SENSE OF PLACE IN THE POETRY OF JOHN MONTAGUE

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"The whole landscape is a manuscript
We have lost the skill to read,
A part of our past disinherited;
But fumbled, like a blind man,
Along fingertips of instinct"

(Montague 1984, pp.35)

In this study of a "sense of place" in the work of John Montague a knowledge of his birthplace sheds light on a geographic interpretation of his work. Born in Brooklyn in 1929, he spent his childhood in his ancestral home of Garvaghey, County Tyrone. Throughout his life he travelled widely, sampling a variety of different cultures and societies, an experience which helped him to put his home place of Garvaghey within a global perspective. Yi-fu Tuan once stated that travel increases one's awareness, not of exotic places but of one's home as a place (Tuan 1977). This is especially true of Montague. Due to his extensive travel, he wrote about Garvaghey not from the wholly subjective point of view of an existential insider, but from the perspective of an "outsider-insider". Thus in his writings about his parish in Co. Tyrone, he is highlighting what it is not, so he can more easily identify its unique characteristics.

A reading of much of Montague's poetry makes clear that he has two particular concerns. The first is to comprehend his locale, in this case Garvaghey, in order to understand it as a 'place'. Part of this need stems from his wish to relate the present day in his home place to the historic situation of the area. He recognises everywhere relics of Garvaghey's past and tries to place his lifetime's experiences within this historic context. His second concern is a desire to respond to the contemporary world *without* parochial invasion, in that he acknowledges the overwhelming importance of his area's genealogy but perceives the need to prevent narrow, local influences from colouring his world view. It is with the first of these two issues that I am most concerned, as it is more helpful in understanding Montague's sense of place.

As we have already argued, the poet's affiliation to place is not simply to the place as it is at the present, or even to the place as it has changed in the course of the twentieth century, but to a much larger local tradition and to a native region. A tradition whose roots are in the past, but which is threatened by twentieth century values, is a central theme in his poem "Hymn to the New Omagh Road" (Montague 1984). This intense recognition of the locale's past is something which helps highlight the rooted quality of his sense of place.

"Behind the flat surface of daily life beat
memories of a richer, more resonant past,
half regretted, half feared. For a long time
this older form of life survived in the
remote areas under the shadows of the mountain"

(John Montague, "The Spectator",
April 26th, 1963)

Brown has argued that the poetic intensity of Montague's work is partly a result of his sense of the area's "mythic, racial and archaeological significance" (Brown 1975; 156). With this feeling for the place of his childhood, he tries to create poetry which explores any common ground between the past and his own everyday lifeworld. His goal is an appreciation of his locale's cultural and historic qualities and the place of John Montague in that milieu. The result of this endeavour appeared in 1972 in his epic poem, *The Rough Field*.

Tuan states that the personality of place is made up of two things. The first of these is the physical endowment of the area, and the second aspect is the modification wrought by successive generations of human activity (Tuan 1977; 27). It is an account of these 'modifications' and Montague's own reactions to them which go to create *The Rough Field*.

Another important aspect of Montague's poetry is his articulation of place on a level above the Romantic and above rustic nostalgia. He makes this clear at the beginning of *The Rough Field* when he states that:

"No Wordsworthian dream enchants me here" (Montague 1984; 13)

This is not to say that his descriptions of Garvaghey do not contain extremely powerful images of beauty and grace reminiscent of the great Romantic poets. On the contrary, take for example this section of *The Rough Field* entitled "A Severed Head"

> May, and the air is light
> One eye, one hand. As I take
> The mountain road, my former step
> Doubles mine, driving cattle
> To the upland fields. Between
> Shelving ditches of Whitethorn
> They sway their burdensome
> Bodies, tempted at each turn
> By the hollows of sweet grass,
> Pale cover, while memory,
> A restive sally switch flicks
> Across their backs"

(Montague 1984; 33)

The important thing to note about such descriptions is the intensely personal vein which runs throughout them. In the context of the whole work, they serve to reinforce the reader's awareness of the bond between Montague and his subject, and especially his memories of that subject.

It might now be useful to examine the way in which Montague examines the effects which "modifications wrought by successive generations" have had on Garvaghey on the one hand on on himself on the other.

In another section of *The Rough Field* which he calls "Home Again", Montague emphasises the historic background of the present-day province in a very effective manner. In each verse of this section he describes his journey home to Garvaghey from Belfast, but he precedes each of these verses with a short prose passage which portrays a historic event that has relevance to the particular area Montague is discussing. In the descriptions of the modern Ulster landscape, the dominant tone is that of the poet's awareness of the British presence and their 'incompatability' with the 'native' surroundings. It is clear that he resents this presence and he argues that it has 'despoiled' him of his purely Irish inheritance. This sense of a "despoiled inheritance" is particularly emphasised in the following extract from "Home Again".

> "Catching a bus at Victoria Station,
> Symbol of Belfast in all its iron bleakness
> We ride through narrow huckster streets
> (Small lamps bright before the Sacred Heart
> Bunting tagged for some religious feast)
> To where Cavehill and Divis, stern presences
> Brood over a wilderness of cinemas and shops,
> Victorian red-bricked villas, framed with aerials,
> Bushmill hoardings, Orange and Legion Halls.
> A fringe of trees afford some ease at last
> From all this dour despoiled inheritance,
> The shabby through-outness of outskirts:
> 'God is love' chalked on a grimy wall
> Mocks a culture where constraint is all"

(Montague 1984; 12)

In this verse Montague paints a picture of Belfast which shows a virtual disgust for the city and for what it represents to him. Words such as 'iron bleakness', 'stern presences', 'wilderness of cinemas and shops', 'shabby through-outness' and 'constraint', indicate that he feels that the city, especially the city of Belfast, is a distortion of his native culture. The tone of the last line of the verse might go so far as to suggest that the whole culture out of which the city has grown in the past few hundred years is alien to him.

"Through half of Ulster this Royal Road ran
Through Lisburn, Lurgan, Portadown
Solid British towns, Lacking local grace.
Headscarved housewives in bulky floral skirts
Hugged market baskets on rexine seats
Although it was near the borders of Tyrone –
End of a pale beginning of O'Neill –
Before a stranger turned a friendly face,
Yarning politics in Ulster monotone.
Bathos as we bumped all that twilight road,
Tales of the Ancient Order, Ulster's Volunteers;
Narrow fields wrought such division
And narrow they were, though as darkness fell
Ruled by the evening star which saw me home"

(Montague 1984; 12-13)

This verse of 'Home Again' holds a line which encapsulates his ultimate opinion on the British built towns in the Ulster landscape:

"Solid British towns, Lacking LOCAL GRACE"

(Emphasis added)

With these two words, 'local grace', Montague captures the essential reason why he finds two hundred years of Planter modifications extraneous to his culture, and to the culture of all Gaels. These modifications lack local grace and as such will never be a natural part of his landscape. The fact that he has such a distinct awareness of what is alien to his native culture indicates that he also has a sense of the elements of the landscape which are 'natural' and as such, part of his sense of place. Concerning this Tuan has argued that it is chiefly possible to be aware of our attachment to place only when we can see it from a distance (Tuan 1977; 79). For Montague this distance was not only physical but also temporal. He views Garvaghey in an historical, indeed Celtic dimension, setting its present day situation in the much wider context of what has gone before. He is also very much aware of his own personal bond with this past, with his ancestors, and it is out of such an awareness that he created a "rooted" sense of place. In *The Rough Field* he states:

"To a gaunt farmhouse on a busy road,
Bisecting slopes of plaintive moorland,
Where I assume old ways of walk and work
So easily, yet feel the sadness of return
To what serves still though changing.
No Wordsworthian dream enchants me here
With a glint of glacial corry, totemic mountain
But merging low hills and gravel streams,
Oozy blackness of bog-blanks, pale upland grass;
Rough field in Gaelic and rightly named
As setting for a mode of life that passes on;
Harsh landscape that haunts me,
Well and stone, in the bleak moors of dream.
With all my circling a failure to return"

(Montague 1984; 13)

Here Montague describes his initial reaction on arriving home after being abroad. From the moment he reaches that 'gaunt Farmhouse', he reverses to his former ways of 'walk and work'. It is as though he has no control over the process of reversion and to resist these 'old ways' would be to alienate himself somewhat from the place. Here also Montague makes one of his most important statements on the relationship between man and his home place. He realises on his return to the building which was his home that he can never hope to fully return after an absence. Part of that bond between the poet and his place has been eroded and he can never restore it to its former strength:

"With all my circling, a failure to return".

We have all heard the saying that one can never step into the same river twice and as such

man's longing to return completely to his home place will always be tinged with regret. As George Elliot has said:

"In every parting there is an image of death"

Montague realised this and strove to combat this loss of identity with his home place. He recognised the ephemeral nature of the landscape and yet saw within his landscape that the essence of place will always be retained to some degree. It is his ability to detect this essence and give it poetic form that makes him an ideal candidate to display a sense of place.

The next section with which I shall deal, 'A Severed Head', brings us back to the notion of despoiled inheritance. Here Montague proclaims that the very manner, the language, in which he writes about this inheritance is contrary to his native culture. He is conscious of the historical events which have forced him to express his environmental perception in a "grafted tongue". He is using culture, language and history to attack British designs of his place. Here he speaks of the loss of a language and the pain and humiliation of growing, as he calls it, 'a second tongue'.

An Irish child weeps at school
repeating its English . . .
To slur and stumble
In shame the altered syllables
the altered syllables
of your own name;
to stray sadly home
and find
the turf-cured width
of your parents hearth
growing slowly alien:
In cabin
and field, they still
speake the old tongue
You may greet no-one.
To grow
a second tongue, as
harsh humiliation
as twice to be born.
Decades later
that child's grandchild's
speech stumbles over lost
syllables of an older order"

(Montague 1984; 39)

His resentment towards the planters is ever to the fore here. This section also shows how Montague makes the connections between the past and the present day, and how he uses himself as a link between the two eras. Although he does not specifically state it, it is quite obvious that the 'child's grandchild' mentioned in the poem is Montague himself, as he goes 'stumbling over lost syllables of an old order'. Thus the 'lost language' is another element of a lost culture which he sees strewn across the landscape.

While journeying through this landscape, Montague walks with an ease of someone who knows where he is, and knows the land on which he walks. As he walks, he focuses his eyes on those things which, to an outsider, would seem inconsequential, but which for him are the essence of Garvaghey and a part of himself.

"Like shards
Lost culture, the slopes
are strewn with cabins, deserted
In my lifetime . . .
The thatch
Has slumped in white dust of nettles
on the flags"

(Montague 1984; 34)

He gives the impression of constant change in this seemingly stagnant area. There is nothing but the shells of cabins left, and yet these cabins, deserted, and with their thatched roofs fallen in, do not spoil the landscape as do those "solid British towns". One reason for this is that these ruins possess 'local grace' and are thus very much part of Montague's 'natural' inheritance. Their existence as mere shells stand as physical reminders of what the landscape once looked like when it was dotted with clusters of houses populated by the "native" Irish. In the closing section of 'A Severed Head' the poet places these ruins, these bogs and their "plaiting thorns" in a much more personal context:

> "A high stony place – bog streams,
> Not milk and honey – *but our own*"
>
> (Montague 1984; 40 – emphasis added)

Up until now, I have concentrated on Montague's involvement with, and reaction to, the historical events that have influenced Ulster as a whole, and more precisely Garvaghey. I should now like to turn and examine the effect which the twentieth century has had upon his home place and how Montague views this.

We have already seen that Montague writes about Garvaghey from an insider-outsider perspective. The outsider influence is partly as a result of his wider travel experience, which has given him a broader context into which he can place Garvaghey, but there is another quality which places Montague outside the 'insider's trap' of total "subjectivism" (Buttimer 1978; 18). There is no doubt that he identifies with the people of his landscape, but he is sufficiently distanced from them, both by education and experience, to be able to view them not just as individual characters but also, and perhaps chiefly as, representatives of a dying culture. It is as a result of this that the overall tone of *The Rough Field* is a lament at the passing of a tradition. Montague sees this as a vital tradition, possessing an indigenous strength which he fears will never be regained if once it dies.

As John Clare wrote about the effects which modernisation of agricultural life had on his home place in rural England during the nineteenth century, Montague also writes about the effects which the modernisation of the transport networks have had upon the Ulster landscape, and particularly upon Garvaghey. The role of transport, and in particular the road network, has long been recognised as a major factor in the formation of peoples' mental maps. In Lynch's *The Image of the City* (1960) it has been argued that the roads in an area were most often chosen by people to act as the borders, or limits to their fields of care. Similarly Snow, in "The New Road in the United States", argues for the importance of the old roads to 'place geography'. The 'old road', as Snow saw it, was an actual extension of place as it was seen to be related to the land at both sides of the road. The 'old road', though it may not have been as highly efficient and time-saving as the new motorways, was at least better integrated into the landscape and had a character of its own, not like the ugly black strips which cut through today's landscape in the name of cost- and time-efficiency.

Montague reacted very strongly to the creation of these roads. He sees them as lacking the same local grace that the British towns lacked and between which they ran. In another section of *The Rough Field* entitled 'Hymn to the New Omagh Road', he very effectively be-littles the advantages of a new road in his local landscape. He compares the advantages of its creation, such as the shortening of one's journey by fifteen minutes, or allowing for heavier vehicles to plough through the countryside, to those things which the new road destroyed, 'chance streams', 'wren's or robin's nests', 'stone-lined paths', and 'hillocks and humps'. All of these are erased by the engineer who is oblivious to the personal structures which gave these objects a greater meaning than economic policy allows for, and so modern technology "eats" away the poet's places.

> "From the quarry behind the school
> the crustacean claws of an excavator
> rummage to withdraw a payload
> a giant's bite . . .
> Secret places
> bird's nests, animal paths,
> ghosts of children hunkering
> down snail glistering slopes
> spin through iron cylinders to
> resume new life as a plant stream
> of building material.

A brown stain
seeps away from where the machine
rocks and groans itself, dis-
colouring the grass, thickening
the current of the trout stream
which flows between broken banks
— the watershead, a smear of mud —
toward the reinforced bridge
of the new road"

(Montague 1984; 60-61)

Here Montague fears the encroachment of universal forces into the secluded world of the Garvaghey landscape. He sees this encroachment as one of the instruments of a 'placeless' geography. To be able to recognise such a powerful process of change is an important aspect of his environmental perception. These new forces do not harmonise with the historic, value-ridden environment, but instead attack the cherished place of the poet's childhood. Ralph also addresses the topic of placelessness consequent upon modernisation and like Montague sees this as something irreversible, a process which tears apart the fabric of traditional society. Montague says in the closing section of *The Rough Field*:

"Our finally lost dream of man at home
in a rural setting! A giant hand
as we pass by, reaches down
to grasp the fields we grazed upon.
Harsh landscape that haunts me,
well and stone in bleak moors of dream
with all my circling a failure to return
to what is really going,
going.
GONE"

(Montague 1984; 83)

Here Montague makes one of the most powerful statements about place and placelessness and yet it is difficult for some to wholly agree with him. As a result, I am sure, of being brought up in a strongly rural tradition myself, I would argue that the "dream of man at home in a rural setting" is not lost, and furthermore, I do not regard it as a dream. For many, this notion is such a powerful and primitive one, such an intricate part of our ancient tradition that one feels the Irish person can never abandon it completely. Our basic need for an 'enclosed' home place, for a 'Garden of Eden-type' place, is so intense, both in its secular and religious guises, that not even the "crustacean claws of the excavator" can root it out of our being.

The final poem which I shall deal is not taken from Montague's epic work "The Rough Field". Nevertheless, it shows his sense of place in a different but equally intense light. All the poems so far strive toward a similar goal to place the present day Garvaghey into context with its historic past.

next poem, "The Water Carrier", has no political or historic overtones and displays, through a very ordinary event in the poet's life, his immense attachment to place. Reminiscing on childhood s in Garvaghey he recalls:

"Twice daily I carried water from the spring,
Morning before leaving for school, and evening;
Balanced as a fulcrum between two buckets . . .

The water ran so pure and cold, it fell
like manacles of ice on the wrists . . .

Recovering the scene, I hoped to stylise it
Like the portrait of an Egyptian water-carrier
Yet halt, entranced by slight but memoried life.

I sometimes come to take the water there,
Not as a return or refugee, but as some pure thing,
Some living source, half-imagined and half-real.
Pulses in the fictive water that I feel."

(Montague 1982; 21)

Here again we have the realisation that a complete return to the home of one's childhood is impossible once one has left it for adult life. Montague attempts to recall a typical experience of his childhood, without romantic nostalgia, and to give this experience a place in his adult life. He returns to the stream, not because he wishes to revert to his childhood, but because he sees the spring and its waters as part of him, "a living source, half-imagined and half-real". One of the most poignant lines of the poem is also one which establishes the nature of the bond between Montague and this whole experience of well and water.

". . . it fell
like manacles of ice on the wrists."

These manacles, metaphorically, bind Montague to this part of his childhood and to this place. He is "manacled" to the flowing stream, and even though the gushing spring is constantly changing, the aura of the place will always be part of his unchanging sense of the place, it will always be part of him. We could, here, quote Deane, who said of Montague's relationship to the past and its traditions that

"He is a man possessing his cultures,
and not possessed by it."

(Deane 1979)

CONCLUSION:

So why do we study sense of place? What are the practical values of exploring 'insideness' and 'outsideness' in poetry or any other medium for that matter? Seamon states that such an exploration sensitises the student to these types of experiences and helps him or her to understand and integrate them into a life in the twentieth century (Seamon 1979). Montague, for instance, understands both his own attachment to place and also integrates this sense of his past into his twentieth century existence. But what of those among us who are unable to so eloquently display our own sense of place? It must be remembered that when we speak of "sense of place", it is more important for the individual involved to be aware of its existence in his or her own life than to be capable of displaying it to the public eye. It is not something which one can 'create' through intensive study of an area. Its formation can best be described as a process which acts upon the human subconscious, capturing memories and experiences which contain the essence of time or place. These memories, buried deep within the mind, can be recalled later in life, 'recollected in tranquility' as it were. This process cannot be hurried by increased concentration on the part of the inhabitant as time is a crucial factor in the nurturing of a sense of place. The human inhabitant acts as a receptacle into which the aura of a place filters and is stored for the future. Thus Ralph argues:

"We do not grasp space only by our senses . . .
we live in it, we project our personalities
into it, we are tied to it by emotional
bonds; space is not just perceived,
it is lived."

(Ralph 1979; 10)

To really live in a place is to know it from the inside-out, and from the outside-in as in the case of Montague. From this perspective a person becomes part of a place, he becomes 'stitched' into the fabric of that lifeworld. By becoming more aware of this lifeworld, we can, to a greater degree, accommodate the processes of late twentieth century change within our world. There is a need, as Buttimer has argued, for people to "take cognisance of their taken-for-granted assumptions about the relationships between people and place" (Buttimer 1978; 38). This advice is particularly relevant to planners who are 'officially' responsible for the creation or designation of new places within our

world. By taking more regard of this people-place relationship they could more effectively integrate their plans with the wishes of those being planned for.

As I have argued, the creation of a sense of place is a process which acts upon the subconscious and cannot be forced into existence. This being so, there is still much to be said in favour of Tuan's advocation of thoughtful reflection on the experience of place.

> "Thought creates distance and destroys
> the immediacy of direct experience, yet
> it is by thoughtful reflection, that the
> elusive moments of the past draw near
> to us in present reality and gain
> a measure of permanence."
>
> (Tuan 1977; 148)

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