

## The Sense of Place in the Poetry of John Montague

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The purpose of this paper is to articulate the »sense of place« that the author takes to be one of the distinguishing characteristics not only of Montague's work, but of a whole tradition within Irish poetry. On the theoretical level it draws attention to the depreciation of spatiality in discussions of literature and targets a body of texts in which the human environment figures as one of its recurrent motifs. In regard to the broader field of British studies, the findings of the paper point to the need to inscribe differences within a subject which is all too often conceived of as a homogeneous entity.

In one seemingly trivial sense the places of Montague's poetry are the spaces appropriated by its textual materiality. Readers acquainted with the poems recall the many ways Montague has negotiated the boundary line between his transcribed utterance and the blankness of the page. Seamus Deane made the observation that Montague in his love poetry makes of silence »a supreme and chaste virtue ... silence rides on the words, we hear the mild thunder of their passage and then the silence comes again like an aftertaste« (Dunn 1975:15). In a number of instances Montague seems to have moved in the direction of concrete poetry. The stairs-resembling closure of »Down« (T,28), the stanzaic division of the poem »Tracks« (T,43) which intimates a trail of human steps or the juxtaposition of slab-like couplets in »A Graveyard in Queens« (SD,48) indicate Montague's awareness of the semantic possibilities of textual materiality. On the other hand, in the sequence *The Rough Field* (1972) the blank places surrounding his lyrics are swamped by

snatches of intertextual voices which create a sort of reverberating historical background for a text attempting to utter the fate of a troubled land and its peoples. In both instances the material contours of Montague's poetry manifest the semantic implications of the the staged mediation between the page itself and the printed text inscribed upon it.

On another level one could approach the materiality of Montague's poetry by considering the way he grouped and regrouped his poems. Namely, Montague habitually reprocessed his poems and incorporated them into different collections. Such a practice presupposes that the collections as wholes create particular semantic fields or, put otherwise, that they instantiate an enabling context of utterance which invests the reprocessed verses in their different stagings with a specific weight and meaning.

Touching upon these issues only as pertain to the interests of the present reading, I will deal here with a more concrete aspect of Montague's poetry. In what follows I will trace the presence in the poems of a sense of place which should ultimately produce a tentative chart of a geographical trajectory through his collections. It will turn out that the places inscribed within this poetic oeuvre are not only signpoints of the poet's subjectivity but constitute a geography which both conditions the makeup of this subjectivity and bears traces of an enfolding historical environment. Furthermore, the reading which follows should help us position Montague within the post-Yeatsian Irish poetic tradition. And finally, regarding institutionalized English studies in Croatia, I hope that my findings will strengthen the claim to approach Irish literature and culture as a distinctive body within the discipline.

To begin with, let me emphasize that when I refer to a sense of place I do not have in mind the memorable or specific characteristic of a particular place as such. Rather the emphasis is on the psycho-emotional response to or the human experience of terrestrial habitats. *The Dictionary of Human Geography* provides us with a simple definition:

The consciousness that people themselves have of places that possess a particular significance for them, either personal or shared. The most obvious such consciousness relates to home, where above all one feels »in place«. Places where significant biographical events have occurred may also elicit a strong sense of place and this may be intersubjective in the case of a community or a neighbourhood. (Johnson, Gregory, Smith 1986:425).

To put it in more abstract terms I cite David Ley's remarks on the subject: »Each place should equally be seen phenomenologically, in its relational context, as an object for a subject. To speak of a place is not to speak of an object alone, but of an image and an intent, of a landscape« (Gale, Olson 1979:228). In what follows I will examine the relational context of the poetic subject to a set of objects which represent the configurations of, to borrow a term from Derek Gregory, Montague's »geographical imaginations« (Gregory 1994).

The collection *About Lovel* (1993) which groups together Monrague's love poetry shows him to have been a masterful artisan of this genre. More to the point of my reading, the reassembled texts create a semantic field of »bodyscapes« (Bryld 1995) which prompted me to begin plotting Montague's sense of place from his portrayal of the human body, more specifically, his infatuation with the female body. Although in an early poem »Special Delivery« he does speak of the euphoria of passion »before the gravities/of earth claim us/from limitless space« (T,29) there is no warrant to ascribe to him an ethereal conception of human love. On the contrary, »The gravitational pull/of love« (SP,36) he mentions in »Virgo Hibernica« gestures to the sensual carnality that in a number of poems leads him to write with a rhapsodic kind of scatological frankness.

If one opted for a biographical explanation of the centrality of the female body there is the »harshness« of his schooling in St. Patrick's College, the subject matter of the 1993 collection *Time in Armagh*, which wage as he writes »The holy war against the growing body/In the name of chastity« and where the pupils »fantasized about sisters of younger boys« (TA,15,11). The sensuality of lines such as

we begin to make  
love quietly, bodies  
turning like fish  
  
in obedience to  
the pull & tug  
of your great tides (T,14)

could be said to compensate for this enforced celibacy, whereas the many concrete references to the female genitals such as »mawlike womb« (27), »the honey sac/of the cunt« (T,38), »odorous nooks/& crannies of love«, »vaginal mouth« (T,40), »the rooting vulva of Circe« (ME,46), apparently manifest a subservience to the »pull & tug« of the female body. The short lyric »Sheela na Gig« is unabashedly a hymn to this vaginal fixation:

The bloody tent-flap opens. We slide  
into life, slick with slime and blood.  
Cunt, or Cymric cam, Chaucerian quente,  
the first home from which we are sent  
into banishment, to spend our whole life  
cruising to return, raising a puny mast  
to sail back those moist lips  
that overhang labia minora and clitoris.  
To sigh and die upon the Mount of Venus,  
layer after layer of warm moss,  
to return to that first darkness!  
Small wonder she grins at us, from gable  
or church wall. For the howling babe  
life's warm start: man's question mark. (ME,31).

The iterative verbal structure and complex of metaphoric identifications show Montague struggling through his medium to get at the irreducible bed-rock of corporeality. Although the celebratory invocations signal a sense of rhapsodic exuberance the exigent tonality of the piece marks a sense of urgency and loss. This theme of enclosure and banishment (first home, cruising to return) is a running motif in the body of texts targetted by my reading.

The places of Montague's love trysts are enclosed spaces, shrines radiating a perceptible emotional intensity. There is that »secret room/of golden light« (T,37) or the »vast bedroom/a hall of air« (T,43) or, to take another instance, the identification of love itself with a »lighted room/Where all is gaiety and humbling grace« (AL,13). However, the fragility of these exceptional places is highlighted by the menacing external world, metonymized by »a city's panelled skyline« (AL,4) or in the resumption of habits, »work, 'phone, drive/through late traffic« (AL,3). In the third section of the poem »The Cave of Night« Montague positions this enclosed space of intimacy within a concrete historico-geographical setting (the Catholic Falls section of Belfast):

While jungleland troops  
ransack the Falls, race  
through huddled streets,  
we lie awake, the wide  
window washed with rain,  
your oval face, and tide  
of yellow hair luminous  
as you turn to me again  
seeking refuge as the cave of night blooms  
with fresh explosions. (SD,30)

The incongruity of the two simultaneous actions staged in this excerpt (love and war) accentuates the sense of a demarcated enclosure within an extensive exterior. I will show that the space outside these havens of intimacy or, to put it differently, their locat- edness within the external framework, displays a number od different configurations.

To begin with, there are the seemingly neutral spaces of the phenomenal world that are prior to any sort of human emotional investment. Although I noted above that place as such in not my immediate concern here an ecological substartum runs through Montague's poetry. This is particularly true of the earthscapes of the 1975 collection *A Show Dance*. Coming as it does after the painful evocation of the historico-political turmoil of Ulster in *The Rough Field*, this configuration of anonymous space functions as a reprieve from the vicissitudes of historical time. A brief passage from the poem »Process« in the next collection, *The Dead Kingdom* (1985), states explicitly: »only the earth and sky/unchanging in change« (DK,18). The collection *Mount Eagle* published three years later in 1988 brings an abundance of poems sounding the depths of nature. For instance, »The Hill of Silence« describes the bog softening under human feet, while bracken and briar restrain man's movement »clawing us back, slowing« (ME,72). The individuality of man is here overshadowed by and submerged into his common source of origin. However,

an antonymous gesture of naming, which demarcates this anonymous extensiveness of space and which takes us to what I deem the most important sense of place in Montague, is encapsulated in, for example, these lines from »A New Litany«: »The impulse in love/to name the place« (DK,94).

In my opinion the decisive step when delimiting the spatial reference of Montague's poetry is to chart in the many presences of Ireland. A number of early poems register the plaintive evocations of former mythical greatness found in so much Irish writing. Such is the site of »the small, grey stones of the oratory/held into the Atlantic for a thousand years« in »The Answer« (SP,12). In other poems a hill is a battleground where fought the fairies of Ireland or Scotland (SP,18) and a valley cradles an »archaic madness/As once, on an impossibly epic morning« (SP,28); The sense of the copresence of the past in Montague's evocation of landscape comes to a head in the much-cited lines from *The Rough Field*:

All around, shards of a lost tradition:

Scattered over the hills, tribal  
And placenames, uncultivated pearls.  
No rock or ruin, dun or dolmen  
But showed memory defying cruelty  
Through an image-encrusted name.

The whole landscape a manuscript  
We has lost the skill to read: (RF, 34-35)

Like many other Irish poets Montague is here engaged in what he had elsewhere labelled the cultural work of »racial memory« (SP,18). However, because of a series of displacements, which Montague has mapped into the poetry, his participation in this procedure evinces a certain idiosyncratic and ambiguous quality. His anguish, voiced in the last two lines quoted above, at not being able to fathom the resonances of the landscape manuscript can be, at least partially, attributed his to many estrangements.

The way Ireland had overshadowed the immigrant Brooklyn of his birth and how it figured in his later cosmopolitan experiences have to be taken into account when speaking of Montague's sense of place. The immigrant's dichotomous perspective marks the very originary »leap/of conception«: »here in/Ireland, or alien Brooklyn« (DK,59). Brooklyn where the above dilemma is ultimately resolved stands as that »strange, cold city« (DK,69) while the poet's physical return to Ireland as an infant is doubled as a temporal dislocation, »transported to a previous century« (DK,91). But when the father later rejoins the family in Ireland a new exile is in the making: »for when/weary Odysseus returns/ Telemachus should leave« (RF,46). The destinations of this second leave-taking,

in this strange age  
of shrinking space, with the needle  
of Concorde saluting Mount Gabriel  
with its supersonic boom, soaring  
from London or Paris to Washington  
(ME,48)

chart the cosmopolitan dimension that ought not to be ignored when engaging Montague's poetic. In a passage of autobiographical reckoning the poet wrote: »My amphibian position between North and South, my natural complicity in three cultures, American, Irish and French, with darts aside to Mexico, India, Italy or Canada, should seem natural enough in the late twentieth century as man strives to reconcile local allegiances with the absolute necessity of developing a world consciousness to save us from the abyss« (*Irish University Review* 1989:88).

Interestingly enough it is during the long-delayed father and son reunion, described in the poem »At Last«, that a revealing sense of dislocation, crucial to Montague's sense of place, is inscribed into the landscape:

We drove across Ireland that day,  
lush river valleys of Cork, russet  
of the Central Plain, landscapes  
exotic to us Northerners, (SD,51)

The passing vistas are »exoticized« by the poet's rootedness in and the pull of the Northern province. In that vein one can understand the opening lines of the poem »Upstream«:

Northwards, annually,  
a journeying back,  
the salmon's leap  
& pull to the source (DK,11)

As Montague writes in the »Preface« to *The Rough Field* »one must start from home« which to him is »a Catholic family in the townland of Garvaghey, in the county of Tyrone, in the province of Ulster« (RF,vii). The five parishes of the North are the referant of the deictic markers of his poetry (»this place«) being the ultimate matrix of the poet's historico-cultural, collective and personal identities.

It was a vision of his »home area, the unhappiness of its historical destiny« which served as inspiration for the poem sequence *The Rough Field*. The locale is a site of extinction and sectarian division: »I assert/a civilisation died here« (RF,45). Moved by »disillusion« and »anger« the poet nevertheless recognizes the fated nature of his positionality:

But what if  
you have no country to set before Christ,  
only a broken province. No parades,  
fierce medals, will mark Tyrone's re-birth,  
betrayed by both South and North;  
so lie still, difficult old man,  
you were right to choose a Brooklyn slvm  
rather than a half-line in this  
by-passed and dying place. (RF,43-44).

Like the fiddler's music in the fourth section of *The Rough Field* the poem itself honours »a communal loss«

& a shattered procession  
of anonymous suffering  
files through the brain:  
burnt houses, pillaged farms,  
a province in flames (RF,38)

but whether the poet wholly identifies with the »tribal pain« which the poem purports to »assuage« (RF,39) is a different matter.

Although a powerful sense of the North is evident throughout Montague's work he is not blind to the locale's parochial and debilitating nature, a state of mind which he himself termed a »turmoil of contradictory allegiance« (*Irish university Review* 1989: 79). In »Northen Lights«, for instance, which commemorates his mother's burial, his »hostile imagination« evokes a dreary landscape: »chill rain always beats down/on these small gray houses/only gay on market days«. The next stanza is marked by a sense of paralysis:

A stranded scommunity,  
haunted by old terrors,  
the Dromore murders;  
neither Irish, nor British  
its natural hinterland  
severed by the border.

The feeling of growing estrangement culminates in the following decision: »I want no truck with/this narrowing world/of bigotry and anger« (DK,86-8). Needless to say, a part of this estrangement derives from the particular itinerary which has been mapped out above. In a paradoxical manner it is the poet's experience of our »strange age/of shrinking space« which had prepared him for the refusal to accept the mores of »this narrowing world«.

My findings lead me to the conclusion that it would be more appropriate to use the plural from when speaking both of the senses and the places of Montague's poetry, His investments and engagements with places encompass the rhapsodic exuberance of the love poetry, the appropriation of a locality steeped in historical memory and both the enriching rootedness and the frustrating parochialism of the North. It is Montague's ambiguous relationship with this Northern landscape, charged as Terence Brown writes »with atavisms and significances that might overwhelm the imagination« (Brown 1988:214), that enabled him to negotiate an imaginative position between a suffocating localism and a liberating cosmopolitanism.

Montague's critical engagement with the Irish poetic tradition is primarily conditioned by the sense of being a part of a particular place. However, I would also argue that the displacements he inscribes in his poetry provided him with a perspective and a voice with which he participates in what Robert Garratt labels »the chief task in post-Yeatsian poetry:

the redirection of poetry in Ireland, away from the romantic Revivalism and mythmaking of Yeats's Ascendancy tradition toward a Joycean acceptance of the modern world and its protean condition caused by evolving and dividing social and cultural standards. (Garratt 1986 273).

The cosmopolitan experience of an age of »shrinking space« gives him a broader perspective and compels him to contextualise his demarcated territory, undermining its uniqueness and mythmaking potential:

A changing rural pattern means clack  
of tractor for horse, sentinel shape  
of silo, hum of milking machine:  
the same from Ulster to the Ukraine. (RF,83).

The »failure to return/to what is already going/going/ GONE« with which Montague concludes *The Rough Field* signals the passing away of an imagined landscape and is Montague's requiem for days of old, a gesture that is a kind of trademark in so much Irish writing.

A concluding remark: I concede an awareness that the above reading of the sense of place in Montague's poetry owes something to its Croatian context. Since we necessarily perceive and interpret the world through a particular cultural grid can it be otherwise. This grid makes me suspicious, for example, of contentions such as those made by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht that in England and the United States »literary studies maintain their orientation toward a nationally unrestricted horizon of canonized text and toward general 'humanistic' values of education« (Gumbrecht 1995:503). If we register the Irish presence within what used to be thought of as the study of English literature – and I see my reading as making a contribution to this task – we will question both its »unrestricted horizons« and its pretensions to »generalit«. In addition to the emergence of Women's Studies, Black Studies, Cultural Studies, etc., which are being coopted into our disciplinary discourse, we will have to reinscribe national borders perhaps overhastily blurred and erased within the dream of the global village.



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Nakana rada jest artikulirati »oćut mjesta« kojega autor smatra razlikovnim obilježjem ne samo pjesništva J. Montaguea nego čitave jedne tradicije unutar irskog pjesništva. Na teorijskoj razini rad skreće pozornost na zanemarivanje prostornosti u raspravama književnosti i ukazuje na tekstove u kojima ljudski okoliš figurira kao važan motiv. Unutar šire oblasti britanskih studija, nalazi čitanja inzistiraju na potrebi upisivanja razlika u predmet koji se prećesto shvaća kao homogeni entitet.