CHAPTER 40

'A POTTED PEACE/LILY'?[1] NORTHERN IRISH POETRY SINCE THE CEASEFIRES

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It is as if every gable end of this most 'unpoetic' of cities has its poetic graffito: the corners of its streets are stiff, not with rhetoric, but with poetry.[2]

In his essay '"What itch of contradiction?" Belfast in Poetry' Eamonn Hughes focuses on the ability of the city to disturb fixed categories of interpretation: the binaries by which, amongst other things, secure identities are formed and on which they are founded. 'The city,' Hughes remarks, 'affronts the sense of the nation as homogenous' by forcing the individual into perpetual and strange encounters with the 'other'. Belfast, then, as both representational and lived space, has always militated against the 'rustic imperative' of Irish writing, asking more questions than it answers, raising 'contradictions' not as a means of settling hard and fast distinctions but in terse opposition to such distinctions.[3] The 'binaries' of Belfast, primary amongst which remains, at the time of Hughes's writing, the question as to 'whether it is a living city or a necropolis', trouble rather than affirm: '[Belfast] is caught in an endless chain of signification, self-divided and always deferred.' This, Hughes suggests, would be true of any city, but with Belfast it, like every other bothersome aspect of identity formation, has been 'profoundly accentuated by the Troubles'.[4] Three decades of civil war have held Belfast in a vacuum of uncertainty, the capital of a province which, emphatically, cannot see its future.

[1] Alan Gillis, *Hawks and Doves* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2007), 52.
[2] Eamonn Hughes, '"What itch of contradiction?" Belfast in Poetry', in *The Cities of Belfast*, ed. Nicholas Allen and Aaron Kelly (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 101.
[3] Ibid., 114, 115.
[4] Ibid., 107.

Belfast, as we all know, is now running hard on the heels of that future: the ceasefires of the 1990s were followed in 2007 by the institution of devolved government at Stormont; the Troubles, having passed from lived reality into a saleable product, gleam like 'a staked African wasp' from behind the windows of the tourist bus.[5] There are boat tours, bus tours, walking tours, black taxi tours; you can sign your moniker on the peace wall. Goodwill is everywhere, as is 'progress', and the idea of the city-as-necropolis now seems profoundly dated. Poetry, as well as gracing the gable ends (where they still exist), now crowns the dome of one of Ireland's largest and plushest shopping malls, which itself sits on the erstwhile site of one of the city's oldest and most characterful bars, now revamped in 'beige leatherette'.[6] 'Belfast'—or at least the Belfast of 'mixed grills and whiskeys (cultureless, graceless, leisureless)'—is, in the words of Leontia Flynn, 'finished', and a new Belfast is coming 'under construction', keen to take its place:

> Belfast is finished and Belfast is under construction.
> What was mixed grills and whiskeys (cultureless, graceless, leisureless)
> is now concerts and walking tours (Friendly! Dynamic! Various!).[7]

One might well ask what this means, first for Hughes's sense of the city as challenging space, and second for the art which must now emerge from that reordered civitas, so seemingly fat of cheek, so prosper-placid. Its rebarbative aspects tamed, does Belfast stop posing more problems than it offers solutions? How, following in the wake of three decades of war poetry, will the poets now coming of age define themselves and their role, particularly in relation to the city? It will be the purpose of this essay to engage with and attempt to answer these questions.

I will refer throughout to the work of three poets—Leontia Flynn, Alan Gillis, and Sinéad Morrissey—none of whom had published a collection before the ceasefires of 1994, and all of whom wrestle, at a profound and sustained level, with the problem of representing and interrogating their 'own moment in history'.[8] I will argue that, perhaps contrary to expectation, the peace context renders identity in Northern Irish poetry more, rather than less problematic; that the surface glitter of 'normalization' masks as well as embodies a malaise to which these poets are attuned; that expanded opportunities in terms of, for example, travel, also entail expanded responsibilities; and finally, that fulfilling the role of conscience for a society which does not care to hear is equally essential as, and more difficult than, speaking for and to a populace which audibly demands one's contribution. I assume throughout that 'culture is a debate, an argument' and that the new poetry of this so poetry-bedaubed city takes, as it always has done, a crucial part in that debate.[9] The coordinates have changed; the need for creative responses remains

[5] Sinéad Morrissey, *Between Here and There* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), 14.
[6] Leontia Flynn, *Drives* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), 2.
[7] Ibid., 2.
[8] Aaron Kelly, 'Geopolitical Eclipse: Culture and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland', *Third Text*, 9:5 (September 2005), 553.
[9] Tom Paulin, 'The Vernacular City', in *The Cities of Belfast*, ed. Allen and Kelly, 234.

constant. I hope to show how these three poets offer interrogations of 'our predicament' and tentatively propose solutions that may prove 'adequate to' it.[10]

Belfast, site of an enduring and much-media-covered conflict, has in fact, it could be argued, been for the past few generations an 'identi-city' *par excellence*. The mnemonic quality of the city as represented in, for example, the work of a poet such as Ciaran Carson, is undeniable, and it is precisely those features to which Hughes's essay draws attention that have made it so. The Troubles, rather than problematizing Belfast's identity, have in the past confirmed it: Belfast, like the many other sites with which Carson connects it, has been firmly located on the 'conflict map' since the outbreak of hostilities in 1968. Likewise, the poet has held a prominent place as spokesperson or sage in relation to the conflict. Despite Michael Longley's wholly defensible opposition to the idea of the writer of poems as instant cultural commentator, the fact remains that the genre was unusually buoyant in the North in the late twentieth century, enjoying a cultural centrality from which, in other Western locations, it had long since fallen away.[11] The Belfast of the Troubles was the heyday of the poet, however much we might deny the symbiosis of that relationship: many a great poem was born of the fraught 'binaries' to which Hughes attends (and to which we might add that of artistic freedom versus civic responsibility).

The city, by contrast, is both cheekily and pointedly absented from the list of 'B' battle locations in the title sequence to Paul Muldoon's *Horse Latitudes* (2006), and the general pose of this collection is instructive in terms of how we might begin to probe the 'post-ceasefire' atmosphere, as read in the work of poets both established and new. Outwith the Troubles, Carson takes to probing other conflicts: the Crimean War, the Second World War, the Troubles re-read through the lens of private relationships. Muldoon instead turns his attention to entropy—failed aspirations ('Soccer Moms'), the descent from the sublime to the ridiculous ('A Hummingbird'), the clash between debased urban sprawl and the erstwhile natural world ('Starlings, Broad Street, Trenton, 2003').[12] The revised position of the artist vis-à-vis social commentator or anti-establishment 'rebel' is wearily encapsulated in a poem comparing two appearances by Bob Dylan at Princeton University ('Bob Dylan at Princeton, November 2000'):

> That last time at Princeton, that ornery degree,
> his absolute refusal to bend the knee.
>
> His last time at Princeton, he wouldn't wear a hood.
> Now he's dressed up as some sort of cowboy dude.
>
> That last time at Princeton, he wouldn't wear a hood.
> 'You know what, honey? We call that disquietude.'[13]

[10] Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (London: Faber, 2002), 23.

[11] Michael Longley, Introduction, *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster* (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland; Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971), 8.

[12] Paul Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes* (London: Faber, 2006), 28, 82; Paul Muldoon, 'A Hummingbird', *Answering Back: Living Poets Reply to the Poetry of the Past*, ed. Carol Ann Duffy (London: Picador, 2007), 21.

[13] Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*, 24.

Dylan's 'disquietude' may not be palpable, but Muldoon's certainly is: in these poems, he continually disturbs, by assuming, the complacent register of the contemporary, and worries at Francis Fukuyama's notion that we may, indeed, have arrived at the 'end of history'.[14] 'A Hummingbird', written in response to D. H. Lawrence's exuberant rendering of prehistoric grandeur, pits enervated conversational bathos against the 'jabbing, terrifying monster' painted in the original.[15] Lawrence's poem concludes with the assertion that 'We look at [the humming-bird] through the wrong end of the telescope of time'; in Muldoon's, it is almost as though we have walked past the telescope unawares, and blundered on into some flaccid limbo.[16] Lawrence's context pre-dates language, the means by which we understand and rationalize the universe; Muldoon's falls out, with language, at the other end, signifying the natural death point of the system. The poem, a sonnet, is, bar the concluding couplet, entirely comprised of empty conversational titbits:

> 'I'm guessing she's had a neck-lift *and* lipo.'
> 'You know I still can't help but think of the *Wake*
> as the apogee, you know, of the typo.'

The couplet sums up: language and its creatures are 'Like an engine rolling on after a crash,/long after whatever it was made a splash'.[17] Muldoon is, needless to say, sticking the boot in here: he opposes, in his courting of it, the slack, dulled language of the age, just as he opposes in Dylan the falling away from political activism to self (and national) parody. 'A Hummingbird' is as ingenious in its choice of model—the spitfire Lawrence—as it is in its mode of response, the way in which it turns the telescope around again. The point, however, is that the territory Muldoon surveys here is 'beyond': beyond action, beyond commitment, beyond even saving, perhaps. There are no big concerns, nothing to latch onto or strive towards: everything has been achieved and, in the achieving, palls sadly into that 'which deadens and endures'.[18]

Admittedly Muldoon now writes from within an American context, but similar tendencies can be observed in many of the earliest poems of the three poets under examination here (all of whom were, at the time, based in Northern Ireland). *These Days* (2004), the first collection from Leontia Flynn, repeatedly addresses the condition of belatedness:

> For 64,000, what's Paris's oldest bridge?
> The Pont Neuf? The Pont Royale? We can't remember which is which.
> And the days are too long, and the nights are too long,
> And life lounges late on the sofa. Not. Flipping. That. Switch.[19]

[14] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

[15] D. H. Lawrence, 'Humming-bird', *Answering Back*, 20.

[16] Ibid., 20.

[17] Muldoon, *Answering Back*, 21.

[18] Louis MacNeice, *Selected Poems*, ed. Michael Longley (London: Faber, 1988), 19.

[19] Leontia Flynn, 'Bridges', *These Days* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), 31.

The winsomeness of Flynn's voice has tended to distract attention from the seriousness of the matter at hand: what she grapples with in poems like 'Bridges' is, precisely, the sense of having no poetic 'role', no civic function. Like Gillis, Flynn often revisits the poems of the past, both contrasting their contours with the (diminished) contours of her own life, and seeking, through them, for a sure sense of how to proceed. The figure of the parent, whether literary or biological, is of critical significance to Flynn's early poetic: in 'Eeps', the biological father prompts, Heaney-style, the speaker's desire to write, and in 'Acts of Faith' the mother tends a sick daughter who, at twenty-four, still cannot manage to field the world alone.[20] '26', a sestina, contrasts the mother's assumption of responsibility at twenty-six (marriage, setting up house) with the daughter's failure to make any such commitment; it ends inconclusively: 'What will you give up? What will be handed down?'[21] This is not mere ineptitude, however: the opening poem to the collection introduces a subject who, 'preachy with book-learning', has spent years being groomed for greatness, only to find, on reaching maturity, that the expected niche is nowhere to be seen.[22] Flynn's poetic enacts a continuous assault on the pretensions of the individual (and, thus, the lyric voice). In 'The Amazing, Disappearing', the subject is out of focus, lacking sure definition: '"Watch out for that—"'. In 'The Second Mrs de Winter', she forms a poor substitute for the absented 'original'. In 'The Franklin's Tale', the 'amazing' action undertaken by her is the ordinary feat of learning to drive. And in 'It's a Wonderful Life' (#1), the over-dramatically imagined 'apotheosis of our lives' (public suicide) is undercut equally by the backdrop against which it is set (a student flat 'Somewhere between five and seven in the morning/to gauge by the light and inferior type of talk show') and by the fact that, again, the 'inspiration' behind it is derived from a source that pre-dates the self—in this case, the film from which the poem takes its title.[23] The point, however hedged with irony, is clear: Flynn's is a poetic persona both unsure of its own features and 'salivating' for a sense of vocation.[24] *These Days* suggests that she can find nothing satisfactory to write 'about', and that she is chronically unsure of her coordinates, both as poet and citizen.

To some extent, these features mark Flynn's out as an aesthetics of transition—one ghosting the vacuous point at which separate cultures collide and, ultimately, swap control of the vehicle. As Colin Graham suggests, the last ten to fifteen years have marked 'a transitional phase in Belfast's physical and social being': 'the new and the old are juxtaposed', both architecturally and ideologically.[25] As Flynn puts it, 'Belfast is finished and Belfast is under construction'.[26] Similarly, Sinéad Morrissey writes of being 'between here and there' (and Alan Gillis of being 'somebody, somewhere'); she also

[20] Flynn, *These Days*, 3, 2.
[21] Ibid., 50.
[22] Ibid., 1.
[23] Ibid., 12, 13, 30, 35.
[24] Ibid., 30.
[25] Colin Graham, '"Every Passer-by a Culprit?" Photography and the Peace in Belfast', *Third Text* 19:5 (September 2005), 571–2.
[26] Flynn, *Drives*, 2.

encapsulates the precise quality of the transitional moment in a poem from her sequence, 'China':

> One day, China met China in the marketplace.
> 'How are you, China?' asked China, 'we haven't talked in so long'...
> 'It's true,' replied China. 'We have a lot to catch up on.'[27]

This allegorical figuration of separate 'faces' of the same country meeting each other concludes a sequence which has (literally) travelled extensively between the two: composed after a British Council funded trip on the Writers' Train, the 'China' poems pit urban-industrial squalor ('a semaphore of cranes') against vegetable opulence ('Spinach, pak choi, cabbage greens') and ancient symbolic language against contemporary clamour ('the city with a name like the din of a smithy').[28] Morrissey likewise brings this split perspective to the changing face of Belfast. In her poem, 'In Belfast' (which takes its cue from and radically updates Derek Mahon's 'In Belfast', now retitled 'Spring in Belfast'), 'history's dent and fracture' still 'split[s] the atmosphere' but, in conjunction with this, the wheels of consumerist capital begin to turn in earnest:

> The inhaling shop-fronts exhale the length
> and breadth of Royal Avenue, pause,
> inhale again. The city is making money
> on a weather-mangled Tuesday.[29]

The animism of this image—the leviathan maw of the high street sucking in and spitting out the unperceiving subject—strikes chords with the approach of Alan Gillis, who might be said to have replaced Carson as Belfast's lover-laureate. In 'To Belfast', a poem which takes the sestina form but fails to finish it, Gillis celebrates the city's habit of 'getting out of hand', refusing to 'stem/to... cameras'—in effect, that 'off-beat, headstrong, suicidal charm' which Morrissey records with greater scepticism.[30] Gillis's poem, like Flynn's persona, is trapped in the vortex of conflicting trends and attitudes—whilst he wishes to see the city's self-protecting 'bullet-proof knickers drop like rain' (or, in Morrissey's terms, to see it coming into its 'own abundance'), he laments the seemingly inevitable Californication this will entail, the transformation of Belfast into a 'Hollywood film' funded and styled by external influences:

> For Belfast, if you'd be a Hollywood film, then I'd be Grace
> Kelly on my way to Monaco, to pluck the stem
> of a maybell with its rows of empty shells, its head
> of one hundred blinded eyes. I would finger your trace
> in that other city's face, and bite its free hand
> as it fed me, or tried to soothe the stinging of your rain.[31]

[27] Sinéad Morrissey, *The State of the Prisons* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), 30.
[28] Ibid., 24–5.
[29] Morrissey, *Between Here and There*, 13.
[30] Alan Gillis, *Somebody, Somewhere* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2004), 16; Morrissey, *Between Here and There*, 14.
[31] Gillis, *Somebody, Somewhere*, 16.

The substitution for individualist 'grace' of the iconic 'Grace' of the silver screen, the hundred identically 'blind' eyes of the maybell—even the morphing of Hughes's 'hard and soft' binary, identified as characteristic of Belfast in the poems of MacNeice, into mass-produced virtual 'hardware and software': all these bespeak the shift from a city which, however problematically, held fast to its own defining marks ('the tramlines of your cellulite skin') into one that is indistinguishable from anywhere else in the developed Western world.[32] What wafts from the shop-fronts under this new dispensation is not the racket and clatter of localized breath so much as the airy absence of the global market.

Gillis's poem, however, does have a sting in its tail. The abbreviated formal template—the poem has only four stanzas, rather than the requisite six and a three-line envoi—does not indicate failure, or even entropy, so much as the feisty interjection of the dissonant subject. In historical-determinist readings, society moves through an inevitable series of stages before arriving at the 'ideal state': according to theorists such as Fukuyama, liberal democracy (for which read late capitalism) represents this terminal point, and is thus the pinnacle of achieved 'normality' towards which all peoples should strive.[33] The sestina, as form, enacts this very process when taken to completion: although cyclical, in that it repeat-transforms identical terms, it lends itself cleanly to narrative development in a manner eschewed by most set lyric forms (compare, for example, the villanelle as described by Eavan Boland and Mark Strand: 'Its repeated lines, the circularity of its stanzas, become, as the reader listens, a repudiation of forward motion, of temporality and therefore, finally, of dissolution').[34] By sticking a spanner in the works—curbing the propulsive drive—of this formal framework, Gillis both protests against and arrests, however temporarily, the progress of Belfast down the set path from identi-city to identikit-city. On the cusp of Graham's moment of transition he grasps, like the photographers whose work Graham analyses, 'the trace... of a city that once was and is now being denied'.[35]

The work of all three poets is ghosted by the traces of that which is 'being denied', though this rarely takes the form of straightforward mourning either for the past itself or for the victims of that past. Whereas the 1990s 'ghost book' focused on the difficulty of coming to terms with the past and finding an acceptable means of moving on (witness, for example, Muldoon's *The Annals of Chile*, Longley's *Gorse Fires*, and Ormsby's *The Ghost Train*), the spectres which haunt the work of Flynn, Gillis, and Morrissey are more likely to be those, on the one hand, of locality, and, on the other, of the individuated self.[36] To these one might add, also, the phantoms of class and of the engaged political subject. Aaron Kelly has written persuasively of the less examined and more egregious

[32] Hughes, '"What itch of contradiction?"', 106.
[33] See Fukuyama, *The End of History*.
[34] Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (New York: Norton, 2001), 8.
[35] Graham, '"Every Passer-by a Culprit?"', 572.
[36] See Michael Parker, *The Imprint of History*, vol. 2, *Northern Irish Literature 1975–2006* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 162.

aspects of the peace process, a process which to some extent at least masks continuing and chronic inequality beneath the veneer of high-level private investment projects. His argument is worth quoting at length, not least for the angered fervour with which it is delivered, and its determination to break the codes of polite written discourse:

> Rather than a new ethical dispensation, Northern Irish society's reconciliation is an economic one, a reconciliation with the dynamics of a world system and the post-modern, an ideology whose only compass is the flow of capital around the globe.... The voguish phrase that inserts itself in all late capitalist discourse about economic development and the supposed benefits of private enterprise, investment and regeneration for everyone – 'the trickledown effect' – should not obscure the fact that working-class communities are being pissed on from a great height. In contrast to a popular will to end sectarian conflict, the state-sponsored aspects of the Peace Process – extending British 'Third Way' capitalism westwards and the Celtic Tiger northwards... aim at establishing a wishy-washy and market-driven postmodern pluralism that actually serves to mask the real socioeconomic divides in our city that threaten ultimately to remove power from people completely.[37]

Also a conscientious objector to the jargon of peace (witness his poem 'Progress'), Gillis likewise makes a point of introducing 'unacceptable' elements into the language of his poems and, at times, allowing these elements to run the show. In an essay on 'The Vernacular City', Tom Paulin argues for the establishment of a 'national literature' conducted through the 'energy and pithy imagery' of Belfast's 'scutching vernacular'.[38] In poems like 'Last Friday Night' and 'Home and Away', Gillis might be seen to take this baton up, giving back to his native city the rallying cry of its spiky dialect, and thus bolstering its quiddity against the threat of normalization.[39] In truth, however, the voices to which Gillis gives airtime in these poems are the ghettoized poor—those who, as Kelly affirms, have been pushed to (or left on) the sidelines of the gentrified city, and whose micro-narrative finds no place in the self-congratulatory blurb of 'wishy-washy... pluralism'. These are ghosts who are still alive, and whom the newly painted city would prefer to ignore. By giving them room in his poems Gillis lends them subjectivity; yet the power with which the poems endow 'wee Markie' etcetera is not wielded triumphantly but rather accusatorily. Their voices form a scathing reminder; they are contemporary Belfast's marginalia, both social and poetic, rather than the centrally printed text.

Gillis, then, does not write dialect poems in his own voice (they serve a different purpose), but his lyric persona does incorporate rebellious streaks, at the level of both image and subject matter. In the sestina 'For What We Are About To Receive', the reader is treated to a stomach-churning binge on rancid pork loins, 'five Belfast baps and twelve green/bottles of beer'.[40] Rather than buying from the popular end of the 'pine-/fresh

[37] Kelly, 'Geopolitical Eclipse', 547–8.
[38] Paulin, 'The Vernacular City', 239.
[39] Gillis, *Somebody, Somewhere*, 27; *Hawks and Doves*, 40.
[40] Gillis, *Hawks and Doves*, 16.

mall', Gillis's speaker cussedly opts for the 'snubbed' part and, indeed, in this poem, speaker might be seen as equivalent to city, on the model of 'To Belfast':

> . . . you laid down the law that night I brought clear
> spring water and readymade greens
> that I sprinkled with toasted pine
> nuts as you spelled out loud and clear that the odds
> against us keeping faith were five thousand
> to one, and that I needed to get over
> the fact that we were over.[41]

In other words, the speaker's attempt to 'gentrify' fools nobody; a purchase from the posh end of the mall doesn't ensure the proverbial leopard has changed its spots. This, like many of the poems in *Hawks and Doves*, Gillis's second collection, is a disgusting poem and a poem of disgust: its remit is by no means limited to shocking via physical revulsion, but the assumption by Gillis of, if one likes, the crossover stigmata of the bingeing-yet-still-tatty city into his own persona is a significant technique, and one that is also adopted, with personal variations, by both Flynn and Morrissey. In 'Poem for Christmas', Flynn brilliantly equates herself with the Belfast depicted by Aaron Kelly, a Belfast economically buoyed but still caught at the political crossroads (it is dated December 2005, before the institution of devolved government):

> To this place of gangsters, double deals and crime rings
> I must belong: both of us like to drive
> if they can love us, men off one by one
> with broken promises. Then *pause* – and seem to thrive
> as words and buzzwords rush to fill the vacuum.[42]

Morrissey too raises questions as to the legitimacy of surface unity and polish: her poems constantly disturb the line between inner and outer, saying things they 'shouldn't' and implicitly marking poetry as the vehicle through which social silencings are challenged, as in 'The Second Lesson of the Anatomists' and '& Forgive Us Our Trespasses':

> *See how the inside belies our skin,*
> say the anatomists,
> after showing us how freakishly we split;
> *the outside smooth and assiduous*
> *unto itself, while the inside*
> *baffles and seethes . . .*[43]

> Accept from us the inappropriate
> by which our dreams and daily scenes stay separate[44]

[41] Ibid., 16.
[42] Flynn, *Drives*, 23.
[43] Morrissey, *State of the Prisons*, 11.
[44] Morrissey, *Between Here and There*, 21.

'The Second Lesson of the Anatomists' goes on to connect the body private with the body socio-civic explicitly, drawing parallels between the epidermis and the fragile 'glass room' of a party boat on the river:

> There is a party going on. There is wine
> and a light fixture being obedient
> unto itself. And then there is this spillage
> in the centre
> from somewhere stranger and more extravagant
> which has drawn us all here.

The 'truth', for Morrissey, is always 'stranger and more extravagant' than the 'effortlessly deceptive' nature of what is presented and accepted at face value;[45] the precise nature of the 'spillage' in this poem, though it is clearly linguistic, remains undefined, but it is not an imaginative step too far to conceive of it as being poetry itself: the outburst that spoils the gilded party, the language that refuses 'quiet conformism' in favour of what Gillis calls the 'cockamamie-chorded music' of dissent:

> Long since the burger-eating burghers of bright suburban valleys
> ordered me to lay off this cockamamie-chorded music
> because it disrupted their day's work and upset their night.[46]

One of the values Morrissey prizes most highly is freedom of speech, and in her work the right to speak is frequently associated with the act of bucking dominant trends. In 'Flight', she assumes the voice of a woman who is doomed to sport a scold's bridle for daring to speak her mind, and whose visionary impulse is opposed to her husband's staid (and coveted) rationalism:

> My husband desires a sign.
> But for all his reading of *Revelation*
> I say heaven admits its own
> And it is Him. The jaw-straps tighten.[47]

This is not femininity run wild, however. Morrissey is well schooled in the literature and ideology of the eighteenth century, and her work poses a fruitful dialogue between civic Enlightenment values and the power of that which, outside the framework, continues to exist in a state of subversive potential; likewise, she balances Utopian impulses with the Meliorist recognition that imperfection is not only human, it is a positive good. Unlike Gillis, Morrissey is not inclined to hatchet the establishment directly, but in her bristling defence of personal freedom, her continuing belief in the value of 'prophetic speech',

[45] See also 'The Invitation', *Through the Square Window* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009), 33–5. Morrissey is equally alert to the surrealism of the conventional. See, for example, 'Mother Goose', *Through the Square Window*, 46.
[46] Morrissey, *State of the Prisons*, 11; Graham, '"Every Passer-by a Culprit?"', 569; Gillis, *Hawks and Doves*, 57.
[47] Morrissey, *State of the Prisons*, 9.

and, perhaps most importantly, her attitude towards and application of language, she opposes both the flattened media discourse of the day and the 'shadowy' powers-that-be who would dull potentially disruptive responses through manipulation of that discourse.[48] Where Gillis stresses the impact of those forces that would numb or pap out of existence any verbal challenge ('this fall from bustle into soft bubbles/of self-regard where the headless chicken-/like rampage of... days dissolves into easy-/listening nights, while outside are militias,/lead levels, diplomacy and logistics') and, indeed, in his praxis, enacts that very impact, piling information on information so that 'everything glitters for an instant/and then snuffs it', Morrissey simply opposes them by doing otherwise and, primarily, by drawing greedily on the vast resources of language available to her.[49] In her poem 'Matter', she covets not only the eccentric explanations of ancient scientists—theories from a time before science became obsessed with 'gauze instruments and [a] penchant/for boiling'—but the very wealth of phenomena, and words hitched to phenomena, to which they grant her access; likewise, in 'Pearl' she upholds and voices the desire to constantly 'be amazed'.[50] More than either of the other poets discussed here, Morrissey openly values and regards as politically forceful the faculty of imagination on its own terms and in its own right: this, and the duty and right to speak, form the twin axes of her poetic; they are also the points from which she undermines 'the pastiche paradise of the post-modern'.[51]

On the surface of it, few poets have less in common than Morrissey and Leontia Flynn: against Morrissey's joyful exoticism of diction Flynn pitches a smartly streetwise lingo; in place of Morrissey's roving strain, Flynn is short, sharp, and to the formal point; the broadening of horizons that draws Morrissey to literal travel is lambasted by Flynn as a bourgeois fallacy, which leads only to superficial encounters with myriad versions of the same thing. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the value Morrissey places on originality (and, concomitantly, agency) is rendered deeply suspect in Flynn's *oeuvre*, which goes out of its way to floor any pretensions upheld by the individual voice. *These Days* contains forty-eight poems: twenty-nine of them are single- or two-stanza poems fed through a ten-line framework, as though to suggest that every subject taken on is forced into the same-size factory mould.

Earlier, I suggested that Flynn's brand of anti-epiphany points towards immersion in an aesthetics of transition, and that the means by which she goes about detracting from her own literary value could be linked primarily to a vacuum in Northern Irish culture: the point at which Northern Ireland teeters on the brink of becoming one thing rather than another, without yet having decided (or had decided for it) what will constitute the features of its new 'face'.[52] Colin Graham argues that 'For the last decade or so, Northern Ireland has been strangely without any significant utopian cultural coordinates.

[48] Kelly, 'Geopolitical Eclipse', 546.
[49] Gillis, *Hawks and Doves*, 63, 65.
[50] Morrissey, *Through the Square Window*, 14; *Between Here and There*, 58.
[51] Derek Mahon, *The Yellow Book* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 1997), 19.
[52] Flynn, *These Days*, 18.

Meanwhile the political scene has asked all else to wait for it.'[53] Read alongside Gillis or Morrissey's work this seems unfair, but it adheres almost perfectly to the grim dramatizations of 'waiting' (or even, Generation X-style, patent ignoring) discernible in Flynn's earliest poems—poems which have her 'fiddling/with the radio dial.../While Rome Burns', viewing sociopolitical uproar as a 'festival time'.[54] 'Punch-drunk' and media-savvy, she seems the perfect model of lethargic disengagement. The analogy is, however, too neat—not least because it should never be this easy to map poetry onto the political realm—and there is much in Flynn's work that suggests a deeper interrogation of, and reaction against, her own cultural 'moment', particularly in terms of her exploration of precisely that entity so prized in Morrissey's poems, the individual lyric voice.

In 'Two Crossings', Flynn hatches a tidy metaphor for the Northern Ireland of the late 1990s—a culture in a boat that is pretending 'not to be' one, and thus not to be going anywhere. In the process, she also conjures up a convincing depiction of the 'gloomy' Northern Irish, dissatisfied with everything yet too polite to say so:

> One of my miserable neighbours is a gigantic beery man
> with a moustache. He is complaining loudly
> because one of his party didn't receive their free drink.
> He tells them: if you don't complain about nuthin,
> nuthin is ever done...
>
> ...
>
> A waitress dives over to clear up and ask was everything alright?
> The miserables tell her it was, thankyou,
> thankyou very much –[55]

As an observation on agency, this is astute (the Northern Irish never get because they're too embarrassed to ask), but what is perhaps more interesting is the contrast between Flynn's own narrative voice in the poem and the 'leviathan and clattering *accent*' she describes. Not only does Flynn's voice lack this accent—the very premise on which the poem is based and with which its air '*seems to be* alive' (italics mine)—it is in fact positively American in key. The approach is subtle, but clearly evident: 'people *quit* moonwalking the deck'; folk gather 'in the *diner*'; it might be 'snowing over the sea *right now*' (italics mine). If the air in the boat is alive with one kind of accent, the poem's breath is slyly laced with another—or, perhaps more suggestively, 'half asleep with [the] rocking' of it. The phrase 'seems to be alive' thus comes to imply its opposite, for both parties: those with the accent (and without the will to speak) pass into redundancy, whilst the poem's speaker finds herself colonized, not by Standard English (Ireland's oldest linguistic grouse), but by the worldwide distributor of popular culture. This is not the language of cool worn lightly but, rather, a critical appraisal of the ubiquitous and all-effacing blanket nature of that language. What Gillis enacts at the level of visual signifier (the landscape branded by confectionery, etcetera) is woven by Flynn into the vocal texture

[53] Graham, '"Every Passer-by a Culprit?"', 568.
[54] Flynn, *These Days*, 8.
[55] Ibid., 25–6.

of her poems; both yield lyric personae who, like the city they write about, have been encroached upon and infected by the 'shadowy' powers that be.[56] Gillis's completed sestina, 'For What We Are About To Receive', proffers, in contrast to 'To Belfast', a speaker who is trapped helplessly in the very system he would oppose; likewise Flynn's voice, lauded by the British establishment for its 'basic-wage, take-what-you-get... assurance', is in fact a carapace formed of the Hollywood-esque influences that dictate her fate in 'It's a Wonderful Life'.[57]

This is not to suggest that Flynn is in thrall to a language or a set of mannerisms over which she lacks control; rather, it is to draw attention to the way in which she manipulates language as a form of 'mimicry', and to propose that, rather than showing her hand, she shields jealously an active subjectivity *behind* the winsome frontage of her poems, suggesting their attractive 'personality' has little to do with their underlying thrust.[58] On the one hand, she mocks through embodiment the monoculture of the American Diner World; on the other she protects her true identity from it. The interaction of these tactics is clearly visible in one of her best-known poems, 'The Myth of Tea Boy', in which the characters, keeping their 'secret belie[fs]' to themselves, 'act like [they're] in diners/from everyone's favourite Hopper poster, Nighthawks' and, like the 'fronts on the Golden Mile', depend on this 'pose' to protect their fragile sense of self:

> As the room fills up with 'Eternal Flame': the cover version, on the radio,
> and, floor to ceiling, the last of the summer light, we also know
> for as long as this pose is held we won't spill a single drop.[59]

In other poems, this circumspection is applied directly to the language in which it is iterated. 'On the Third Floor of the Royal Infirmary' compares a girl's fraught response to her new 'face' to the speaker's attitude to the written word: 'Now she can no more look, cold-eyed, in a looking glass/than I at this'.[60] And in 'Poem for Christmas', 'words' are equated with the 'buzzwords' of peace: city and poet both '*pause*'—cease active being—'and *seem* to thrive/as words and buzzwords rush to fill the vacuum' (italics the author's, then mine).[61]

The emphasis on thriving (or its opposite) in 'Poem for Christmas' flags up a recurrent trope in Flynn's work—that of sickness—which again both highlights and opposes

[56] Gillis, *Somebody, Somewhere*, 13–14; Kelly, 'Geopolitical Eclipse', 546.

[57] Gillis, *Hawks and Doves*, 16–17; John Burnside, cover blurb to *These Days*.

[58] For an analysis of the technique of 'mimicry' as applied to photography, see Graham, '"Every Passer-by a Culprit?"', 569–70. Graham argues that the apparently documentary approach of mimicry permits the artist to intervene in and comment upon the image being presented, thus creating 'aesthetic... disturbance' and asserting personal agency. For a direct playing out of this idea in the poems, see 'Personality', where the essence of the poem is described as 'the rictus grin/on a student's practice corpse—that breathes iambically/*between* each line, with their knives parting the skin,/love me, love me, love me, love me...' (Flynn, *Drives*, 10; italics mine). Flynn here inverts the predicted intonation of the final line to lay the stress on the self—'love *me*, love *me*'—rather than on the general concept of 'love'. The distinction between surface and depths is also instructive.

[59] Flynn, *These Days*, 37.

[60] Ibid., 18.

[61] Flynn, *Drives*, 23.

the conditions of the poetry's making. *These Days* performs a whistle-stop tour of contemporary neuroses: anorexia, obsessive compulsive disorder, and depression all make an appearance, and are set against the backdrop of the poet's own long-suffered tryst with eczema. But it is in her second collection, *Drives*, that the subject of illness truly takes hold. The book plays host to a series of poems, mostly in sonnet form, that adopt as their unifying principle the physical and mental affliction of artists, and suggest that (as in Gillis's 'For What We Are About to Receive') the artist lays bare social malaise through both physical and subconscious responses to his or her environment. Dissonance, as in other aspects of Flynn's poetry, seeps through the cracks in the perfect skin, rather than advertising itself upon the surface. For example, 'Alfred Hitchcock' pits Hitchcock's penchant for the 'ice-white blonde,/groomed to perfection'—sure symbol of 1950s wealth and style—against the fact that:

> Hitchcock himself will never learn to drive
> on account of his lifelong, much-debated fear
> that a copper might pull him over – and give
> no warning or reason, but march him from the car
>
> and lock him away in the dark where his terrified cries,
> unheard or unheeded, are the cries of a blubbery child.[62]

The oedipal aspects of the poem aside (the 'much-debated fear' is, as in many of the poems, attributed to the mother), this marks within the artist a point of intersection between the topside and undersides of society: a society in which he succeeds—is indeed viewed as a cultural icon—and of which he yet retains the not-so-irrational fear that boosts and generates his work. (Hitchcock is, after all, the master of the psychological thriller, and was doing his best work during the McCarthy era.) Likewise, in 'Sylvia Plath's Sinus Condition', Flynn highlights 'the channel prone to flood' that links 'the long-limbed, gee-whiz, perfect girl... this blonde self' to 'the darker one,/who breeds an absent father's awful abscess'. As with Hitchcock, Plath straddles the stools of socialite and social dissident, her poetry acting as the 'fistula' through which the one arises to infect (or disinfect) the other.[63] The use of illness-as-dissent might seem a passive construction—one which permits of doing nothing—but can in fact be viewed in the opposite light. By assuming (like Flynn herself) the accepted characteristics of the social paradigm—by, in effect, mimicking—Plath and Hitchcock gain access to positions of power and influence which they would otherwise be denied; by wearing camouflage, they successfully infiltrate the establishment, and are able to criticize it from within. Just so, in one of the most politically forceful poems in *Drives*, Flynn lurks beneath the camouflage of the canon as a means of both shielding and making (or 'driving' home) her point. The poem, 'Washington', shapes itself around Shelley's 'Ozymandias':

> *I met a traveller*, walking in the mall
> in Washington, in April, *from an antique land*,

[62] Ibid., 33.

[63] Ibid., 46.

map-less, in rapid tourist mode, between
Who said the Washington Memorial
and... Jesus fucking Christ... this mausoleum
where Lincoln sits in state, and there in stone
fluent and just his Gettysburg address.
Boundless on either side, are wreaths to war.
Look on my works ye mighty and despair.
And by the White House, men with walkie-talkies.[64]

This poem turns the 'cover version' paradigm round and sees Flynn coming into her 'own abundance', albeit through the means of an incomplete narrative that 'lets [itself] out' carefully, and refuses, with Longley, the journalistic imperative of quick and easily digestible comment; the true poet, as Marianne Moore suggests, 'digesteth harde yron' and demands the same robustness of the reader.[65] 'Washington' also highlights indirectly Flynn's close relationship with the poets of the American pantheon, a relationship opposed to her impish donning of popular culture from the same source: where one feeds the surface, the other feeds the heart of her aesthetic, as is made clear by her engagement with, amongst others, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and, of course, Plath, in the artist poems of *Drives*. Finally, the poem is exemplary in pointing to a Belfast which has undergone radical transformation in relation to its boundaries and, consequently, the limits within which its writers can comfortably rest.

Flynn, Gillis, and Morrissey belong to a city which must now admit of 'frigates gathering for war'—war that happens not on the doorstep, but 'too far/out for us to see'—as part of its ethical purview; a city that is hopelessly entangled with, and must therefore bear responsibility for, the imperialist colossus which is currently, in Morrissey's words, 'Loose in the world. And out of proportion.'[66] This Belfast has shed its binaries, and in their place has taken on not the single hue of the homogenously settled but instead the bizarre, shifting colourations of what Morrissey calls 'Found Architecture'—the product of a kaleidoscope:

that makes its heel-to-toe shapes, not from beads or seeds
or painted, meticulous details, but from the room,
from whatever room I happen to be in[67]

All three poets both depict and challenge this architecture, paying honest attention to its complexity, and continuing to fight the corner of poetry not only as 'a way of happening' but also, crucially, as 'a mouth'.[68] No quiet conformism here; no fear of taking the wheel. Northern Ireland is the land of the lyric, and these three poets continue that trend; they also find new ways of bringing the lyric into forced conjunction with the cosmopolitan

[64] Ibid., 29.
[65] Flynn, *These Days*, 35; Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1994), 99–100.
[66] Gillis, *Hawks and Doves*, 12; Morrissey, *The State of the Prisons*, 37.
[67] Morrissey, *Through the Square Window*, 18.
[68] W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1979), 82.

space of the contemporary city.[69] There is no room in their work for the notion of lyric as a space of rooted tranquillity (or even potted scion). Flynn's 'Airports' captures succinctly the contemporary condition of being everywhere and nowhere at the same time: 'when we return, the airports remain in us./We rock, dry-eyed, and we are not at home.'[70] But they do find innovative means of garnering force from its formal cohesiveness—means related, perhaps, to Aaron Kelly's querying response to the mission statements of postmodernism:

> It is no coincidence that at a moment in History when millions of people previously denied a voice in that historical process... have, at however minimal a level... been able to articulate their oppression and exclusion, the dominant intellectual and political centres of the Western world suddenly decide that truth no longer exists; that narrative must fail to represent since all stories are suspect; that identity... can be dismissed as an oppressively anachronistic essentialism in an era of hybrid flux.[71]

This sounds very much like a command to 'Pull yourself together'—resist ultimate dispersal—which is precisely what the lyric poem does; it is also the imperative-to-self of Gillis's news-and-nonsense besieged speaker in the long poem 'Saturday Morning'.[72] 'N.I.' emphatically does not and cannot stand, these days (if it ever did), for 'N[ot] I[nterested]'; there is, quite simply, too much at stake.[73]

[69] See Aaron Kelly, 'Desire Lines: Mapping the City in Contemporary Belfast and Glasgow Poetry', in *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry*, ed. Peter Mackay, Edna Longley, and Fran Brearton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 359–63, for an analysis of Gillis's use of the urban lyric.
[70] Flynn, *Drives*, 35.
[71] Kelly, 'Geopolitical Eclipse', 546.
[72] Gillis, *Hawks and Doves*, 21.
[73] Flynn, *Drives*, 22.