Canadian Journal of Irish Studies

Passion and Arrogance: Poetic Craft and Topographies of Remembrance in the Work of Michael Hartnett
Author(s): Eóin Flannery
Source: *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall, 2005), pp. 42-49
Published by: Canadian Journal of Irish Studies
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25515594
Accessed: 06-03-2018 09:49 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

Canadian Journal of Irish Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*

This content downloaded from 193.1.104.14 on Tue, 06 Mar 2018 09:49:23 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

Eóin FLANNERY

Passion and Arrogance

Poetic craft and topographies of remembrance in the work of Michael Hartnett

It [Hartnett's poetry] embodies an Irishness

we will be the poorer for ignoring: a sense of shared values, a disdain for crude materialism, a respect for tradition where that is wholesome, a delight in nature and an awareness of, and an openness to the bigger world we share with others. (Michael Smith, "Michael Hartnett: A Memoir" 157)

In his seminal study, *Oral Tradition as History*, Jan Vansina argues that landscape is properly viewed as a layered and richly textured depository of both individual and communal memory. The landscape is implicated in the processes of retrospective remembrance, and it is also active in the creation of memory. Accenting the articulacy of topographical memory, Vansina suggests that "the landscape, changed by man or not, often was a powerful mnemonic device" (45) While cartographic surveys and pastoral or romantic representations of physical terrains furnished limited versions of geographical record, in many respects such discourses are differentially collusive in the pacification of lived memory. It is my argument that such representations belong to the realm of historical discourse, and as such, are estranged from the realm of memory. Rather than celebrating or tracing the actuality of the concrete, the sacredness of the everyday or the evolution of the local, the historical record tends to analyse, dismember and consign the "traditional" and the "past" to anteriority. In canvassing its own universality, history homogenises human experience and, thereby, neglects the multiplicity of collective and individual memory. It is in the light of Pierre Nora's contention that "Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things" (633), that I wish to broach the subaltern memorial signatures of Michael Hartnett's poetry. As Michael Smith's epigraphic tribute confirms, Hartnett's poetry embodies elements of Irish culture that are too often relegated to the wistful elegies of the picturesque, or the cheapened apologies of a society addicted to the promises of modernisation. Hartnett's work not only reflects the qualitative, and lived, communion between memory, tribe and topography, but his poetic craft is a vocational project that assumes its urgency from that very landscape. Such topographical preoccupations are long established in the Gaelic literary tradition, and are also evident in the poetry of contemporary Irish language artists like Cathal Ó Searcaigh and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill.

Drawing on recent theoretical discourse on Irish colonial history and on the Irish cultural landscape we may explore the poetic and cultural processes of counter-modernity that both permeate and energise Hartnett's creative language, together with his aesthetic delineation of an organic relationship between language and its physical and cultural environs. It is not my intention to fasten the indelible label of "postcolonial writer" to Hartnett, but merely to suggest that his work engages with many of the political and cultural concerns that have exercised recent work on colonialism, postcolonial theory and subaltern critiques of modernity. Through his experimental, courageous and renovating use of diverse poetic forms, together with his embrace of marginal cultural constituencies, Hartnett's oeuvre cannot be termed either "traditional" or entirely "modern." As such it, firstly, challenges dubious conceptions of residual Irish "traditionalism" by foregrounding the vitality of Gaelic subaltern spiritual, linguistic and social rituals, but equally articulates the postcolonial desire to critically re-imagine beyond the staid parameters of modernity. Concentrating on a selection of poems from four collections of his poetry, the *Collected Poems* (2001), *A Necklace of Wrens* (1987)[1], *Inchicore Haiku* (1985) and *A Farewell to English* (1975), I will discuss Hartnett's unique rendition of his *native*, local landscape; a body of work in which we can trace the poetic efflorescence occasioned by the intimacy of poet, tribe and community.

The Craft

In the opening poem of his collection, *The Reed Bed*, entitled "A Ball of Starlings," Dermot Healy provides us with an ornith[e]ological creation myth. Healy constructs the poem in just two sentences, initially he evokes a sense of the rural Gothic as the starlings swoop in congress over the lakeside location, "As evening falls/over the bulrushes/parties of starlings/arrive in flurries/to join the other shape-makers/at the alt" (11). The lengthier, second act of Healy's poetic myth cascades musically with the same violent force as the "set of arched wings" (11); progressing in metaphoric evocation, Healy conjures a scene of seismic, if not cosmic, creation and birth. Within this moment of creation, as always, there lies both the possibility of new life, but concurrently the immanence of death. Capturing the turbulent ballet of the viscid mass of starlings, Healy locates a fluid, vital force, which he variously describes as "a whispering ball of starlings...a great teeming net of birdsong...a ticking globe above the reeds" (11-12). As the poem opens Healy's collection, it successfully inaugurates the ensuing poetry and symbolically recalls Hartnett's own poetic biography.

This content downloaded from 193.1.104.14 on Tue, 06 Mar 2018 09:49:23 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

Although the narrative reflects on a concretely biographical remembrance of the poet's youth, Hartnett's "A Necklace of Wrens"[2] confluences the twin dynamics of factual recall and creative imagination, while undergirding these with the spiritual force of artistic faith. It is this sense of transcendence, both clearly visible physical transcendence in bird-flight, and a more pagan-theological faith, which unites Healy's and Hartnett's ornith(e)ological poetic narratives of creation and birth. "A Necklace of Wrens" dramatises Hartnett's enduring, indeed actively pursued, trust in the communal valence of the poet and his richly studied craftsmanship. In the ostensibly prosaic narrative, Hartnett details what is essentially a ritual of consecration, a form of pagan ordination through which he is elevated to the poetic/artistic cabal and a vocation which he later describes in the following terms: "A true poet is an egoistical bundle of *passion and arrogance*, concerned only with the Art [my emphasis]" (NLI, MS, 35910/2). Noticeably, this intimate ritual of poetic initiation derives from a quasi-mystical blending of the human and the natural; Hartnett here both extols and embodies the spiritual economy of his rural subaltern community. While Hartnett's later poetic career is evidential of a desire to forge a stylistic mode that is adequate to his personal and tribal spirit, the instance of poetic birth is *performed* in an instinctual idiom of silent grace. From the poem's beginning, an apparent recollection of a youthful rural adventure, "When I was very young/I found a nest," we move to a scene of somatic and spiritual communion, "They rose and re-alighted/around my neck/made in the wet meadow/a feather necklet" (19). The poetic sensibility, the craft of the bard, so cherished by Hartnett, is possessive of a vocational quality. Such is the intensity of this vocational urge that, as we already established, the pursuit of poetic style becomes a presiding concern of his subsequent engagements with both the Irish and English languages.

Notwithstanding the vocational integrity of Hartnett's poetic craft, he explicitly rejected any sense in which his poetry and its provenance might be restrained by the limits of a "coherent metaphysic." Responding to Denis O'Driscoll's suggestion that he might be mindful of an "ideal audience" for his poetry, Hartnett flatly rejected the idea as a containing gesture of labelling. He replied: "I wish to avoid all labels. In my opinion, one of the most interesting poets was the Portugese poet, Pessoa, who had 3 or 4 personae or masks...I work like that – I write ballads, serious poetry both in English and Irish, blues, both in strict metres and in freer verse" (O'Driscoll 17). Hartnett's poetic vocation does, however, intersect with the abandoned heritage of the Gaelic bardic tradition and, in many ways, his insistence on both perpetuating, and re-vitalising, such an artistic-communal heritage is suggestive of his eschewal of a dissolute modern world. Speaking on the lives of his revered Gaelic poets, Hartnett insists that, "They were the last defenders of the Gaelic culture and when Cromwell came they were shocked, because they were so used to getting free dinners. The Cromwellians, like the present government, didn't understand patronage" (White 18). For Hartnett, it seems, the poetic sensibility is not a luxury, it is never a discrete romantic excess, but assumes an integral responsibility within the tribe, the community and the society. The poet, in this tradition, both maintains a formal or public position and, in effect, lives his poetic craft. Ultimately, there is a self-conscious gravity to Hartnett's craft, a fact noted when interviewing Hartnett by Victoria White, who found that "Hartnett's obsession with his craft is hard to take" (18). Furthermore, in a 1995 piece tellingly, and somewhat ironically, entitled "Wrestling with Hartnett"[3], the poet-critic Eamon Grennan distilled the stylistic economy of Hartnett's poetic/artistic and personal universe. Hartnett's stylistic sensibility is propelled by his desire to realise "a style adequate to the expression of his emotional and intellectual and spiritual condition" (663). In divining for such a pure poetic idiom Hartnett remains in tune with the rememorative cultural bonds of his tribe. Indeed, as Grennan notes, the stylistic codes of Hartnett's aesthetic are co-extensive with his interface with and responsibility toward his personal and tribal communities. Ultimately these formal modes must be "adequate to his relationships with himself, with others, and with the world" (Grennan 663).

There are self-evident philosophical congruencies between Hartnett's farewell to the English language as a medium of poetic expression in 1975 and, the Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's return to his native Gikuyu language. And, perhaps, the unconscious unifying factor in both decisions is crystallised by wa Thiong'o:

> We therefore learnt to value words for their meaning and nuance. Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning...The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own. The home and the field were then our pre-primary school but what is important, for this discussion, is that the language of the evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work in the fields were one. (11)

Under the compressed spatial and cultural coordinates of the colonised society, in which language is alternatively an index of race, modernity, civilisation and cultural assimilation, wa Thiong'o maps the linguistic fibres of his immediate tribal inheritance. Likewise, Hartnett is keenly sensitive to the contested genealogies of both the Irish and English languages in Ireland, which are thrown into relief most explicitly in his engagement with their poetic heritages. In this context, the formal mechanisms of Hartnett's poetry and his navigation of two linguistic traditions are reflective of the heightened cultural self-consciousness revealed by wa Thiong'o. Equally, just as wa Thiong'o elaborates on language as a *living* indice of communal identity, Hartnett's work is reflective of his own awareness of the symbiosis that obtains between the physical landscape, historical narratives and linguistic codes, all of which sustain the rememorative cartographies of any community or tribe. However, as both poets discovered, the acute demands of political and economic modernisation are more efficiently serviced by the universalising prose of global English; the relevance of indigenous idioms, then, is contracted by the obsolescent poetry of their expressive codes.

This content downloaded from 193.1.104.14 on Tue, 06 Mar 2018 09:49:23 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

"Farewell" and *Haiku*

Part of the motive force behind Hartnett's resolution to jettison the English language as a poetic medium was his belief that by the mid-1970s the Irish language had become a devalued cultural currency in Ireland. Traditional, or pejoratively termed "nationalist," remnants of Irish historical identity, examples of which would have included the Irish language, residual reverence for the socialist republicanism of 1916 and "the victimhood package of Irish history," were adjudicated to be incompatible with the modernising aspirations of contemporary Ireland. Unsurprisingly, Hartnett's refusal to publish in English did not transfigure the cultural landscape of Ireland, but it did draw a mixed reaction from his contemporaries within Irish poetry and literature. It is well documented by now that the Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson adjudged that Hartnett's move amounted to nothing short of melodramatic posturing. Carson is correct in crucial areas of his critique of the entire collection, which is uneven in its style and often indulgent in its philosophical speculations. But his most vituperative comments are reserved for the vanity of Hartnett's linguistic project. In Carson's view there is an absurd quality to the gesture and ultimately he is left to speculate whether the book has any definable purpose at all:

> I am sympathetic to anyone who feels that his own cause or the cause of a "people" might be improved by writing in one language rather than another. Possibly self-publicization might well help the cause, but in this case, any news is bad news, and the whole affair has almost degenerated to the level of a real-life Beal Bocht. (189)

With a renewed, and intensified, period of violent crisis in the North of Ireland, any default to forms of traditional nationalism was deemed as sympathetic to, or tolerant of, the perceived excesses of the IRA campaign. Furthermore, Ireland had, since 1973, been installed as a member of the European Economic Community, a development that was both reflective of, and further enabled, the country's processes of economic and social modernisation. Hartnett has openly stated that among the factors that persuaded him to pursue such a drastic change in his linguistic media were the policies of the incumbent Irish government, particularly the attitude of cabinet minister Conor Cruise O'Brien. Cruise O'Brien had long been, and still is, affiliated with a school of thought that canvassed the urgency of Irish socio-economic modernisation. This brand of social and historical thinking later became loosely federated under the rubric of revisionist literary criticism and historiography. Thus, Hartnett's response was a rejection of the bland liberalisation of his contemporary Ireland. While, as he makes explicit, Hartnett did not abandon the fecund heritage of literary expression in the English language. Rather, he aligned himself with those who were convinced of the degraded status of the Irish language. Modernisation, in theory, heralds economic prosperity, lateral political participation and stability, as well as cultural freedom. However, Hartnett's eschewal of English stems from his realisation that modernisation, in its Irish variant, occasioned little more than a trammelled version of cultural homogenisation. In effect, and as many critics have since pointed out, modernisation and its socio-cultural agents smoothed out the rough edges of Irish cultural history. They were content to abandon cultural forms that were not immediately amenable to the uniform requirements of politico-economic modernity. Under this political dispensation, "All that reminds us/ we are human and therefore not a herd/ must be concealed or killed or slowly left/ to die, or microfilmed to waste no space./ For Gaelic is our final sign that/ we are human, therefore not a herd" (Hartnett, *Collected Poems* 146).

In section four of "A Farewell to English" Hartnett cynically reduces the arrival of Irish independence in terms reminiscent of a Mylesian universe of suffocating bureaucracy. The achievement of the national goal is cast in terms of the most pallid banality:

> So we queued at the Castle
> in nineteen-twenty-two
> to make our Gaelic
> or our Irish dream come true.
> We could have had from that start
> mad certain of our fate
> but we chose to learn the noble art
> of writing forms in triplicate.
> With big wide eyes
> and childish smiles
> quivering lips on our lips
> we entered the Irish paradise
> of files and paper-clips. (Hartnett, *Collected Poems* 144)

Evacuated of any semblance of political or cultural ambition, the Free State, in Hartnett's view, settled into a defensive administration of the emerging society. In fact, Hartnett's caustic judgements on the historical genealogy of the political failings of his contemporary Ireland bear many of the hallmarks of subsequent postcolonial critiques of Irish society in the immediate aftermath of independence, which have consistently revealed it as politically reactionary and culturally conservative jurisdiction. For Hartnett, language itself becomes debased when pressed into the service of such rootless ideologies. He suggests that if "The act of poetry/ is a rebel act" (*Collected Poems* 145), then poetic expression in the Irish language is doubly marginalised. The language may be "the conscience of our leaders,/ the memory of a mother-rape they will/ not face," but it retains little value within the sterile linguistic markets of "the world of total work" (Hartnett, *Collected Poems* 146). Precisely the patterns of behaviour, social conversation and cultural exchange that I trace below in Hartnett's poetry were anathema to the crudely dichotomised worldview of revisionism and modernisation theory. Under this mentality, orality, rurality, mythology, superstition, poetry, subjectivity and contingency were discharged, while text, urbanity, fact, prose, objectivity and verifiable narrative were endorsed. Hartnett's "farewell" was exactly that, and he returned to publishing poetry in English a decade later in 1985 with *Inchicore Haiku*, in haiku form it is a time when "My English dam bursts/ and out stroll all my bastards./ Irish shakes its head" (Hartnett, *Collected Poems* 149). And there is a sense of continuity between the two collections, particularly the political spirit of the title poem in the earlier collection and that which pulses through much of the later collection. But, of course, *Inchicore Haiku* provides further evidence of Hartnett's remarkable appetite for, and more significantly

This content downloaded from 193.1.104.14 on Tue, 06 Mar 2018 09:49:23 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

proficiency in, the formal, tonal and rhythmic cadences of international poetic traditions.

As if shaken to consciousness Hartnett opens *Inchicore Haiku* with the following triad, "Now, in Inchicore,/ my cigarette-smoke rises - / like lonesome pub-talk' (*Collected Poems* 148). The "Now' that enunciates the beginning of the collection is also the return to the English language; it stitches a seam of both linguistic and temporal continuity between the "farewell' of the previous decade and the ensuing meditations on the present in English. Indeed it is both telling and highly appropriate that the haiku was chosen by Hartnett in these circumstances. The poetic form of the haiku is heavily indebted to the beliefs of Zen Buddhist aesthetics and its lays a heavy premium on perceptive clarity and the rawness of everyday experience.[4] "Haiku are slivers of verse traditionally arranged in three lines of five, seven and five syllables each" Chris Arthur writes, and this economy of style and rhythm allows the skilfully crafted verse to:

> put us in touch with things in a way that seems electrified. Their few words come charged with a voltage that eludes longer compositions. Deft, economical, startling, exact, and with an austere beauty typical of Zen aesthetics, haiku seem imbued with that kind of super-density you sometimes read about in science fiction stories when a tiny fragment of alien rock, no more than a dust-speck, turns out to weigh more than an elephant. Haiku catch moments that have touched their writers deeply, skewering the experience on their tiny tridents of verse. (xv)

In temporal terms, then, the "Now" that opens the collection situates the aggregated moments of enlightened insight in their various presents. The haiku is the poetic form that is grounded in the current instance of clarity, as it expresses a fleeting yet profound glimpse of "the depths of the ordinary" (xvii).

From a socio-political standpoint, the collection releases some of the frustrations that Hartnett felt towards the presiding political and religious elites in Ireland. Extending his grossly expressed antipathy towards Irish politicians from "A Farewell to English," Hartnett produces moments of barbed wit and verbal acuity as he gives voice to his despair at the hypocrisy and mendacity of such self-governed classes. For Hartnett, religious authorities remain aloof from the needs of the material of the individual. He asks, "What do bishops take/ when the price of bread goes up?/ A vow of silence," and subsequently observes that, "In St Michael's Church/ a plush bishop in his frock/ confirms poverty" (*Collected Poems* 162). The lethal incision of the first verse takes the form of a comic one-liner, but its ability to unsheathe the pervading crassness of its target is enabled by Hartnett's capacity to contain his antagonism within the syllabic limits of the haiku. The balance and rhythm of the poetic form adopted by Hartnett here, and throughout the collection, are considerable advancements on the often unruly technical and formal performance of "A Farewell to English." The concision of the haiku, then, allows for a more convincing and structured poetic and critical consciousness to be aired. The urban landscape of Inchicore, and its environs, registers as a morass of loneliness and deflated ambitions; the poet's consciousness is both assaulted and haunted at all levels by "the noise," the caresses and the incongruous vistas of the cityscape. In this respect, Hartnett the hermetic urban poet recalls the impoverished flaneur of mid-nineteenth century Dublin: James Clarence Mangan: "Stalking Emmet Road/ a shocked rook blessed me with crusts - / manna for the dead" (*Collected Poems* 149). Of course, in this brief image, it is uncertain whether the rook is "stalking" from above, or if it is Hartnett himself who is shuffling ominously along the roadside.

It is telling that Hartnett again invokes the image of a bird in flight and he does so repeatedly during the eighty seven haiku. From "No goldfinches here - / puffed sparrows in sunpatches/ like Dublin urchins," to "On a brick chimney/ I can see all West Limerick/ in a jackdaw's eye," and the still later "My wife, my children - / the noise of spring approaching / My three white seagulls" (*Collected Poems* 149; 150 and 159). The accumulated effect of these three haiku is one of acute displacement; there is little that is soaring or transcendent about any of the scenes. In particular, the second image conjures a sense of the Gothic, as something or someplace that is lost or has been abandoned is glimpsed in the black orb of the "jackdaw's eye." Similarly, the third haiku reflects Hartnett's actual exile from his family; accordingly, the prospect of hope or regeneration that is attached to Spring does not approach in soothing tones but is announced in terms of an abrasive "noise." While Hartnett draws on an enduring international tradition of haiku poetry, in Gabriel Rosenstock's opinion, "the compressed form" and "the clear-eyed view of nature" (21) afforded by the haiku form has a close relation to the formal history of Irish language poetry. Hartnett's decision, then, might also be seen as "the logical continuum of almost two thousand years or poetry" (Rosenstock 21).

In his monumental four volume study of the haiku, R. H. Blyth argues that "Haiku are expressions of a temporary enlightenment in which we see into the life of things" (qtd. in Arthur xvi), and in Hartnett's case "things as they really are" offer little nourishment for optimism. *Inchicore Haiku* provides a litany of caustic criticisms of modern Dublin, ridiculing self-serving politicians, "Along Emmet Road/ politicians' promises/ blow like plastic bags" (*Collected Poems* 158), and the presiding emotional temperature of the collection is of despair and disappointment. In many ways the environment described by Hartnett is socially, culturally, and emotionally dysfunctional. Hartnett expresses this wounded cultural condition through a variety of surreal and resonant images: "I want the country: / here trees grow out of concrete. / And paper leaves fall."; "In the sad canal/ my face and a broken wheel - / debris of dead tribes"; "In local chippers, / queuing for carbohydrates - / a dwarfed people.," and "Women in the street/ faces the colour of fear/ I turn away my eyes" (*Collected Poems* 153; 151; 151 and 161). These images collectively reveal the emotional and natural atrophy of Hartnett's suburban community; his invocation of the natural world, in terms recollective of Kavanagh, may be revelatory to some extent, but is not borne of any Romantic rapture. The sense of disjunction is most convincingly expressed, firstly, in Hartnett's creation of his own "crack'd looking glass" in the form of the dour waters of the canal. His watery reflection becomes a refracted artefact of a "dead tribe," a discarded fossil of a dormant

This content downloaded from 193.1.104.14 on Tue, 06 Mar 2018 09:49:23 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

culture that has been superseded in contemporary Ireland. Likewise, the natural world has been enveloped by the brick and mortar progress of urbanity; unlike the organic cycles of natural life in "the country," the trees that line the urban cityscape are merely idle props.

A final trope that I wish to address in *Inchicore Haiku* is that of "the tear"; during the course of the collection Hartnett invokes the notion of weeping, tearfulness or crying in eight of the haiku. The employment of this trope engenders a melancholic atmosphere and is consistent with the overall tone of the collection. He writes: "The local bread-shop:/ a fresh smell of broken homes,/ a fist of wife's tears"; "Hollows in my cheeks:/ death giving me dimples./ The tap drops a tear," or "In Richmond House/ the floorboards ooze ancient tears/ of unemployment" (*Collected Poems* 150; 154 and 160). The images themselves may seem incongruous, but they are symptomatic of a culture of endemic torpidity. But, perhaps, even in the despair of the tear, of the weeping individual there is a germ of hope. Through the physical expression of grief or pain, we have the capacity to stir emotions in other people and "Somatic and semantic, biological and dialogical, the tear at once expresses our universally sensitive nature and addresses itself to our fellows...the pleasure of "being moved and shedding tears" is always implicitly shared, just as a tear appeals to interlocutors past, present, and future" (Caplan 11). On the one hand, Hartnett expresses the depressed condition of his society and of his experience within that society; however, the expression of grief through crying is often construed as a form of dialogue with others, as a moment of potential solidarity. It might be argued that the constant invocation of this somatic betrayal of inner emotion actually provides a prelude to the close of the collection, by which time Hartnett concludes: "My dead father shouts/ from his eternal Labour/ "These are your people!"" (*Collected Poems* 165). Are the tears, again captured in a verse such as "A dead river flows/ on under the live bridges./ And fishermen weep" (*Collected Poems* 153), moments that escape the trap of self-indulgence, which often accompanies isolation or exile? Though the haiku expresses the poet's private epiphanic experience, Hartnett's repeated use of the image of the tear is surely a gesture to his absent audience. While he may eschew "Company!" (*Collected Poems* 152) in one haiku, this somatic trope suggests a desire to connect and to commune with a broader cultural community. And maybe this sentiment is also palpable in the dry humour that suffuses several of the haiku, most notably, "From St Michael's Church/ the electric Angelus - / another job gone" (*Collected Poems* 152). In this instance Hartnett compacts his mischievous wit and a simple economic loss into a final, and clinical, poetic reflex.

"In the Landscape"

Hartnett's poetry is not only sustained by a conscious personal and formal attachment to the eighteenth century Munster poets, but as we have established, his work is wed also to the cultural and physical landscape out of which it emanates. In a late poem such as "Sibelius in Silence," in which Hartnett the poet is brought to a form of creative, linguistic crisis, we can locate the intersection of these dual artistic and historical concerns. The poem constitutes a meditation on both the poet's craft and on the legitimacy of his cultural, linguistic inheritance. Hartnett's crisis manifests in an intense sense of betrayal, "I ate/the berries that the conquered grew;/all this (papers, costume, customs,/fibre transformed and muscles)/and my longing to belong)/was negated by my voice/my traitor larynx" (*Collected Poems* 225). But the crisis is fomented by Hartnett's stated commitment to the integral organicism of community, culture and landscape. Earlier in the poem he delineates the intimate processes of memorial inscription that nourish the bonds of communal identity, and that ultimately, for Hartnett, legitimate participation in that culture. He writes: "They settled where their dead/were buried and gave names/to every hill and harbour,/names that might become unspoken/ but would forever whisper "Not yours'/to mapping strangers" (*Collected Poems* 223). Broadening the logic of Seamus Deane's point that "The relationship between the Irish and English languages in modern Ireland, at least since the Famine, has a bearing upon and may even be homologous with the wider relationship between tradition and modernity" (113), I want to draw a further homologous relation between the subaltern, folkloric materials of Hartnett's poetic landscape and its perceived anachronism under the progressive dynamics of Irish modernisation. Those, then, who reject or remain suspicious of modernity's "storm of progress" and who seek to reclaim the dynamism of Irish linguistic, artistic and social traditions, can, I would argue, find solidarity in both the formal poetic craft and thematic intensity of Hartnett's poetic oeuvre. Rather than canvass insidious romantic reflections on inert and discarded cultural indices, Hartnett underscores the vibrant articulacy of a threatened cultural sphere. The razing of the physical landscape and its reduction to an aggregation of ruins is, historically, wedded to the fate of the Irish nation and, by implication its culture and language. Addressing what he terms "the presence of absence in the Irish landscape," Whelan argues: "Ruins signified the right to a remembered presence, to visibility and voice, not silence and subjugation of the old inhabitants by the intruders and their consequent loss of status in their own land" (13).[5]

In one of his most well-known works, "Death of an Irishwoman," Hartnett laments the passing of his grandmother and in so doing catalogues many of the pagan social mores that animated her domestic landscape, "Ignorant, in the sense she/ate monotonous food/and thought the world was flat,/and pagan, in the sense/she knew the things that moved/at night were neither dogs nor cats/ but *púcas* and darkfaced men." As the poem continues Hartnett begins to visualise his deceased grandmother in terms of a range of familiar material objects and social practices. He writes: "She was a summer dance at the crossroads./She was a card game where a nose was broken./ She was a song that nobody sings./She was a house ransacked by soldiers./She was a language seldom spoken." His language, which ostensibly materialises as that of an inventory, assumes the ritual beauty of a spiritual incantation – an affective catalogue of memories. Equally, "Death of Irishwoman" dramatises a radically alternative feminine

This content downloaded from 193.1.104.14 on Tue, 06 Mar 2018 09:49:23 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

allegory of the Irish nation and in its final line suggests a version of Irish identity that, while perhaps not being broadly inclusive, certainly achieves a renewed depth, "She was a child's purse, full of useless things" (*Farewell* 76). Given the self-evident ossification of romantic allegorical representations of the be-shawled native female within Irish literary history, popular culture and cultural memory, it seems that Hartnett re-energises such moribund romantic nostalgia with a localised version of subaltern femininity. In fact, by concretely humanising the female figure, as that of his grandmother, Hartnett confirms the viable autonomous alterity of subaltern Gaelic culture. A culture that not only populates the narratives of his poetic creations, but which actively nourishes the very process of artistic gestation and birth.

While the Gaelic culture, to which Hartnett as poet cleaves, is readily disposable in many quarters as irredeemably mythological or benightedly esoteric, within Hartnett's aesthetic these cultural accretions of a traditional Gaelic condition retain a problematising valence in the face of a homogenising modern world. In David Lloyd's terms, their very disjunction with the patterns of modern historical time and space enables "the disintegrative power of unruly memory" (269). And again this is manifest in Hartnett's recollective representation of his grandmother, "Maybe morning lightens over/the coldest time in all the day, /but not for you. A bird's hover, /seabird, blackbird, or bird of prey, /was rain, or death, or lost cattle" (*Collected Poems* 52). Noticeably, we return to the tropes of bird-flight and transcendence, as Hartnett explores the folkloric cartographies of the rural landscape and tribal ritual. Furthermore, in tracing these folkloric cartographies, Hartnett equally embraces the communion of person and place. Specifically, the antiseptic contours of the rational discipline of scientific cartography, emblematic of a repugnant urban modernity, cannot commune with the sentient rapport that obtains between the individual and the unruly, haunted landscape. Hartnett writes of being "in the landscape" rather than objectifying its organic textures with the de-animating calculus of reason. He asserts "Maps tell us nothing," conversely they locate, measure and identify and are never "in the landscape" but remain aloof and uncommitted. Their limitations are indexical of their alienation from the lived or performed identities of these local communities, Hartnett continues, "they cannot trace/ the mental rubrics of the deaths and myths/that occurred here and occur/still in the mindscape of the race/that first enacted rituals/for the spirit of this place" (2001: 202). The recalcitrance of the ritualistic is enforced, firstly, by the incessant sibilance of the entire second verse, but equally, the reader cannot escape the recollection of Hartnett's earlier poem "A Necklace of Wrens," which, as we have noted, is both a recollective representation and a fulfilment of one of these recounted "enacted rituals." Any sense of ritual community, of individual participation, indeed of traumatic displacement or flight is part of the fabric of the relationship between the living landscape and the tribe.

Eavan Boland expresses the vitalisation of the historical present by the past in similar topographical terms in her poem "Achill," in which she captures the distancing effects of modernity's arithmetic approach to landscape and remembrance. Boland begins, like Hartnett, disowning the surgical operations of scientifically representing a landscape: "That the science of cartography is limited." Of more significance, however, is not just the material objectification of a contemporary landscape, but the fact that the memorial accretions of a colonised and displaced community are bleached or cauterised under the cartographic optic:

> Where they died, there the road ended
> And ends still and when I take down
> The map of this island, it is never so
> I can say here is
> The masterful, the apt rendering of
> The spherical as flat, nor
> An ingenious design which persuades a curve
> Into a plane
> But to tell myself again that
> The line which says woodland and cries hunger
> And gives out among sweet pine and cypress
> And finds no horizon
> Will not be there.
> (5)

Hartnett's own affective relationship with the physical coordinates of his environment manifest further in a more acerbic and satirical verse commentary on the austere abstraction of "Public Art." The poem essentially lampoons a so-called "sculptor friend," whose creative output is critiqued, and belittled, as little more than an indecipherable "borrowing from some theory of some school." Crucially, it is the notion of a non-verbal register of communicability between the tribe and the landscape that preoccupies Hartnett. And in extolling the communicative codes of "remnants [which] speak a language," which in turn are "part/of the vocabulary of the tribe" (*Collected Poems* 201), Hartnett most expressly embodies Whelan's contention that "A living landscape dynamically embraces a spontaneous and reciprocal relationship between a community and their environment…[t]he landscape connects the outer contours with an inner vision" (16).[6] The objects that populate the image-scape of Hartnett's verse, in this case discarded possessions that still retain a level of appreciable articulacy, are at one level simply detritus. However the kernel of Hartnett's argument is that the tribal identity is the cumulative result of both a historical and an ongoing performed consummation between individual and the local landscape. Returning to Whelan: "The environment provides a locus for human affection, imprinted as remembered forms, ways of being, ways of living, ways of knowing" (16). Indeed it is an issue that reaches levels of apoplexy in Hartnett's poem "USA," in which he savagely depicts the usurpatory and rapine conquest of Native American lands. In verse that can legitimately be criticised for compromising its technical grace for unfettered polemic, Hartnett, nevertheless, again broaches the affective bonds of community and the traumas of territorial dispossession. Extending the feminine allegorisation of nation from Ireland to the American continent, Hartnett portrays a historical scene and process of unrestrained violence: "They chained the land and pulled her down/and nailed her to the sea with towns./She lies on her back, her belly cut in fields/of red and yellow earth. She

This content downloaded from 193.1.104.14 on Tue, 06 Mar 2018 09:49:23 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

does not yield,/she is not theirs. She does not love this race./ She will not open her legs to enclose/the scum of Europe, jockeying for grace" (*Collected Poems* 122).

Perhaps, then, we might suggest that Hartnett's dramatisation of what are essentially "non-modern" cultural *practices* approaches a "provincialization" of modernity itself. As we read a poem like "Mrs Halpin and the Lightning" we might be mindful of Dipesh Chakrabarty's conclusion with respect to subaltern histories. Recalling Yeats' famous anecdote regarding his collection of Irish folklore narrative from a Mrs. Connolly in Connemara,[7] Chakrabarty concludes:

> As old Mrs Connolly knew, and as we social scientists often forget, gods and spirits are not dependent on human beliefs for their existence; what brings them to presence are our practices... These *other ways of being* are not without questions of power or justice, but these questions are raised ...on terms other than those of the political modern [my emphasis]. (111-112)

Not only do we see Hartnett portraying active, arguably recalcitrant, cultural practices, but such pursuits are mediated through the figure of woman. He writes: "When the blue sheets crackled/with electric starch/Mrs Halpin with a goose's wing/flailed holy water drops/like the steel tips of holy whips/to beat the demons from the room" (*Collected Poems* 75). The imbrication of these recalcitrant subaltern mores and the constituency of Irish femininity is an issue that recurs in Hartnett's oeuvre and which is arguably indicative of a liberatory impulse. Such is the organic complexity of an oral, folkloric tradition that it sanctions, even requires, a democratic, inclusive participation across historical times and spaces.

Through a cautious aggregation of Chakrabarty's postcolonial historiography and Hartnett's animation of such self-evidently subaltern constituencies, we can trace the disjunction of modernity's temporal cartography with itself. In other words, and without reducing Hartnett's complex poetic conscience to a function of a postcolonial theoretical agenda, his poems both embody and suggest the multi-temporal fabric of historical time. Not only this, the very existence of alternative linguistic, social or spiritual lived practices, however superficially banal they may appear, are equally indicative of contradictory historical times and spaces to those of modernity. Hartnett writes: "Her fear was not the simple fear of one/who does not know the source of thunder: these were the ancient Irish gods/she had deserted for the sake of Christ" (*Collected Poems* 75). Crucially, Hartnett's poetic renderings of what he clearly perceives as a threatened, if not terminally ill, Gaelic culture are never exercises in nostalgic containment, nor do they constitute plastic fetishisations of discrete socio-cultural traditions. These poems expose Hartnett's personal anxiety regarding his own cultural inheritance; he is not exclusively concerned with recording these cultural practices and mores, but each act of poetic representation is also an act of self-actualisation.[8] The key point is that the "non-modern" exists in a coeval relation to the modern, a fact established in the very formal procedures of Hartnett's verse translations from Irish to English[9] and in his vocational immersion in European modernist and Eastern mystic art forms, including his translations of the works of Federico Garcia Lorca and his use of the "haiku" form. It is not a matter of creating sclerotic binaries between the purportedly modern and the irretrievably traditional or archaic. Rather, Hartnett's thematic and formal concerns emphasise the redundancy of such dichotomies. In dislocating Hartnett from the "modern," I am not arguing that his work is conservative or archaic, but that it asserts the vibrancy of subaltern times and spaces.

Hartnett's poetic art demonstrates the organicism of landscape, language and personal and communal memory. But his work is neither idealistic nor nostalgic, and, this is essentially a key revolutionary feature of Hartnett's oeuvre. He imbues the landscape with a creative vitality and strips it of the claustrophobic contours of idyllic abstraction, a feature that is too often invoked in more sentimental art. The physical coordinates of Hartnett's landscape shed the passivity of objectification and become active participants in the creation of communal and personal memory and identity. Likewise the craft of the poet is implicated in the functions of historical memory; and as Hartnett records in "Sibelius in Silence," the breath of tribal heritage invigorates poetic song:

> Caught at school in webs of grammar
> which still at night enmesh my face,
> I had no tongue in the land I came from
> but at first, at best, a stammer;
> but the fluency I sought I found
> in the speech that underlies my music.
> The land took me in her embrace;
> I wed the land and dreamed her freedom." (*Collected Poems* 226)

Throughout his poetry he is profoundly sceptical of the deadening cultural effects of modernity, and, variously, provides polemic, reflective, satirical and waspish rebukes to its progress. For Hartnett, the poet, the tribe and the legible landscape function as part of an alternative subaltern, circulatory system of counter-modern memories and cultural practices.

This content downloaded from 193.1.104.14 on Tue, 06 Mar 2018 09:49:23 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms

Notes:

[1] *A Necklace of Wrens* is a bilingual collection in which Hartnett's own translations of poems originally written and published in Irish appear side by side. The originals were published almost a decade earlier than the bilingual edition.

[2] This scene is evocatively rendered most recently by Hartnett himself in the documentary *A Necklace of Wrens*, TG4, Windmill Lane Pictures, Windmill Lane, Dublin, 1999.

[3] The title of Grennan's piece is a reference to a 1982 essay by Hartnett entitled "Wrestling with Ó Bruadair."

[4] The great practitioners of the haiku were Basho (1644-1694); Buson (1715-1783); Issa (1763-1827) and Shiki (1867-1902). On the haiku see R.H. Blyth, *Haiku in Four Volumes* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press: 1952) and in an Irish context Gabriel Rosenstock, "The Stairway of Surprise: Reflections on Poetry and Haiku," *Blithe Spirit: Journal of the British Haiku Society* 8:4 (1998), 21-25.

[5] Unpublished version of the essay, for which I would like to thank Professor Whelan.

[6] The cartographer Tim Robinson makes some suggestive comments on these issues, "Thus we, personally, cumulatively, communally, create and recreate landscapes – a landscape being not just the terrain but also the human perspectives on it, the land plus its overburden of meanings," "Listening to the Landscape," *The Irish Review* 14 (1993), 30.

[7] Chakrabarty recounts the story as relayed to him by David Lloyd:

> One day, in the period of his extensive researches on Irish folklore in rural Connemara, William Butler Yeats discovered a treasure. The treasure was a certain Mrs. Connolly who had the most magnificent repertoire of fairy stories that W.B. had ever come across. He sat with her in her little cottage from morning to dusk, listening and recording her stories, her proverbs and her lore. As twilight drew on, he had to leave and he stood up, still dazed by all that he had heard. Mrs. Connolly stood at the door as he left, and just as he reached the gate he turned back to her and said quietly, "One more question Mrs. Connolly, if I may. Do you believe in the fairies?" Mrs. Connolly threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, not all Mr. Yeats, not all." W.B. paused, turned away and slouched off down the lane. Then he heard Mrs. Connolly's voice coming after him down the lane: "But they're there, Mr. Yeats, they're there."

See *Provincializing Europe*, 111.

[8] John McAuliffe remarks that "The poet's estrangement from his inheritance is most vivid in the powerful poems about older women, written before he began to write solely in Irish, which can be understood as elegies for a disappearing culture," "Alien Nation: Michael Hartnett and his Audience," *Metre* 11 (2001/02), 188.

[9] Hartnett has produced significant translations of a variety of eighteenth century poetry, as well as earlier seventeenth century works.

Works Cited:

Arthur, Chris. *Irish Haiku*. Aurora: The Davies Group Publishers, 2005.

Blyth, R.H.. *Haiku in Four Volumes*. Tokyo: Hokuseidon, 1952.

Boland, Eavan. *In a Time of Violence*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1994.

Caplan, Jay. *Framed Narratives: Diderot's Genealogy of the Beholder*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985.

Carson, Ciaran. "Au Revoir: A Review of Michael Hartnett's *A Farewell to English*." *The Honest Ulsterman* 50 (1975): 187-189.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Deane, Seamus. "Dumbness and Eloquence: A Note on English as We Write It in Ireland." *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory*. Ed. Clare Carroll and Patricia King. Cork: Cork University Press, 2003. 109-121.

Grennan, Eamon. "Wrestling with Hartnett." *The Southern Review* 31:3 (1995): 655-675.

Hartnett, Michael. *A Farewell to English*. Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1975.

—. "Wrestling with Ó Bruadair." In Seán Mac Réamoinn, ed., *The Pleasures of Gaelic Poetry*. London: Allen Lane, 1982. 63-78.

—. *Inchicore Haiku*. Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1985.

—. *A Necklace Of Wrens*. Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1987.

—. *Selected and New Poems*. Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994.

—. *Collected Poems*. Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2001.

—. Michael Hartnett Papers. National Library of Ireland MS, 35910/2.

Healy, Dermot. *The Reed Bed*. Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2001.

Lloyd, David. "Ruination: Allan de Souza's Irish Photography." *Third Text* 18.3 (2004): 263-272.

McAuliffe, John. "Alien Nation: Michael Hartnett and his Audience." *Metre* 11 (2001/02): 186-192.

Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*." *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*. Ed. Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt. New York: The New Press, 1995.

O'Driscoll, Denis. "An Interview with Michael Hartnett." *Poetry Ireland Review* 20 (1987): 16-21.

Robinson, Tim. "Listening to the Landscape." *The Irish Review* 14 (1993): 21-32.

Rosenstock, Gabriel. "The Stairway of Surprise: Reflections on Poetry and Haiku." *Blithe Spirit: Journal of the British Haiku Society*. 8.4 (1998): 21-25.

Ryden, Kent C.. *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1993.

Smith, Michael. "Michael Hartnett: A Memoir." *Metre* 11 (2001/02): 155-158.

Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: Heinemann, 1986.

Whelan, Kevin. "Reading the Ruins: The presence of absence in the Irish landscape." Unpublished essay, 2003. 1-23.

White, Victoria. "Heartbreak in two languages." *Irish Times*. 15 Dec. 1994: 18.

This content downloaded from 193.1.104.14 on Tue, 06 Mar 2018 09:49:23 UTC
All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms