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The Literatures and Cultures of the Irish Sea

Series Editor: John Brannigan
General Editor: P.J. Mathews

Fiona Stafford

Writing around the Irish Sea: Inlets, outlets, Firths and Mouths

Over the centuries, the Irish Sea has been a space of irresistible fascination, firing the desire of those on every shore. It has been crossed and crossed and crossed again, and its languages have been traded, coloured, crushed and recovered by the long succession of Kings and conquerors, saints and smugglers, exiles and excisemen, fishermen and ferries, travellers and traders, priests and planters, steam magnates and starving workmen, tourists, television companies, businessmen, bankers, seabirds, soldiers, golfers, scholars, artists, writers. With such a shifting history, we might be forgiven for looking for the fixed and the permanent – things that seem to predate human accounts and, transcending time, offer a promise of the future. But as we move around the Irish Sea, its borders seem as fluid as its history. How firmly fixed are the sands of Morecambe Bay, or the waters of the Solway? Where does Scotland stop and Northern Ireland begin? Where does Welsh water become English? The Sea's astonishingly promiscuous, and doesn't seem to keep to its own, allotted space. Trying to find a way of approaching the Irish Sea, I began to think about places where the sea meets the land – the cliffs, the strands, the harbours and the headlands – but perhaps this really meant places where the land meets the sea? I thought of Morecambe Bay, Cardigan Bay, St Bride's Bay, Dundalk Bay, Dublin Bay, Luce Bay, but when I consulted 'Bay' in the OED, I found two quite contradictory meanings:

> Bay – 1. An indentation of the sea into the land, with wide opening
> 2. (obs) An indentation of the land into the sea

So are these 'Bays' indentations of the land into the sea, or the sea into the land? Inlets or outlets? And does it depend entirely on your perspective? From where you view the natural feature? Whether you are approaching from land or sea?

It's a big question for the Irish Sea – where people on every shore and island seem always to have been so very conscious of those across the water – whether it's Fergus of Galloway gazing across to Ireland, Wales or the Isle of Man, or Columba heading for Iona, or the Vikings hidden in the Sound of Man**,** eyes fixed on Dublin. Leaping forward many centuries, we still find Norman Nicholson on Black Combe, feeling the wind from Sligo, Bernard O'Donoghue flying over to Manchester, or Andrew McNeillie gazing North from Wales to the old family farm in Galloway or westwards to Ireland and the Aran Islands. The Irish Sea has inspired longing, horror, fear, greed, indignation, curiosity, wanderlust, love – different emotions depend on different perceivers, and the Sea is both a mirror on which to project the most powerful inner feelings and a great source of life and energy, spurring everyone into action.

But what about the features that surround the ragged Irish Sea, the rivers that flow into it, or fill with its tidal swellings? Are they inlets or outlets? Firths or Mouths? And what do we mean by these common terms? A Firth is, of course, an arm of the sea; and a mouth, in this geographical sense, is the point where one body of water opens into a larger one. But when I was exploring these simple meanings, I was startled to discover the number of different words with the same definition – an arm of the sea or the mouth of a river. Not only 'firth' but also 'brace', 'fleet', 'loch', 'mere', 'pill' and 'resort' are all defined in the *OED* as an 'arm of the sea', while 'inlet' is a 'small arm of the sea'and 'creek' is apparently an 'armlet of the sea'. When we look up 'mouth of a river', it too, is the definition for a number of different words – 'fall','inver', 'open', 'ostiary', 'port' – while 'water-foot' is the 'mouth' of a stream.

It is striking to see such anthropomorphic impulses visible in the language and the definitions of geographical features. An arm of the sea, for example, though derived from the obvious meaning - 'a narrower portion of anything projecting from the main body' – is, according to the dictionary, 'in ancient use and quite transferred'. So, the sea has had arms for a very long time.

These dictionary definitions of physical features are relics, perhaps, of older ways of perceiving the world, the legacy of what Blake might have called the 'enlarged and numerous senses of the ancients'... who 'animated all sensible objects with Gods or Goddesses'. Literary students and scholars are used to the old conventions of River Gods or parades of personified Rivers, but what seems to be an ancient natural anthropomorphic impulse can still be found in the *OED*. The noun, 'bosom', for example, in one of its definitions, (n2) can be 'applied to the surface of the sea, lake river or ground'; but in another meaning (4c) it is 'a concave bend in the coastline, or the part of the sea embraced by it'. This is remarkably figurative as definitions go. Something about the earth, and the sea, it seems, nourishes and preserves the imaginative impulse, even in the face of the most scholarly, objectivity.

If we think about the coast of the Irish Sea, with all those arms and mouths, it begins to look remarkably animated. But what is suggested by an 'arm of the sea' or the 'mouth of a river', – what images do these words evoke? Extended arms have many possibilities: they might be greeting, waving, embracing, holding, carrying, controlling, or overpowering. The word 'firth' is derived from Old Norse, fjord; and to the Vikings, the Solway Firth was an arm of the Sea – through which to extend their power inland. But from Scotland or England, the Solway is just as much the destination of local rivers, where the mouths of the Nith, the Esk, the Eden, the Wampool are to be found. Again, it all depends on perspective and direction.

Mouths, though imaginatively rather different from arms, are equally multi-functional, and might be eating, drinking, spewing, suckling, kissing, gasping, shouting, laughing, crying, singing or speaking. What do rivers say? And what is the meaning of a mouth that is perpetually open? Is the sound of the river very different when it meets the sea – when it issues forth and then disappears through its mouth? And what if the mouth is a foot? For as we have seen, river's end is sometimes known as the foot or waterfoot.

But the essential uncertainty of the river-mouth, which is at once an end and a beginning, depending on which way the river is approached, is perhaps best caught in one of the non-anthropomorphic terms that is still in common use around the coast: Estuary. This may be inanimate in origin, but is by no means inactive, for it is derived from the latin, *aestuarium*, meaning heat, boiling, bubbling – and it has two distinct definitions. The first is 'a tidal opening' or, as ever, 'an arm of the sea indenting the land', and the second, 'the tidal mouth of a great river'. So is an estuary an inlet or an outlet? A Mouth or an arm? This struck me as an interesting question for writing about the Irish Sea, whose uncertain borders are rippling with estuaries: the Severn, the Liffey, the Duddon, the Mersey, the Dee, and the Solway, which is the one that interests me most for a variety of reasons.

The sense of an estuary as a kind of no man's land or a place of disputed power, where uncontrollable forces clash can be felt powerfully in one of the early Irish *Suibhne* poems, which describes the river Garbh (basically a name for rough water), magnificent and terrifying as it meets the Atlantic swell. This is Kenneth Jackson's translation:

> The cry of Garbh tunefully calling, that calls out where it meets the wave; great lovely schools of fish swimming by its brink.
>
> I delight in my patient stay, watching the flood-tide fill the sandbanks; the mighty torrent of the great Garbh and the seawater thrusting it back.
>
> It is pleasant to see how they wrestle, the flood-tide and the cold ebb; alternately they come, up and down every time.
>
> I hear a strain of music in the Garbh, with its wintry clearness; I fall asleep at its loud murmur on a very cold night of ice.
>
> The melodious birds of the shore, musical and sweet are their familiar voices; longing for them has seized me for their chanting the Hours.

> At their sound I fall asleep on peaks and on treetops; the tunes which I hear are music to my soul…

We can very much see the imaginative, anthropomorphic impulse of the early Irish poet here, as Sweeney delights in the great 'wrestle' between the flood tide and the cold ebb, the mighty Garbh and the mightier Sea. And all the time, he is listening to music of the river, falling asleep at its loud murmur, listening to the billowy sea, the sigh of the wind, the groan of the ice, the cry of the great current. Like all rivers, this one is never still, but it's as it meets the sea that its voice seems most various and insistent.

Thoughts of Suibhne falling asleep to the sound of the river lead naturally to Burns, across the Irish Sea and the centuries, in Ellisland, imagining Mary, surrounded by blackbirds, lapwings, doves, asleep by the murmuring stream of Sweet Afton, or to Wordsworth, across the Solway from Burns, recalling the Derwent, 'fairest of all Rivers', who

> loved
> To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song,
> And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
> And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
> That flowed along my dreams? (*The Prelude*, I, 272-76)

Both poets catch in the river murmurs, a deep voice of peace, and Wordsworth, reflecting on what he heard instinctively as a child, knew that something in the 'steady cadence' of the 'ceaseless music' had the power to temper 'human waywardness', composing unruly thoughts to 'more than infant softness' and giving 'among the fretful dwellings of mankind, A knowledge, a dim earnest of the calm, /Which Nature breathes'. Both Burns and Wordsworth listened to rivers, allowing the ceaseless music to flow through their minds and into their poetry. Sweet Afton, a tributary of the Nith, and the Derwent, which flows into the Cocker, make their way towards the Irish Sea; in these poems, perhaps because they are located a little inland, or perhaps because their poets were so open to their own personal inland murmurs, the rivers harmonise with the verse, generating steadiness and peace.

In the early Irish poem of Suibhne, the movement of the Garbh seems much less calm, not so much a nurse as a mighty champion, taking on the invulnerable sea itself. But this elemental power can also be felt, perhaps surprisingly, in the work of another Romantic writer, who was both a friend of Wordsworth and an admirer of Burns, and who drew deeply on the shores of the Irish Sea. I am speaking of Sir Walter Scott, the great poet of the Scottish Borders, whose novels took so much from the land and seascapes of Scotland. Much of *Redgauntlet*, for example, the novel Scott published in 1824, takes place around the Solway and, in one of the most dramatic moments of the novel, *in* the Solway. This is when Darsie Latimer, the young Englishman, brought up in Edinburgh but now seeking his true identity, finds himself being forcibly taken from a fishing hut on the Scottish coast across the Solway Firth at night. He is injured, lying in a cart in the darkness, bound and helpless, and only able to guess at where he is. Gradually, the slow movement of the cart, 'sinking' and 'sticking' makes him realise that he is in 'the formidable estuary which divides the two kingdoms'. This is a place of meeting and division – where rivers meet the sea, where earth meets firth, where Scotland meets England, north meets south – and where the estuary divides them all. It is also a very treacherous stretch of the coast, famous for its quicksands and alarmingly rapid currents. Darkness accentuates sound and as Darsie hears his captors suddenly dispersing in alarm, he finds himself abandoned in the cart, which is now stuck firmly in quicksand, as the tide approaches with ferocious speed:

> There lay my native land – my own England – the land where I was born, and to which my wishes, since my earliest age, had turned with all the prejudice of national feeling – there it lay, within a furlong of the place where I was; yet was that furlong, which an infant would have raced over in a minute, a barrier effectual to divide me for ever from England and from life. I soon not only heard the roar of this dreadful torrent, but saw, by the fitful moonlight, the foamy crests of the devouring waves, as they advanced with the speed and fury of a pack of hungry wolves.

There is nothing reassuring about the sound of the Solway. This is an image of terrifying inundation, as the waves are transformed to a wolf-pack, roaring hungrily. The ancient impulse to animate the water seems as natural as the fear inspired by the sound of the approaching tide. By focusing on the hapless Darsie, whose struggle against his uncertain identity drives the plot, Scott is able to represent the terrifying power of the estuary, where one moment the waters part to allow crossings on foot, horseback or even wheels, and the next the unstoppable sea is charging inland engulfing everything in its path. Scott's Solway is a Border region, a place of the in-between, dangerous, full of secrets, where strange things shift over sands by night. This is partly historical – the Isle of Man's more relaxed customs and excise meant that the entire area had long been famous for smuggling, which was partly why Robert Burns could get a job with the Excise in Dumfries – but Darsie's ordeal is touching on something much deeper and grander. This is a moment of terror and startling clarity, as the sea roars towards the helpless figure in the sand. The physical landscape is magnified, and echoing, for the roar of the dreadful torrent resounds with greater meaning than Darsie can comprehend.

Readers of the novel, however, may at this dramatic moment recall the conversation earlier in the novel, where Darsie first meets Willie Steenson, the old fiddler. Wandering Willie, whose own name derives from a traditional Scottish song, is blind, but so tuned into the sounds of the land and sea that he is able to see far more than his hapless young companion. When they meet, Darsie has been walking near Dumfries, and he describes the refreshing scene:

> The air I breathed felt purer and more bracing. The clouds, riding high upon a summer breeze, drove, in gay succession, over my head, now obscuring the sun, now letting his rays stream in transient flashes upon various parts of the landscape, and especially upon the mirror of the broad firth of Solway.

When Darsie hears Willie's music for the first time, he asks him whether he is 'of this country' and receives the following retort:

> 'This country! .... I am of every country in broad Scotland, and a wee bit of England to boot. But yet I am in some sense of this country, for I was born within hearing of the roar of the Solway'.

Darsie is viewing the Solway like a picturesque traveller, keeping the firth at a pleasing distance – it is indeed, a 'mirror', which reflects his own preconceived ideas. Darsie Latimer may be looking at the broad firth, but he is not as open to its full power as he thinks. In striking contrast, Willie, the blind man, a Wanderer and a Borderer, characterises his native coastland by its *roar*. Darsie doesn't quite catch the point of this, any more than he understands the tale Willie tells about his grandfather's journey to Hell – a tale in which, even the dread border between life and death can be crossed and, with luck, recrossed. Soon after this, when Darsie is stranded in the cart in the dark, we can hear the resounding truth of Willie's words in the 'roar of this dreadful torrent'.

Though his words are not always fully understood by Darsie Latimer, Scott's memorable character, Wandering Willie, found a very sympathetic interpreter some years after publication, in the unlikely shape of John Ruskin. For in his very last work, the autobiographical, *Praeterita*, completed in 1889, the great artist, critic, and social reformer concluded his lifetime's reflections with memories of Wandering Willie and the roar of the Solway. Late in *Praeterita*, Ruskin quotes Willie's words, 'I was born within hearing of the roar of the Solway' and comments particularly on Scott's use of 'roar'. 'No word is ever used by Scott in a hackneyed sense', he writes, and then goes onto muse on Scott's ability to reanimate commonplace language:

> For three hundred years of English commonplace, roar has rhymed to shore, as breeze to trees, yet in this sentence the word is as powerful as if it had never been written till now! For no other sound of the sea is for an instant comparable to the breaking of the deep ocean, as it rises over great spaces of sand. In its rise and fall on a rocky coast, it is either perfectly silent, or, if it strike, it is with a crash, or a blow like that of a heavy gun.

> Therefore, under ordinary conditions, there may be either *splash*, or *crash*, or *sigh*, or *boom*; but not *roar*.

And he continues on this theme, his own prose energised by the sound of Scott's language:

> But the hollow sound of the countless ranks of surfy breakers, rolling mile after mile in ceaseless following, every one of them with the apparent anger and threatening of a fate which is assured death unless fled from, - the sound of this approach, over quicksands, and into the inextricable gulfs of mountain bay, this, heard far out at sea, or heard far inland, through the peace of secure night – or stormless day, is still an eternal voice, with the harmony in it of a mighty law and the gloom of mortal warning'.

This is more than a question of acoustics. For Ruskin, the roar of the Solway encompasses anger and imminent death, but it is also the sound of an eternal voice. What Ruskin catches in the words of Scott's novel affirms his own intuitive response to the great firth, the uncertain Border that people cross at their peril, that seems to gleam peacefully when viewed from afar but looming ever nearer, ultimately overwhelms everything. The roar that terrifies young Darsie Latimer seems to be coming at last for the ageing Ruskin, as he meditates on his life, work and approaching end.

Ruskin's autobiography covers a lot of ground, but right at the end, after a final visit to Italy, he concluded that this Border region of Scotland was second only to the Holy Land in international importance:

> it seemed to me that this space of low mountain ground, with the eternal sublimity of its rocky seashores, of its stormy seas and dangerous sands; its strange and mighty crags, Ailsa and Bass, and its pathless moorlands, haunted by the driving cloud, had been of more import in the world's history than all the lovely countries of the south, except only Palestine.

It is an amazing tribute, and a reaffirmation of his celebration of the ruggedness and freedom of Northern Europe expressed in his famous essay, 'The Nature of Gothic', published years before in 1851. In this much later, and deeply personal, retrospective, which oscillates between past and present, global and individual, Ruskin finally acknowledges his own debt to the Solway, in language that gestures to the universal and eternal:

> To the living reader, I have this to say very earnestly, that the whole glory and blessing of these sacred coasts depended on the rise and fall of their eternal sea, over sands gilded with its withdrawing glow, from the measureless distances of the west, on the ocean horizon, or veiled in silvery mists, or shadowed with fast-flying storm, of which nevertheless every cloud was pure, and the winter snows blanched in the starlight. For myself, the impressions of the Solway sands are a part of the greatest teaching that ever I received during the joy of youth.

For Ruskin the landscape was inseparable from the art he most admired, which was audible in the words of *Redgauntlet*, and visible in the evocative landscapes of Turner, which he had loved throughout his life. As he continues with his description of the Solway sands, he recollects Turner's astonishing image of the Solway,

> for Turner they became the most pathetic that formed his character in the prime of life, and the five later Liber Studiorum subjects – 'Solway Moss', 'Peat Bog, Scotland', 'The Falls of Clyde', 'Ben Arthur', and Dunblane Abbey' remain more complete expressions of his intellect, and more noble monuments of his art, than all his mightiest after works, until the days of sunset in the west came for *it* also.

These are the words of an old man, for whom the image of the sands gilded with the withdrawing glow of the sea leads naturally to thoughts of sunset and eternity. This is the elderly Ruskin, addressing the 'living reader', capturing the impressions of the Solway before his own sands sink. But there's nothing peaceful or still in his description of the fast-flying storm,

the rise and fall of the eternal sea. It is a kind of word-painting, akin to Turner's landscapes, which Ruskin had done so much to introduce to his contemporaries, and whose spirit lingers in these last, glimmering recollections.

Thoughts of the Solway take Ruskin back to his youth, back to the landscapes that had taught him most, back to the stories that fired his imagination. It is when Ruskin is recalling his own attempt to locate the spot on the north side of the firth, where Wandering Willie's grandfather wakes up after his visit to Hell, that he is moved to acknowledge his own debt to the Solway sands. The roar of the Solway is greater than the individual, and somewhere within Scott's words, Ruskin is hearing not just the physical sounds of the familiar coastline, but the roar heard by Jeremiah, who feared that the waves would come for those 'foolish people without understanding; which have eyes and see not, which have ears and hear not'. The next verse reads

> Fear ye not me, saith the Lord: will ye not tremble at my presence, which have placed the sand for the bound of the sea by a perpetual decree, that it cannot pass it: and though the waves thereof toss themselves, yet can they not prevail; though they roar, yet can they not pass over it?'

For Ruskin, deeply dismayed by the dark condition of late nineteenth century Britain, the Solway, with its rushing waves and its inimitable roar may have seemed a chastening embodiment of this ancient warning. In Ruskin's eyes – and words - these are 'sacred coasts', and the voice of the estuary is an eternal voice - ominous, gloomy and yet with the harmony of mighty law. If Matthew Arnold could only hear the long withdrawing roar of the 'Sea of Faith' at Dover beach, Ruskin's mind was still deeply attuned to the eternal voice – and its terrifying inescapable power.

The strange recollection in *Praeterita* is a moment of revelation that fuses religious feeling, literature, music and a very particular stretch of the earth. Wandering Willie's music is both local and universal. Ruskin observes that the distinction of the music of Scotland is in its 'association with sweeter natural sounds, and filling a deeper silence'; in other words, it is somehow part of the very land in which it has flourished for so many years. Ruskin also understands that local sounds enable the revelation of universal truths: 'Mozart's birth', he observes, a few paragraphs earlier, 'wrote the laws of melody for all the world as irrevocably as if they had been set down by the waves of the Solway'. In tuning his ear to the sounds of *his* native region, Wandering Willie has discovered the laws of melody for the world.

For Ruskin, genius was fostered by tradition and new creations never destroyed the older foundations of truth. And since local truth was also universal, Ruskin could move easily from the Solway to other fountains of truth and moments when the sunset transfigured everything. 'How all things come together', he writes in the closing paragraphs, shifting suddenly from the Solway to Siena, and a translucent moment when the fireflies 'shone fitfully in the still undarkened air'. 'How they shone!' he wrote, 'the fireflies everywhere in sky and cloud rising and falling, mixed with lightning and more intense than the stars'. At the very end of the book, the thunderous Italian evening with the gleams of intense light in the still undarkened air seem to utter the same truth as the roar of the Solway, where the eternal sea, rises and falls forever, over sands which the sunset 'gilded with its withdrawing glow'. What the voice of the great estuary says to Ruskin, then, is best conveyed through words that speak to the imagination, to the internal music of the mind.

But it was clear to Scott that not everyone heard the same sounds. Wandering Willie is only one of the voices in his novel, and it is set firmly against the different perceptions of Darsie Latimer. Scott's acute perception of the Solway as a great Border made him alert to opposing perspectives and the whole of *Redgauntlet* is built from contrasting points of view. With this in mind, we might therefore question whether Ruskin's version of the local is really universal? Can we all hear what Ruskin hears in the Solway, and can Ruskin really hear everything that is there?

The closing passages of *Praeterita* were written in 1889, and by that time the Railway companies had been running trains across the Solway viaduct between Kirkbride and Annan for 20 years. Indeed, the research for this paper has helped me to understand something that had

long been a personal puzzle, and that is my father's recollection of going over the Solway bridge as a schoolboy, crossing between his home in Bowness on the Cumbrian coast and his grand-parents home in Annan on the other side. As far as I was aware, there wasn't a bridge over the Solway at that point – and certainly hasn't been in my lifetime. But the railway viaduct was there from the 1860s to the 1930s, enabling my father to walk across as a child, and Ruskin, if he chose, to cross by train. The 'roar' that the aged Ruskin heard when he revisited the Dumfries coast must therefore have included the sound of the Glasgow and South Western steam engines and the rattle of trucks and carriages – but they make no obvious impact on his account. Is the Solway just as much a broad mirror for the older Ruskin as it is for the young Darsie Latimer?

Thinking about the subjective nature of Ruskin's perceptions led me to wonder further, whether the roar of the Solway sounded the same from the other side of the Irish Sea. And the poem that seemed especially pertinent to this question is Ciaran Carson's 'John Ruskin in Belfast'. In this poem, published exactly a century after *Praeterita* in 1989, in *Belfast Confetti*, Carson imagines John Ruskin in Belfast – that booming Victorian industrial city, which is now home to one of Turner's late paintings 'The Dawn of Christianity'. Turner's circular painting of the Holy Family silhouetted against a bright blue sky contrasts sharply with the 'knitted, knotted streets' of Belfast, which are depicted in the poem as being full of 'old shoes, ashes, rags, smashed crockery, bullet casings, shreds of nameless clothes, rotten timber jaggy with bent nails, cinders, bones and half-bricks'. As he approaches, Ruskin feels engulfed by the 'the Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century', which refers to the essay he wrote in the 1880s about the dense cloud that had seemed to be darkening the age. He feels like his hero, Turner, lashed to the mast, experiencing the sea-storm for the sake of his art, but Ruskin is at sea in the modern city, amidst the 'industrial Armada' where there is no distinction between sea and air, where the writhing cloudscape collapses into 'terraces and sinks and troughs'. As he struggles against the overpowering environment, Ruskin remembers a lecture he delivered in Dublin in 1868, murmuring, 'fragments of my speech, The mystery of Life and Its Arts' swam up through the cumulus…'

In that lecture, 'The Mystery of Life and its Arts', Ruskin had explored the decay of national arts, especially in Ireland, after its early flowering. Warming to his theme, he compared two religious paintings, one a 'corrigible Eve' from Lombardy, the other, 'an incorrigible Irish Angel'. Both were judged to be poor pieces, but where the 'Lombardic Eve knew she was in the wrong, the Irish angel thought himself all right'. Ruskin continues with his criticism of the Irish artist, with a rather heavy wit that now makes uncomfortable reading, 'The irish missal painter had drawn his angel with no sense of failure, in happy complacency, and put red dots into the palm of each hand, and rounded the eyes in perfect circles, and I regret to say, left the mouth out altogether, with perfect satisfaction to himself'. This then led onto broader comments on the Irish character, which are even worse: the Irishman, according to Ruskin, being 'generous-hearted', intending to do right, but inclined to do wrong 'without finding it out', and then flying into wrath and refusing to admit his mistakes.

This is the very passage that Carson seizes on for his poem, turning fragments of Ruskin's lecture into long lines of verse, which culminate in the troubling words: 'and I regret to say, the mouth is left out altogether'. Carson's Ruskin is haunted by 'that blank mouth' – a 'calm terror, closed against the smog and murk of Belfast' - and he prays, 'let it not open /That it might condemn me'. This expresses a fear of that Irish mouth, a fear of what a mouth might say. In the Irish context, whether nineteenth- or twentieth-century, reluctance to recognise the mouth or to hear the sounds that might utter from it has an obvious political edge. Ruskin's Dublin lecture can easily be read either as a patronising British view of Irish achievement, or as a very dark expression of the neglect of hungry mouths, or just as a refusal to hear what Irish voices – or Irish angels - might be saying. But in *Belfast Confetti*, nothing is very obvious, so no sooner has Ruskin's fear been articulated than the poem moves on – 'let it remain inviolate'. Does this mean Ruskin's speech? Let it not be torn apart by an opposing point of view? Or does it refer to the missing mouth? May the hidden mouth not be violated, for perhaps allowing a mouth into being is not always, after all, an act of liberation, or even basic humanity. Carson's collection, *Belfast Confetti,* is filled with images of mouths, and the poem that is actually entitled 'The Mouth'

demonstrates the terrible consequences of voicing certain opinions or letting certain things be known – in other words, of being seen as 'a mouth'.

But along with its responses to the Troubles, *Belfast Confetti* also displays Carson's fascination with river mouths. In the prose passage called 'the Farset', especially, he muses on the meaning of 'Belfast', and reaches back to his childhood, 'The river, the stream, the sewer trickles from a black mouth and disappears down a black hole. It is this which gives Belfast its name'. The movement from mouth into black hole is a literal description, but it also recalls his poem, 'The Mouth'. For Beal, we are told, 'means a mouth, or the mouth of a river'. This in turn connects Belfast with the 'blank mouth' that threatens Ruskin in the poem, thus encouraging readers to wonder whether that blank mouth is an image of self-destruction? Of not being heard? Of oblivion? Or all of the above?

In 'The Farset' passage, Carson goes on to quote from nineteenth-century guide writers and etymologists, puzzling over the meanings of 'Fast', or 'Farset' (fearsad'), and whether 'Belfast' means just 'the town at the mouth of the river', or whether, as a nineteenth-century Irish language specialist, the Reverend Dineen, suggests, it might have the additional meanings of 'a shaft, a spindle, the ulna of the arm, a club, the spindle of an axle, a bar or bank of sand at low water, a deep narrow channel on a strand at low tide, a pit or pool of water, a verse, a poem.' Etymologies are problematic, especially given the multiple influences in Belfast of Irish, English, Scots and Scots Gaelic, but somewhere within the fluid ironies of the place-name, and the fascination with what can't be pinned down, is something of the old anthropomorphic impulse, being twisted and scattered amongst the rest of this particular modern urban space. Carson, alert to the shifting currents of language, seizes on Dineen's definitions to suggest 'let Belfast be the mouth of the poem' and concludes that the 'river Farset, the hidden stream, is all of these things' – an axis, and a maze of channels, which remembers 'spindles, arms and songs' and at the same time 'remembers nothing'. So perhaps the Irish missal painter knew more than Ruskin suspected – perhaps the angel's mouth was missing because it was unpaintable, defying any single perspective, any easy representation? Perhaps, in the 1980s, the missing mouth seemed the most accurate way of representing Belfast's 'hidden stream'?

As Ruskin in Belfast returns to the painting by Turner that he presumably came to see, he (or is it Carson now?) muses on the subject, which is the Biblical moment of the Flight into Egypt, and searches for an angel in the silhouetted palm tree. This angel, like that other incorrigible angel, has no body, let alone a mouth, and yet words still issue from 'the sealed tomb of his mouth': 'Be thou there until I bring thee word' – These are the words from the Gospel, the angel's warning to Mary and Joseph to flee into Egypt and keep their baby safe until they receive word to return.

Perhaps the absence of a mouth in the old Irish painting of an angel suggests that no one could be warned about the massacre. Or is it rather that that angel, too, was capable of issuing words, and what appeared to be a blank mouth was really the sealed tomb which would suddenly burst open? Or did the resurrection seem a very long way off to the Belfast poet in the 1980s, contemplating the 'Dawn of Christianity'? Looking at Turner's painting, it is difficult to know whether the Holy family are moving towards you or away – it all depends on the perspective of the viewer. Both time and language are very fluid in Carson's poem, too, which focuses suddenly on a moment of transition, of flight, of waiting for a word. May be the single 'word' just couldn't quite be heard? In the knitted knotted streets, where the river is the axis of the Falls Road and Shankhill, disappearing into the dams and sluices, before being lost in its final culvert, it is not easy to hear a single clear voice, or to interpret any providential words. What does the mouth say?

Ruskin's answer – or Carson's - is to take the missing mouth, quite unexpectedly: 'Let that missing mouth be mine' he says,

> as one evening in Siena,
> I walked the hills above, where fireflies moved like finely broken starlight
> Through the purple leaves, rising, falling, as the cobalt clouds – white-edged, mountainous –
> Surged into thunderous night; and fireflies gusted everywhere, mixed with the lightning,

Till I thought I'd open up my mouth and swallow them, as I might gulp the milky way.

Suddenly free from the all-engulfing storm-cloud of the industrial city, Ruskin is drinking in the visionary moment in Siena - or the Solway. For this is the closing image of *Praeterita*, where all words cease.

In the Solway, Ruskin heard the eternal roar, and if it was magnified by the railway viaduct, he chose not to record that in his autobiography. In *Praeterita*, Ruskin blamed another native of the Solway region, that other great prose writer, Thomas Carlyle, for listening too much to the pressures of the present, and in so doing, he was inadvertently risking criticism from later historicist readers. But perhaps he knew more than historicist readings might allow. Perhaps Ruskin, too, was prophetic rather than prejudiced. For now the railway viaduct has gone again – demolished in the 1930s, and the area from which it travelled is a nature reserve. If you visit the tiny village of Bowness on Solway, you can find buildings built on the stones of Hadrian's Wall, and houses constructed for the railways - strange, anomalous survivals from eras that have vanished as if they never were. The roar of the Solway is perhaps more powerful than any manmade 'roar', and Ruskin understood more by the end of his life, as he lapsed in and out of periods of mental illness, than he had in his prime?

Perhaps Ruskin's response to Belfast, as intuited by Ciaran Carson, was to shut out the blank mouth and stop any words from issuing forth. In other words, to make the mouth not an organ for speech, but rather a means for drinking in eternal truths, for suckling on natural beauty, on stories from the dawn of time. May be the open mouth is not struggling against the arm of the sea, and doesn't despair when words disappear, but patiently draws life from the rise and fall of the eternal sea.

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