

MOSSBAWN VIA MANTUA

IRELAND IN/AND EUROPE: CROSS-CURRENTS AND EXCHANGES

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Among the several virtues which Samuel Taylor Coleridge ascribes to the creative imagination in his *Biographia Literaria*, one of the most notable is the ability of imagination to retrieve what he calls “the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects.” Coleridge is making a case for poetry as a matter of refamiliarisation rather than defamiliarisation. He sees it capable of refreshing perception in much the same way as his friend Wordsworth hoped to. In the famous “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth had proposed to throw over the incidents and situations of common life “a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way.”

When James Joyce made his character Stephen Dedalus declare that the shortest way to Tara was via Holyhead, he was therefore thinking along the same lines. Leaving Ireland, taking the boat from the North Wall in Dublin to Holyhead in Anglesey, proceeding then through England to Paris and subsequently to Trieste and Zurich, then back to France and forth again to Switzerland, Joyce established conditions where his writing could more easily restore a sense of novelty and freshness to old and familiar objects. From the viewing deck of Europe ordinary Irish things were presented and represented to the mind in an unusual way.

As a title, “Mossbawn via Mantua” is meant to echo Joyce and to suggest how the Irish home ground can be reviewed in the light of certain European perspectives – classical, medieval, and modern. These planes of regard allow us to get a closer view of that ground by standing back from it and help to establish a different focus, a more revealing angle of vision. I’m thinking of Mantua first and foremost as the birthplace of the poet Virgil and I juxtaposed the name of his region with the name of my own birthplace because it so happened that the invitation to speak at this conference arrived just after I had finished a sequence of short autobiographical poems which depended significantly on Book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In this, too, I was following the example of Joyce, since each poem in the sequence echoed and paralleled episodes in that most haunting book in much the same way as Joyce had echoed and paralleled books of Homer’s *Odyssey* in the different chapters of his novel *Ulysses*.

As I see it, there were five main European starting points which gave me short cuts back into Irish destinations, which is to say five headings under which I will group the poems I’m going to read.

First and foremost, there's the whole mythological, cultural, and intellectual baggage which European civilisation holds in common, all that we have inherited from the Greek and Roman and Judaic past, all that came to Ireland from the fifth century onward with the arrival of Patrick and his Christian missionaries. Their conversion of the country had immense cultural as well as religious significance. The pens and parchments and manuscripts which those missionaries introduced were as important for the Irish future as were the monasteries and chalices and croziers. Call it the Christian humanist inheritance, if you like; think of it as a religious order amplified and inflected by the classical discoveries of the Renaissance, but whatever you call it or however you think of it, this heritage remains foundational, a determining factor in the way we in Europe imagine and make meanings of our experience. It provides the first co-ordinates of the western mind, its common vocabulary, a system of longitude and latitude whereby the individual can locate himself or herself in culture and consciousness, a system so pervasive as to be unremarkable. It was moreover the system employed to epoch-making effect by twentieth-century Irish writers, the mythic method, as T.S. Eliot called it when he reviewed James Joyce's *Ulysses*. And at a more local Irish level, it was the method employed by Patrick Kavanagh in his poem "Epic," where he imagines the row between two Co. Monaghan farmers in the light of Homer's Greeks and Trojans in *The Iliad*. Rather than the mythic, however, I shall call this inheritance simply 'the classical.'

But, of course, there is an antithetical European inheritance, one which is equally familiar and accessible, less official, perhaps, but no less attractive to the imagination. This is what we might call the barbarian element in European culture, all that babble beyond the pale, all those tribes north of the Alps and north of Hadrian's Wall, all that is symbolised by the runic Germanic letter or the Irish ogham stone rather than the lines of Roman script. It is the element symbolised by the Viking longboat rather than the Mediterranean trireme, by the human head of the Tollund man displayed in the museum in Silkeborg as opposed to the sculpted head of a Caesar or the painted face of a Saviour in some museum in the warm south. In spite of the fact that we may now find these north/south antitheses a bit too prim and binary, too *reçus* and stereotypical, they continue to exert a gravitational pull on our thinking, and for a period in the 1970s my poems were not so much waiting for the barbarians as dwelling among them. I found myself "lost, unhappy and at home" among the Germani, contemplating the dying Gaul on his shield and the Iron Age victim in the bog, inclined to lie down in the Anglo-Saxon word-hoard and even farther to the north in the Icelandic burial mound.

Another term which the Greeks reserved for people living to the north of them is less pejorative and more suggestive than 'barbarians.' They talked, you remember, about a tribe called the Hyperboreans, people who lived beyond Boreas, beyond the north wind, although in this version of cultural geography the Hyperboreans were at least recognised as a more or less developed nation. One Greek tradition, for example, maintained that when the God Apollo left his shrine at Delphi in the wintertime, he mi-

grated to the north and dwelt among them for the duration of the season. So I think of my third European poetry province as Hyperborean. And in my literary atlas, it is inhabited by different twentieth-century poets of Russia and Eastern Europe, poets who helped me make sense of my own situation in the turbulent Ireland of the 1970s and 80s. Of these, the first to absorb me was the Russian Osip Mandelstam, whom I imagined “on a muddy compound, / His gift like a slingstone / Whirled for the desperate”; but very soon after that I was in thrall to the Polish Zbigniew Herbert and the Lithuanian Czeslaw Milosz, dual citizens of the republic of letters and the republic of conscience.

The fourth province is more specific, more precisely defined, more easily located. It is the one invigilated by the poet whom Yeats called “the chief imagination of Christendom,” Dante Alighieri, and the Dante part of my work is inhabited by shades of the dead who tell their stories in a book called *Station Island*. By the mid-seventies I had learned from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* that one way to represent the vehemence and complexity of a riven society is to allow those most violently and fatally involved in it to speak for themselves and bear witness to their own experience, so in imitation of Dante and indeed Chaucer – not to mention the anonymous author of the seventeenth-century Irish poem “Trua mo thuras go Loch Dearg” / “Alas for my journey to Lough Derg” – I made myself into a pilgrim. When I was a teenager, I had done that same Lough Derg pilgrimage, had fasted and prayed on Station Island and performed the penitential exercises, as generations of Irish people had done for centuries. So in the early 1980s, I imagined myself setting out again for Station Island and wrote a sequence of poems in which I encountered familiar ghosts, some of them the shades of people killed in The Troubles (people I had known personally), others figures from the historical past, such as Joyce himself, but all of them spirits who acted at one moment as accusers, at another as counsellors, at yet another as confessors and ultimately, therefore, as comforters.

The fifth zone of European operations is one of more or less direct translation, and my translation activity has been mainly carried out in three of the four provinces already mentioned. In the classical area, for example, I have done translations of Virgil, including extracts from the *Aeneid* and a faithful rendering of his Ninth Eclogue, not to mention an adaptation of the Fourth (“Bann Valley Eclogue” in *Electric Light*) as a millennium poem set in post-ceasefire Northern Ireland. I’ve done a Horace “Ode” and versions of two plays by Sophocles, as well as an adaptation of the Watchman’s speech at the beginning of Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*. But it hasn’t all been classical. Barbarian Europe was also given its due when I buckled down to a complete translation of the Old English epic *Beowulf*, a story set in the Angles’ and Saxons’ ancestral home in Baltic Europe. Dante, too, I have approached directly, with a translation of his account of the vengeance wreaked by Count Ugolino on Archbishop Ruggieri in Cantos 32 and 33 of the *Inferno*. But with Dante, as with my Hyperboreans, the main influence has been indirect, a matter of example, of being shown

how to deal with conditions on the home ground, of trans-lation in a wider, looser, more general sense as 'carry over.'

In all these cases, however, the translations were a response to different contemporary crises. The Dante, for example, which deals with the starving to death of the imprisoned Ugolino in a tower in Pisa – that particular passage was translated during the late 1970s, at the time of the dirty protest in the Maze Prison, a protest which would eventually lead up to the IRA hunger-strikes of 1981. The Aeschylus ("Mycenae Lookout," *The Spirit Level*, 1996), in which the watchman imagines the bloodshed of the Trojan war and the bloodshed to come when his master returns to Mycenae – that was done fifteen years later, after the orgy of sectarian killing which had preceded the IRA ceasefire in 1994. And later still, in the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, I translated Virgil's Ninth Eclogue. The Ninth Eclogue is fundamentally concerned with the frail but vitally necessary work of poetry in a time of violence, so I suppose I did that job as a poet's *apologia pro vita mea* over the previous thirty years. Finally then, my version of the Horace ode was done in the aftermath of the 9/11 destruction of the Twin Towers, since the Latin original is about high towers being toppled and those in high places being brought low by the sudden bloody predatory swoop of the goddess Fortuna. In every one of those acts of translation, therefore, you could say I was approaching terror via Holyhead.

To begin with, however, my poems were more about territory than about terror – my own personal territory, that is, in the fields around the townlands of Broagh and Anahorish and our farm at Mossbawn. So to start with, I want to read one which approaches that territory by way of Mount Helicon, the muses' mountain in the ancient Greek province of Boeotia. When I wrote it I was unaware that Helicon was the place where Hesiod, the original European farmer poet, had worked his land, but I did know that it was where the Hippocrene Spring was situated. This spring was a source of poetic inspiration, sacred to the muses, and its water had welled up when Pegasus, the winged horse of inspiration, landed on Helicon and left his hoof-mark in the ground of the hillside. So before I ever thought of Mantua, I had found analogies for my Co. Derry world in Boeotia. This poem, called "Personal Helicon," was the last one in my first book, published in 1966.

Personal Helicon (*Opened Ground* 15)

I could read many poems which proceed by this method and parallel personal experience with a mythic or legendary character or occasion. There are a couple, for example, in which the god Hermes is linked to my cattle-dealer father with his stick and his hat and his trademark yellow leather boots: Hermes was the god of fairs and markets, and he too came to be known by his broad hat and winged ankles and trademark sandals. Equally I could read a poem which links a defiant husband walking ahead of his wife through a tunnel in the London Underground to a different

underground scenario, the one where Orpheus and Eurydice are toiling up the path from the land of the dead. But instead I'm going to read something slightly odder, something written in the distressed, exhausted mood of the mid-1980s in Northern Ireland, something which involves the Greek philosopher Diogenes, the one who went round Athens in the fifth century BC with a lantern in his hand trying to find a just man among the citizens.

One of my favourite sights in the Irish countryside is a hawthorn hedge in wintertime, a hedge stripped of its green leaves but decked now with its crop of ripe red berries, the small, bright, stony haw itself, hanging from its twig like a lantern from the hand. In this poem, therefore, Diogenes materialises bearing in his hand a haw on its twig, carrying it through the narrow-minded world of the Ulster Troubles as if it were a scanning device that could read the heart and soul of every citizen.

The Haw Lantern (*Opened Ground* 299)

For someone of my generation, educated at a traditional grammar school, which also happened to be Roman as in Roman Catholic, it would have been hard not to take those classical deposits for granted and treat them as a *lingua franca* of sorts, a way of bridging the gap between our Ulster subculture and European high culture. But in 1970 a veritable "shock of the new" came from what I called "the old mankilling parishes" of Iron Age Denmark, more specifically from the pages of P.V. Glob's book *The Bog People* and from displays of bog bodies in the museums of Aarhus and Silkeborg. "The Tollund Man" was the first of those bog poems, written just two years after the Civil Rights march was baton-charged in Derry and one year after the first killings and reprisals in Derry and Belfast. It arrived, in other words, at a time when the wedge of polarization was being driven deep into the Northern Irish psyche and the shadow of violence was darkening over the population of the entire island.

The Tollund Man (*Opened Ground* 64-65)

"The Tollund Man" was published in 1972, in a book called *Wintering Out*. But the imagery and heritage of Northern Europe got a much fuller and more obsessive treatment in *North*, published in 1975. I'll read just one of the bog poems contained in it, the one about "The Grauballe Man." This is a companion piece of sorts for "The Tollund Man," dwelling upon the Grauballe Man's mutilated but beautifully preserved body as a way of reflecting the brutal killing and dumping of victims in the savage and increasingly sectarian atmosphere of Ulster in the early 1970s.

The Grauballe Man (*Opened Ground* 115-116)

During those early years of the Troubles, however, my Hyperboreans were as important to me as my barbarians. What the Hyperboreans provided was comfort and example, comfort when I *read* their work, example when I wondered how to write poetry

in our own dark time. The question which I repeated then and often since then was the one framed by Shakespeare in Sonnet 65, "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?." And one answer given by poets as diverse as Pasternak and Mandelstam and Milosz was to write poetry that showed beauty holding its plea by holding its own, showed beauty remaining true to itself and thereby defying its evil and ugly opposite.

In Warsaw, for example, at the most desolate period of the Second World War, in face of the cruelty and devastation being visited on that city's population, Czeslaw Milosz had written what he called a naïf poem boldly and simply entitled "The World," a poem that was as far from the world of the occupied city and the warring continent as could be imagined. In perfectly rhymed stanzas, in a pellucid schoolbook language, it conjured up a childhood world of innocence and security, of beloved relatives and beautiful landscapes. Yet the poem was by no means escapist: rather it was obstinate in holding on to a vision of human life informed by creative virtue and communal trust. It shone, to quote Shakespeare again, like a good deed in a naughty world.

I was not familiar with "The World" when I put together the poems in *North* which dealt with the barbaric aspects of life in our vicious little province. But those dark compositions were prefaced by two poems dedicated to an aunt whom I knew and loved in my childhood in Mossbawn, and the dedicatory poems operated in much the same way as the Milosz poem in that they presented a world which contradicted the violent one we were being made to suffer. The first of them is a kind of placid Dutch interior, the second a Breughel-like picture of seasonal life going on in spite of the bombs and ambushes and assassinations that were happening just beyond the art-space established by the poems themselves.

Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication (*Opened Ground* 93-95)

I mentioned the poet Zbigniew Herbert as one of my Hyperboreans. I could equally have invoked other post-war figures such as Miroslav Houb or Marin Sorescu, writers living in Soviet regimes who dealt obliquely and allegorically with the political conditions in their different countries. They were poets who maintained their self-respect by refusing to be co-opted by the Party and who managed instead to write poems true to their own imaginative selves. In doing so, they reinforced their moral certitude by the integrity and truancy of their artistic discipline, maintained their inner freedom in spite of the repressive conditions.

The next poem I'm going to read could not have been written without their example. At one level, it's a straightforward account of an experience that was commonplace during the Northern Troubles. It's a recreation of what it was like to be halted and inspected and mildly interrogated at a British Army roadblock; it's about getting through the physical barrier of the armoured cars and the armed soldiers and out on to the unimpeded road ahead. At another level, however, it's about the psychological ex-

perience of enduring that interrogation as a member of the nationalist minority, an experience which entailed feelings of being in some sense subjugated and being in some kind of bad faith for co-operating. Which means, I suppose, that the poem ends up being a kind of compensation, a kind of lyric getaway, a payback in writing for the small but real compromises required for the maintenance of a civil and indeed a civic life.

From the Frontier of Writing (*Opened Ground* 297-298)

“From the Frontier of Writing” is composed in a muted form of *terza rima* and appeared in *The Haw Lantern* in 1987. In its original form, however, it had been included in a first draft of the *Station Island* sequence. I had meant it to be something that happened to the pilgrim on a northern road as he drove along towards Lough Derg, but decided eventually to leave it out. Next, however, I want to read a section which I did include, a passage where the pilgrim hears the story of a random sectarian assassination from the lips of the victim himself. This is obviously written in imitation of one of those cantos in *The Inferno* where Dante meets the shade of someone who has died a violent death and who now repeats the whole story – a story which would have been well known to the contemporary audience. And this was the case with my poem also: it retold the well-known story of a local Catholic shopkeeper who was visited by police in the middle of the night and asked to come down to supply them with something in the shop. It turned out, however, that these particular policemen were also loyalist paramilitaries, in effect a mini-death squad, and they quite brutally shot the man on his own doorstep. In this section the pilgrim speaks first and is answered by the shade of his murdered friend, a friend he had known in his youth as a wonderfully stylish athlete and footballer. And again the story is told in a form that keeps close to the Dantean *terza rima*.

Station Island VII (*Opened Ground* 255-258)

I suppose you could argue that a passage like that is a form of translation because it is a carrying over, in a very obvious and direct way, of the Dantean example. So in conclusion I could now go on to read some of those translations I mentioned earlier, except that I don't think there's any necessity to do that. You've already heard enough of my classics and barbarians and Hyperboreans and Dantesqueries to have got the point. But since we are in German-speaking Europe, and near the old Austrian province of Carinthia, what I want to do instead is to read two brief poems which reveal the ongoing reality of these European cross-currents and exchanges, the reality moreover of that phenomenon which Eugenio Montale called “the second life of art,” its obscure pilgrimage through memory and conscience.

I'll finish, therefore, with translations I have done of a poem by Rilke and one by an anonymous poet writing in the Irish language. The Rilke, which was published in

1908 in the second volume of his *New Poems*, is entitled “Die Brandstätte” in the original. It evokes the state of mind of a young boy who suddenly turns up at the burnt-out site of his home the morning after the fire. He is bewildered: the world has proved itself unreliable, has made itself strange and made him strange in it. When I came on the poem shortly after the attacks on the twin towers on September 11, 2001, it seemed to catch the kind of dazed, estranged condition of individuals and whole societies in the aftermath of that shocking event.

Rilke: After the Fire (*District and Circle 16*)

The lyric poem can be defined as the snapshot of a moment of consciousness, hence its availability and, *pace* Robert Frost, its translatability. For the logic of what I have been saying means that the poetry is not that which is lost in translation but that which survives it. Cultural differences, historical circumstances, the whole circumambient life and times out of which a poem arises – admittedly all those things can have an estranging effect, yet a true poem speaks beyond itself and its origins. “Die Brandstätte” would be meaningful for a survivor of 9/11, but it would be equally meaningful for one who survived the fall of Troy or the burning of the library in Alexandria or a blitz in London or a bombing raid on Berlin or Baghdad.

I could just as easily, therefore, have called this address *New York via New Poems*. I want to end, however, with a translation which would allow for an even more topical title, something like *Clonmacnoise via Carinthia*. I’m going to conclude with my own translation of a poem written by an Irish monk in ninth-century Europe. This is a diaspora poem, if you like, written by one of the first of those “rambling scholars,” as Helen Waddell has called them, one of the *peregrini* far from his birthplace, deep in the learned language of Latin, but still very much at home in his native Irish language and in his newfound monastic life of study. It too is a poem which affords a sense of novelty and freshness in relation to an old and familiar situation. It’s about the relationship between the monk and a cat called Pangur Bán who shares his cell, a work of great technical intricacy in the original, but also a work of great intimacy and immediacy. I did this translation a few years ago, and I hope its theme of study rewarded and intellectual endeavour engaged upon as a pleasurable and profitable challenge will make a fitting end to my address and a fitting start to our conference:

Pangur Bán

Pangur Bán and I at work,
Adepts, equals, cat and clerk:
His whole instinct is to hunt,
Mine to free the meaning pent.

More than loud acclaim, I love
Books, silence, thought, my alcove.
Happy for me, Pangur Bán
Child-plays round some mouse’s den.

Truth to tell, just being here,
Housed alone, housed together,
Adds up to its own reward:
Concentration, stealthy art.

Next thing an unwary mouse
Bares his flank: Pangur pounces.
Next thing lines that held and held
Meaning back begin to yield.

All the while, his round bright eye
Fixes on the wall, while I
Focus my less piercing gaze
On the challenge of the page.

With his unsheathed, perfect nails
Pangur springs, exults and kills.
When the longed-for, difficult
Answers come, I too exult.

So it goes. To each his own.
No vying. No vexation.
Taking pleasure, taking pains,
Kindred spirits, veterans.

Day and night, soft purr, soft pad,
Pangur Bán has learned his trade.
Day and night, my own hard work
Solves the cruxes, makes a mark.

Works Cited

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