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"An Island Once Again: The Postcolonial Aesthetics of Contemporary Irish Poetry"

By JEFFERSON HOLDRIDGE

World is the ever nonobjective to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being.

Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*

Flames have only lungs. Water is all eyes.

The earth has bone for muscle....

But anxiety

can find no metaphor to end it.

A.K. Ramanujan, "Anxiety"

THE POSITION OF THE SUBJECT, of history and landscape are the central themes of any essay on the aesthetics of contemporary Irish poetry and often provoke as many questions as answers. To give specific weight to some broad theoretical analysis, this essay shall closely examine a selection of works. Before detailed discussion of the texts, the idea of a postcolonial aesthetic should be defined. The two important frames are provided first by a correlation between Fanon and Kant and second by various ideas of the psychoanalytical sublime. Politically, there are three Fanonite/Kantian stages to what is here termed the postcolonial sublime; it is an aesthetic that aligns Fanon's dialectic of decolonization, from occupation, through nationalism, to liberation with Kant's three stages of sublimity, that is, from balance between subject and object, through aesthetic violence upon the internal sense, to transcendent compensation. The first uplifting stage of the postcolonial sublime is when the reified subject becomes aware of the possibility of freedom and of how its humanity was denied by the colonizer. Great, often exaggerated claims for the native culture are consequently made, as we see in the Celtic Revival. The second, negative stage is when one becomes aware of the impossibility of recovering the precolonial wholeness, the culture before the colonial rupture, and of the complicity the society and family have had in their own subjection; one also becomes aware of the violence necessary to free oneself, of violence that necessarily wounds both sides of the struggle, and threatens to make "a stone of the heart."¹

The third positive stage of the postcolonial sublime is multifaceted. It can occur during the retrieval of morality and freedom, during that time when the

1. W. B. Yeats, "Easter, 1916," *The Complete Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Daniel J. Albright (London: Dent, 1990), 228.

violent struggle finds its reflection in the self's romances, in the forgiveness between opposites, however brief, that is necessary for the inevitable hybridity of future life—as is reflected in Heaney's poem "A Peacock's Feather." This stage of the postcolonial sublime is also when the sensible portion, the irrational anarchic body with which the colonized subject had been identified, is given the transcendental subject status that is normally reserved for the colonizer—as is hinted at in McGuckian's poem "Dovecote." The resolution of the sublime struggle can also be achieved through a transcendent act of self-sacrifice, as in Mahon's poem "Antarctica." Obviously the transcendental nature of that status is problematic in any postmodern reading; the movement between the second and third stages, or the feeling of being caught between the blessings of the third and the curse of the second therefore forms the basis of what Samuel Beckett calls an "unspeakable home."²

In *The Romantic Sublime*, Thomas Weiskel presents a psychoanalytical model that is very similar in structure to that movement outlined above. It is one in which "the sublime moment recapitulates and thereby reestablishes the Oedipus complex, whose positive resolution is the basis of culture itself."³ Taking father as colonizer and son as colonized, for the discourse of colonization is primarily a patriarchal one, the parallels are obvious and the resolution equally elusive, depending upon a reconfiguration of the highly changeable sexual constellation of Mother, Father, and Son. As Fanon notes of colonizer and colonized, "The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity."⁴ The synthesis of the third stage, the resolution, is not apparently dialectical, and this is why it is not easily resolvable. The Mother does not necessarily provide a form of synthesis, but rather a different category of feeling associated either with birth, nurturing, forgiveness, and so forth, or else with the emotive, the irrational, and the transgressive, that is, tenderness toward the other configured with the threat of otherness. "The native's challenge to the colonial world is not simply a rational confrontation," writes Fanon, "it is not a treatise on the universal, but the untidy affirmation of an original idea."⁵ That original idea is, in Homi Bhabha's words, "the irremovable strangeness of being different," which in Beckett's words is "unspeakable home." The best way to achieve the unveiling of that strangeness is in the relation of self to other, in the recognition of freedom, of the inhuman "thing," the tortured body that has been colonized, the repressed other, the anarchic or feminized sexual body, what Bhabha calls "the historical relationality, the interstitial in-between that defines and divides them [colonizer and colonized] into antagonistic subjects."⁶ The source of antagonism is often the effort not to be feminized. Such a recognition of otherness could

2. Samuel Beckett, "Neither," *As the Story was Told: Uncollected and Late Prose* (London: Calder, 1990), 108.

3. Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime; Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986), 94.

4. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1991), 38.

5. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 41.

6. Homi K. Bhabha, "On the Irremovable Strangeness of Being Different," *Four Views of Ethnicity*, *PMLA* 113 (1998): 38.

conceivably constitute the basis if not the revelation of the third stage of positive sublimity, the positive resolution of the beautiful that is "the basis of culture itself," and which demands an elaboration of issues of gender and sexuality that are extremely difficult to articulate.

The writers in question can obviously be said to be trying to move from the second to the third phase. Only this movement has been going on for sometime. In terms of W. B. Yeats's poetry, we see that the early work is most definitely of the first stage. Celtic is glorified; Saxon disparaged. With this movement is a palpable inability to critique the current situation. This is truer of his poetry than of his prose and political life, in which he was somewhat more advanced. The second stage covers the volumes from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* to *The Tower* in which the violence of self and societal change is interrogated. The third stage occurs in Yeats's poems of the afterlife, of the unifying art of Byzantium, or in those on Coole Park wherein he finds a reconciliatory image of the feminine, of the beautiful, in Lady Gregory. It is best described in the volume, *The Winding Stair*, in which he imagines a balance between the various religious, political, and sexual elements of his life and of Ireland. Such themes continue to be explored in the last volumes. The political nature of this third stage is made clear in the poems "The Curse of Cromwell," "Come Gather Round Me Parnellites," "Roger Casement," and "The Ghost of Roger Casement," in which the anarchic, sometimes threatening force of the sexual body, often feminized and colonized as in the Casement poems, becomes vindictively powerful. Throughout Yeats's poetry, the postcolonial dimension is concurrent with many other dimensions of the aesthetic question. When he imagines any stage of the sublime, the philosophical, aesthetic, and religious meanings are as vital as is the political. In any of these categories, there is a continual movement between the terror and peace that interconnects them all.

James Joyce's postcolonial sublime similarly begins on the shifting grounds of religion, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis and ends in an indeterminate liminal state among their different methods of approaching questions of origins, ends, and purposes. In other words, he tests the limits of verifiable experience and hesitates before religious, psychoanalytical, aesthetic, or political resolutions. These irresolutions are represented in terms of the familial relationship. The complex shifting relationship through the four generations of Joyce's family and the Holy Family, which are implicit in so much of his work, forms the basis for the sublime moment in which Joyce, confronted on the one hand with the estrangement of death, and on the other hand with the familiarizing homogeneity of birth, must face his deep yearning for reconciliation, for the positive resolution of the Oedipus complex and of the colonial nightmare. For, as he states in *Ulysses*, hope resides in "Amor matris; subjective and objective genitive"; the love of the mother for the son and of the son for the mother.⁷ Ultimately, the hope is for release from the

7. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Penguin, 1960), 34.

family and social cycles of union and division. The release, however, remains difficult to attain. The Madonna-like neighbour in "Araby," the muselike image of the girl on Sandymount Strand, the earthly sensuality of Molly, or the supernatural figure of Anna Livia Plurabelle, illustrate how the female body is used tantalizingly both to illustrate the frustration of such desire for female or maternal presence and to illustrate its perpetual reenactment and development. It is an enchantment which, as Kristeva writes, "will have to wait for some other time, always and forever."⁸ At the end of the poem "Ecce Puer," for example, Joyce is the most abject of men, the man of sorrows, who prays for the hope of redemption that the child and maternal body represent.

Poets after Yeats and Joyce, and certainly after Beckett, have some different choices to make. They may well look to the anarchic sexual body or the maternal one for meaning, but most for varying reasons cannot unironically look to the Anglo-Irish ascendancy or to Christian metaphysics and what they represent in aesthetic terms. Even Yeats and Joyce must look toward them with a certain ironic nostalgia. In "A Peacock's Feather," Heaney makes his division from Yeats quite plain. McGuckian, on the other hand, uses the feminine body and its anarchic signification as her poetic, but, perhaps for reasons of gender does not feel the same nostalgia as Yeats, nor is she as willing to use the public voice. Finally, Derek Mahon has the most ambiguous relation, as he rues the conquering puritan aesthetic of his tribe, while often cultivating its effect, and feels himself to lack a community to which he can easily belong. Yet, for Mahon, ambiguity is a poetic end in itself as we see in his mixed attitude toward postmodernism (see the volume, *The Yellow Book*).

The textual analysis begins with Beckett's lyric, "Neither," and moves through poems by Heaney, Mahon, and McGuckian to show that what Beckett calls "unspeakable home" lies behind much of the contemporary (postcolonial) aesthetic. In this poem, the Irish cannot climb to the sublimity of Yeats's "proper dark"⁹ of an antithetical subjective realm to solve the subject-object mystery (which, to Yeats, has divided the mind of Britain since Berkeley first posited subjective idealism against Locke's materialism as a specifically Irish philosophy). And this is because the very condition of their truths is neither subjective idealism nor objective pragmatism; rather, as Lyotard suggests, it is the violence of their difference. They cannot celebrate the Nietzschean assertions of self over society for to them such celebrations ring hollow. What Beckett calls the "self so-called" is too shifting an entity to be easily accorded transcendental status.¹⁰ Even Heaney, whose sense of subjectivity is probably the most stable, views the disruptive, potential victim/victimizer of otherness as central to any notion of a transcendental subject.¹¹ This version of Irishness finds in "Old patchworks that the pitch

8. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 23.

9. W. B. Yeats, "The Statues," *The Complete Poems*, 384.

10. Beckett, "Stirrings Still," *As the Story was Told*, 128.

11. See "St. Kevin and the Blackbird" in Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1996), 20. In this poem, St Kevin's transcendental self is defined by the extent of his self-sacrifice for the blackbird.

and toss/Of history have left dishevelled,"¹² the uneasy realization that one is on an "island once again."¹³

Beckett's "Neither" functions as an Ur-text for contemporary Irish poetry because it reveals a subjectivity that is defined by its very instability. A subjectivity in which, as Heaney writes in "The Tollund Man," one "feel[s] lost/Unhappy and at home."¹⁴ It is the process of growing up in the twentieth century, of living "it bomb by bomb," and learning "what is meant by home" as Mahon reflects in "Afterlives."¹⁵ In "Neither," Beckett's libretto for the minimalist composer Morton Feldman (1962), we experience the aesthetic alienation of the age. Existence lies neither in the subjective reality of the self nor in the objective reality of the unself but in the "unspeakable home" between.¹⁶ Beckett's sense that we find our humanity in the experience of others is very real but, of course, is only part of the story. Our real search is for something else, something inhuman, that which is not of human form, that is monstrous and/or divine, but it is a search marked more by ignorance than signification:

to and fro in shadow from inner to
outershadow

from impenetrable self to impene-
trable unself by way of neither

One searches for a way out of the Cartesian dilemma in which the subjective spirit cannot understand the basis of its intermingling with the world of substance and looks to ideas of purely subjective spirit and pure substance as refuges:

as between two lit refuges whose
doors once? gently close, once turned
away from gently part again

Nevertheless, the formal subjective realm of the sublime and the objective empirical fact of the beautiful are illusionary. The searcher, or the lost one, to borrow a phrase from another of Beckett's texts, moves from one to another,

beckoned back and forth and turned
away

heedless of the way, intent on the one
gleam or the other

until something paradoxical strikes the memory, out of space and time, a human figment of the inhuman, that aspect of desire that exists outside of time and space but informs them both, that desire which Krapp keeps rewind-

12. Seamus Heaney, "A Peacock's Feather," *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber, 1987), 38.

13. Medbh McGuckian, "Dovecote," *Venus and the Rain* (Meath: Gallery, 1994), 40.

14. Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1990), 31.

15. Derek Mahon, "Afterlives," *Selected Poems of Derek Mahon* (London: Viking, 1991), 190.

16. Beckett, "Neither," *As the Story was Told*, 108.

ing his tape to unveil.¹⁷ It is not the human face of the moment but the supernatural force that drives it. It is a sound that is no sound. It is a place that is neither subjective nor objective, masculine nor feminine, self nor another; it is a sublime, unholy nexus that waits to be recognized and sanctified by a light not shed by subject or object, but rather one that gently “unfades” in the *via negativa*:

till at last halt for good, absent for
good from self and other

then no sound

then gently light unfading on that
unheeded neither

unspeakable home

This is the sublime of neither moral nor aesthetic universalization but of the violence of the irreconcilable relationship; it is also the repressed desire for the inhuman that cannot be sublimated, the sublime that the beautiful aims to unveil and to cure. In every poem that follows there is a similar move toward unveiling, toward what may either be called grace or a cure.

Heaney’s “A Peacock’s Feather” fills in the spaces left blank by Beckett’s minimalist effect. It also places the sense of home in more traditional aesthetic landscapes, where gentle, ordered lands signify the beautiful and rugged, mountainous ones signify the sublime. He begins the poem with an appeal to a Kantian transcendental dimension but also with an acknowledgement of the strength of the empiricist Burkean one:

Six days ago the water fell
To christen you, to work its spell
And wipe your slate, we hope, for good.
But now your life is sleep and food
Which, with the touch of love, suffice
You, Daisy, Daisy, English niece.

The idea of cleansing the child of original sin brings one to the root of the aesthetics of sublimity, because sublime feeling is associated with the sense of sin. The sublimity of birth is somehow cured by the beauty of baptism. Heaney hopes, or perhaps ironically suggests, that his English niece stands a better chance of being so cleansed because of her surroundings, that her fate is with the guiltless beautiful rather than with her mother’s sublime Irish origins; this is made clear in the next stanza:

Gloucestershire: its prospects lie
Wooded and misty to my eye
Whose landscape, as your mother’s was,
Is other than this mellowness
Of topiary, lawn and brick,
Possessed, untrampled, walled, nostalgic.

17. Samuel Beckett, “Krapp’s Last Tape,” *Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove, 1984), 53-64.

The formal reality of the baptism is proved in the empirical reality of the surroundings. Such transcendence from the empirical paradoxically does not deny its claims. The boundaries of the beautiful in the above stanza are protected by the same violence that protects Edgar Linton's estate in *Wuthering Heights*. And Daisy's mother, like Heathcliff and Emily Brontë's father, comes from a landscape other than this "mellowness/Of topiary, lawn and brick."

In the next stanza, Heaney makes the sublime landscape of his and his sister's origin plain and explains why the choice of rhyming couplets is suitable for the neoclassical subject of the beautiful:

I come from scraggy farm and moss,
Old patchworks that the pitch and toss
Of history have left dishevelled.
But here, for your sake, I have levelled
My cart-track voice to garden tones,
Cobbled the bog with Cotswold stones.

He begins with images out of paintings of the landscape sublime, and then, because the images are at odds with the chosen style, Heaney explains that his style is predicated by the garden tones of the beautiful, tones closer to Yeats's famous beginning of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" than those for which Heaney is known. Yet, as if to weave some irony into the style, Heaney has shortened the usual rich pentameter to a more chastened tetrameter. He is suspicious of the "rich man's flowering lawns" of Yeats's poem, because he knows them to be walled and nostalgic. As Luke Gibbons has pointed out about Burke, eighteenth-century Ireland and the birth of aesthetics, the terrors of the natural sublime in Ireland are the very real ones of roving Irish brigands and English militias; there is no aesthetic distance as there is in England, and Heaney, like Burke, is aware of this.¹⁸ History has left the land "dishevelled."

Heaney then proceeds to bear in upon the Yeatsian sublime when he parallels the close of Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter" and the Coole Park poems with something much less "accustomed and ceremonious" than what Yeats imagines:

Ravelling strands of families mesh
In love-knots of two minds, one flesh.
The future's not our own. We'll weave
An in-law maze, we'll nod and wave
With trust but little intimacy—
So this is a billet-doux to say

That in a warm July you lay
Christened and smiling in Bradley
While I, a guest in your green court,
At a west window sat and wrote
Self-consciously in gathering dark.
I might as well be in Coole Park.

18. Luke Gibbons, "Topographies of Terror: Killarney and the Politics of the Sublime," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 95: 1 Winter (1996): 23-45.

Yeats's marriages and alliances are very different from Heaney's. The latter has no "rich horn" and "spreading tree" to symbolize the erotic basis of the beautiful, of the subject-object mystery at the base of the aesthetic experience but rather his families ravel and "mesh"; and, since the "future's not our own," they probably unravel and unmesh as well, especially as there is trust but little intimacy between the Irish and English branches of the family. There is only a legal labyrinth or an "in-law maze."

Though there is always the billet-doux of desire, Heaney, unlike Yeats in Coole Park, has difficulty imagining the reconciliation of the Anglo and the Irish traditions. He is "self-conscious in [the] gathering dark." Like Beckett, Heaney has brought us to the difficult moment in which the subject recognizes the humanity of the other. If sublimity is Irishness and the beautiful is Englishness, then any union should somehow reconcile their properties—the subjective, the objective, the masculine, the feminine—as well as their shared bloody history, which is precisely what Heaney imagines in the last stanza:

So before I leave your ordered home,
Let us pray. May tilth and loam,
Darkened with Celts' and Saxons' blood,
Breastfeed your love of house and wood—
Where I drop this for you, as I pass,
Like the peacock's feather on the grass.

The tilled earth and wood that represent the natural Celts and the order and artifice of loam and house that represent the artificial English should be Daisy's soul food. As symbol of this possible union, Daisy, or day's eye, is appropriately named. She is the symbol of the third stage in the postcolonial sublime, the movement towards some redemptive hybridity. Irish history is then figured as moving from the beauty of its preconquest origins through the terrible sublimity of its conquest and the processes of decolonization to a beautiful reshaping. It is a reshaping here represented somewhat apocalyptically with a peacock's feather, a symbol that is again borrowed ironically from Yeats.

As so often with aesthetics, the dialectic of the beautiful and the sublime aims toward a synthesis in which the sublime returns from its negative manifestations to its more positive beginnings in the beautiful. We also note in this scenario a movement from masculine terror of war to the maternal powers of the mother language. For the tilled earth and the soil's building material of bricks, "darkened with Celts' and Saxons' blood," are meant rather mysteriously to be the matrix of the beautiful. This takes us back to the eighteenth-century beginnings of aesthetic, in which the sublime was seen as an extension of the beautiful and not as its opposite. Heaney's attitude toward this is not incredulous, however; the poem is a beautiful symbol of apocalypse like the feather, but it is not the revelation itself.

Mahon's poem "Antarctica" is an ironic rendering of the type of self-sacrifice that would make such redemption and transcendence of historical oppositions possible. Any "home" for the spirit is posited in the bleak terrain of the unspeakable. Any hint of the erotic basis of the aesthetic moment is absent. This is surely a feat of Kantian disinterestedness, of the domination of the sen-

sible portion during sublime transcendence to the supersensible realm, but its parodic rendering shows how difficult it is to achieve the sublime in the present age except through the mediation of the ridiculous, of the antisublime. This is a theme that has become even more explicit in Mahon's recent volume, *The Yellow Book*, in which the very terms of the sublime have grown nonexistent, or have given way to the grotesque. "Antarctica" begins with a mock suspension of space and time and mock experience of the incomprehensible:

"I am just going outside and may be some time."
The others nod, pretending not to know.
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.¹⁹

He then proceeds to the explicit point at which the imagination goads the spirit into its domination of the body to escape space and time:

He leaves them reading and begins to climb.
Goading his ghost into the howling snow;
He is just going outside and may be some time.

At this stage the repetitive structure of the villanelle begins to complement the apparent ridiculousness of the experience. The sinking of the multilayered baroque beginnings and ornate trappings of the sublime is evident in the stylistic subversion of the verse form:

The tent recedes beneath its crust of rime
And frostbite is replaced by vertigo:
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

The strange self-sacrifice of L. E. G. Oates who, knowing supplies were low, hoped to aid his companions by his disappearance during Robert Scott's ill-fated expedition to Antarctica in 1910, may seem an anachronistically heroic act alongside the present creed of self-preservation, but Mahon insists that it has value:

Need we consider it some sort of crime,
This numb self-sacrifice of the weakest? No,
He is just going outside and may be some time —

The act indeed is the last hope for the Kantian moral sublime, for the categorical imperative:

In fact, for ever. Solitary enzyme,
Though the night yield no glimmer there will glow,
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

The glimmer here calls to mind Beckett's famous image in *Waiting for Godot* in which he writes "[t]hey give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more."²⁰ It is an image to which Mahon devotes the poem "An Image from Beckett." With a "subliminal batsqueak/Of reflex lamentation," Mahon mourns a universe of death presided over by the nega-

19. Derek Mahon, "Antarctica," *Selected Poems*, 190.

20. Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1986), 83.

tive being "No One." The poem ends with a last will and testament and the hope that in the "northern landscape" that so haunts him, his children may have light enough to read his will.²¹ It is this hope that turns the gleam of Beckett's image into a glow of sublime self-sacrifice. Although they never reach this type of crescendo, muted as it is, Beckett's works do propose that, even if it is not realized, humanity is potential only in the relationship of self to other. To Mahon, here, the sacrifice of the self is the only way to transcend the absurdity and danger of our predicament; and yet in transcending the absurdity one also forsakes human companionship, as this is the sublime's inhuman cost:

He takes leave of the earthly pantomime
Quietly, knowing it is time to go.
"I am just going outside and may be some time."
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.

Although Mahon's debt to Beckett is largest and certainly the most acknowledged of the poets discussed, McGuckian has her own inheritances. In "Dovecote," she engages in Beckettian blurring of boundaries, inverted sayings, and impenetrability, on her way to unfading a light upon her own unspeakable home. Expectedly, the sensuousness of her language and the oblique nature of her content leads the poem toward a strange confluence of opposites. There is a prettiness about the poem on the hunger strikers, which seems at odds with its content. Yet, this makes sense as the superhuman quality of their sacrifice evoked intensely human sympathy. The poem is a critique of their act of transcendent rebellion that also acknowledges its emotive power. In this poem she imagines building a cote for doves, which the strikers have become, from a single, pure wood, one that is nevertheless full of knots. She means this image of beauty to supplement winter, a season more traditionally associated with the sublime. The wood by association reminds her of a bow, a weapon, and that in turn reminds her of how nothing is sweet, or beautiful, that is not pure. Thus we move from dove, a symbol of peace, sacrifice, and Christ, to winter wood and weapon, from the beautiful to the sublime, from human knottiness to inhuman purity:

I built my dovecote all from the same tree
To supplement the winter, and its wood
So widely ringed, alive with knots, reminded me
How a bow unstrung returns again to straight,
How seldom compound bows are truly sweet.²²

From the image of inhuman purity she moves to a womblike image of the beautiful's untrespassed domain. And yet those striking doves within it, island-like, subjects isolated but still faithful, quite paradoxically need rescuing even though they are far above or seem in their suspension to risk little:

21. Derek Mahon, "An Image from Beckett," *The Collected Poems* (Meath: Gallery, 1999), 40.

22. McGuckian, "Dovecote," 40.

It's like being in a cloud that never rains,
The way they rise above the storm, and sleep
So bird-white in the sky, like day-old
Infant roses, little unambitious roads,
Islands not defecting, wanting to be rescued.

McGuckian then readily admits that she is seeking the spirit of her home, one that has qualities of the beautiful and the sublime, one that can be either fertile or sterile, human or inhuman. The sensuousness it promises is of a doubled kind, a negative pleasure so typical of the sublime experience, but McGuckian does not forget its roots in the beautiful:

Since I liked their manners better than
The summer, I kept leaning to the boat-shaped
Spirit of my house, whose every room
Gives on to a garden, or a sea that knows
You cannot reproduce in your own shade.

Aware that the beautiful means to unveil and cure the sublime, she has brought her inhuman spirit of self-sacrifice, this threshold experience, into the aesthetics of her domestic sphere. Like Beckett, however, she knows that there is something unspeakable about her home, the source of her creativity, and traces this quality back out to the sky, the inhuman realm against which we define ourselves:

Even to the wood of my sunflower chest,
Or my kimono rack, I owed no older debt
Than to the obligatory palette of the rain
That brought the soil back into tension on my slope
And the sea in, making me an island once again.

Nature itself becomes the palette of the artist and our lives the work of art, the origins of which is that sublime, unholy nexus that waits to be recognized on the blurred edges of reality. Here is the place of "neither," where the soil of earth, like the skin of the body, grows tense and bodies forth, surrounded by the salt strangeness of the sea, which knows itself an island once again, but also knows it can return to the mainland it both fears and loves. The hunger strike was for society although it was antisocial. It aimed to consolidate the community by destroying the individual, by endeavoring to expose the aggression of the colonizer, by sacrificing the colonized body. That the strikers become islands "once again" echoes the refrain of the national anthem becoming "a nation once again," resounding both the joy of freedom and the difficulties of identity in isolation. Art too is created in solitude for the sake of the larger society. McGuckian's poetic captures this in a very central way. The sexual/sensual resonance of her poetry is a profound and physical form of communication and yet her oblique poems find their inspiration in separateness. That double quality is what Heidegger calls the curse and blessing of existence; one dwells on the boundaries, unspeakable and at home, unable to find the metaphor that will end the anxiety of this borderline existence, looking for an authority that is beyond meaning.

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