

Article

'I see where I stand' Detachment and Engagement in Harry Clifton's Poetry

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Abstract: This essay reads Harry Clifton's poetry as a body of work that illustrates the poet's engagement with and detachment from the poetry of his peers. It notes Clifton's chosen routes of travel in Africa, Asia, and Europe, his interest in Ireland and its elsewhere and his endeavours to find an ideal distance to write from. It also elucidates his Irish subject matter, his involvement with journals, editors and publishers as well as his critical readings of 20th-century Irish poetry. The essay engages with important strands of current critical thinking that have sought to examine a post-nationalist Ireland with Clifton being seen as a bridge between an older and younger circle of writers. Neither hermetic nor sociable, Clifton emerges as a poet engaging with concentric circles of Irish poetry on his own terms.

Keywords: Ireland; migration; engagement; circles; travel; detachment; poetry

In a cluster of poems that conclude Harry Clifton's *Comparative Lives* (1982), the poet's troubled relationship to Ireland comes into particular focus. The poet takes stock of his relations with his contemporaries in Dublin while reflecting on recent experiences in Asia finding himself alienated from the dysfunctional city he has returned to. This was the year of the GUBU bother when, in the summer of 1982, Irish society and politics veered in the direction of the grotesque, unbelievable, bizarre and unprecedented (GUBU). This phrase was memorably articulated by then Taoiseach Charles Haughey in his improvised response at a press conference to a bizarre set of circumstances by which a wanted murderer was found staying in the house of the then Attorney General, Patrick Connolly, in a case that would be famously fictionalised later by John Banville in *The Book of Evidence* (1989).¹

The collection of poems Clifton published in that year evokes the bleakness of Dublin at that moment. The poet returns from his stint in the Far East (from 1980 to 1982, he had worked in Thailand) as an unwelcome revenant barely noticed by his contemporaries:

Anonymous, passing back
Into the Live Register
Of Ireland, I'm home again
On the beaten track –
A man.

¹ In August 1982, suspected murderer Malcolm MacArthur (who was subsequently convicted of the murder of Bridie Gargan in Phoenix Park on 22 July 1982) was apprehended at the house of then Attorney General Patrick Connolly. Under the media spotlight, Taoiseach Charles Haughey described this turn of events as 'a bizarre happening, an unprecedented situation, a grotesque situation, an almost unbelievable mischance' and this phrase was condensed by Conor Cruise O'Brien, as 'grotesque, unbelievable, bizarre and unprecedented' (GUBU) which became shorthand for this and other high-level political scandals in Ireland as well as denoting an era of dysfunctional Irish politics in the early 1980s.

My estate
 Approximately –
 Cup and plate, knife and spoon,
 Time and silence,
 Rented room. (Clifton 1982, p. 9)

This almost Larkinesque drabness ('Mr Bleaney' comes to mind)² is socially embedded within the Dublin of its time: a city of cheap lodgings, bad weather, unemployment and economic gloom which Clifton describes as 'the rain-sodden bedsitter land of a mouldering provincial city of the Empire [...] capital of a half-independent Republic [...] in his essay 'Coming Home' (Clifton 2006, p. 7) which details his returns and flights across three decades. Clifton, born in 1952, witnessed the growing pains of an Ireland still far from self-confident or economically assured. Indeed, Sebastian Barry, writing in his Introduction to *The Inherited Boundaries: Younger Poets of the Republic of Ireland* (Dolmen Press, 1986) in which a generous selection of Clifton's early poetry was included, would characterise the Ireland of mid-century as 'a separate, little-understood place' (Barry 1986, p. 14), a country 'without definition', of 'islands inside an island' and of 'dullness, dismay, and inaction' (p. 18). Among the poets included in Barry's anthology, Michael O'Loughlin has lived outside Ireland for extended periods. Matthew Sweeney (1952–2018) lived in London for many years while Aidan Carl Matthews, Thomas McCarthy, Dermot Bolger and Barry himself have remained primarily in Ireland.

Clifton experiences the cold draughts of reality often dealt out to the returning Irish migrant. The poem 'November', also from *Comparative Lives*, is similarly bleak as the poet subsists in a Dublin of 'freezing fog', 'unswept streets' and 'silence', a city too far gone, '[t]oo ripe for revolution'. The grimness is, to some degree, bracing because at least '[i]n all this' the poet sees where he stands:

Muzzled dogs comprehending
 The home stretch, the nature of the traps –
 I see where I stand
 In all this, and everything else under wraps. (Clifton 1982, p. 57)

Clifton senses that 'coming back was not the same as coming home' (Clifton 2006, p. 8) and seems to be struggling with 'identity problems' in reconciling himself to his home country, feelings that he later acknowledges in 'Coming Home' (p. 9). The poet is tentative and provisional, almost evasive about his home ground, and these deep reservations would persist up to and beyond Clifton's definitive return to Ireland in 2004. Clifton's later volume *Portobello Sonnets* (2016) charts some of the same anxieties of return, admitting to the 'fears and vulnerabilities involved'. In an interview, Clifton explains that during the genesis of that sonnet sequence, from 'late autumn 2004', he wrote some 'violently negative' sonnets that were later 'cut' (Clifton 2016b) and he confesses in 'Coming Home', with regard to the earlier occasion of a literary spat in the late eighties over an article he published on the Irish literary scene, to finding such 'anger' to be 'cathartic' (Clifton 2006, p. 10).

One discerns, therefore, deep continuities of exile and return in Clifton's sense of himself in 2004 as being, in lines from sonnet 1 of *Portobello Sonnets*, the '[l]atest of blow-ins, ready to try again' on the 'dangerous Dublin stretch' where attempts to 'disturb the human silt, [...] in home waters' are problematic at best (Clifton 2016a, pp. 9, 13). The feeling of subterfuge is also palpable; silence, exile and cunning drift miasmically across these lines and the act of homecoming is imbued with the aura of the exilic. As fellow poet and contemporary, Michael O'Loughlin warns in *The Irish Times* in words directed at the unwary returning Irish migrant: 'Think again [...] for it will be a mistake

² Philip Larkin, 'Mr Bleaney', *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), pp. 102–3.

[...] Don't come back. If you decide to come back anyway, remember that returning is the Great Irish Solecism. Never forget, we don't want you' (O'Loughlin 2018). Arguably, Clifton and O'Loughlin have discovered where they stand and this process of revealing what might otherwise be 'under wraps' is part of Harry Clifton's distinctive aesthetic, no less than it is the subject of O'Loughlin's own poetry, his forthright critique of the Irish polity. The return is always problematic whereas flight provides an escape from confusion. The poem 'Icy Pandemonium' from *Secular Eden* (2007) shows Clifton's relief at being able to get away from 'the family circle' and 'the notion of home' after the 'glittering frenzy of Christmastide' in Dublin (Clifton 2007, p. 65). Safe in Paris, Clifton can reflect on family misfits, 'silent siblings', and an Irish literary scene that resembles '[t]he dialogue of the deaf,' with writers 'outshouting each other/In Nesbitt's or the Palace' (Clifton 2007, pp.65–66). On the short flight from Dublin to Charles de Gaulle, Clifton anticipates:

[...] the warmth to come,
A silence at the heart of Paris, a room,
Detached, anonymous, nothing to do but write. (Clifton 2007, p. 66)

This detachment and embrace of anonymity remain consistent features of both earlier poems of the 1980s and poems published in the new millennium, but a new note of confidence and literary purpose is articulated in 'Icy Pandemonium' and the poet seems to have a clear sense of the poetic tasks in hand. In *Comparative Lives*, the poem 'Reasons of State' is suffused by the marginality and drift that Clifton seems to have drawn from creatively in this phase of his writing career which is here expressed by way of an encounter with a female contemporary towards whom the poet had been romantically drawn in an unhappy relationship:

By autumn, I am gone
To the Gold and Ivory Coasts
Of imagination, a feckless son
Bequeathing the Dublin streets
I am miserable on
To yourself. You came from the country
To do them justice for me,
With civic rationality,
Proper pride. We kiss goodbye
In the yellow light of some lamppost,
Watch each other retreat
Into separate destinies, [...] (Clifton 1982, pp. 54–55)

Clifton is 'miserable on' the streets of Dublin, but his poems of exile from this period at least, convey the same world weariness. 'Loneliness in the Tropics', for example, from *Office of the Salt Merchant* (1979) vocalises a low-voltage air of resignation that is echoed by 'Early Days':

No one coming home
From North, South, East or West
To the unlit aerodrome
Tonight [...]
I walk back,
My mind full of empty spaces,

Billowing like a windsock

On a pole. (Clifton 1979, p. 35)

The desolate aerodrome serves as an objective correlative for the poet's feelings of frustration; he 'has been here a year', but is listless; the aerodrome offers escape and entrapment, and only infrequent flights out. Like the room in 'Early Days' or the dog track in 'November', everything points to comparative ways of being lonely, to shifting modalities of discontent.

Reviews of the collections published by The Gallery Press were mixed and may have further discouraged the poet and convinced him that escape was the better option. Writing in *Poetry Ireland Review*, James J. McAuley dismissed *Comparative Lives* as 'bloodless shades—discontented man adrift in seas of solipsism' (McAuley 1983, p. 45) while *The Liberal Cage* (1988) was described by Tom Clyde in *Fortnight* as 'passionless, cynical, disillusioned, hard-bitten ... a hard book to get excited about' (Clyde 1989, p. 21). Bill Tinley, meanwhile, in *Poetry Ireland Review*, considered the poems in *Night Train Through the Brenner* (1994) to be 'travel weary and "directionless"', failing 'to transcend the circumstantial' (Tinley 1994, p. 42). More discerning critics recognised Clifton's distinctive talents; Gerald Dawe was an early champion who found Clifton's poems 'exciting ... carefully mediated', resisting 'the immediate effect' and using 'the random, arbitrary "events" of experience' to explore 'their very contingency' thus drawing the opposite conclusion from Tinley with respect to Clifton's orchestration of experience (Dawe 1981, p. 14). John F. Deane was less stinting than McAuley in his assessment of *Comparative Lives* as the work of a poet 'finding his themes' which are 'modern, urgent, his own' (Deane 1983, p. 43).

In 'Reasons of State', the unnamed College contemporary has launched a political career while Clifton struggles to establish his early literary reputation. As the much later poem 'Art, Children and Death', from *Herod's Dispensations* (2019), avows 'still, one goes on writing ...' (Clifton 2019a, p.28) even if the reviewers are hostile. Writing and publishing may often seem benighted by the twin perils of isolation and social obligation, and failure is never to be discounted, but some dispensations are acknowledged by Clifton. Sonnet 7 in *Portobello Sonnets* gives a heartfelt '[t]hank you from the human world' to a deceased editor whom the poem commemorates as having been a 'contact point' whose contribution to literary circles in Dublin deserves a 'Last Post/On a silent trumpet' (Clifton 2016a, p. 15). These contacts must be borne in mind in a discussion of Clifton; he has maintained strong relationships with various editors and literary magazines over the years starting with *The Honest Ulsterman* in the 1970s, edited by Frank Ormsby, where Clifton published his first pamphlet *Null Beauty* (Ulsterman Publications, 1975) and where several of his early poems featured from 1974–79. Subsequently, Clifton's affiliations have included *Poetry Review* (UK) in the 1990s 'where Peter Forbes ran a broad church' (Clifton 2015, p. 2) during which time Clifton was a regular reviewer. *Metre* magazine, edited from Dublin and Prague by David Wheatley and Justin Quinn, published Clifton's pamphlet *God in France: A Paris Sequence 1994–1998* (Metre editions, 2003) as well as poems and reviews by Clifton in eight issues during its lifetime of seventeen issues between 1996 and 2005. Clifton's first four poetry collections—*The Walls of Carthage* (1977), *Office of the Salt Merchant* (1979), *Comparative Lives* (1982) and *The Liberal Cage* (1988)—were published by the Gallery Press who also brought out Clifton's *The Desert Route: Selected Poems 1973–1988* (1992). Subsequent publishers Wake Forest University Press and Bloodaxe Books have published Clifton's more recent collections: the award-winning *Secular Eden: Paris Notebooks 1994–2004* (2007), *The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass* (2012), *The Holding Centre: Selected Poems 1974–2004* (2014), *Portobello Sonnets* (2016) and *Herod's Dispensations* (2019). A 'silent trumpet' can now perhaps be sounded to this wider circle of editors and publishers who have supported Clifton's career to date.

Notwithstanding these publishing networks, as a poet, Harry Clifton has, in his own words, 'never been part of a "circle" in the sense [commonly] implied [...] cohorts of likeminded poets socialising with ease and no fear of departure from a common consensus or party line' (Clifton 2019b). 'The Garden' in *Secular Eden* perhaps best expresses this detachment from literary networks:

No need to mention where all this was
 I had travelled enough, by then,
 To dispense with where [...]
 I was here, in the garden [...]
 nothing else mattered
 But the garden and having your own key. (Clifton 2007, p. 19)

Clifton has found sympathetic niches within Irish literary circles and in the UK, US³ and in Europe⁴ but he does not believe in partisan groupings of ‘likeminded poets’. In all of this, he retains a strong sense of the commonalities of human experience wherever he happens to be. In response to questions from Justin Quinn in a feature on ‘Irish poetry and the diaspora’ in *Metre* magazine in 1997, he wrote:

The city of Paris rubs off in a different way than the American Midwest, the Jos plateau of Nigeria differently than the mountains on the Cambodian border. Having lived and written in all those places and many others, it is no longer the difference between them that interests me, but what they share in terms of a common human experience. (Clifton 1997, p. 11)

In an interview with David Wheatley, also in *Metre* magazine, he describes himself as ‘a citizen of a language rather than a citizen of a place’ and says that his travels have been a strategy or opportunity to ‘renew [his] vision through changing the angle’ (Clifton 1996, p. 41; p. 45). In Paris, for example, he ‘was protective of [his] mother tongue, English—alienation not assimilation the desired condition’ (Clifton 2011a). On this view, Clifton has neither embraced overseas cultures in the full, linguistic sense, nor reconciled himself fully to his country of origin.

This reluctance to assume a narrower Irish cultural identity has raised suspicions on the part of some critics that Clifton’s self-confessed ambivalence is part of a strategic distancing of his work from the matter of Ireland or from historical experience as such (‘outside history’ is a common phrase in Clifton’s poems). Wheatley asks whether Clifton has ‘cultivated [...] to some extent’ his distance from the contemporary poetry scene (Clifton 1996, p. 40) while Ailbhe McDaid, in a more sceptical reading, considers Clifton’s poetry as one of ‘contrived detachment’ (McDaid 2017, p. 155). In McDaid’s eyes, Clifton’s ‘central ethic’ is one ‘of marginalisation’ (p. 159) which ‘prioritises peripherality through existential distance’ (p. 161). But for other critics, such as Justin Quinn, Clifton’s ‘cultivated marginality’ (McDaid 2017, p. 149) is less bad faith and more an honest ‘reaction against Ireland’ and, even more, an ‘engagement with foreign experience for its own sake’ (Quinn 2008, p. 190). On this view, Clifton is among a group of Irish writers who have a ‘valedictory’ approach to Ireland (Quinn 2008, p. 2).⁵ Quinn identifies a trend in contemporary Irish poetry towards ‘the disappearance of Ireland’ (Quinn 2008, p. 194), a trend also suggested by McDaid’s study of *The Poetics of Migration in Contemporary Irish Poetry* (2017). It remains a moot point whether Ireland can be made to disappear so readily, but certainly such poets as Clifton, O’Loughlin, Muldoon and others mentioned below have succeeded in putting more than an ‘existential distance’ between themselves and their country of birth. Poetic focalisation between speaker and subject is one means by which Clifton achieves what he terms an ‘ideal distance’ from the intrinsic ‘complexity’ of Ireland, a technique which he uses very effectively in his poems (Clifton 1997, p. 12). One senses, however, that the marginalities this method conveys are less ‘contrived’ than genuine and are part of a broader Irish cultural dynamic.

³ Clifton held residencies at universities in Iowa, New Hampshire and North Carolina in the 1980s and Wake Forest University Press published *Secular Eden* in 2007 as well as being his US publisher for subsequent volumes.

⁴ For example, he taught at the University of Bordeaux during 1996 and Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux published *Le Canto d’Ulysse* (Ollier 1996), a selected poems in French translation edited by Nicole Ollier in that year.

⁵ Discussed as ‘Muldoon and other émigrés’ in Chapter 11 of Quinn’s *The Cambridge Introduction to Irish Poetry, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 175–93.

Indeed, Clifton's distinctive cosmopolitanism wins more unstinting praise in *Post-Ireland?: Essays on Contemporary Irish Poetry* edited by Holdridge and Conchubhair (2017). As the editors explain in their Introduction:

The title of this collection of essays, *Post-Ireland?*, acknowledges the question of the disappearance of a certain version of Ireland, that the old definitions may no longer apply, and implies with the question mark that perhaps Ireland can never be left behind because, as a colonial entity, the formulation of its identity has always been linked to its possible dissolution or absorption. (Holdridge and Conchubhair 2017, p. 10)

For them, Clifton is an exemplary figure, 'a bridge between older and younger poets, between Ireland and post-Ireland' (p. 10) whose sense of place is 'always being redefined' and who thus avoids either a rejection or adoption of 'essential identities' (pp. 10–11). He has a 'mysterious migratory sense' (p. 11) which allows for traversing of times and places; movement is the most continuous element. In this respect, Holdridge and Ó Conchubhair rightly point out that Clifton's 'After Ireland' from *The Holding Centre* supplies a defining image of a shifting and spectral Irishness that redefines rootedness for our more liquid times:

A solitude,
A self-sufficiency
Feeding, not on roots,
But on the dream of roots. (Clifton 2014, p. 134)

This Heaneyesque imagery echoes Clifton's 'The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass', a poem very much concerned with aftermaths, where a victim of the Irish Civil War is commemorated in images of 'tracks', 'turf', 'frost', 'winter', 'a pillow', 'ice in the soul' (Clifton 2012, pp. 44–46), a vocabulary surely resonant of Heaney's *North* (1975). Even though the body of Captain Lemass rests in the Beckett country of the Dublin mountains, the poem reminds its readers more of Clifton and Heaney's admiration for Patrick Kavanagh than it does their more limited affinities with the Nobel laureate from Foxrock. The poem excavates the troubled inheritance bequeathed by Captain Noel Lemass, brother of future Taoiseach Seán Lemass and veteran of the Easter Rising, who was murdered by Free State troops in 1923. Lemass is a cypher and symbol for those other Irish disappearances—and all disappearances—that Heaney's poetry so movingly responds to. Heaney's reading of Kavanagh's transition from 'real topographical presence' in his early poetry toward 'luminous spaces within his mind' in his later poetry, gives us a hint as to how Clifton has fused symbolic and tactile aspects of the Lemass memorial site (Heaney 2002, pp. 135–36) via Kavanagh and Heaney. We observe Clifton working here with both 'roots' and 'a dream of roots', experience and memory, much as Kavanagh, on Heaney's reading, transitioned between these modes in moving from his early Monaghan phase to his later Dublin phase.

Clifton confesses to having come to Heaney's work later than many of his contemporaries and to first reading it properly with 'an unconditioned eye' in 2004 and admiring its 'physical sense of the world' (Clifton 2011b, p. 21). Indeed, Clifton's own distinction between a poem 'about the senses' and one 'of or from the senses' (Clifton 2011b, p. 21, Clifton's italics) corresponds to the reality/imagination dichotomy of 'roots' and 'a dream of roots' originally perceived by Heaney in Kavanagh. Clifton's own presentation of the physical also owes a debt to 'the bare cosmic space' of wilderness regions that are 'indifferent to man' which he identifies in Gary Snyder's poetry but which equally are spaces Beckett conjures with in his evocations of inhospitable terrain in the Dublin and Wicklow mountains where Beckett used to walk with his father as a boy (Clifton 2011b, p. 24). The cover of Clifton's *The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass* which uses David Davidson's iconic photo of man and boy on a road to nowhere on the snow-covered hill country near Dublin, first published in Eoin O'Brien's *The Beckett Country* (1986), affirms this connection.

The Beckettian line of influence is one that also runs through the work of Derek Mahon who wrote a Foreword for Clifton's *The Desert Route: Selected Poems 1973–1988* (1992) in which he praised Clifton's 'formal assurance' and 'intricate melancholy' (Clifton 1992, p. 9). The formal assurance and mastery of stanzaic forms are common to both poets and Clifton 'fell in love with the large, contemplative stanzas' of Mahon's celebrated early poetry when a copy of *Courtyards in Delft* (1981) reached him on the Thai–Cambodian border courtesy of Peter Fallon of the Gallery Press (Clifton 2016c). In his review of Mahon's *New Collected Poems* (2011), Clifton praises 'the irregularity of line, the jaggedness' of Mahon's famous poem 'A Disused Shed in Country Wexford' while also admiring 'the spellbound simultaneity of a single experience' which conflates 'Peruvian liftshafts, mycologists, light meters, mushrooms [...] Treblinka and Pompeii' (Clifton 2016c). Something of Mahon's formal assurance and detachment seems to have rubbed off on poems in Clifton's *Winter Sleep* in which the Civil War context finds equivalent expression. Mahon's poem features 'the expropriated mycologist' and relic of the pre-Independence social order who 'never came back' leaving his mushrooms to fester 'in a foetor/Of vegetable sweat since civil war days' (Mahon 2011, p. 81). In Clifton's 'Misprision' '[e]verything' is 'out of joint' and, like Mahon's famous example, the occlusions of the poem are its chief preoccupation, empty chasms like 'Peruvian mines' suggestive of 'places where a thought might grow' (Mahon 2011, p. 81). Clifton's 'Misprision' goes back to

... 1922, when the disappointed
Landlord fled, and the circle of apples grew
At the base of the tree. (Clifton 2012, p. 32)

It is a poem of revenants, like 'The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass' and it covers that same sweep of history that Mahon brilliantly achieved in his retrospective poem that was inspired partly by the postcolonial vista of J. G. Farrell's novel *Troubles* (1970). In *Winter Sleep*, the poem on the facing page titled 'Dying Generations' has the same 'spellbound simultaneity' Clifton admired in Mahon's 'Disused Shed', with a nod presumably to Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium'. The 'eternal everydayness/Of Ireland' is encapsulated in distant and detached imagery of 'an empty mind [...] a high ceiling,/A jug of clear spring water,/The buzz of a chainsaw, somebody felling a tree' (Clifton 2012, p. 35) resonant of Mahon's aural and visual palette which, in 'A Disused Shed', includes '[a] trickle of masonry', 'rooks querulous in the high wood' and 'a lorry changing gear at the end of the lane', sounds indicative of the same aura of absence that Clifton creates (Mahon 2011, p. 81).

If the poems of Clifton's award-winning *Secular Eden* (2007) and his prior collection *Night Train through the Brenner* (1994) seemed to call for an account of the 'ideal distance' he has sought by living abroad, it was because of their expansive range which demanded an account of Clifton's 'migratory sense'. It seems unhelpful to refer to this sense simply as a 'rootless aesthetic', as Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin does in her review of *Portobello Sonnets*, or as one that has been wilfully 'discerned (even demanded) by critics' (Ní Chuilleanáin 2017), applied to the poems after the fact. Rather, as Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin goes on to acknowledge, Clifton is 'exploring on his own terms the fertile gap between the native and the national' (Ní Chuilleanáin 2017) and, one must add, the national and the international. The return of Clifton to Dublin in 2004 is an important attempt 'to try again' (Clifton 2016a, p. 9), a wish, as Clifton explains 'to reconnect with an older generation before it passed away' (Clifton 2016b) and to engage with Dublin's literary milieu more actively. This re-engagement with Ireland entailed a readjustment akin to 'rebuilding an identity' and the poems that would be published in *Portobello Sonnets* and *The Winter Sleep of Captain Lemass* were written mainly in the period 2004–2010 as part of this 'deliberate immersion in all things Irish' a fact reflected in the sections of *Winter Sleep* which are located in the 'Twenty-Six Counties', the 'Six Counties' and 'Elsewhere' and also in 'the local, the everyday' contexts of *Portobello Sonnets* (Clifton 2016b). His appointment as Ireland Professor of Poetry from 2010 to 2013 placed Clifton at the apex of Irish letters. Nevertheless, as his poem 'The Chair' wryly shows, the poet, now traveling 'somehow in first class', does not really relate to his newfound professorial status and the social obligations it entails:

That commonest of objects, a chair –
 I relax into it, gradually,
 After a lifetime. The dream upholsters itself [...]
 As for the young, they have more to do
 Than knock on my door. And what advice,
 If any, could I give them? (Clifton 2015, p. vii)

Here, at the heart of Ireland's academic establishment, his characteristic tone of unruffled detachment is maintained just as, in *Portobello Sonnets*, we find the poet 'malingering without guilt/At the heart of things' (Clifton 2016a, p. 10); he is on the fringes, but central nevertheless. Perhaps an attitudinal shift is discernible, an ease on home ground which has superseded the much earlier 1980s disenchantment, but the poet as the fulcrum of a circle or school appears as distant a prospect as a knock on the door from a young student. Put simply, Clifton is not that kind of poet and he has always considered that his 'real work' has been 'done in obscurity'. Accolades and honours, such as the Ireland Professorship of Poetry, are part of what he calls 'the "afterlife"' of writing (Clifton 2019b).

Reflections on Clifton's relations with his contemporaries are therefore best advanced in terms of the social matrices by which he has navigated Ireland's literary waters rather than by attempting to locate his development in relation to any specific circle of poets. His criticism for *Poetry Review*, *The Irish Times*, *Metre* and other periodicals demonstrates an astute awareness of literary politics notwithstanding his own distaste for cliques and factions. For example, his first lecture as Ireland Professor of Poetry, delivered at Queen's University, Belfast on 8 February 2011, endeavours to outline a cultural moment in the London of 'the late eighties and early nineties' when Thatcherism was at its zenith during which time 'a group of poets ... came together'; Clifton names Michael Donaghy, Don Paterson, Ian Duhig with Sean O'Brien as '[t]heir senior and sometime mentor' (Clifton 2015, pp. 1–3). With the decline of the industrial North in the UK and the vulgar consumerism of the south east for context, the lecture lucidly illustrates a set of shared social concerns among this group, but again, 'Writing the Rustbelt in Britain and Ireland', the topic of Clifton's lecture, proves to be the concern of a loosely affiliated range of poets not a close-knit circle. Literary and cultural formations take many forms and Clifton's own poetic identity is best delineated in terms of what he is not than by what he is or may have been. In his 1996 interview with David Wheatley, Clifton notes that his poetry has not conformed to the dominant modalities of four important movements in Irish poetry of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, namely poetry of 'the Northern Irish troubles [...] the new wave of women's poetry [...] Irish-language revivalist poetry. And [...] the emergence of a Dublin working-class literary consciousness' (Clifton 1996, p. 40). As Clifton explains, 'the kind of poetry I was writing, out of African or Asian experience, was completely off the agenda' (p. 40). As Irish society has become (slightly) less provincial, Clifton suggests, his poetry 'has become more understandable' (p. 40). Clifton's work has been praised for its formal excellence, what Colm Tóibín describes as a 'hushed and controlled beauty' (Tóibín 2012). For some critics, these qualities sit uneasily with his cosmopolitan oeuvre which uses 'the conventional short poem' to express 'an enlarged and independent world-view' as J.C.C. Mays has argued (Mays 2016, p. 60). For Mays, 'the way' the poems are crafted sits oddly with their international subject matter, a traditional mode for non-traditional material and Mays prefers poets like Billy Mills, Catherine Walsh and Maurice Scully who 'want out of the rut altogether' in order not to give the impression of a 'package[d] ... experience' (Mays 2016, p. 60). Mays does, however, acknowledge that Clifton 'has won respect from both sides' of the avant-garde/mainstream divide in Irish poetry circles and he suggestively aligns Clifton's poetry with that of 'James Fenton in the UK' another well-travelled craftsman (Mays 2016, pp. 59–60).

In making these statements, Clifton demonstrates a keen awareness of how he has been situated, or more often overlooked, within the dominant paradigms of contemporary Irish poetry. In his lecture on 'The Uncreated Conscience: Europe in Irish Poetry', he characterises the 'displacement' of European travel as being a paradigm that, for most Irish writers, moves from 'innocence to experience' and

he notes examples of Irish poets who, at a time of extreme Irish insularity during and after World War Two (or ‘The Emergency’ as it was officially called in neutral Éire), insisted on recognising and inhabiting ‘the corrupt [...] universal [...] realm’ of Europe (Clifton 2015, p. 20). Samuel Beckett, Francis Stuart, Charles Donnelly (who died in 1937 fighting on the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War) are all perceived as writers whose engagement with this ‘realm of experience’ (Clifton 2015, p. 20). Clifton endorses. He goes on to quote from Thomas Kinsella’s ‘Downstream’ noting that poem’s post-Holocaust anxieties as symbolic of the “‘coming to conscience’” of this small number of Irish authors who achieved historical insight ‘not by staying at home but by self-immolation in a European catastrophe’ (Clifton 2015, p. 19).

Clifton seems especially alert to the perils that condemn idealism at times of crisis or in wartime. In signature poems like ‘Death of Thomas Merton’ (from *Comparative Lives*, 1982) and ‘Dag Hammarskjöld’ (from *The Liberal Cage*, 1988), it is the liberal idealism and unworldliness of these figures that render them vulnerable. The high-achieving Hammarskjöld, for example (sometime Secretary-General of the United Nations), ‘will never be good enough’ in spite of his Nordic work ethic and ‘Lutheran’ integrity (Clifton 2014, p. 55). His life, Clifton implies, is compromised from without by the muddy waters of international diplomacy, and from within by the impossibly high standards he sets himself. In the end, his ‘loneliness’ and ‘pain [...] can’t be controlled’ even as the ‘ethical’ (and unethical) ‘forces multiply’ around him (p. 55). He dies in a mysterious aeroplane accident in 1961, one of the ‘missions that failed’, while negotiating a ceasefire during the Congo crisis (1960–65) in circumstances ‘[n]o one controls’, except perhaps the intelligence agencies of the US and its allies (p. 56).

In Clifton’s eyes, staying in Ireland or on home ground leads one to ‘being categorised, boxed-in, neutralised for life’ (Clifton 1997, p. 12), but to go abroad has its own risks, even if ‘the strange aesthetic distance’ of European cities is ‘the necessary ground of imagination’ (Clifton 2015, p. 20). Clifton’s readings of his fellow Irish poets are alert to the ambiguities of ‘ethical authenticity’ (p. 26); the Holocaust, the Northern Irish Troubles, the Vietnam War can variously produce moral heroism, cowardice or corruption and Clifton is highly attuned to how these ethical complexities are inflected in the work of his contemporaries and immediate forebears—Thomas Kinsella, Patrick Kavanagh, Paul Muldoon, Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Dennis O’Driscoll and Michael Hartnett—all of whose work, in various ways, is for Clifton, a ‘coming to conscience’.

Viewed through the lens of Clifton’s own reflections on his contemporaries, his status as an exemplar to a slightly younger generation—Vona Groarke, Caitríona O’Reilly, Peter Sirr and David Wheatley for example—or as ‘a bridge between older and younger poets’ (Holdridge and Conchubhair 2017, p. 10) can be viewed more clearly. Arguably, Clifton’s poetry is not only a valediction to a certain version of mid-century Ireland, but at the same time a reaffirmation of a concomitant European conscience. Far from being the work of a deracinated outsider, Clifton’s oeuvre represents new tributary to the living stream of ‘elsewheres’ in Irish writing. Not only has Ireland caught up with Clifton, Clifton has accommodated himself to Ireland in a conscious process of adjustment and ‘reconciliation’ (Clifton 2016b). Clifton has absorbed Ireland more fully into his work since 2004 and Ireland has responded in kind with a fuller acknowledgment of his gifts thus diminishing somewhat the anxieties of past renunciations of his native land.

Clifton’s ‘Where We Live’ (from *Night Train Through the Brenner*, 1994) has a very contemporary, post-millennial feel being a searching meditation on the relative unimportance of location for the contemporary poet:

Where we live no longer matters
If it ever did, the difference
Between North and East, South and West,
Belfast Central or Budapest,
Currency changed, like innocence,
For the life that was going to be ours.

Let us admit it. There are powers
No border can contain. (Clifton 1994, p. 25)

This poem first featured in an anthology titled *Ireland in Exile* (1993) edited by Dermot Bolger at a time when Ireland's economy had begun to strengthen with an associated tail-off in emigration (from 1994 to 2009 Ireland received more migrants than it lost). Social trends in Ireland were thus keeping time with Clifton's openness to questions of identity and belonging and were reflected in Bolger's view in the Foreword to *Ireland in Exile* that contemporary Irish writers 'simply commute' (Bolger 1993, p. 7) between different locations and their whereabouts at any given moment is of no great import, just a question of 'changing the angle' (Clifton 1996, p. 45).

This new reality of constant movement feels weightless in Clifton's poems. No longer a world of distance and division (whether of race, creed, geography or class), increasingly all places are one place, like Paris in the new millennium, a secular Eden where '[n]o-one will ever fall from grace' and 'the Seventh Day' will pass innocuously with:

A rattle of skateboards –
Children playing [...] lovers,
Crossing race and bloodline.

—but '[n]o guilt now, only vertigo' (Clifton 2007, p. 96). The burdens of emigration, sexual prudery, racial prejudice have been lifted. In this context, it is the secular French state that upholds the status quo, signalled by the 'French municipal hall' and 'the flag of state' in the poem (p. 96). Paris represents the cosmopolitan ideal of a universal city at a time (late 1990s, early 2000s) when most of the new democracies of Eastern Europe were striving towards European integration and Francis Fukuyama's ideas of the end of history and the demise of 'the last ideological alternative to liberalism' were largely unchallenged (Menand 2018). The 'pure, organic apple' (p. 96) of Clifton's 'Secular Eden' now seems especially tainted and treacherous as several European countries slide towards 'illiberal democracy' (Drakulic 2019) and US and UK governments themselves become less stable and more authoritarian. In the geo-political sphere at least, Eden has proven itself to be illusory, or at least temporary, and Clifton's poem anticipates these developments.

These international perspectives move us well beyond 'the [...] concept of the Irish nation' as a baseline for poetry (Quinn 2008, p. 2) and would seem to affirm 'the disappearance of a certain version of Ireland' (Holdridge and Conchubhair 2017, p. 10). The imagined community of nationhood is supplanted here by a transnational view of citizenship in a European context with secular Paris as its template. For Eamon Grennan, the essential point is that 'some implication' of 'community' is voiced by virtually all Irish poets among whom he names Eavan Boland, Seamus Heaney, Thomas McCarthy, Peter Fallon, Frank Ormsby and John F. Deane. Grennan suggests that these poets inhabit '[c]oncentric circles of community', sometimes 'threatened', sometimes 'oblique', but distinctively present nevertheless (Grennan 1999, p. 369). On this view, 'Ireland can never be left behind' and will inhabit an in-between zone of past, present and post in the minds of its poets and will linger as a residual community that shadows the consciousness of these writers (Holdridge and Conchubhair 2017, p. 10). Grennan names yet other writers as being, even in extremis, 'somehow in voluntary or involuntary exile from a sense of community' and here, Harry Clifton's 'grieving over a Western world in physical and emotional tatters, beyond the possibility of any redemptive community' finds a place alongside what Grennan identifies as the 'brooding' and 'vulnerable' communal impulses of peers like Medbh McGuckian, Seamus Deane and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (Grennan 1999, p. 369).

However, Grennan misses here the ways in which Clifton integrates aspects of a 'redemptive community' on the international or transnational plane, not in respect of Ireland. *Night Train Through the Brenner* (1994) contains several important meditations on the Italian village community where Clifton and his wife, the novelist Deirdre Madden, were welcomed for a year in the early 1990s. Clifton's prose

account of that year *On the Spine of Italy: A Year in the Abruzzi* (1999) is a profound meditation on rural communities and how modernity has rendered them vulnerable and depleted:

Apart from the changing of the seasons, and the liturgical calendar, our time up there was characterized by a lack of external happenings. It was life reduced to the domestic, the local and the natural, with the great dynamos of work and history removed. But the minutiae of life loomed larger. Whether someone said hello or didn't. The meaning of a passing glance, a nod, an expression. Without many words being exchanged, everyone had developed an almost marital intimacy with each other over the years [...] Their world was bounded by a few houses, a bridge on either side of the village, and the provincial town of Teramo.

(Clifton 1999, p. 195)

Clifton deals with the strata of communal feeling wherever he happens to be. In *Portobello Sonnets*, the Grand Canal at Richmond Street is the product of 'secret sources' (Clifton 2016a, p. 24), like the springs in the Abruzzi that are described in 'Taking the Waters' as being 'taps that flow' and which emanate '[f]rom the depths of Europe [...] Centuries deep' (Clifton 1994, p. 42). Ireland and Europe, the local and the universal, are forged in alignment in these poems. Water, that life-giving element, is literally under the 'old crust of Europe' (p. 42) as the village wells of the Abruzzi make evident. Clifton's detachment here speaks of a profound and elemental commonality of experience that belies any lingering impression of him as a poet solely of metropolitan detachment.

Therefore, Harry Clifton's distinctive poetic pathway is one of detachment *and* engagement. The metaphor of the desert as 'a place of clarity and emptiness [...] a point of departure' captures Clifton's creative independence and thus has 'a positive sense' for him. (Clifton 1996, p.42). It features in the title poem of his first full collection, *The Walls of Carthage* (1976) where it is 'metaphorical', but 'real deserts' (p. 42) also feature in Clifton's poetry, notably in the title poem of *The Desert Route: Selected Poems 1973–1988* (1992) where the desert is the locale for 'trade routes' trekked by trains of people 'like free beings' (Clifton 1992, p. 21). His revised selected poems, *The Holding Centre* (2014) dwells on these 'contradictions' (Clifton 2014, p. 51) of freedom and its limits, of idealism and corruption, of migration in both its positive and negative aspects (affluent travel versus destitution and flight). The 'barbed wire' of the refugee camps denotes a 'prison that saves' (p. 51) just as 'The Desert Route' is one of contrasting '[l]ines of purpose' which are 'almost parallel' but not really; a new road, a 'superhighway' is being constructed to be superimposed on the old desert route of 'camels' and 'donkeys' (Clifton 1992, p. 21) and the poem is populated by diverse figures 'lost in' indeterminacies of 'space and time' (p. 21). Like the Atacama Desert of northern Chile, where Harry Clifton's parents met 'in the desolate nitrate port of Antofagasta' (Clifton 2006, p. 7) before returning to Dublin in 1950, the language of the desert route is:

A language all conditionals, subjunctives
In a land of might-have-been, where the cloudscapes thicken
Like myth, on the hiddenness of the Andes,
And it never rains but once a year, in the far, far north, [...]

('Chile', Clifton, unpublished poem)

Here Clifton is delving for origins in his own mixture of Irish and Latin-American heritage. The 'complexity' of the poet again emerges (Clifton 1997, p. 12); the happenstance of origins, their contingency is felt as a form of '[o]riginal sin', a post-Edenic lapse into being and history:

They called it the rain shadow,
Brought it north
On honeymoon, around Cape Horn,
Through tango cities, African ports,

A past alive in a haunted future
 Long before I was born –
 (Clifton 2012, p. 86)

The ‘rain shadow’ is that of the Andes mountain range overshadowing the Atacama Desert and inhibiting rainfall. Here, arguably, is the counterpoint to Clifton’s communal vision of water, his intense need for an ideal distance. As Chilean author Ariel Dorfman writes of his own journeys in northern Chile:

Perhaps I was afraid of precisely what so many others through history have found attractive in the emptiness: the solitude and extreme introspection that a landscape devoid of human habitation will force you to face with a vengeance, a truth about yourself that you can find nowhere else [...] A voyage to origins [...]
 (Dorfman 2004, p. 5, p. 13)

The Irish equivalent to this ‘introspection’ might be Clifton’s ‘Oweniny, Upper Reaches’ which is a retrospective poem of the routes Clifton has taken ‘Atacama [...] Niger [...] Bellacorrick [...] To the back of beyond. Pure watershed’—in realms that are ‘self-haunted’ (Clifton 2012, pp. 94–95). Similar barren landscapes feature in ‘Cloudberry’ which covers a geological spectrum of time attempting to ‘go back/[...] behind all that is Ireland/To the age of free migrations’ amid vistas of ‘tundras/Bogs and blasted heaths, [...]’ (Clifton 2014, p. 129).

Equally, the desertification metaphor can be applied, in a more insouciant mode, to Clifton’s poetry of the city via sociological theorist Zygmunt Bauman whose theories of liquid modernity have been so influential. In his essay ‘Desert spectacular’, Bauman argues that ‘[i]n the desert, and in the anonymous city, time has been frittered away because these are no-spaces, spaces out of space [where ...] the loneliness of the stranger can be played to his advantage [...] It is his footprints alone which cross the void with routes’ (Bauman 1994, pp. 140–41). Bauman uses the metaphorical desert-city to set up a theory of identity-formation in liquid modernity which is very similar to the flânerie of Clifton’s urban Paris. ‘God in France’, for example, imagines the deity ‘[a]drift on the everyday’ enjoying his ‘omnipresence, simultaneity’ in the ‘[r]andomness, flux,’ and ‘freedom’ of contemporary Paris (Clifton 2014, pp. 123–24). Meanwhile, the persona of ‘A Talking Head on the Rue du Bac’, is ‘[j]ust following the curve of the world/[...] Rambling on, with nothing to say,/From shelter to shelter’ (Clifton 2007, p. 23). In these poems, to quote Bauman again, there is ‘but the absence of bounds’ and the speakers of the poems are ‘unbound by habit or convention’ and their ‘pilgrimage’ is part of an elaborate ‘exercise in self-construction’ (Bauman 1996, pp. 20–21) not unlike the more austere self-hauntings of ‘Oweniny, Upper Reaches’ or ‘Cloudberry’. These desert wanderings seem to aptly encapsulate the engagement and detachment of Clifton’s work. They are detached from passing sensations but are also ever alert to surfaces and depths, geographies and histories in ways that show how Clifton’s desert route is that of a poet whose clarities are firmly grounded in the social world.

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