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Border Crossings – John Montague's *The Dead Kingdom*

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The motif of the journey occupies an important place in John Montague's poetry. Though often recommended to be distrusted, biography offers a comfortable support for this – born in Brooklyn, raised in Northern Ireland, educated in Dublin and in the United States, the poet became acquainted with and accustomed to travel and its consequences from an early age (cf. Montague quoted by Dawe 15-16). The poetry, as a result, frequently involves a journey of some kind – often in the form of a literal one which in turn develops rich metaphorical dimensions that overwrite the original story and which offers a wide range of analogies for the contemplation of experience.

Journeys involve points of departure as well as destinations yet very often it is the process itself that acquires principal significance. The allegorical reading of life as a journey is an old idea resting on these old assumptions; its long history, however, does not diminish its potential powers of illuminating experience from less than usual perspectives, and it is also capable, by its very nature, of throwing light on the process of illumination by bringing ritualistic actions of remembering into the focus of conscious observations.

Journeys imply progress and process, consist of stations to pass and involve borders to cross. There are differences between stages of the journey which are observable from various perspectives; yet there is a paradoxical element involved in this phenomenon as there is continuous progress along the way and the successive stages are separated from each other by arbitrarily drawn interfaces comfortably called borders – change is observable but the exact end of one stage and the beginning of the next is a rather elusive concept. This can lead to the reconsideration and the reassessment of the category of the border, and the concept can be destabilised as a consequence, which in turn can further illuminate experience and its interpretation.

The occasion for John Montague's collection *The Dead Kingdom* (1984) is the death of the mother of the poet and her funeral. The collection takes the frame of a journey from the south of the Republic to the North, her former residence and also the scene of the poet's childhood. The poems charter a rich territory: the landscape, the concept of change, the troubled history of Ireland and the not any less troubled family history of the poet mark the field and the scope of the collection. Its principal genre is the elegy, one of the favourites of Montague: it is a genre that involves an imaginative reconstruction of the past

and a number of imaginative border crossings along the way. There is a crossing of a border in bringing to a present (textual) life past events, facts and persons (the motif of the "*nekiya*, the hero's descent into the underworld" (Johnston 198)), and there is also an act of remembering, the crossing of a border from the present to the past.

Montague's technique in *The Dead Kingdom* is similar to the one he employed earlier in his seminal *The Rough Field*: short lyrics are organised into a sequence of epic qualities, the individual poems thus acquire significant additional dimensions pointing beyond their usual lyric structure and the collection becomes more than a sum of its parts. The implications of the epic involve certain technical elements, and Montague favours a straight line of development in the structure rather than the circular patterns involved in *The Rough Field*. Chronology is consistent on the whole, and the journey's progress in space is undisturbed by digressions as the persona observes his surroundings and conducts his meditations on the inescapable historical dimensions of the Irish landscape. Communal history intersects with personal history, and the last two sections of the collection focus on the imaginative recreation of the family circle, thus the journey across Ireland is simultaneously a journey back in time, yet in a curious way the vision remains stereoscopic as the persona retains his awareness of the present and also of the 'pastness' of the past. In this way borders are crossed, and borders are observed and kept intact at the same time. This inherent ambiguity is connected with the paradox of the elegy as a genre – that there is a process of falsification involved in recollecting the past, what is recollected is never identical with the experience itself.

The first instance of border crossing is the opening poem of the collection: the news of his mother's death is communicated to the poet. On hearing the news he returns from the sea to the shore: he comes from water to land, from a fluid and changing world to the solid one; the sense of being kept comfortably afloat is replaced by a hard and clear sense of reality, of inevitable change. There is another contrast involved in this picture as the salmons' annual northward journey to the source opens the account – the poet's own northward journey to his 'source', the scene of his childhood and the figure of his mother, however, is not grounded in the notion of fertility but is occasioned by death.

The northward journey in the car with the cousin thus begins in a vaguely *in medias res* manner. The experience of moving past the landscape induces a parallel with the notion of the process of change – the poems explore not only the contemplated landscape but the concept of change intimated by elements in the landscape. All this is underwritten by another sense of change, one that involves a shift in the persona's mental world, reflected in his interpretation of the landscape. The bogs of the central part of Ireland are waterlogged places of peace and memories; the peacefulness of the landscape repeatedly implies timelessness yet there are also concrete events recollected from the childhood of the persona, suggesting a tangible temporal dimension, which preserves the ambiguous tension of the journey. As the border between the Republic and the

North is approached the harsher elements of the Northern landscape take over: its glacial memories and memorials imply a less consoling sight and a corresponding mental atmosphere as the persona gets closer in both space and time to the event that has prompted the journey.

The memories evoked by the landscape and certain concrete places are private ones at first. They are apparently randomly recollected, yet they give the impression of a happy past, very much in contrast with the present in which the contemplated scenes are neglected and miss the order imposed upon them by human presence. This is what happens in the poem "Abbeylara": the fond memories of a near idyllic past – "In the garden at Abbeylara / it was always summer" (Montague 131) – are replaced by images of a chaotic and overgrown garden in the present after the death of the inhabitants, "as if they had never been" (Montague 131). The conclusion of the poem implies the omnipresence of change with strong negative overtones as the futility of human endeavour for imposing patterns on the world is suggested by the closing line. The conditional, however, also implies a sense of 'but', an insistence on the fact that the people recollected indeed existed in the past.

The personal memories progressively give way to communal ones – myth, legend and 'actual' history replace the childhood episodes as the journey unfolds. The communal aspects imply a more profound and more serious concern with the past, yet the prominence of mythic and legendary elements at once point toward the importance of the extra-rational dimensions in that past and in its human assessment. The seemingly monotonous and peaceful landscape shelters surprising memories, and violence intrudes as Montague does not intend to romanticise the historical dimension. The tradition of *dinnseanchas*, the Irish lore of place is revised as personal nostalgia is inescapable along this particular journey yet communal history serves as a reminder of patterns beyond the individual and the omnipresence of the tragic in a wider national context.

The journey from the Republic to the North inescapably involves the crossing of the border between the two countries. The political border normally reads as a clear-cut physical location whose whereabouts are marked with utmost precision; in this case, however, the concept comes under thorough revision. The account of the crossing is given in the poem with the laconic title "Border". The persona's anxiety rises despite his frequent experience of the crossing of that border during his childhood as this particular instance is different due to the occasion itself. The most recent history of the North also contributes to the persona's unease since the "sand-bagged / barracks of Rosslea, Derrylin" (Montague 154) indicate that the place of arrival is a land of ongoing conflict. As a result, the crossing becomes a nearly acrobatic manoeuvre:

Under Quilca Mountain
inching the car across
a half-bombed bridge,
trespassing, zigzagging
over potholed roads (Montague 154)

The short lines Montague chooses to employ reflect the claustrophobic conditions of the crossing yet at the same time they would also urge a quick downward movement in the stanza by their very brevity, which creates a tension that corresponds to the anxiety of the speaker.

The crossing is eventually completed, and the persona arrives at the land after a succession of alterations:

post-
boxes, now green, now red,
alternately halted by British
patrols, unarmed *gardaí*,
signs in Irish and English,
both bullet-pierced (Montague 154)

The tactics of listing the two sets of distinct landmarks transforms alteration into alternation, thus the passage creates the impression of oscillation rather than that of straight and steady movement forward, which further undermines the usual expectations concerning the concept of the physical border. The transformation becomes complete with the persona's assessment of the destination – he steps

into
that shadowy territory
where motives fail, where
love fights death,
good falters before evil. (Montague 154)

The indicated destination is vague and general enough to be any place, and it is exactly this deliberate undermining of anything concrete and tangible that Montague needs for his further progress towards a reconsideration of his family history.

The event of the crossing in these particular circumstances initiates profound changes in the subsequent poems as Montague turns from the communal to the personal and private again. In "The Plain of Blood", the first poem to follow "Border", the change is already observable. This poem appears to continue the pattern laid down in the earlier sections of the collection as the landscape is read in terms of its mythic heritage encoded in its name. The

speaker, however, becomes rather pragmatic in dismissing myth and identifying "wise imperial policy" (Montague 155) as the more tangible cause of the conflict. Though a pair of poems, a curse and a blessing answering each other, follow, and there is a poem conducting a meditation on several deities, the communal and mythologizing drive is eventually renounced and the persona focuses his attention on his own family history in the last two sections of the collection.

The change in focus goes together with a change in perspective as the present is virtually dismissed and the account descends into the past. The exploration of the family history is centred around repeated visits to the North and the belated forming of relationships between son, father and mother. Chronology is handled in a less rigorous manner than so far, and the internal world of memory takes a more prominent role at the expense of the outside world of the landscape and of contemporary events.

The poem "Gravity", which opens the penultimate section of the collection, is built on the temporal contrast of the persona's wife expecting a child and his dying mother. This situation also implies borders – these are borders yet to be crossed, and the opposing emotional associations of childbirth and death suspend the poem in a state of tension. This tension is further upheld by the persona's decision of not telling his mother about his new marriage after the disintegration of his previous one as he does not want to upset the mother's beliefs resting on "an antique code" (Montague 162).

The sight of the weakening mother induces a series of poems which trace the mother's life – from the perspective of the persona. The poem "Intimacy" is framed by the episodes of watching films together with his mother as the principal means of getting closer to each other. The first scene of this forming relationship is the cinema to which the grown son takes his mother; in the absence of the father she is "rigged out like a girlfriend / in her evening finery" (Montague 163), and they watch romances as these provide a comfortable escape from "real life" (Montague 163), both in the general and in their particular case. A brief reflection on the sad family history, and of the mother's "melancholy destiny" (Montague 164) brings the father back into the picture, only to remove him again by referring to the brief family reunion which lasts until the father's death. In accordance with the time shift the public world of the cinema is replaced by the private one of the home as the television offers similar comforts to those of the former scene, and the shift in location suggests a greater degree of intimacy between mother and son in the final and irreversible absence of the father. The picture, however, is once again one of ambiguity, as the retreat from the public scene to the private one is also an act of resignation, of the acceptance of a situation by circumstance rather than by choice.

The brief summing up of the mother's "melancholy destiny" compels a more detailed reflection on the family history in the next poem of the collection ("Molly Bawn"). There is a set of pictures of the mother as a young woman, her courtship and marriage, and there is also the inevitable catastrophic intersection

of communal and personal histories as her brothers are traced in the family narrative. The abrupt end of the poem with the image of emigration, in their case to Brooklyn at the beginning of the Great Depression, is also the rather abrupt end of her potential happiness – the ironic phrasing ("making sure to land in / good time for the Depression!" (Montague 165)) gives the impression as if the occasion were ultimately responsible for her (and the family's) miseries.

The end of the poem is at once the starting point of the next one, "A Muddy Cup". The image of the cup is the mother's experience of emigration – her decision to follow her husband with their children reaches a rather bitter climax in her unexpected arrival at the father's lodgings, and the subsequent fight ends in a reconciliation involving the consumption of the persona. This appears to be one of the key moments of the family story, and it is followed by a similar one when the mother returns to Ireland with the three sons but refuses to take the youngest one (the persona) into her care, sending him away to the relatives of the father to a nearby yet distant farm.

The persona then directs his attention to the father, left behind in Brooklyn. Tellingly, Montague chooses a Christmas scene to evoke his father's figure – he is seen as a man pulling his sons, all three of them, on a sleigh. The apparent harmony of the image is quickly dissolved, however, as his future is briefly outlined – vanishing family, loneliness, unemployment and drinking await him. At the end of the poem mutual confessions reduce the distance of father and son yet the eventual breaking down of unease between them is delayed until a special occasion, that of a broadcast made by the persona which merits the admiration of the father, however laconic that may be.

The restoration, or perhaps of the proper forming for the first time, of the normal relation between father and son marks the beginning of a wider family reunion. This takes the image of a silver flask which goes around as the family travels to Midnight Mass, and the picture is completed by the presence of the same set of decorations which embellished their last Christmas in Brooklyn. This scene, bordering on the melodramatic, however, is not maintained for long t: the episode remains the only one of its kind in the family account. As such it is sharply contrasted with the succeeding poem of the collection which is entitled "Last Journey." The persona, in spite of the specific temporal element of the title, refuses to provide the exact details of the journey just as he omits the definite article which usually accompanies the adjective "last" – neither time nor destination is specified. This decision freezes the moment and liberates the persona from the compulsion of a neat closure – there is an emphasis on the progress in the account, and there is a refusal of crossing that border which is suggested by "last."

The last section of the collection begins with a piece focusing on the process of dying yet there are no personal details specified within it. Instead there is the intimation of another border, that of family secrets, which are threatened by the process itself and which may come under scrutiny by younger generations. The implications of this become clear when the persona's tactics are

revealed – refusing to address his mother's death, he recalls the death of his maternal grandmother instead, thus making the previous generation the matrix of the one whose passing he is compelled to face. This refusal to discuss the mother's death is paralleled with his scrupulous avoidance of giving an account of the father's death, which appears to be the expression of a reluctance in crossing one inevitable border – or at least, of a reluctance of assessing it.

The persona's physical journey has its destination in the funeral of the mother. The account, corresponding in mood to the occasion, concentrates on cold and hostile details, and the old physical distance keeping son from mother is emblematically retained for the night preceding the event as the persona and his cousin spend the night in the childhood home of the poet, seven miles from the mother's home. The funeral embodies that ambiguity which underlies the whole collection, of the constant state of change and the simultaneous presence of continuity and discontinuity: inherited "old terrors" (Montague 178) and the seemingly unchanging world in which the mother lived in the same place where her mother had lived before reflect continuity, while the persona's exclusion from this world in childhood and his present refusal of joining "this narrowing world / of bigotry and anger" (Montague 179) represent the discontinuity in the process of change. In this stereoscopic vision, life is also seen in the duality of the continuity of consciousness and the constant change of the body through its cycles of seven years of full renewal. Bodily change is read as "minor deaths" (Montague 179), repeated over and over until the last one which is curiously understood as "a freedom" (Montague 179), finding its proper metaphor in "a light battling through cloud" (Montague 179), which points towards a profound belief in a superior world of transcendence.

The event of the funeral is recalled in the poem "Northern Lights". The account begins with the image of wild geese, imaginatively identified with the spirits of the newly dead, and concludes with a short passage on the phenomenon denoted by the title, echoing the popular superstition that "by whistling you could / bring them nearer" (Montague 179). The mystery is only partially dissolved by identifying Aurora Borealis as the interaction of magnetic particles in the upper atmosphere; the haunting vision of the lights remains "our sky's virid necklace" (Montague 179). The constantly changing play of light which is only visible at night becomes the proper image of Montague's mission: the mother's figure (and that of the father too, in its turn) is only possible to observe in its entirety when she is no longer around, it can only be fully possessed when it is no longer present.

The physical journey may end here but the metaphorical one still continues – the mother's funeral is not the final resting point of the narrative. The completion of the mother's image needs a final readjustment, one that soothes the tension created by the event of the funeral. The basic question echoes the painful paradox of a childhood without parents: "How can one make an absence flower, / lure a desert to sudden bloom?" (Montague 180) The consequences of the absence of the mother are distressing – a nearly unquenchable thirst for love,

speech impediment and repeated instances of humiliation; yet this situation occasions the persona's discovery of poetry as well, balancing the account to some extent.

The absence is also responsible for the unceasing interest of the persona in seeking explanation for his case of maternal rejection. The already grown man decides to meet his mother and to make himself known to her, though this is done solely on his initiative. The final reproach to the mother, however, is balanced by a nearly miraculous condition which is only learnt when she is dead: despite all her apparent rejection of him, she was still unable to part totally with him:

> I never knew, until you were gone,
> that, always around your neck,
> you wore an oval locket
> with an old picture in it,
> of a child in Brooklyn. (Montague 183)

This closure is indeed somewhat melodramatic yet it possesses the power for the benevolent readjustment of the whole picture as a result. Questions still persist, though, since the mother's choice of the image instead of her son receives little attention in the end.

The last two poems of the collection focus on the notion of change and there is a brief account of the journey back. The return is made from the past to the present and there is also a hint at the future through the image of the cradled infant of the poet (whose birth is also omitted from the account), which restores the usual awareness of time and its inevitability. The persona, in a strongly Yeatsean manner, renounces his earlier nostalgia and concludes the sequence with an Inuit saying: "'To walk away, without / looking back, or crying"' (Montague 185), yet this retains the ambiguity which characterises the whole collection: the persona's insistence on retracing the family history stands opposed to this conclusion, but the picture has been completed and the return is now possible to make.

The poems of *The Dead Kingdom* repeatedly call attention to the natural parallel of moving North. References to the annual northward journey of the salmon and the wild geese recur, and the "wavering needle" of the compass is repeatedly evoked, as if all these formed an inescapable constituent of life. The North possesses a profound significance in Montague's own context due to his Northern upbringing and his mother's home, making it indeed something of a magnetic pole or a centre of gravity. The implications of the North as a location, however, are also strong: its cold, dark and increasingly hostile nature to human habitation form an inseparable association in the poet's mind in his vision of the journey and its conditions – the movement away from the comfortable and

happy present to the tormented world of the past is paralleled by the physical movement from the south to the north.

In the course of this journey the motif of the actual border crossing acquires special importance. The destabilised image of the border and the arrival in a metaphoric world of anywhere suggest the omnipresence and omnipotence of change and the impossibility of standing still. The still point is an illusion only, the construct of the human mind – just as the interpretation of character is a mental construct. The speaker's reconstruction of the father and mother figures is also a process of creation, a constant rewriting and readjustment of their images, which has a range of implications with a strong sense of ambiguity: the lasting wound is perhaps also possible to heal and the broken family circle may be imaginatively completed, yet all this is tentative only.

Montague's tactics of deliberately employing ambiguity in the course of his journey creates tension and suggests an honest acknowledgement of the simultaneous presence of two sides to every situation. The two sides hint at the presence of borders between them and the crossing of these borders facilitate the scrutiny of them. The concept of the border in general is also examined and its basically illusory nature is revealed: it is a category created for convenience yet it becomes evasive when put under closer scrutiny. From a more distant perspective the difference is seen, the border in between is observable yet when getting closer to the contemplated scene it becomes increasingly less concrete and tangible, giving way to a set of infinitesimal differences and eliminating the sense of neat interfaces and dividing lines. The present flows into the past, actual experience modulates into memory and life unfolds in the dichotomy of birth and death, the only borders which may be considered tangible – both of which remain essentially unaddressed in their actual occurrence in Montague's account.

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