Memorials of the Irish West: John McHugh, Paul Durcan, and Harry Clifton

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The Irish West locates itself between its real geographical and cultural location and the myth of native Ireland conceived largely by the representatives of the Irish Revival at the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth century.[1] Once a desolate land with harsh living conditions, a place of decline and exile, a vestige of Gaeltacht, now a pillar of Irish tourism, it used to compete, or is still competing, with the expectations of writers who envisaged it as the place helping to overcome an impasse in their career. In 1896 W. B. Yeats famously advised J. M. Synge to go to the Aran Islands instead of exploring the cosmopolitan center of Western civilization. In Yeats's view, Synge's mingling with the local population would result in "express[ing] a life that has never found expression" (63). In reality, instead of being mute, the West existed beyond the hegemony of the written English word, and very soon that "unexpressed" life emerged in the Blasket biography,[2] written by representatives of "the old school, practically uneducated in the modern sense" but "highly trained in the tradition of an ancient folk culture" (Flower v). One of the late examples of that muteness fallacy, though rendered in a new medium of cinema, was Robert Flaherty's manipulated *Man of Aran* of 1934, the film where the ocean roars but people hardly speak.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Irish artists are still investigating the tension between the reality of life in the West and its illusion created in art. Achill and the Blasket Islands have inspired the three works discussed below: John McHugh's sculpture *The 1950s Boat* (2009),[3] Paul Durcan's poem "1950's Boat (after John McHugh)" (2009), and Harry Clifton's poem "The Year of the Yellow Meal" (2012). These artists revise the realist mode by various means. Clifton introduces elements corresponding to magical realism in prose; McHugh searches for an experimental form able to accommodate the intricate socio-historical map of the territory; while Durcan extends the same map with meanings related to its contemporary context. In this way, they either give voice to "the mute West" in a different medium (McHugh), mediate its voice by means of their own (Clifton coding the Blasket biography into his poem), or fight the myth of inarticulacy altogether (Durcan). They also enable communication with the margin—the West being the margin of the margin in postcolonial terms—and confront

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cosmopolitanism with parochialism, marking the trail of migration and globalization with nostalgia rather than futurity.

Painters and writers visiting Achill have long tried to convey the play of illusion offered by its landscape and human memory. In the first half of the twentieth century, Irish artist Paul Henry (1876-1958) was trying to depict its swift changing sky dominated by scudding clouds. Some of his paintings feature the islands which will soon be deserted (Inishkea in *Achill Head*) or evacuated later (*Blasket Islands*).[4] Louis MacNeice in "The Strand" walks the "mirror of wet sand" observing "white Tintoretto clouds beneath [his] naked feet," and experiences a vision of his now deceased father which is being blotted out by the sea foam (226). Derek Mahon on the same island watches "the glow of the sun through mist," ("Achill" 29) which slowly discloses the peak of Croagh Patrick. Thinking about his family staying in Greece at that time, he compares the Irish view to the one he remembers from their Greek holidays; the poem, however, uses *licentia poetica*: one of these views does not exist, the other looks differently.[5] It is obvious then that these artists deal with *absence* in relation to landscape and memory, and so do McHugh, Durcan, and Clifton, who additionally delve into the reasons and consequences of this absence in the works analyzed below.

Based on Achill, McHugh responds to the natural environment with sculptures which are frequently "filled" with empty space interacting with the borders, or rather bones, of the sculpture.[6] That space is never really empty though: it is completed by the surroundings and by viewers' imagination. For instance, a set of environmental artworks made of thin pieces of wood makes the observer think of literally inhabiting the environment, analogously to inhabiting a house. The artist also engages the local community in artistic endeavors. In the 1990s he invited a group of artists to work on various sites around the island and collect local songs and stories. Then he supplied the audience with maps "to set off exploring the island in search of [these] works" such as, for instance, a sound installation "at a ruined house on Atlantic Drive"; "a tiny patch of land" on a disused farm; and woven organic material covering up "the cracks and fissures . . . in the Achill island" (Clancy). The project was thus probing the Achill landscape with its natural and cultural memory by means of experimental forms, and McHugh's sculpture follows the same paradigm.

His sculpture *1950s Boat* (see Fig. 1) consists of various components, which come from Dooagh village, as the artist notes in his commentary (McHugh, "Boat Fragment").[7] Although the village prides on its *currach*s, the sculpture consists of a fragment of a larger boat, which the artist retrieved from his family buildings, a piece possibly collected while shore ranging (that

is, looking for items washed ashore by the sea). This boat fragment is attached to a piece of bog deal: once part of an ancient forest, in modern times it is often used by villagers as construction material. It stands on a piece of metal fragment of a petrol pump coming from the island's bus garage. The table, made in Dooagh, belonged to a knitting factory established on Achill in 1914 (closed down in the 1970s) to prevent young women from migrating to work on Scottish farms. As the artist concludes, "[t]his sculpture was made as a memorial to people of Dooagh village and those who emigrated from there" (McHugh, "Boat Fragment"). McHugh's sculpture not only excavates memory and commemorates the island life, but also evinces that natural history continues in human history, and offers an insight into economy and ecology.

The sculpture is experimental in its form, though it may exhibit, to some extent, a recycling tendency in art, ever-growing since the late twentieth century when the life of the planet became alarmingly precarious. McHugh's experiment may indeed invite an ecological reflection on polluted seas, on the amount of rubbish washed ashore, but also, on man-made pollution. As the artist comments, the pump was "discarded on the beach in the midst of concrete rubble from a demolished part of the bus garage" (McHugh, "Boat Fragment"). In a larger picture though, an Irish artist, especially one from the West, would associate sea pollution with shore ranging: shipwrecks meant good fortune for the destitute and starved islanders. McHugh mentions building material (the boat piece was previously stored in the rafters), while Clifton in his "The Year of the Yellow Meal" includes the image of "a bullock washed ashore / That fed us for months" quoted from the 1929 Blasket biography of Tomás O'Crohan (Tomás Ó Criomhthain), *The Islandman* (56). Economic issues are closely linked to these contexts. Clifton's text, devoted to migration from the Blaskets, wryly comments on British colonialism and "political economy" responsible for the Famine, whereas *1950s Boat* alludes to Achill migration patterns. Just as McHugh calls his sculpture a memorial and Clifton calls his poem a "form of time-remembrance" of those offshore communities,[8] O'Crohan in the 1920s had "written minutely of much that we did, for it was my wish that somewhere there should be a memorial of it all" (244).

In *1950s Boat*, the history of absence, exile and sea-bound life finds both its mirror image and its counterbalance in the evolving persistence of the Irish natural environment: the memory of the land. The artist created a work which spans thousands of years via one element channeling this memory: bog deal, a piece of Ireland's prehistoric forests. In today's prevailingly empty landscape of the country, forests endure in the layers of turf. Yet the history

of Irish forests is related, on the one hand, to the long tradition of boat-building, sea-faring, and fishing, further explored in Durcan's poem; and on the other, to Ireland's colonial history, when Elizabeth I ordered the Irish forests felled so that the "natives" be chased out of their hiding. By combining seemingly incongruent elements which date back to various eras and which were created in divergent circumstances with a number of traditions, McHugh's experimental sculpture encapsulates the history of the Irish West in a temporal and spatial framework that makes it converse with contemporaneity. One of the keys to this topicality, advocated by Paul Durcan in his response ("1950's Boat"), is the year the sculpture was created: 2009, right after the dramatic collapse of the Celtic Tiger. McHugh himself may have created his work without the crisis in mind, but the material and immaterial past which he commemorates by means of *remnants* and *pieces* brings to the viewer's mind the falling apart of the bubble created by the economic boom. Especially those parts of his sculpture that belong to the once thriving economic activities of the Achill inhabitants (fishing; knitting factory; bus garage) speak loud in the context of the post-2008 crisis with its loss of jobs and closing down of companies in the capital.

At the first sight, Durcan's poem does not strike the reader as experimental, but the impression seems misleading. At the beginning of the 2000s, David Wheatley observed that an "apparently uniform trend in Irish poetry is its frequently remarked-on resistance to experiment" (253). While this claim is highly disputable in reference to some remarkable younger poets who emerged right afterwards (Caitríona O'Reilly with her linguistic experiments, or Leontia Flynn exploring IT and the cyberspace), older poets such as Durcan have also been notably experimenting. Durcan is famous for being "in thrall to orality" (Gillis 350) and for using everyday material from mass media and the streets, also manifest in "1950s Boat (after John McHugh)". This particular poem approaches a traditional genre in a creative way. It inscribes itself in the range of *ekphrasis*, previously applied with success by both Durcan himself (for instance, in *Crazy About Women* of 1991 and *Give Me Your Hand* of 1994), and other Irish poets (such as Derek Mahon, Eavan Boland, Vona Groarke, for instance). Yet, by engaging in this interdisciplinary dialogue, Durcan's text persuasively *reworks* a piece of visual art: the poem's semantic layer offers a completely new shape to McHugh's sculpture, making an experiment out of an already experimental work of art.

In many respects, Durcan's experimental interpretations of McHugh's sculpture are related to the mode of existence of visual arts rather than to the literary frame of reference, although the latter is also relevant. Visual arts work with immediacy and are in the current moment: the space and time when the

piece is positioned and viewed. Henry Moore's sculptures, for instance, reveal completely different attributes when placed in nature, in the museum, or in the artist's studio; not to mention extremist theories of contextualization, which assert, ever since Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), that anything can become art when placed in the museum. The opening lines of Durcan's poem immediately locate McHugh's sculpture and by doing so, automatically set the interpretative scheme: the speaker strolls through the *Royal* Hibernian Academy (emphasis added) "in the heart of Dublin at the seat of power." Clearly, the power is not just the one wielded by the government of the present Republic of Ireland. The postcolonial legacy of the RHA looms large around this sculpture, whom the poet views as an outcast, a representative of the margin: a "boat person, emigrant, refugee," a person "at an angle to the universe." The last phrase was used by E. M. Forster in reference to C. P. Cavafy (Forster 91), the Greek poet hailing from the outskirts of the then British Empire—Alexandria, which was simultaneously a center of a thriving Greek diaspora. In the 1970s, Cavafy's marginal identity drew Derek Mahon's attention; Mahon made it a paradigm to handle—through translation—the postcolonial heritage of Northern Ireland at the height of the Troubles.[9] Durcan, as Alan Gillis observed, is "often pitched as . . . an outsider who gives voice to the marginalised and the oppressed" (356), and the same was claimed by critics about Mahon, though his homelessness is arguable.[10] Here, Durcan's anthropomorphization of McHugh's sculpture as a "boat person, emigrant, refugee" alludes not only to the history of the Irish West migration, or to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century refugee issues, but first and foremost, to the Irish cast outside "the seat of power" and now reconquering the space. Yet, colonialism is just one of the spheres where Durcan's version of *1950s Boat* squares the account with the past and the present.

Another territory where Durcan ventures with his poem is marred by stereotypes of femininity. In order to challenge them, the poet transforms McHugh's sculpture into a female figure, symbolic of various narratives and given a voice at the end of the poem. For Durcan, the Irish West is a woman, and she is finally not mute. The opening scene reveals the antifeminist icons of a fashion model and a muse. The image of the naked woman arching her breasts for a photographer and "sculpted by Rodin in the death-throes of his romance with sculpture" defines the female exclusively in terms of her objectified body and in relation to the male gaze and control. The poem simultaneously reinforces and undermines this fashion model role by depicting the girl's footwear: a "rust-brown *a la mode* high heel shoe." The type of shoes indicates a fashion victim (ruined spines and ruined feet), while the subsequent digression points to the role of a Cinderella. "(O where was its

pair?)," the speaker asks, again reducing the protagonist to an inferior passive creature whose only raison d'être is to fulfil man's desires. Yet at the end of this sentence, the shoes evolve into "her petrol-pump platforms from New York City"; ciphered under this pun on "platforms" is the long history of exile from the Irish West to America.[11]

The Irish West re-emerges in the image of the woman waiting for the news about her drowned husband, son or father. She becomes "the tragedy of . . . womanhood" listened to by the speaker, "her weeper," who calls himself "a bundle of her / Grandmother's knitting / Laid aside in an ebb-tide," as if he was one of Synge's *Riders to the Sea* (1904), whose remains were identified by the patterns knitted into his sweater. This trope in the poem has been linked, somewhat paradoxically, with the knitting factory from McHugh's commentary: the "green work-table." Durcan's allusion, elsewhere in the poem, to Nikos Kazantzakis's *Zorba the Greek*,[12] brings in an additional context to this tragic role of the woman; after all, its female protagonist was stoned to death when she tried to strike a new relationship after becoming a widow. Here, in Durcan's poem, she stays alone, "embracing . . . a piece of the wreckage" and "keeping her balance on that one . . . leg"; heroic despite the adversities. The leg, "sheer as bog deal from prehistoric forests," indicates her link with the Irish landscape and its female representation persisting, to feminists' horror, in Irish literature (examples of such feminized landscape narratives and feminized bog mythology can be found in Seamus Heaney's poetry). If Durcan's poem deals with absence in relation to landscape and memory, as it has been claimed at the beginning of this article, the absent one is the real woman, enchanted into nature already by old Irish literature and represented across Europe as the antithesis of masculine culture. It is exactly this banning of women from culture and from history that Durcan's poem seems to counter.

Women reclaiming history in Durcan's poem take over traditionally masculine roles and achievements: fishing, sailing and exploring. The lines "She . . . once fished off the coasts of Newfoundland / Now so high she is banking over Labrador" are followed by the reference to the Bantry Boat. Undoubtedly, the girl epitomizes Irish connections with Canada: St Brendan's crossing the Atlantic and Irish fishermen doing the same centuries later. This woman of grief becomes the woman of power: her voyage, designed as a detour from Britain to America (an alternative to British colonialism) ends triumphantly in the postcolonial "halls of power." Finally, she abolishes the last bastion of masculine conquest by stating that she "was the First Woman on the Moon."

Endowed with the power of judgment and the spirit of social conscience, she is pointing a finger at "the New Ireland" (alternatively "the Bank of Ireland"),[13] which stands for the sudden death of the Celtic Tiger at the time the poem was written. She assumes the line of Durcan's public profile, too, as the poet regularly delivers a critique of political and social issues. In another poem about Achill, he openly portrays "Ireland . . . chock-a-block with greedy, sneaky, cut-throat, vainglorious men" who brought the country to bankruptcy ("Achill Island Postman," 94). In "1950s Boat" the woman's accusative gesture plays out the tension between globalization and Irish consumerism on the one hand, and parochialism and massive emigration of the marginalized Irish West on the other. In other words, her moment of triumph coincides with the moment of the country's past and present trauma.

Durcan's text apparently gives voice to women and the Irish West, but this empowerment is rather dubious. Their voice is first a silent gesture (pointing the finger); then comes a series of strong statements shouting from the page in capital letters. Strangely enough, however, the phrases in capital letters have been stripped of punctuation (contrary to the rest of the poem) and read like headlines: "YOU DID THIS TO ME / I AM NOT A MODEL / LOOK AT ME." Lastly, the most powerful identity statement, which should be a source of utmost pride, is revealed in a whisper: "I was the First Woman on the Moon; / I was the First Woman on Achill Island." The only person who hears these words is the speaker, "her weeper." If this sculpture is the symbol of the Irish West (which defies its mythological role of a model) and the symbol of women (who claim their presence on the past and present map), they both seem to stray on the losing side.

The abundance of interpretations in Durcan's poem is a characteristic feature of his poetry as a whole; as Lucy Collins observes, "the fusion of the topical and the fantastical has prompted critics to term his work surreal," but Durcan's poems were more adequately diagnosed by Mahon as cubist (216). Mahon argued that Durcan is "transfixed by the simultaneity of disparate experience, all sides of the question" ("Orpheus" 116), and the same could be said, in our context, about McHugh and his sculpture combining incongruous elements. "This simultaneity of representation" in Durcan's poems, Collins argues, "accounts for the prevalence of visual keys to the work . . . This openness to all possibilities . . . constitutes a dissenting position in its unwillingness to accept the unifocal stance demanded by society" (216). McHugh's sculpture—though the artist offered an interpretative framework in his commentary—is also open to all possibilities: by definition, as a visual work, and by the complexity of its form. It has become an incentive to Durcan to apply a traditional genre in a subversive way: as a means of protesting

against the political situation, social constraints, and oblivion shrouding the past. His female protagonist defies the dominating patriarchal and sexist stereotypes, but is still used as a symbol of the land. The correlation of the sculpture and the poem has thus resulted in an ambivalent palimpsest of arts, genres, and meanings.

Harry Clifton's poem "The Year of the Yellow Meal" could be equally glossed as a palimpsest, one that reaches across the genres for the achievements of prose. It encodes the microcosm of the Blasket biography (one of the most "native" of Irish genres) into a poem by means of the macrocosm kindred to magical realism. Its shadowy presence helps the poet to enquire into the political, economic, metaphysical, and literary legacy of the Irish West as the mode appears particularly suited to transcribe the Western spirit. In magical realism, just as in Clifton's poem and in parts of Tomás O'Crohan's *The Islandman*, the spirit presiding over the narrative is an oneiric, timeless suspension of reality.

The application of this literary term to poetry here is tentative and open to questions. If "[m]agical realism . . . facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction," as Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris claim (5-6), including the fantastic, the same can be said about poetry in general. If magical realism "is a mode suited to exploring – and transgressing – boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic" (5), much of this applies to countless works of art, literature, and culture, including the three discussed in this article. However, a few particularities of magical realism make it appealing in the context of Clifton's poem. First, the marginal location of its major center, Latin America, enables the critique of the colonial metropolis; such decentralizing tendencies in shifting the cultural focus have been seen in many countries and works of literature, not least in Derek Walcotts's Nobel-winning *Omeros*, situating Homer in the Caribbean and addressing British colonization. For Clifton, juxtaposing the Latin American location at the root of magical realism with the peripheral Irish West in "The Year of the Yellow Meal" may not be coincidental: born of a Chilean mother and an Irish father, the poet spent the most part of his life travelling the world. "To write ex-centrically, then, or from the margin, implies dis-placing the discourse" and "speak[ing] on behalf of the . . . un-privileged," D'haen claimed in Zamora and Faris's book (195); Clifton making the Blasketeers speak openly about the reality of the British government's policy during the Famine, for instance, displaces the discourse of the political economy reigning over the British Empire at that time.

Second, this position of an outsider makes Clifton exceptionally tuned to defamiliarizing perspectives characteristic of the Blasket perception on the one hand, and to the tropes of the *Odyssey* echoing in his poem on the other. As we know, drawing on fables and myths, and defamiliarizing processes are typical of magical realism (Zamora and Faris 151). Third, the temporal frame of this mode corresponds to the fluidity of time in the Blasket world, though in the Irish context this specific sense of time—or perhaps the lack of it—is often related to space: landscape, light, sound, and so forth. One of the most recognized representatives of magical realism, Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980), advocated the existence of its specifically American variety, which "does not imply a conscious assault on conventionally depicted reality but, rather, an amplification of perceived reality . . . inherent in Latin American nature and culture" (75). Such amplification can also be noticed in the mentality of Blasketers represented in "The Year of the Yellow Meal."

The Blasket biography, whose specimen Clifton encoded in his poem, was itself a kind of linguistic experiment, stimulated by a group of foreign researchers in Celtic languages,[14] who proved more insightful than Yeats in recognizing the creative potential of the Irish West. Their policy of encouraging the islanders to write books and memoirs in Irish followed the discovery that the locals "*spoke* great literature and all they had to do was transfer that on to paper" (Micheál De Mórdha, Director of the Blasket Centre, qtd. in Freyne; emphasis in the original). The Revivalist limiting myth formulated by Yeats was rooted in the world of imagination, and already Synge's first-hand experience of the Aran Islands revised that myth into a more honest (but still mythical) literary construct: experiments with Irish English and attempts to convey Western mentality. The experience and scientific reasoning of Blasket linguists, on the other hand, acted as a midwife to local literature describing the reality, which to any outsider felt like another myth: a world outside time and power structures. "We had no court, no doctor, no nurse and no priest, but we didn't need them, because we had the best community you could imagine," recalls the oldest surviving man of the Blaskets in a 2016 interview (Micheál Ó Cearna qtd. in Bramhill).

The islands were evacuated in 1953 since they continuously suffered from extreme weather conditions which regularly cut them off from the mainland. Older islanders did not survive the evacuation: "A lot of them just curled up and died after leaving," says Gearóid Cheaist Ó Catháin, author of the famous Blasket memoir *The Loneliest Boy in the World: The Last Child of the Great Blasket*. "We weren't great mixers on the mainland," he continues and adds, "An islander is a different animal from a mainlander. . . There's complete silence on the Blasket Islands, and that total silence and peace and tranquillity

that's associated with these remote areas has a fascination for people" (qtd. in Freyne).

Much of this incredible reality has been translated by Clifton into "The Year of the Yellow Meal," and before further analyzing it in the context of magical realism as a macrocosm, it is worthwhile to look at the author's way of encoding the microcosm of Blasket biography into his poem. Obviously, the relationship between the poem and the book can be just a matter of inspiration, where a group of images from *The Islandman* stimulated a poetic reflection about the Irish Westerners' perception of the world. Yet I would rather like to see it as a long palimpsestic path which the poet joined to distil the essence of O'Crohan's book, with intermediary texts on the way. As Flower notes in his "Foreword," the biography started as a series of letters in Irish, which was later transformed and published by another author as a series of tales "in the language of West Kerry," and eventually completed by O'Crohan as a book. The author, who inherited his idiom from poets and taletellers teaching him in his youth, aimed in his book "at a simple style, . . . using none of . . . the 'cramp Irish' of the pure literary tradition" (Flower ix). O'Crohan has thus distilled the semantic essence of his story, sacrificing its form for the sake of communication. What Flower did in his turn was to simplify the Irish version even more, adopting "a plain, straightforward style, aiming at the language of ordinary men who narrate the common experience of their life frankly and without any cultivated mannerism" as he considered other methods of translation, such as literary dialects, artificial (x). As we know, he has also considerably abridged O'Crohan's book. The new unabridged translation from Gaelic by Garry Bannister and David Sowby, published in 2012 under the title *The Islander*, did not meet with critical appraisal; one of the critics even called it "a Blasket bore," "useful to Gaelic students as a reference, and of appeal only to the most masochistic of general readers" (Ridgway). Harry Clifton, appreciating the Flower version, distilled the excerpts of O'Crohan's translated prose into the language of poetry in English, restoring to it, perhaps, something of its initial poetic expression, and in this way closing the circle, which O'Crohan's story travelled in Irish literature.

In its author's view, "The Year of the Yellow Meal" constitutes "a common form of time-remembrance, time-definition in the ahistorical world of these offshore communities," whose time was measured by "shipwrecks . . ., drownings, marriages, etc."[15] The relativity of time recalls the narratives of magical realism, where this temporal framework is interspersed with realistic events. Clifton's poem offers a similar pattern. Part of its action recalls the Famine, the "yellow meal" being an animal feed of Indian corn flour issued

by the British to the starving Westerners. It was almost completely indigestible by the human body and thus devoid of nutritional value; the Irish mills could not grind it sufficiently (Fraher).

The scene we observe in Part Three of Clifton's poem is, perhaps, a very realistic moment of the Blasket islanders leaving their land in order to survive, and arriving on a leaking ship in the Dingle Peninsula completely disoriented: "Call it Metropolis. One steep street, / Enough to be lost in / Forever." No "great mixers on the mainland" indeed. The westward direction of their migration is heralded by the lighthouse on the islet of Teeraght at the end of Part Two, "last light before America." The Blaskets famously came to be called "Next Parish America" though the neighboring country in the west is Newfoundland and Labrador: the land discovered by St Brendan and mentioned in Durcan's poem. Other realistic scenes of the poem include the police gathering rent arrears on the Blaskets, as well as the shadow of "His Majesty" and "World War." At this point the reader begins to suspect that the temporal borders in this poem are fluid: does it refer to the Famine migration? Is it O'Crohan's narrative, set after the First World War and mentioning the migration it entailed, the narrative further enriched with tales of the past? Or is the opening scene of the 1953 evacuation of the Blaskets, perhaps?

The psychological reality of the islanders is more real than the outward reality and, just as in magical realism, time is stretched or non-existent or subjective. The poem opens with an Odyssean scene of a voyage without a destination, [16] and closes with the evocation of "Irish Greeks." Although all cardinal points are enumerated in the poem, it is the west which defines the existence of the Blasket people: "Drifting out of the west, / Eternal unrest – / Ebb and flow, our whole existence . . ." ("The Year of the Yellow Meal"). Their state of constant drifting without an aim or landfall corresponds to eternity on the one hand, and circularity and repetition on the other (the "ebb and flow"). In realistic terms, the tide measures islanders' time in terms of kelp gathering and shore ranging, while scarce visits (the priest and police) are also defined by means of traditional time ("twice yearly"). Yet the spatial/geographical reference of the West transforms itself into a temporal metaphor, as in the idiom "go west." Leaving the island means that their world will slowly disappear. O'Crohan realized it twenty years before the evacuation, writing his book "so that some record of us might live after us, for the like of us will never be again" (244).

In Clifton's poem, the land that the exiles can see from their boat, identified as "Ireland," appears "unreal" since they had always been surrounded by the landscape "open to nothing": "A stony world, of treelessness and sea-light / Open to nothing—call it heroic. /If we were

Greek, you might think of us as stoics" ("The Year of the Yellow Meal"). The nothingness of the horizon concurs with the lack of expectations for the future and with living in the present moment only, which forms the gist of the Blasket perception of time. Heroic is the code of the epic—the *Odyssey*—but empty space teaches a stoical and to an extent, indifferent attitude to life. This description of the West has a biographical undercurrent: Harry Clifton used to spend his holidays in the West of Ireland, travelling from the "lyrical," "humanized" landscape of the East to the "epic" and "mysterious" landscape of the West, "where human beings were small against the landscape" ("Interview"). Coming from a cosmopolitan background, the poet recalls this world as follows: "It catered to my own nostalgia, as a child, maybe for a time before I had been born, when part of my family had been in the big world . . . before arriving at the small world of Ireland." Yet he also talks about "heroic landscape" and "elemental reality" governed by the weather, with no history and with great movements as in mythological, prehistoric times when he talks about Africa, where he spent two years after graduating ("Interview"). This description seems similar to the Irish West in "The Year of the Yellow Meal," though the Blasket migration is tiny in scale when compared to the African movements of peoples. This African perspective somehow mirrors the distance of the author to the mysterious subject in his poem.

When reaching the mainland (Ventry, Dunquin),[17] the islanders literally "fall into time," to borrow the title of Emil Cioran's *La Chute dans le temps*. They suddenly realize that "there was such a thing as time. / It hung from a chain / On a merchant's waistcoats." Their notion of time and of "unreal" Ireland resides in their self-reliance and lack of identification with any controlling social structure: they believe themselves to be "people . . . without a nation." Instead of time, power, territory, or God, they put trust in "gut metaphysics," chance, and the gods of survival: nature and food. They do not conceive of time in arbitrary logic imposed by the European civilization; neither do they conceive of the sea in abstract terms ("the word *sea* meant nothing" to them). Instead of the geographical entity, the sea exists only as a "blind force," being as much a nurturing force as a destructive one. After all, in the harsh weather patterns prevailing in the West, despite their dexterity in boat handling, the majority of Irish fishermen did not even learn to swim not to prolong the suffering while drowning. In the poem, the "blind force" goes hand in hand with "necessity": the sea offers the only way out of their island and of their predicament.

Works of magical realism in its best known territory, Latin America, have been written about and for the margin, subversively flying in the face of the colonial power discourse—and so does Clifton's poem about the Irish and

European margin. As Zamora and Faris demonstrate in the last part of their *Magical Realism*, this literary mode registers the rise and fall of societies rather than individual experience, and the focus of "The Year of the Yellow Meal" is a decline of a unique community and its culture. A stinging comment on the policy of the British government during the Famine—that the bullock washed ashore fed the islanders "without His Majesty's help"—sums up the irrelevance of traditional Christian belief in those tragic circumstances, as the bullock becomes an object of worship to the starved islanders. The poem takes an ambiguous stance on institutionalized religion, and also offers "a kind of Irish/Greek study of stoicism underlying Catholicism," as the author put it.[18] When "starvation, / Our theology" makes the Blasketers emigrate, it is also starvation that reveals "the knowledge of god" (*theology* in Greek) to them on the mainland in the quasi-religious status of the British "manpower raised / To godhead." Their drifting "out of Kingdom Come" mocks the name of the United Kingdom in Biblical terms, analogously to the "Metropolis" with a capital M but only one street, which parodied the idea of colonialism. Rather than staying in the British paradise, the islanders prefer to escape on a leaking vessel and head, perhaps, to America.

For the author, this escape may reverberate with his own biography in the Irish context: in his youth, he left Ireland to travel the world. The Ireland he left was an "introverted country, very deliberately consolidating its independence by delving into itself and emphasising its separateness from the world in general," which he felt was a negative influence to a person of cosmopolitan background; as a child he felt not completely part of that society ("Interview"). He worked in Africa and Asia, lived in Italy, and eventually settled in Paris for over a decade, moving back to Ireland only in 2004. This regard of an outsider is manifest in many poems, including "The Year of the Yellow Meal" and the preceding poem of the same collection, "Skellig Michael,"[19] where the speaker assumes vantage points similar to those of the Blasket islanders.

He looks back from the sea and from the island onto Ireland, calling it "life, temptation" as he relives the religious dilemmas of his own youth and of the Skellig Michael monks. Ireland viewed across the sea is "solid" and "too much milk and honey," a suspicious idyll; it is also "the vine transplanted out from Egypt," the chosen land of Catholicism. In Clifton's poem, where the rough sea turns the world "medieval" and merges temporal frames (again in a way kindred to magical realism), Ireland becomes a myth "occluded in our weather, // Or call it a spirit-mist. / Where the selkies bark, the oceans break." While Ireland is not "unreal" as in "The Year of the Yellow Meal," it is

mockingly "invisible therefore real / As the books insist" ("Skellig Michael"): a figment of the scribes' imagination, a floating island of medieval geography.

In both poems distance plays a crucial role: inhabitants of smaller islands treat the isle of Ireland as the mainland. Some of these islands *belong* to Ireland only nominatively, in arbitrary cartographic and political terms, which had little to do with the autonomous spirit as well as the psychological and natural geography of these areas in the past (although the advent of tourism may have changed this perception). In their article "Islands, Literature, and Cultural Translatability," Susan Bassnett and Stephanos Stephanides suggest that "[p]erhaps those who inhabit islands have a particular kind of spatial awareness, aware . . . that sooner or later the land stops and the sea begins. Non-island cultures inhabit different spaces, where the opening or closing of frontiers acquires a meaningfulness that can never be experienced by islanders" (7). It seems that Clifton and Durcan in their poems, as well as McHugh in his sculpture, translate this spatial awareness by submitting the myth and tradition of the Irish West to the test of formal or semantic experiment, either liberating that tradition or showing its constraints. At the same time, they relate to the political, economic, cultural, and ecological conditions of their times, posing the question whether the Irish West is steeped in nostalgia and buried in memory, or rather provides a fertile ground to confront the issues critical for the whole country (migration, economic collapse, social exclusion, position of women, sea pollution, "internalized theocracy"[20]). They approach the West with empathy or, on the contrary, with the feeling of estrangement, making its tropes migrate through time and space, between reality and illusion.

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Notes

[1] The Irish Revival was a cultural phenomenon that appeared in Ireland under the British rule in the nineteenth century. Its aim was to reinforce Irish identity by reviving native Irish culture, literature, and the Irish Gaelic language. The artists involved turned to the Celtic past and mythology, travelled to the Irish West, translated Irish literature, some of them were involved in the republican movement. The group included Lady Gregory, W. B. Yeats, J. M. Synge, and other writers, also responsible for founding the Abbey Theatre as one of the vehicles of the Revival.

[2] For the explanation of the phenomenon of Blasket biography see the last part of this article referring to Harry Clifton's poem.

[3] Exhibited at the Royal Hibernian Academy in 2009. Reproduced below with the kind permission of the artist.

[4] The paintings can be consulted on "Paul Henry" in the "Achill 27/7" website. The series of works devoted to the Blaskets comes from the 1930s.

[5] I searched for these views when making photo projects for Mahon's poems in 2015. See my project website <www.irellas.com>, under "photo projects," then under Mahon "Achill," and then under texts in the series "In search of Croagh Patrick viewed from Achill."

[6] The artist's website: <http://www.johnmchugh.ie>. Also his drawings focus on the surrounding landscape.

[7] McHugh's unpublished prose description (May 2009) of his *1950s Boat*. Together with the photograph attached to my article, I received it with the courtesy of the artist in 2015. My description of the sculpture in this paragraph follows his commentary in this source text.

[8] Clifton, E-mail to author, 20 July 2015.

[9] See chapter three of my book *Irish Poets and Modern Greece*.

[10] I oppose this perception in *Irish Poets and Modern Greece* (see chapters one and three).

[11] This path of exile is also coded in the speaker's crypto-allusion to *The Odyssey* ("the Greek islands").

[12] Durcan possibly refers to the islander fatalist's spirit conquering all the "beautiful catastrophes."

[13] The former version comes from the prototype poem I have received from John McHugh; the latter from Durcan's *Praise in Which I Live*....

[14] Three Englishmen (George Thomson, Robin Flower, Kenneth Jackson) and a Norwegian (Carl Marstrander). O'Crohan's biography was encouraged by Brian O'Kelly of Killarney (Flower x), his teacher of writing and reading in Irish.

[15] Clifton, E-mails to Joanna Kruczkowska, 20 July and 5 Aug 2015.

[16] For other uses of the *Odyssey* references by Irish poets see my interview with Theo Dorgan and the part devoted to Heaney's "Sonnets from Hellas" in my monograph *Irish Poets and Modern Greece*.

[17] After the 1953 evacuation, part of the Blasket people immigrated to the States and part stayed in Dingle facing their islands. Dunquin is the port of departure for the Blaskets.

[18] Clifton, E-mail to Joanna Kruczkowska, 20 July 2015.

[19] Skellig Michael is another island of the Irish West, which used to be famous for its early medieval beehive monastery, but now is more famous for starring in the final scene in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. The controversies around the shooting included ecological and cultural concerns: the island is a habitat of wild birds and the site of the unique monastery of St. Fionan.

[20] Paula Meehan once commented that Ireland still "struggle[s] with an internalized theocracy" (Meehan 171).

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Fig. 1

1950's Boat 2009 Wood table, metal, bog wood, wood boat piece. 180 cm L x 210cm H x 120cm W.