Rural Ulster is a place mapped in poetry. From the Bardic songs of Gaelic times to the weaver ballads of the Scottish planters, it is an area immortalised in words. Many poets have turned to the countryside for inspiration and yet there is no universal theme to this place. The vast wealth of rural poetry has only one thing in common and that is its diversity. For, like the poets who write of it, rural Ulster is a multitude of things.

Modern rural verse can be traced back to one defining work: The Great Hunger written in 1942 by the Monaghan poet Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967). This epic poem liberated Irish verse from the Yeatsian world of fairies and noble peasants, showing rural life as brutal, tragic, bitter, euphoric, indeed everything it actually is rather than the romanticised view of old. Kavanagh had the nerve to include a hero without any heroic qualities, Paddy Maguire, a character who should ‘neither be damned or glorified,’ who struggles through a futile existence on his farm, who is doomed to an empty, celibate life and who, ‘said whatever came into his head / And inconsequently sang / While his world withered away.’

In alternating tones of anger, joy and despair, Kavanagh explodes the myth, the lie that ‘the peasant has no worries / In his little lyrical fields / He ploughs and sows.’

Though it is a work of tragedy, it is filled with remarkable images (‘potato-gatherers like mechanised scarecrows move’) and even in its despair it has a sharp edge of humour from, ‘O Christ! I am locked in a stable with pigs and cows for ever’ to the description of Maguire’s dream, ‘to clean his arse / With perennial grass / On the bank of some summer stream.’

The authorities confirmed the poem’s revolutionary power when they saw fit to have Kavanagh’s house raided and have it seized. Nonetheless, it got out and Irish poetry would never be the same again.

Another visionary followed in the form of Belfast poet John Hewitt (1907 –1987). A father figure to the Ulster renaissance of the 1960s, and an anthologist of traditional weaver poetry, Hewitt claimed, ‘I have turned to the landscape because men disappoint me’ (‘The Rams Horn’) a knowing white lie, since he was a tireless socialist who never gave up his faith in humanity. Indeed he continued in the same poem to demonstrate his compassion seeing, ‘the horned ram, glowering over the bog hole / though symbol of evil, will step through the blown grass with grace’ thus seeing the soul even in those damned as monsters.

Hewitt took great solace from the countryside particularly the Ulster glens and headlands where he sought refuge from the city. They inspired much of his work from the vaguely experimental, ‘The Mourne Mountains like a team of bears / tumbling into the sea / the embroidered fields like a monks patched cloak’ (‘From The Chinese of Wang Li Shi’) to the sympathetic portrayal of a rural neighbour,

He turned and plodded up the winding lane
to his dark house behind the fuschia hedge
and left me, thinking, under the far stars
how one could measure another's loneliness (‘Company’).

Whilst he found great beauty in nature, his poems were never whimsical. He held no illusions
and accepted that the countryside could be a wild and dangerous place. In ‘The Gap’ a farmer
reflects on his mortality during an illness, ‘Fencing a rough place on the mountain / where
the stirk was killed / he took a chill and came home shivering.’

The poem raises haunting parallels with the fate of Ulster’s lost laureate Louis Mc Neice.
Whilst collecting sound effects in a Yorkshire cave, Mc Neice was caught in a storm on the
moors and failed to change his drenched clothes. As a result, he developed bronchitis, which
led to pneumonia and his untimely death at the age of 55.

A major theme of Hewitt’s work is seeing the ‘eight hundred year’s disaster’ of political
violence in Ireland through the prism of the countryside. A keen supporter of civil rights for
all, he attacked and ridiculed the attitudes of conservative planters, ‘so long as I can walk my
dogs / around the old estate / and keep the Fenians in their bogs’ (‘An Ulster Landowner’s
Song’).

In ‘An Irishman In Coventry’ he juxtaposed ancient myths of the land and modern politics to
chilling yet somehow hopeful effect,

the dream’s distortion and the land’s division
the midnight raiders and the prison cells
Yet like Lir’s children, banished to the waters
our hearts still listen for the landward bells.

In ‘Post Script, 1984’ he explored infamous places whose names resonate because they were
the setting for atrocities, places born from and sunk deep into ‘our dark dream-clotted
consciousness.’

In ‘Ulster Names’, he showed us the other side of the coin when he surveyed the local
landscape and place names with a pride tinted with sadness, ‘I take my stand by the Ulster
Names / each clean hard name like a weathered stone...’ ending with the hopeful assertion
that the land is just one thing we all share, ‘for over us all is the自我same sky / the limestone’s
locked in the strength of the bone / and who shall mock the steadfast stone?’

He died a few years later and is remembered more fondly than any other Ulster poet as much
a source of inspiration to the next generations as the countryside was to him.

While the poetry of Seamus Heaney can soar off to allusions of ancient Greece and Beowulf,
the centrepoint to which he always returns is the humble soil of his family’s County Derry
farm. His early work is infused by a great tension, resulting from the conflicting forces
jostling for his soul; the pastoral competes with the urban, the traditional with the
progressive, myth with reality, the love of his homeland with the allure of exile.

His first collection, Death of a Naturalist (1966) is firmly rooted in this environment, with its
vivid evocations of farm life, yet it is a setting that he has left behind and one already fading
into memory. In the first poem ‘Digging’, Heaney gives voice to his feelings of ambition, and
a lingering sense of guilt, in breaking the inherited tradition of farming, choosing the poet’s
pen to his father’s spade and seeking ‘the heaven of education’ to ‘the earth of farm labour.’
Nonetheless he has never shaken off the allure he has for the countryside. At the very beginning of his Nobel Prize acceptance speech thirty years or so later, he returned to the ‘intimate, physical, creaturely existence, in which the night sounds of the horse in the stable beyond one bedroom wall mingled with the sounds of adult conversation from the kitchen beyond the other.’

With the escalation of the Troubles, Heaney turned his attention to exploring tribalism, the weight of ancestry on the minds of the living and colonialism and its victims. He did this through reference to the countryside, and through its myths and archaeology he found analogies for the Troubles.

In ‘The Other Side’ from Wintering Out (1972) he depicts a Protestant farmer jibing the infertility of the Catholic Heaney family’s land from his own fertile plains, referring sardonically to ‘his fabulous, biblical dismissal / that tongue of the chosen people.’

In the series of bog poems (North, 1975) that made him famous, Heaney delves into tribalism and the grip it has. In ‘Punishment,’ he presents as sisters the ancient corpse of a ritually sacrificed woman unearthed from bogland and Ulster women tarred and chained to railings for collaborating with the enemy. He confesses to the hold tribalism has over his soul and a sense of powerlessness, calling himself an ‘artful voyeur’ who ‘would have cast…the stones of silence’ and ‘would connive in civilised outrage.’

Though his work is political, he never resorts to propaganda or piety. Instead he seeks the dark rivers beneath politics and explores them through poetry ‘both the ship and the anchor’ of our souls. In later work he has continued walking the line between responsibility and feeling, exploring many styles from Dante to Eastern European, all filled with the stately authority that, for better or worse, has become his trademark. As far as he has travelled, he always returns to the rural setting of his childhood farm. As he wrote in The Spirit Level (1997), ‘It may migrate but it returns to the land.’

If Heaney is the troubled rural native, Michael Longley is the enthusiastic emigrant, leaving the streets of Belfast to embrace the countryside. Longley was one of the great bearers of humanity through the dark days of the Troubles.

While the vast majority of intellectuals fled, he stayed through the worst and through his poetry, he maintained a brave and honourable form of humanism, despite receiving death threats and witnessing friends murdered. When the IRA called its ceasefire, it was Longley who anticipated what needed to be done with the heartbreaking lines, ‘I get down on my knees and do what must be done / And kiss Achilles’ hand, the killer of my son.’

He has produced some of the most glorious and haunting depictions of rural Ulster (and Ireland) using nature as a balance to the horrors of the Troubles.

In ‘The Ice-Cream Man’ he offers an elegiac litany of Irish flowers ‘thyme, valerian, loosestrife’ in memory of a murdered shopkeeper.

In ‘The Fishing Party’, he lists local fishing flies ‘Dark Mackerel, Gravel Bed, Greenwell’s Glory, Soldier…’ for off duty policemen killed on a fishing trip.

He too is under no illusions. Life is hard and on occasions cruel.
In ‘Two Pheasants’ he frames the unforgettable image of a pheasant running, ‘exploded over cultivated ground to where / A car in front of our car had crushed his bride.’

In his sequence ‘The Mayo Monologues’, from the collection Echo Gate (1979) he deals with the violence and alienation that bubble under the veneer of civilisation, using rural imagery such as a ‘ram tangled in barbed wire,’ ‘the purgatory of the windy gaps,’ culminating in the harrowing scene where a mentally handicapped boy is ‘flogged with a blackthorn’ because of a misunderstanding.

That he can still find an almost Zen-like beauty in such a world, that he must find it, is Longley’s abiding strength. Longley enables us to see the everyday as extraordinary and makes the familiar sound startlingly new, for example in his poem ‘In The Corner Of The Eye’ he paints a kingfisher as ‘a rainbow / fractured against / the plate glass of winter’.

It is this reverence, this sense of awe in nature and the redemptive power of art that offers us some kind of hope. In his recent collection Snow Water (2004) he sums it up best, ‘Poems endure the downpour like the skylark's / Chilly hallelujah, the robin's autumn song.’

There are other poets whose work has a broad range of subjects, but who touch on rural themes.

The poet Derek Mahon, whose work travels through time and space and is inspired as much by Baudelaire as Hewitt, has immortalised the islands of Achill and Rathlin. The former as a place of beauty but also the setting for an ode to loneliness, ‘And wish she were with me now between thrush and plover / Wild thyme and sea-thrift, to lift the weight from my heart,’ the latter the setting of a massacre of native women by invaders but now a peaceful ‘sanctuary... where amazed / Oneiric species whistle and chatter’ that is ‘through with history.’

The Brooklyn born, Tyrone bred poet John Montague has produced a wide-range of work from pastoral pieces steeped in Irish history to brave new twists on love poetry. His work has at its core an open-mindedness and urbaneness, no doubt the result of his travels and his time with Allen Ginsberg in California, Brendan Behan in Dublin and Samuel Beckett in Paris. Yet, he never preaches, but rather lets his work carry itself with moral subtlety. He is capable of great political and social meditation as in The Rough Field (1972) where he explores the faultlines of the North while also displaying a sense of delicate lyricism; ‘a hazel tree rustles, / I am led towards the borders of dream’ (‘The Screech Owl’).

He celebrates the countryside, laments modern man’s disconnection from it and mourns the lost names and Gaelic language of the place,

The whole landscape a manuscript
We had lost the skill to read,
A part of our past disinherited;
But fumbled, like a blind man,
Along the fingertips of instinct. (‘A Lost Tradition’).

He once referred to the poet Theodore Roethke as, ‘Yeats in a speakeasy.’ The phrase is telling and he may as well have been saying it of himself, for he has that mixture of authority and subversion, dealing with myth and the history of the land, but with a crucial absence of Yeat’s aloofness and blessed with a modern worldly air.
Like Yeats, he has seen a relative renaissance and a resurgence of energy in his later years which he explores in his recent poem White Water (2004),

‘As a fish gleams most / fiercely before it dies,’ facing
down his own mortality as,
luminous, bleached –
white water –
that light in the narrows
before a storm breaks.

With the advent of post-modernism and globalisation, the nature of culture poetry has changed. The great academic patriarchs of old are increasingly solitary figures. Instead poetry has fragmented into many protean forms, finding its voice on journals and magazines, in bars and coffee shops and in the multi media forms of digital film, music and the internet.

The post-Heaney generation of poets (Carson, Muldoon et al) have followed prevailing trends and are thus more urban, more cosmopolitan, more postmodern. On occasion they touch on the rural but are more likely to look beyond the confines of Ulster, or the shores of Ireland for inspiration. Though in today’s globalised society there are vast thrilling continents of space and time to explore and inspire, it is important not to lose our roots, to ignore our sense of history and our place in the environment.

The danger is, in turning away from the land we may lose something. There is a danger of being set adrift in the cosmopolitan, just as others were once trapped in the parochial. If we have no affinity with the land, it and ultimately, we, are doomed. The future rests on a new generation of poets and writers finding fresh ways of seeing our surroundings and ourselves. A new generation of poets are only now beginning to make themselves known. The land awaits.

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