Absence and Fasting:

the critical and the creative in the author's published works from *Out of Step: Pursuing Seamus Heaney to Purgatory* (1992) to *The Getting of Vellum* (2000)

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Abstract

In 'Absence and Fasting' the poet Catherine Byron discusses the interactions between the critical and the creative in her work, from the publication of the monograph *Out of Step* in 1992 to that of the poetry collection *The Getting of Vellum* in 2000 and the essay 'An Appetite for Fasting?' in 2001.

In *Out of Step* she embarked on several years of critical and creative engagement with the *locus* of spiritual and literary pilgrimage, St Patrick's Purgatory on Station Island in Lough Derg. Initially drawn there by curiosity about the implications of the absences and silences of women in Seamus Heaney's sequence 'Station Island', she discovered that her footstepping of Heaney's narrator 'Seamus Heaney' on the island itself led her to unexpected places of doubt and despair, both cultural and personal. In a series of reflective essays (published 1992, 1998, 2001) on the repercussions of her engagement with the matter of Ireland, and Station Island in particular, she interrogated the autobiographical in her own writing and that of others. In the 1993 collection *The Fat-Hen Field Hospital* she fore-grounded poems set outside Ireland, on a Scottish smallholding where the violence is mainly agricultural. These poems led to her collaboration with artist-calligrapher Denis Brown, and to new themes and modes of composition, initially writing on skins – animal and human – and latterly on glass. This culminated in the publication of the collection *The Getting of Vellum*, in which the ghosts of Station Island make their final appearance.

The account of this period of research concludes with a brief look forward to Byron's next project, which starts from an investigation into the chosen 'invisibility' of the protagonists in the Spanish novels of Kate O'Brien and Maura Laverty, and into their appetite for the physical.

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List of publications submitted

Copies of three books accompany the bound thesis:

Critical monograph

1992. *Out of Step: Pursuing Seamus Heaney to Purgatory,* Bristol: Loxwood Stoneleigh.

Poetry collections

1993. *The Fat-Hen Field Hospital,* Bristol: Loxwood Stoneleigh.

2000. *The Getting of Vellum,* Cliffs of Moher, Co Clare, Ireland: Salmon Publishing & Leicester: Blackwater Press.

Copies of published works bound into this volume:

Exhibited works

1996. *Couple,* Denis Brown: mixed media on two calfskins. Poem by Catherine Byron

1998. *The Last Gasp,* Denis Brown: glass with gold earring. Poem by Catherine Byron

New Media

1999. *Renderers,* www.poetrysociety.org.uk/places/cbyron.htm (selected images from the website). Also at http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/poets/byron

Extract from poetry collection

1993. *Settlements & Samhain,* Bristol: Loxwood Stoneleigh (expanded version of the 1985 'Galway' sequence).

Critical essays

1992. 'The Landscape of Seamus Heaney', *BRICK: A Literary Journal,* No. 42/43, 75-80.

1999. 'The Most Difficult Door', in P. Polkey, ed., *Women's Lives Into Print: The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Auto/Biography,* London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 185-196.

2001. 'Crypt' & 'An Appetite for Fasting?', in Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, ed., *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art,* New York: Syracuse University Press, 61-71.

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> Woman still remains this nothing-at-all, this totality of nothingness (*ce tout du rien, rien du tout*) where each masculine unity (*un*) comes to look for what will replenish the resemblance to self, (as it were) to sameness. She cannot herself unsettle the displacement/disturb the ownership of the place which she constitutes for the (male) subject...
>
> Luce Irigaray[1] (trans. Montefiore,147-8)

INTRODUCTION

My creative and critical research over the last twenty tears has focussed on women's voices and physical presence in the history and culture of modern Ireland. The published works that I am presenting as my doctoral thesis investigate aspects of female silence and absence: from male literary texts, from patriarchal religious ritual, and from women's own consciousness. Taken together, they document a journey of self-discovery as reader and as writer, in which I move between prose and poetry and between degrees of disclosure of autobiographical material in my own work and in that of my contemporaries. My investigations centre on the ancient *locus* of spiritual and literary pilgrimage, St Patrick's Purgatory on Station Island in Lough Derg, County Donegal, one of Europe's long-attested entrances to the underworld. The foundation work is *Out of Step* (1992a), my *in situ* feminist reading of Seamus Heaney's 12 poem sequence 'Station Island' (Heaney 1984), which engages in particular with his ambivalent representations of feminine presence and absence. In *Out of Step* I foregrounded Heaney's creative use of a first-person, apparently autobiographical, voice, and wrote a book that is itself autobiographical. The difference between his and my uses of autobiography was to become central to my subsequent research. In addition, I went on to explore further feminist issues around hearth and home, hunger and fasting.

The long-term challenge that Seamus Heaney's 'Station Island' presented to me was to prove initially a critical one, and later a creative one. I will attempt to describe the rationale and methods that I used, and developed further, in the course of writing the works submitted for the doctorate: the monograph *Out of Step*; the associated long essays 'The Landscapes of Seamus Heaney' (1992b), 'The Most Difficult Door' (1999) and 'An Appetite for Fasting?' (2001); selected poems in *The Fat-Hen Field Hospital* (1993a) and the full collection *The Getting of Vellum* (2000).

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[1] The original text is in *Speculum, de l'autre femme*, 282.

The culminating account of this period of critical and creative research is the poem 'Crypt' and the essay 'An Appetite for Fasting?'. These are published as a single chapter in Haberstroh's *My Self, My Muse: Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art* (Haberstroh 2001). The other poets contributing essays and poems to this volume are Eavan Boland, Moya Cannon, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Medbh McGuckian, Joan Newmann, Mary O'Malley and Eithne Strong. The inclusion of my critical and creative work in Haberstroh's book, and the company it keeps, is an appropriate way for me to close my research file on the significance of St Patrick's Purgatory in my work.

In the explanatory essay which follows here, I will attempt to trace the methods, both intentional and instinctive, that informed my creative and critical journey from *Out of Step* to the chapter in *My Self, My Muse*. I will begin by quoting the same words by Adrienne Rich that I used as the epigraph for the essay in that chapter:

> A poem can't free us from the struggle for existence, but it can uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulating emergencies of our lives, the fabricated wants and needs we have had urged on us, have accepted as our own.
>
> (Rich, 12-13)

THE BACKGROUND

My early creative work (collected in *Settlements*, 1985,1993b) was concerned with the recounting and re-imagining of women's versions of family history, and the impact on them of external events such as the terrorisation of the population of rural East Galway by the Black and Tans during the final months of Ireland's War of Independence. Oral accounts passed down through the women of my mother's family – the Duanes of Ballinahistle – offered witness narratives that were very close in their outlines to accounts of the same events in a section of *Lady Gregory's Journals.*[2] The Duane women's versions offered family-specific detail that fleshed out incidents still regarded as notorious atrocities in the locality. In my re-membering of the women's oral accounts I wanted to explore issues of gender relating to both external (British versus IRA) and domestic violence (within my grandparents' marriage). In the sequence 'Galway', which is at the centre of *Settlements,*[3] I experimented with a range of female voices: first person

[2] Gregory, 1946. See especially Part III, Politics 1: The Terror. I did not, however, discover Gregory's accounts of these events until 1998.

[3] 1985, 29-38; the version in 1993b, *Settlements & Samhain*, 27- 44, contains three additional poems.

dramatic monologues in the voices of my grandmother and of the daughter-in-law who eventually took over the farm; third person narratives in the voice of a daughter who emigrated to England; and a sort of 'chorus' voice representative of the collective family storytelling I witnessed whenever there were gatherings of two or more Duane women of the Ballinahistle generations. Paradoxically I found that I was able to deal with far tougher and more intimate material in the 'Galway' sequence of *Settlements* than in 'Erosions' and 'Driving Into the Past', the sections that enclosed it, although many of the poems that these contained were in a first person voice that was ostensibly my own.

'"I" is not I', the American poet Sharon Olds insists at readings of her work, which is apparently autobiographical to a remarkably detailed and often shocking degree. In the years following the publication of *Settlements* I was engaged with this enabling but challenging paradox both in my own poetry and when reading and listening to the poetry of my contemporaries. I grew more alert to differences in the reception of 'confessional' or 'autobiographical' work written by men and that written by women.

I recognised, to some extent retrospectively, that the creative energy driving my 'Galway' sequence was to do with incidents in my own life rather than simply the family 'herstory' that I had originally conceived it to be. It was also driven by my distress over contemporary events in the wider arena: by focussing on the violence of the final stages of Ireland's War of Independence I had found a distanced way of responding creatively to the complexities of violence and gender being played out sixty years later in my own homeland of the North of Ireland, and in particular the prison hunger strikes of 1981 in which ten IRA men died. I began to interrogate my own pusillanimity in writing poems that were thus cloaked – by being ostensibly located in other times, other lives. I began to sense that my supposedly feminist intention, to 'give a voice to voiceless women', could be seen as patronising to those women, and that the resulting 'Galway' sequence could indicate a failure in my own political and personal nerve. For I had slipped into the historical narrative some very personal material about sexual violence and miscarriage.

I felt torn between two apparently contradictory injunctions by poets from the past whose work was very important to me: Emily Dickinson's 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant' and W B Yeats's 'There's more enterprise in walking naked'. I wanted to write poetry that was formally more akin to speech, and about matters more closely connected to my own life and times than to those of my grandmother. But if I could only understand the dynamic of my own writing in retrospect, how far could mere intention help me? My reading at the time was predominantly in contemporary American women's writing, but it was,

paradoxically, a male poet's text that surprised me into a period of deeper reflection on the links between the private and the public in the matter of poetry: Seamus Heaney's personal and autobiographical 'Station Island', and its central preoccupation with the 1981 hunger strikes. My unintended but increasingly overwhelming engagement with the dilemma that Heaney's text posed for me was to turn me into a writer of creative non-fiction, alter my stance and self-awareness as a feminist, and contribute to considerable changes in my own creative practice as a poet.

In the early Eighties Seamus Heaney began to read out instalments of a projected poem-sequence about St Patrick's Purgatory at venues such as the Cheltenham Festival of Literature. I was immediately intrigued. I had long been drawn to St Patrick's Purgatory because of its special place in Irish literature, and in particular as the *locus* of key mid twentieth century texts such as Sean O'Faolain's short story 'Lovers of the Lake' (1983) and Patrick Kavanagh's book-length poem *Lough Derg* (1978). Heaney published the completed sequence as the central section and title poem of his1984 collection *Station Island*. It raised questions and challenges that were wholly absent from the acerbic but inclusive works of O'Faolain and Kavanagh, writers of the previous generation: both had used the island as a microcosm of Irish society, and in both 'Lovers of the Lake' and *Lough Derg* women play an equal part. Heaney's account of the island and the famous pilgrimage was, in contrast, almost exclusively male in its focus and in its *dramatis personae*.

This intrigued me on both the critical and the creative front, especially as this new work was deeply engaged with issues of violence and gender. Further, in Heaney's tentative poetic *bildungsroman* the chill air of the ongoing 'Troubles' hovered over autobiographical material more direct and personal than any poetic text he had published before. This was germane to my own creative preoccupations, but what transfixed me above all was the voice of the hunger-striker and *quondam* neighbour of the Heaney family in South Derry, Francis Hughes, in Poem IX. My close reading of this poem was to be the focus of my anxiety about Heaney's exploration of Northern nationalist masculinity, and its – and to some extent his – concomitant recoil from the feminine. It was therefore at the heart of my uneasy critical account of his sequence in *Out of Step*, and was the grit that, years later, troubled me into writing my own sequence 'Coffin. Crypt. Consumption'.[4] Utterly different in its conception from Heaney's ventriloquising of Francis Hughes in Poem IX, 'Coffin. Crypt. Consumption.' does have certain things in

[4] Published in full in Byron, 2000, 5-9.

common: it is narrated by a voice from beyond the grave that initially speaks, and is partly set, on Station Island.

Heaney's sequence had rekindled my longstanding interest in St Patrick's Purgatory. Other Irish pilgrimages had been engaging me creatively during the early Eighties, especially those set close to the western seaboard: the ascent of Croagh Patrick on Clew Bay, and the Pattern of St Cavan on the island of Inisheer in Galway Bay.[5] St Patrick's Purgatory, with its enclosed and inland setting, was initially – and for a very long time – far less attractive to me as a creative *locus*. Its literary history had been, for centuries, exclusively in the hands of male writers; the other pilgrimages were, poetically as well as geographically, much more open. However, as I began to research the Purgatory's history and its contemporary importance to Catholics from the North I began to realise that it offered me, as well as Heaney, a way of engaging with the political and gendered complexities of the aggressively passive Republican hunger strikes of 1981: of 'reading' and of 'writing' them. Indeed, I spent the rest of the Eighties and much of the Nineties investigating issues around the public and private significances of the ancient and still-vital pilgrimage site on Station Island, especially to the women and men of the nationalist community in the North. It was chastening to discover the extent to which, after nearly a quarter of a century away from both Ulster and Catholicism, I was still of their company. Seamus Heaney's sequence had drawn me into making my own, unruly, 'station' at Lough Derg. It was indeed a symbolic journey into the underworld. The path back to the upper world was hard going. But it had to be of my own treading, as the path down was not. And for my continuing practice as a writer it is also important that the path is, even now, 'not clear' – as in Annie Dillard's extended metaphor:

> When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow, or this time next year.
>
> You make the path boldly and follow it fearfully. You go where the path leads. At the end of the path, you find a box canyon. You hammer out reports, dispatch bulletins.
>
> The writing has changed, in your hands, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions to an epistemological tool. The new place interests you because it is not clear. You attend. (1989, 3)

[5] See section III, 'Turas', in Byron 1993a for 'The Pattern of Saint Cavan' and other pilgrimage poems set on Inisheer and other islands of the North and West. The Irish word 'turas' means 'pilgrimage'.

After publishing *Settlements* and my second poetry collection *Samhain,*[6] a reworking of early Irish tales from the Ulster Cycle,[7] I felt the need to progress from my reliance on distanced material such as family history, folktale, and my rather antiquarian interest in landscape and its making. I wanted to write more directly, as indicated above, and not to take shelter or protective coloration from pasts that were not my own. After I completed *Out of Step* my creative work engaged increasingly with the Belfast of my childhood (the short sequence 'Silk & Belfast Linen', 1993a, 29-31) and with my years of experimental farming in SW Scotland (the title sequence of *The Fat-Hen Field Hospital,* 1993a, 7-26). These poems were not autobiographical in the confessional meaning of the word, but they did come more directly out of first-hand experience than the 'Galway' sequence. What interested me in this work was the fictionalising and dramatising of events and interactions that I had witnessed: the creative crossover in poetic monologue between auto/biography and fiction.

I worked my way by a more consciously intellectual route to the stylistic and political decision to write *Out of Step* entirely in the first person and in the present tense. I found, after several false starts, that it demanded a shape that was fictional and even mythic: that of the quest, and a quest that foregrounds a first person narrator. Further, I needed to identify myself as that narrator, so that a (highly selective) autobiographical narrative germane to the geographical, literary and spiritual quest became an outer framing device to the more conventional (in literary critical terms) inner structure of the book: the close reading, chapter by chapter, of Heaney's twelve poem sequence.

Although Heaney's sequence itself foregrounds a first-person narrator called 'Seamus Heaney', it was not primarily his example that prompted the use of the first person in my own text. Heaney's stated model had been Dante's first-person pilgrimage narrative in *The Divine Comedy*, and as a medievalist by training I was familiar with the rich first-person tradition that Dante's example fostered in the emergent literary vernaculars of France and England, as well as of his native Italy. Rather, my own desire to write in the first person came out of the enthusiasms of the feminist movement of the Nineteen-Seventies: consciousness-raising, bearing witness, the personal being political. In particular, I wanted to make my critical judgements as transparent as possible to my

[6] Byron, 1987: reprinted in *Settlements & Samhain* (1993b).
[7] 'The Death of Aoife's Only Son' and 'The Wasting Sickness of Cuchulain and the Only Jealousy of Emer' in Gantz, 1981, 147-178.

reader, with the minimum of authorial distancing. The book would be confessedly provisional rather than authoritative, and its judgements would be seen to arise from a particular set of physical circumstances and a precise geography as well as from a particular writer at a particular time. It would lay bare to the reader the stages of bafflement and of understanding. Most important of all, my prose text would, like my poetic ones, find itself only in the process of being written: I would be 'writing blind' in an avowedly feminist mode.

Mine was a practical, hands-on method, but a lecture by Nicole Ward Jouve at Cheltenham in 1991 alerted me to a more theorised account of the significance of the present tense, as exemplified in the writing of Hélène Cixous. This was illuminating, if in retrospect, about my own choices:

> Hélène Cixous always writes in the present.
>
> There are two ways of writing in the present.
>
> It can be argued that any text is in the present. In *Writing Degree Zero* Roland Barthes has described the prevailing mode of fiction, the preterite, as a disguised, idyllic and bracketted present.... But there is another way of writing in the present, which is, as it were, writing blind. Writing as a process of projection and discovery. (Ward Jouve, 93)

The immediate reasons for my own choice of the present tense for *Out of Step* were circumstantial and readerly, rather than theoretical, but Ward Jouve's account of the 'unpredictability' of Cixous's 'body language', and the autobiographical aspect of her critical writing,[8] was to inform my understanding of that choice.[9] As Ward Jouve says,

> the process of writing itself means you're summoning what is in you as you write, which is often only brought to the fore as it is being written... Each step is costly, from word to word, sentence to sentence' (93).

With *Out of Step* I walked my way into what was for me a new way of writing. The initial research for the project required a literal and physical bodily engagement with setting and text before I could embark on any writing of my own, or decide on its mode or its shape. I needed to pace out my own 'station' on the stone of St Patrick's Purgatory in order to assess, as I thought, the presence or absence of aspects of the feminine on a site with such a long history of association with the sacred. When I began to write, I realised that the three-day protocol of the pilgrimage would also give me a very useful framework for my narrative. I also had, as a given, the framework and time-scheme of

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[8] See Ward Jouve, Chapter 6: 'Hélène Cixous: from inner theatre to world theatre', and especially the discussions of her critical work. For example, Jouve says of *Venue à l'écriture* that it 'is more directly autobiographical than any of [her] first-person fiction, and arguably as imaginative' (91).

[9] It would also clarify my practice in the writing of two of the subsequent essays (1999a, 2001).

Heaney's sequence, and the various links to his other autobiographical writings, in prose and poetry. Book-ending these Island-bound episodes were my own journeys to and from Lough Derg. The stylistic challenge of managing these nested time-frames took me back to the prose of an American woman poet who was my very near contemporary. I began to examine her prose with a writer's eye rather than just a reader's.

I had long loved the work of Annie Dillard, author of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1976) and *Holy the Firm* (1984), two books of mysticism intimately rooted in the natural world. Both are written as journals, and thus are written mainly in the present tense. Both are apparently autobiographical, but not remotely confessional. Within their pages, Dillard's wide-ranging reading – scientific as much as literary – is as immediate an experience as any that involves the senses alone. I was drawn to both form and content in Dillard's work. I liked, too, the way her prose books were hard to categorise: Natural History/Autobiography/Spirituality/Philosophy were some of the categories they were allotted to. She moved between works of poetry and of creative non-fiction with clear distinction between modes, but an overall seamlessness. I was intrigued to discover in her *The Writing Life* that the prose book *Holy the Firm* had, in fact, first been conceived and even written as a long poem. Its evolution offered other parallels to my own project:

> Once I wrote a favorite, difficult book, a true account of three days on an island on the northwest coast. I began the book on one island and wrote most of it on another island; it took a long time. Much of it I wrote as poetry. Its two subjects were the relation of eternity to time and the problem of suffering innocents.
> (Dillard 1989, 47)

But it was her earlier book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,* that offered a more appropriate template for my Station Island project. It is about going over and over the same ground, and walking in circles. Dillard walks round and round the valley of Tinker Creek in Virginia through an entire circle of the seasons: her text takes on limitations of both geography and time, and she does it all on foot. There was a serendipitous congruence and difference here between her book and Heaney's sequence: Dillard's twelve months, Heaney's twelve poems. The full-year span of Dilllard's book was to give me some inkling of how to extend and complete *Out of Step* with a fifteenth chapter, as described below. Most importantly from a stylistic point of view, Dillard 'writes blind', in the present tense, about her own walked circuits of Tinker Creek, but she incorporates into this continuum many reports from memory, reading, and conversations: these use a variety of tenses. I learned a great deal from her elegant dispositions.

Dillard's 'writing blind' takes her to difficult and risky places, as it should. Her Tinker Creek journal culminates with a contemplative's achievement of mystical enlightenment

about damage and death and – a major theme – predation and parasitism in the natural world. In her closing pages she is reading Emerson's account of his dream:

> 'I dreamed that I floated at will in the great Ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand and brought it to me and said, "This thou must eat." And I ate the world.' All of it. All of it intricate, speckled, gnawed, fringed, and free.
> (1976, 237)

I knew before I started that at the comparable point in my proposed book I would be reading a text with none of that transcendence: Heaney's disappointingly dismissive and narrow final poem, the meeting with James Joyce. I did not, however, anticipate quite how far out in the desert and on a *via negativa* my 'writing blind' would strand me.

This was one of the main discoveries that I made about process. Writing up my 'station' was a far tougher discipline than the supposedly more direct and intensely physical 'station' I had made on the real-time, real-space Station Island. Against all expectation I found that I was becoming much angrier with Heaney and his poem as I wrote the final chapters of *Out of Step*. While physically on the island and involved in the pilgrimage, I had found my reading of Heaney's sequence illuminated by my barefoot, fasted and sleep-deprived participation in the pilgrimage. One of the more annoying discoveries I made there was that 'Heaney the pilgrim' had skipped about half of the required three days on Station Island, and with them most of the more tedious devotions and exercises. On the island the annoyance felt trivial: I was amused, even a little indulgent. And as I left the island on the last morning of my 'station', and caught the bus to Enniskillen, I was quietly confident that by coming to Lough Derg I had found answers to most of the doubts and queries that 'Station Island' had raised in me as a reader. Heaney the pilgrim and the poet was not going to get off lightly, but I retained most of my respect and affection for his work.

It was in the writing up, poem by Heaney poem, chapter by chapter, that I slowly lost my complacency. My hands-on reading of the text on its literal site did not survive my later '[w]riting as a process of projection and discovery'. This was in itself a shocking discovery: my bodily 'footstepping'[10] of a text had not proved to be thorough enough, radical and intimate though it had seemed at the time. And the deeper disillusionment that I began to feel with the final three poems of Heaney's text, and retrospectively with the whole sequence, dismayed me. I realised that his pilgrim persona had not simply

[10] The term 'footstepping' is usually associated, these days, with Richard Holmes's *Footsteps* (1986). I was not, however, aware of this seminal account of the crossover between biography and autobiography until

walked out on the second day of his 'station': he had walked away from the difficulty and despair opened up in his own Poem IX. I grew increasingly uneasy with his distorted construction of a femininity that contaminated the world of the hunger-striker Francis Hughes: it had scary implications for masculinity in the Northern nationalist community as a whole. The last three poems papered over the awful fissure that had opened in Poem IX. Instead of resolving or even facing it, Heaney the pilgrim and Heaney the poet simply left it behind, and turned with relief to what he represents as the masculine clarities and *auctoritas* of Bishop Ronan[11] and James Joyce.

Heaney appeared to be flinching from his own depiction of Northern nationalist masculinity distorted by a polluted femininity. It had been a contentious and intriguing thesis. Was the poetic 'argument' to be taken no further? Was this shrinking from difficulty a loss of nerve that I would now be painfully alert to elsewhere in his oeuvre? By this time a new collection had been published, *The Haw Lantern* (1987), and I read it anxiously, finding the poems that shift into allegorical mode evasive and abstracting. Had the fracture I had found in 'Station Island' been symptomatic of a wider failure of nerve?

Perhaps, too, there was an equivalent flaw in me as critical reader. Here I was aware once more that there was a difference between my levels of understanding as physical pilgrim and as writer. Was my autobiographical and critical narrative distorted by the new doubts about myself: about the sentimental, indeed infantilised, relationship I had had with 'Mother Ireland' ever since leaving at the age of seventeen? I worried that as a woman I was as faulty and partial in *my* idea of the feminine as I had found Heaney the male pilgrim to be in his. (I will expand on these areas of self-doubt in the next section of this essay.)

These doubts on both the critical and the personal fronts made completion of the project problematic. *Out of Step* originally finished on a bleak note with Chapter 14. However, the decision to foreground my own intimate response to the text, while responsible for the plight I was in, eventually enabled me to find a way forward. I wrote another chapter to follow Chapter 14, 'The Most Difficult Door', in which I described my return journey to Belfast almost exactly a year after my pilgrimage to St Patrick's Purgatory. I had ended Chapter 14 midway across St George's Channel on the Dun Laoghaire to Holyhead ferry,

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after *Out of Step* was published. I am grateful for the greater depth of meaning it has given to a term that was already achieving some currency amongst literary sleuths and biographers.

[11] The unattractive Christian coloniser of King Sweeney's territory in the medieval Irish text *Buile Suibhne* that Heaney translated as *Sweeney Astray* in 1983. It still astonishes me that Heaney elevates Ronan, or his undiscriminating otter, to such eminence in 'Station Island'.

out of sight of all land and reluctant to make landfall on either of my countries, Ireland or Britain. In the new chapter I had not only visited the house of my childhood for the first time since I left it in 1964, but was able to end the book on the Larne to Stranraer ferry:

> And the evening is clear: so clear that, on this shortest of the Irish sea crossings, I can see both countries, one on the west horizon, one on the east, all the way across (1992a, 248).

I found a way, too, to make a rueful accommodation with Heaney. Quoting from his poem 'The Cleric', I acknowledged his – unwitting – part in prompting my journey:

> Give him his due, in the end
>
> he opened my path to a kingdom
> of such scope and neuter allegiance
> my emptiness reigns at its whim (1984, 107-8).

I was exhilarated by my glimpse of a future migrant freedom. I had won through to a quite unexpected and liberating knowledge of the implications of patriarchy and 'Mother Ireland'. The emptiness was a positive; the conclusion was, as I had made clear to my reader and myself from the very start of Chapter 1, provisional. This was closure with a future to it, rather than my earlier despair.

I was thus able – just – to complete the book, but I could not for some time see my way forward, either as reader or writer. I was taken aback by the consequences of my experiment in writing prose 'blind'. The same technique in poetry had brought me a slow-burning illumination down the years of my commitment to it. Had that been a shallow, partial access to self-knowledge and critical wisdom? Did the writing of engaged critical prose expose me to wholly different and ultimately destructive – rather than, as I'd assumed, a comparably creative – risk? I was shocked to be in the end so out of sympathy with Heaney's oeuvre and with myself as reader. and distressed that I was now so disillusioned both with Ireland and with my self. My identity as a woman and as a poet was too bound up with what seemed to be a dubious understanding of Irishness. My deliberate attempt to move closer to my subject-matter in time, space and personal engagement had made me recoil, not just from Heaney's poem, but from far too much of what had formed me.

At the heart of this discomfort was an unease, too late in the day, about my early decision to write in an avowedly autobiographical voice. I had been able to achieve an apparent – and almost real – transparency in *Out of Step* that at the time had eluded me in my poetry, though it was in poetry that I really wanted to develop it. I was forced to

reflect afresh on the differences between Heaney's eponymous narrator and my own. I saw Heaney's poem as – amongst other things – a modern version of the medieval 'dream vision', with shades of Langland's and Chaucer's chastened and ironic narrators in his persona, as well as of Dante's more measured pilgrim voice. I had brought a differently-sourced autobiographical voice, a critical and feminist one, and had written in prose, in order to interrogate his poetic text. Was the problem the collision between the two modes, or the uncomfortable areas of overlap? When I sent an advance copy of the book to Heaney, as a courtesy, I was intrigued to receive a long handwritten reply almost by return: *Out of Step* had clearly touched a raw nerve, and it seemed to be the autobiographical nature of both his poem and my critique that was the source of the pain. In the opening sentence of the letter he said that my subtitle – *Pursuing Seamus Heaney to Purgatory* – had taken him by surprise: he was clearly uneasy about his pilgrim persona being 'pursued' by mine. He continued:

> [W]hat makes it difficult for me is the unique genre you have managed to bring into being, part "witness", part literary criticism, part conversion narrative. When I read "Heaney" in the text, it is as if I personally (rather than my work) come under scrutiny, and I feel rebellion about this. On the other hand, there is the honorific aspect of having 'Station Island' treated so vitally, as part of a suffered and examined life (yours). (1992)

Were we both, in our different ways, too literal in our responses to the other's text? Was it even valid for Heaney to object to the use of 'Heaney' in my text when he had used it so centrally and extensively in his own? His description of *Out of Step* as 'part conversion narrative' surprised me, and not just because it seemed rather dismissive. I had set out to research and write the book as a sort of quest narrative, but the quest had ended, unexpectedly, in the sort of (potentially blessed) failure and loss that is reflected in the Zen proverb: 'My barn has burned to the ground. Now I can see the moon.' In the writing it had turned itself into, if anything, a profoundly liberating *de-conversion* narrative: de-conversion from Heaney's poem, from the Catholic and Nationalist traditions, from my lifelong idea of Ireland. In his letter Heaney went on to refer to *my* autobiographical material, in a subtly back-handed compliment, as 'a suffered and examined life'. In both of these references to *Out of Step* Heaney was putting my text into genre pigeonholes that subtly distanced it from his own writing: his words had a whiff of superiority.

He went on to suggest that *Out of Step* constituted a wider threat to him – or was it to his persona?

> Your reading is a poet's as well as a feminist's, and I respect it. What I regret is the fact that it will give the all clear for people with more vindictive agendas to get going on the pilgrim... Pursuing indeed.

Did that first sentence imply that he would not have respected my reading if it had been solely a feminist's, and not also a poet's? And was feminism one of those 'vindictive agendas' that he felt so anxious about? Together with that earlier note of disdain, and the elaborate courtesy of his language, the letter was beginning to read as a male-to-female put-down.

At the very centre of his letter, however, between these statements of personal and masculine unease, was a surprising and illuminating paragraph about the final shape of 'Station Island':

> "Station Island" leads into the "Sweeney Redivivus" poems, which I had thought were much less "obedient" etc. – in fact, I had a notion of using "On the Road" as a final section of the S.I. sequence, but in the end felt that it was formally too much out of kilter.

'On the Road' (1984, 119-121) was the poem I had invoked twice in the closing paragraphs of my final chapter. It, even more than 'The Cleric', had offered me the possibility of some reconciliation with the poet whose final three poems of the 'Station Island' sequence had so unsettled me. The revelation that 'On the Road' might have been its thirteenth and final poem was extraordinary. Before his publication of the completed sequence in 1984 I had twice heard Heaney read, as work in progress, the poem about meeting James Joyce. It had seemed to me back then a stage in the poet's recreation of the pilgrimage, not a likely concluding piece, but when *Station Island* was published there it was as the concluding Poem XII. The more I footstepped and wrote about both pilgrimage and poem, the more unsatisfactory the Joyce poem seemed as the sequence's final word. The sense of incompleteness was increased when I did my own 'station'. One of the distinctive aspects of the Lough Derg pilgrimage is that it begins and ends away from the island: the pilgrim begins the seventy-two hour fast from midnight on the day before arrival at Lough Derg, and does not break it until midnight at the end of the day of departure. There is much lore and laughter and community as people travel both to and from the Lough, on boat and bus. The first and second poems of Heaney's sequence keep to this tradition, meeting on the way first Simon Sweeney the tinker in Poem I and then William Carleton, the nineteenth century author of *The Lough Derg Pilgrim* (1876), in Poem II. Heaney's pilgrim persona eventually reaches the island in Poem III. But later on the sequence lacks a sense of departure, of travel home. I had wrestled with the thought that this incompleteness must be intended by the poet – and of course, as published, it is.

In the light of Heaney's letter, however, I could not but speculate about how I would have read the sequence if he had in fact made 'On the Road' its final poem – the very poem that I had instinctively read and reread while I sought a way of bringing closure to my troubled discussion of *Station Island* and 'Station Island'. The reason he gave me for not so doing – 'that it was *formally* too much out of kilter' (my emphasis) – puzzled me. I loved the poem's emotional and spiritual shifts, and its luminous transfiguration of humility – a two-edged 'virtue' throughout the 'Station Island' sequence, especially in relation to its constructions of the masculine and the feminine. In 'On the Road' two-stress lines, arranged in four-line stanzas, offered a quickening of pace that matched its quickening of the spirit. The very form was what had drawn me to it, the sense of speed and possibility:

> The road ahead
>
> kept reeling in
> at a steady speed...

The information came too late to be included in *Out of Step*. It was already in print. Perhaps this was fortunate. The discovery that 'Station Island' might have had a different and more resolved and open ending, its migrant spirit transcending gender, made me crosser than ever with the poet in Seamus Heaney. And was this the real raw nerve I had touched in him, my less than enthusiastic critique of his sequence as published, culminating with my unwitting perception of how it might have been, in my dwelling on 'On the Road' at the end of *Out of Step*?[12]

[12] See Appendix Two for my account of Heaney's essay 'Yeats as an Example?', which expresses a desire to re-order the final pages of Yeats' *Collected Poems*. This resonates intriguingly with his near-contemporaneous decision over the ending of 'Station Island' - and *Station Island*.

> I was skeptical of the very structure of the Irish poem. Its inherited voice, its authoritative stance, its automatic reflex of elegy – these given qualities, from a technical perspective, accrued too much power to the speaker to allow that speaker to be himself a plausible critic of power.
>
> Eavan Boland (1996, 191)

In writing and publishing *Out of Step* I was raising my voice in a male arena. Critical reception of Seamus Heaney's poetry was an almost entirely male preserve at the time. The poet Anne Stevenson had published a couple of essays about his work, but mine was the first full-length study written by a woman.[13] The unexpected negativity I found at the heart of Heaney's 'Station Island' sequence, and the concomitant loosening of my own allegiance to Ireland, prompted the writing of a series of essays that reflected on the dislocations I was experiencing as reader and as writer.

The first of these is listed in the Contents page of the Canadian journal *BRICK* as 'The Landscape of Seamus Heaney',[14] but at the head of the essay itself is the too-appeasing title 'Following Seamus Heaney to Purgatory'. I had earlier rejected this phrase as a subtitle for *Out of Step,* and substituted 'Pursuing' for 'Following' but I reinstated the less combative participle for the *BRICK* essay. I guess that I wanted to soften my attack on the negativities I had found in Heaney's text. After completing *Out of Step* I should have been bolder in speaking out. I should have developed my arguments further. But I felt, for a time, even more anxious. I more or less repeated myself.

My early methodological decision to write the book in the present tense while recreating a past journey meant that I had documented the alterations in my reading of Heaney's poem *as they happened in the writing process.* Having become dismayed and disillusioned with the last three poems of his sequence, I did not – and strictly, in my chosen methodology, could not – then return to Chapters 1 to 10, and rewrite their naïve enthusiasms and queries in the light of this new understanding. On the other hand, once I had written Chapters 11 to 15 I could not unknow what I had discovered. I was more than prepared to stand by my critical insights, since I had made it clear from the start,

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[13] And still is, at the time of writing. Elmer Kennedy-Andrew's *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A reader's guide to essential criticism* (2000) and Neil Corcoran's *Heaney: A Critical Study* (1998), the 2nd edition of his Faber Student Guide of 1986, demonstrate the extent to which Heaney criticism is still an almost entirely male arena. *Out of Step* is still the only monograph on Heaney's poetry listed in their bibliographies that is written by a woman.

[14] It is odd that I noticed this dissonance between Contents title and actual title for the first time during the writing of the current essay. Was the 'landscape' title an intervention by the editors of *BRICK*, Michael Ondaatje and Linda Spalding? Did they have their own reservations about that deferential 'Following'?

and maintained to the end, that I was offering a provisional and transparent reading. What was now problematic was to decide on the tone of what I wrote next. In the essay for *BRICK* I tried to recreate, however briefly, the world of Innocence that had preceded the world of Experience I now inhabited, but all was inevitably refracted through the considerable unease in which the writing the last five chapters of *Out of Step* had left me, and the essay is, I feel, flawed and to some extent dishonest because of this anxiety.

Part of the unease was, I knew too well, the very fear of raising my voice in a male domain that had been a central theme in my personal and my political investigations into the meaning of St Patrick's Purgatory to Irish Catholic women. I was an exemplar of what I had been kicking against – and found myself uncomfortably close to the 'self-disgust' of Heaney's pilgrim persona when he addresses his own reflection in the hostel mirror[15] towards the end of Poem IX, the one that begins with the voice of the ghost of hunger-striker Francis Hughes:

> 'I hate how quick I was to know my place.
> I hate where I was born, hate everything
> That made me biddable and unforthcoming.'

In attacking aspects of Heaney's work I knew I was also attacking aspects of being Irish that were close – too close – to my heart. The darkest realisation was that I had romanticised some of the violence committed in the name of nationalism. The least welcome was that I was not, in practice, the reconstructed feminist I thought that I had grown into in adult life. Too much of my childhood conditioning – as a Catholic girl reared in the North of Ireland – was in the grain, it seemed, and I was not entirely confident that I could, in fact, ever entirely overcome this either emotionally or intellectually. It was therefore very important to me, eventually, to take my autobiographical reflections further in the writing of two extended essays: 'The Most Difficult Door' (1999a) and 'An Appetite for Fasting?' (2001). Before I was ready to do so, I had to return to writing poetry.

[15] Susanna Egan, in *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*, 12, illuminates the ways in which 'writers resort to the mirror as metaphor – for revelation as for disappearance'.

I very much wanted to move on from the resulting realisations. This was to prove far easier to achieve in poetry.

I knew where I wanted to start: in the place *outside* Ireland where I had been most physically engaged in the realities and brutalities of farming and food-production. I drew on my experience of animal husbandry on a Scottish smallholding in the mid-Seventies, especially the inexpert slaughterings and other mutilations of goats, calves and hens that still haunted me. This was real violence, and very close to home. At the same time I wanted to distance the narrative from the literally autobiographical. I used the domestic setting of a smallholding run by a couple to investigate the extent of a wife's complicity in the violence that is physically visited on the animals by her husband and by other more expert men. It took me more than a year to write 'Getting Tough', then 'The Favour', and finally 'This was *halal*' (1993a, 10, 12-13 and 15). These three poems contain the meat of the drama. It was in them, too, that I felt I had finally taken on both the speaking voice and the personal material I had long wanted to work with, and transform. In retrospect I can see this as a revisiting of my distanced explorations of the extent of women's complicity in the violent career of the male hero of the Ulster Cycle, Cuchulain, in *Samhain* (1987, 1993b). That sequence/verse drama had itself been a considerable advance on the *pietà* poem in my 'Galway' sequence, 'The Black and Tans deliver her cousin's son' (1985, 35).

All three of these key farming poems in the title section of *The Fat-Hen Field Hospital* have a first person female narrator: the wife. In 'Getting Tough' she addresses the husband directly, listing his grimly incompetent slaughterings of goat, hen and cockerel in a very matter-of-fact and accepting tone. She becomes progressively more involved, as witness and then co-slaughterer. In the final line she describes her role as that of her husband's 'helpmeet'. In 'The Favour' she addresses him again. Now husband and wife work together to prepare for the castration of four bull calves, but when the male 'expert' arrives, the wife retreats 'way away / in the screen of the alders' to watch the two men at their task. From her concealed vantage point she sees enough to offer a narrative of events to her husband:

> It was you who held those calves
> one at a time while that man
> went down on them. You
> who grabbed the next.

---

between acceptance and publication, longstanding editor Jeremy Mulford decided to create the new imprint Loxwood Stoneleigh for his contemporary literature list.

He who kicked each pair
of steamy testicles clear
for the watching dog.
It was you and the man and the dog
and the four bull calves
all hurdled there by the gate
for that intimate act.

But in 'This was *halal*' the husband does not appear, nor is he addressed. The man doing the slaughtering is a senior abattoir worker who has come to the farm to despatch two goat kids on the premises. Now the wife is seen – by the man, by herself – as a promising assistant, potentially more competent than the (absent) husband. At the end of proceedings the slaughterman even offers her work at his abattoir:

'Ever need a job, though, call me at the abattoir.
I pay good money to women. There's not many
has a call for it. Them that do
have a feel. They're the best gut-men I know.'

I wrote that final sentence with a shock of surprise, but also of deep recognition. I felt that at last I had taken on the reality of farming. I was no longer romanticising my Galway grandmother's very real calling as a farmer: I was seeing clearly the blood on my own hands, as well as re-entering the awe-ful exhilaration of being party to an expert killing. The woman, the wife, had moved out of the screen of the alders. Now she could become an expert herself, an actor and not a mere 'helpmeet' in the killings. Even helpmeets, of course, play a vital support role to their men in war and conflict: I had explored this in the character of Emer in *Samhain*. I also made my own post-writing links between the 'gut-men' of the poem's final sentence and the women who had done 'active service' for the Provisional IRA.

But as a poet, it was the politics of marriage rather than those of Republicanism that engaged me once the writing of 'This was *halal*' freed me to return, though gingerly, to Irish material. In the short sequence 'Silk & Belfast Linen' (1993a, 29-31) I was back in my own Ireland as well as one of my mother's Irelands. This felt particularly significant: I had got away from Galway. The first two poems of three were set in the Belfast of my early childhood: a child is watching and listening to women talking as they work. In 'The Lampshade Makers' the women are apparently privileged, with time to kill. They sit around together, making silk and lace lampshades as a home-making rather than a commercial activity. As they recycle pieces of worn silk, are they are talking, in veiled ways, about their marriages?

And then they take their trousseaux
all to bits – all their night things
snip-snipped to a panel pattern:
the camisoles and wedding negligées
of silk and silk-satin and silk-mousseline.
They cut away chafed seams, stained underarms,
faint foxing of blood below.

I was remembering the meetings of a group of women who – as I realised much later – were in fact highly educated. Many of them held doctorates, but in Fifties Belfast they were effectively barred from participating as academics in their own right. They were 'academic wives'. It seemed to me to be a local example of the stifling domestic scenario about whose North American incarnation Betty Friedan wrote so angrily in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique.* I was intrigued that, when I sent a copy of the poem to two members of the group that I had come to know years later as an adult myself, they greeted it as an account of a wonderful period in their lives, not one of stifling oppression and limitation. In fact, one of them read it out at a reunion of the group in Belfast in the early Nineties – and told me they were all delighted by the memories of busy friendship it evoked. I was baffled. My version of their lampshade meetings had been politicised by my own generationally-bound feminist views. When the subjects themselves read my poem, they saw it as celebratory, not at all as ironic or angry. When, a few years earlier, I had 'given a voice' to my Duane grandmother in the sequence 'Galway', she hadn't been alive to contest my version. These women did not *contest* my version of it: they cheerfully missed the point – *my* point – entirely.

The second poem in the sequence, 'Shears', is in the voice of a Belfast woman, another real woman remembered from my childhood, and she is given her own name within it: Ruby Morrow. Yet I did not seek her out to show her my version of her story, or check whether she was still alive before I published it. This raises another aspect of feminism in my poetic practice. I would not publish a poem in quite this form now, and perhaps would not even write one. In the Eighties I had begun by writing poems – notably the 'Galway' sequence – in which I cloaked my self, and talked instead through the mouths of the dead. That had brought doubts of moral and artistic integrity, as discussed earlier. But taking on the voices of the living, of the women of my parents' generation, feels even more problematic now. The fact that two poems from these distinct periods in my publications, 'The Black and Tans...' from the 'Galway sequence and 'Shears' from 'Silk & Belfast Linen', have become my most anthologised poems does not in the least assuage my doubts about the validity of such ventriloquism. And in 'Shears' I have

additional doubts over the ways in which I indicate Ruby Morrow's Belfast dialect and accent via the *spelling*.

The last poem of the three, 'Pegging Out', was set – very unusually for me – in England, but conjured at its heart an activity that went right back to childhood:

> I thought
> of my mother and father, still pulling and snapping
> sheets between them after forty-nine years.

The voice of this narrator is one of the closest to my own autobiographical voice that I can find in any of my published poems. I am relieved, now, to note the shift into such personal 'nakedness' in the final poem of this sequence. It seems to suggest that, in small space, I was working towards a resolution to my artistic and moral struggles with appropriation and ventriloquism. The first two poems were, in some respects, a regression from which I had managed to extricate myself in the third. Ironically, I think they are better poems than 'Pegging Out'.

A running theme of this mini-sequence is the tearing, staining and laddering of fabrics. Looking back, I think it is possible that I was indirectly inspired in this by my admiration for and critical engagement in the work of Medbh McGuckian, who writes so superbly about the autonomous life of fabrics and clothes as part of her symbolic interiors. Her poem 'The Flitting' (McGuckian, 1982, 48), which was a thrilling and controversial winner of the 1979 National Poetry Competition, had introduced me to her brilliant embrace of *in*direction. It was not a mode that I wished or was competent to imitate, but I loved her poetry for its utterly distinctive interior world and detailed sensuality. In the late Eighties I got to know her personally, and stayed with her and her family in their caravan at Ballycastle, from where we went walking through her childhood landscapes. We talked about farming, and children, and phantom lovers – and of how, as women and as poets, we wrote, or didn't write, about the Troubles.

I learnt from her that she and Paul Muldoon had been the two most junior members of Philip Hobsbaum's famous 'Group' at Queen's University, Belfast.[18] Their poetry was, arguably, the most riddling and indirect of any work brought to that remarkably creative

[18] I also thought that McGuckian (born 1951) had been the only woman poet involved in the Group. When I read Joan Newmann's contribution to Haberstroh's *My Self, My Muse* I discovered that she (born 1942) had been part of it from the very start, and that when nine pamphlets were published for the inaugural Belfast Festival in 1965, Newmann was one of the nine poets: the sole woman alongside Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Arthur Terry, Philip Hobsbaum, Stewart Parker, James Simmons and Seamus Deane. Newmann's first full-length collection *Coming of Age* was not published until 1995.

forum. By the late Eighties, Muldoon had, like nearly all the rest of the 'Group' poets, left Belfast and the North. It was only Michael Longley and McGuckian, I think, who still lived in the city itself at the time of my friendship with McGuckian.[19] My own much earlier departure from the city weighed on me afresh. In England I was continually distressed and disturbed by the news from Belfast, but I received it at a safe and sealed distance. Was it possible or even permissible for me to take on any aspect of the Troubles in my writing? Was it not a sort of poetic tourism? I had written an essay about McGuckian's work up to and including *On Ballycastle Beach* (McGuckian, 1988), using a line from one of its poems as my title: 'The Room is a Kind of Travel Also' (1988). Working on it, and a subsequent 'defence' of McGuckian (1989), had confirmed for me her spiritual and physical inhabiting of the house and home that is Belfast. Our conversations opened up for me the narrow but welcome possibility that I *could* write about the Belfast I had been a child in – but never the Belfast I had not been part of since leaving. Hence 'Silk & Belfast Linen', and also another poem that was important to my understanding of the issue of voice and appropriation. 'Let-Down' (1993a, 44) is in the voice of a woman whose breasts become painfully engorged after childbirth, until she remembers learning to milk a cow when a child herself. The vividness of her recall brings immediate physical relief. It was partly based on a story McGuckian told me as we walked together in the country around Ballycastle, and partly on memories of my own of a childhood summer in Rathmullen on the shores of Lough Swilly in Donegal. The woman speaker of the poem is neither Medbh nor me. She is an invented character, in an invented scenario.

Writing 'Let-Down' made me unusually alert to the multiple sources that feed into a poem. Its coming together was more than usually exciting. As I learnt to write more directly from my own experience in the smallholding and Belfast poems, my confidence in fictionalizing my material increased. Although it became apparently more autobiographical, I knew my work to be in reality more 'made up' than that in my first and second collections. In my reading, I grew increasingly impatient with critics and literary biographers who assumed an exclusively autobiographical reading of any poem with a first person narrator. Heaney had given his pilgrim persona his own name; it did not seem too unfair to have taken him, at least partially, at his word. But when, for instance, Anne Stevenson was certain that she had found biographical references in Plath's poem

[19] Joan Newmann had moved to Ballycastle on the North Antrim coast: she lived all year round in the town where the McGuckians were summer visitors. She moved to West Donegal in the late Nineties.

'The Disquieting Muses', and berated her about their use,[20] I felt this was both illogical and unfair. Did Stevenson, a poet herself, really need to be reminded that '"I" is not I'? It was clearly a slippery area, this interface between writing poems and writing critical prose. In relation to my own practice I wanted to know, long term, whether it worked better to integrate the two modes, or to keep them separate.

In the meantime I found that the looser, more colloquial style I was using in my own poetry required an ever more vigilant exercise of craft: the art was to conceal the art. My aim was to write a free verse that had the spine of a vertebrate, rather than formal verse that had the exoskeleton of an invertebrate. I was particularly interested in the technique of Sharon Olds,[21] who, in addition to taking on the interface between the confessional and the fictional in her subject-matter, was immensely skilful in the writing of poems in a single, modulated sentence: elegant examplars of the tall and sinuous vertebrate poem. Her poems reminded me of the long sentences of the skilled rhetoricians of the ancient world, Thucydides and Cicero, whose speeches I had studied years before in their original languages. This was an unexpected return to another sort of childhood imprinting: all those teenage years spent inventively writing 'proses', in which I had to translate a speech by Edmund Burke, say, into Thucydidean Greek or Ciceronian Latin. I had almost forgotten the closeness to idiom, language and style that these exercises demanded – and what an excellent grounding they offered to the nascent poet. Or pedant. This reminded me, as if I needed reminding, that poetry is my preferred writing mode. The feeling when a poem 'comes right' is very similar to the pleasure in bringing a dead language to supple and breathing life. For this to happen, every word and accent must fit together with an exactness that cannot be achieved in the baggier world of discursive prose.

Nevertheless, I still had unfinished business to tackle in that more linear world.

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[20] She presented these criticisms in a lecture she gave at Loughborough University while she was working on her biography of Plath, which was subsequently published as *Bitter Fame* in 1989.

[21] John Harvey, poet and small press publisher, did the poets of England the great service of introducing us to her poetry in the excellently edited volume of new and selected poems *The Matter of This World* (1987).

> I realise with fear, but also a dawning relief, that I may not always need – want? – to write only about Ireland.
>
> 'The Most Difficult Door' (1999a)

My poetic friendship with McGuckian had given me a new understanding of the symbolic and emotional power of the house. More literal than her, I persisted in recreating only one house, a 'real' one: 4 Holyrood, the Belfast house I grew up in, and had already returned to in my writing at the very end of *Out of Step.* At times I did so obsessively, creating a notebook divided into 'rooms' in which I recorded everything I could remember about the physical spaces and any incidents or activities played out within each room, right down to the understairs cupboard cum darkroom. Little of this material has been used directly in my creative or critical writing, but its compilation was an important limbering up for the essay 'The Most Difficult Door'.

I deliberately gave this essay the same title as that of the final chapter of *Out of Step,* which was itself borrowed from the title of a poem by Carol Rumens that has been significant for many women, and has often been specially requested at her poetry readings. Her 'Most Difficult Door' is about the difficulty of leaving: leaving the house, the family, the accumulations of the past. In my essay I wanted to explore further the implications of my bodily return to 4 Holyrood in August 1988, and the unanticipated sense of becoming seriously dislocated from my past self by doing so. I had returned to the house in dreams and in memory ever since I left it at the age of seventeen. Indeed, it was the writing down of a dream visit there in the late Seventies that had reawakened my long dormant desire to write poetry: 'Night Flight to Belfast' had been one of the most directly autobiographical of the poems in *Settlements.* In this essay I wanted, in addition, to return to my old subject-matter, family history, but to give for the first time equal weight to the Irish/maternal and the English/paternal sides.

The house in Belfast was at times riven by my parents' deep differences over religion. But it was also 'that blessed, baggy house [in which] all the impossibilities and tensions of our parents' unlikely coupling had been, somehow, contained' (1999a, 187). Superficially our Catholic/Protestant household was a microcosm of the society outside its walls, but it was distinct in two key ways: neither of my parents came from the North of Ireland, or had total sympathy with either side of its sectarian divide. My mother's Galway Catholicism was different in several respects from the Catholicism that had developed in the North after Partition. My father came from an English Methodist/Anglican home, but

had been an atheist from the age of fifteen. Growing up there, I had two social colorations: I was an honorary Protestant in university circles, and a Catholic at school and church. My friends from each of these communities rarely coincided. Some of them only met 'the other side' at all under the roof of 4 Holyrood.

Hitherto I had not reflected creatively on these complexities. In my work I had drawn solely on the Irish side of my inheritance. Now, in my discomfort with my emigrant's idealisations of things Irish, I wanted to think my way back through my paternal grandmother as well as my maternal, and to seek inspiration from my English inheritance. I had spent the majority of my adult life in England, but this was hardly apparent in my writing. This essay could be a first step in reclaiming my Englishness, and in particular the tradition of dissent and bloody-minded pacifism to which my English grandmother had devoted her life. I had, after all, known her far more intimately than my mother's mother.

The structure that I devised for the essay was inspired by the genesis of that first publishable poem of my adult life, 'Night Flight to Belfast'. It had had the immediacy of a dream:

> This night I visited my childhood home
> and walked through rooms and passages and doors
> my memory could not trace:
> a room with orange silk upon the walls
> and orange beds; a cubbyhole with pens
> and drawings on a table, half complete;
> an open book of flowers, Redouté prints.
> My feet wheeled unsurprised past further doors
> to where the hallway like a ballroom waited:
> the staircases were double, each fleeing its mate
> in twin wide curves to an upstairs dark that I
> would not ascend to.
>
> The house warmth failed, the dusk had lapped
> up unfamiliar linoed corridors.
> Outside, the crackling tramp of a patrol
> and 'Number sixteen! Open up!' the soldiers cried.
> But our house was number four. And then
> the image overlay of single stairs,
> of woodwork's brown combed grain on heavy doors
> and plain poor white distemper on the walls.
>
> I was trapped in the wrong house
> the wrong dream
> and soldiers kept on banging
> at that unknown door. (1985, 41;1993b, 47)

I began writing the essay in the conventional preterite, with the story of the sole meeting of my two grandmothers, which took place in 4 Holyrood when I was already a teenager.[22] I continued with a resumé of three generations of family history, which culminated with a description of my own marriage as

> an out-of sequence version of the Sleeping Beauty story...At my prince's kiss I began a sleep that took away my country, my poetry, and a large part of myself. When I woke up I was ten years into my marriage. (1999a, 188)

At this point, without planning it thus beforehand, I shook myself free of the constraints of a continuous linear narrative. 'Night Flight to Belfast' had been written in the past tense, but I knew I now needed to write about its dream-genesis in the historic present. I called this section '1977: the first awakening'. The structure of the rest of the essay then fell into place: I wrote three further 'awakening' sections – the second, third and fourth awakenings – also in the present tense. These were dated 1981, 1988 and 1992. I hoped that the considerable gaps between these snapshots of autobiography would offer the reader of my 'history' the sort of creative space that is more associated with the reading of poetry and fiction. Nevertheless, I was surprised that the conclusion of the piece, too, demanded to be written in the present tense. Should I not be returning to conventional essay format after my four snapshot 'awakenings'? It seemed not. And I was pleased that the conclusion, like part of my second and all of my fourth 'awakening', was quite clearly set in England – and that, instead of the rather plaintive note of the final section of *Out of Step,* it was keen to embrace 'the fascination of what's difficult'.

CREATIVE WORK: Towards *The Getting of Vellum*

Although I was attempting, in the essay discussed above, to reflect in prose on my own past poetic practice, the writing of new poems remained and remains mysterious to me. The achievement of a poem, the discovery of it, is not a willed act. Even though I have written several poems to commission in recent years, it has been the external deadlines that have enabled me to do so, rather than any constraints of form or theme. Although I still occasionally set myself exercises in form[23] those constraints do not free me. Each poem I write must find its own shape and rhythmical pattern. What it 'says', on every level, must remain unknown to me during the act of writing. Indeed, I prefer not to speculate about the poem's 'meaning' – beyond the level of bare narrative - until some

[22] It was only during the writing of this piece that I discovered that I had not even been there to witness it: my vivid 'memory' must have been based on my mother's narrative of events.

considerable time has passed. I have a residual belief in the poem as a form of Sibylline divination, an oracular utterance whose multiple meanings only slowly emerge, and are not necessarily any more available to the Sibyl than to her audience. One of the strange pleasures of giving poetry readings is that, in the re-uttering of an old poem, I can occasionally be surprised into a new understanding of my own words fifteen or even twenty years after writing them down. This is in addition to the revelations of 'meaning' that readers and audience members offer me down the years: I am particularly pleased if they find a significance that I have been entirely unaware of. [24]

Some parameters and even themes can be willed, however: after making the breakthrough of writing about Scotland in the title sequence of *The Fat-Hen Field Hospital,* I was determined to maintain my poetic distance from the matter of Ireland. My 2000 collection *The Getting of Vellum* is, perhaps appropriately, the first to be brought out by an Irish publisher: having written my way out of the diasporist's obsession with the 'mother country', I felt that I could at last be an Irish poet. After all, only five poems in this collection are set wholly in Ireland.

One of these is a key text in *The Getting of Vellum*, since the sequence 'Coffin. Crypt. Consumption.' (2000, 5-9) begins right at the heart of everything I had been attempting to shuck off: my first person narrator is a body lying supine and surrendered – in a coffin, and on Station Island. The second part of the sequence is back with the animals in Scotland, and in the third the surrendered body is to some extent reclaimed. This sequence marks, and indeed enacted in its evolution, my final relinquishing of the matter of Station Island. It also took me by surprise, more so than any poem I have written.

This mock-funeral monologue was not at all what I intended or imagined when, in August 1995, I was given a commission to write a long poem for performance at the Royal Festival Hall on the theme of 'Ghosts', to be delivered just before Christmas. I had not been writing for some months. I had been quite ill for the first time in my adult life, and illness had apparently drained me of the energy necessary to write poems. Writing to commission was a challenge, but one I welcomed. Perhaps the deadline might prove creative rather than restricting. But for months I wrote page after page of drafts without feeling that sense of landfall on an unexpected shore that is for me the mark of a potential poem (or, in the case of *Out of Step,* a chapter). I was trying to write a narrative

[23] I wrote almost exclusively in sonnet form from the ages of ten to twenty, but since writing seriously again from my mid-thirties I have not felt satisfied with any poem I have written in a traditional form.

poem with the working title 'The Winter Husband'. It drew rather loosely on several of the Greek myths about the underworld. It was a wife's story of her search for her young husband when he goes missing for the winter half of every year, a gender and relationship 'twist' on the story of Demeter's annual search for Persephone. As I wrote and rewrote my drafts there were narrative consequences that took me by surprise, such as the lost husband becoming Hades' lover, and the (originally unintended) total absence of a Demeter/mother figure. The poem was partly in the voice of the searching wife, partly in a Chorus of liberated cyber-nuns in Belfast. The settings were England and the North of Ireland in winter and Greece in the spring. I felt a sort of liberation in writing 'The Winter Husband': it was so far from my usual Ireland-based subject-matter. I was particularly pleased that my Belfast nuns were so witty and foul-mouthed. However, this dramatic poem was never finished. The only piece of it that I have preserved is the short poem 'Hotel Hades' (2000, 15).

'Coffin.'

It became clear, as I wrote draft after draft about Greece that ran into blankness, that Ireland's very own entrance to the underworld had not yet released me from its grip. As the deadline for the 'Ghosts' commission approached, the poem 'Coffin' pushed its way to my attention, as I have described in my essay for Haberstroh's book, 'An Appetite for Fasting?' (2001). I found I was writing, very rapidly, the first person narrative of a person going through a mock burial at Lough Derg. I had read about this practice years before while researching *Out of Step*. The story now came back unbidden, and haunted me into taking on the voice of a narrator unlike any previous one I had used: it is oddly fixated on the interior workings of the physical body it inhabits. I thought that I had long ago left behind the dissatisfactions and doubts of *Out of Step*, but it seemed that St Patrick's Purgatory was still in bodily and spiritual pursuit. The body's speech from the coffin culminates in language taken from the penitent's role in the sacrament of Confession:

> *Peccavi.* I have sinned.

Immediately, the ghosts of the animals of *The Fat-Hen Field Hospital* are back:

> The blood of others is
> sticky on my hands.
> I have no stomach for it.

[24] For example, the *orange* walls and beds of the 'wrong house' in the poem 'Night Flight to Belfast'. Was there a long-unacknowledged Unionist reference there?

'Crypt'

On Station Island years before I had found myself, to my horror, trapped in a line of the faithful, shuffling up to a priest who was hearing Confession (1992a, 175-181). Once again, having written 'Coffin' to its unexpected conclusion, I found myself face to face with the same sacrament, and re-visiting the scrupulous training in the examination of conscience that I had received at the age of six from the Dominican nuns of Aquinas Hall, my Belfast primary school. Were the cyber-nuns of the failed 'Winter Husband' sequence still on my trail? This time around[25] I was far clearer about what it was in my past life that might require contrition. 'The blood of others' made an instant link for me with my farming days, not so much with all the botched slaughtering as with the detail of the butchering and processing of the animals' carcasses. My bibles back then had been Jane Grigson's *Charcuterie and French Pork Cookery* and John Seymour's *Practical Self Sufficiency.* I still dip into the former for the elegance and engagement of its writing, though never for practical advice, since I have long since ceased being a carnivore. The butchering diagrams in my copy of the Seymour are indelibly stained with blood and marrow from my farming days. When I open those pages I can remember each animal whose flesh I cut up, preserved in dry and wet cures, and cooked. The memory of their bodies is as fresh to me as the memory of the bodies of my lovers, and far more detailed. There is a solemn but down-to-earth intimacy to the searching and sorting of an animal's carcass. In late fourteenth and early fifteenth century England the Gawain-poet[26] and Juliana Berners[27] rendered the 'unlacyng' of animals into precise and beautiful poetry. I had first glimpsed this possibility for my own work in the culminating poem of the 'Fat-Hen' sequence, 'This was *halal'* (1993a, 15).

The 'Ghosts' deadline was very near. Next I retrieved and considerably revised an occasional poem I had written for *The Uses of Water,* the farewell pamphlet put together by eight Midlands poets for the poet Gillie Griffin when she moved to Canada in 1994. 'Bones in the Fridge' had drawn on my days as a Grigson-inspired *charcutière*, and in particular on an incident when even the weights I used as a press for my attempts at cheese-making were no help in making *fromage de tête*: they were not heavy enough to keep down the lid on my grandmother's huge saucepan while a pig's head was being cooked in it. It was both farcical and freaky when the dead snout kept poking out from under, rather too like a live pig. 'Bones in the fridge' became the basis for 'The first

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[25] On Station Island I had blurted out – for real, and then word for word in *Out of Step* – "'Last month, Father, my divorce came through.'" (1992a, 178)

[26] See especially the 'unlacyng' of the deer in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* 1319-1401.

[27] In her treatise *The Boke of St Albans.* See, for example, *The Reward for the Hounds,* translated by Dorothy Gilbert in Gilbert and Gubar, 26.

examination of conscience' of 'Crypt.'. The process of redrafting the poem sparked off another memory, that of dealing with an excess of eggs by storing them in a great bucket of isinglass. 'Self-sufficiency' farming had always presented me with either feast or famine, and because I was not farming for real, as my Irish grandparents had, famine and failure had seemed so much easier to cope with than 'success'. The whole enterprise felt phoney in retrospect, but the animals themselves, though long dead and consumed, were still painfully actual to me. I remembered a Jesuit retreat I had gone on as a student. We had been guided through four days of meditations based on the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius Loyola,[28] during which the retreatant is asked to summon up, sense by sense, the physical detail of Christ's bodily and mental suffering during the Passion, and to take partial blame for inflicting it upon Him. I wrote 'The second examination of conscience'. It was my *mea culpa* to the hens, of course, not to God.

Perhaps it was this unexpected return to the Catholic patterns of guilt and self-examination that made me particularly open to Denis Brown's mixed media work, *The Word*. For it was at just this point in the evolution of the 'Ghosts' commission that an entirely new source of inspiration entered my work: the beginning of my still-continuing creative collaboration with Denis Brown, the Dublin-based artist-calligrapher. We had been paired by the curator of a touring exhibition originated by the Midlands Arts Centre in Birmingham, and given a collaborative commission to produce a new piece of work that brought together our two areas of specialism.

We met for our first exchange of ideas in London at the Tate Gallery café. Brown had been reading my farming poems in *The Fat-Hen Field Hospital.* I had been looking at reproductions of several of the pieces in his series *The Word*: vellums made from the whole hides of calves and even kangaroos, and huge open 'books' made of metal and paper. On these he had inscribed, in his most beautiful calligraphic hand, texts from Leviticus such as the prohibitions on the spilling of seed, and about the uncleanness of leprosy and of menstruation. He had then distressed the pages of each vellum or 'book' with a mode of obliteration appropriate to its text: tearing and wounding, smearing with brick-dust and bloodlike sealing wax, piercing and tangling with electric wire. Mere

[28] Thomas Corbishley, S.J., trans., *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, 1963. See page 36 for the practice of the 'application of the senses' required of the retreatant contemplating Christ's life and death, and the pains of Hell, and page 71 for the way this works in relation to the stages of Christ's Passion. Each of the five senses is dwelt on in turn: comparable 'exercises' are sometimes used, though with rather different end-results, in creative writing workshops: the imagination is freed from its tendency to abstraction

fragments of text remained legible after these assaults. Brown has written of 'The Leprosy Texts' in this series:

> My works using these texts are normally on vellum skins. Traditionally the finest surface for calligraphy, vellum supports countless medieval manuscripts and works of art. I select skins with pronounced graining (caused by skin pigmentation and hair follicles) and present them whole and untrimmed to emphasise their animal origins. Typically, the skins are riddled with representations of sores, suggesting that the ideologies presented by the texts have fallen ill and rank of a disease as sinister as the one they describe... I trust that the viewer will look beyond the specifics of leprosy. Recently, for example, the discovery of AIDS raised new phobias of contamination.
>
> (Brown, 3-4).

Fascinated by Brown's distressing of canonical and patriarchal texts, as well as of his own brilliantly executed calligraphy, I wrote my third 'Examination of conscience', which plays, especially in its second stanza, with the two opposite meanings of the verb to cleave:

> Oh, I knew then fine
> what cleaving was:
> to split with a blow
> or to hold on tight.
> A man and a woman
> shall be one flesh.
> Cleave thou only
> unto him. One flesh.

I now put together the three 'examinations of conscience' as 'Crypt': the coffined pilgrim's meditations on the costs of meat, of eggs – and of marriage.

'Consumption'

It was with the final section of my 'Ghosts' commission that a preoccupation closer to home than the fate of my Scottish animals became apparent to me. Gillie Griffin, the original dedicatee of 'Bones in the fridge', the poem that I had just rewritten as 'The first examination of conscience', had during the early Nineties been writing poems that came out of the shadows and insights of a spell of anorexia nervosa in her late teens, following the death of her father from cancer.[29] I admired and was intimately acquainted with her writing. Much of its subject matter was indeed foreign to me, but now it seemed that I was travelling towards somewhere similar: a debilitating eating disorder of my own stalked the writing of 'Consumption'. When I began what would be the final poem of the sequence with the summoning words 'Come, Hades, lord of the inner channels', I felt simultaneously uneasy and relieved to find myself half-identifying Hades with my current

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by a deliberate and entirely 'selfish' focus on the immediacy of sense impressions, and their connections to personal, rather than religious, memory.

[29] See her 1996 collection *Warm Bodies, Foreign Parts*.

surgeon. This was the old, familiar tension between the authentic and the confessional. The Hades whom my benighted pilgrim was addressing might be the king of the classical underworld inspecting the entrails of an animal sacrificed to appease him. But he was also uncomfortably close to the surgeon who had persuaded me to 'eat' a tiny endoscopic camera so that he could inspect my (living) entrails from within. Was my reference to a particular medical procedure in this first stanza too technical and hermetic? Or – the opposite of that – too obviously and noisily confessional? The first half of the next stanza seemed to compound the poem's tendency to self-reference, for 'Station Island' made a sly appearance: *'light-headed, leaving home'* is not merely a quotation from Heaney's Poem 1, but the title of the first chapter of *Out of Step*. Would I never be free of both texts? But the erotic overtones of the two lines that followed heartened me:

> I am pure pink for your pleasure. Thread me through.
> This is the purest form of penetration. (2000, 9)

Here I was moving away from both medical procedures and classical references. And I had no idea where.[30]

I sent Denis Brown the whole of 'Coffin. Crypt. Consumption.' as soon as it was written, in case there was any short piece of text within it for him to work with for the exhibition commission. He immediately singled out the two-stanza 'third examination' about the cleaver and the cleaving, and gave it, and the artwork he made of it, a new title: 'Couple'. Though a short poem on the printed page, it was quite a long piece of text for him to incorporate comfortably into a visual piece. He dealt with this by inscribing the first stanza on one calfskin and the second on another, with the text area taking up approximately one seventh of the height of each skin, and a third of its width. The stanzas were small proportionately, but perfectly legible. He mounted the two calfskins side by side, not touching. Across both he wrote in an overarching curve, and in far larger letters than the poem, the Latin text of St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians which was the source of my wordplay on cleaving:

> *Propter hoc relinquet homo patrem et matrem suam et adhaerebit uxori suae: et erunt duo in carne uno.*

[30] Not long after I wrote 'Consumption' the artist Mona Hattoum exhibited a video of a journey through her own gut recorded by an endoscopic camera. I was fascinated by the differences between visual and verbal language in relation to artistic use of this technology. I envied Hattoum for being the director of the video about her own body, rather than its *patient* subject. Most of all I rejoiced that we were both artists who were entering a body that was alive and actively peristaltic rather than one that was stiff and cold. For I had started on *my* artistic journey into the body with a voice from a coffin, and continued with dead meat.

And to 'write' the letter O of 'One flesh' he hammered an old wedding ring flush with the surface of the vellum.[31] *Couple* toured England, Ireland and Scotland for two years as part of the exhibition *Words Revealed / Focail Nochtaithe: An Irish / English Anthology of New Lettering & Poetry.* The four other poets whose texts were newly 'lettered' within it were Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomnaill, Maura Dooley and Medbh McGuckian.[32] When I went to the Birmingham Readers' and Writers' Festival to participate in the exhibition's official opening events I saw Brown's work for the first time in the flesh, rather than in reproduction. I fell in love with the physicality of his handling of vellum. The other lettering artists had worked with stone, ceramics, paper, cloth and computer monitors. I felt blessed that my partner artist had worked with skins.

Although I was interested to see how each one of my fellow poets had responded to this unusual commission, the work that most engaged me was Dooley's. The final stanza of her poem 'Raft of Desires', about leaving (Ireland, of course) on the night ferry, spoke so directly and simply about the finality of emigration:

> And it's over, it's over,
> over the water and over,
> the life I once knew
> and the life I have left.

I marvelled especially at the last two lines – pure monosyllables – and resolved to work ever harder at simplifying the language in my own work. And at taking to heart and mind the finality of my own leaving of Ireland. My deep admiration for this poem, which came out of Dooley's collaboration with the artist Noel Connor, was enhanced by the simplicity of its actual presentation and its creative starting point, an ancient typewriter that Connor had found in a junkshop. He sent it to Dooley with a simple question: what will be typed on the last sheet of paper to be inserted into this machine? In the exhibition that sheet and that typewriter contained and displayed Dooley's poem.

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[31] I told this story during a reading in Dublin in June 2001, when Denis was in the audience. He told me afterwards that this was not so: he had made the ring of the 'O' with gold foil, using the ancient skills of the illuminator. There was no ring, and had been no hammer. I was intrigued with my own inventiveness, and wondered whether the hammers that dominate the last two stanzas of my poem 'Getting Tough' had creatively contaminated my memory of Denis's interpretation of this later poem, with its focus on a cleaver - a tool that is wielded with a comparable action. In an email on 17/08/01 Brown wrote: 'Yes the ring is gilded in the traditional and most difficult of gilding techniques - burnished onto a gesso base of my own laborious making - a technique requiring just the right amount of humidity in the air to enable the hard gesso to be moistened again by a breath or two, so that the loose leaf will stick to it...in practice this normally means laying the gesso in the evening, and getting up early to gild it, before the air dries too much - c. 6am is a good time... So when I heard you thought I'd just hammered in a real ring! - it all seemed rather brutal- (but then I've never been married....) Yes the leaf is like the copper I gave you for Emma- except Gold can be beaten much, much, thinner, and for this method of gilding, there can be no transfer paper attached to it - it's loose, and even a careless breath can send it flying away! I heard that half a penny's weight of gold can be beaten out to cover a football field.'

[32] With the exception of Dooley, these poets would later contribute to Haberstroh's *My Self, My Muse.*

I was fascinated by the contrast between Denis Brown's distressing of the canonical and Noel Connor's recycling of the ordinary,[33] and by the ways in which Maura Dooley and I had responded to our partner artists. I realised during the public seminar at the exhibition's launch that only Dooley and I amongst the five poets had produced new work specifically for the project. The other letterers had been given, or had chosen, poems already written and published by *their* partner poets. I felt that these artists had been illustrators and interpreters of poetic texts, rather than collaborators in making: a lost opportunity in terms of the imaginative intention of the *Words Revealed* project. At the time of the launch Denis Brown and I had no further plans to work together, but the contrast that we found in Birmingham between the pieces that were created by collaboration and those that were after-interpretations was to inform the principles and practice of our subsequent creative partnership.[34]

CRITICAL CONTINUATIONS: 'An Appetite for Fasting?'

> Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.
>
> I want to describe, not what it is really like to emigrate to the kingdom of the ill and live there, but the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation: not real geography, but stereotypes of national character. (Sontag, 3)

Susan Sontag's wise caveat opens her study of the 'punitive or sentimental fantasies' associated with tuberculosis and cancer, *Illness as Metaphor*. Her own metaphors of the dual citizenship we hold in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick, and of illness as the 'night-side of life', come uncomfortably close for me to the imagery of both the Greek and the Christian underworlds: in terms of my own writing the kingdom of Hades, and St Patrick's Purgatory on Station Island. In 'An Appetite for Fasting?' I wanted to reflect on the ways in which my research into the fast and the hunger-strike in 'Station Island' had conditioned me for my own subsequent sojourn in 'the kingdom of the ill'.

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[33] The other work created by Dooley and Connor was the Lottery-inspired 'Poetry Instants/Raft of Desires'. She also co-created a piece with the artist Gary Breeze, who worked with Welsh slate.

[34] Brown, Connor, Dooley and I gave an open seminar on the project at the Birmingham Readers' and Writers' Festival as part of the formal opening of *Words Revealed*. Our reflections on process were enriched by the participation in the seminar of the writer A L Kennedy and the editors Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. I had been working with Gilbert and Gubar as organiser and chair of the Readers & Writers

Being *literarily* haunted by tales and texts and even single words seemed fair enough for a poet, but my years-long inability to eat any solid food began to feel far too *literal*. Was the religious fasting stalking me, or the1981 IRA hunger-strike – or was it all just coincidence? The dysfunction in my gut was a direct result of an earlier surgical error, but did that necessarily rule out a psychosomatic connection? It became important to me to set out – in prose – to revisit Station Island one last time in order to tease this out.

In the act of writing 'An Appetite for Fasting?' I found a new ease and resolution. I moved away from the nervy pressure of writing in the historic present, and relaxed into a simple, storytelling preterite. This piece offered me a new direction in autobiographical writing: it was not tied throughout to the scaffolding of a man's poetic text like *Out of Step*, or that of family history like 'The Most Difficult Door'. I needed to open the piece by setting the scene of my site of damage – Station Island and the misrepresentations of the feminine that had grieved me there – but I would not dwell on it thereafter. I felt ready, at long last, to welcome the creative emptiness of the last chapter of *Out of Step* into my very bowels. At times, however, the writing process became unsettling: I felt personally uncomfortable and critically transgressive in writing about my own illness, my own body. I felt an unanticipated return of the anxieties about female 'nothingness' described so disturbingly by Irigaray in the epigraph to the current essay.[35] I was encouraged to continue by a wise – and unabashedly domestic – passage in Anne Le Marquand Hartigan's *Clearing the Space: A Why of Writing:*

> Clearing the space is not something we do once in our lives. Exactly as in the domestic scene, the table is always returning to crumminess [*sic*]. It is always demanding the hand and the cloth to clear it... We are always beginning again. This is exhausting and at the same time renewing. Despair and hope lie side by side in the double bed (14).

Ah, the palpable *loci* of food, and of sex. Those were the areas of metaphor I yearned for, rather than those of sickness in Sontag or of self-starvation in Ellmann. I made a 'firm purpose of amendment' that 'Coffin' really would be my last poetic outing to Station Island. So far, it has been.

Patricia Boyle Haberstroh, editor of *My Self, My Muse,* invited each of her nine poets to make explicit 'the relationship between autobiography and poetry', and 'to contribute both

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Festival seminar that marked the British publication that month (May 1996) of the 2nd edition of their *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women.*

[35] i.e. 'Absence and Fasting'.

a prose piece and a poem that illustrated some of the points in that prose'. In her arrangement of the book it is significant that she puts the poems first:

> The poems are placed before the prose to emphasize the links between them, and to highlight the ways in which women poets manifest issues of identity and gender in their poems (15).

Her brief gave me the tiny nudge of 'permission' that I needed. I relaxed, as I wrote, into revealing something of my current forced abstinence, rather than restricting myself, as heretofore, to events safely in my past. I allowed myself to reflect personally as well as critically on the evolution of the crucial sequence 'Coffin. Crypt. Consumption.'. And I took pleasure in writing about the human as well as the creative importance to me of friendships with other writers, notably the novelist Sue Thomas and the poet Gillie Griffin. This was an area of memoir that I had not ventured into before.[36]

It was also important to write about the experience of re-reading a crucial text – in this case Maud Ellmann's *The Hunger Artists* – and being astonished by the difference between the new reading and my earlier one. My relationship with Ellmann's book became a sort of case-study in reading as an interactive, creative, and circumstantial activity. I wanted in particular to consider how I read *as a writer,*[37] as well as about my changed awareness of certain issues and examples in Ellmann's study. I was astonished to rediscover – on the very first page of Ellmann's study – the story of the woman who had survived a hunger strike in Armagh prison only to die, within a year of her release, of anorexia nervosa. How had I forgotten this? Was it that when I read it first time around, I had been close to anorexia only at a remove, in the lives of two close friends? Since then, I had discovered for myself how surprisingly easy it is to give up eating, and how seductive is the consequent tendency to 'disappear'. *Absence and fasting.* Ah yes, they can become seriously pleasurable.[38] Rereading *The Hunger Artists* and then writing about it took me to another level of understanding of Irigaray's *'rien du tout'.* No wonder my poem 'Consumption' addresses Hades, the Lord of the dead, as the most deeply penetrative of lovers. I devoutly hoped, when I realised this particular instance of self-divination in my writing, that the third and final stanza of that poem would prove more

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[36] I had not, for instance, allowed any references to my friendship with McGuckian to 'contaminate' 'The Room is a Kind of Travel Also' (1988).

[37] At this time I was creating a new third year writing module for English Literature undergraduates, called 'Reading as a Writer'.

[38] In Kafka's short story *Ein Hungerkünstler,* from which Ellmann took her title, the 'fasting artist' is very reluctant to end his fast at the end of each forty-day 'performance': 'he alone knew... how easy fasting was. It was the easiest thing in the world.' (*Stories,* 244).

prophetic than its death-enchanted first two, in its hints of a wish for both spiritual and physical recovery:

> This is the going up into the gaps.
> This is the airy way of the hunger artist.
> I beseech ye, o my bowels,
> that I may not be mistaken.

I have been rereading Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* while writing the current essay, and have been astonished, rather as I was when rereading Ellmann's opening chapter, to 'discover' the following passage very close to the end of Dillard's book:

> Ezekiel excoriates false prophets as those who have 'not gone up into the gaps'. The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound... Go up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. (235)

When I was writing 'Consumption' I was thinking of a much chillier and suicidal reference, to my own 'god of the gaps', who makes an appearance in a poem that I added to my 'Galway' sequence in 1993, 'The Emigrant's Return, Chicago to Galway 1985'. This was inspired by the story of a son of neighbouring family farm to Ballinahistle. He had come 'home' after several decades in Chicago, only to drown himself almost immediately, and with no explanation, in a bog pool on the farm. In the poem he speaks to the brother who has struggled to run the farm for all those years. He ends:

> I never thought to find
> the god of the gaps
>
> who slipped the leash on me
> there in the Windy City
>
> here, where you hold out
> lonely on old land
>
> I lean like Ryan's Charleys[39]
> for the kissing-wire
>
> away from sustenance
>
> The gap-god knows
> where I should be, between
>
> sourness and stillness,
> and the sweet and fecund sod.
> (1993b, 43)

[39] The local nickname for Charolais cattle.

Were both Ezekiel's and Dillard's very different words about 'the god of the gaps' somewhere in my subconscious as I wrote 'Consumption'? I would like to think so, to hope that what is read and then forgotten is not entirely lost.

This realisation tends to confirm for me that it is in my poetry that the major work goes on, however long it may take me to begin to understand it: it is my main 'research'. But before I proceed to my concluding discussion of the more recent poems in *The Getting of Vellum* I will briefly reflect on the place I have reached in my prose writing. On the final page of the final chapter of *Out of Step* I wrote:

> I am thirsty for the voices of women, for a complex and noisy chorus to counter those haunted fruitless woman-silences of both 'Station Island' and Station Island. (1992a, 247)

I realise in retrospect that, without setting out consciously to do so, I have indeed in the course of 'An Appetite for Fasting?' moved away from the male territory of both Islands, and written thereafter wholly about women's voices and texts. And my instinctive choice of the preterite over the present tense also feels significant: again in retrospect, I sense that it enacts a move towards a resolution of the tensions expressed in the prose texts of this whole period of my critical and creative research.

I have read with recognition Susanna Egan's recent study of the 'politics of crisis and the body' in relation to autobiographical writing, and in particular what she says about

> the contemporary phenomenon of "writing engendered by a crisis that is not yet resolved." The urgent present tense of this writing is particularly significant for its contestatory or resistant strategies that untrammel the subject from discursive helplessness... In practical terms, crisis is an unstable condition seeking change.[40]

The process of writing *Out of Step* precipitated a crisis in my writing that has taken me several years to work through. In prose, this has been a slow and fitful journey, and I have been only partly in control or even aware of its progress. In the essay 'The Most Difficult Door' I deliberately foregrounded the lives of women, whereas in 'An Appetite for Hunger?' I wrote about several writers who, it turns out, happened to be women. I also wrote with a new frankness about my self and my body. In the former essay I needed to move into the 'urgent' present tense as soon as I began to write about my own life; does my settling for the settled preterite in the latter suggest that I have now 'resolved the crisis', in Egan's terms?

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[40] Egan, 4-5. The internal quotation is from Egan's own 1987 essay 'Changing Faces of Heroism: Some Questions Raised by Contemporary Autobiography' in *biography* 10:20-38.

On the final page of 'An Appetite for Fasting?' I wrote a *desideratum* that I still feel happy with – though of course I could only write even this in avowedly provisional mode:

> I want to become more puzzled, less sure, the older I get. I want to be surprised as a reader, and even more as a rereader. I hope to surprise myself most of all in my writing of poetry. It was this poem's ['Coffin. Crypt. Consumption.'] pressing deadline that late, late in the day let through some more of the ghosts I didn't see on Station Island. Prose is one way of journeying to understanding. Poetry can be a form of divination. (71)

FURTHER CREATIVE WORK: *The Getting of Vellum*

At the launch of the *Words Revealed* exhibition Denis Brown expressed a rueful uneasiness that he had had to suspend his text-obliterating techniques when working with my cleaving poem to create *Couple*. It was not, he assured me, that he held anything against my words *qua* words, as he did against those of parts of Leviticus, but that it had gone against the grain, artistically, to produce a piece on which every word was legible. Within a month, however, he wrote to say that the making of *Couple* had in fact made him realise that he had come to the end of his series *The Word* and with it the instinct to letter and then immediately 'dys-letter' a text. *Couple,* our joint piece based on my 'third examination of conscience', was the start of a long and still developing artistic collaboration between us, in which the visual and the verbal are in continual dialogue. I write new work inspired by his processes and materials as well as by particular pieces. He picks up on particular poems I have written, not necessarily the ones in which I am consciously responding to his work. And he has found new conceptual methods of working against his own great facility as a letterer, and interrogating the very texts he has chosen. Particularly important to him in developing his work on fragmented and layered glass, as opposed to vellum, has been my short poem '*Amour Fou*'[41] from my ongoing reworking of the 9th Century Irish tale of two poets, *Liadáin & Cuirithir. 'Amour Fou',* about the diving of a human lover into the watery element of her otter lover, was itself triggered by my interest in Brown's *Ave Maria* series (on glass, not vellum): small pool-like drownings of rosaries, circled like weed or coral over the text of the prayer. Recent developments in the *Liadáin & Cuirithir* series have introduced words and images of ice and tundra, as well as many variations on the 'cut edges' and 'last gasp' of '*Amour Fou*'.[42]

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[41] Byron 2000, 14. Two earlier poems in the series appear in *The Fat-Hen Field Hospital,* 34-5.
[42] The first series was shown as part of *The Calligrapher As Terrorist,* Brown's one-man exhibition at the Danish National Museum of Graphics, Odense, in 1998.

In the title and the contents of my 2000 collection, Brown's work on and with vellum is crucial. As I found when writing 'Crypt', the ghosts of the Scottish animals of *The Fat-Hen Field Hospital* still stir in my poetry. The Hereford cross calves whose castration I witnessed, and then recreated in 'The Favour' (1993a, 12-13), were succeeded in this new work's title sequence by the hundred and twenty-eight calves of seventh century Lindisfarne whose hides make up the Lindisfarne Gospels; and by the stillborn calf I saw being skinned and then disembowelled at a knacker's yard in twentieth century Norfolk. My hands-on research into the processes that transform the skins of calves into the finest vellum was prompted and funded by a BBC/Arts Council of England 'Write Out Loud' training bursary, which initially sent me on an intensive 'conversion course' in writing for radio, designed specifically for poets and run by the poet Simon Armitage and the senior BBC drama producer Susan Roberts. We were forced, in a series of increasingly technical briefs, to write scripts for the ear of a one-off listener, rather than performance poems: a vital distinction. I then won a commission to develop my pilot piece into a short programme.

I began by recording Denis Brown while he was on a purchasing visit to his Czech vellum-maker in County Kildare. Joe Katz walked and talked us round his factory, and then I eavesdropped on the two of them discussing individual skins. Katz had told us that the skin of a stillborn calf – a slunk or slink calf – makes the very finest grade of vellum. Back in England I made contact with John Warman, a knacker (or renderer) via the taxidermist and sculptor Emily Mayer who was based near him in rural Norfolk. In Warman's yard I was able to witness what went on earlier in the chain of production: the careful winching off of the most easily torn of calf-hides, those of the slinks. I then recorded material at a dairy farm, at Mayer's studio, and in the office of the lead archaeologist of the dig at Lindisfarne that had just discovered pits full of calf bones in the Abbey grounds. This was a very refreshing way to research a piece of writing, because the audio material I gathered included so many independent and distinctive voices, as well as the sounds and acoustics of the different locations. Then I worked intensively for three days at BBC Bristol with a senior studio engineer to realise the eight-track sound script. These sorts of collaborations, of content and of creation, were new to me, and the abdications of control that they offered were exciting in creative terms. It was a welcome, though temporary, move away from the solitary task of the poet.[43] The specific demands of the radio audience made me write more conversationally, and then deliver my words more naturally and quickly than I would at a reading. In adapting the

programme's script for the printed page of *The Getting of Vellum* I have, of course, entirely lost the sound tracks and the acoustic of the sea off Holy Island, and the whisper of vellum on vellum in the Rope & Vellum Factory, and the voice of Iarla Ó Lionáird singing 'Calling Home the Calves' in Irish.[44]

In the related sequence 'Renderers'[45] – related in the sense that it goes over the same literal and metaphorical ground that I travelled in researching 'The Getting of Vellum' – the version printed in the book is even further from its original medium, since it was commissioned specifically for the Web.[46] The primarily visual medium encouraged me to make increasingly minimal use of text in my web-images, in stark but illuminating contrast to the extensiveness I had learned to aim for in writing for radio. I also experimented with the visual layering of texts, putting technical words such as 'apoptosis', 'cisplatin, and 'armature' in fainter tints under the words of the relevant primary text (by primary I mean the text that appears, unadorned and unlayered, in *The Getting of Vellum*). I did not want to make use of the 'hot-links' beloved of hypertext fiction writers and some webpoets: I preferred to keep my reader within the loop and order of my own sets of 'pages', but to exploit poetry's innate 'hot-links' by including visual and verbal references that the reader might cross-reference, both internally and externally. For example, I scanned real celandine flowers to accompany the text on the first 'page' of the poem 'from calf to vellum'. They were simply 'to hand', the first bright wildflowers I could find in early March. Later I realised that they were more than simply seasonal, and vividly lifelike when scanned. They offered the reader further layers of connection: they could be the spring flowers gathered by Persephone in the Fields of Enna – the calf had slipped down 'a swallow-hole to Hades' — or the yellow flowers that are associated in rural Ireland with rich grazing for milch cattle. On the last set of 'pages', the primary text of the fourth poem 'from sketchbook to canvas' is written across 'real' pages scanned from the sketchbook of the painter Eileen Coxon, and includes her quotations from other writers such as Richard Jefferies.[47] Each of the background excerpts from Coxon's sketchbook is word-rich, and her images cross-reference with

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[43] Denis Brown and I preserve that solitariness in our ongoing artistic collaboration. We rarely meet, and work in some secrecy, with the Irish Sea between us.

[44] Iarla Ó Lionáird recorded 'Aililiu Na Gamhna' in 1997, on the disk *The Seven Steps to Mercy*.

[45] The primary text version is printed in *The Getting of Vellum*, 37-39.

[46] www.poetrysociety.org.uk/places.cbyron.htm The evolution of this experimental project was initially logged in my contemporaneous trAce journal http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/poets/byron/homepage.htm and then reflected on in the paper 'Renderers: Transcribing the Rural City' in *Migrant Cartographies*, forthcoming from the Universities of Leiden and Amsterdam.

[47] 'There is a mark only now, where the footpath was... it has left a winding crease.' Reference not given by Coxon.

images and words that appear elsewhere throughout the four poems that make up the sequence.

'The Getting of Vellum' and 'Renderers', reprinted at the heart of this collection, represent a period of experimentation with other media and collaboration with other artists and craftspeople that has been demanding, unexpected, and exhilarating. The creative process cannot be so easily analysed in the poems written in solitude. I have a hunch that Denis Brown's works on glass have prompted in some unanalysable way my poems about living skin. From the erotic possibilities of pictographic skin ('Writing on skin', 3) to the reclaimed skin of a selkie lover ('Coco de mer', 12-13), these poems move the skin scenario, as it were, from abattoir to boudoir. This shift to the world of the living is welcome, for elsewhere my poet's heart is still in the abattoir and the morgue, investigating the interface between life and death. For too many years my dealings with that interface had been weighed down with the impedimenta of Donegal's ancient entrance to Purgatory. I worked hard in this book to take the scenario elsewhere. 'The Hotel Hades' (15) salvages the modern Greek setting of a section of the eventually abandoned long poem 'The Winter Husband', and I found a way to touch ancient Rome by translating Propertius's Poem I xix (4). Poems set in Egypt (16-18), Sicily and La Chartreuse (23), the Judaean desert (22),and even Elsinore (11) cumulatively reassure me that even Scotland is not over-represented in this collection. And the final poem 'Booked in' (59) leaves speaker and reader aboard a plane that has just landed at an unnamed airport.

All of these poems are beneficiaries, in their combination of reportage, autobiography and fiction, of the breakthrough I made in writing 'Let-Down' in my previous collection. In the long poem 'Morbid Anatomy' (53-55), however, I sense the beginnings of an entirely new 'autobiographical' impulse: the creation of an alternative life trajectory. 'Morbid Anatomy' is an experiment in a different type of fictionalizing: the creation of scenes from 'my' life as the medical student my parents so wanted me to be. I found the playful possibilities of this seductive, and am currently experimenting further with the idea. The playful note in both 'Let-Down' and 'Morbid Anatomy' is something that I have learnt from the crazily inventive narratives of a male contemporary, Paul Durcan, rather than from the sinuous monologues of Sharon Olds, or even from the witty juxtapositions in the work of Irish language poet Nuala NÍ Dhomhnaill. I have particularly admired the way her sequence 'Feis/Carnival', with its erotic reclaiming of the feminine and welcoming of the masculine, and its settings from prehistoric burial chamber to sports car to ferry, tackles

the complexities of gender stereotypes in Irish life and poetry. [48] Durcan goes further: he treats them as high farce.

In his collections of the late Eighties, *The Berlin Wall Café* (1985) and *Going Home to Russia* (1987), I had found a poet who was writing far closer to the essence of speech even than Sharon Olds. And a poet who wrote about women and men without that male-cohort distancing that was still apparent in so much poetry, reviewing and literary life in Ireland. Then, in the early Nineties, Durcan produced a book that would illuminate my own very different foray into working with a visual artist (Denis Brown): in *Crazy About Women* Durcan tells tall tales about his favourite paintings in the National Gallery of Ireland. He introduces the book thus:

> The challenge of art is to be inclusive and *Crazy About Women*, born out of a lifetime's romance with the National Gallery of Ireland, is my attempt to be so inclusive as to make the intercourse between what is painted and what is written as reciprocal as it is inevitable. (1991, xi)

I welcome this insistence on equivalence and reciprocity between the two art forms, and despite the pre-existence of the paintings in Durcan's project, he does indeed create the illusion of 'intercourse'. His use of the first-person voice and the fictions he spins with it are iconoclastic, anachronistic, and exhilarating. Their incidental illuminations of each of the forty-seven chosen paintings (which accompany the poems in high-quality colour reproduction) is kindled from a life-long relationship with those paintings, not from cross-art rivalry or parasitic appropriation, as is too often the case with 'poems after paintings'. Reflecting now on my own recent work, I suspect that my admiration for the fictional inventiveness of *Crazy About Women* has not only underlined my respect for Denis Brown's creative independence during our continuing collaboration. It may have influenced several poems in *The Getting of Vellum:* the mix of realism and selkie magic in 'Coco de Mer' (12); the murder fantasy that spins off from Claudius's poisoning of Hamlet's father in 'The Natural Gates and Alleys of the Body' (11); and, of course, the student's obsessions with cooking, dissection and Goya's clothed and unclothed *majas* in 'Morbid Anatomy'. (53-55)

I find it curious, and rather unexpected, that I am concluding this account of my latest collection with reflections on the recent influence of a male poet's work, in addition to that of a male visual artist. I feel relaxed about this. Durcan and Brown both demonstrate that male artists working in Ireland and around the world (they both have a lively international

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[48] Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, *The Astrakhan Cloak*, Irish/English parallel text with translations by Paul Muldoon, 1992, 10-19.

presence and following) are well able to walk out of patriarchy's confines. The inclusiveness that Durcan sees as art's challenge is vividly central to the work of both men. Perhaps I have been drawn to their work out of a deep need to assuage my disappointment with what I saw as Heaney's failure of nerve in 'Station Island', and my own subsequent self-doubt. And Durcan offers a peculiarly appropriate male counterpoise to Heaney in relation to the older poet's argument with me about the differing function of autobiography in his 'Station Island' and in my *Out of Step*: both men keep putting their namesakes into their work. 'Paul' and 'Paul Durcan' are characters that play both autobiographical and fictional parts in many of Durcan's poems; he frequently mixes the two modes in a single poem. The man does not take himself seriously, yet – or therefore – his work is far from lightweight. Was Heaney just too precious about his eponymous pilgrim persona in 'Station Island' to be able, finally, either to 'let go, let fly, forget'[49] or to work towards the 'book of changes' that the voice of 'On the Road' yearns to 'meditate'[50] into being?

TOWARDS MY OWN 'BOOK OF CHANGES': *The Cap of Invisibility*

> What is so astonishing about putting one's life into words, about telling a story, is that certain aspects of being are not only revealed but come to exist fully for the first time.
>
> Susan Griffin (358)

During the period of writing as research that is covered in this essay, my greater willingness to embrace the autobiographical has indeed brought 'certain aspects of being' into existence for me, in both poetry and prose. When I went to Saint Patrick's Purgatory in search of the silent women of 'Station Island' I was not planning to become an autobiographer, but the researching and the writing of *Out of Step* made me into a – partial – one. The 'aspects of being', my own and others', that I discovered there have jostled me into the further experiments in autobiography discussed above. The uneasy dialogue between my text and Heaney's created a double crisis of marginalization in my own sense of self. Not only was I a woman in the male arena of Station Island/'Station Island'. It was also brought home to me there that I was now irretrievably living outside Ireland, and a member of its most banal diaspora – as seen from Ireland North and South. To rephrase Gerard Manley Hopkins, who made the opposite journey: 'I am in

[49] James Joyce's advice to the pilgrim in 'Station Island XII'. Heaney, 1984, 93.
[50] Heaney, 1984, 121.

England now; now I am at a third remove'. And for too long I had, perhaps, been writing from my own 'lonely began'.[51]

When I left Belfast at the age of seventeen, first for London and then for Oxford, I felt a huge sense of relief in the invisibility that England gave me. It was a luxury not to be categorised by culture and religion. I was careful to use the neutral English accent that my parents had always expected of me at home, dropping the Belfast accent I had used at school and with my friends. Thirty years earlier, my mother, sent to England to train as a nurse, had taken elocution lessons in order to lose her brogue. To become invisible is one of the unsung pleasures of emigrant assimilation. For a variety of reasons Irish women coming to England in the middle decades of the Twentieth Century were on the whole more successful at assimilation than Irish men.[52] For me invisibility meant, in the late Sixties, welcome relief from sectarian assignment rather than humiliating marginalisation. However, as I touched on in the essay 'The Most Difficult Door', and earlier in my memories of spending the summer of 1968 in Judaea (1992a, 117-119), I was slow to realise the particular practical and philosophical difficulties that my initial embrace of invisibility in the mid-Sixties would pose for me, in the Seventies and Eighties, as woman and as emergent feminist. As the poet Carol Muske suggests in her study of poetry and autobiography, women 'may be just *too good* at negative capability' (8).

Now I want to inhabit a 'migrant rather than emigrant'(1992a, 247) invisibility. It has often been the women of Ireland who have had the greater practical freedom, as well as the greater success, in the leaving of it. Excluded from any rights to inherit land or property, most daughters knew from the start that they would have to leave 'hearth and home', and make their own way in the outside world: the city, England, America. In my next critical work I intend to be in gentle pursuit of two women writers who got 'up and away'[53] to the North of Spain in the years immediately following Ireland's bloody Civil War. I want to find out more about the particular 'caps of invisibility' they chose by going there as governesses[54] in the early Twenties: a double 'disappearance' for a young woman to

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[51] 'To seem the Stranger lies my Lot', Hopkins, 1953, 68.

[52] See Lennon, McAdam and O'Brien's *Across the Water: Irish Women's Lives in Britain* for a sociological overview and many individual accounts of the experience of immigration and assimilation. Their studies demonstrate how much more effective single women were than single men in 'becoming English' when they came to Britain. Far more women married into English families, or extended their education/training.

[54] A phrase used by Heaney in 'On the Road' in Heaney, 1984, 119-121.

[54] In her Introduction to the Virago edition of *Never No More* the novelist Maeve Binchy gives a wry Irish gloss on how governessing in Spain was seen at the time: 'Maura followed a course quite familiar to Irish girls of her age and background – but almost unheard of in England, she went as a matter of course to be a governess in a Spanish family. The link was obvious. A young Irish girl might be allowed to Spain without

take on at the time. Kate O'Brien and Maura Laverty worked in the same two cities, Madrid and Bilbao, from (respectively) 1922 and 1924. They both, much later, published novels based on their experiences: O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* in 1936 and Laverty's *No More Than Human* in 1944. The Spanish episode was catalytic in their writing lives. And for each writer her semi-autobiographical Spanish novel was the third one she published.

Mary Lavelle sets out for Spain from bourgeois, provincial Mellick – the thinly disguised Limerick of O'Brien's own childhood. She fully intends to return in a year to marry her safe and much older fiancé John, who will not in any case be financially able to marry her for a long time yet. But from the very start of the novel, even before she leaves Mellick, Mary yearns to disappear:

> She would wander always, be a free lance always, belong to no one place or family or person...She would be unobserved, uncherished and, she hoped, unreproved. She had in fact put on a cap of invisibility, from under which, however, she could use her unlearned eyes with circumspection and in peace. (O'Brien, 22, 30)

Mary is, interestingly, far younger and more naïve than her creator was when *she* went to Spain,[55] but its impact upon her is immediate. She is awakened from her distance and reserve by intense experiences of political discussion,[56] sexual attraction, and the *corrida*. As soon as she has acted upon this triple awakening, which she does with admirable clarity and verve, she knows she must cut herself off from the life awaiting her back home. Laverty's even younger Delia Scully sets out with a different alertness: she is hungry for the rich mix of independence, affection and wonderful cooking that she has recently gained and then lost again, too quickly, with death of her beloved grandmother;[57] she begins to find it – and much more – in Spain, once she falls out of the upper-class milieu of governessing for the nobility and learns to fend for herself with the help of Spanish working people Her final lodgings in the novel are in rooms over a *pastelleria*. Down in the kitchen the family share with her the delicious secrets of Catalan baking. This is her real initiation into the heart of Spain. And, like Mary Lavelle, but at a different social level, she finds herself involved with political activists who will organise resistance to Primo de Rivera's dictatorship.

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overpowering danger of losing her faith. After all Spain was dripping with cathedrals, and saints, and cardinals, it would be nearly BETTER [sic] than home' (Laverty, 1985, xv).

[55] O'Brien had a degree in English Literature from Trinity College, and was working as a journalist and translator for the *Manchester Guardian* when she decided to 'drop out' and go to Bilbao for a year.

[56] The father and the grown-up son of the Areavaga family are both active in opposition politics.

[57] See Laverty's first novel, *Never No More*. Maeve Binchy says that the charismatic central character 'Gran', and Delia's two precious years in her household, are both fictional, despite the autobiographical feel. 'Delia Scully' is the narrator of both novels, but *No More Than Human* 'takes up Delia's story *and*

Both protagonists, in these distinctively female versions of the expatriate Irish *bildungsroman*, don the cap of invisibility, reinvent themselves as adults and as writers – and then, at the end of each novel, do a revised version of their initial disappearing trick. Mary Lavelle is 'going home... with a brutal story' that will release her fiancé from any sense of obligation or even connection[58]. Delia Scully raises her return fare – from Madrid to 'home' and back – by selling her first stories and political pieces to Irish papers: she has become a financially viable foreign correspondent[59]. Neither character sets out for Ireland, as both do in their respective concluding pages, with any intention of 'going home for good'.

In writing themselves, these writers and their thinly veiled personae contradict with anticipatory insouciance Irigaray's downbeat account of woman's male-inscribed nothingness. This gives me an inkling that disappearance can be a dynamic, rather than a disaster, in my own ongoing 'book of changes'. For these women have a markedly *increased* appetite at the end of each novel. Dillard says of 'her' world, in the closing pages of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

> Any way you look at it...it is chomp or fast.
> It is chomp or fast. (1974, 206, 208-9)

This is a polarised version of appetite that used to resonate with me, but I no longer want to be seduced into Dillard's ascetic mysticism.[60] After all the years of fasting I need sensuality. *The Getting of Vellum* is, though by a narrow margin, a book that is more about earthbound resurrections than about death or transcendence. As I set out for Spain I will recall my own youthful escape to foreign parts, to Grenoble in 1965.[61] And I will take with me the words of poet Mary O'Malley in *My Self, My Muse,* in which she remembers her vital years away from Ireland, living and working in Lisbon:

> I felt at home in my body, and in a way that would never be allowed in Ireland. It was as if the other half of me had come alive. Those were radiant years, the other side of sin.[62]

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also the lifestory of Maura Laverty herself, and this time according to those who knew her, it's entirely true' (Laverty, 1985, xv; my emphasis). But see note 59 below.

[58] O'Brien, 255.

[59] Laverty herself actually *wrote* for the Madrid daily newspaper *El Debate.* Her character Delia Scully is merely gets to know several of its left-wing journalists and is befriended by one of its political cartoonists.

[60] I was dismayed to discover recently that in her forties Dillard had become a Roman Catholic.

[61] See 'The Blue Darkness', 2000, 23. This poem comes from my time living in Grenoble.

[62] 'Between the Snow and the Huge Roses', in Haberstroh, ed., *My Self, My Muse*, 40.

APPENDIX ONE

Biographical Notes: Catherine Byron

1947 Catherine Mary Greenfield is born in Paddington, London, the second child of David Greenfield, Lecturer in Physiology at St Mary's Hospital Medical School and Margaret ('Peggy') Duane Greenfield SRN.

1948 David is appointed Dunville Professor at Queens University, Belfast. The family lives for a year in Rugby Road just behind the university, then a mile south on the Malone Road in another university house, 4 Holyrood. They live there until they leave Belfast in 1964. Holyrood is a cul-de-sac with two pairs of semi-detached houses. At its end is a path that leads through several acres of allotments with many wild corners. Catherine, a wanderer from the age of two, spends much of her time in 'The Plots'. She makes friends with many of the elderly gardeners, but is far keener on wild flowers than garden plants. Her ambitions, seeded in these years, will be to become a poet and a field botanist.

1951-58 Catherine goes to Aquinas Hall Primary School, run by nuns of the Dominican order (O.P.), a benign institution with wooded grounds just across the road from Holyrood. In 1952 David buys a Morris Minor, and their travels around Ireland begin. Peggy is one of twelve children who grew up on Ballinahistle, a small farm in East Galway, and several of her siblings are still living in Ireland, in Counties Mayo, Galway and Dublin. After Peggy's eldest brother takes over the family farm in 1954, effectively turns out his parents and youngest sibling, and demolishes the old house in order to build a bungalow, the visits to Ballinahistle are brief and infrequent. In addition to visiting family the Greenfields spend all their holidays camping, on dunes or in farmers' fields, and especially on the Western seaboard: Donegal, Connemara and Kerry. They use the 1930s tent and home-made sleeping bags that David's parents have passed down to them. At weekends in Belfast they are always out exploring the coasts of Antrim and Down, eventually buying a small dinghy to explore Strangford Lough under sail.

1958-60 Catherine moves to secondary school: Rathmore, a new girls' grammar school in Dunmurry, five miles south of the city. Several other Aquinas pupils go there, but none of them is happy. In her second year Catherine has a long time off school due to glandular fever. David takes this opportunity to suggest that she follow her brother (who is now at Downside) to boarding school in England. Having made reluctant vows before his marriage that any children would be educated as Roman Catholics, he prefers that this should take place in an English establishment.

1965-71 Halfway through her first year at Oxford Catherine gives up on Classical Mods, and requests a transfer to English Language and Literature: this is agreed, but postponed to the following academic year. She spends the summer term reading Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Eliot's *Four Quartets* under the guidance of (retired don) Rosemary Syfret. Early in that first year she quarrels bitterly with John Gray – a quarrel that will not be revisited and resolved until they talk it over in the Crown Bar in Belfast in 1993. And she meets Ken Byron, a second-year historian who is a fierce and serious member of the Catholic Student Society. On a Jesuit-run retreat that they both attend over her first Christmas vacation, he breaks his silence to inform her that he is going to marry her. She remains speechless. Eighteen months later, in June 1967, they marry. They are both virgins, and the first night is more than usually disastrous. Catherine has to have corrective surgery. After the marriage she stops writing for more than ten years. In 1968 both Catherine and Ken give up being Catholics after reading the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae.* In 1969 Catherine is surprised to do well enough in Finals to be asked by her Somerville tutor, Rosemary Woolf, to stay on and work for a BPhil in Medieval Studies. She agrees to do so, as she has no immediate plans. Woolf secures a college bursary to facilitate her studies. Despite finding postgraduate work much less satisfying than her first degree she persists with the BPhil, but is relieved to become pregnant in the final months. She has her first child, Emma, five weeks after the *viva voce* examination.

1971-74 Ken Byron is by now a secondary school teacher. They live a few miles south of Oxford, and Catherine tries to keep her mind exercised by becoming a distance tutor for students of the National Extension College who are preparing for the Medieval and Renaissance Literature papers of the London External degree. She continues with this teaching for three years, until her second child, Naomi, is a year old. The initial professions of equality that she and Ken made to each other vanish under the onslaught of small children. For several years she has very little sleep, and what there is is continually broken. She feels that she has lost her mind as well as her identity. She is, at the same time, deeply satisfied by parenthood.

1974-78 The Byrons move to Southern Scotland, where Ken has a new job at a College of Education. They buy a rural smallholding and set out to put into practice some of the radical ideas of the Seventies 'self-sufficiency' movements, in both food-production and education. Catherine runs a playgroup in their house, and later a free school for six children in a basement in South Glasgow. She is inspired by the writings and practice of Susan Isaacs in Cambridge in the Twenties, and by the American advocate of de-schooling during the Sixties and Seventies, John

Holt. She and Ken help to set up the national organisation Education Otherwise, which still flourishes. Catherine is also, rather like her first cousin Helen in Ontario (who runs 'Ballinahistle 2' there to this day), trying to emulate their grandmother Duane, the farmer. At Avonbank there are two milking goats and their kids, a breeding sow and twelve laying hens. Two piglets, kept on for fattening, plough up with their snouts a half-acre of meadow that is then used for growing crops for human and animal consumption. Catherine begins to write *Down, Down, Down on the Farm,* a comic novel based on their incompetence and bad luck as farmers. In the midst of this her first poem in years arrives unbidden: 'Night Flight to Belfast'.

1978-84 These are the years in which the Byrons' marriage unravels. When the College of Education closes they have to sell Avonbank and leave Scotland. They move to Leicestershire, which brings them closer both to Catherine's parents, now living in Nottingham, and to Ken's widowed mother in Leicester. This does not make for harmony. After the Avonbank years of more equally shared tasks, Ken is now out all hours, and most weekends, working as a schools drama adviser. He rarely sees Catherine or their daughters, and is in a state of anger when he does. Catherine initially tries to retrain as a museum curator but is soon offered and accepts the post of (p/t) Lecturer in Literature in the Complementary Studies department of Loughborough College of Art & Design. And it is at LCAD that she begins to take writing seriously, both her own and the work of her art students. In September 1980 she realises that for the very first time since the children were born she possesses the means and the cheek to go away by herself. She has five weekdays clear between the start of the school year and the Art College year; she simply gets into her car and drives to Holyhead to catch the ferry to Dun Laoghaire. From there she drives non-stop to West Donegal, and camps in a pup-tent on the familiar dunes of Portnoo. This is where and when her commitment to poetry is remade. By 1984 she has begun to publish poems in small magazines and read them on Radio 3. From 1981 she is an assistant, later managing, editor of *Other Poetry,* working alongside Anne Stevenson, Michael Farley, Evangeline Paterson and Mahendra Solanki. Anne Stevenson and Michael Farley run Taxvs Press in Durham, and ask her whether she has written enough to put together a short collection. In early 1984 they accept *Settlements* for publication in 1985. Meanwhile, Ken takes the manuscript of her unpublished novel about farming, adapts it as a five-part serial, and sells it to *Women's Hour* under his own name. She first learns of this after the contract has been signed. The serial goes out as his work. In August 1984 Ken, who has begun an affair

with one of his teaching colleagues, suddenly leaves his family to move in with her.

1985-90 In late 1985, soon after the publication of *Settlements,* Michael Farley leaves Anne Stevenson and moves in with Catherine. Although this is done at Anne's suggestion and indeed urging, it causes much scandal in the poetry world. Catherine soon becomes involved with the managing and production of the flourishing Taxvs list. Her teaching at LCAD begins to move into the field of 'artists' books'. But by the end of 1988 the loss of various grants means that Taxvs cannot sustain its publishing programme. Michael Farley gives the entire backlist to Rupert Loydell of Stride Press. He and Catherine part amicably. He returns to dairy farming, and becomes a strict Baptist. Catherine uses the new solitude to complete the writing of *Out of Step,* and applies to do a PGCE in TESOL at Leicester University the following year. The long-term plan is to be able to earn a living abroad: to travel, and to write about her journeys and those of earlier writers. In these years she is increasingly asked to do readings and residencies as a published poet.

1990-94 While she waits for her younger daughter to become fully independent Catherine takes consecutive appointments in Leicestershire and Solihull as a Literature Development Officer. When *Out of Step* is published she is invited to deliver lectures about it at three universities in Ireland, and when *The Fat-Hen Field Hospital: Poems 1985-92* is published six months later she is a guest reader at Listowel Writers' Week. In between the two LDO jobs she lives briefly in Derry, conducting the Verbal Arts Centre's first audit on its role in the community of writers, both locally and for the whole island of Ireland.

1994 – In October 1994 she takes up a half-time post at The Nottingham Trent University, teaching Medieval Literature and Writing. She continues to work across the UK as a freelance poet, e.g on a series of poetry and public art commissions. This work is progressively curtailed by illness from 1995. Nevertheless, the artistic collaboration with artist-letterer Denis Brown is able to flourish, and she completes the manuscript of *The Getting of Vellum.* It is published in 2000.

APPENDIX TWO

Seamus Heaney prefers 'Cuchulain Comforted' to 'Under Ben Bulben' as the final poem for Yeats' *Collected Poems*

> 'What then?' sang Plato's ghost. 'What then?'
> (Yeats, 'What Then', *Collected Poems* 1963, 347)

In an essay from the late seventies, 'Yeats as an Example?' Seamus Heaney (1980, 98-114) celebrates, rather warily, Yeats' lifelong emphasis on and realisation of 'the otherness of art from life, dream from action'. He admires Yeats' 'elaborate obstinacy' in taking on the world 'in terms of the waywardness of his beliefs, the remoteness of his behaviour and the eccentricity of his terms of reference.' There is a scaresome quality to this Yeats, but also an enviable intransigence and staying power. Yeats, Heaney notes, did literally stay put, but he did not stay the same.

> When Joyce rebelled, he left by the Holyhead boat and created his drama by making a fictional character called Stephen Dedalus point up and repeat the terms of his revolt. When Yeats rebelled, he remained – Joyce scorned such 'a treacherous instinct for adaptibility' – but he still made a new W. B. Yeats to tread the streets and stage of Dublin... Yeats remade himself, associated himself with cold, disdainful figures... The solitude, the will towards excellence, the courage, the self-conscious turning away from that in which he no longer believes...

This is eerily familiar – compare the injunctions Heaney puts into the mouth of Joyce in 'Station Island XII' and years earlier into the mouth of Michael MacLaverty. In 'Fosterage' (*North* 1975) the Belfast novelist urges the young Heaney back in 1962: '"Listen. Go your own way. / Do your own work."' Injunctions are all very well but in the essay Heaney is keen to get to grips with the meat of Yeats' practice as a possible model: '[T]he finally exemplary moments are those when [his] powerful artistic control is vulnerable to the pain or pathos of life itself..."masterful images" which compel the assent of artist and audience alike [and] are dependent upon the "foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart".' This leads to the key question contained in the essay's title: is Yeats, as 'a very great poet... a very bad influence on other poets'? Apparently not:

> He is, indeed, the ideal example for a poet approaching middle age... [H]e bothers you with the suggestion that if you have managed to do one kind of poem in your own way, you should cast off that way and face into another area of your experience until you have learned a new voice to say that area properly.

I have quoted extensively from this essay because its meditations are so intriguing in relation to the 'Station Island' sequence: Heaney was working on both at about the same time. The very cadences of the essay's prose suggest that it was far harder to write than his essays on other poets who are closer to his heart. 'Yeats as an Example?' lacks some of his magical fluency and grace,

stumbles at times into cul-de-sac or involution. But it offers a revealing, though sidelong, vantage point from which to take a final look at 'Station Island'.

Seamus Heaney had written to me, as discussed earlier, about his 'notion of using 'On the Road' as a final section of the S.I. sequence' and his eventual decision not to do so. As he draws to the end of this rather uneasy essay about the complex artistic and personal challenges he was finding in Yeats, Heaney does a bit of wishful reordering of the final pages of the great man's *Collected Poems,* and his prose begins to sing once again. He finds 'something too male and assertive' about its concluding poem, 'Under Ben Bulben', but goes on:

> If I had my choice I would make the end of that book more exemplary by putting a kinder poem last, one in which the affirmative wilful violent man, whether he be artist or hero, the poet Yeats or the headhunter Cuchulain, must merge his domineering voice into the common voice of the living and the dead, mingle his heroism with the cowardice of his kind, lay his grey head upon the ashy breast of death.
>
> I would end with 'Cuchulain comforted...It is written in *terza rima,* the metre of Dante's *Commedia,* the only time Yeats used the form...

In *Station Island* as published, 'On the Road', Heaney's own 'kinder poem' with its distinctively Heaneyesque restorative 'common voice of the living and the dead', is separated from the 'Station Island' sequence by the whole of the final section of the collection. And in the sequence's final poem it is not Yeats that Heaney the pilgrim meets and is counselled by as he leaves the island, but James Joyce, the writer who left, but who then spent the rest of his life recreating, detail by intricate detail, the city that was *his* 'first place'. In the process of writing this essay, did Heaney the poet instinctively *write Yeats out* of his own engagement with St Patrick's Purgatory, so that he could give pride of place to Joyce? The old injunctions that Heaney seems to need to hear down the years from a succession of his seniors, rather than put his own name to them, make Joyce his supreme mid-life mentor, dispensing individualistic and masculine advice:

> 'Keep at a tangent.
> When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim
>
> out on your own and fill the element
> with signatures on your own frequency...'

Only the use of 'Dante's *terza rima'* in the twelfth poem of 'Station Island' makes a – very tenuous and purely formal - link with Heaney's essay, and its concluding commendation of 'Cuchulain Comforted': that 'kinder poem'.

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Couple

Denis Brown 1996
Poem - Catherine Byron

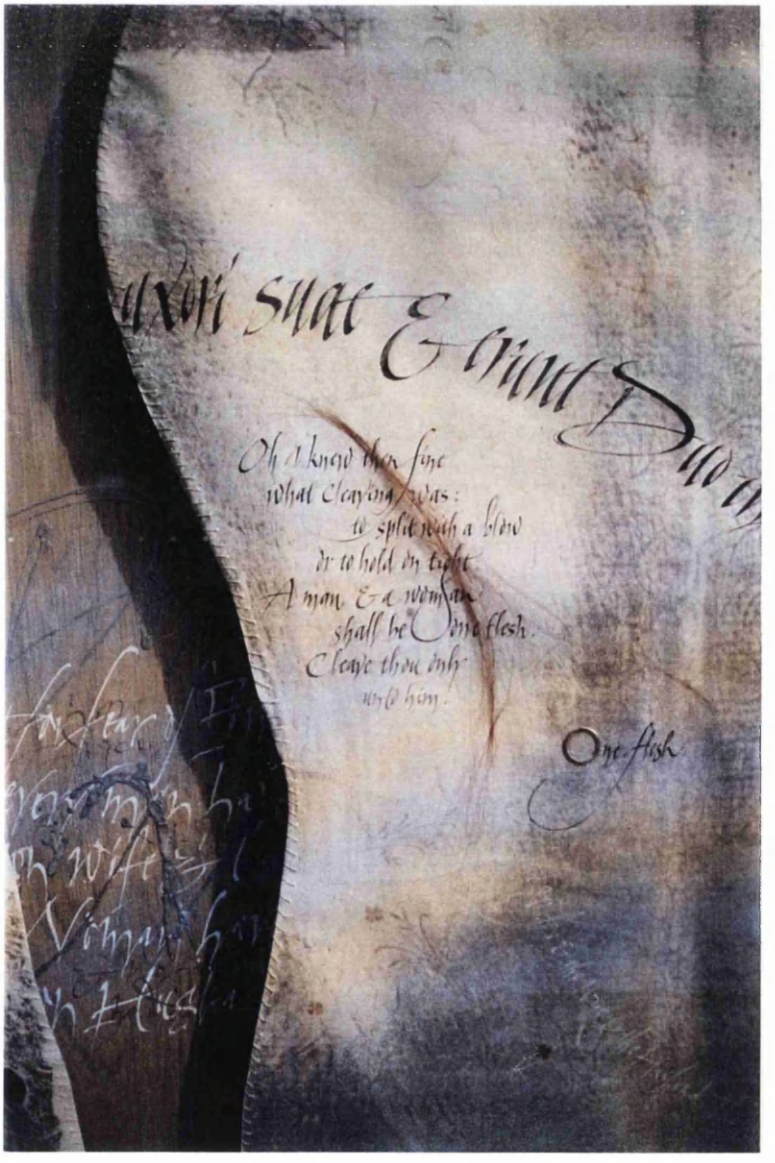
Mixed media on two calfskins on oak veneered board, 108 x 145cm

Text:

'Crypt, The third examination of conscience'
The Getting of Vellum, 8

Exhibited
Words Revealed / Focail Nochtaithe
An Irish / English Anthology of
New Lettering & Poetry

MAC Birmingham / Irish Crafts Council Touring Exhibition
1996 - 1997


uxor suae & erunt Duo in carne una
Oh I knew then fine
what cleaving was:
to split with a blow
or to hold on tight
A man & a woman
shall be One flesh.
Cleave thou only
unto him.
One flesh

detail

The Last Gasp

Denis Brown 1998
Poem - Catherine Byron

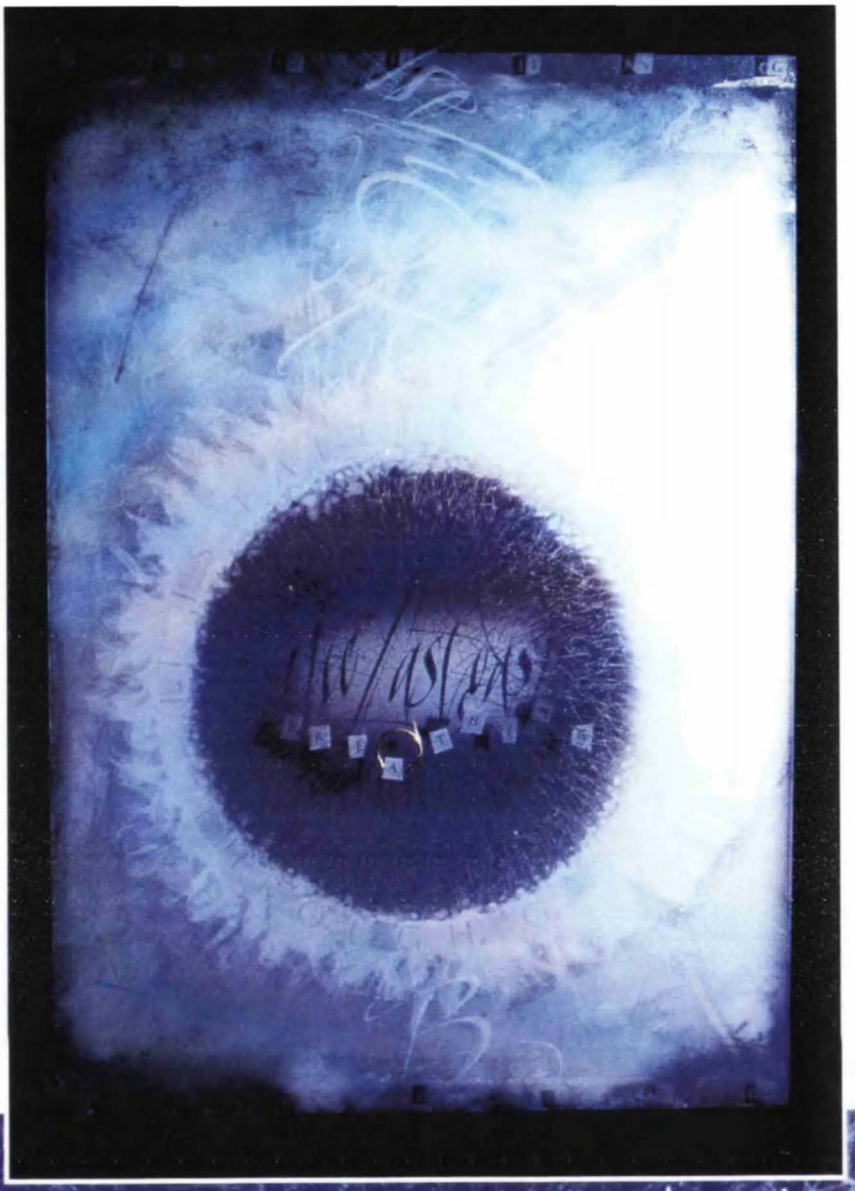
Glass with gold earring, 18.5 x 14 inches
Winner of the Glass Society of Ireland Award 1998

Text:

from 'Amour Fou'
The Getting of Vellum, 14

Exhibited as part of the Liadain series in

Exploding the Word / Kalligrafen som terrorist
Arbejder af den irske kalligraf
Denis Brown
Danmarks Grafiske Museum, Odense
June – September 1998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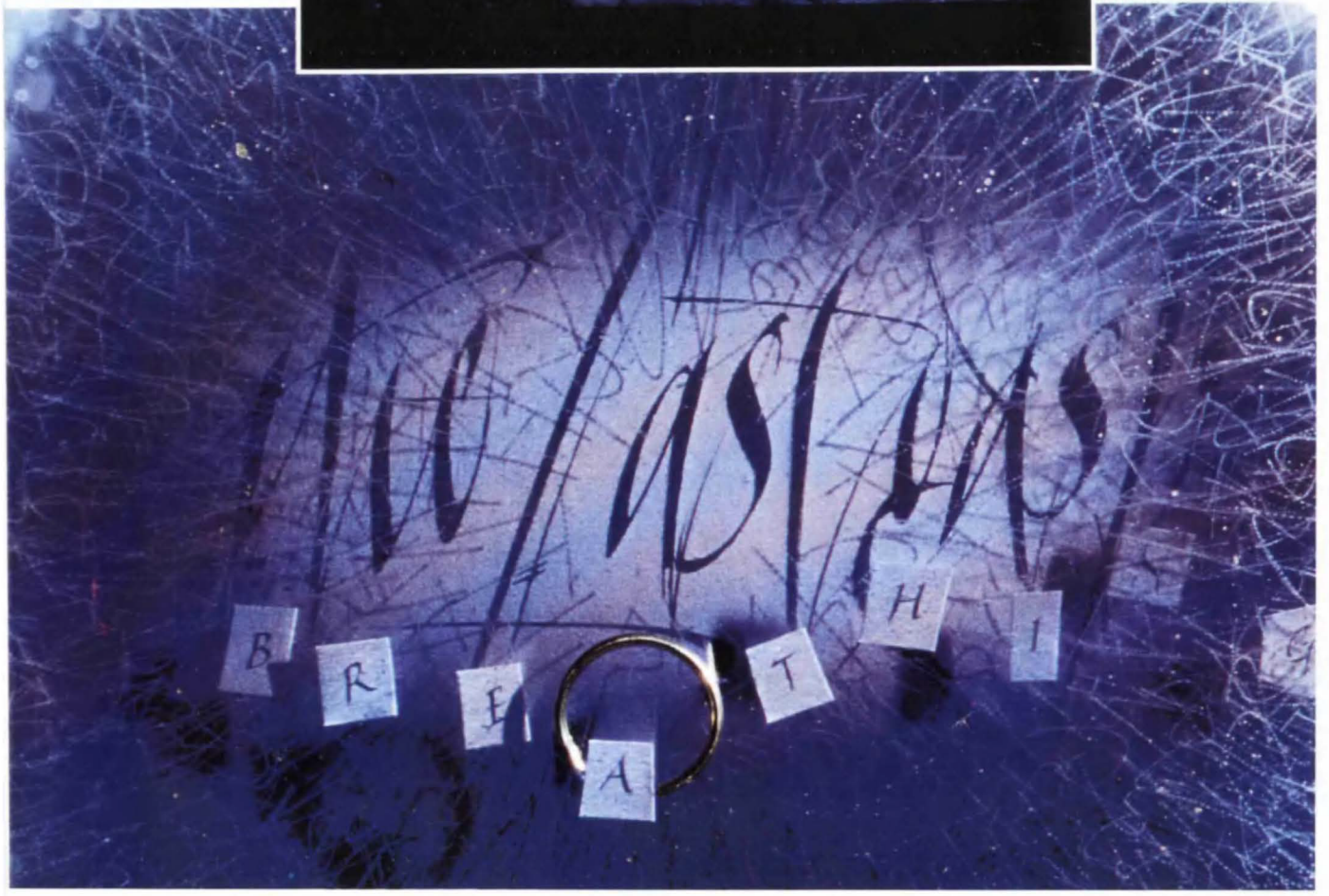

BREATHING

Renderers

images printed from the web

Text:

see also the print version 'Renderers'
The Getting of Vellum, 37-39

Sample webpages from
the *Poetry Places* long poem commission
for the Poetry Society website

Online publication April 1999

The samples are:

The front page of *Renderers*

'from calf to vellum' – all four pages

'from sketchbook to canvas' – fourth of four pages

Renderers

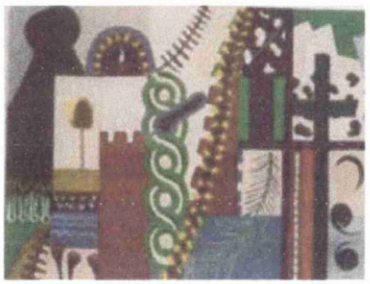
in the Vale of the River Tas, South Norfolk

4 linked webpoems of 4 pages by Catherine Byron:

from calf to vellum **from sketchbook to canvas**

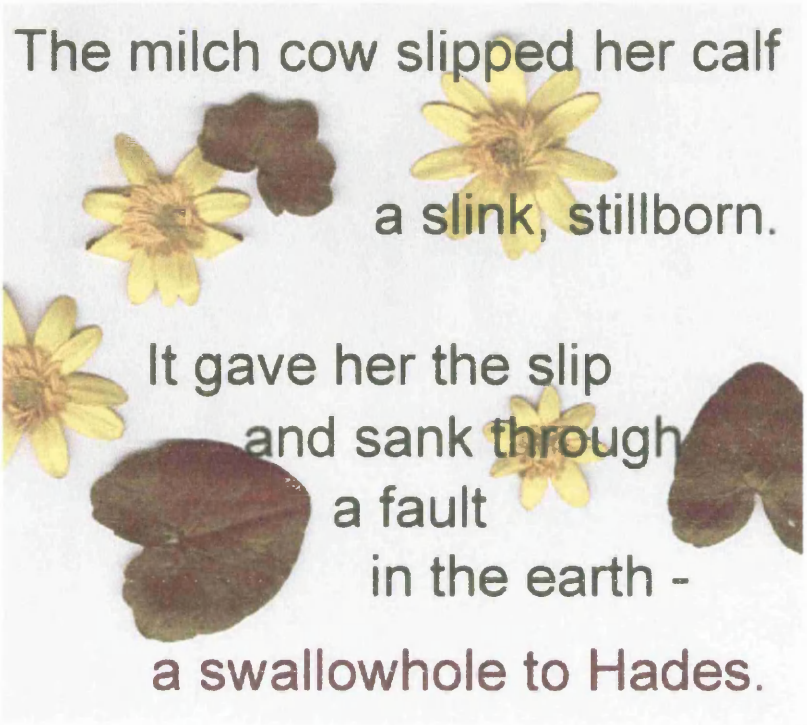
from topiary to Taxol **from junk to gesture**

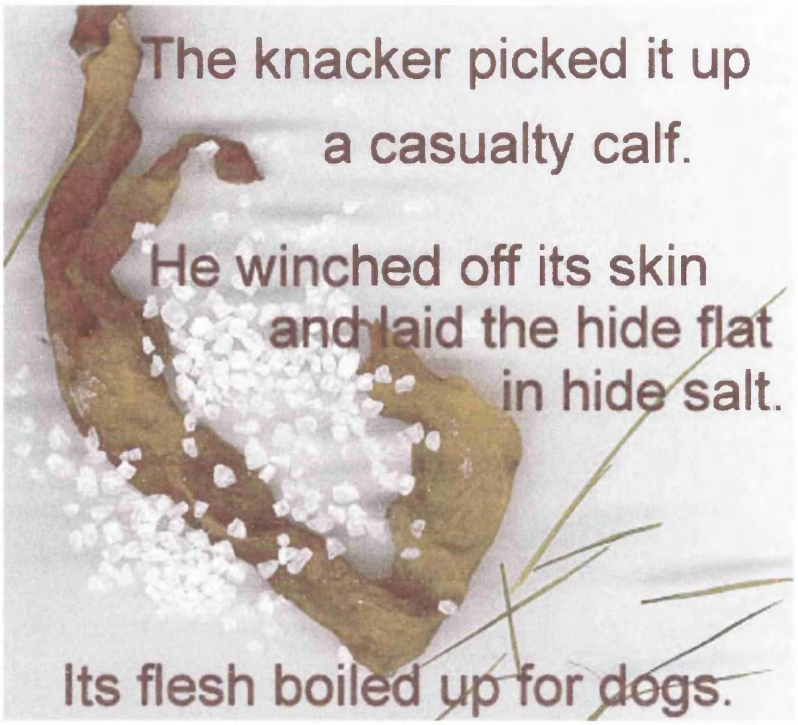
Click on a title to open a poem,
then click anywhere on a page to go to the next page

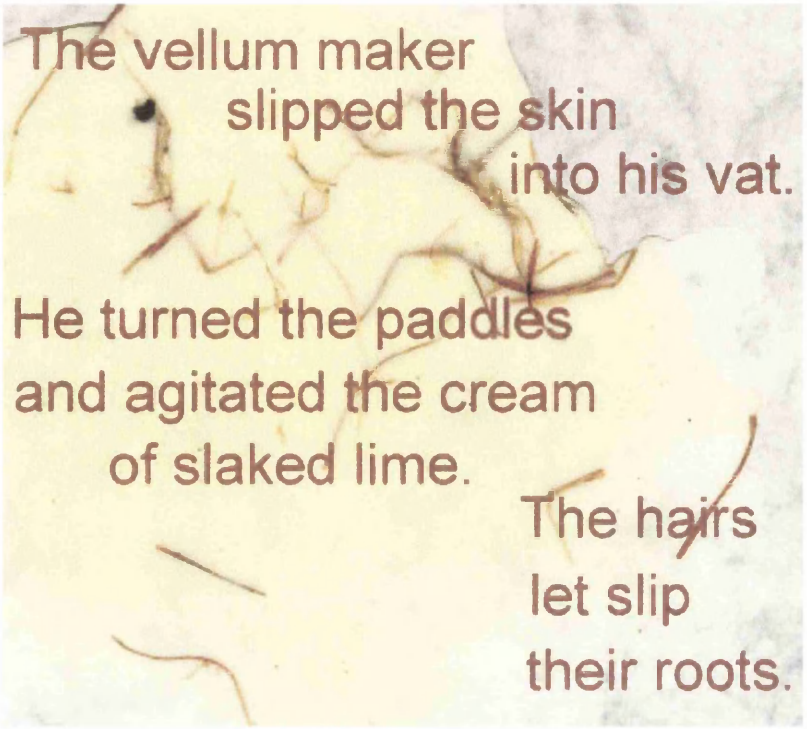


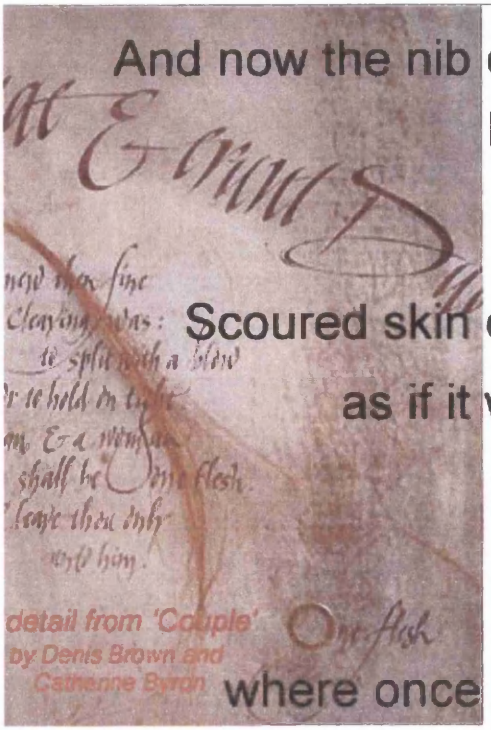
- back to Poetry Places
- CB's journal at trAce

Yew monoprints, sketchbooks,
& title painting by Eileen Coxon


The milch cow slipped her calf
a slink, stillborn.
It gave her the slip
and sank through
a fault
in the earth -
a swallowhole to Hades.


The knacker picked it up
a casualty calf.
He winched off its skin
and laid the hide flat
in hide salt.
Its flesh boiled up for dogs.

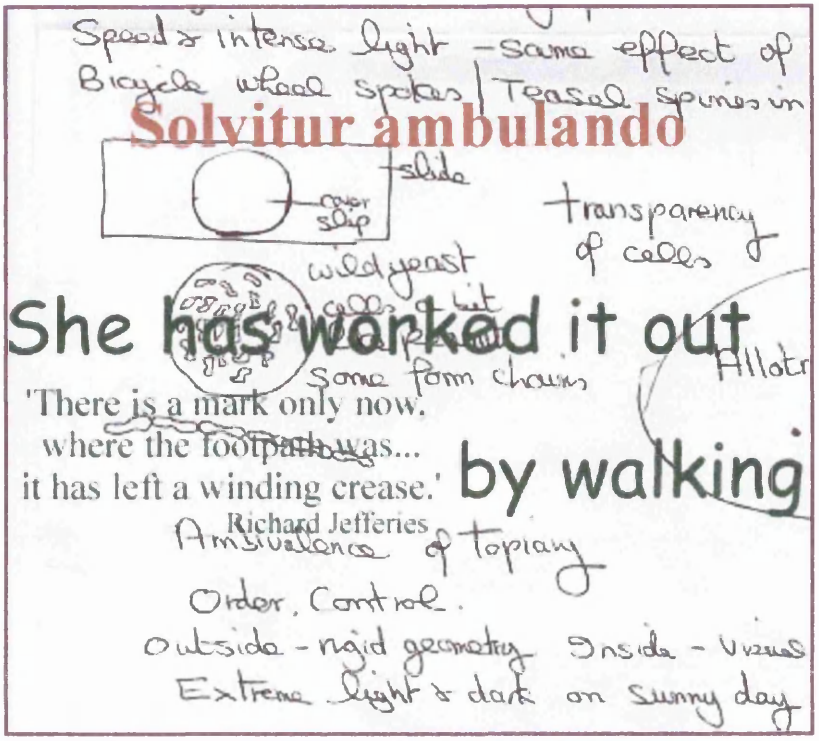

The vellum maker
slipped the skin
into his vat.
He turned the paddles
and agitated the cream
of slaked lime.
The hairs
let slip
their roots.



And now the nib of the letterer
bites the nap.

Scoured skin drinks ink
as if it were paper.

Is inscribed
where once veins ran.


Speed & intense light - same effect of
Bicycle wheel spokes | Teasel spines in
Solvitur ambulando
slide
cover slip
transparency of cells
wild yeast
cells
She has worked it out
Some form chaos
Allotr
'There is a mark only now.
where the footpath was...
it has left a winding crease.'
by walking
Richard Jefferies
Ambivalence of topiary
Order. Control.
Outside - rigid geometry
Inside - Viscous
Extreme light & dark on sunny day

'Galway'

Note

The poems added to the 1985 version of the 'Galway' sequence are:

'After the Wedding at Aughrim'

'Family Circle'

'The Emigrant's Return'

OTHER WORKS BY CATHERINE BYRON

Settlements (Taxus, 1985)

Samhain (Taxus/Aril, 1987)

Out of Step:
Pursuing Seamus Heaney to Purgatory
(Loxwood Stoneleigh, 1992)

The Fat-Hen Field Hospital
(Loxwood Stoneleigh, 1993)

SETTLEMENTS & SAMHAIN

by Catherine Byron

LOXWOOD STONELEIGH
BRISTOL

This edition first published by Loxwood Stoneleigh in 1993

Settlements first published by Taxus in 1985
Samhain first published by Taxus/Aril in 1987

The 'Galway' section of *Settlements & Samhain* contains three poems not previously collected

Designed and typeset by Falling Wall Press Ltd, Bristol
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham
Cover printed by Doveton Press Ltd, Bristol

Drawings by Catherine Byron

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Loxwood Stoneleigh
11 Colston Yard, Colston Street, Bristol BS1 5BD, England

Contents

/over

GALWAY

Dedication

The first time you were dying, every child
was summoned by the nuns and mostly came
some from continents adrift. Their rushing feet
bruised your knuckles as you hauled yourself
back up the ladder. Then there was a poise
a present time for greetings and for joy.
But soon you were riding again in the giddy trap
and crunching untarred lanes with that first bike
the country round had seen – *spoilt Catherine Sullivan*

No wonder after years were blotted out
those endless births in marriagebed and barn
always a child at the breast and a child to come
always the *I can't wait* of stock and farm.

Wedding at Aughrim, Galway 1909

'A made marriage it was
my dowry to roof his barn.
Years of sewing and saving –
quilts and sheets and shifts
lace from Carrickmacross –
and a fine sum to take
to a family down on its luck.

His mother it was that washed me
that first night
parts of me bruised into bigness
the bites, the scores.
"Alas for the women of this world"
was the word of her keening.

Boys at the well's edge
squeezing frogs in their fists
to pulp.
My brothers pouring oil
down the labourer's flungback nose
to stop his snores.

She brought me my wedding soap
towels with soft nap.
She rocked me in arms
that followed a slower song
than the ceilidh band below.

Boys on the running shore
pressing a limpet's foot
for orange innards.
Boys forking lugworms from the slob
with blunted tines.
Soft bait for lures or frassing.

His mother stands at the door
holding a whip.
Three days and nights
she will not let him come
to his own birthbed
his marriagebed.

Small boys firing the whin.
Crack! it's away.
A burning bush
no stopping it.'

After the Wedding at Aughrim

The night of his wedding
his lover thought that she
would never breathe again
to the heel of her lungs
never notice the shine on grass
heed the larks' high patter.

In the starless dark her brothers
tracked pale ruts of the road
to the brightness of dancing
where his barn scattered straws of light
on cars and carts and cycles
out in the yard. Within
guests trod *The Bridge of Athlone*
to bodhran and silver flute.
Her brothers worked with clasp-knives
and did not speak. Tyre after tyre
sighed and grunted collapse.
They called bad cess to him
under the cover of music.
Left it at that. Their sis
never could whistle him back
the way he had chosen.

He took his bride upstairs
and ached for his lover
beating, beating through
till he broke her into
the woman he wanted
till he opened his eyes
till she wept and became
herself, for how should she be
ever, ever, the other?

The kin of the other
walking away from the music
hated each step of land they paced
that was his. They hungered
for acres to keep them from
the halting midland train
to England, America.

In their different beds
lover and bride were turning
sleepless alone at half-light.
The groom was dressed and out
in his chilly yard, for there
the damped anger of voices
thrust to the man's bruised sight
those wheels grating and grounded
that had spun to his wedding.

She promises her firstborn daughters to the religious life if God will allow her to survive a dangerous miscarriage, Galway 1912

'Blood is bulging now
like a field drain
between my thighs.
I am leaching away
I am muck in a downpour.
O Christ make haste to help me.

I offer them up
doves in a cage of love
doves for your temple.
I fumble to grasp your hem
as a dam
a falling sluicegate
as a twist of rag merely
to stopper the neck
my life is leaking through.

This is a bargain clearly
a clenching of need.
I bind my daughters now
to perpetual love.
May they rest
in a peace beyond recall
sealed wells
in a yard enclosed.

I must live as a vessel
a vessel only.
Sure and to God
some day I'll bear him
his living son.'

The Black and Tans deliver her cousin's son, Galway 1921

'Didn't she step out into the yard
God love her
and see her own son's brains
scattered like mash about the flags?
And didn't she then kneel down
and gather the soggy shards
of her womb's child into her apron
carefully, as a girl gathers
mushrooms in the September fields?
And didn't she then stifle
the outbreath of her grieving
till only a whistle
or whimper of her lamentation
was heard in that place lest
the soldiers note her the more?'

One of her daughters sails for England, Dublin to Liverpool July 1932

In all sad sailings
from enormous oozy piles
of docksides
streamers ringlet down.
They catch, are clutched,
tugging cords that cross
the indrawn suck of air
as oily turmoil severs
the left and leaver.
The ship's screws
dredge up sludge
heaving momentum
from viscosity
and the lighted wall
slews from rooted cranes.
Streamers snap
plumbing slow verticals
of wharf. There is
a bass shudder
into the winking channel
as exiles turn away
to weep in their jars.
On deck the rising wind
strips flimsy twists
of streamer
from salt shrouds.
And the last buoy
falls astern.
Bay gapes to sea.

Churching: her daughter in England is delivered of her first child, Birmingham 1938

The church clanks empty after late Mass.

Returned from the far country of caring
and giving suck, she walks softly
to the familiar altar rails.
She notes the gew-gaw fleur de lys
her eye grown critical investigating
the pale and curling fronds
of her child's astonishing extremities.

She awaits the priest in an attitude
of humility, mantilla veiling
her amazement at sameness in this place only
amongst a world newmade
by her act of making.
Through the fingers of attempted prayer
she summons the hosanna tree
of the dawn of her delivery,
the sparrows' and starlings' gloria.
She hears the priest hurry
in cassock and crossed stole
from sacristy to sanctuary
and prepares her spirit for the spell
that will pronounce her
clean.

The Ancient Burial Mound on Caher Hill, Galway 1984

'I would be feared,' she said
'that you might fall
in that great gap.
We had a dog these thirty years ago
went wild there
used it as cave to rear
her pack of wildlings.
Mind yourself now
the dark is sudden and steep.

'Then there's the well,' she said
'at the caher's edge.
Many's the time I've feared to see a child
white in its grip
and I fetching the cows
from the far field –
himself away cutting turf
and the childer barred in this room
against all outside harm.
'Tis deep and never fails.
Watch you its brink.'

I climb up Caher Hill:
the drought of May has scorched the grass above
great kerbstones at its bounds. The corbelled grave
fallen to cobbles once is filled with earth
her son has carted there three winters since.

And by the southwest slope dark bittercress
and rush are the only markers of the pipes
that siphon water to the house and troughs.
The well and the caher's mouth are stopped with green.

She rocks on sore hips to the parkeen wall
to wave me back to haven. Too many years
she's nursed an absence at her hearth, and seen
her man's dead face before they coffined him.

Family Circle, Galway 1984

He sits, chair splayed,
his ruckled hunch and arms
curved in a ring-fort
round his plate of bacon.
It is lapped like the pink
wet tongues of his dogs.
Potatoes are piled and spilt
to roll at his hands' entrance
where he admits them one
by one on a fork's tines
and peels them to whiteness
soft as his unseen skin.
He eats first and alone
making his own circle.

His mother stands and waits.
She bakes the old bread still –
great wheaten discs she holds
close to her body to shave
long low cross-sections from.
Sets it on blue delf –
her wedding portion that
she owns not a saucer of,
not a cup's handle.
Lays it in the round
of her son's crouched holding:
the piece to complete it.

He rises. You'd not see
the likes of Mairtin Ryan
tipping his chair at the range
or breast-feeding his shovel.
All afternoon he digs
a great tree-shape in earth
across the bog meadow.
This day the branch ends
at tagged and whitened wire –
the mearing fence that loops
him in with the flaggers,
the yellow weed.
He sees
unseen the knotted rope
of remittances,
told beads that hold
city to farm to city.
His sisters, his girls
all have fisted their way
along it decades since.

The Emigrant's Return, Chicago to Galway 1985

How I imagined this

slow run across the stoat's
quick track in the low furrow

the fanned and pleated sedges
the straights of rush

and the humped edge of the bog
here, where my liverish hand

hardly rouses the slow
brown curds of standing water

Ryan's acres are green
to this march fence

his wetland herringboned
with straight crock drains

until it runs
with moving apparent water

its tilth open to seed
and the pacing of stock

Listen, my brother
ageing keeper of ragwort

of fields that drivel
to this sour dead end –

I never thought to find
the god of the gaps

who slipped the leash on me
there in the Windy City

here, where you hold out
lonely on old land

I lean like Ryan's Charleys
for the kissing-wire

away from sustenance

The gap-god knows
where I should be, between

soumess and stillness,
and the sweet and fecund sod

'Following Seamus Heaney to Purgatory'

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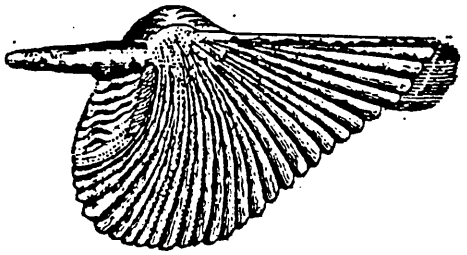

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Cover photo of Sheila Watson in Dog Creek, B.C., 1935

Following Seamus Heaney to Purgatory

by CATHERINE BYRON

I thought of walking round
and round a space utterly empty,
utterly a source, like the idea of sound....
—Seamus Heaney, "Station Island" Poem III

Circling, silence, emptiness. What was it about this very particular grouping of ideas that drew me, in the summer of 1987, to set out on a strange and disturbing pilgrimage? It was a pilgrimage that had every right to the literal religious meaning of the word — but that wasn't how I saw it before I went, no, not as far as *I* was concerned. I thought of it as a purely literary quest, a hands-on investigation into aspects of the feminine in Irish male writing, Heaney's in particular. If there was to be a religious dimension, I saw it in relation to the old Celtic religion of Ireland and Britain, rooted in place, reverencing the elements of stone and water. Christianity, and Irish Catholicism in particular, were not after all part of my life or my belief system any more — were they?

Heaney's words, first published in 1984 in his eponymous *Station Island,* were to take me, finally, physically, to Lough Derg, home of one of the most long-attested pilgrimages in Christendom; one set, as so many such shrines were, in an already-sacred pre-Christian place. Particular gaps and silences within the strange twelve-poem sequence "Station Island" that lay at the centre of his book kept haunting me: there was a resounding silence of women in Heaney's account of his half-imagined, half-remembered pilgrimage, or "station" there. Part of me was affronted by this, for in the sequence women are often present, though hovering just out of earshot, or in the corner of the eye. But I was also alerted and intrigued. I had been reading mainly women's writing for a few years now, but during more than a decade Heaney had been a male writer I always had time for. All through the seventies, when I was reading hardly anything at all — because I was running a smallholding in Scotland and bringing up babies — I'd awaited each of his collections eagerly: he wrote about home for me, the rural Ireland of my childhood, and Ulster in particular. Because I had left it, very reluctantly, at seventeen, and just before the present "Troubles" began, the place had retained a sort of Eden quality for me that coexisted with grief for the unfolding tragedies of the years that followed.

In the eighties, as I read more widely in feminist texts, I valued Heaney's ideas about the "somnambulist encounter" between feminine and masculine that he saw as essential to the creative process. Was he, in "Station Island," articulating the centrality of women's silence and absence, developing further his own long-running argument about the relation between feminine and masculine within the poet, within the country and people of Ireland, and within himself? If so, I wanted to understand what was going on. He had always seemed to me unusually — especially for an Irish male poet — alert to these nuances of gender in both creativity and nationalism. Was he making an oblique or even unconscious reference to ideas more usually found in discussions of *ecriture feminine:* that which is, as Mary Jacobus puts it in her *Reading Women,* "located in the gaps, the absences, the unsayable or unrepresentable of discourse and representation"? I decided that the only way to find out was to go to Lough Derg itself, and go during the pilgrimage season which runs from June to mid-August.

A hands-on investigation? It was to be a feet-on, and feet first one! I'd sometimes foot-stepped a poet before, but I've never had to take my shoes and socks off, and walk barefoot in circles on stone for three days while doing it. I had to fast too, and continue the relentless repetitive rounds of prayer and barefoot circling through a night vigil that kept me awake for forty consecutive hours. Before I went, I hoped that going there would illuminate my reading of Heaney's sequence. The physical and emotional demands of the pilgrimage certainly did this, though not remotely in any way that I had anticipated. What took me completely by surprise was the radical change in related areas of understanding and self-knowledge, both professional and personal: of the difficulty of being a female reader of male texts and mythologies at all; and of my own emotional baggage as a woman who was brought up as a Catholic in divided and sectarian Belfast. When I began, later, to write it all up as a book, the balance tipped more and more away from "objective" commentary. The literary "study" became autobiography, meditation, anecdote: a journal in which I declared my self — and that self's responses to much more than Heaney's sequence of twelve poems....

FROM THE JOURNAL

My travelling is straight to begin with, on the circuitous "straight" routes that take me across Ireland's boggy midlands. It continues a northwest trajectory I've taken from where I live these days, in another midlands, the shires at England's navel. Tedious hours in a bus with poor suspension. The journey on foot and in the fresh air will only begin when I reach my destination, strip off shoes and socks, and start the circling — always sunwise and barefoot — on the stone circles of Purgatory. The fasting, however, has already begun, before I even mounted the Lough Derg bus in Dublin. Only water has passed my lips from midnight. For this is the first of the three days of my "station."

THE CROSSING OVER

We have crossed the Border twice in the last hour, cutting across a salient of Northern Ireland. Just a few miles past the last border post in Pettigo, at the end of a remote, bucking bog-road in the bare hill-country of South Donegal, here it is: Saint Patrick's Purgatory, on the stony island where legend has it that the man spent forty days and forty nights alone in prayer. It was a territorial takeover: this *temenos* sacred to the female spirits of stone and water, and held in the lough's round eye, was summarily pitched on by Patrick for Christianity 1,500-odd years ago. Was that when its punitive, purgatorial tradition began?

I must pay cash for my spell in Purgatory, for my minimal bed and board there. Eleven Irish punts or ten pounds in sterling, handed in at a kiosk window at the top of a windswept concrete ramp that goes down to the lough. I am given an aluminum disc that covers the palm of my hand: a coin for the ferryman who will ship me over. This place is a serious purgatory, a rehearsal for death's irrevocable one-way trip. In the middle ages sinners came from all over Europe to be walled into its funereal cave, in order to sweat out their misdeeds, and have visions of hell with which to terrify the living on their return. This place is an ancient entrance to the Underworld, a Hades, a Purgatorio. (Dante knew of it.) Does the freckled boy who takes my silver disc know he is standing in for Charon?

My bus companions and I pile into the last boat of the day with the rest of the waiting pilgrims. Charon starts the outboard, and the "crack" begins. We're laughing, light-headed. Where are you from? How many times have you done your station? The fools that we are! And what will the good Lord do to us in the way of weather? The wind is cold off the water and there's a shower darkening the lough's desolate western shore, but the journey takes only a few minutes. We are already across the short channel before the squall reaches us. Charon hoists us and our small hand-luggage over the gunwale. We are on the concrete, and soon will be walking on the grass and soil and stone of Station Island.

As I walk, still shod, into the small open space between the high buildings (hostels, basilica, presbytery, church) it's like being in a busy city piazza that has been dropped, inexplicably, into the midst of wilderness. There are hundreds of pilgrims, chatting, reading, or doing their rounds on the stone "beds" lost in prayer. How was it that, despite all I've read about the popularity of the place, I'd expected my "station" to be a solitary communing with wild waters and hills, and to have nothing as civilized as lawn or — yes! — *pavement* under my feeling feet?

THE FIRST DAY: THE POEMS

Straightaway I have to start playing the part of a pilgrim! To strip off shoes and socks, and set to, with rosary beads and bowed head. (I have had to borrow a set of beads, when no one was looking, from a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes on a landing in the hostel.) I have dumped my few belongings in the grim third-floor dormitory to which I have been assigned, taken my sheet of instructions, and come down to start my "station." For a very short time the unaccustomed sense of belonging, of unquestioned acceptance by my fellows, laps me round with an unexpected and long-forgotten comfort: community. It is assumed that I am one of us. The familiar accents lull me too, especially the accents of Ulster: all around me the cadences and word-music of my childhood drift past in the conversations and murmured prayers of my companions.

This sense of safety, of community, doesn't last long. Very early in those penitential rounds we have to stand one by one with our backs to Saint Brigid's cross, our arms outstretched like a crucifixion, and say three times: "I renounce the World, the Flesh, and the Devil." Suddenly I realize what a crazy situation I am in. Literary research? That's a laugh. But if I'm not prepared to make my station in all seriousness, why am I here? I walk across to the stone cross built into the basilica wall, and turn so that it is at my back. The four storeys of the men's hostel close off all view and sunlight. I am in their shadow. Pilgrims who have repeated their

mouthed renunciations move away and start on their beads. Fresh ones join me at the wall. I know now that I cannot say these words, with all their skewed and gnostic impedimenta. So I tell the flickers of the wind from the unseen lough that I *rejoice* in the world. I *rejoice* in the flesh. Just for the moment though, I leave out the Devil.

I half expect a thunderbolt to fall on me from God's medieval arsenal. I am lapsed. I am living in sin. What has brought me to this heartland of my childhood faith is a spiritual curiosity in the widest sense, and not — I hope — any stirring of repentance for my long agnosticism. But I am stirred, and — yes! — scared. I am not believer enough to knuckle under and mouth the proper words, nor — I am disturbed to discover — agnostic enough to regard them as meaningless. Have I presumed too much on my old religion, and — worse — on my own self in coming here? "But all this you were clear of you walked into / over again. And the god has, as they say, withdrawn." The words of one of the ghosts that haunted Heaney at the same point in the pilgrimage echoes round my head. It was poetry, not faith, that brought me here, surely? But never have the two felt so uncomfortably intertwined.

As the first day's devotions continue, my discomfort with the situation grows. I also realize, with considerable annoyance, that Heaney's supposed poetic pilgrimage does not conform neatly to the prescribed pattern of the real one. I am more and more envious and fed up, as the persona of his poems walks the wrong way round the basilica, walks right out of the evening Mass, and avoids altogether being bolted into the basilica for the communal all-night vigil. Fine for him, I think bitterly. Why didn't I do it as a teenager as he did, and lots of my schoolfriends, so that I had memories of the place to draw on in my misguided attempt to understand his sequence? Then I wouldn't need to be so literally caught up in the pilgrimage's every grim detail now. What is worse, I seem to have this masochistic and surprisingly religious conviction that if I don't at least try to do it properly just this once, I won't get anywhere near the heart of the pilgrimage's meaning. And it isn't just important in Heaney's work. There's O'Faolain's intriguing "Lovers of the Lake"; and Patrick Kavanagh and Dennis Devlin both wrote long poems set on the island. I am particularly fond of Kavanagh's.... All men, though. I can't think of any women who have written about it so centrally — or at all, come to that. I wonder why?

And now, as I follow the relentless demands of the pilgrimage devotions I begin to lose touch with my optimism about Heaney's sequence. I'm no longer so much curious about the way he keeps the women in its poems shadowy, on the margins, inarticulate and unnamed: I resent it. The closest glimpse we get is of a girl's golden-skinned back in a party dress — but she never turns around, we never see her face. Am I getting obsessive about these absences? Is the island affecting my judgement?

Gradually it comes to me that there are indeed feminine aspects at the heart of his sequence, disturbing and questionable ones. For I see that the articulate male ghosts from Heaney's past offer progressively more troubled exemplars of a sort of negative feminization. It's bizarre — and it's closely allied both to their Catholicism *per se* and their powerlessness as Ulstermen. "Whatever you say, say nothing" has been the watchword of the minority community there: a subject people well schooled in humouring those with the upper hand. These men have mastered (mistressed?) the stereotypical feminine qualities of passiveness, self-abnegation, guilt and self-blame — it's no wonder that there's no space for the women who hover at the edges of Heaney's poems to move into articulate centre stage!

Ghost by ghost the men take on a surrogate female existence that inexorably culminates in that supreme self-sacrifice and denial of nurture: the hunger strike. The ninth poem tells of the death of one of Heaney's East Derry neighbours in the Maze hunger strike of 1981: the unbearable ultimate in the alliance of violence and passivity. The method of protest pioneered by the suffragettes is taken over by young men fired by the worn Easter 1916 rhetoric of blood-sacrifice for Mother Ireland. This is a readiness to die "for the cause," not just in the heat of battle or even in front of a firing squad, but in a long-drawn-out *in*action. This is non-violent protest by men convicted of violent acts, who want to be seen as soldiers rather than criminals. It is a non-violence that becomes, day by painful day, terminal violence against themselves.

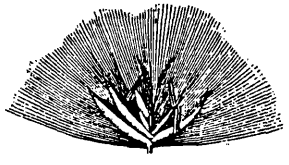
Heaney the pilgrim's response to this is the stuff of nightmare:

All seemed to run to waste
As down a swirl of mucky, glittering flood
Strange polyp floated like a huge corrupt
Magnolia bloom, surreal as a shed breast.
—Poem IX

It's as if everything feminine is blighted and polluted. The well, the source, the ditch, all the Heaney-beloved rural images of dung and seed and grass fall away from the poem's innermost heart. The very countryside in which he, and the hunger-striker Francis Hughes, and another ghost, his murdered cousin Colm McCartney, spent their boyhood, is worm-eaten and mildewed.

But that shed breast! Not only have the symbols of fertility been polluted, and feminine qualities hijacked and perverted by the suffering males of the poems. The women that do appear at the margins are progressively only fragments of themselves: a mild mouth, a honey-skinned back, a voice of lamentation, a severed breast. When Heaney-the-pilgrim wakes, on the last day of his imagined pilgrimage, to a hearth in the hostel that is also a hearth of remembered home, it's no surprise that there is no female presence there at all.

All the traditional Irish iconography of the female — farming and fertility, kitchen and hearth, Mother Ireland and Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Our Lady herself — has taken on the tarnish of this shadow-feminizing of the dead men in Heaney's purgatory. If only he showed, in the remaining three poems of the sequence, some awareness of the extraordinary and complex area of sexual politics that the first nine of them suggest! But in his last three poems, the poet turns away to abstract consolations, and to other more self-possessed male company. Authority (patriarchal, of course) is restored in various ways. If the feminine is so dangerous, or so debilitating, men had really better keep clear of it. Work-lust is to be preferred to the other sort!



THE SECOND DAY: THE FAITH

I grit my teeth as I toil through the night vigil. What makes me crosser than anything is that Heaney-the-pilgrim, nightmares notwithstanding, has apparently escaped this, the grimmest part of the pilgrimage. His imagined "station" can be very selective when it comes to the duties, but I'm stranded in the physical reality of mine. He's off hobnobbing with the ghost of James Joyce at the ferry house carpark already, while I'm stuck in here, desperately trying to stay awake while mumbling an endless rigamarole of prayers in unison with hundreds. For the first "station" of the night we are ceremonially bolted inside the basilica, to remind us of the ancient custom of walling pilgrims into Saint Patrick's underground cave for *ten days*. For nearly an hour we reenact the outside circling stations — round and round the broken stone walls of the beehive cells, onto the lough-lapped stones at the water's edge — except that we are doing it indoors, rectangulating in a long huddle and straggle round the pews and aisles of the basilica. Shuffling, kneeling, standing up again, shuffling. And doing it all together. Then we are given twenty minutes in the blowy night air to wake us up, and it all starts again. We're still barefoot, of course. And, I suddenly realize, we are overwhelmingly women. (The official figure, I discover later, is that seven out of ten pilgrims are female.) Why do women feel so much more strongly the need to supplicate and appease a male God? It's obvious, I suppose wearily — but it rankles.

It is after one in the morning. It is after three. Fasting means little on this vigil, even boredom is strangely suspended. It is sleep that drags at us and threatens to pull us down. Staying awake demands a level of concentration that I last remember needing when I was in labour. The pressure for sleep comes in waves that arrive closer and closer together, like the unmanageable pain of contractions that I must again and again rise to, find ways of getting through. What birth, though, will follow *this* travail?

This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,
As freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go
—Emily Dickinson, Poem 341

In this long night I am far from Heaney, far from poetry, far from the cool self who brought me here on a purely literary quest. I am the Catholic child who hid in the hedge as the Orangemen marched past with fife and Lambeg drum near my Belfast home every Twelfth of July. I am the Child of Mary who strewed flower petals before her statue in more intimate processions at my convent schools. I am the child bride of twenty years ago. Once a Catholic, always a Catholic? This forced immersion in the practice of my old religion has shown me that though I lapsed from it in the turning-point summer of 1968, it has schooled me most efficiently for my role as a woman. I'm very "good" at being passive, self-abnegating, guilty — especially in relationships with men.

Perhaps because everything is in English now, no longer in the Latin of my childhood, the immense importance of the male in every aspect of the liturgy assaults me. Everything about this religion, on the surface at least, is so much kinder and more human than it was

in my scruple-ridden childhood in Belfast. Yet still the only role-model offered to me, and the hundreds of other women here, is that of God's mother: nurturing, serving, and keeping a low profile. And innocent — naturally — of sex. The patriarchal assumptions are stifling. I *knew* all this, of course — but only with my head. On the marble floors of Saint Patrick's basilica I am learning from the soles up that, lapsed or no, this all-embracing patriarchy moulded too much of my character for comfort. Is forty too late to work on a new model, and outside all institutions? I think hollow-hearted about the man I live with now. How automatically, despite our protestations of feminist intent, we keep falling into old patterns of polarity. Do our heads and our hearts have no control, then, over habits of response formed for us so assiduously in our childhood's culture? Is there no hope that individuals can, even partially, remake themselves?

THE THIRD DAY: ON THE ROAD

Leaving the island is an intensely lonely experience. There is no one to take my hand as I climb out of the boat and reenter the "real" world. I feel cut off from my childhood, but also entangled in its aftermath. So where has it left the poet I've almost forgotten about? Ah, he took the "fish-cold and bony" hand of James Joyce ages ago, and with it some confirming advice. Is it because I am so bruised by my brush with a forgotten but intimate patriarchy that I resent the robustly masculine tone of Joyce's advice (ventriloquized of course by Heaney himself)? Joyce, city man par excellence, whose Molly Bloom never rises from the supine during the whole of *Ulysses*, has nothing to say to the feminine side of Heaney's once-androgynous muse. He tells the poet to be active and solitary.

Keep at a tangent.
When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim

out on your own and fill the element
with signatures on your own frequency,
echo soundings, searches, probes, allurements

elver gleams in the dark of the whole sea.

—Poem XII

No more circling for Heaney, then. It's the straight line of a tangent from now on. "Poor men with their linear time," says the poet Gillian Allnutt, "stretching away into an infinity that defeats the imagination. They don't understand that it all goes round and round, going away and coming back like the moon." Neither the "listening for poems" in wise passiveness, nor the "somnambulist encounter" between masculine and feminine in himself and his subject matter, is the metaphor for creativity that he favours now. Instead he psyches himself up to act as a sort of Captain Nemo of the poetic deeps: questing, invasive, egotistical. Has he been, then, utterly unaware of the conflicts and shifts that his pilgrimage has uncovered, that he can leave it behind on so assured a path?

Well, let him go. I have several hours yet of fasting if I am to complete my station, but my first aim is to get to Enniskillen and try to hire a car. I need, quickly, to make my own circle, a wider one than any performed on this narrow crowded spot. I am going to the wild familiar places of the west of this same county, County Donegal.

Half-deliberately I travel in a sinister, not a right- or sunwise arc. I drive north and west to the Bloody Foreland, and then drop south, zigzagging bay by bay down to the country of my heart. Rosses, Gweebarra, Dawros, Glencolumbkille: the southwesternmost estuaries and peninsulas of the ancient province of Ulster. At Narin in Dawros I strip my feet bare once more, this time to squelch them through bog and tidal sand, and wade in the Atlantic.

All over the west of Ireland, during June, July and the first half of August, pubs and hotels are ready to lay on a midnight supper for pilgrims from Lough Derg. But long before midnight on my third "station" day I have already broken my fast on wild raspberries and sorrel leaves. It's the closest to pagan I have managed to get all trip. But the loved strands and bays of my childhood places cannot assuage the growing feeling of bereavement. When I return the hired car and catch the Dublin bus a few days later, I feel that I have lost faith with the sense of Ireland and my own Irishness that has shaped me and my own creativity. There is a great danger of romanticizing when one lives away from one's native land, and looks at it through the exile's distorting glass. Is seeing it suddenly in focus what ails me?

LEAVING

This is the first time I will have returned from Ireland cast down and troubled. My previous pilgrimages to the West have been the essential other life that makes my sea-less city existence in England's Midlands bearable. Now not all the barefoot rounds in wild Donegal

can dismiss the larger-scale images of waste and suppression that I hold in my mind's eye from both Station Island itself and Heaney's sequence. The strong sense of the feminine that drew me to this difficult pilgrimage is seen so exclusively through male consciousness — both Heaney's and the Church's — that it is distorted beyond usability for me, but not, sadly, beyond recognition.

How much their vision *needs* the silence of its women, and women's madonna smile! Where can I turn to hear a real heterodoxy in this land? One that offers me a way of respecting the female experience in Ireland, finding a value in it that at this moment eludes me? For I have taken into myself that distortion, taken too much to heart the pollution and drought at Heaney's heartland and mine. The male orthodoxy of Ireland has revealed itself to me as it never has before, on my earlier sentimental and sheltered journeys to the West.

Heaney's voice may be a mite heterodox on the island's strict Catholic terms, but it seems to assume a patriarchal men-only version of the world with just the same easy unconsciousness of difference as the priests do: it is, after all, "the norm" to be male. And what a weight of male poets there is in Ireland! The handful of women who have made their names in the past have been balladeers of religious or nationalist sentiment — no nourishment there, not for our times. The women who publish now are thin on the ground, and close to me in age. In Ireland I have had to look to the male poets as forerunners — or look elsewhere altogether. There is a strange but explicable lack of the foremothers Virginia Woolf recommended us to seek out.

So. I have followed Heaney's footprints, and found that on Station Island the steps don't fit. Will I now return to other parts of his work and find dissatisfactions there as well? Must the rereading of once-loved texts after I have stumbled, clumsily, half-aware, onto a new level of feminist consciousness always be an experience of disappointment and loss?

For so much of my life I have read poetry and fiction, whether by women or men, as though I were a man! The study of literature and the canon of works deemed classics have been so heavily male — not just in Ireland — that I and many women became honorary males of the mind when entering the field, just as in childhood we became honorary boys: climbing trees, making bows and arrows, and wearing our grubby and torn clothing with pride.

Does the shift in attention, my starting to hear the silences of women, inevitably mean a loss of sympathy with so much that I have been nourished by in the past? On the other hand, ideas that have only been ideas to me begin to take on flesh. Luce Irigaray's proposition, for instance, that male representations of women distance us from our psychic identities. "We are," Irigary says, "alienated from our being through existing in language only as a negative, a "hole," and through the psychic processes, determined in part by language, whereby we acquire our identities as women." And Toril Moi, in *Feminism and Poetry,* says that it is "the repression of her meaning that makes his thought possible." Those unspeaking, unindividualized women of "Station Island," that disembodied breast in the ninth poem — how can I read of them unquestioningly from any perspective other than the male one that I have been trained in from childhood? As reader and as woman I have no ground to stand on here. I too am an absence — where I thought I was in the land of my heart.

I am close to a despair that is to do with both Irish society, and myself. I even begin to wonder whether I will ever want to return to Ireland after this trip. The internment on Station Island has told me harsh truths about my own identity. As the evening ferry swings out of Dun Laoghaire on its way to Holyhead I do not, as usual, stay up on deck to watch the last outlines of Ireland slip into sunset: Wicklow's Sugarloaf to the south, the Hill of Howth and Ireland's Eye to the north. This time I am not sad at all to be leaving. I only wish that the boat could stay forever in the waters of Saint George's Channel, and never have to make landfall on the coast of either of my countries.

'The Most Difficult Door'

Women's Lives into Print

The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Auto/Biography

Edited by

Pauline Polkey

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The Most Difficult Door

CATHERINE BYRON

Be wary, but don't fear the darkening street.
I give you this, my opened map of flight.

The Most Difficult Door
(Rumens 1987: 67–9)

The first and only week that my Irish grandmother and my English grandmother spent together in the house of my childhood was early in the summer I turned thirteen. Thirty-seven years later, I remember it as the only still point of my shifting, shifty genetic inheritance and of my ambiguous nurturing. 'Mongrels', my brother and I used to call ourselves. We were so very conscious of belonging to neither the Ireland our mother came from, nor the England of our father. We were growing up in Belfast, chief city in the country of neither parent, Northern Ireland, and within a social and intellectual community where it was assumed we were Protestants. We were in fact practising Roman Catholics. Well, three of us were; my father was argumentatively agnostic.

Looking back, it seems extraordinary that our two grandmothers had not met before. There were unimpeachable reasons why neither of them had made it to our parents' wedding, but I feel sure that the ceremony itself, if not the union, would have offended them both if they had been there. A Roman Catholic marriage service, but with no Nuptial Mass? Neither would have been happy. For the two women were, even for the period, unusually fervent holders of their own highly coloured and dramatically opposed beliefs. My father's mother was a deeply religious strict Methodist, the wife of a headmaster, from England's south coast. My mother's mother was a deeply religious Roman Catholic who had run, almost single-handed, her husband's small farm in East Galway. What on earth would they make of one another when they met at last, for the first time, eighteen years after their son and daughter's wartime marriage? They would be under the same roof at long last. That

was, however, in the province that was the unaccommodated relict of the centuries-long conflict between their countries and their faiths.

The house itself, in a cul-de-sac called Holyrood, was jerry-built late Victorian; the tell-tale orange dust of dry rot fungus kept coming to light in new places, and the hallway was particularly prone to its invasive threads of mycelium. The early summer that my grandmothers came, the hall floor was not, as usual, having new planks pieced into it. My mother was relieved. It was bad enough that the two women, both in their seventies, had to go all the way up to the guest room on the top floor, which with the turns and half-landings meant four substantial flights of stairs. For my brother and me the attic storey was far snugger than our draughty first floor bedrooms, and in every way more desirable. The guest-room had what my mother called a queen-sized bed, almost half as wide again as our narrow singles. We were never, ever, allowed to sleep in it. I dream that I do, sometimes, even now.

My parents were that classic courtship couple, a doctor and a nurse. They were brought together by the war in London's time of greatest peril, and then their city centre hospital was evacuated into the country. They fell in love for keeps there, cycling along the deeply leafy lanes of Buckinghamshire. When they married in a nearby (Catholic) church in 1943, were they sad, or secretly relieved, that neither of their mothers was there? My father's mother was ill with heart trouble. My mother's mother could not leave either farm or Ireland, not during what the Irish government called 'The Emergency' – elsewhere known as 'The Second World War'. It would take those 18 years before the two women set eyes on each other for the first – and last – time. How utterly astonished both my parents were when they did finally meet, and loved each other immediately. They stayed on together in Holyrood – did they really share that queen-sized bed? – for more than a week. The joint visit was unplanned, unexpected, and a complete success.

'The really glorious moment was when the two of them were sitting side by side, watching the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Kent on that first television we had. How they both adored a royal wedding!' my mother told me, marvelling still at that common ground between them when she spoke of it a month later, a year later; speaks of it even now when she is older than they were when it happened.

Four years on, though, from that legendary, healing week, things were very different. It was within days of my English grandmother's

sudden death in London. I found my mother in distraught tears that were different from her initial grief and shock.

'Can you believe it?' she asked me. 'I've just heard it from the solicitor. Granny has left Ian Paisley money in her will.'

'What? Ian Paisley?'

'Well, not by name. But she's left it to his organisation. "To help in the good fight of the Protestant Truth against the Church of Rome." And I loved her. I thought she loved me. I thought she'd accepted me as her daughter, despite the religion. Now I feel I hardly knew her after all.'

It was one of the very few occasions in my life when my mother could not find the words that would hold together the wound in her that was her 'mixed marriage'.

Through all the Belfast years our home was a microcosm of our parents' bifurcated life, its uneasy balance of power and appeasements. How expert we the children became in the subterfuges and the well-chosen silences that kept our father sweet. For he was understandably bitter about the promises he had been forced into making by the Church in order to marry my mother: that any children were to be raised and schooled as Catholics. We worked very hard to minimise his day-to-day awarenesses and hurt. My mother first and then my teachers – all nuns from Ulster homes – schooled me expertly in what Seamus Heaney has called 'the government of the tongue'. Sometimes I think that my friends and relations who have grown up in the South, the Twenty-Six Counties, the Republic, whatever you want to call it, have no idea how beleaguered and placatory and colonised a version of Catholicism we Northerners were raised in – men as well as women.

Then it all came to an end. My brother and I returned one July from our respective religious boarding schools, and found the carpets already lifted, the furniture already sent for crating or to the salerooms. There were faint shadows on the walls where pictures and plates had hung. We were moving, we were told, to London.

In that blessed, baggy house, all the impossibilities and tensions of our parents' unlikely coupling had been, somehow, contained. The strangeness for both of them of living in a half-alien place with smouldering sectarian tensions that half-matched their own had – I think, I guess – made their own split loyalties more manageable. After they left Belfast, and settled uneasily into a tiny just-built town-house in the London suburbs, things were difficult between them for a long time. I left home soon enough to escape the worst

of it. I even took the radical step of marrying when I was still only nineteen, and a student, to ensure that I got away completely. The oddest thing of all, looking back, is that I married an Englishman, and buried all my Irishness, and my plans to be a writer. I forgot a great part of my self, like so many other young women who have come over from Ireland, South or North, down the decades of this century. Irish women have been experts in assimilating, intermarrying; in burying both the shame and the pride of coming from Ireland.

So I married my Englishman – who was in fact, as we later discovered, half-Irish – and, in an out-of-sequence version of the Sleeping Beauty story experienced by many more women than me, I fell asleep. At my prince's kiss I began a sleep that took away my country, my poetry, and a large part of my self.

When I woke up, I was ten years into my marriage.

1977: THE FIRST AWAKENING: NIGHT FLIGHT

I wake from the nightmare, terrified.

'Army! Open up!' Soldiers are crashing first their fists and now the heavy butts of their guns against our front door. The panel near the lock is beginning to split, splintering inwards. I am back in the hall of Holyrood, and in the midst of an army raid. What or who are they after?

> 'Number sixteen! Open up!' the soldiers cried.
> But our house was number four...
> I was trapped in the wrong house
> the wrong dream
> and soldiers kept on banging
> at that unknown door. (Byron, 1993: 47)

I am writing it down, catching it, trying to hold it steady. It arches away from my grasp like a landed fish. In the nightmare I'm home, I'm in Belfast – and yet it's not right, somehow it's not right. Only when the soldiers call out 'Number sixteen!' do I realize that I'm not in 4 Holyrood. The house in the nightmare is then instantly unfamiliar, very grand, and decorated entirely in bright shades of orange. The poem that appears on the scrap of envelope I've scrabbled round for beside the bed is almost automatic writing. It is the first poem I have written for ten years.

The place where I have woken is Avonbank, a small farmhouse twenty miles south of Glasgow, in the southwest of Scotland. Here I am with my husband and two small daughters, plus six goats, two pigs, twelve laying hens and one crazy cockerel. I must shake off both terror and the shreds of sleep, and get up. So many living creatures rely on me here. 'Always the *I can't wait* of stock and farm' (Byron, 1993: 29). This is not quite the tough economy of subsistence farming that my Galway grandmother struggled in, but it's tough none the less. No time or space in my heart to think of the Belfast I have never once returned to: no space even for taking in, really taking in, the doorstep shooting of a relative, an uncle by marriage, who was murdered two years since when he answered a knock on his door, just a street away from my ur-house, my Holyrood.

This is the third year we have lived in the West of Scotland. The baked goods trouble me. They are too like Belfast goods: thin freckled potato cakes to pan-fry for bacon and egg breakfasts, soft triangular soda farls, wax-wrapped loaves of sliced white pan. Other things are unsettling too: the segregation of schools and of children into Catholic and Protestant; the announcements in the local press of Orange Lodge meetings; the very accents and cadences of Glasgow speech. Dead ringers, too often, for Belfast.

We have so little cash to spare, but on just one day each year I insist on leaving the farm and the children, and going alone into Glasgow, to the bookshop where I will spend the day deciding which paperback I will take back to Avonbank as my essential ration for the year ahead. The first year I bought Seamus Heaney's *Door into the Dark*. This year I bought his *North*. Is it his words that have entered my dreams and turned them into nightmares? Or is it my dreams that have made me open to his words? My brain is so scrambled by babies and animals that I only read the children's books these days. Heaney's poetry is the one grown-up text I can cope with. Strange to remember, dimly, that I took two degrees at Oxford before dropping out, turning off, mucking in.

My Galway grandmother, hearing that we keep goats, is deeply ashamed for us. When she was farming, only the landless kept goats. They could graze them on 'the long acre' – the roadside verges. It was all the grazing they had.

'Ah, they must have fallen on hard times, God love them,' she writes to my mother. When my mother comes up from England to visit us, she laughs at the way we play at farming. I think I am being very radical, but what does that word mean? Perhaps I am

literally returning to roots, rather than making new ones. And I'm not even very good at it. My husband and I learn how to handle our goats and hens from books. We were not, like her, brought up to farming. Our animals again and again have a hard time of it through our well-meaning, townie ignorance.

That nightmare gives me the first poem. Later I title it 'Night Flight to Belfast'. But I will get no closer to writing another until four years have passed: when we have left the farm, and left the west of Scotland.

1981: THE SECOND AWAKENING: DRIVING NORTHWEST

It is breakfast time in the English Midlands, early September. My daughters have settled into the new school year. There is a week before term begins at the Art College where I've got a part-time job. I say – to all three of the family, out of the blue – 'I think I'm going to drive to Ireland today.'

Last week I noticed – where? – that the ferry fares to Ireland fall to the winter rate today. I've also noticed on a map that the trunk road we now live near, the A5, goes northwest from here across England and Wales, straight to Holyhead: the ferry port for Dun Laoghaire in Dublin Bay.

'I'm going to drive to Donegal.' The plan is unfolding as I speak. I have never spent a night away from the children before, but the time is suddenly right. My husband is so astonished he agrees, and the girls are surprisingly calm. I promise them I'll be back for the weekend, see them all off to work and school, fix afterschool childcare with my neighbour, and start throwing clothes and a sleeping bag into the car.

It is thirty-six hours later. I am standing barefoot on my beloved Narin strand in southwest Donegal. The westering sun is lost behind lowering rainclouds driven towards me by equinoctial gales, but I know the exact line of its fall into the Atlantic: between the isles of Iniskeel and Aranmore. I am alone on the rainswept, windswept strand, my chief mother-landscape all through childhood. I'm going to pitch my pup-tent on her dunes, and sleep with my ear against her intricate sward. Tomorrow I'll wake at first light to walk her sands of pounded shell and bone.

And already I'm jotting down lines, finding words that move like live creatures on the pages of my notebook. At first I'm writing of

my own return, of the seventeen-year displacement since I was last in this place – at seventeen years old. The symmetry both delights me and appalls: my life halved – or doubled? Quickly, so quickly the pressure becomes unstoppable, I know what I want to write, and the words, the lines, whole poems well up from some long-untapped source in me. I keep having to huddle, my back to the gale, in hollows of the dunes in order to take down my own dictation. I am voicing the Irish landscape's own layered witness to the past. I am speaking the unrecorded and disregarded herstory of my grandmother's rural generation of women. These are the two themes that will be at the heart of my first book, *Settlements*: the sequence that is in my grandmother's voice, 'Galway', and the sequence that gives the book its name, about the making and remaking of the land itself.

In the next four years I will write, and eventually share, then gradually publish, many of these poems. In October 1985 I will hold the first slim copy of *Settlements* in my hands, amazed. This book will be of my mother's, and her mother's, Ireland: the Republic, the Free State whose bloody birth they both witnessed. As I rejoice in the rain on Narin strand on that blessed September day in 1981 I cannot yet conceive of returning to my own differently troubled Ireland – to Belfast. Sure, haven't I far too much of the matter of the South to deal with first, to keep me circling, distancing – delaying?

I will not dare to make that journey until 1987.

AUGUST 1988: THE THIRD AWAKENING: FINISHING OUT OF STEP

> January 1987. Belfast. Everything white under snow. In all my imagined returns to the city of my childhood, there was never *snow*! Such an uncommon weather in that damp sea-city, where one season trickled rainily into the next. Or so I remember it. And did the hills always hang this close over the west of the city – or is it that their out-of-the-ordinary whiteness leans on perspective?' (Byron, 1992: 153)

Bless, me, Belfast, for I have sinned: a sin of omission. It is twenty-three years since last I walked your streets.

And now it is August of the year after that brief, strangely cloaked return. I have written the body of my first prose book,

astonished still at my staying power, I who love poetry for its brevities, its gaps, its silences. How did I ever produce the tens of thousands of words, the fourteen *chapters*, for heaven's sake, of this manuscript? There is still one last chapter to write.

It was Seamus Heaney's words that finally brought me home to Belfast, by way of St Patrick's Purgatory. His twelve poem sequence 'Station Island', published in 1985 in the collection of the same name, was the irritant that got me back over the Border from my mother's and my grandmother's Ireland, and north into my own. Crazily, I footstepped his virtual pilgrimage to St Patrick's Purgatory by doing it for real myself, last summer. First of all, in the January, I travelled to Lough Derg in the remote and unpicturesque hills of southeast Donegal, and gazed across its chill waters at the hibernating miniature city that is the Purgatory, Station Island. There were months to go before the start of the pilgrimage season, when from June to August pilgrims would crowd onto it, day after day, on their overlapping three-day 'stations'. I was trying to imagine my own intended 'station' – on a literary quest, not a Catholic one, I assured myself. I had been haunted by the odd feel to the feminine absences Heaney was clearly – unclearly? – trying to articulate within his predominantly male-peopled poem. Was it something about the place itself that had unnerved him, I wondered, that stone island set in fresh waters, pre-Christian haunt, perhaps, of the goddess? Last summer, and in the seasons of writing since, I have found much bleaker reasons. I have finally lost patience with Heaney's accounts of the feminine, whether in terms of the land, or the spirit; even – especially – in terms of the real women and men who walk on, or away, in his poem 'Station Island'.

In January 1987 I gazed, none the wiser then, but eager for the quest, across Lough Derg's waters. Then I simply drove northeast across Donegal to my aunt's house in Derry. There, I was one mile over *that* Border. The next day – how come it was suddenly so easy? – I drove on, due east, to Belfast. Automatic driving. A flying, snowbound stopover.

And now I am back again, a year and a half later. This time I have driven slowly from the south on a different trajectory, up from the Mourne Mountains through County Down. My slowness comes from terror and longing, for this time I am planning to go *all* the way home, back to Holyrood, the house of my childhood. On Down's switchback roads I realise that I have never been a driver on these roads. I left just days after I reached the legal age for a licence. So it is all the more important that I walk the last stretch home – though not barefoot, as I was on Station Island.

> Belfast without snow. And on my own ... I park the car as near the city centre as I can, and walk across the square through crowds as anonymous and absorbed as those on Station Island's lake-bound piazza. At the far end I keep on walking, out from the centre but still within the city, walking south to the house I grew up in ...
>
> My house is empty. It's a student house now, unused through the long vacation. So I can walk right up to it, and look through every ground floor window, through the letter box, into the yard. I am hungry to see it, but brace myself for the hurts.
>
> The hearths of my old home are not just cold, they have hardboard tacked over them. The plaster mouldings of its cornices are gap-toothed. Each room looks like a waiting-room. Or a boiler-room. The backyard is partly demolished, its bricks a rubble of red and the flaking whitewash of countless springtime fresh coats. There has been no whitewashing now for many springs ... (Byron, 1992: 244–5).

While I am sitting on my backyard's crumbling wall, the thump of an explosion sends a shiver through the atmosphere. Not so very far away, I think, as if I am used to this. I am unsurprised. As I walked south out of the city, I had noticed, with only a mild curiosity, the traffic slowly seizing up in both directions, and the thick throb of ever more helicopters overhead. More thumps. This is the day set for the extradition of Maze Prison escaper Robert Russell from the Republic to the North. It sounds as though West Belfast is exploding with anger and despair. And yet I feel detached, as if I'm not here, not *now*, on the twenty-sixth of August 1988. I am back in August 1964, on the day when the last contents of 4 Holyrood were crated up, and the container taken off to the docks for shipping to England.

> In Belfast *I* am the ghost, the unquiet shade stranded, like Heaney's men, in lack of acceptance and lack of understanding. A seventeen-year-old takes so little and so much into exile. I have never, I realize with a shock, been an adult here. My forced leaving of Belfast twenty-four years ago is an unfinished story. It snags me continually in its over-and-over-again stuck record of grief. How to go forward from that repetitive and finally uncreative nostalgia?

> My returns to Ireland's west have been, I see now, those of a child running to its mother for simple consolation. I have sought there the landscape of my childhood's delight, and also a more subtle and spiritual comforting. Last summer's experience at Station Island has indeed pushed me, rude and unprepared, into Experience, and made me turn away in puzzlement from the 'mother' that I now see with adult eyes ... (Byron, 1992: 246)

I realise with fear, but also a dawning relief, that I may not always need – want? – to write only about Ireland.

1992: THE FOURTH AWAKENING: WRITING THE PATERNAL LINE

My father, my mother and I are walking along the grey shale of Charmouth beach on England's south coast. A mile to the west, behind us, is Lyme Regis, the town of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, and of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. For my father it is his Eden, the enchanted boyhood place he lived in until he was eleven. It has taken until now for me attend to his shy plea back in 1985, when *Settlements* came out: 'Isn't there anything in the story of *my* side of the family that you might want to write about?' No, Dad, has been my unspoken, unvarying reply. My matter is Ireland. My *mater* is Ireland. But here we are in Dorset, walking his childhood lanes, peering through a high hedge at the house that he grew up in, well inland.

Oddly, he is more interested in the house that he *didn't* grow up in, and hurries us back to the sea. He is not sure of the number, but it was one of a row of eighteenth-century fishermen's cottages just up the hill from the Cobb, Lyme's famous and spectacular harbour.

'My mother was so sure it would fall down into the sea,' he tells us, 'she wouldn't let my father buy it. But – it's still here, seventy years later!' He is utterly astonished that so much of the Lyme Regis he remembers has not been washed away.

This stretch of the Dorset coast has a tendency to slip into the sea. Its unstable shale cliffs are a fossil hunter's dream. To many, the name Lyme Regis means fossils, and Mary Anning – who in 1810 at the age of eleven found a complete ichthyosaur on Charmouth beach – is more famous than Austen or Fowles. But my father, though he was to become a scientist, was not encouraged to follow her example. Far too dangerous. His mother was – despite the steel corset of her faith – always dreading what might be lost, rather than welcoming what might be found.

And so we are walking along Charmouth beach, under its unbuilt-on, unsecured cliffs, and my father is terrified that my mother and I will be caught in a landslip. We, heedless beachcombers, are fossicking happily in the slithered shale at the cliffs' feet, alert for ammonites. We soon find several small, glittering beauties, and then feel ready to stop ignoring my father, who has been gesticulating all this time from near the sea's edge, wanting us to join him at that safe distance. We walk on together as a threesome along the shoreline.

A muffled bang. I instinctively raise my camera from a huge ammonite glistening in a sea-pool, and photograph the tiny landslip as it happens. About two hundred yards away, stones and small boulders are bowling down to the sea, and a puff of dust goes up above the cliff face. Two walkers, startled, dodge to one side. The effect on my father is astonishing. He is like a small boy, thrilled and even triumphant.

'Mother was right! You see! She was right!'

The blown-up print of my snapshot will be the best present I give him in years. I am suddenly immensely curious about this woman.

1997: WRITING AS A FORM OF LEAVING

It took me a quarter of a century from the date of my physical departure to leave Ireland for real, but that same quarter century did not see me putting down a new taproot into English soil. 'As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country' (Woolf, 1938: 96). Yes indeed. But Virginia Woolf also told us to think back through our foremothers, advice that I still find it very difficult to disentangle from their countries when I try to think back through mine.

I'm researching my English grandmother's life now. I'm wary and circumspect, but I'm warming more and more to her testy dissenting tradition, her intransigent pacifism, her disdain for the bourgeois niceties of her sisters. Recently my father has given me the prison letters she and his father exchanged when she was interned for much of 1940 in Holloway Prison. She was arrested without warning, during the Battle of Britain, for noisily preaching

pacifism when so many other pacifists – including Virginia Woolf – had reluctantly renounced it in the face of Hitler's barbarism. My English grandmother, the more I find out about her, is difficult, intolerant: no martyr, and an uncomfortable role model in interesting ways I never imagined when, say, my mother felt so betrayed by that bequest to Ian Paisley's co-religionists. I feel increasingly drawn to her.

I am no longer just my mother's daughter, my maternal grandmother's granddaughter, in the place where it matters: my writing. Ireland was for years a sort of romance with me, a slowness, a sweetness – however bloody my subject-matters. My too-close, barefoot reading of Heaney's 'Station Island' confirmed a gut feeling that nationalism, Catholicism and the gender distortions they fostered in the North of Ireland were sickening, not sweet. I was ready to leave.

I am conscious already how much tougher – in my head and under my tapping fingers – I will be on Winifred, my father's mother, than I was, in my starry-eyed thirties, on Catherine, my mother's mother, the one I was named for. I have no idea what I will make of Winifred's – and my – England. In my fiftieth year I'm into the fascination of what's difficult. One day I may even be clear enough of country to see Catherine, too, uncanonised. No rush, though.

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‘Crypt’

‘An Appetite for Fasting?’

My Self, My Muse

Irish Women Poets Reflect on Life and Art

Edited by
Patricia Boyle Haberstroh

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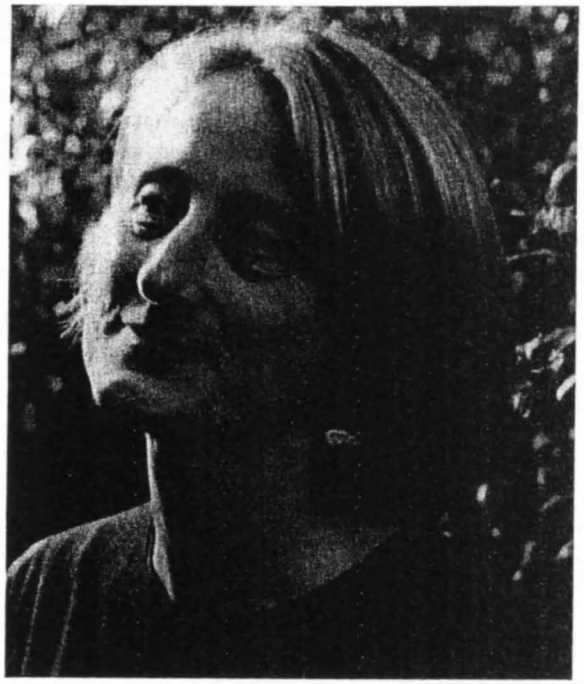

Catherine Byron. Photograph by Maxine Beuret.

Catherine Byron

II Crypt

The first examination of conscience

There are bones
haunting the fridge
with mould on them like moss.
How many years now
since my carnivore days
when I picked the cage
of a chicken carcase clean?
Oh, and that pig's head
that I boiled for brawn
in a Scottish winter.
Remember how I needed
a brick to lid down the snout
when the boiling made the gristle
rear right up with the heat?
The brawn was clear and lovely
like a cache of garnet and pearls.
Never again, though. Never again.

The second examination of conscience

Eggs in a bucket
swimming in isinglass.
Whole eggs from the hens
the shells gone leathery as turtles',
whites gone all to water
yolk sacs slack and milky
so easily torn.
How I cashed in on their
mother-frenzy, my lovely
Rhode Island Red
Light Sussex cross
layers. From point of lay
to their moulting each Nov-
ember I forced them to be
egg-crazy, egg-a-day
wonders. I laid up
their overplus, stashed eggs
like oval ghosts in a pool
against their bald eclipse.
And all infertile: I'd
coq-au-vined long since
their solo cock of the coop.
Never again. I'll not
swallow any of that.
I have no stomach for it.

The third examination of conscience

When I bought the cleaver
at the butcher's suppliers
in the cold hinterland of East Kilbride
the man behind the counter
asked me quite straight
did I get on, like,

with my old man?
Fine.

Oh, I knew then fine
what cleaving was:
to split with a blow
or to hold on tight.
A man and a woman
shall be one flesh.
Cleave thou only
unto him. One flesh.

(from Byron, "Coffin. Crypt.
Consumption." 2000, 7–8)

An Appetite for Fasting?

> A poem can't free us from the struggle for existence, but it can uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulating emergencies of our lives, the fabricated wants and needs we have had urged on us, have accepted as our own.
>
> —Adrienne Rich (1993, 12–13)

Ten years ago I was barefoot on a crowded island of penance, St. Patrick's Purgatory on Lough Derg in County Donegal. It was a poem that had drawn me there; not at all, I thought, my long-collapsed Catholic faith. Over in England I had been trying to explain aspects of Seamus Heaney's sequence *Station Island* (1984) to baffled fellow readers of his work. Like him, I had grown up Catholic in Northern Ireland. Surely, friends said, I could tell them what he was on about in this poem that sat so uncomprehended at the heart of his collection of the same name. The more I read the sequence, the more I felt the need to find answers to queries of my own. I wanted to be bodily in that place to listen out for the female voices whose silences and absences had intrigued me down the years in Heaney's previous work. In *Station Island* they had become resonantly out of earshot, but unquestionably there. The words of another poet nagged at me: "I do not know which to prefer, / . . . The blackbird whistling / Or just after" (Stevens 1955, 93). I loved the Zen way in which Wallace Stevens paired a sound with its shadow-silence, giving equal

weight to each. Heaney's comparable pairings in *Station Island,* of sound and its silence, presence and its air-held absence, lacked Stevens's purity. Their emptiness and voicelessness referred only to women, or to girl-children. His male ghosts might not be embraceable, but they could certainly speak.

I wanted to see whether, as a woman, and walking barefoot on the ancient sacred site of stone and water built over by more than a millennium of Christianity, I could hear the audible female silences, touch the palpable female absences so intriguingly implied in a sequence that was, amongst many other things, the autobiography of a male poet's soul. I was feeling both uneasy and optimistic about Heaney's recent work: he was a poet whose writing had long had an ambiguous gut-hold on me. There was so much that I recognized and felt affirmed by in his previous scenes from the complexities of growing up Catholic in rural Ulster. Why then my growing unease the more I reread this new work?

Station Island is Heaney's revisitation in dream-vision of an island that is peopled by ghosts from his boyhood and early manhood: an island that gives them back their (male) voices, at first affirming the poet, then arraigning him; increasingly self-reflexive. Of all those voices, the most difficult in every sense—for poet, for reader, for anyone involved in Ulster's trouble—is that of Francis Hughes, the second IRA man to die in the 1981 hunger strike in the prison of Long Kesh.[1] His aggressive passivity, his rejection of all nourishment, is particularly problematic for women, whether as witnesses to the historical "act" or as readers of Heaney's poem about him, the ninth in the twelve-poem sequence. At the dark heart of a pilgrimage that requires unusually harsh (for late twentieth-century Christians) fasting, and a complete removal from the rhythms and repasts of hearth and home, Heaney has the hunger striker, a very special sort of "fasting artist," holding center stage.

Before I went, physically, to St. Patrick's Purgatory on Station Island in remote Lough Derg[2]—and took off my shoes and socks for the three days and two nights in order both to comply with the penitential rubric of the pilgrim-

1. David Beresford's *Ten Men Dead: The Story of the 1981 Hunger Strike* (1987) gives a remarkably well-documented and contextualized account.

2. I went to St. Patrick's Purgatory 24 August 1987, rather late in the annual pilgrimage season, which runs from 1 June to 15 August. About eight-hundred fellow pilgrims arrived on the same day as me, and another thousand on the next. Each pilgrim spends three days and two nights on the island. During 1987 the total number exceeded thirty thousand pilgrims.

age and (more romantically) to sense the ancient stones and soil of the island through the bare soles of my feet, walking and circling before I set out for Donegal with Heaney's slim volume in my hands—I thought that the fasting would be the toughest part of my own "station." I couldn't imagine getting through the three days of that medieval hangover of a pilgrimage without the warmth and fullness and conviviality of meals. And afterwards, when I was reliving the whole experience in the months that it took to write the book *Out of Step* (Byron 1992b), it was the tenth chapter, the one that dealt with the implications of Francis Hughes's death from self-starvation, and the different "readings" of it that came from feminist, Catholic, historical, and political perspectives, that was the most anguishing to write. It was also, indeed had to be, the longest. And it was the chapter that, mysteriously, refused electronic transfer and had to be rekeyboarded at the publisher's and therefore proofread by me word for word in the old, laborious way. All the other chapters/files on my disk transferred their data with sweet reasonableness.

I had mentioned in one of my writing seminars at the art school earlier that summer that I was going on a historic and penitential Irish pilgrimage at the beginning of August. I would be fasting for three days, I told my students, and walking round the circular remains of hermits' beehive cells on bare feet, night and day. Over the remaining weeks of the term, students kept coming up to me, always singly, and shyly offering their advice. "Oranges," said the first one to take me to one side. He was a mature student, a butcher who had left the meat trade to retrain as a fine artist. He saw himself as the reincarnation of Van Gogh, and specialized in abattoir studies in heavy impasto. "Take plenty of oranges with you for when you're over the fasting period. They'll get your gut working again like nothing else." My gut? Oddly enough, I was baffled by this first mention of one of fasting's possible consequences. "Yeah. It's being bunged up that's the problem every time for me. Getting things going again." It was the "every time" that intrigued me. It turned out that he fasted regularly, for forty-eight hours every four weeks. Just water, not even fruit juice. It was essential, he said, for his work. It cleared the creative imagination, freed it up, just as it cleared the body. Oh, and he was thinking of turning vegetarian next.

Others came to me with similar stories of regular fasting, and a variety of tips. "Drink, like, gallons of water. It's a bit like a hangover, after," said a young woman whose sculptures were made of found detritus and beachcombings. "You'll be on a high," said another. "Detoxification, that's what it is. It

simplifies everything. Better than tabs, or acid. Be prepared to go a bit wild." A third suggested: "I'd take a packet of pure glucose with you, the lozenges, you know—like you're allowed to take into exams. It's not really cheating if they help you through a bad patch in the small hours. Chocolate now—that would be cheating." This was all very practical, and apparently based on experience. It was only the fine artists who came with their know-how. The textile design and silversmithing students were either ignorant of the benefits of fasting or unforthcoming. The ceramics students, I knew, had their own secret field of magic mushrooms in the outwoods, a location passed down to first years every September in an initiation rite that was at least half-serious.

Could it be that the painters and sculptors were onto something? That their creativity was reliably released or refreshed by a very regular, workaday regime of one-, two-, three-day fasts? I liked the idea. Fasting as a way of wisdom, even of vision. Visions of Hell and Purgatory were, after all, what Station Island had been famous for for centuries. I began to feel rather excited. Once I was on my way to Station Island, on the St. Patrick's Purgatory service bus from Dublin that carried thirty or so of us pilgrims northwest across the bumpy, undistinguished midlands of Ireland, the fasting did not seem too difficult, as long as water was permitted. I'd been fasting from midnight. If you are busy and focused, I thought, and nobody else around you is eating, fasting isn't hard. Once we were on the island, one visit to the kitchen was allowed in that first twenty-four hours for a grim snack of dry toast and black coffee or tea. That too was fine. There were hundreds of pilgrims now on the tiny island, and we were all in this together. And the *craic*,[3] as groups of us took our turn at the long benches and refectory tables, was great. It was only when the long night of the Vigil began, and we did circuit after circuit inside the basilica, rosary responses, creeds, droned prayers without end, that I started to feel the fast clenching my stomach. Even then it was surprisingly easy to dismiss the discomfort. As that longest of nights went on, it was the loss of sleep and not the fasting that became unbearable. The longer the spells in the basilica, the more the bodies of the slouching pilgrims craved sleep, and gave in to it, momentarily. I saw people asleep where they stood, even where they walked. We were kept going by the shove-and-crowd mind of this forced march that was paced by prayer and response, prayer and response. On one level this made for a very human solidarity, and the short breaks taken for a smoke, or even a game

3. Chat; conversation.

of cards in the night shelter, were welcome in their lack of sanctimony. Nothing—not the mantra-like communal chanting, not the hunger, not the deprivation of sleep, not even the wind blowing off the dark waters of Lough Derg—nothing brought a smidgen of illumination, or a glimpse of Hell.

During the longueurs of the second day, when it was even more difficult not to nod off in the thin sunshine, I read the poems of St. John of the Cross, and the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila,[4] a couple of sensual mystics to inspire me, keep me going. But there was a hollowness in my heart that was to take me a long time to articulate. Perhaps, I thought—as I left the island on the third morning, with a profound sadness that I could not yet name—perhaps this pilgrimage has been too crowded, too cheerful, too watered down. Perhaps I was hoping for too much when I wanted to sense through my bare feet the pre-Christian sacredness of water and stone, the ancient female spirit of place? I came away with mixed feelings of personal failure and wounded feelings of good riddance. Ireland, country of my mother, and mother of me for my first seventeen years, was suddenly no longer haven or wellspring. Station Island had dealt me a body blow: my writing, my poetry in particular, came out of the matter of Ireland, its women's histories, its landscapes, its long losses through emigration.

I looked at the people sharing the great open boat that was taking us back across the lake to the mainland. Seven out of ten of my fellow pilgrims had been women, and this, I'd been told, was the norm. But I had found the island's voices and viewpoints to be entirely male, as much so in the Catholic liturgy as in Seamus Heaney's poem, though the emphases were, naturally, very different. The actual women I talked to on the island had many different takes on all this, but they accepted it, worked with it even in working against it. In the boat they were calling out to each other that we'd all be back the next year. The island had a hold on ye, sure enough. Not, I swore, on me—and I haven't been remotely tempted to go back, to either it or to my ex-faith. But when I left Ireland within the week, and for the first time ever was glad to do so, I felt as if there had been a death, or a divorce, deep inside me.

4. In Poem XI of *Station Island*, Heaney's pilgrim persona meets his confessor, "[r]eturned from Spain to our chapped wilderness," and is given as his "penance" the task of translating "something by Juan de la Cruz." Spain, and its spirituality in particular, has had a long connection with Irish Catholicism, and a special place in Heaney's own *bildungsroman*. See Peggy O'Brien's essay, "Lough Derg, Europe and Seamus Heaney" (P. O'Brien 1992–93).

Naming that grief took a long time. It is not fully encompassed yet, and it is only through writing that I can slowly, unevenly continue the process of grasping it. In the slow, painful retracing of the ground of Station Island as I wrote *Out Of Step,* I began to understand how much of my sorrow was anger. The book grew into a critical, historical, spiritual travelogue that was roped together by autobiography. Only by being completely open about the circumstances of my own barefoot reading of Heaney's sequence could I work out what I was so angry about. I needed to be there in the text, not to absent myself in the impersonality of "the author." Heaney had conjured up the ghost of James Joyce to welcome his pilgrim self off the island, to cheer him, and send him on his way. It was Annie Dillard and her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1976) that I held tight to, that wonderful journal of her year of walking, thinking, reading, and contemplation on the same circuit, the same ground.

As I wrote my way through the three days of my Irish pilgrimage, the realization dawned that the corner-of-the-eye women, the just-out-of-earshot women that I had gone in search of were not, really, the point. What was happening in Heaney's sequence as the poems darkened, and sectarian murders, bombs, then the hunger strike took center stage, was a progressive feminization of the male speakers in ways that became grotesque. Unwise passivity, victimhood embraced, a travesty of nurturing—it is a complex mix of manhandled myth, colonization's tics, and a religion whose ground rule is "offer it up." If Heaney were right, and the men of the nationalist community had become so unattractively feminized, where did the women come into it?

It was an extraordinary and painful vision of the nationalist dilemma. What I found so hard to understand or forgive was the way Heaney's pilgrim self, having revealed this horror, walked away from it. In the last three poems of the twelve he draws back from this cliff or fall, and with a little light penance is off and away, with James Joyce's blessing: " 'Let go, let fly, forget. / You've listened long enough. Now strike your note' " (Heaney 1984, *Station Island* XII, lines 29–30). Just like a man, I thought, my anger tipping me into my own sin of stereotyping. I thought I had at last named the reason for my earlier gut feeling that Station Island was seriously out of step with me, and I with it. Recently, though, it has been back haunting me in a different guise after a gap of several years.

I love food. Of all the writing I had hunted down about St. Patrick's Purgatory before I went, the story I most enjoyed was Sean O'Faolain's "Lovers of

the Lake," where the two lovers drive off from their uneven "stations" on Lough Derg and right across Connemara, to fill the hours before midnight and enjoy the dinner that awaits the end of their fast: "These homing twelve o'clockers from Lough Derg are well known in every hotel all over the west of Ireland. Revelry is the reward of penance. The porter welcomed them as if they were heroes returned from a war. . . . Within two minutes they were at home with the crowd. The island might never have existed if the barmaid, who knew where they had come from, had not laughed: 'I suppose ye'll ate like lions?' " (O'Faolain 1981, 41–42). Yes, I thought, the whole point about fasting was the heightened pleasure that food and drink gave you after it was over. Well, not the whole point, not the Church's point—but sure, wouldn't you say grace, and mean it, for at least the next couple of meals?

In actuality my physical problem with the fasting required on St. Patrick's Purgatory had turned out to be trivial. (Yes, I did take that packet of glucose tablets, and yes, I chewed them slowly and gratefully at about 5 A.M. on the morning of the vigil, when my blood sugar was at its lowest.) My problem with the hunger striker's involuted voice and barren death at the heart of Heaney's poem had been a critical one: I would engage with it later, when I was writing it up. For me the forbidding of sleep—through the interminable night, on and on in the bright tedium of the second day—had been by far the greater penance, the harsher fleshly privation. In the long run, however, the shadow of fasting has been the darkest of all the shades that have haunted me from that double pilgrimage: the walking of my station on the island, and the subsequent walking of heart and mind through the writing of *Out of Step.*

It was years later that my colleague Sue Thomas, the novelist, said that she was sure that I had become a saint. I had to laugh. Sue, of all my friends, is the one most innocent of a Christian upbringing. I had been astonished and pleased that she had read *Out of Step,* and understood it so well. Much of its range of reference was unknown to her, but she is, after all, a science fiction writer, so I guess she is used to strange societal and belief structures. But me a saint? I felt sure she hadn't got any of her facts right. I had been ill. I had lost some weight, and now was living quite contentedly, on a nutritional supplement that gave me all I needed. The surgery I had undergone to alleviate the problem had, in fact, made it dramatically worse, but I was so relieved to have found at last a painless way of "eating" that I did not miss real eating at all. I was, nevertheless, a great oddity to the few who noticed that I never ate. New to ill health, as well as to this inability to eat normally, I found myself in an-

other category: the recipient of etiologies and their corresponding systems of healing, both conventional and alternative.

In her last book, *Love's Work,* the philosopher Gillian Rose wrote of the reaction of friends and colleagues to the diagnosis of her ovarian cancer:

> I could compose a divan of divination, an anthology of etiologies:
> *Camille Paglia* (American author and media personality): "Nature's revenge on the ambitious, childless woman."
> *Braham Murray* (theatre director, my first cousin): "Your inspiration poisoned at source."
> *John Petty* (Provost of Coventry Cathedral and faith healer): "Transgenerational haunting and possession."
> *Ian Florian* (Principal, College of Traditional Acupuncture): "Imbalance of energies necessary for a woman to sustain success in the world."
>
> (Rose 1995, 77–78)

My illness was not life-threatening, yet it clearly made people think they should explain it, code it, find me a cure, a way back to normality. But I was feeling so much better on my ultrasimple regime that I was not myself engaged in seeking etiologies, or even a cure. I was finding surprising pleasures in vicarious, and even in virtual, eating. And the last thing I wanted was the label of saint.

Sue meant it, of course, in an almost value-free way, whereas for me it came laden with Christian baggage of suffering and self-sacrifice. Then her daughter Amber lent me a science fiction novel by an American professor of linguistics, Suzette Haden Elgin. In *The Judas Rose* (1987), Elgin describes women in a future period of worldwide famine rediscovering the possibility of living entirely on music. Monks and nuns had lived so frugally in the Middle Ages: perhaps the continual singing of plainchant had been a major contributor to their diet? In secret, her women linguists refine the skill of audiosynthesis and pass it on to the hungry people under the cover of music teaching.[5]

Not long after Sue had called me a saint I was one of several poets commissioned to write a long poem on the theme "Ghosts" for a performance at

5. Recently I came across an account of a Bengali woman saint, Giri Bala, "the woman yogi who never eats," a contented householder who was visited by Paramahansa Yogananda in 1935. She lived by a sort of spiritual photosynthesis, and by tuning in to "the hum of the Celestial Motor" (see Yogananda 1993, 524–53).

London's South Bank Centre.[6] For four long months I worked on one about a wife taking on the Orpheus role and venturing into the underworld in an attempt to win back her husband to the light. I kept returning to the myths of the Greek underworld in dissatisfaction. Persephone, Alcestis, Eurydice: so many women poets keep taking them on, rewriting them, but I could not work out why and how they kept nagging at the poet in me. Suddenly, ten days before the deadline, quite another poem began to arrive, and fast. I was back working on material I had long filed and forgotten, namely, my research into the St. Patrick's Purgatory of earlier centuries. Well-off pilgrims had paid to have a funeral mass said over them as they lay within an open coffin. Then the coffin was sealed in the subterranean cave of St. Patrick's making, and the pilgrim was entombed for ten days and nights, with only enough bread and water for barest survival. No wonder the place was renowned as one of the chief entrances to the underworld, already notorious in Dante's day. No wonder pilgrims in those days saw visions of Hell and Purgatory.[7]

My new poem was interested only in the mock funeral at first, not those infernal possibilities; then it opened into what became three "Examinations of Conscience." Fasting and abstinence from food became their (unwilled) focus. As soon as I had put this section together, and before I wrote the final one, I took Maud Ellmann's book *The Hunger Artists* (1993) down from my dusty Station Island bookshelf. The older I get the more I find that the way in which I read a once-familiar text is as mobile and unpredictable as my way of writing a new one. It was as though I were reading the opening words of its first chapter, "Autophagy," for the first time. They took my breath away: "A

6. My reading of "Coffin. Crypt. Consumption" was given at the Purcell Room on 13 December 1995, and recorded for transmission on BBC Radio 4 on Christmas Day 1996. The third "Examination of Conscience" was the inspiration for, and the central text in "Couple," a large (108 x 145cm) mixed-media work on two calfskins by artist-calligrapher Denis Brown. This work was commissioned from us both for the touring exhibition "Words Revealed," originated by the Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham, in partnership with the Crafts Council of Ireland, for a two-year tour of Britain and Ireland in 1996–98.

7. The best-documented example of the false funeral is that of Raymond de Perilhos, a Knight of Rhodes and Chamberlain of Charles VI of France. In 1397, armed with a letter of safe conduct from Richard II (of England), he arrived at St. Patrick's Purgatory in the hope of seeing how his beloved late master, John I of Aragon, had fared in the next world. He claimed that the extreme lengths he had gone to had been rewarded—and he later made good political use of his professed visions. A detailed account of his adventures is given in Cunningham 1984.

few years ago a friend told me that he was going to a wake in Belfast for a woman who had been in a hunger strike in Armagh, the principal detention camp for female terrorists in Northern Ireland. She had survived the hunger strike, and had even been released from prison, but had died within the year of anorexia nervosa" (Ellmann 1993, 1).

What is the relationship between these two forms of self-starvation, so similar in their physical effects and yet so incommensurable in their meanings? I had known that women prisoners had been on hunger strike too but that the IRA command had excluded them from the high-profile strike of 1981. I had completely forgotten this story linking, so poignantly, the hunger strike with anorexia nervosa.

I had been very close to several sufferers of anorexia, still am, but I had not in my earlier reading of her book taken to heart Ellmann's extraordinary juxtaposition. She writes that her aim in writing it is "not to find the cause of self-starvation but to follow the adventures of its metaphors" (1993, 15). How I warmed to that disdain for etiologies as I read on. Starving, writing, imprisonment: it was an astonishing and scary ride. The third chapter, "Sarcophagy," transfixed me with its close reading of Clarissa's fictional self-starvation (in Samuel Richardson's 1740s novel) alongside the real-life self-starvation of the ten men in Long Kesh. She was writing of the apparent feminization of the men "in that their bodies were transformed into images of meanings rather than the instruments of acts." But there are also "fierce dissymmetries between the sexes. For the men imprisoned in the Kesh, hunger was a public and concerted enterprise, the corporeal expression of their . . . demands." Clarissa starves herself in private, "like the modern anorectic." Though a vigorous user of words, Clarissa "never articulates the reason for her hunger. . . . Word and flesh consume each other in her . . . inexorable quest for discarnation" (Ellmann 1993, 71–72).

The kernel of my three "Examination of Conscience" poems had been written a year earlier, for my closest poet friend, Gillie Griffin. I wrote about a fridge haunted by chicken bones and brawn—"fromage de tête." After I had written it, I knew it was for her. The woman in the poem vows never to eat meat again. It was only when placing the piece in this new context that I understood what I'd written, what I had given her. Gillie was not just a vegetarian. She had been anorectic years before, and still felt shadowed every day by anorectic habits of thought and feeling. That had not been in my conscious mind at all. It is strange how important forgetting is to writing. Like Keats, I

feel uncomfortable about poetry that has designs on me—especially when it is my own.

The deadline was by now helpfully close. The final poem of my sequence turned out to be an invocation to Hades, not only as lord of the dead—though my first experience of serious illness was making me only too anxious to propitiate him—but principally as "prince of peristalsis, potholer extraordinaire," the guardian spirit of those more palpable underworlds: bowels and drains; more literally still, the camera eye of endoscopy. The title was a rush job: simply "Coffin. Crypt. Consumption."

I am content with all these odd juxtapositions, and decisions and compositions made under duress: I want to become more puzzled, less sure, the older I get. I want to be surprised as a reader, and even more as a rereader. I hope to surprise myself most of all in my writing of poetry. It was this poem's pressing deadline that late, late in the day let through some more of the ghosts I didn't see on Station Island. Prose is one way of journeying to understanding. Poetry can be a form of divination.

When *Out of Step* came out, many women—and some men—wondered why I had spent so much time and anguish over a man's text. I wondered too, and never more so than when I realized that that text had become spoiled for me precisely because it had, unwittingly, of course, forced me to read it as a woman first and foremost. I had to confront within myself the learned privileging of the male, so exquisitely inculcated in a Catholic girlhood in Ulster, and hardly shaken by years of being intellectually a feminist. *Station Island* acted on me, to its own detriment, in the way Adrienne Rich describes in the epigraph to this essay; or, more oddly, in the way Heaney's Joyce urges on his male pilgrim-self in *Station Island:* " 'Let go, let fly, forget. / You've listened long enough. Now strike your note.' "

As reader, as writer, I see that my task in this Vale of Soulmaking is to shuffle off the impedimenta of my "fabricated wants and needs." Now I am learning at gut level about hitherto unfamiliar disorder and dysfunction. No etiologies, please, no miracle cures. I want, in Ellmann's words, to follow the adventures of the metaphors.