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The Executioner's Boots: The Fiction of John Montague

The opposite shore unveils itself,
Bright in detail as a painting,
Alone, but equal to the morning.

— "The Point"

It is not unusual for a poet to turn to fiction at some point in his career, as if finding in the scope afforded by narrative an opportunity to extend and contextualise the more atemporal focus of the poetry. Typically, he will produce one or two novels characterized by easy elegance of language rather than by formal inventiveness: Clarke's Hiberno-Christian romances, Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn*, George Barker's *The Dead Seagull*, Larkin's *A Girl in Winter* and *Jill*. These fictions are inevitably overshadowed by their writers' poetic achievements to the extent that it is nearly impossible to read the prose without referring it at some point to our knowledge of the poems. The prose writings are at once an alternative to and a gloss on the poetry. Where the poems deal in ellipses and in the emblematic or symbolic transformation which snatches the lyric moment out of time, the fictions serve as documents of record and recall, and acknowledge temporality and history.

While John Montague's poetry has tended towards the longer rhythms of the sequence, his favoured forms as prose writer have been the short story and the novella rather than the more expansive latitudes of the novel. Nine early stories were gathered in *Death of a Chieftain and Other Stories* (1964), followed over two decades later by *The Lost Notebook* (1987); there have also been occasional uncollected short stories.¹ Starting from the premise that the two bodies of writing are interconnected, it is the intention here to look at Montague's fiction in the light of his poems.

Montague's poems generally eschew narrative, even when, as in *The Great Cloak*,² they are presented as a group with a prefatory note

1. *Death of a Chieftain and Other Stories* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1964); *The Lost Notebook* (Cork and Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1987); "Off the Page", *An Gael*, III, 1 (New York, Summer 1985), 40-45; "A Prize Giving", *The Irish Times*, 26 August 1988, p.13.
2. *The Great Cloak* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1978).

outlining the "Plot" of the events to which they refer and which govern their organization. The book remains an assembly of individual lyrics, as does Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*. When narrative is introduced into the poetry, it is associated with cruelty and dysfunction. In "The Wild Dog Rose", first collected in *Tides*³ and later included as part of the final section of *The Rough Field*,⁴ the old woman who is its subject has a story to tell; it constitutes the central section of the poem:

And there
where the dogrose shines in the hedge
she tells me a story so terrible
that I try to push it away,
my bones melting. (T, p. 17).

It is a story of an attempted rape. The squalid encounter is redeemed only by the presence of the dogrose, its beaten blossoms holding out a symbolic token of necessary resilience in the face of violence.

Prose is the normal medium of fictional narrative, but Montague has on a few occasions essayed the prose poem, most remarkably in "Coming Events" (T, p. 26). This has as its subject a late sixteenth-century painting by the Flemish painter Gerard David which depicts "The Judgement of Cambyses", with a character named Sisamnes being skinned alive in the presence of Cambyses. The scene is rich in historical and narrative associations, all of which Montague jettisons in his rendering of the picture. His description becomes as self-consciously detached as an anatomy lesson: "a man being flayed".

Four craftsmen are concerned with the figure on the table: one is opening the left arm, another lifting away the right nipple, a third incising the right arm while the last (his knife caught between his teeth) is unwinding the results of his labour so as to display the rich network of veins under the skin of the left leg.

The anonymity of the event hesitates between the universal and the particular; the text itself is non-committal as to its significance:

The whole scene may be intended as an allegory of human suffering but what the line of perspective leads us to admire is the brown calfskin of the principal executioner's boots. (T, p. 26)

3. *Tides* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1970). Subsequent references to this edition in the text abbreviated to T.
4. *The Rough Field* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1972). Subsequent references to this edition in the text abbreviated to TRF.

By rejecting the historical and narrative aspects of David's painting, Montague makes of it a moment of violence and stripping bare, in the most extreme sense. The executioners and onlookers are distinguished from the victims by their clothes, "rich ermine" and "brown calf-skin", and by their serenity of expression: "mild admiration". And, as we perceive the painting through Montague's commentary, we are aligned with those executioners and onlookers; we too are invited "to admire" as our attention is finally directed not to the intricacies of flesh and the centrality of suffering but to the calf-skin boots, artefacts from another more commonplace skinning, now transformed by the skill of a craftsman.

If there is a companion piece to "Coming Events" in *Tides*, it is "Life Class", which imaginatively explores the surfaces of a woman's body as she poses for drawing students. An opposition is set up in the poem between the grotesque sensual imaginings of tormented asceticism and a gentle celebratory acceptance of the body's offerings. At the end, the "simply human" is drawn into an artful neutrality:

On cartridge paper

an army of pencils
deploy silently to
lure her into their

net of lines while
from & above her
chilled, cramped

body blossoms
a late flower:
her tired smile.

(*T*, p. 42).

In "Coming Events" the progress of entry into the "rich network of veins" is diverted towards the marginal contiguity of the executioner's boots; the possibility of lustful fear of a woman's body in "Life Class" resolves itself in a net of lines.

The images of pain and violence which find their way into Montague's poetry through modes associated with narrative — storytelling, the use of prose — offer a key to the epigraphs for his collection *Death of a Chieftain*. Its original epigraph was to have been a passage taken from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

I fear him. I fear his redrimmed horny eyes.
 It is with him I must struggle all through the
 night till day comes, till he or I lie dead,
 gripping him by the sinewy throat. . . Till
 what? Till he yield to me? No. I mean him no
 harm.⁵

This was dropped in favour of some lines from John Hewitt's "Jacob and the Angel"⁶ which also refer to a struggle, this time in the more intimate world of imagination and family:

I wrestled with my father in my dream,
 and in that dream remembered who we were,
 and why we should not struggle, he and I . . .

The stories in *Death of a Chieftain* are implicit with struggle and conflict. Even when no harm is meant, even when there is a remembrance of why there should be no struggle, the world of the stories is fragmentary and riven. In this they contrast with the predominant movement of Montague's poetry, which is generally towards recognition and integration; these may be achieved in joy — "Everything then/In our casual morning vision/Seemed to flow in one direction" ("The siege of Mullingar", *ACL*, p. 60) — or in sorrow, as in the affirmation "that nothing dies, that even from/Such bitter failure memory grows" ("Courtyard in Winter", *ASD*, p. 19). The tendency towards mythopeia in the poetry, in which the details of life take on symbolic or emblematic significance under some governing idea, finds its counterbalance in the stories. In "The Siege of Mullingar" Montague seemed to dance lightly on the grave of an old invalidated myth — "Puritan Ireland's dead and gone,/A myth of O'Connor and O'Faolain" — while offering a new one in its stead. But in "An Occasion of Sin", a story which is roughly contemporary with that poem, a young French woman is confronted by "Puritan Ireland" not quite dead and gone yet. "The Cry" tells how a successful journalist returns on a visit to his native Ulster and enters into the inbuilt small-town tensions of the place before being rebuffed as an outsider, while another story, "The New Enamel Bucket", also explores the divisions in Ulster society and the violence that. at the time of its

5. See Montague's comments in "Work Your Progress", *Irish University Review*, 12, 1 (Spring 1982), p. 49.
6. Montague had been working on Hewitt's poetry at the time *Death of a Chieftain* was being prepared for the press, contributing an essay on Hewitt to *Poetry Ireland* in Spring 1964.

writing, was still largely latent. And in the darkly comic title story, "Death of a Chieftain", the bitter failure of Coote's attempt to find proof of some connection between the early Irish tumulus builders and the lost civilizations behind the Central American pyramids does not breed any redemptive memory; instead, he dies with pointless dignity under an ersatz megalithic tomb.

The opening story of the collection displays conflict graphically in the heightened atmosphere of a boarding-school setting. It describes how a newly arrived martinet Dean is brought down by a spontaneous alliance of the boys under his charge. As in several of the stories, the focus of the narrative is uncertain; it rests fully neither with the Dean's point of view nor with that of the pupils, but shifts from one side to the other. In the curiously detached telling, only the confrontation is heightened; it enacts in narrative form what is found more acutely in "Coming Events". The final stage of the rebellion against the Dean is provoked by his singling out one particular boy as the object of his contemptuous authority; the others react, and

the dangerous aloofness which had been his power was now swept away from him; he was no longer a priest of a person in authority, but merely someone who had humbled and hurt another past enduring. (p. 18)

The boys' rebellion is at once an adolescent discovery of their own ability to withstand and subdue an unwarranted imposition, and an exposure of the shallow foundations of the restraints operating on them. The final moment of the story has the boys scattering outside "with wild and joyful cries", but the sense is one of dispersal, not cohesion. For them the episode has already become a part of the past; it does not survive as a constituent of their future.

Dispersal and disintegration underlie the stories. The nineteen sixties seemed to promise a loosening of the old restraints, and in "A Change of Management" Montague rehearses his favourite theme of a new Ireland coming into the ascendant, shedding the old pieties. Such release is gained only through resignation. As new structures are established, the free spirit of Cronin, a writer who might — just might — cross over from potentiality to achievement, quits his job in the public service, and is spun off from the centralized cohesion of economic progress; but for people like the protagonist O'Shea:

there was no real escape left, not even here: the most they could hope to find was someone under whose direction they might give their best. Besides, was it such a criminal thing to wish to lead an ordinary life? (p. 114)

A childhood yearning to transcend the ordinariness of Ulster farm life is at the basis of "The Oklahoma Kid", a sadly funny of an expedition to the local town to see a cowboy film. Together with the young narrator, three or four enthusiasts hire a car for the excursion; the evening is a fiasco, and the great expectations of a night out end with the child and his companions making their way home under the scornful eyes of the townsmen. It is, thus far, one of the most successful stories in the collection. But Montague then makes something other of it, by adding a postscript. "By right the story ends there, and anything further will only spoil it", says the narrator, going on to tell how seventeen years later "life add[ed] a codicil" when, mid-way through a journey down the centre of the United States, the grown man suddenly recognised himself as "the Oklahoma Kid from County Tyrone".

This delayed recognition leads to a certain dispersal of the effect of the story, moving it from fiction to anecdote by interrupting its closure. It is an unusual turn for a short story, but not for a poem, where a similar turn is often used, although to different effect. In Montague's poetry, he frequently describes a remembered incident from the past and then, in the final stanza or lines, shifts abruptly to a later time, as in "The Water Carrier" and "Like Dolmens Round My Childhood" in *Poisoned Lands*, "The Country Fiddler", "The Cage" and "A Grafted Tongue" (TRF). In these, the turn opens up the poem's significance; it is an efficient way of achieving the transformation of the particular, allowing its aura to carry over to a time outside its own. Montague uses that technique of "carry over" to something approaching the same purpose in his novella *The Lost Notebook*. The recollection of an event thirty years before is told first as a story, but then tailed by its aftermath. The value of the story rests not in itself but in its formative impact on the narrator.

The final story in *Death of a Chieftain*, "A Ball of Fire", also anticipates *The Lost Notebook* in some respects. Brought to an awareness of the life and death of a neighbour, the artist Michael Gorman finds himself disturbed by the undirected energy of the last months in the man's life. He first sees the man on 1 November, the same day on which he leaves a painting unfinished, not seeing any fit endpoint for the flow of colour on to his canvas. Only after the anonymous and withdrawn neighbour has been found dead in his desolate basement flat does Gorman face into the painting again.

7. *A Chosen Light* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1967). Subsequent references to this edition in the text abbreviated to *ACL*.

He placed it on the easel; its living spaces stared back at him, a chaos of unfulfilment. Then he reached for a brush and began to work.

Across the dark expanse of the canvas, a line began to develop. At first frail, like an electric wire, it grew stronger, more defined. It became a dancing, independent line, full of weird energy, and softly radiating light. It ran right across the canvas until, completing and culminating the picture, it finished in a smothered explosion of colour, like a ball of fire.

(p. 174).

This movement towards artistic completion is, however, a strategy of evasion, just as much as is the forced concentration on the calfskin boots in "Coming Events"; Gorman is seeking to assuage the feelings prompted by his encounters with his neighbour.

The title of *The Lost Notebook* refers to a journal, since lost, which was written during the summer of 1950 while the narrator was a youthful visitor to Florence; the novella represents itself as a recollection of that lost season. The narrator looks back knowingly to the moment when he began to put on knowledge. More than the notebook has been lost, it is suggested: naiveté, inhibition and ignorance have been shed in the course of a passage from innocence to experience.

The notebook is twice lost in the story. Shortly after the young man returns to his family home in Ulster the journal goes missing for a few days, to be read by someone unknown. It again disappears during the ensuing three decades, leaving the events to be retold in the form of fiction, with retrospection substituted for introspection. The account we are given is understood to be at once a re-exploration of that summer and a reconstruction that overlays the raw telling of the original. The account ends protectively with indications as to how the lost notebook, and by transference *The Lost Notebook*, should and should not be read.

The idea of it being read by the wrong person, by someone unsympathetic to the extreme feelings displayed in the commentary and the drawings, the scrawls of two young people so involved with each other, sometimes in anger, sometimes in pleasure, filled me with rage and dismay. (p. 93)

. . . the idea that someone should look at our joint efforts with censorious eyes was almost a sacrilege. Love or lust, loathing or friendship, it was ours, a thrusting from our so differing worlds towards freedom, towards ease. What happened between us was a stumbling towards something without which two equal beings cannot survive, something called honesty. (pp. 95-6)

These embedded instructions on how to read suggest that honesty is a hard-won privilege, not to be understood by outsiders. The account is surrounded by self-awareness, gained through the shedding of an awkward adolescent self-consciousness. Now, where the ur-notebook had been ingenuous, the novella is artful.

The incident at the end, when the notebook is taken and its raw intimacies looked over by some indeterminate other, is a reworking of an action to be found in Montague's poetry. It occurs most notably at the end of "All Legendary Obstacles", when the old lady clears a circle on the train window to look out at the lovers on the platform as the,

Move into the wet darkness
Kissing, still unable to speak.

(ACL, p. 16)

The individual experience of love or sexuality or suffering is given its force by the presence of an excluded onlooker. The burgomeisters in both "Coming Events" and "The Massacre",* the giggling hotel-maids in "Tracks" (T, p.43), all serve to frame the events and emotions, giving them detachment and distance.

In *The Lost Notebook* the initiatory eroticism of the original experience which constitutes the *fabula* is transformed into an eroticism of recall in the *sjuzet*. The narrator too, by virtue of inexorable temporality and reconstitutive memory, has become an observer of those events through which, as a participant, he had been freed into adulthood. The Florence journal had been a joint production; in addition to the jottings and poems by the young man there were the girl's line drawings and comments. These offered another perspective and were, Montague suggests, perhaps the more honest part of the document. As rewritten by the narrator, her viewpoint is occluded by his need to try again, shaping the earlier events and emotions in the light of an acquired wisdom. In the process she is marginalized, if not quite written out. But maybe she does not need a second go; there is the implication that she had been able to get it right the first time. For her the affair was an episode rather than an epoch, at best a remission in the course of "a kind of despoiling. an endless disappointment" (p. 95). He, on the other hand, is absolved from any guilt in this defilement, for it had been initiated before they met; it has its origins in her family, and particularly in her unhappy love for her brother. There, where she had looked for full intimacy, she had been rejected and supplanted. The sexual and artistic energy of her life is generated by the failure of that love.

8. *A Slow Dance* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1975) p. 41

A persistent sub-text in *The Lost Notebook* is the uneasy confrontation between the Irishman, cowed by his sense of the past, and the energetic present of America as embodied in Wandy; it is an encounter which takes place in Florence, a setting which epitomizes the artistic wealth of continental Europe. This fictional account can be set alongside the reportorial telling of a contemporary and parallel experience. In an article for *The Bell*, "Fellow Travelling with America", Montague described his participation in a seminar on American Studies at Salzburg in 1950, organized by American academics for delegates drawn from a variety of European countries. The excitement the opportunity it affords is tempered by an ambivalence regarding the hegemony which the U.S. exerts over Europe. Montague represents himself as being inadequately equipped to deal with the situation. (I think he modestly included himself as an "average" student.)

The average Irish student, as produced by our universities, is far behind in fluency of languages, humility before achievement, or just plain *savoir vivre*. He is gauche, eager perhaps, but more arrogant and precious than his counterparts abroad. His faults are reflected in the cultural atmosphere of a country: there is no active sense of European culture, but a kind of self-conscious, isolated bravado with the artist in the invidious position of spiritual director to the intelligentsia.⁹

It is a situation related to that on which Montague draws for *The Lost Notebook*; the artistic richness of Europe becomes an arena in which the Irish and the American, cultural outsiders both and alien to that richness, can meet and react. In the unsettled and unsettling world of their passion, the two are surrounded by the mute fixities of painting and sculpture. The names tumble through the text: Botticelli, Michaelangelo, Titian, Della Robbia . . . some twenty or more, references acting as a sort of fixative on experience. The art-works have a history, and it becomes the young man's stratagem to learn and relay it to his companion. She, on the other hand, is more attracted to the paintings of Mondrian, too contemporary to have a history, too inscrutable to tell a story.

The girl has already undergone an emotional and erotic wounding, and is the less vulnerable of the two. The culminating moment of their relationship is his anal penetration of her body, but this is immediately followed by Wandy's account of her past. The effect of what she has to say is to exclude the man. Even in that culminating moment he has

done no more than re-enact what has already happened with her brother; since then she has found greater ease and release in lesbian love.

So much for *mise*, Mr. Meself, Ireland's gift to womanhood, and future star of art and love. Whether she was at long last being honest or determined to try and get her own back, after what I had just done, or a mixture of both, **was** beyond me. (p. 73)

The moment of entry has been swiftly followed by a state of enforced detachment; already Wendy is beyond him. Her gift to the young Irishman is not of herself but of her knowledge.

The passionate man's pilgrimage ends when he returns to his family home in Ireland, counterpointing sharply the progress of the girl who is in flight from hers. In the third and final part of the novella he plays out a scene with his mother which is "like a parody of the end of Joyce's *Portrait*, with [him] mournfully pressing the case for freedom, and she arguing, with an equal measure of gloom, for orthodoxy" (p. 90). The struggle with the spectre or dream with which *Death of a Chieftain* began is here repeated.

The case for freedom underpins *The Lost Notebook*. When, in 1966, on the anniversary of the Easter Rising which marked the start of the push for Irish freedom, Montague published the pamphlet *Patriotic Site* (later made part of *The Rough Field*), he quoted Engel's remark that "the real aims of a revolution, those which are not illusions, are always to be realised after that revolution". The last freedom is sensual freedom. *The Lost Notebook* aims to be more than simply an exercise in the erotic; it presents experience as exposure, a stripping bare, an opening of the self to pain. Not for nothing is the book dedicated to Francis Stuart. The pain is a necessary preliminary to sensual freedom. One form of that freedom is detachment, a casting off of involvement. It is the onlooker's stance, and the artist's, as they stand back to admire the beautiful surfaces: a woman's body, the flow of colour on a canvas, a pair of boots. The honesty of Montague's fiction rests in its attempts to inhabit the space between those apparent opposites of pain and beauty.