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Reconceiving the British Isles: The Literature of the Archipelago

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Poems & Paradigms

Historians have been 're-conceiving the British Isles' for longer than literary critics. The names they give their re-conceptions include 'three kingdoms' history, 'four nations' history and 'Atlantic' history. But increasingly, to adapt T.S. Eliot: *In the room the critics come and go, / Talking of the "archipelago"*. Talk of the archipelago received a boost from John Kerrigan's superb book *Archipelagic English* published two years ago. In fact, literary academics have often been archipelagic critics *avant la lettre*. That is, they have approached texts from these islands, and from the medieval to the modern period, with due attention to what Kerrigan calls the 'expansive, multilevelled ... polycentric' aspects of 'the literary and cultural field'. I began 'talking of the archipelago' myself when I found that my own field, modern poetry in English, made it impossible not to do so.

Yet modern poetry can be peculiarly hard to prise away from the systems – both intellectual and institutional – established by nation-based literary studies. That also applies to how "international" or "modernist", as critical terms, can simply mean 'American'; and to how "English poetry" can take over. In fact, "English" poetry is rarely segregated on a national basis – there are no anthologies, for instance. But this seeming abdication is explained and outweighed by two factors: first, confusion between country and language; second, as in other spheres, confusion of Britain with England.

This paper will argue that archipelagic 'polycentrism' is crucial to readings of modern Anglophone poetry. The fact that "Anglo-American" criticism suppresses nationality is no reason for Irish or Scottish criticism to over-emphasise it. In fact, both the suppression and the over-emphasis can mean that the archipelago punches below its collective aesthetic weight. The strikingly archipelagic Rhymers' Club, which W.B. Yeats co-founded in 1890s London, was the original avant-garde coterie. Further, to think in terms of the 'Atlantic archipelago' is to open up the full range of poetic traffic between our islands and America.

My talk has two main headings: the mobility of poetry; the immobility of critical paradigms. First, it's obvious that poetry, like people, or with people – and with languages – moves around these islands. Like it or not, English colonisation or expansionism, Irish and Scottish migrations, have had a cumulative effect. You could devise an intricate map to track poetic criss-crossings since 1890: a map of genres, forms, images, language, lexis, contexts, intertexts, influence, ancestry, domicile,

movements, groups, networks, publishing. The map would pinpoint connections and disconnections – not always where we might expect to find them. And it would register sea-changes. To quote Kerrigan again, the archipelago ‘fosters fusions and transformations’. On this map, one poet who would be all over the place is Yeats. I’ll be stressing Yeats’s archipelagic bearings, and their continuing significance.

There’s a naïve literalness to the idea that poetry becomes more ‘international’ – less “insular”, so to speak – if its author moves to Budapest or Boston. Meanwhile actual or imagined or literary travel within these islands tends to be taken for granted. It lacks the categorical *cachet* of “Abroad” or “Exile”: perhaps, indeed, because it falls between home and abroad. These are actually suggestive poles, and the poetic charge between them ranges from defamiliarisation to tension to conflict. Sea-changes can be subversions. To return to the mystique of “Abroad”: Alan Bennett once joked, in the persona of a self-important expatriate writer: ‘Why did Joyce go to Paris? Or Brenda to Scunthorpe?’ In fact, Irish and Scottish writers often went to London for reasons that national literary histories play down. One such, Louis MacNeice, ironically wondered whether his CV would look better if he had ‘had a Berlin to say goodbye to’. Hence the mock-heroic title of his own 1930s travel book, *I Crossed the Minch* – the Minch being the channel between mainland Scotland and Skye, Lewis, Harris and North Uist. MacNeice’s mock-heroics also insist that he has indeed made a journey: the isles are not the mainland, neither are they homogeneous. Even Hugh MacDiarmid’s nationalism faltered on the multiplicity of the Scottish islands. Similarly, MacNeice represents the islands as partly foreign, partly implicated in his own archipelagic baggage: Irish baggage, his English Left-wing intellectual milieu, the Scottish dimensions of Ulster.

Perhaps island poems, like MacNeice’s ‘The Hebrides’, epitomise the need to ‘talk of the archipelago’. I’m now going to look at a few poems, written between 1916 and 1977, which show their archipelagic co-ordinates on the surface. And I’ll link those co-ordinates with underlying aesthetic dynamics. The locus of poetry itself is also at issue. I should stress that I’m only pulling out one or two strands from among the comparative possibilities which these and other poems present. The poems are all by poets who have variously suffered from critical failure to think in archipelagic terms: Yeats seen as not Irish enough, W.S. Graham as not Scottish enough; MacNeice seen as ‘divided’: neither Irish nor English; Philip Larkin seen as too English; Edward Thomas seen as English in ways that overlook his Welsh background and Irish influences. To quote another Thomas, Dylan: Addressing a Scottish nationalist audience in Edinburgh, Dylan Thomas called himself ‘a border case’. He said: ‘Regarded in England as a Welshman (and a

waterer of England's milk), and in Wales as an Englishman, I am too unnational to be here at all. I should be living in a small private leper-house in Hereford or Shropshire, one foot in Wales and my vowels in England'. Archipelagic criticism is not about admitting 'border cases' into national canons. It is about re-conceiving the entire poetic landscape in terms that 'border cases' show to be necessary. If a poem doesn't fit the paradigm, change the paradigm.

Yeats's 'Under Saturn' and Larkin's 'The Importance of Elsewhere' include the word 'home'. Home is itself a mobile motif, and usually a sub-national one. The stress on local dwelling that characterises the poetry of our islands has proved paradoxically transferable: ever open to 'fusions and transformations'. For instance, Patrick Kavanagh's well-known concept of the 'parochial' poem was influenced by English country poetry – Clare, Thomas – which he contrasted with 'this national thing [that] is no use to anyone'. As a metaphysics of place, which now encompasses ecology, "home" has Romantic roots in Wordsworth's construction of the Lake District: duly transplanted by Yeats to Sligo. 'Under Saturn' (1919) was written when Yeats came over from Oxford to introduce his English wife to Sligo. Larkin's poem (1955) moves in the opposite direction: he wrote it soon after he returned to England after five years in Belfast.

To quote from the poems: 'I am thinking of a child's vow sworn in vain,/ Never to leave that valley his fathers called their home'; 'Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home,/ Strangeness made sense'. Both poets situate 'home' with reference to other points of the archipelagic compass, and as they do so they imply the psychic variables that writing poetry involves. 'Under Saturn' begins: 'Do not because this day I have grown saturnine/ Imagine that lost love, inseparable from my thought/ Because I have no other youth, can make me pine'. Larkin presents a psychological spectrum that ranges from 'lonely' to 'unworkable'.

To quote his second stanza: 'Their draughty streets, end-on to hills, the faint/ Archaic smell of dockland, like a stable,/ The herring-hawker's cry, dwindling, went/ To prove me separate, not unworkable'. All this gloom, then, is partly reflexive. 'The Importance of Elsewhere' measures the mix of closeness and distance on which its own inspiration depends. Yeats explains his 'fantastic ride' on Pegasus as driven by a quest to recover 'lost love': not Maud Gonne, but the 'valley' of his early poetic sources: 'Although my wits have gone/ On a fantastic ride, my horse's flanks are spurred/ By childish memories of an old, cross Pollexfen ...'

'Under Saturn' is archipelagic on a familial level: the Pollexfens originally came from Devon – this may accommodate Yeats's English wife. The poem is also archipelagic on an aesthetic level: not only does the speaker implicitly carry with him poems shaped by absence; what constitutes his poetic 'home' is not "Ireland" as such, but an intimately known locality, now a Wordsworthian nexus of childhood and memory. Similarly, 'The Importance of Elsewhere' indicates that Larkin pre-experienced 'Ireland' in aesthetic terms: that is, he had spent three years immersed in Yeats. But, just as critics often take Yeats at his word when he repudiates Wordsworth, so they sometimes believe Larkin when he claims that Hardy purged Yeats from his aesthetic. The importance of Larkin's double-edged 'elsewhere' includes the poetry of elsewhere.

Contact with Yeats endures in his stanza-structure, in the play of monosyllabic against polysyllabic words, in his smuggling of 'archaic' folk traces into a cameo of 1950s Belfast. Of course, transformation is at work too. For Yeats, childhood and memory are more cultural poetic agents than they are for Wordsworth – 'vision' comes from supernatural sources. Similarly, in the lines: 'These are my customs and establishments/ It would be much more serious to refuse', Larkin relocates and darkens Yeats's 'custom and ceremony'.

To quote Larkin on Belfast again: 'the salt rebuff of speech,/ Insisting so on difference'. Philip Larkin is not usually hailed as a theorist of 'difference'. Yet 'The Importance of Elsewhere' suggests the archipelago's ability to feed antinomies of 'home' and 'strangeness' – including 'speech' – that may be intrinsic to lyric structure. From one angle, 'Under Saturn' rewrites 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'. 'Innisfree' should not be underrated as a template for poems of intra-archipelagic travel: poems governed by desire or nostalgia, their direction most commonly from city to country or east to west. W.S. Graham's 'Loch Thom' also rewrites 'Innisfree', and, like 'Under Saturn', involves a temporal as well as spatial journey. To quote the opening lines: 'Just for the sake of recovering/ I walked backward from fifty-six/ Quick years of age wanting to see/ And managed not to trip or stumble/ To find Loch Thom and turned round/ To see the stretch of my childhood/ Before me'.

The poem's own implied locus is Graham's domicile on the Cornish coast. This may colour the stress on the loch as 'freshwater', with the sea, 'the firth' of Clyde, miles away. The speaker makes a dream-like return north to where Loch Thom once represented escape from industrial Greenock. Like Yeats's 'valley', the loch also seems an inspirational neo-Wordsworthian source to which return is problematic: 'My mother is dead. My father is dead./ And all the trout I used to

know/ Leaping from their sad rings are dead'. The capitalised, unpunctuated last words imply multi-faceted dislocation: 'GOBACK/ GOBACK GOBACK FAREWELL LOCH THOM'. Two other archipelagic factors: first, Graham's mother was Irish: hence perhaps 'my mammy's/ Bramble jam scones', and other Irish allusions in his poetry. Second: he was influenced by Dylan Thomas – in the 1950s, as pan-archipelagic a force as Yeats. Hence 'fifty-six/ Quick years of age'. 'Loch Thom' might also be read as a dark counterpart to Dylan Thomas's 'Fern Hill'.

Edward Thomas's 'The Ash Grove' (1916) is another poem about return and about poetry. But its core 'locus' is neither named nor fixed. The speaker remembers the spatial and temporal 'interval' he once came upon in a decayed ash grove. He connects it with other such groves by invoking a song of that title, itself elusive. To quote the last seven lines: 'And now an ash grove far from those hills can bring/ The same tranquillity in which I wander a ghost/ With a ghostly gladness, as if I heard a girl sing// The song of the Ash Grove soft as love uncrossed,/ And then in a crowd or in distance it were lost,/ But the moment unveiled something unwilling to die/ And I had what most I desired, without search or desert or cost'. The 'ghostliness' here seems associated first, with what Thomas called his 'mainly Welsh' ancestry; second, with his terming himself 'one of those modern people who belong nowhere'. Ash is native to the hills of South Wales. 'The Ash Grove' is a Welsh harp melody, set to various Welsh and English words, some of which the poem echoes. Its Welsh dimension concerns an occluded past: a half-dead grove, a hypothetically fallen house, an almost 'lost' song. Yet all this somehow survives to enable the epiphany, the poem. Thomas's poetry can be read in archipelagic terms, not only because it elides boundaries between England and Wales, but also because his imagining of England draws on his reading of Welsh and Irish poetry, especially Yeats. The pervasive presence of folksong is one example. Another presence here is Wordsworth again: in the ratio between memory, 'tranquillity' and poetry. But the poem's English, Welsh and possibly Irish co-ordinates, perhaps a touch of Celticism, are blended in a way that makes its 'tranquil' space fragile.

'Carrick Revisited', written at the end of the Second World War, is Louis MacNeice's most explicitly archipelagic poem. It situates his Carrickfergus childhood, both geographically and historically, between 'western Ireland', home of his 'fathers', and 'southern England' where he now lives. Public and family history interpenetrate: Carrick's Norman castle 'as plumb-assured/ as thirty years ago', two world wars, the fact that the MacNeice family's departure from 'western Ireland' was precipitated by sectarian tensions. Here again childhood landscape is recalled in a way that suggests formative effects which inform the poem itself. I quote: 'The channels of my dreams determined largely/

By random chemistry of soil and air;/ Memories I had shelved peer at me from the shelf'. In stressing randomness rather than rootedness, or stressing the dialectic between the two – Abroad/ home – MacNeice lays out archipelagic terrain that has fostered a mobility central to his own aesthetic: 'Time and place – our bridgeheads into reality/ But also its concealment! Out of the sea/ We land on the Particular and lose/ All other possible bird's-eye views'. Obviously the sea enters archipelagic scenarios. Some of these poems evoke the heyday of boats and trains: an era wonderfully captured by *A Floating Commonwealth*: Christopher Harvie's book on the commerce, culture and politics of Atlantic and Irish Sea coasts. Greenock and Belfast were hubs of this traffic. The Pollexfens had shipping interests. Yeats refers to 'the Sligo quay', Larkin to 'dockland'.

As a poetic locus between 'western Ireland' and 'southern England', 'Carrick' marks the spot where MacNeice transformed Yeatsian aesthetics. During the 1930s MacNeice violated Yeats's boundaries – as no other Irish poet did – by not screening out the fact, language and imagery of technological modernity. The first stanza of 'Carrick Revisited' calls on or calls up the urban impressionism that marks MacNeice's contribution to the socially conscious aesthetic of the "English" 1930s: 'Here are new villas, here is a sizzling grid'. Yet the felt incongruity of villas and grid with the Lough's 'green banks' strikes a residually Yeatsian note. 'Villa' is a kitsch word that derives from the suburbanisation of London. 'Grid' is a 1930s "pylon poet" word.

Both seem thrown into environmental and aesthetic question. MacNeice introduced Irish dimensions to English contexts and *vice versa*. For instance, his city-poems – of Birmingham and London as well as Belfast and Dublin – are complex spaces on which much "urban" Irish, English and Scottish poetry was subsequently built. Similarly, MacNeice violated the neutrality of Irish poetry with consequences for how later Irish poets mediate or invoke the second world war – as in so-called "Troubles poetry".

In 'Carrick Revisited' the speaker 'was – and is – dumbfounded to find myself/ In a topographical frame'. MacNeice and other poets have often been 'dumbfounded', in the sense of silenced or only partially heard, by the topographical frames that nation-based paradigms impose. I'm currently involved in a project entitled 'Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry: Relations and Comparisons'. Poetry is both central and peripheral to Irish and Scottish literary studies: central because both fields derive from the cultural nationalism of Yeats and MacDiarmid; peripheral because, as these poets found in different ways, poetry does not always march with the nation. Further, excessive weight on "Scottish" or "Irish", before "poetry", can pre-empt literary-critical

readings. Yet, of course, such weighting reflects the struggle to assert a distinctive Irish literature or depose 'English Ascendancy in British Literature' – the title of an early polemic by MacDiarmid: a struggle that has had to be renewed. During the mid twentieth century little was done in indigenous Irish and Scottish criticism either to theorise national canons or to contest Anglo-American ascendancy in modern literature. So when Irish and Scottish literary studies began to take off during the 1970s, as if making up for lost time, their broad tendency was nationalist. Critics were less keen to 'talk of the archipelago' than kick away the Irish or Scottish props sustaining "English" literature's illusion of its organic unity. This tendency was accentuated by the Northern Ireland Troubles (from 1969), and by the lost referendum on Scottish devolution (1979).

By the same token, the archipelagic paradigm might be construed as neo- or crypto-unionist: or as driven by the alliance between the Irish and UK governments that enabled the peace process. I would add that dialectics between unionist and nationalist criticism are an under-noted force in the history of the archipelagic literary academy. In any case, Ray Ryan and Liam McIlvanney warn, in their co-edited *Ireland and Scotland: Culture and Society, 1700-2000*: 'To advocate an Irish/ Scottish context is to establish a political – and in some eyes, a polemical – framework for debate. Within Irish studies, the Irish/ Scottish comparison is viewed by some as unionism's answer to postcolonial studies.' That is so because it appears to reconnect the Republic with the UK; to pivot on Ulster (not necessarily the case nor *ipso facto* a bad thing); and to position Northern Ireland partly outwith this island.

That is, as a zone where Ireland and Scotland interpenetrate. In contrast, from the angle of Scottish literary studies, an Irish-Scottish framework looks more like nationalism's answer to 'English Ascendancy in British Literature'. Meanwhile, most studies of modern poetry and most literary histories remain nation-based. [For example, the recent multi-volume *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* and *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* largely inhabit parallel universes. Yet they are unconscious twins. The editors of both stress 'inclusiveness', linguistic multiplicity, plural 'identities'. So far, so good, you might think. But both inclusiveness and identity politics can leave 'border-cases' stranded, while neither advance literary-critical argument.]

To conceive modern poetry in archipelagic terms is, I believe, to advance aesthetic and critical thinking. But it's not a question of either/ or. The archipelagic paradigm complements rather than usurps nation-based studies. It helps to identify the appropriate contexts of explanation and interpretation – local, national, archipelagic, international – in particular cases. The paradigm exposes internal

disconnections and trans-national connections. It gives the adjective 'colonial' a much-needed rest. And it can replace *a priori* assumptions with readings that elicit what is truly distinctive in national or literary terms.

The poems I have discussed happen to highlight the interactive posterity of Wordsworth and Yeats – as in Seamus Heaney's poetry, for instance. The archipelagic paradigm often reinforces the view that transformations of Romanticism remain alive in modern poetry. It also helps us to understand Yeats's own influence from a perspective that doesn't yoke him often incongruously to Eliot and Pound or obsessively to Ireland. MacNeice's and Larkin's transformations of Yeats underline the fact that much of his mid-20th century aesthetic posterity occurred on what might be called his 'other island'. To some, this might prove that Yeats was a Brit all along. To others, it might suggest that Irish nationalist ideology prevented certain Irish poets, and such critics as there were, from engaging with his mature poetry, as did MacNeice and Auden in the 1930s; or Larkin, Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill in the 1950s. Irish poets of the last half-century have not just been exposed to an unmediated or national "Yeats". There are still too many studies along the lines of 'Yeats and X and Ireland'.

Irish literary history has yet to reckon with where 'northern Irish' poetry came from. One answer, an archipelagic answer – as perhaps most of the answers would be – is that it came from Yeats via Britain. It's no accident, for instance, that Seamus Heaney's essay 'Englands of the Mind' focuses on Larkin, Hughes and Hill. But here Heaney may partly be responding to hidden 'Irelands of the mind' – also to many layers of Yeats's archipelagic origins and impact.

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Poems

Under Saturn

Do not because this day I have grown saturnine
Imagine that lost love, inseparable from my thought
Because I have no other youth, can make me pine;
For how should I forget the wisdom that you brought,
The comfort that you made? Although my wits have gone
On a fantastic ride, my horse's flanks are spurred
By childish memories of an old cross Pollexfen,
And of a Middleton, whose name you never heard,
And of a red-haired Yeats whose looks, although he died
Before my time, seems like a vivid memory.
You heard that labouring man who had served my people.

He said

Upon the open road, near to the Sligo quay –
No, no, not said, but cried it out – 'You have come again,
And surely after twenty years it was time to come.'

W.B. Yeats (1919)

The Importance of Elsewhere

Lonely in Ireland, since it was not home,
Strangeness made sense. The salt rebuff of speech,
Insisting so on difference, made me welcome:
Once that was recognised, we were in touch.

Their draughty streets, end-on to hills, the faint
Archaic smell of dockland, like a stable,
The herring-hawker's cry, dwindling, went
To prove me separate, not unworkable.

Living in England has no such excuse:
These are my customs and establishments
It would be much more serious to refuse.
Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.

Philip Larkin (1955)

Loch Thom

1

Just for the sake of recovering
I walked backward from fifty-six
Quick years of age wanting to see,
And managed not to trip or stumble
To find Loch Thom and turned round
To see the stretch of my childhood
Before me. Here is the loch. The same
Long-beaked cry curls across
The heather-edges of the water held
Between the hills a boyhood's walk
Up from Greenock. It is the morning.

And I am here with my mammy's
Bramble jam scones in my pocket.
The Firth is miles and I have come
Back to find Loch Thom maybe
In this light does not recognise me.

This is a lonely freshwater loch.
No farms on the edge. Only
Heather grouse-moor stretching
Down to Greenock and One Hope
Street or stretching away across
Into the blue moors of Ayrshire.

2

And almost I am back again
Wading the heather down to the edge
To sit. The minnows go by in shoals
Like iron-filings in the shallows.

My mother is dead. My father is dead.
And all the trout I used to know
Leaping from their sad rings are dead.

3

I drop my crumbs into the shallow
Weed for the minnows and pinheads.
You see that I will have to rise
And turn round and get back where
My running age will slow for a moment
To let me on. It is a colder
Stretch of water than I remember.

The curlew's cry travelling still
Kills me fairly. In front of me
The grouse flurry and settle. GOBACK
GOBACK GOBACK FAREWELL LOCH THOM.

W.S. Graham (1977)

The Ash Grove

Half of the grove stood dead, and those that yet lived made
Little more than the dead ones made of shade.
If they led to a house, long before they had seen its fall:
But they welcomed me; I was glad without cause and
delayed.

Scarce a hundred paces under the trees was the interval –
Paces each sweeter than sweetest miles – but nothing at all,
Not even the spirits of memory and fear with restless wing,
Could climb down in to molest me over the wall

That I passed through at either end without noticing.
And now an ash grove far from those hills can bring
The same tranquillity in which I wander a ghost
With a ghostly gladness, as if I heard a girl sing

The song of the Ash Grove soft as love uncrossed,
And then in a crowd or in distance it were lost,
But the moment unveiled something unwilling to die
And I had what most I desired, without search or desert
or cost.

Edward Thomas (1916)

from *Home*

...

The word 'home' raised a smile in us all three,

And one repeated it, smiling just so
That all knew what he meant and none would say.
Between three counties far apart that lay
We were divided and looked strangely each
At the other, and we knew we were not friends
But fellows in a union that ends
With the necessity for it, as it ought. ...

Edward Thomas (1916)

Carrick Revisited

Back to Carrick, the castle as plumb assured
As thirty years ago – Which war was which?
Here are new villas, here is a sizzling grid
But the green banks are as rich and the lough as hazily lazy
And the child's astonishment not yet cured.

Who was – and am – dumbfounded to find myself
In a topographical frame – here, not there –
The channels of my dreams determined largely
By random chemistry of soil and air;
Memories I had shelved peer at me from the shelf.

Fog-horn, mill-horn, corncrake and church bell
Half-heard through boarded time as a child in bed
Glimpses a brangle of talk from the floor below
But cannot catch the words. Our past we know
But not its meaning – whether it meant well.

Time and place – our bridgeheads into reality
But also its concealment! Out of the sea
We land on the Particular and lose
All other possible bird's eye views, the Truth
That is of Itself for Itself – but not for me.

Torn before birth from where my fathers dwelt,
Schooled from the age of ten to a foreign voice,
Yet neither western Ireland nor southern England
Cancels this interlude; what chance misspelt
May never now be righted by my choice.

Whatever then my inherited or acquired
Affinities, such remains my childhood's frame
Like a belated rock in the red Antrim clay
That cannot at this era change its pitch or name –

And the pre-natal mountain is far away.

Louis MacNeice (1945)

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