

E S S A Y

BORN IN BROOKLYN'S BIFOCAL VIEW OF TIME AND SPACE: JOHN MONTAGUE AS A HYBRIDIZED IRISH AMERICAN

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Charles Fanning's 1990 book *The Irish Voice in America: Irish-American Fiction from the 1760s to the 1980s* focuses only on Irish-American fiction because of the "complexity" of drama and the "simplicity" of poetry (40). Having few kind words for Irish-American poetry, Fanning asserts that

The problem has been an endemic blight of programmatic melancholy or bravado that emerged from the experience and perception of forced exile. The stock-in-trade of Irish-American poetry has been the immigrant's lament for a lost, idealized homeland and the patriot's plea for Irish freedom from British oppression. Such materials make good songs but bad verse that exhibits simplistic strains of nostalgia or righteous indignation. (4)

Eamon Wall takes Fanning up on this statement, and sets Montague forth as a poet who presents in his long work *The Dead Kingdom* "a substantial and unsentimental exploration of the complex nature of the diaspora and the beginning of mature, poetic reflection on the role of the immigrant Irish in the 'global' world" ("Grafted" 374). Wall is ebullient with praise for Montague, perhaps because the poet is filling the void that Fanning has pointed out. To Wall, Montague's *Collected Poems*, "For sheer breadth of vision and writing skill...is perhaps the greatest volume of collected poems to emerge from an Irish poet since Yeats" ("Second" 118). While Edna Longley believes that Montague is "a more complex poet" than his contemporaries Richard Murphy, Thomas Kinsella, and James Simmons (138-39), her praise of the writer is not unbridled. She criticizes *The Rough Field* because its depiction of history and landscape "disappoint hopes his poetry had previously encouraged" (144). Sections of this long, epic-like poem, according to Longley, "Fall for the inevitable temptation of barren historical collage" (144). Additionally, *The Rough Field* "seems too conscious of its synthesizing position in relation to events and to the sequence as a whole" (145). However, Longley believes that the poem "for all its flaws—with all its flaws—is perhaps the most characteristic and significant achievement of a generation," as it reflects the strengths and the weaknesses inherent in the poetry of its time (145-52). While Longley might consider consciousness of synthesis a weakness in Montague's work, it is precisely the act of synthesis necessitated by his awareness of hyphenated American hybridity that defines Montague's writings about the experience of being an Irish American.

At the 1976 presentation of an award from the Irish American Cultural Institute, then president Dr. Eoin McKiernan hailed John Montague as "an international relay station, a satellite orbiting Ireland, and transmitting outward and inward poetic and humanistic forms, themes, and ideas for the mutual stimulation and enrichment of cultures" (qtd. in Redshaw "Appréciation" 122). Daniel Tobin, in "'Lines of Leaving/ Lines of Returning':

John Montague's *Double Vision*," asserts that Montague's writing "anticipates the poetry of the New Irish in America and elsewhere. He therefore reveals himself as a poet not only of his time but, in crucial ways, a poet before his time" (164). Raised in County Tyrone, Montague nonetheless spent time in America from birth to age four and again during his graduate studies. Still, the reflections of the American experience in his poetry and prose have received surprisingly little critical attention, with critics choosing instead to focus on Montague's dealing with the Irish political landscape, as reflected in his varied lyrical and narrative poems. However, his poems, short stories, and essays anthologized in 1991 *Born in Brooklyn*, most previously published and some appearing in their print debut, contain a wealth of information on being an Irish American and bear further critical attention. As becomes clear through a reading of this collection, ethnic Americans, and in Montague's work, Irish Americans in particular, are in a unique position, able to simultaneously live in two cultures, providing them with the opportunity to understand American situations from the inside and from the outside. This multiplicity of points of view allows for an open-minded approach to both personal and national issues. Using the trope of the Irish American (often himself) as an anthropologist, both literally and figuratively digging up facts about his own past and synthesizing them to make meaning in his current situation, Montague demonstrates in the poetry, short fiction, and essays in *Born in Brooklyn* that "the complex fate of being an Irish American" (55) involves a responsibility to consider situations from multiple perspectives in order to avoid repeating, on both the personal and national level, mistakes from the past.

To Montague, it is important for a writer to have a sense of family and home, or at least to search for these two entities. Antoinette Quinn goes so far as to assert that "Montague's appears to be a belated and acute case of Irish literary deracination. Born a hyphenated Irish-American he is a perpetually displaced person, in permanent imaginative quest for a home" (29). Gerald Dawe believes that a "sense of dislocation... pervades Montague's poetry" (15) and that he must constantly search for his place. However, it seems that Montague has moved beyond a search for a home to an acceptance of the fact that he has multiple homes. Having moved to another country away from his immediate family at such a young age, Montague's sense of home is not lessened, but his search for a consanguinity between his home countries is heightened. Montague believes that a poet should both strive toward a familiarity with the work of other international poets, but that he should also "belong to some place... come from some place" ("Global Regionalism" 155). Throughout and before his literary career, Montague has searched through the past, conducting an "investigation," since he believes that a failure "to come to terms" with Ulster's situation will cause "a certain lack in [him] as [a] writer" (166). Digging through the fields of his own mind, family artifacts, and the landscape of stories available to him, Montague set out on a lifelong trek to understand the components of himself that lie buried on either side of the Atlantic. Stipe Grgas believes that Montague's "ambiguous relationship with [the] Northern landscape" during his childhood "enabled him to negotiate an imaginative position between a suffocating localism and a liberating cosmopolitanism" (151); however, it seems that such an outlook of balance would be bred also by Montague's own transatlantic experiences. Montague locates the major influences on his life in America, Ireland, and France, leading to what Tobin refers to as "the exile's experience of displacement" (154). In *Born in Brooklyn's* "The Evolving Logos," a trib-



ute to Teilhard de Chardin, Montague betrays his search for connections among Ireland, America, and France, noting that although buried in New York, the French Jesuit is buried between two priests with Irish surnames (112). Clearly, this poet is searching for a way in which to connect the various geopolitical influences on his own life.

Montague expresses his acceptance of the Irishman's multiperspectivity, asserting that "the Irish writer is, at his best, a natural cosmopolitan" (*Book of Irish Verse* 38). He also believes that "An Irish poet [is] in a richly ambiguous position, with the pressure of an incompletely discovered past behind him, and the whole modern world around" (37). This is not the language of a threatened man, as some scholars seem to see him, but instead of an individual who sees opportunity for growth through his experiences in the world. Tobin concedes that Montague is a poet "whose birth fates him to be caught between the desire for a home lost before his birth and the recognition that the consciousness of being homeless may afford him a painful though privileged vantage point by which at once to survey the world and live within it" (154). However, Tobin considers "Montague's American inheritance...a profound psychic and social disruption" (151), rather than as, as Montague himself seems to indicate, an opportunity for further understanding his background, and therefore himself, and as a result, the world around him.

For Montague, the literary voice has both autobiographical and communal elements. Much of his writing is intensely personal, focusing on his own experiences and thoughts. Wall considers Montague to be "a confessional poet: he reveals more of his life in his work than any other poet of his generation" ("Second" 117). Montague himself believes that "a poet should speak for his people, out of his people's pain" ("Global Regionalism" 163). For Montague himself, this particular voice has yet to be fully uncovered, as "Ireland is not yet a nation. It is a broken, incomplete nation" (163). Robert F. Garratt considers even *The Rough Field*, a national poem, to be strongly colored by personal interpretations of history, "the distinct and autobiographical element which shapes the historical consciousness" rendering "the urge to discover the self [to] make possible the understanding of community" (94-95). The poet creates meaning by telling the story of history and by finding his own place within the story (102). Garratt points out that Montague is "aware of how personal a vision history can be" (101); Montague's writings are his way of sorting out the elements of his personal vision, selecting the aspects that are relevant and discarding useless preconceptions. As Thomas Dillon Redshaw notes, Montague's poetry has a reputation for being "essentially autobiographical," an impression which "can diminish the genuine stature of some of Montague's repeated themes—emigration and binationality, fosterage and abandonment" ("Abstracting Icons" 113). Through his exploration of personal experience, Montague gains the capacity to delve into universal issues. Montague's work thrives on a constant shifting between microcosm and macrocosm; in a Whitman-esque way, Montague reads himself as the world and the world as himself. Constantly striving to discover new evidence for who he is, Montague explains: "my effort to understand as much of the modern world as possible serves only to illuminate the destruction of that small area from which I initially came, and that theme in turn is only part of the larger one of continually threatened love" (qtd. in Redshaw "*Topos and Texne*" 31).

Montague is willing to accept all parts of his experience, even the unsavory ones, that have helped to shape who he is. In "A Muddy Cup," included in *Born in Brooklyn*, Montague recounts the negative experiences that his parents had in Brooklyn, focusing

particularly on his mother's distaste for the whole adventure. Because even these experiences are part of the life story of Montague, as they led to his conception and surrounded his birth, Montague proclaims that he is

a third son who
beats out this song
to celebrate the odours
that bubbled up
so rank & strong

from that muddy cup. (ll. 41-46)

Were he simply to discount the arguments, poverty, and urban setting that surrounded his young childhood existence, he would be missing, in the puzzle that is his adult self, significant elements that shaped him, and that, by extrapolation, shaped the American immigrant experience in the twentieth century. In *Born in Brooklyn*, Montague immediately follows this poem, which originally appeared in *The Dead Kingdom*, with "Mother Cat," which debuted in *A Slow Dance*. Placing these two poems in the collection in this order allows Montague to capitalize on the image of mother as cat that ends the first poem and controls the second. Through this image connection between the two poems, Montague invites the reader to see "Mother Cat" not only as a confessional poem about the persona's feelings of having been neglected by his mother but also as a statement about the excessive competition to survive that all immigrants to America face upon arrival and about the need to be able to adapt. By arranging these two poems in this particular order, layers of meaning are added to each.

In *Born in Brooklyn*, Montague provides evidence that Fanning's assessment that Irish American poetry is characterized only by sentimentality and brashness falls short of the truth. Montague's portrayal of Irish American life, in poem, short story, and essay shows the many dimensions of such an existence. A longtime wish of Montague's was to "put all [his] American poems together, to suggest the complex fate of being an Irish-American" ("American-Irish" 35). He wants his writing to be seen neither merely as Irish nor merely as American: "Modern poetry used to be a common adventure, above national prejudice" (35). Or, as Montague wrote in 1972 "Having been born in America, and having spent many years there and in France, I see no reason to belong to any school, except that of good writing" ("Order in Donnybrook Fair" 313). Montague recounts how, by age four, he was "unwittingly the inheritor of three nationalities [American, Irish, and British],.... And yet [he has] kept a double vision, a part of [him] still profoundly moved by [his] American *patria*, [his] American heritage" ("American-Irish" 34). Because he has held on to all sorts of memories and has, in some cases, uncovered facts about himself, he has a realistic view of himself and therefore of his world. When asked, "Are you American, Irish, Irish-American? None of the above?" Montague responded "All of those" (Ingersoll and Howard 23). One is left to wonder whether Montague actually intended to say that he is also "None of the above." However, the way in which Montague labels himself or the various ways in which others might label him are not as important as the ways in which Montague pieces together the reality of who he is. He considers it important that "one



slowly accepts all the parts of oneself so that they combine into a glorious whole” (24). Rather than fragmenting his work, his multiple allegiances and international background “provided him with a perspective and a voice with which he participates in” understanding the fluid boundaries of the modern world (Grgas 152).

Montague includes part of “The Figure in the Cave,” a chapter of autobiography, as the first selection in *Born in Brooklyn*. With this work focusing on the relationship between his Irish and American backgrounds, Montague early sets out for the reader the idea of piecing together fragments in order to understand the whole person. Montague acknowledges that “losing a family and a country in one sweep must not have been easy, although for long I suppressed my earlier memories” (11). However, sweeping away this earliest part of his experience is not conducive to self-knowledge, and Montague notes that “though to understand, however, dimly, is to begin to forgive, a writer should not forget, and my American past keeps surfacing” (13). Knowledge is required for conflict resolution, and once attained, knowledge must be retained. Accepting of his fate of being multi-national, Montague thinks that such an existence “should seem natural enough in the late-twentieth century as man strives to reconcile local allegiances with the absolute necessity of developing a world consciousness to save us from the abyss. Earthed in Ireland, at ease in the world, weave the strands you’re given” (14). This is not the voice of a rootless, exiled man, as some critics perceive Montague to be, but rather these are the words of an individual who has come to terms with his own history and is ready to share what he has learned. A poet should reject neither local influences nor international influences, and should instead be a “global-regionalist” (“Global Regionalism” 174). The key in Montague’s experience as Irish and American, or as an Irish American, is balance. James D. Brophy notes that Montague’s early poem “The Water Carrier” “is about equilibrium....nothing is whole,...even water is of two kinds and must be balanced” (154-55). Similarly, the different aspects of one’s nature must be tempered with one another. Not only is “creative anguish” born of multinationalism but also are “potential richness [and] comedy” (Montague “American-Irish” 32). He feels free to ponder, “Somewhere in New York my *alter ego*, my *doppelganger*, sits brooding over his destiny....How would I have woven together my two worlds, the New World and the lost Ireland?” (32). By thinking along these lines, by carefully considering the inverse point of view, Montague gains a deeper understanding of his own situation, and invites other hyphenated Americans to do the same.

As he reveals throughout *Born in Brooklyn*, the poet’s own quest for information began when he was very young. His earliest memories are, like James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus’, impressionistic in nature. When he recounts memories of his very early childhood, Montague uses lists of sense impressions, rather than narratives. His recollection of his uncle John is “as large-hatted, cheerful and kind, but [he] hear[s] no music in the background. Instead the sound of many voices, sometimes quarrelling, the clink of glasses. And then the sounds die away” (The Figure in the Cave” 10). In “A Muddy Cup,” Montague’s recounting of the environs of his early childhood home in Brooklyn is thus:

*(cops and robbers
cigarstore Indians
& coal black niggers,*

*bathrub gin and
Jewish neighbors*. (ll. 51-55)

This is either a catalog of what the young Montague could reconstruct of his life in Brooklyn or a list of things that his mother emphasized to him about their life in New York. Either way, it shows not an understanding, but merely a recollection. Montague would later use memories like these as groundwork for his research on his own life. Not many years after he left Brooklyn, presumably when he was about ten years old, the action of the short story "The Letters" takes place. Again, his personal memories of New York are snapshots, with the narrative to be filled in. It is in this story that he shows his readers how he began to fill in the missing pieces from his life story. Feigning illness to stay home from church one Sunday morning, the young Montague will begin to excavate, this first excursion into the kitchen cabinet. In this work, Montague uses unexpected tense shifts to show that the experience of discovery that he had on that day many decades ago is still present to him. The first paragraph is in the present tense, but in the second and for the rest of Montague's adventure, he enters the past tense. His understanding of his parents' situation in New York is tied closely to material culture, as Montague claims "Finally I understood, standing there with the letters in my hand" (31). The items he has excavated have taught him what he needed to know. In the penultimate paragraph, after the boy awakes from his sobbing-induced sleep, the narration of the story returns to the present tense, indicating that there is a divide in the boy's understanding of himself between his innocence and newly-found knowledge. Unlike the rest of the story, which is narrated from the first-person point of view, the final sentences of the story are narrated from a third-person point of view, stating of the young Montague: "He will never be the same again and it is partly his own fault. Those who pry learn what they deserve" (31). Because of what he learned on that day about the circumstances surrounding his birth and early childhood, and because he has seen another person's view of these situations, Montague is able to view his own situation with some detachment.

Montague's methods of anthropological research into his own existence became increasingly varied. Rather than merely remembering tidbits of what he had seen in Brooklyn, the young Montague tried to unobtrusively interview those who knew his parents before they emigrated. However, his hopes were often not realized, as

With the indifference of the hardworked, my aunts did not speak much of the past and failed to understand my secret pleas for information. My main hope lay then in what casual knowledge I could find. Patient as an archaeologist, I reconstituted the past from old books and photographs and the rambling conversation of the older men in the parish. ("Oklahoma Kid" 51-52)

When direct interviews failed, Montague continued his archaeological searches and even engaged in participant-observation. However, when he was a child, his understanding of the information he gleaned was incomplete, as he associated cowboy stories with his existence in New York, unaware that "Arizona was nearly a continent away from Bushwich [sic] Avenue, Brooklyn" (48). Also in his poems, Montague reveals that he continued his research into his past well into his adult life. In "Stele for a Northern Republican," Mon-



tague discusses his adult understanding of his father's republican activities, about many of which he has learned since his father has returned to County Tyrone from Brooklyn. Still somewhat uncomfortable with some of the information he might unearth, Montague writes: "Hesitantly, I trace your part in/ the holy war to restore our country" (ll.11-12). Montague then recounts, to the best of his ability, the secret battles that both of his parents fought for the cause of republicanism. Among the works in *Born in Brooklyn*, this poem marks a breakthrough, as it recounts the point at which the persona (who is, in fact, Montague) is able to critically examine the actions of even his own parents and to assess both the good and the damage that these actions have done, on not only a personal scale for Montague but on a national scale. His final assessment is that his parents and those of their generation who engaged in undercover military activities have done damage to the movement for a united Ireland because of the excessive violence and intolerance that they engendered, creating in the process "only a broken province" (ln. 53).

Montague's mission to learn about himself takes him again across the Atlantic, where, in New York, he attempts to research the circumstances surrounding his early life. He recounts his experience:

I took the subway to the hospital
in darkest Brooklyn, to call
on the old nun who nursed you
through the travail of my birth
to come on another cold trail. (ll. 26-30)

Here, there are shades not only of research but also of detective work. Montague's birth is figured as a mystery, and he must travel into the darkness, through the subway, in which his father used to work, in order to uncover information about his origins. In trying to come into contact with his past, Montague is jarred into the present by his awareness of the rough neighborhood through which he must travel. Although he is considering the past and his mother's experience in giving birth to him, his mind immediately turns to the present and he notes the disparity between his own childhood and that of his daughter, between his mother and his wife as a mother. In his mind, Montague then travels back to his childhood, to his parent's dismissal of him to Ireland, sending him "to a previous century" (ln. 63). Travel across the ocean and across time, at least in his mind, are essential to Montague's ability to contextualize his findings and to gain the necessary perspective to make sense of what he learns. This transatlantic theme is further relied upon in "The Locket," in which Montague recounts how he learns after his mother dies that she always, in life, wore a locket that contained a picture "of a child in Brooklyn" (ln. 42). Although by the time of his mother's death he has not been such a child for decades, it is significant that she always associated her son with his Brooklyn roots. And, ultimately, Montague is reminded of the impending end of his own life when, as an adult, he visits the grave of the paternal uncle after whom he was named:

I submit again
to stare soberly

at my own name
cut on a gravestone

& hear the creak
of a fiddle

filter through
American earth

the slow pride
of a lament. (ll. 93-102)

Not only does Montague see his own name on a gravestone but he also imagines his uncle's artwork, Irish fiddle music, coming through American earth; likewise, Montague's own poems, with both Irish and American dimensions, will outlive him and will serve to mediate between the two cultures for those who read them.

Fluidity of movement is at the heart of Montague's American poems. This movement is both transatlantic and transcontinental, both synchronic and diachronic. While the movement is rarely meant as literal, it is nonetheless essential to the person's synthesis of information gleaned from the traveled-to and traveled-from places. Seemingly paradoxically, the poem titled "The Cage" hinges on the relationship between the narrator and his father in America and then in Ireland. While the father's life in America was spent working in the subway and was marked by a dearth of opportunities for advancement, he returns to an open, untouched countryside in Ireland. Since the beginning of the poem is about the father's workday in New York, the line immediately following this discussion which reads "When he came back" (ln. 22) is expected to be about when he came back from work. Instead, it refers to the father's return to Garvaghey. Such a transition seems effortless, and the facility with which it appears that the father returns to Ireland suggests that the son frequently makes these trips in his imagination. The poem moves on to an injunction: "when/ weary Odysseus returns/ Telemachus should leave" (ll. 33-35), suggesting again an impending voyage for the son. Straightaway, the son is transported back to New York, where he imagines seeing his "ghostly" (ln. 42) father working in the subway once again. Immediately following this poem, which first appeared in *The Rough Field*, is "A Christmas Card," which first was printed in *The Dead Kingdom*. In this poem, the narrator recounts his memories of his father at Christmastime in Brooklyn, and mutedly praises his father for working and living alone in Brooklyn for as long as he had to. However, at the end of the poem, there is ambiguity as to where the father goes when "the job was done;/ and then [he] limped home" (ll. 35-36). While the home could be the Brooklyn boarding house, reading this poem in light of the previous poem, it is more likely that the home to which the poet refers is the father's birthplace. While it is physically impossible to limp from Brooklyn to Ireland, the use of such an image is an interesting one: it suggests a closeness between the two locales. Doubtlessly, in Montague's mind, such a closeness must exist. It is reaffirmed in "Magic Carpet," the final selection in *Born in Brooklyn*, in which the narrator has achieved sufficient distance from terrestrial matters to see happiness and safety, and which can allow the rider to see from any perspective he desires, "from Cork to



Upstate New York,/ from Altcloughfin to Albany” (ll. 12-13).

In “Death of a Chieftain,” Montague provides a prototype for many of the experiences of the Irish American as archaeologist. The story is of Bernard Corunna Coote, university-trained archaeologist and renegade Orangeman turned Bostonian, who decides to settle in San Antonio, Mexico, with the hopes of proving that Celts were the original inhabitants of the Americas. The short story contains some surprising links to Montague’s own life. Aside from the penchant for archaeology, Montague, although a Catholic, did feel some alienation from his family for sending him into fosterage at such a young age. Montague considers himself to have Irish, American and French allegiances; Coote is an Irish American, and among his companions in San Antonio are a transplanted Frenchman and an American of English extraction, recalling County Tyrone’s current alignment with Britain. Finding himself in the isolated, unusual atmosphere of San Antonio, Coote must learn the proper codes of behavior:

After this rash beginning, Bernard Corunna Coote learned to offer his confidences with the same casualness as he played his cards. And though (unlike the latter) they lay without immediate comment, he knew that they were being picked up, one by one, gestures toward a portrait. Assembled, they made what Tarrou once smilingly called LE PETIT TESTAMENT DE BERNARD CORUNNA COOTE. (85-86)

Coote must adapt to his new environment. For his whole life, Coote had been made by his family to feel like “a sore disappointment. His whole career seemed a demonstration of the principle of cultural reversion, i.e., the invasion of the conqueror by the culture of the conquered” (86). Coote’s *compadres* note that he is searching for something in a frenzied way, and they struggle to understand what he is doing: to them, his is “an alien discipline” (93). Hautmoc, the main proponent of the purity of the Indian race in Central America, tells Witchbourne that Coote “is looking for something we both have lost” (93). For Coote, proving his theory by finding sufficient evidence becomes an obsession, and his companions “felt that some incongruous struggle was going on, an almost physical rending, as though a blind man were trying to see, or a cripple to walk” (94). He searches for all kinds of evidence to prove his theory: he uses personality observations and physical characteristics, but continues to seek archaeological evidence that will indubitably link Celtic culture with that of the natives of the Americas. He is obsessed with his own brand of synthesis, through which he plans to link cultures around the world and to justify his own life’s work to his family. Through a narrow-minded view of globalism, Coote hopes to combine multiple races under one banner, thereby obliterating the need for an individual home and self-identity. Tarrou, whose insulting Coote on the grounds of gender because of his insecurity in his own masculinity has caused Coote to go on this frenzied hunt for the origin of the civilization of the Western hemisphere, remarks of Coote’s mission: “Who would have thought the irrelevant could have such deep roots?” (96), underestimating the importance that Coote placed on his own justification of his existence. When Coote discovers that the natives in his employ, led by Hautmoc, have constructed a stone formation that simulated an ancient Celtic burial site, Hautmoc says that he participated in this hoax “because if the place you are searching for does not exist, then it should. Your

dream and mine have much in common” (100). However, it is too late for Coote to find out if his dream is true and can be proven elsewhere: the pseudo-Celtic tomb is built, and it must serve its purpose. The search for purity and the single-minded pursuit of a goal cost Coote his life. In this story, we have an example of an archaeologist of the self gone awry: the challenge that faces the Irish American, as Montague suggests throughout *Born in Brooklyn*, is to piece together the parts of oneself, but not to search ceaselessly without accepting the factors of oneself that cannot be controlled. Coote could not find that his forefathers were the source of “the purest people in the world” (80), so he missed out on the opportunity for intercourse with the others who could have helped him to learn about himself.

For Montague, this challenge of being an Irish American has not only personal but also political implications. Noting the importance of politics in poetry, Montague stated:

I do believe that there is some connection between poetry and politics....Even the articulation of healing is valuable. If you can get the private life right, or at least partly right, if you can achieve some intervals of peace inside marriage and love, then perhaps that would be some kind of paradigm of how people should behave towards each other. (Ingersoll and Howard 26)

Politics are endemic in poetry, in Montague’s definition: “I mean politics in the widest sense—the spiritual atmosphere of a country, one’s concern for its spiritual health—this, I think, is one of the strongest strains in contemporary poetry....To declare poetry to be a-political [sic] seems to me a failure of nerve” (“Global Regionalism” 163). Montague believes that “violence begins from the top in a state” (170), seeping from the government and infiltrating the people. When we combine Montague’s ideas about the relationship between literature and politics with his presentation of the Irish American experience using the trope of anthropological research, the result is strong political poetry. In “Visible Export,” Montague identifies Eugene McCarthy as identifiably “an Irish politician” (ln. 3), one who would fit in well with his Irish contemporaries. However, punning on McCarthy’s own House Committee on Un-American Activities, Montague defines McCarthy himself as “un-American” (ln. 5). Short but powerful, this poem makes clear Montague’s position on the importance of a government’s respect for its citizens. Having the privilege of both American and Irish vantage points, Montague can identify corruption and make connections between injustices perpetrated internationally, so that nations do not duplicate the mistakes of other nations. Likewise, it is clear that “Vietnam” is written by an individual who has been witness to long periods of conflict, and who therefore has strong beliefs on how not to go about solving them. While taking the side of neither of the conflicting parties, Montague shows from a bird’s eye view (quite literally, as the sky seems to be the place from which the persona narrates) the type of conflict that Vietnam appears to be: an old set of values repelling a comparatively new set of values. Having lived in Northern Ireland and having had the dubious benefit of looking at this war-torn area both from far away and from within, Montague believes that it is impossible to force a people away from something that it is intent on doing. In “Sinnsear: Kindred,” Montague makes no directly political statements; instead, he reflects on a set of events that profoundly impacted both Ireland and America. By drawing connections between John and



Robert Kennedy and their ancestral past, comparing them with Cuchulain and observing a farmer who ploughs his fields as the Kennedys' "forebears might have done" (ln. 17), Montague suggests the continuity of the experience of Irish Americans with that of their homeland. Additionally, because in Montague's dream vision, the brothers are warned by "A far-off cottage window flash... like Morse" (ln. 21) and are able to preserve the parts of their bodies that were in reality shot, Montague suggests that the dream of the Kennedys, and of the Irish in America, lives on.

For Montague, then, the Irish American experience involves seeking for the truth in the past, but not getting so caught up in it that no room is left for development in the future. As Eamon Wall suggests, "Montague is conscious of the fact that others have traveled this road before, that each step he makes draws him deeper into history. He is also aware, however, that new travelers must come through to redefine that ancient landscape—physical and psychological—for an Ireland beginning to strive to belong to the modern world" (366). Patricia Lynch believes that Montague's poetry requires him to "cut...living roots," but that this "violence" is tempered by the good that it will do the places mentioned in his poems to be discussed on an international stage (212). Likewise, Montague's digging through his own personal landscape, his family and national background, is tempered by the invitation he thereby extends to others to do the same and to create their own Irish, American, or Irish-American landscape. The "complex fate of being Irish-American," which Montague never explicitly defines, consists of deciding to what degree it is necessary to synthesize ancestral and personal elements. While learning about the past can help a person to understand his origins and the influences on his life, it is his own life that makes him who he is. Montague's experience as an Irish American is characterized by an anthropological interest in the influences on his own life. Montague invites only an open-minded curiosity, however. The challenge of being Irish American, as Montague presents it in his montage *Born in Brooklyn*, is to uncover and to understand one's own past—not to entrench ideas and preconceptions more deeply but to allow oneself an alternative vantage point, from which to accurately assess personal and political decisions and actions. Not all incongruities may be solved; some must be accepted. It is the acceptance of unresolved incongruities that Montague sets forth as the best part of the American experience, setting this also as the model for Ireland. Such acceptance, in order to be sincere, must come after an understanding of oneself and one's own past. Connections can be made with the experiences of others, but it is both unrealistic and unwise to expect others to conform entirely to one's own schema. Montague asks, perhaps facetiously, "I would try to keep the two things together in my head: to be forging forward and to be looking backwards. Is that possible?" (Ingersoll and Howard 31). Montague's answer to his own question is evident in his poems, short fiction, and essays: an emphatic "yes." In fact, in his creative work, Montague posits that one can look forward only by simultaneously looking backward, and that looking backward is fruitful only if it also inspires looking forward.

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