loss

## ***Ordinary Days***

Some days it is not your words  
at all that come but the words  
of others, who have no epic  
in mind. There just to ramble  
and make fun, they come alive

in the memory - their characters  
long dead. Remember them, some  
late winter's day when the holly  
is still too verdant by the roadside,  
when you need to set your spirit free.

## ***March Light***

I can see the clouds  
effecting the silent shadows on the hills  
over the Burren from here.

I can see the dark layers above the white cumulous ones  
and the light grey and blue tangled skeins  
beneath – these are the shadows.

I can see the faint white stems  
of the windmills of Derrybrien  
breaking the dark horizon to the east.

These make me think inconceivable of the sea-  
I suppose it is their intended motion.  
By the time I have taken all this in

the shadows have disappeared  
and the March sun is opening the Burren  
and I must face the reality

that this is the only landscape able to make me feel,  
where everything is in motion  
and flowing away from me before I can fully grasp it.

And who has had a hand in it, do I know?  
Keeping the hills like capstans  
and the clouds turning and turning over them.

Who has marked out the boundaries  
for man and woman, mating beast and nature?  
Who is to say that what appears as solid,

like the hills of stone, is the very thing  
that is massing and growing?  
When everything is discovered anew, as children do.

It is in the middle and later years  
we are contented with the classical view  
and the poet talks of poetry as its own reward.

But I am like a child here unable to tell  
good from evil, light from shade, one from the other,  
I am not ready for Beowulf, Virgil, Dante, or Milton yet.

I want my half share of inherited happiness first.

## ***Broken Tile***

When the tile broke  
it became even more interesting.  
The break was not straight down the middle

Between the antlered stags attacking  
and the hunters facing them  
as in the Lascaux cave painting.

The tile stuccoed and ochred to look like  
it had been lifted like faded wallpaper  
from the prehistoric wall

was too light and fragile to last.  
With the human compulsion to order  
we arrange its broken bits like a jigsaw.

The beauty of the broken tile  
we know is that it could be fixed  
and the grouted joints would not matter.

Yet we have not fixed it or found  
a place fit for it on the smooth walls  
of the bathroom or kitchen here.

The tile remains sadly dislodged  
its loose chipped pieces  
here to be puzzled out again and again.

## ***Horse Fair***

Today reminds me of the public and private spaces  
of old shops, the ornate handrails outside the windows  
designed for the practicalities on fair days –  
keep cattle off the footpath, no dung down here

to farm foul the town – and save the front.  
That stance is mostly gone now,  
small tidy town house windows and residential  
doors – more besides changed inside.

Outside in the street an untidy bunch  
of scruffy winter-coated animals  
ramped out of horse boxes are  
loosely corralled against jeeps and kreels.

Cars slow down in surprise to let the horse  
and rider trot pass them up Church Street.  
Tradition stands around in its best to admire  
and price the power tools this Sunday morning in town.

## ***Captive***

The swallow burst into the house  
through the open door.  
Looking for a way out,  
it tilted at the walls,  
and scrambled for air  
and light towards the windows.

To calm it, I scold it  
gently and close my fist  
over it on the window sill.  
I can feel its quiet but there is  
as near to nothing there –  
my fist is fully closed.

I hold for a moment the nearest thing  
to the hot sands of Africa,  
the intangibility of the secret of its journey  
and how it sleeps on the wing  
there and back.

Very calmly I open the window,  
hold open what freedoms I can offer  
but as much as I want to set it free,  
I want it to stay.

## ***Destruction***

That morning when I opened the door  
the nest was in rubble.  
I scrutinised the ground  
but my eyes travelled  
up the pillar  
to a few wisps of mud  
still clinging to the mortar,  
which told me in absolute certainty  
that this was no accident.

A few magpies floated about  
at the eaves or watched unseen  
from the branches and the vantage  
of their watchtower  
in the leafing ash.  
Ugly and nauseating chatter  
erupted everywhere,  
withering the mind with fake  
hysterics, lying in wait  
with early-morning stealth,  
the enemy taken out.

Who will tell the swallows then?  
All their preparation work undone.  
I pick up the little coil of hay,  
old hay of past summers.  
Still intact, perfectly rounded  
and shaped to receive eggs.  
It's the egg without the shell,  
that Darwinian destiny  
I hold in my hand; nature takes control.

Sure, they will build again  
but it will never be here.

## **Old Photos**

I

The scanner light passes across  
the old photos like some kind of transport  
into the past, the lid I've kept closed.

It's no more than a poor reflection  
of images projected onto a matrix  
of frayed dots.

Looked at from the right distance  
they form shapes,  
reconstituted shapes I recognise.

Pale faces. Frail war-time bodies  
in homemade or dressmaker suits.  
I try to read these photos like a book

I zoom in past them,  
the background like chance detail  
coming into focus just before it blurs.

I recognise the fields they stood in,  
the walls they stood in front of  
to pose in their Sunday best.

The paths, the gables, the outhouses  
the hills, the clouds, even  
poverty; as much as the lens provides.

I notice the changes in growth—  
everything was barer  
before global warming.

II

In your twenties, your uncertain twenties,  
things could only get better, maybe?  
Marriage but tragedy too from TB.

One of you Lysaght girls  
would escape to an education  
leading to thwarted ambition,

making do with seasonal work in hotels,  
exposing you all to the world.  
Faces I had never known.

On slow summer days  
I rummaged the box of prints  
and plumbed the memories of my mother

and aunt for stories:  
“We were so young then,” they’d sigh,  
or “Ellie was sick then.”

“They saw her coming from the bus,  
afterwards they told us they knew  
she was gone.”

III

They are all gone now, the house closed  
and I am again rummaging in the box of prints  
taking out the snapshots from the Kodak wallets.

But this time placing them one at a time  
above the light of the scanner,  
moving across them deliberately and slowly.

## **Lake**

The dogs prefer the water  
on the other side of the road  
they drink in the puddles by the gate.

We walk down the long strip  
of *rae* and cut-away bog  
between the spruce plantations.

We cross over the collapsed  
stone and moat walls;  
old husbanded farm divisions.

They wade around in the rushes  
at the edge of the quarry, a ritual-  
they disturbed ducks here once.

*Ciseacha* – wattle bridges –  
made for horse-borne loads  
take us across old drains hidden

in the overgrowth of rushes, soft mosses  
and Golden Marigolds.  
White Bog Cotton nods in the wind.

We reach dry land, patches  
like islands, where hawthorns,  
furze and holly thrive,

holding the shapes of wintering cattle  
burrowing for shelter  
near the corner of stone walls.

Everything is of a piece  
that takes us down;  
sloping down to the lakeshore.

The ‘island’ is just thirty metres off shore.  
It might be reachable like a crannog  
with secret stepping stones?

Or we might walk on water  
if the boundary wall of stakes  
and barbed wire was not watermarked.

Yet, there it is, the stone wall  
inexplicably built around  
a grove of sallies and elm,

home to the two lake swans  
and their clutch  
keeping its secret.

Keeping it for us;  
we are all keeping it  
just the way we want it.

## **Odds**

A rosebud as compact  
as this. So much concentrated  
yet concealed in  
the whorls of petals  
unpacked by the decongestion  
of growth into its shaped destiny,  
the final beauty.

A friend recovering from  
chemo  
wonders if her hair  
will be a different colour  
or texture – hair  
that she may never dye.

I don't know what odds  
the rose defies to be –  
many I should say.  
Or the same as everything else.  
The things that run wild  
for the moment I let them.

The outer petals may fall.  
The crown curl up into itself  
and shrivel but  
I am remembering to save  
it in the cut glass bowl.

**Portland, OR**

I

The Chinese garden stood  
like a stone bookend  
in Portland's Chinatown  
across the avenue  
from the purple tower reflecting  
purple skies.

Inside the garden's limestone walls  
we drank green  
jasmine tea  
and watched a pair  
of white breeding ducks  
flitter across the miniature landscape  
of the jade pond – their home.

To imagine them free to  
fly over the walls  
whenever they wished  
was easier;  
soaring higher than the purple tower,  
to the river and the sea,  
and coming home again.

II

We stepped out of the garden  
onto the street,  
a perfect American street  
of pavement and parking metres  
and tramway tracks  
that went all the way to the airport  
and back.

III

From your apartment window  
the rusted arms of the dockland's  
ironworks or gasworks  
raised against the sky  
were becoming real to me.  
The gloated leaves  
of the jade plant  
had amassed a destiny  
in the room my heart  
did not know of yet.  
That night we would lie together,  
the next day we would say goodbye  
again.

## ***The Record Player***

Pre-TV, it is a music box painted bright  
made of flimsy plastic and wood,  
a hinged lid open, the speaker louvered like

fish gills sending out the faintest  
vibrations from behind the cloth cover  
where the music issues.

No point in making it up  
out of a lost air or ballad -  
Killoran or Brendan O'Dowda perhaps.

The music is not what informs the memory  
I have of our neighbour's record player,  
the childish charm of the contraption does.

Like a catch opening and closing  
an umbrella, it allows the records  
fall through one at a time

onto the already spinning turntable.  
The obedient arm with the needle  
swings into place and picks up the tune

bobbing up and down, playing  
lightly over the grooves, finding the wave  
like a boat loose on water.

After leading out and lapping gently,  
an invisible hand decides it is over.  
Rises up and moves back, setting the memory down.

***The Man I Am***

This place has made me the man I am.  
My diamond hill, the field with the fort,  
where I am the purveyor of all I see,  
in parallel to the real world, an axis of vision.  
On the dark hill of Carrowmanagh  
the white rough-dashed school stands.  
The hazy phosphorescence over  
the village church spire, is the sea at Lahinch.  
The dark hills of Drumnagrown and Caheramore  
overshadow the valley with the old abbey.  
A gap of light between Doon hill and the rest  
opens towards the hills of faraway East Clare.

The house in the trees is our house,  
tucked away at the far end of the big meadow.  
I see somebody like me step out  
from the trees to walk the dark green  
path in the after grass to the well, or perhaps  
climb the hill to the fort.

I will not be joined here, no call reaches me.

***Explaining to Ross the meaning of tomorrow***

He will go to sleep  
and wake up and it will be  
tomorrow.

I didn't go any further  
into reality or dream  
or the unconscious.

He knows all about those.  
I stopped at tomorrow.  
Quite shocked.

By the way  
Ross is a dog,  
a golden retriever.

Our chats are discursive  
enough. He places little store  
on words without action.

We argue sometimes  
about which direction to take  
at the crossroads.

He is Frostian on that one –  
the road less travelled.  
Wilful would describe him.

He is in total control of his emotions.  
He has a memory  
like an elephant's,

but for the life of me  
I can't get out of him  
what you whispered to him when you left.

## ***Daley Days***

Mai, the model, my student  
 flirts with Miguel the shopkeeper  
 to see if he will recognise  
 somebody from the *barrio*  
 wearing a school satchel  
 and long dark hair.  
 You taught me how to say *pájaro*.  
 It is Valencia, I am  
 on the edge of the artichoke fields  
 overlooking the farmhouse  
 across the street - a landed house  
 with locked entry gates  
 where the *Tía* lived.

Yes, life was beginning already.  
 From where we are  
 we can hear the birds.  
 Everything aural is accentuated  
 towards the need for words.  
 You are telling me to say it  
 like I'm singing, *pá—ha—ro*,  
 encouragingly  
 laughing at my best efforts.

Even this does not intrude  
 on my lonesome songs,  
 my discourse with Dan Daley  
 and the voices I can hear.  
 You ask me why I am sad.  
 I am powerless to convey.  
 But I remember you in this poem.

The day I learned to say *pájaro*,  
 I placed the photos  
 on the table,  
 arranged the panorama  
 like a jigsaw till you could  
 see what I saw  
 on a summer's day  
 in a meadow in Clare.

***On a birthday***

Snow lay on the ground  
slowly melting,  
already half melted.

The sun orbbed like the moon  
through a dark snow cloud,  
relatively no sun rays.

To be able to face the sun  
in the eye – today  
and think it was the moon.

Water rushes down the shoots  
from the slate roof.  
There is colour in the land again.

## **Wall Builders**

Here wall builders reuse dry stone from old  
abandoned sheds and forgotten houses,  
reclaiming them as wordstock that told  
of the sun, rain and air, more stubborn ones  
of moss, mould and colour. They pick through  
the piles of stone to hand – having to work  
the rubble is know-how to the task too.  
Lifting and laying, propping and wedging  
them in; the patient purchase of stone  
closes the gap between time and place.  
Till the wall begins to hold like a sentence,  
each boulder balancing and keeping pace.  
Though time will claim this wall as its own  
masons are anonymous as the stone.

## ***Something Meant For Me?***

The blue daub dissolving  
in the rust and muddy waters,  
the embossed lettering  
of the registered trade mark

of Cantrell & Cochrane  
unworn and unwearable.  
It is not flat bottomed or steady,  
a bottle meant to sit in a crate,

Not meant to be moulded in mud-  
cradled here between the heavens  
of hoof prints - fired into the lake  
perhaps but falling short.

Turning up now without a stopper,  
on an errand like a schoolboy,  
choked up with daub  
and disintegrating contents.

I rinse out the blue mud,  
dissolving what message it holds for me  
as it filters through my fingers  
and comes clean.

## ***Love Again***

Love  
Like everything  
Else does not last forever -  
Nothing does - but where's the harm in  
Trying?

**DISSERTATION**

# A Consideration of Artistic Truth

(Word count: 12,097)

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MA Creative Writing

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## ***A CONSIDERATION OF ARTISTIC TRUTH***

### **1. Background**

After some years of a dry spell in writing, I am hoping this discipline of writing, and having work regularly to workshop will prove successful in getting me writing poetry again. I am also looking for a new direction or focus in my work, as I feel the love sonnets, written during a residency period in September 2000, too closely a part of me, have abandoned me poetically in a blind alley. They are also incomplete; even as a chapbook and I feel I may find them difficult to collect within the new direction (as yet unknown) I am embarking on here.

When my personal circumstances changed in 2003 and when I realised that Nancy and I would no longer be together, I stopped writing the sonnets – maybe I had already stopped writing in 2001, as most of the sonnets dated back to the Valparaiso residency. There seemed to be nowhere to go with them. In a sense I was in denial about writing. Where can a poet go from here, I ask? Is this, what is called “writer's block?” And from then until 2006 I have written very little poetry. I worked for three years on a commissioned biographical book, and researched that intensely but was disappointed when the main subject withdrew and work had to stop.

Finding it difficult to continue from where I left off in poetry I am now looking for a new starting point for my work. I am considering new poetic forms, but feel I need to be free and write freely.

As a starting point for this new direction or relaunch of my writing career, I have completed the second draft translation of *San Manuel Bueno, mártir*, the novel by the Spanish author Miguel de Unamuno. I felt it was necessary to complete this before beginning poetry afresh. And in a way, maybe *San Manuel* belongs to the sonnet sequence, and will appear there together (wouldn't that be an interesting book?). However, the idea was to adapt it for the stage.

How does *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* belong to the sonnet poems? This is an interesting question, and the discussion needs to be developed more here. Possibly in the way that a visual artist often contrasts work in an exhibition so as to give surprising juxtapositions. But how can an extraordinary novel about the making of a saint, about truth and deceit, about faith and disbelief, good and evil, about actions not words, about love, have to do with love sonnets?

I read the novel back in the late 1990s while I worked and lived in Spain. I was so inspired by it that I wanted to translate it into English. Christmas 2006 I took up *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* again – having come across the book while unpacking books in my new home in Ballagh, and I began to see the need to fulfil the earlier ambition. I re-read the book looking for the same insights and feelings I had originally felt about it. Reading and wondering if I had been mistaken about it, I realised I hadn't. The main theme, which I empathise with, centred on the leadership and inspiration the priest Reverend Manuel was giving in the community to his parishioners, while inside he was living a life of deception in not believing what he was preaching. Was this the self-denial? No, it wasn't. This is something else. In the relationship with Nancy, I had found it impossible to resolve how I could love so much and yet let go so much. It was like being pulled apart from inside. In the end the facade breaks down like Yeatsian anarchy, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;” (“The Second Coming”).

In San Manuel's case, the revelation and confession of the lie to a few does not bring relief, it brings torture because the irony is that the majority of us need the lie to "dream" our lives as Manuel says to the narrator Angela in confession, "*Y si te ocurren dudas, cállatelas a ti misma. Hay que vivir*" (San Manuel Bueno, mártir 145). I translate this as follows: "And if you have doubts, then keep them to yourself. We must live and let live". In the end, his secret is shared with the reader where it is safe because people do not want the truth, not his truth. We live in a conspiracy of silence.

All this philosophy coincides with my experience in the aborted biographical research project, where people were living the lie. For some perpetuating the lie is the only way to survive. There is no fixing this. Art had failed me in this regard. The revelation and the lesson for me was that I had made a fundamental mistake about truth, and artistic truth in particular. I had believed in my work up to then in the power of expression, to name the truth. I had thought there was universal truth in literature, and poetry. The cathartic and the cure. But now I was seeing it more in terms of a conspiracy; the writer with the reader. What implications was this going to have for my writing?

I began to re-evaluate the function of writing and poetry. If writing could not be trusted for honesty, where could I turn?

I have always had an interest and admiration for physics, the theory and origin of the universe, etc., and a layman's understanding of mathematics. Here was where I would surely find universal truths. Strangely this brought me back to literature by another route as Beckett does in the "sucking-stones sequence" in the novel *Molloy*.

They were pebbles but I call them stones. Yes, on this occasion I laid in a considerable store. I distributed them equally between my four pockets, and sucked them turn and turn

about. This raised a problem which I first solved in the following way. I had say sixteen stones, four in each of my four pockets these being the two pockets of my trousers and the two pockets of my greatcoat. Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I replaced by the stone which was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it. Thus there were still four stones in each of my four pockets, but not quite the same stones. And when the desire to suck took hold of me again, I drew again on the right pocket of my greatcoat, certain of not taking the same stone as the last time. And while I sucked it I rearranged the other stones in the way I have just described. And so on. But this solution did not satisfy me fully (Beckett 63).

But have I jumped too far ahead to be here? Let's go back to where I began with poems in my early 20s; about life and the land I came from. Mine was not unlike other poets who came from the land, who were too of farming stock in rural Ireland, who like Kavanagh wrote about that. I was born in 1959 and was raised in a small village in Kilshanny in north county Clare. There I grew up on a small farm with my older sister and brother. Like most families of this period also included in the household were the extended family of my aunt, Brigid, and my grandmother. From an early age I was aware that every waking effort of my parents and aunt went into working on the farm without question of the economic or personal

gain in the often clichéd but true sense of farming as a way of life. Two close neighbouring families took “transfers” out of the parish and were moved to better land in Meath and South Clare by the Land Commission. Their divided lands helped shore up the lives of many of those you remained. On a personal level I lost childhood school friends in the move and the contact we tried to maintain convinced me that the price of economic gain was precariously balanced against the loss of culture to the detriment and well being of the emigrant.

In my early teens I discovered a glass case full of books in a neighbour’s house. These belonged to my cousin Fr Vaughan and his uncle. Borrowing the books involved memorising as many titles as I could on occasions when I saw the cabinet so that I could ask for the book my name and author when I needed one. Over a short time I had read the complete works of Canon Sheehan and Charles Kickham. My mother had inspired an interest in me in Canon Sheehan’s *Glenanaar* set during the famine; his brilliant fiction exposed me to observations on philosophy, clerical life, Irish history, agrarian and social issues of his time, all within an effortless and popular narrative style. I wanted to become a novelist. And I began to keep a notebook to record thoughts and ideas. In my final years in secondary school in Lisdoonvarna when a career guidance councillor came to the school and gave us a written questionnaire to help us figure out our future lives, every section for me involved the creative arts, it dovetailed to the conclusion of writer. The problem was that it embarrassed me to admit it and I was glad when nobody had to know about it.

Education was the way out. With the sacrifices and help of my family I got myself to college, the first member of my family to do so. I studied history and English in University College Galway and after graduating took a Higher Diploma in Education to be a teacher. College was a disappointment for me because it fostered critical thinking instead of creative thinking. One day in my final year while reading Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey I had an epiphanic moment – like a discovery or sudden insight into the poem. Playwright and novelist

Tom Kilroy, who became professor of English in my final year, gave me advice about my writing style reminding me that good writing started at the sentence. I knew then that if I were serious, I had to think of writing as craft.

By 21 I was confused and unemployed, lacking ambition, teaching part time, hanging out and helping out on the farm at home or working for a time as a labourer in Dublin's building sites. In 1983 I got some more regular teaching hours in Complementary Studies in the CoAct (College of Art, Commerce & Technology) (now LIT) and I remained there till 1989. In 1984 I became very involved in an Arts Council scheme to promote the visual arts in Ennistymon, "Ennistymon 84". This project appealed to me because of my experience of being unemployed. I was convinced that in an economic recession the celebration of culture – that which we always have in abundance but need to be reminded of – is very important. It exposed me to visual artists and artists of all kinds and their work and way of life. Poet Richard Murphy came to read and for his introduction I read a book of his poems. I was taken by his sonnet to actress Mary Ure and I expressed my interest in it to him. He read it for me. It all instilled confidence on many personal levels and was to lead to a turning point when I worked on writing up a report on the project.

When I began to write poetry shortly thereafter and continuing on into the late 1980s, I wrote lyrical poetry; epiphanies of character, rising to a known truth. I wrote too about language, myth, and I introduced dramatics in the personas of Dan Daley and his father, and their dialogues. The Daily Dialogues sequence provided me with a means for reconciling my cultural and rural background, the past, folklore, myth, and history – it was like a door into it, really reliving it. After a short while I had quickly exhausted the theme even though I realised it was a good device. The poem "A Flowing Speech" is a good example of the style of poem I was writing in the early 1990s:

## A Flowing Speech

His Father: It is to have one's say that is important.

Dan Daley: But to know when to hold your peace, too.

His Father: We are not often of the same mind

Dan Daley: and then we change our minds.

His Father: Silence can be an admission of something.

Dan Daley: Or nothing.

His Father: A prolonged silence tantamount to intimidation

Dan Daley: or a sulk, forever shifting inexorably  
into a heavier reproach.

Speak now.

Speak now of the time –

school days chanting catechism or tables,

the first time, the first day.

The stories you heard at one time,

all funny every one of them,

raconteurs too, not one not funny.

Continue then in your own vein,

even of the hardships,

the constant tread,

and of the good years;

the blue-green of the rich grass

ripening.

His Father: On the wayward flight of years  
too close to the bone by half  
of the body that could virtually do anything.

To submit with philosophy now,  
to inject a hieratic morbidness,  
to say my beads by the fire.

No.

You colour me with green of my fields,  
you bid me  
speak.

However, that is now some time ago, and I return to the question again, as to what kind of poem I will write now.

I think of poets who seem to be consistent in theme, approach, technique, and confidence throughout a very long writing career. I think also of those too who have changed during a long writing career, e.g. Yeats after 1916 and the Rising, Kavanagh, after his illness and before his later poems on the canal bank, Thomas Kinsella in his later work. There are many more examples I could give. I know the need for change is a personal thing and is motivationally a difficult thing to explain. It is as organic as re-branding or reinventing oneself; more common in the creative world than anywhere else, I imagine.

And what is change but a re-evaluation of what's gone before - or perhaps a new way of looking?

And what in fact changes for a poet? Is it form? Is it theme? Is it expression? Inspiration? These are the themes I expect will engage me and inform my poetic work in the following months and that I will reflect on here.

## 2. Father and Son

I met an acquaintance one day in Ennistymon, and in conversation about general things and local news, he mentioned about a family he knew who were strangely related. He told me the story of a man and his adult son, who visited the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. The father was recently widowed and the son was unmarried. While on the island visit they both met and fell in love with island women. The women were sisters. The father and the son married the sisters, and both had families. Tom's question to me was to explain the relationship between the two families. He knew that I would make something of this, and parted from me smiling.

I began by drawing out the family tree and before long it began to grow strange directional branches and shapes. Unnatural growths you might say. I then tried to describe in words, the relationship of father to son and realised that everybody could be described in at least two ways and that it was very complex.

The challenge is if and how I can make a poem of it. I am back to where I left off in Beckett's hexadecimal conundrum of the rotation of 16 stones in Molloy's pockets and in the order in which they could be circulated in his greatcoat's four pockets so as to have each sucked. I am calling the poem "The Conundrum of Relations" for now. This is the starting point, an early draft of which I am including here.

### **Father and son and sisters (early draft)**

Oh what possessed you to marry sisters?

Did you not realise how complicated

It would make relations?

When the currach took you over to meet

Your futures and took you home

Two sisters. Were you the older  
Bolder in what wouldn't matter –  
Grandfather and uncle-in-law  
At once to your wife's sister's children?  
And how did you take to being  
Brother to your wife's sister's  
Son, like you, your father's child?  
And passing on to the next generation  
It gets no easier  
First cousins all, nieces and nephews  
Some, others their uncles and aunts.

Try drawing that family tree with its puzzling branches.  
Try unravelling its riddle  
Over a pint or two; not now, but when  
You're left to wonder about next of kin.

The poem is complete, but kind of rudderless - the title is not right. I tried calling it "Father and Son and Sisters". The workshop found it amusing and enjoyed it. I got encouraging feed back and help with phrasing within the poem, which I'm very grateful for. They agreed that the title was not right; and suggestions included a "Family Tree", "Relations", etc.

Looking at it now, I don't feel I have achieved anything like the ambitious idea based on the Beckett "sucking stones" episode. I wrote it with an ironic and dramatic tone, and also

as I wrote it I realised there was no analogy between the sequences of sucking stones to the natural relation to family, however achieved. While it might seem frivolous and trite, it does attempt to address the fact that problems, either real or imagined, are always of our own making and can only interest us. The art is to interest the reader long enough in a potential solution, which is at least what I am hoping I have achieved.

But this week, I start again.

This year, 2007, is the centenary of the birth of the poet Louis MacNeice's (1907 - 1963). He is an Irish poet whom I've been interested in recently. However, it's not been easy to get acquainted with him. He stands off culturally from me and what I know. Born in Belfast of Clifden parents, educated at Oxford. It has been said that he hides behind his technique. But I have no doubt of his technical brilliance, and it is this that keeps me coming back to his work.

The poem that first sparked my interest in him was "Bagpipe Music" which I heard Seán Tyrrell, who had set it to music, singing.

It's no go the Yogi man, it's no go Blavatsky.

All we want is a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a taxi.

Reading a collection of his poems, I found a whole lot more. Michael Longley in the introduction to the Faber edition of Selected Poems 1988 says, "If poetry is conditioned by life, it is also a quest to interpret this conditioning". So in the context of MacNeice's work as Longley points out that "three conjunctions of time and place particularly obsessed MacNeice's imagination: the North of Ireland; the west of Ireland; Birmingham and London as the joint context of 'an evil time' for Britain and Europe" (MacNeice xiv).

At all stages of his short life (he died aged 56) he wrote masterfully. “Mayfly” which he wrote between 1929 and 1934 is as accomplished as his later work, e.g. “Charon” (1962). There are equal measures of dark and light in both. From “Mayfly”

But when the summer is over.

Let us die together.

I want always to be near your breasts.

And from “Charon”

We moved through London,

We could see the pigeons through the glass, but failed

To hear their rumours of war, we could see

The lost dog barking but never knew

that his bark was as shrill as a cock crowing

Philip Larkin, in his obituary for MacNeice says that his poetry “... was the poetry of our everyday life... we were grateful to him for having found a place in poetry for these properties...” (MacNeice xviii) And as Longley points out, “MacNeice strategy was to report, to bear witness. He packed the contemporary world into his poetry” (xvii).

Louis MacNeice was very consciously a poet, but he was also an academic, journalist, and radio dramatist. In the 1950s his poetry went into a decline, while his other careers flourished. He was the poet as all-rounder, “able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of newspapers, informed in economics, actively interested in politics” (MacNeice xviii). These were requirements that he claimed for the job as poet.

In his essay *Experiences with Images* (1949). He argues for an understanding of poetry in the 20th century.

The poet is a maker, not the retail trader. The writer today should be not so much the mouth piece of the community (for then he will only tell it what it knows already) as its conscience, its critical faculty, its generous instinct (MacNeice xvii).

The latter phrase, “as its conscience” rings particularly true with me as I have used it in another context, an obituary also, describing poet Cyril Ó Céirín’s influence on the Burren Action Group and its campaign to stop development at Mullaghmore. Is this the true function then of the poet in society?

There is now a challenge in what MacNeice has to say on this. His words are to be aspired to. I am interested also in MacNeice’s challenging concept of lyric poetry as drama. Himself a great lyricist (the use of I in the poem), says in his essay *Experiences with Images* (1949),

All lyric poems... are dramatic in two ways.

(1), the voice and mood... are a chosen voice and mood...

(2), in what is said... all poems contain an internal conflict... [Conveyed in] change of tone... rhythmical shift or jump of ideas. Hence all poems, as well as because of being dramatic, are ironic (in the old Greek sense of, “dramatic irony”); poet and reader both know, consciously or unconsciously, the rest of the truth which lurks behind the lines (Battersby).

“This is where MacNeice soars”; according to the Irish Times critic Eileen Battersby, she says, “his grasp of the fundamental meaning, expression and purpose of poetry informs his work and our response to it”.

The poem I wrote is called “Belfast August 2007”. It was not an easy poem to get started, even though it has dominated my thinking since I visited Belfast for the second time in my life last August. When Peter Maguire, a musician friend based in Boston, Massachusetts, took me to see places associated with his youth in west Belfast, I felt this urge to write about it. In fact, I was compelled to. The visit had all the emotional elements of exploration that I have found in travelling; fear, curiosity, intrusion, fulfilment, etc. In Belfast, these were intensified by Peter’s own emotions and fears, incomplete dealings with horrific memories, which I did not wish to intrude in.

Focusing on this I found a way into the subject of the poem by using a series of movements while “driving down the Andersonstown of his memories”.

As difficult as poems are to start, this one proved also difficult to stop, but it seemed to come to a stop around the mural to the fiddle player Sean Maguire.

The reaction to the poem was very strong. I hadn’t expected this kind of response, particularly in people who seemed to know Belfast, either real or as televised during the “troubles”. For most of us living here in the south, it has been the latter. But they are no more or less emotive for that.

Readers in the workshop had problems with the concept of the “visitor voyeur” in the poem. The “visitor” is an image I am picking up from MacNeice’s “The Strand” - a beautiful poem about his father, where he is revisiting Achill by the “western sea” a place obviously dear to both him and his father and where his father:

Kept something in him solitary and wild

...

And the mirror caught his shape which catches mine

...

-and no sign.

Remains of face of feet, when visitors have gone home (MacNeice 105).

As Tom Paulin, quoted in the Longley introduction, points out, "... that word visitor is filled with a sense of dispossession – it is the word used in the west of Ireland to describe tourists". Longley doesn't completely agree, "Everyone everywhere is a tourist – not just Louis MacNeice" and goes on to quote Derek Mahon on the "tourist in his own country." But that excusing aside, clearly MacNeice had doubts about his Irishness, (qtd. in MacNeice xvi) because in the poem "Western Landscape" (written in July 1945) he uses the image again more forcefully in terms of what he calls being "disfranchised":

... let me, if a bastard

Out of the West by urban civilization

(Which unwished father claims me – so I must take

What I can before I go) let me who am neither Brandan

Free of all roots nor yet a rooted peasant

Here add one stone to the indifferent cairn ...

With a stone on the cairn, with a word on the wind, with a prayer in

the flesh let me honour this country (MacNeice 109)

If reference to visitor in my poem needed this kind of explanation, then I decided it needed to be brought right into it. I am revisiting the poem with this intention.

Sometime we have the occasion to meet our heroes in person, and these are moments we don't forget. I remember in 1987 I drove to Dublin to attend the 85<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations for the novelist Francis Stuart in Trinity College and got a signed copy of his essay *The Abandoned Snail Shell*. A complex, controversial, and possibly a misunderstood individual with an indomitable creative spirit having far reaching connections to both Ireland's and Europe's political, literary and cultural history throughout his long life (1902-2000), he appeared as iconic in person as one of the characters in his novels with his ageless and magnificent blue eyes. I felt privileged by history and it was awe inspiring to be in the presence of this great writer, who had known Yeats, and Maud Gonne, and who was married to her daughter Iseult. He was the last connection to the greats of the Irish literary renaissance of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Another early influence was the poet John Ennis, who is now head of Humanities in WIT. When John paid a visit to the class to welcome us to the course, this was our first introduction.

John Ennis was born in Westmeath in 1944. His early poems are rural-based but also heavily influenced by his reading of the classics. When Seamus Heaney said of Ennis that he is, "one of the most underrated poets in Ireland" (I am quoting from memory), it was at this early point in his career. His two early collections, *Night on Hibernia* (1976), and *Dolmen Hill* (1977) are the two I am most familiar with. Rereading them recently I noticed there are two quotations from Hart Crane in *Night on Hibernia*. Then there is the poem "Hart Crane", which is a lament for the American poet. This poem is typical of Ennis's work; written with incredible intensity, sustaining powerful images over pages, lines run on in haste to catch up as a reader must with a very fertile mind and brilliant dexterity in use of vocabulary and thought and the anticlimactic.

I think of you, Hart Crane, that April noon you died:  
Voice of the tortured brain deep, proved a death guide  
Drag hounds of the regressive sea pulled down your love.  
As diesel thrummed.

...

yet I will resuscitate your ghost, it's wide.

skyey, fields, festive.

Breads of poetry. (Ennis 57)

What John Ennis owes to Crane as an influence in his work, would need further exploration of both poets, and would no doubt lead me to a better appreciation of Ennis's early work? But for now I will leave this in favour of the initial feeling that his poetry has on me. It pelts one like the waves of the sea every which way but you know you must stay in the boat to be safe.

### 3. W.S. Graham

The Scottish poet, W. S. Graham (1918 - 1986), is somebody I discovered while reading Seamus Heaney's and Ted Hughes's *The School Bag* anthology where they have represented him there with just one poem; "Malcolm Mooney's Land". When I first read this poem two years ago, I had never heard of Graham and the anthology provided very little biographical information. The experience of the aforementioned poem interested me in the poem and in Graham and his work as to how metaphor and experienced in the poet's life may be completely unrelated.

It is perhaps pretty obvious from reading "Malcolm Mooney's Land" that the poem is not about being trapped like an explorer journeying to some camp or other in a glacier landscape near the North or South Pole but was in fact about the act of writing. The repetition of the word "word" being all pervasive.

A quick Google search, gave me some information on him, confirming a west of Ireland mother, a Scots father, but there was no indication of him having ever explored in the Arctic and Antarctic.

There is a dialogue going on in this poem, with the poet or the poet-persona as traveller, and in this conversation Graham does extraordinary things with language.

Better to move

Than have them at my heels, poor friends

I buried earlier under the printed snow. (Heaney and Hughes 80)

The narrative too is captivating, but there is mystery, lots of it and you keep coming back to it, rereading and rereading. At least, I found I was.

Last week, Graham's poem became the starting point for a poem I had been meaning to write for some time (years). It was to be a tribute to my late friend, Michael John Glyne (1919-1998). Normally, I would have approached it in a very narrative-style away, telling stories and encounters I had with him in Ennistymon, stories he had told me, some stories of mystery and intrigue; politically sensitive still. It would comfort me to be able to lay my hands on the journal (as back then I usually kept a journal) I had recorded these encounters in at the time. I began to search, with little idea of the exact year and was fortunate enough to be able to quickly locate the precise one with entries made in August 1988. Still no idea of how to start the work, I floundered around in the notebook, which was tantalisingly incomplete at times, and at others very insightful, with details recorded accidentally or deliberately, that now resonated more.

Then something came to me in "Malcolm Mooney's Land": why the snow, the glaciers, the bergs, the ice crevices, the cold, the swerving snow, the whiteout, the rafted ice, the tilting floe, the ovens of frost? The notebooks were my glacier, my landscape for the poem, and they would play the role that Graham uses his polar ice landscape in "Malcolm Mooney's Land". Of course, I am aware that there is more, far more going on in Graham's poem than this; I'm simply borrowing a technique from a master and hopefully using it to some advantage. With apologies also to W.S. Graham.

Ruth Padel in her book, *The Poem and the Journey*, says of Graham that he "may be little read by the public but he was one of the most important and original voices of the 20th century. Poets revere him" (Padel 115). I also learned from her book that he was a friend of Dylan Thomas ("his early work was very close to Thomas"). In 1955 Graham published his first major collection, *The Nightfishing*, and settled permanently in Cornwall to live in "classic poet's poverty". However, she goes on to say, "The poet-persona of his poems is an isolated traveller" (Padel 116).

The journey Graham took was language, as we can see in the poem Padel chose to reprint, the second poem from "What Is the Language Using Us for?"

I met a man in Cartsburn Street

Thrown out of the Cartsburn Vaults.

He shouted Willie and I crossed the street (Padel 114)

“In Graham's poem”, Padel says, “Language is bigger than us but is about *communication* between people. It can be a *real* - if we try” (Padel 117).

In the collected letters of Dylan Thomas there are no letters to Graham but Thomas refers to him in a couple as Sydney Graham or Sydney G. He mimics his Scottish accent and turn of phrase in a letter to John Malcolm Brinnin in 1951: “How goes Sydney G.? He was moaning for weeks about his companions, [Kathleen] Raine & [David] Gascoyne. ‘Och, there will be wee orgies with those two sparocks’” (Ferris 820).

I decided to dedicate the poem “Company” to Michael John Glynne who was an inspiration to me while alive, and who is now an inspiration for these poems. The first part of the poem is like an introduction or to quote a phrase I hate, “a setting out of the stall”.

**Company (First draft)**

*In memoria Michael John Glynne*

I  
Today the hound of heaven  
Is at the door. And I am  
Fleeing from him and him from me.  
Did you ever find the labyrinthine ways  
To your mind? The way you could  
Quote from it. From whatever  
Source if I could find these words  
Today that would launch  
Me out of this indifference.  
Had I not these notebooks  
I would have even much less.  
Almost twenty years ago  
Whatever I recorded  
Then is much more  
Than what I can record today.  
Today, what has brought you here?  
So that I would keep my word?  
God knows I was often enough at your door.  
Today is as good a time as any.

The second section, which had no title when I read it to the class, will now be called “Young Rebel”, as it mirrors or imagines a mirroring in Glynne’s own life in the encounter

we shared with a young rebel. This piece has a strong narrative story, full of suggestion, and some direct quotes, but it loses the “landscape” towards the end.

The Company sequence has now been completed. Parts III and IV, “Amongst Friends”, and “What’s the Moon Like” involved experimentation with form as well as subject. “Amongst Friends” is in sonnet form but not in the conventional or Shakespearean sense. It remains in a form of sonnet I have adapted; I used it in the “Great Escape” sonnet sequence of love poems. It tells a story, and the sextet includes some of this the same as the octet. However, it works well and the couplet at the end packs a punch.

“What’s the Moon Like” attempts a sestina. It proved very difficult and restraining, but also stretched me and the material almost to breaking point. I managed to use it for the narrative account of late-night drinking.

Part V, “Mr Gold”, returns to form influenced by W. S. Graham - short lines, broken, rhetorical questions. It is a long poem, nonetheless, about the life and influence of Michael John Glynne, as fellow poet, philosopher, and mentor.

New poems start from old poems. But where does the inspiration come from? Boris Pasternak, in *Dr Zhivago*, describes how Zhivago begins to write again after a period of neglect.

Finally, he got into his stride and, carried away, he started on a new poem ...after two or three stanzas, and several images by which he was himself astonished, his work took possession of him and he experienced the approach of what is called inspiration. At such moments, the correlation of the forces controlling the artist is, as it were, stood on its head. The ascendancy is no longer with the artist or the state of mind, which he is trying to express, but with language, his instrument of expression. Language, the home and dwelling of beauty and meaning, itself begins to think and

speaking for man and turns wholly into music, not in a sense of outward, audible sounds, but by virtue of the power and momentum of its inward flow. Then, like the current of a mighty river, polishing stones and turning wheels by its very movement, the flow of speech creates in passing, by the forces of its own laws, rhyme and rhythm and countless other forms and formations, still more important and until now undiscovered, unconsidered and unnamed.

At such moments Yury felt that the main part of his work was not being done by him but by something which was above him and controlling him: the thought and poetry of the world as it was at that moment and that it would be in the future (Pasternak 479).

What we put off sometimes is the involvement with the artistic work often for good reason, avoiding the pain that the work requires, the sacrifice of the self that leads to the self-discovery in the work and that ultimately and hopefully leads to some kind of universal truth. Or as the psychologist Carl Jung puts it, “the work in progress becomes the poet’s fate and determines his psychic development. It is not Goethe who creates Faust, but Faust who creates Goethe”.

It is not just a coincidence that Yury writes because he is in love with Lara, or that he has come through painful periods of war, estrangement from his family, and hunger, sometimes bordering on despair; these events all come through again in the elation and disappointment he feels at different times in the achievements in the work itself. Until uncertainty and doubt set in, the omens that were there from the beginning, the wolves he saw near the house at night “had become a theme, they represented a hostile force which intended his and Lara’s destruction and was resolved to drive them from Varykino”. While he feverishly continues to burn the midnight oil writing and writing, he knows that he is

postponing the discovery within himself of the end of their relationship; it's his last chance at the dream.

#### 4: Reading Poetry

After some time writing fairly consistently the question arises now of what poet's write about. It is a question I bring to every new collection I read and every new poet I discover. It brings me with excitement and curiosity to read new work.

At a reading during the Ennis Book Festival (March 2008) for the launch of Clare Voices (Three-legged Stool Clare Poets) anthology, I found myself telling the audience that we (poets) write about the past – something to do with the reflected emotions of writing poetry as an introduction to the piece on Michael John Glynne and the poem “Mr Gold”. Could I substantiate this claim if pushed to it? No! Almost every statement or declaration in poetry, as in life, has a counter claim and contradiction.

Coincidentally, the Irish Times columnist and critic Fintan O'Toole would be down the road later giving his ten most-read books to the Book Club Festival audience, and newspaper readers would be reading his copy that very Saturday - an article on the Irish poet Harry Clifton's new collection, “Secular Eden: Paris Notebook 1994-2004” which had just won the The Irish Times Poetry Now Award for 2008 (O'Toole, 6).

O'Toole opens the article with the statement “one of the best-known Irish poems of recent decades is Derek Mahon's Antarctica, which makes brilliant use of the imagery of polar exploration”. He uses this Mahon poem to contrast Clifton's equally stunning achievement in the poem, “The Whaling Station” also about Antarctica. He argues that Clifton is writing out of the sense of awareness of not being the first “explorer to reach the Pole” – to continue the metaphor linguistically – but that Clifton knows in an irony he relishes that he is dealing in second-hand images – “he makes second handedness his metier”.

Clifton, O'Toole claims has made a "great poem out of the very difficulty of achieving what is supposed to be the care of great poetry – originality".

The stimulating argument in O'Toole's article makes me go back to re-read Mahon's poem Antarctica before going forward with Clifton's or indeed the review. Antarctica is in villanelle form, and hinges on the line

At the heart of the ridiculous, the

Sublime

It is dedicated to Richard Ryan, who is probably the subject of the tribute also. The use of the polar images gives the poem both a heroic and anti-heroic or anti-climactic quality:

He is just going outside

and may be some time –

In fact for ever.

But isn't Mahon really in "Malcolm Mooney's Land" of WS Graham and letting the language use him? And is Mahon honestly sacrificing himself to the unknown and the understood and (unlike Clifton) laying claim to something not his own? As O'Toole claims for Clifton a "major writer is one who has escaped the anxiety of influence". While reminding us that "Few achieve this by being completely original...."

Clifton, in fact, speaks through the voice of a baker, the Romanian poet Benjamin Fondane, who was murdered in the holocaust, and the "unknown" Scottish poets Dunbar & Henryson, who are shadows of each other. He gives "annotation" on better known writers such as Stendhal, Saul Bellow, Montaigne, and Saint Augustine. Clifton, who has lived in Africa, Asia, France, Italy, and the US, may in fact have seen it all before, and poetically it will be interesting to see where he does from here.

For all of us contemporary poets interested in the challenges posed to creativity in the post modern experience and understanding of the world where everything is being over mediated, imagined, and interpreted, there is a feeling that we are in the after glow of things and yet in a sense of constant repetition. It is good that the things we produce as poets are both influenced and challenged by this; pushing our boats further out for means and methods of expression in the search for fresh theme. Often our poems are sadly undiscovered or seen perhaps as copies or reinventions. But yet I think one of the greatest challenges to the practice of lyric poetry now is in effect what according to O'Toole Clifton is doing so well - writing about everything that has happened before and been written about before. However, I would wonder if there is a danger of losing ourselves in this.

## 5: Voicing Poetry

I have returned from the Listowel Writers Week (June 2008), a day trip only to the Kerry capital of literature. What writer hasn't put in time here? Who hasn't met and made friends here; and come back again and again over the years? Like most writers of my generation we have all had memorable visits here. You get the feeling from groups sitting around tables in the Listowel Arms Hotel foyer and bar that careers are in the making, publishing deals are being done, advice being imparted, criticism received, authors and work discussed, gossip being exchanged, or simply enjoyment being enjoyed. You can see in the faces of the young and no so young, the eagerness, the enthusiasm to go on, to finish, or to start, the righteousness of what is being attempted, the necessity to return to the desk to continue the work in hand. I am sure there are those who come here with expectations that are dashed and are vowing never to write. If there are, I've never met them, or maybe they have slunk off into a corner to cry.

If you are a cynic or in a cynical mood, you'll only see the misery of defeat, rejections, and hurt pride; you'll attract it in fact.

Hanging on the walls of the Listowel Arms hotel bar there are a series of pen and ink drawings of the Kerry authors who have been associated with the festival over the years – the thirty-eight years of the festival's continued existence: John B. Keane, Bryan McMahon, Maureen Beasley, and Gabriel Fitzmaurice. All but Gabriel are dead now, but according to the old lady who points out to the couple she recognises as visitors to Listowel, "They are all gone now. Maureen Beasley was the last of them."

Seamus Heaney opened this year's festival and had given a reading on Thursday night. On Sunday morning RTÉ radio's Sunday Miscellany programme, which was recorded in Listowel, included a contribution from the Nobel-prize winning poet. He spoke about his two teenage sons describing them from a photograph he took in the early 1970s.

He described what his sons were wearing, the denims, and the Californian hippy look, the photo taken at a family picnic. He describes his concerns for his sons about to embrace life on their own. And he rounds that on himself when had made the decision to live in Wicklow having given up his teaching job in Queens to be a full-time writer. An incredibly brave move at any time for any writer. But not until the local school teacher who was enrolling his children in the Wicklow national school, did the seriousness of his undertaking strike him. When without asking the teacher wrote down in Irish under the heading “occupation of father” in the school register, “filé”, did the realisation hit him. He had better do it now.

The person who is not appreciated, who feels undervalued, usually has sold himself short. The resentment is expressed in jealousy, petty row picking in public, irritation and arrogance. Listowel can bring out this too. David McWilliams, the popular economist delivered a lecture to a packed house in the Arms. At question time people were asking about his idea for reaching out to the Irish Diaspora in helping to save the Irish from the inevitable slump in the economy; the growing personal debt of young people – the “Pope’s Children” as he has nicknamed this over borrowed and over expectant generation born after Pope John Paul’s visit in 1979. A man stood up at the back and boomed his question, what about the inequality of wealth, the appalling health system, the failing system overall of the society he wanted to live in. The manner and tone of his question and its interruptive nature meant that he would not receive an answer. Unfortunately, there is no room for debate when the ego is on show and gatherings such as these are entertainment. Like McWilliams this man liked to entertain while opining. The truth slips out much later in the evening during the ragged hours when the alcohol flows and people are tiring for their beds.

Pat Boran's reading earlier was much more reverent. I didn't know his work sufficiently but a reading can be a great introduction to any writer's work and as an insight into their creative process. Listowel Writers Week has always stood out for me that way. Some time in the 1980s in the little Protestant church in the square, recently converted into St John's Theatre and Arts Centre, I had heard and seen the dark leather-clad Ted Hughes read. It still stands out as one of the most memorable readings I have ever been at. He read solidly without much if any interaction or socialising with the audience and when he finished he walked straight down the aisle and left.

John McGahern read here also, full of honest humility, loaded with talent, a sense of place, working the audience to a higher appreciation and friendliness towards him. Heaney is possibly the most assured reader I have seen. It is like his ego doesn't intrude at all. He uses witticisms that you know he finds funny, winning the audience to their realisation, his reading gift. The work then speaks for itself.

Young poets finding their way fall into the trap of gushing, being inappropriately confessional, over introducing to overcome nerves, afraid of losing the audience (almost impossible) or plotting a biography as they read.

During Pat Boran's reading he mentioned something that seemed to have come out of the context of the workshop he was giving that has given me something to reflect on - if the poem has no more than its paraphrasing, then it probably wasn't worth writing. I agree, this is a valid criticism of poetry but it wasn't the time or the place to discuss this. He spoke about his nervousness of autobiography in his work, which meant as he admitted that he was attracted to it. He read work about his native Portlaoise, his house in the town, his time growing up there. The poems he read were mostly lyrical, narrative in structure. The poem for Michael Hartnett, "Princess of Sorrow", stood out as did his poem about the car alarm going

off in York Street, when he had accommodation in writer Leland Bardwell's house in Dublin.

Funny the things you learn about poets at readings.

## 6. Reviewing Poetry

This is the halfway stage I am now at in terms of the MA course and in terms of my writing objective for it. To maintain a routine is difficult but over the summer of 2008 I continued to write regularly until I felt the work was fizzling out and I needed a break from it.

Earlier in the spring I had completed a review on the poetry of Knute Skinner, the American poet who has lived on and off in Ireland since the 1960s. A collection of his poetry, *Fifty Years: Poems 1957-2007* was published by Salmon Poetry in September 2007. At the launch/ celebration I had been asked to address the gathering on the occasion. There were over two hundred people in the Lahinch Golf and Leisure Hotel for the celebration, including Knute's family, academics, neighbours, fellow poets, etc.

Speaking about an acquaintance and friend to an equally familiar group presents its own challenges. There are demands of emotion, honesty, flattery, celebration, praise, anecdote and humour (if possible). It is not the place for serious objective criticism, yet something of that must be conveyed, above all confirmed. It would have been a daunting task at any time but judging by the reaction I seemed to have acquitted myself well enough, maybe a hint of more to come is what I conveyed.

Some days later Harry Hughes, director of the Willie Clancy Summer School, and founder and editor of *Dal gCais* – an historical magazine of great standing in Co Clare which he has edited for over thirty years – had a proposal for me. He asked me if I would write an article on Knute Skinner's poetry for the magazine. At first I tried to put him off, not out of false modesty or the need for encouragement but genuinely out of a sense of lack of experience of academic writing, laziness of course always comes into it, and the fear of misreading and getting everything wrong about somebody's work – of doing a disservice to them.

I had written reviews of Knute Skinner's work before; I wasn't totally inexperienced. However, there was another reason for my reticence. In Knute Skinner's case I would consider that even though we are friends we were also culturally different; we come from different cultural backgrounds. He is an American academic born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1929 who came to Ireland in the early 1960s to live in county Clare, close to where I was born. I grew up with a knowledge and interest in him and his work. We live a couple of miles from each other but we didn't actually meet till 1984. In 1987 my writing career, which began with fiction and which was still struggling to begin, had quickly moved into editing. I had helped found the literary journal *Departures* (1987-2000) with a group of writers living in Shannon. By 1995 while the journal was beginning to have an influence nationally the early death of one of its stalwart founders, Nora Fahy, had left a great void. Fortunately, Knute and his wife Edna Faye Kiel, whom I invited onto the editorial committee of the literary journal, helped spearhead the New Series of *Departures*, and we worked together happily on five issues from 1995 until its demise in 2000.

From a development of a poetic direction perhaps the most influential period in my poetic work began when I attended the North Clare Writers Workshop which met weekly in Ennistymon during the years 1987 to 1996. Knute Skinner also attended whenever he was home, usually the summer months. I valued his judgement on my work; he was a good and instant critic. He was assured. You didn't get the feeling of personal insecurity you get from many other poets with egos. He instilled confidence and encouragement and inspired many of us.

That aside for the moment, reviewing in Ireland has come under a lot of criticism lately. David Wheatley the poet and critic has addressed the issue of what he calls "insider-trading" in Irish poetry head on. His argument is that reviewing, prize giving, publication is done by friends for friends and he warned of the dangers "the career game" was having on

poetry in general in an article published in *InCognito* in 1999 (Wheatley, 49-52). Ten years later nothing much has changed. Many of the poetry collections chosen for review and published in the *Irish Times*, for example, are compounded by two things: the needs of the staff journalists to earn their living, and the subjectivity of those selected for review.

I don't have issue with the first need; hard to blame somebody for doing something they're good at and getting paid for it. However, the second issue is pertinent to me this summer. My reasoning now is that the best person to review work is the person who knows the work best. This was the argument Harry Hughes used to convince me to write the Skinner review. After some thought and consideration I agreed that with the shared experience in common with Knute Skinner, it would be negligent of me not to use the gift.

That brought me a long way into convincing myself to write the review. But the challenge for me still was how to bridge the cultural divide. Thankfully, Janice Fitzpatrick Simmons, our supervisor's course on North American poets proved immensely valuable to the work I was undertaking, and I am grateful for the insights and direction I was able to take as a result of having been introduced to poets such as Robinson Jeffers, Elisabeth Bishop, Frank O'Hara, John Berryman, Joe Pinsky, etc. Though I have not shared the review work in the class, I would like to include it here in acknowledgement.

Janice Fitzpatrick Simmons, who like Knute Skinner, was born in the States, has lived on both sides of the Atlantic. She too has experienced, felt deeply and written about the experience in her poetic work. In her recent collections, *The Bowsprit*, *Settler*, and *Starting at Purgatory*, she sees herself as "The Settler". Her work confirms for me that the journey of the poet is then both cultural and of self regardless of its setting out point, "the new self in the Old World; I am changed". Her work shows us also how we are as much at the mercy of our destinies as anything else, something that she captures brilliantly in the image of "throwing

stones into dark water” in the later poem, *Dark Water*. This image pulls these cultural distances philosophically into perspective. We are gathered:

...at this margin  
and here we take our chances.

And she asks the question squarely of herself and the reader if we are up to the challenge.

The more time I gave to the review or “reassessment” as I claimed for it of fifty years of Knute Skinner’s poetry, the more I realised how pertinent it was becoming to re-evaluating my own work- particularly when I came to discuss Skinner’s later work typified by his “fictional narrative” poems.

The “Daley Dialogues” of my collection, *Into the Heart of It: Daley Dialogues and Other Poems*, mentioned earlier here, were written while I lived in Valencia Spain between 1990 and 1996. But they possibly had actually begun during the North Clare Writers Workshop gatherings. I have now no clear recollection of why or how they came about. Two voices, Dan Daley and his father, two characters, began an exchange on their lives and their past experiences and I managed to sustain the discourse over twenty or more poems.

Robert Pinsky in his book on contemporary poetry and its traditions, *The Situation of Poetry*, argues for both the “sincerity” and “insincerity” of the voices in contemporary poetry common since Eliot and Pound, “...unlike dramatic poems written before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such poetry uses the dramatic mode as a way to keep in tact a kind of silence or ambivalence ...by making words into the particular experience of someone’s speech.” (Pinsky, 13-14). I had no conscious or informed awareness of this tradition when I began to write Daley Dialogues about a farmer and his son that talk about the same things but who are not in direct

communication. Keeping in tact the silence or ambivalence may be the only thing possible in treating of some personal feelings.

The poet and playwright Patrick White saw the influence of Yeats in the work saying that they offer “a series of ambitious scenes of father-son dialogue that seem Yeatsian in their combination of abstract ideas, mythical force, and realistic detail in almost choral form” (White 5). The mask and the persona can be argued constitutes even the most personal poems dealing with feelings, plain speaking and the confessional. I would go further to say there is even an argument to be made for poetry as fiction.

But there are other poets who challenge the traditions and whose work makes poetry a vital and evolving thing, and who are pushing out the boundaries in other directions. Medbh McGuckian’s work is probably the most challenging to the modern concept of poetry and to the modern reader’s understanding and sensibilities in the way it breaks with the traditions. In her later work there seems to be no restrictions, there is so much more than the personal, much more being addressed in her work. Or at least it is an entirely different approach as in the poem to her mother, “She is in the Past, She has this Grace” for which she was awarded the 2002 Forward Poetry Prize (Best Single Poem):

**She is in the Past, She Has This Grace**

By Medbh McGuckian

My mother looks at her watch,  
 As if to look back over the curve  
 Of her life, her slackening rhythms:  
 Nobody can know her, how she lost herself  
 Evening after evening in that after,  
 Her hourly feelings, the repetition,  
 Delay and failure of her labour

Of mourning. The steps space themselves  
Out, the steps pass, in the mists  
And hesitations of the summer,  
And within a space which is doubled,  
One of us has passed through the other,  
Though one must count oneself three,  
To figure out which of us  
Has let herself be traversed.

Nothing advances, we don't move,  
We don't address one another,  
I haven't opened my mouth  
Except for one remark,  
And what remark was that?  
A word which appeases the menace  
Of time in us, reading as if  
I were stripping the words  
Of their ever-mortal high meaning.

She is in dark light, or an openness  
That leads to a darkness,  
Embedded in the wall  
Her mono-landscape  
Stays facing the sea  
And the harbour activity,

Her sea-conscience being ground up  
With the smooth time of the deep,  
Her mourning silhouetted against  
The splendour of the sea  
Which is now to your left,  
As violent as it is distant  
From all aggressive powers  
Or any embassies.

And she actively dreams  
In the very long ending of this moment,  
She is back in her lapping marshes,  
Still walking with the infinite  
Step of a prisoner, that former dimension  
In which her gaze spreads itself  
As a stroke without regarding you,  
Making you lower your own gaze.

Who will be there,  
At that moment, beside her,  
When time becomes sacred,  
And her voice becomes an opera,  
And the solitude is removed  
From her body, as if my hand  
Had been held in some invisible place?

The word Grace in the title is an interesting word here. It could mean beauty, poise or piety or gift. It is her mother, "...nobody can know her", only time, space and all associated with it – mists and shadows.

In the second stanza there are no words, maybe one word

...which appeases the menace  
of time in us...

But still neither she nor her mother addresses one another because words are "mortal". This is at the core of McGuckian's challenge; poetry is no longer just an affair of language and "high" meaning. She comes at everything from an oblique angle.

The third stanza takes the reader to the clearest understanding yet, McGuckian sees her mother in the landscape of a painting "...her mono-landscape...her sea-conscience ...". Here she moves her subject like a painter repositioning a model. There are painterly *oscura* images of dark and light, a silhouette and a wonderful metaphor for mourning against the violent splendour of the aggressive sea and its unruly nature in terms of the ineffectiveness of human control, of power and diplomacy ("embassies"). She must shift perspective here, not a new picture or image, but a slight tweak or instruction to the reader or the model, "now to your left".

Where language failed movement in the second stanza, in the fourth stanza there is plenty of movement even into dreams in the "very long ending of this moment". However, the reality is still the same, doing laps like a prisoner within the same physical confinement, contrasted with the infinite dimension of "the gaze that looks through you".

The fear in the final stanza is real, posed in the question:

Who will be there,...  
when time becomes sacred,

It is the question that ends the poem with the puzzling simile:

...as if my hand  
had been held in some invisible place?

The final stanza effectively works to develop what I see as an admission of powerlessness; the hand held back, restrained. The future and the past tenses here echo back to the lost time of the present in the first stanza, and this is how the regret is conveyed. The title of the poem is crucial to its understanding, *She is in the Past, She has this Grace*.

The most popular and possibly most interesting and successful contemporary Irish poets are those in the state of “grace”. It is meant in a secular way. Even though we are or we like to think we are in what you might call a post-church, or post religious age in Ireland, the guilt ridden feelings are still very strong, they are unavoidably inherited and come through in the use of the language and expression. The past is what dominates in Harry Clifton’s collection, *Secular Eden*, and the guilt about the past is what he deals with in many of the poems including, *Benjamin Fondane Departs for the East*;

...Call us the Paris crowd,  
Unreal, uprooted, spectres drifting through,  
The ashes of our ancestors in suitcases,  
Bound for Buenos Aires, bound for the New.

This powerful poem is written in the voice of the Romanian/French poet, Benjamin Fondane, who was a victim of the gas chambers during the Second World War:

And now they tell me 'Hide your poems, wait

Somewhere in Nineteen Eighty

Readers will find you. ...'

Clifton uses this poem to identify himself with Fondane; there is something very necessary in the work of a poet locating himself in time and history and giving voice to the forgotten; catching up those and all of us with lines like:

I forgive us all, for we know not who we are

Irrational, fleeting, caught between wars.

It is also post war Ireland, and even with the "shadow-world" of travel behind him, Ireland is still the place for him. In a few poems in this collection set in Ireland it is quite clear that we do "the shared guilt of the past" very well, "The Black Book" deals with the terrible politics of Ireland;

Like a lost undersea continent

Rising forever, to rediscover itself

In our own eyes, and call itself Ireland.

Or in "Red Fox Country" "forking left/Beyond Armagh" where "devoid of Grace" there is a shared guilt of the past especially for this lost soul, with a broken heart "from the Free and Fallen State."

“The Place” – a mountain lake or rain-filled quarry perhaps - is the exile’s epiphany of rediscovery, coming with all the mixed emotional honesty breaking through:

Ireland, so to speak,  
Had come between us, like a foreign word.  
I saw right through it, in a state of grace  
... This, at last, was the place.

I am intrigued by Clifton’s “state of grace” which he returns to again and again. In the title poem, “Secular Eden” he brings the possibilities or impossibilities of guilt and grace together. In Paris with its locked-up churches and the chimes from the Municipal Hall bells,

No-one will ever fall from grace.

In a Secular Eden there is:

No guilt now, only vertigo  
To the end of time, if anyone stops to think.

But vertigo is a conscious balancing act and the fight between staying upright and falling - good and evil - goes on.

## 7. Conclusions

It is St Brigid's Day, the first day of spring 2009. What is holding me up? I ask myself. There is an economic recession but a poetic recession has also begun to kick in. Over the previous autumn and end of 2008 I have written few poems. It would seem that I was writing the same poem over and over, "Portland, OR". This poem started out as a poem about three gardens; a Japanese, Chinese, and Celtic garden. By the end of November 2008 it was about one garden, the Chinese garden in Portland Oregon that I had visited with Nancy towards the end of our relationship some time in 2002/3. It proved a very difficult poem to write; shape, expression, decision, focus, to emote or not.

Writing poems with strong emotional feeling start out like a betrayal of everyone, especially oneself. They are like arguments and the things you say in the heat of the moment you regret later. They are best as the poet says served cold.

The one maturing thing I have noticed in my work over the last few years, in fact I recognise it in my work now, is what I call the application of restraining metaphor. This is a technique I have learned from reading Seamus Heaney's work. It is also perhaps what Philip Larkin described as the "formal distancing of emotion" which he later recognised as influences from Yeats and Auden in his early work, in particular *The North Ship* collection (Larkin, 165). There has to be a protective layer in poems of a personal nature. The skill and mastery that I recognise in Heaney is how he can engage the reader in a playful way with this. He takes you in to his world, the rewards are huge, but he goes only so far; a decent distance is maintained.

On December 7 2008 I heard on John Bowman's radio programme, Bowman Sunday Morning, some interviews with Seamus Heaney from the RTÉ archives (Bowman). The programme was marking the publication of Dennis O'Driscoll's book with Heaney, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, which had just been published on Heaney's

approaching 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. Bowman was focusing on his detractors. One interview from the RTÉ archive in particular had been given to Mike Murphy around the time of Heaney winning the Nobel Prize in 1995. Heaney was unusually negative or realistic I suppose depending on how you look at it. He was talking about the feeling when he was not writing of what he called the “impostor complex”– a particular or “notorious” problem for the lyric poet. He and Murphy joked about the “fear of being found out” that he had also spoken of in an interview when he was 50. Famous for not taking himself too seriously and for his jokes and jibes and off-the-cuff remarks, I wondered was it one of those veiled truths, was it false modesty or was he being deadly serious. The cynic in me couldn’t help noticing that it was a remark that a Nobel poet could safely make at that stage of his life.

Still Heaney’s idea of the impostor complex had reverberations for me and I continued to debate with myself about poets in general and impostors in particular. Bringing it even closer to home, I remembered my aunt Brigid often made the very same remark as Heaney about herself in relation to ordinary and everyday discourse with people. (The respect and reverence for the ordinary discourse is one of the most admirable qualities Heaney has.) But most of the time we have to protect or shield our true feelings - life depends on it. All life exists in fact in an element of a lie. The “real” voice is rarely used. We are all “impostors” in that sense. The justification for the culture of art, creative expression, poets and poetry is the need to turn the artful lie, into the powerful truth. In that sense I think Heaney’s talent had been “found out” years ago.

Returning to my less elevated stance, I had just completed the poem “Portland OR” and brought it to the workshop on December 3, 2008. The reading version was then called “Three Stages of Ending”, divided into the three marked sections. The first part – the garden in the city, jasmine tea, and white breeding ducks - the second moved out of the garden and onto the street, and the third was the apartment with the jade tree and our goodbye, again.

Certain decisions about the poem have been made since then, about its future, yes, almost definitely, about its title, definitely “Portland, OR” because it makes the connection with the sonnet sequence of love poems which tended to have place names as titles.

From the reading, the positive feedback centred on the final section. There was no doubt this was definite and confident. However, the image of the clipped wings of the ducks proved overpowering:

What would they breed? I thought  
Their clipped wings  
evolving offspring  
that would have no need of them.  
Yet there, vestigial like  
as if nature was second guessing  
itself all the way through  
from beginning to end.

Maybe the analysis and judgement from the poet is not what the poem needed. And though it was hard to give up the conceit of the vestigial in nature, I did it in favour of avoiding the debate.

To imagine them  
flying over the walls  
whenever they wished  
was easier;  
soaring higher than the purple tower  
and beyond to the river and the sea,

and coming home to roost.

The metaphor of the ducks persisted; free but not free to leave the garden; it was easier to imagine them free, or to say that the decision was theirs as the decision was mine – transferred.

Detachment has been a difficult line for me to take as I have tended to like to blabber out, to confess the truth; truth in reality about little of consequence. But to deal with the reality of break-up in a detached but not an unfeeling way – as in who cares about others' problems anyway – does not come easy. It is a studied stance and metaphor is everything in making it true. Humour when you can, even better. The dramatic irony that MacNeice speaks of as inherent in lyric poetry, comes to the rescue when what you can't quite explain and possibly shouldn't even try, needs to be said.

In the Heaney understanding of the “impostor complex” in relation to the writing; “will I do it again, will it come” is the main concern we all live with until the time comes again for taking the flatness out of the expression, charging the language, and waiting for the right turn of phrase or finding the right word. Freeing a block takes time and patience. Releasing the tightening bolt in poems, this task goes on and on.

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