

Jelige: rozsda

Cím: The Pulsing of Memory: Depicting a Sequence of Recollections in the Early Poems of
John Montague

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The present essay will deal with the poetry of John Montague. More precisely, it will discuss poems concerning memory: childhood memories, memory of a lost father, memory of Ireland and (a lost) Irish inheritance. The main focus will be on childhood memories and on memory itself, on the ways the poet handles and relives different kinds of past experiences and situations. It will also investigate *how* the poet represents these memories, how he relates his personality (especially temporally) to them and what poetic techniques and structural devices he uses to represent memories in themselves and his relation to them. The imagery of the poems will be peculiarly exciting from this perspective because, as the research will claim, Montague consciously creates a sequence of images which re-occur in the poems about memories and consequently, can be read and interpreted in connection with each other (for example the images of pulsing, water, or fish). The paper will also contain a short speculation about the question if the way Montague handles and represents memories can be likened to a Wordsworthian manner, because several critics claim it is possible (e.g.: R. F. Garratt, Eamon Grennan); and if we argue in favour of this comparison, it will have to be clarified in what sense this manner is Wordsworthian.

The poems to be analysed are chosen from Montague's *Selected Poems* (2001), more specifically from the selection of his first three volumes, *Poisoned Lands* (1961), *A Chosen Light* (1967), and *The Rough Field* (1972). The reason for why these early volumes were chosen is because, as argued before, Montague creates a sequence in his poems, and one can depict a personal, narrative development of the poet's identity through his works that deal with different past experiences. This does not mean, of course, that Montague would not write poems about memories in his later career, the point to be made is that in the poems to be analysed the memories are closely knit together, create a sequence.¹ Although the essay's main attention will be devoted to poems about memories, it will also touch upon the topics of poetic imagination, language, history, and identity.

Firstly, some light needs to be shed on certain aspects of Montague's life as his unusual background has much to do with his poetic style and interest. Montague was born in Brooklyn, New York, to "Irish parents who had been forced to emigrate because of political activities in Ulster"². At the age of four, he was separated from his family and was sent to Ireland to County Tyrone, to live with his aunt on their family farm. Here he got a Catholic education and upraising and later he studied at the National University in Dublin. In the

¹ For example the poems "The Silver Flask" (from *The Dead Kingdom*, 1984) and "The Family Piano" (from *Smashing the Piano*, 1999) also deal with memories, but are much later poems.

² Robert F. Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1989), 200.

1950s, he went to America and in the 1960s, to France. Montague devoted special attention to the question of his family's exiled state, and also to his own, trying to find a place, an identity for himself in this world. Consequently, a frequent topic of his poetry is the question of identity in general, and also more specifically, the question of Irish identity.³ This exploration of the self in his poetry manifests itself as a "drive toward reconciliation, a balancing of opposites, a desire of restoration piqued by an awareness of separation."⁴ Or, as Seamus Deane argues, for Montague, "home is lost, exile is temporary and no solution, only writing, founded on the experience of being neither wholly national nor wholly international, remains. Dislocation, in its etymological sense, is his obsession."⁵

This introductory section of the present research will deal with some aspects and topics of Montague's poetry that also constitute important roles in his oeuvre. These topics are history and language, or more precisely their presence or loss. These themes centre around the question of identity, which is one of the most elaborately discussed problem of the poet.

Aged four he suffered a reverse form of exile when he was transplanted from Brooklyn to Garvaghey, "transported"...from bustling, modern, urban America to a "fading farm" at the back of beyond in rural Ireland, exchanging the familial home for a childless and unmanned household run by two spinsters.⁶

One of the most striking examples of how a child's identity may be hurt can be depicted through the poem entitled "A Grafted Tongue," where "An Irish / child weeps at school / repeating its English".⁷ The child gets punished for each mistake he makes. The child is in agony, because "In cabin / and field, they still / speak the old tongue", but is forced "To grow / a second tongue", which is for him "as / harsh a humiliation / as twice to be born". "A whole culture has undergone the experience of aphasia in losing its language, and then has painfully grown another tongue, the English tongue, which nevertheless remains marked by the political and social crises attendant upon its birth in the severed head of Irish Gaeldom."⁸ Montague was quite familiar with this alien feeling: "born a hyphenated Irish-American he is a perpetually displaced person, in permanent imaginative quest for a home."⁹

³ Ibid., 199-200.

⁴ Ibid., 200.

⁵ Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1985), 147.

⁶ Antoinette Quinn, "'The Well-Beloved': Montague and the Muse," *Irish University Review (John Montague Special Issue)* 19, no. 1 (1989): 28-29.

⁷ John Montague, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2001), 76.

⁸ Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, 152.

⁹ Quinn, "'The Well Beloved,'" 29.

It is through poetry that the poet tries to deal with history and language, through which he craves after creating a personal history in order to find a home, to establish an identity for himself. The poem entitled “A Lost Tradition” serves as a good example for this:

All around, shards of a lost tradition:
From the Rough Field I went to school
In the Glen of the Hazels.

...

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.¹⁰

The poem “is about loss: the loss of people, of the linguistic domain of Gaelic, of historical pride and of the very Irish sense of place.”¹¹ It is packed with family and place names, with which the poet tries to balance the loss of the inheritance that he suffered.

Concerned with the way the present is shaped by the past, Montague writes as a spokesman for his people, the Ulster Catholics. His perspective is nationalist, the poetry expressing an intensely personal realization of historical experience, but seeking also to discover a mythic dimension in Irish rural life.¹²

But as a poet, he is a spokesman of his nation, thus he represents not only a personal, but also a national loss. This is again a poem through which the poet represents personal, and general, national feelings at the same time, like in the poems that are about the memory of the father. In this case, there is more emphasis on language: “The whole landscape a manuscript / We had lost the skill to read”. Montague is so much so an acknowledged spokesman of his nation that in fact these lines had most probably served as a source of inspiration for Brian Friel in writing his famous drama, *Translations*.¹³

The analysis of the “spokesman’s” following poem leads us to the main part of the essay. The poem to be analysed is “A Bright Day” from the volume entitled *A Chosen Light* (1967). This poem will be seen as a framework concerning the discussions of other poems, as it deals with the topic of poetry, where “Montague reveals something of what poetry means to him as a poet.”¹⁴ Furthermore, we have reason to give special attention to this specific piece of text, as it is the opening poem of the previously mentioned volume in Montague’s *Selected Poems*. As a first step let us discuss the implications of the two titles and the connection that

¹⁰ Montague, *Selected Poems*, 74-75.

¹¹ Douglas Sealy, “The Sound of a Wound. An Introduction to the Poetry of John Montague from 1958 to 1988,” *Irish University Review (John Montague Special Issue)* 19, no. 1 (1989): 17.

¹² “John Montague,” in *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, ed. Robert Welch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 371.

¹³ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), 617.

¹⁴ Sealy, “The Sound of a Wound,” 13.

lies between these two phrases. “A Chosen Light” has already quite a few implications. “Light” implicates that light will be shed on the world, that the poems will present certain concerns and issues from a perspective that is, due to light, detailed and proper for analysis. The other word, “chosen” implicates that this light is not of natural origin, that the poet consciously chooses a contemplative and analytic perspective from which he dives into the world that he represents and describes. The poem’s title, “A Bright Day” is in connection with the poet’s viewpoint, with the “chosen light” that gives way to the poet’s speculative mood. “Day” implies that there is still natural light in the world into which the reader is going to step after reading the title of the poem; furthermore, with the addition of the adjective “bright” the already present natural light gets reinforced, thus being able to illuminate the world in a more detailed way. The poem starts with the following stanza:

At times I see it, present
As a bright day, or a hill,
The only way of saying something
Luminously as possible.¹⁵

The following observations can be made from the first stanza: it turns out that it is only “at times” that the speaker can acquire a position from which he can speak “luminously as possible,” but when he can see it, it is indelibly present “as a bright day, or a hill.” Thus, as argued before, the light which sheds light on things is not of natural origin, it requires work and concentration, but it can be achieved. The word “luminously” comprises the implications of both titles: on the one hand, it is synonymous with “bright,” and on the other, it implies the presence of light, thus creating a complex and interwoven structure of visual images. The following one and a half stanzas highlight two important issues via an opposition:

Not the accumulated richness
Of an old historical language –
That musk-deep odour!
But a slow exactness

Which recreates experience
By ritualizing its details

Although it was already implied in the first stanza (“The only way of saying something...”), this poem will not deal with the “what”, but with the “how.” It is not directly language that is reflected upon, but a mode of investigation and a mode of representation. Nevertheless, the poet cunningly balances this opposition with the third line of the second stanza, “That musk-deep odour!,” via paying tribute to his language. But the main focus is on the “slow exactness / Which recreates experience / By ritualizing its details.” It is the chosen

¹⁵ Montague, *Selected Poems*, 31.

light, the mode of investigation which enables the poet to ritualise details, or, as Wordsworth puts it, “to see into the life of things.”¹⁶ “The rehearsal of exact detail, the discovery of the spring that will release the perfectly shaped and resonant image is a characteristic moment in Montague’s poetry.”¹⁷

From a structural point of view, especially concerning the balancing of things, it is interesting that while the first stanza is full of visual images referring to light, these kinds of images are missing in the second and third stanza, but in the last, fourth stanza, the light imagery returns:

Pale web of curtain, width
Of deal table, till all

Takes on a witch-bright glow
And even the clock on the mantel
Moves its hands in a fierce delight
Of so, and so, and so.

Towards the end of the poem, everything “takes on a witch-bright glow.” Not only does light return, it is active, it glows, it vitalizes the environment. Furthermore, Montague does not only equilibrate the light imagery. The vitalizing force of light and reflection upon language will be intertwined in the imagery of the clock. The clock “moves its hands in a fierce delight / Of so, and so, and so.” Language takes up the rhythm of the investigatory mode, “the slow exactness” in the last line, comprising the ticking of the clock and the answer to the “how” in one line: “Of so, and so, and so.” It is also worth noticing that the word “delight” contains the word “light” and also rhymes on the word “bright,” which makes the connection between the content and the structure of the poem even more intertwined. In the poem, as Grennan argues,

the objective world seems splendidly available to a speech that is at once simple, deliberate, and polished. What Montague finds here is a language for and of pure awareness, a language emerging from the core of primary knowledge that must be one of the generative places of imagination.¹⁸

Montague’s poetry is characterised by the mastery, the poetic craftsmanship over language and imagination. A further point to be made is that “the slow exactness / Which recreates experience” can be connected with memory, which will be ritualized by language and imagination. As Robert F. Garratt points out, Montague filters the details of his

¹⁶ William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, eds. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (New York: Routledge, 2005), 112.

¹⁷ Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, 148.

¹⁸ Eamon Grennan, “‘Of So, and So, and So:’ Re-Reading Some Details in Montague,” *Irish University Review (John Montague Special Issue)* 19, no. 1 (1989): 121.

environment “through a Wordsworthian prism, revealing the importance of a poet’s memory to understanding.”¹⁹ It is not without reason to liken Montague to William Wordsworth in terms of how he perceives the world around him and how he deals with memories, as he was an enthusiastic reader of Wordsworth.²⁰

To elaborate on this argument, it is worth comparing the above mentioned analysis of this poem and some of Wordsworth’s views about poetry that he has formulated in his famous “Preface” written to the *Lyrical Ballads*. According to Wordsworth,

poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility had also thought long and deeply.²¹

Or as he describes it again pages later, poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.”²² Wordsworth emphasises that in order to write good poetry, one needs to think “long and deeply”, needs to contemplate on the feelings that overflow a person.

One of the goals of this present research is to show, on the one hand, that Montague can be compared to Wordsworth, in terms of representing feelings and memories. And on the other, to investigate through some of Montague’s selected poems the “how,” the ways in which he manages to carry out the representation of past feelings and memories. In Montague’s poetry it is the “chosen light” which will guarantee that memory recollected is going to be recollected through a “slow exactness,” through a contemplative mood of investigation that gives way for conscious reflection, a standpoint that the poet takes to be able to “recreate experience,” memory. Then, according to this argumentation, the “ritualization of details” is, on the one hand, the evocation of memory, which can be, through a “slow exactness” thoroughly analysed, upon which the poet can consciously reflect; and on the other, through language and imagination, turns the evocation, the description and reflection into a work of art, into a poem.

How the act of ritualization and another frequently occurring motif appears in Montague’s poetry can be well depicted in “The Water Carrier” from the 1961 collection entitled *Poisoned Lands*. As argued before, the “balancing of opposites” is a remarkable feature of Montague’s poetry and there are several opposites that he equates. He has multiple

¹⁹ Robert F. Garratt, “John Montague and the Poetry of History,” *Irish University Review (John Montague Special Issue)* 19, no. 1 (1989): 96.

²⁰ Grennan, “‘Of So, and So, and So,’ 119.

²¹ William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 237.

²² *Ibid.*, 251.

sources of inspiration: American, French, English, and Irish poetry. In his works, he is balancing between the Joycean tradition of exile, isolation, internationalism, and between the Yeatsian nationalism and traditionalism. His poetic output can be seen as one that merges these two viewpoints.²³ The poem entitled “The Water Carrier” serves as a good example to illustrate how Montague balances oppositions. The poem opens with the central image of balancing:

Twice daily I carried water from the spring,
Morning before leaving for school, and evening;
Balanced as a fulcrum between two buckets.²⁴

Already the first stanza raises a number of questions concerning what gets balanced in the poem. The speaker of the poem is presented in past tense, so the poem will deal with the memory of a past self. This self may be regarded as one that is a fulcrum that balances two buckets. It may be also regarded as one which balances morning and evening, so balances from the beginning until the end of something. It will turn out from the poem that what will be balanced are the different temporal appearances and representations of the speaker and his relation to this memory. However, before elaborating on this problem, the imagery of the following stanzas will be discussed. The following two stanzas contain descriptions of natural spring scenes:

A bramble-rough path ran to the river
Where you stepped carefully across slime-topped stones,
With corners abraded as bleakly white as bones.

At the widening pool (for washing and cattle)
Minute fish flickered as one dipped,
Circling to fill, with rust-tinged water.

Each stanza has a reference to water, which is, next to balancing, another central image of the poem. In the second, it is “the river,” in the third it is “the widening pool.” What is interesting is that there is also balancing between the first and these following two stanzas. The first starts with an everyday, almost innocent and harmless image of carrying water. These images of a remembered spring are quite colourful and vivid and this metaphor of spring can be interpreted as a “source of poetic power” for the speaker.²⁵ But on the other hand there seems to be a feeling of penetrating danger or unease in the second and third stanzas. In the second, “you stepped carefully across slime-topped stones, / With corners abraded as bleakly white as bones.” Furthermore, that “stones” and “bones” rhyme can also

²³ Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry*, 201.

²⁴ Montague, *Selected Poems*, 6-7.

²⁵ Garratt, *Modern Irish Poetry*, 206.

confirm the claim that there is an underlying danger in the natural environment that surrounds the speaker. In the third stanza, water is referred to as “rust-tinged,” which goes quite opposite to a peaceful, vivid, and green natural spring description. This is also a kind of balancing: balancing between conventional poetic expectations and the disruption of conventions.

The second or enamel bucket was for spring water
Which, after racing through a rusty meadow,
Came bubbling in a broken drain-pipe,

Corroded wafer thin with rust.
It ran so pure and cold, it fell
Like manacles of ice on the wrists.

The cold water of the spring feels like manacles, which can evoke Blake’s mind-forged manacles.²⁶ This would confirm the view that conventional poetic expressions and expectations can be restrictive for a poet. Furthermore, water is described as “corroded wafer thin with rust,” with the image of wafer evoking religion, Catholicism. But the wafer (just like the water, which is now second time referred to as rusty) is corroded and thin with rust. With referring to poetry (via the Blake reference) and religion with these adjectives, this gesture may be interpreted as one which signals that cultural and poetic traditions can also have, besides inspiration quite a restrictive force. This is also a kind of balancing, balancing between following and breaking with traditions. As Dean argues, Montague “demanded of his generation that it reflect Catholicism as a living force in Irish life.”²⁷ Although these images may hint at the restrictive nature of traditions, the following stanza emphasises that what is needed is not the exclusion of traditions for the sake of a new tradition, but a conscious handling, balancing of both:

You stood until the bucket brimmed
Inhaling the musty smell of unpicked berries,
That heavy greenness fostered by water.

The bucket brims and the greenness, the spring is, after all, fostered by the same water discussed before, so this seems to reinforce the previous argument, namely that traditions, conventional poetic images can have a positive value if one manages to handle, to balance them. It is worth at this point of the poem to turn back to the question of the self. It is interesting that in the first stanza, the self was presented with the pronoun ‘I,’ in first person singular, whereas the self is referred to with the second person singular “you” from the second stanza on and also here in the sixth stanza. This suggests a speaking voice which got one step

²⁶ Ibid., 206

²⁷ Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, 146.

distanced on a narratological level from the firstly mentioned 'I.' Furthermore, the poem becomes self-reflexive, as in the next stanza the poet refers to the act of writing this poem:

Recovering the scene, I had hoped to stylize it,
Like the portrait of an Egyptian water carrier:
But pause, entranced by slight but memoried life.

There were so far two levels of representation concerning the memory of the past self. In this stanza, the writer of the poem appears as a third, as someone who announces a poetic strategy: he wanted to stylise this scene (a way of ritualising memory, which was mentioned in "A Bright Day"), present it like an image "of an Egyptian water carrier." But, ultimately did not do so because, as it turns out from the last line of the stanza, the realisation of the vivid nature of this memory gave pause to the poet, who started to write the poem. The reason for this pause caused by memory is that memory calls the poet's attention to the fact that there is something wrong in the "how" of representing this memory. Memory will get its final representation in the last stanza:

I sometimes come to take the water there,
Not as return or refuge, but some pure thing
Some living source, half imagined and half real,

Pulses in the fictive water that I feel.

Here, the speaker, the poet who wrote the poem appears in present tense as opposed to the former selves, who were represented in past tense and who tried to represent this memory. It is even distanced from the poet who appears in the last but one stanza. The vivid nature of memory is highlighted by referring to it as a "living source." What "half imagined and half-real" refers to is the poet's own experience of writing. Montague presents, on the one hand, the process of writing, through the way he structurally built up the poem, and on the other, via the structure he created, he also manages to present the different (temporal and personal) relations to the memory "by ritualising its details." The last line then, "Pulses in the fictive water that I feel," can be interpreted as a conclusion which, on the one hand, defines the poet's position: he is the one who consciously, through a "slow exactness," "recreates experience" through the poem's structure and imagery. And on the other hand, with the first word, "pulses," he highlights that it is indeed recreated and that this memory has a vivid and affecting nature in connection with him.

The rich water imagery of the poem and the image of pulsing will be central concerning the analyses of the following poems. There is already an image in this poem that should be highlighted before turning to the analysis of the next poem entitled "The Trout:"

At the widening pool (for washing and cattle)

Minute fish flickered as one dipped,
Circling to fill, with rust-tinged water.

The “minute fish” can be seen as an image already pointing forward to “The Trout” from *All Legendary Obstacles* (1966), a poem which also deals with memory. What connects this poem to “The Water Carrier” is the “how,” the handling of memory and the poetic world. This poem is also rich in references to water.

Flat on the bank I parted
Rushes to ease my hands
In the water without a ripple
And tilt them slowly downstream
To where he lay, tendril-light,
In his fluid sensual dream.²⁸

The first stanza already contains a lot of references to liquid elements. The speaker is standing in the water, preparing for fishing. It is worth noticing how the trout and its environment is first referred to: “tendril light.” Light will enable the poet to describe the trout, to ritualize it in “a slow exactness.” In the last line of the first stanza, the imagery of light and water get intertwined, the trout lay “in his fluid sensual dream.” This poem bears with an even more dreamlike quality than the previously discussed two poems, and the imagery of a remembered, dreamlike vision will get explicated in the following, second stanza:

Bodiless lord of creation,
I hung briefly above him
Savouring my own absence
Senses expanding in the slow
Motion, the photographic calm
That grows before action.

“Senses expanding in the slow / Motion” is very similar to the slow exactness in “A Bright Day,” through which the poem can ritualize past experiences. In this sense, “the photographic calm / That grows before action” can either refer to the literal state of the speaker, who had to remain motionless in order to be able to catch the trout; or it can also refer to the kind of poetic mood and perspective which was presented in “A Bright Day:” the poet acquiring a viewpoint from which light can be shed on memories and past experiences, making it detailed enough to ritualise it. There is another crucial point in this second stanza: “Savouring my own absence.” The speaker steps out from his body and gets “preternaturally close” to the trout:

As the curve of my hands
Swung under his body
He surged, with visible pleasure.

²⁸ Montague, *Selected Poems*, 22-23.

I was so preternaturally close
I could count every stipple
But still cast no shadow, until

The two palms crossed in a cage
Under the lightly pulsing gills.
Then (entering my own enlarged
Shape, which rode on the water)
I gripped. To this day I can
Taste his terror on my hands.

But it is not until the speaker feels “the lightly pulsing gills” that he re-enters into his own body, “which rode on the water.” Furthermore, even when the speaker returns into his own body, this return is put between brackets. What remains highlighted is that he gripped and consequently, due to the preternatural closeness, the terror remained. In this poem, it is the terror that is represented by the “fictive pulses in the water” and it is again memory and the pulsing that makes past and present overlap.

The following section of the essay will discuss three poems in connection with the previously discussed ones. The connection and comparison will be based on the imagery and on the way of dealing with and representing memory. The first poem to be analysed is entitled “Woodtown Manor” (from *Poisoned Lands*) which starts with the following stanza:

Here the delicate dance of silence,
The quick step of the robin,
The sudden skittering rush of the wren:
Minute essences move in and out of creation
Until the skin of soundlessness forms again.²⁹

The first stanza comprises many characteristics of previously discussed poems. The poetic world is very detailed, but in this first stanza it is not water or light imagery that is in centre, but silence and soundlessness, which adds the feeling of slowness to this world, similar to the “slow motion” and “photographic calm” that was in “The Trout.” It is interesting that there are “minute essences” in this stanza and in “The Water Carrier” the flickering fish was described with the adjective “minute.” Furthermore, these “minute essences” which “move in and out of creation” may easily invoke the “bodiless lord of creation” from “The Trout.” The poem continues thus:

Part order, part wilderness,
Water creates its cadenced illusion
Of glaucous, fluent growth;
Fins raised, as in a waking dream.
Bright fish probe their painted stream.

²⁹ Montague, *Selected Poems*, 8-9.

Although the first stanza contained no water images, it is introduced in the second stanza. It is exactly water that “creates its cadenced illusion.” Furthermore, as argued before, the adjective “minute” may already invoke the image of the fish. Here in the second stanza “bright fish probe their painted stream.” The adjective “bright” was considered formerly as an adjective which is in connection with the light that enables the poet to see things, minute essences in detail and this stanza can be easily seen as one that stylises or ritualises imagination. The water imagery is central in this second stanza. It is water that creates a “cadenced illusion,” illusion being in connection with light and water. The “bright fish,” “as in a waking dream,” “probe their painted stream” in this illusion, which is very much like the “fictive pulses” in “The Water-Carrier,” or like the experienced pulsing of the trout in “The Trout.” Furthermore, the stanza ends in a rhyming couplet with “dream” and “stream” rhyming, which again connects the imagery of water and light. The third stanza will have light imagery as its core:

Imaginary animals harbour here:
The young fox coiled in its covert,
Bright-eyed and mean, the baby bird:
The heron, like a radiant italic,
Illuminating the gospel of the absurd.

The point to be made is that imagination and light imagery are strongly connected all through the poem, but maybe most explicitly in this stanza: animals are imaginary, the young fox is referred to as “bright-eyed.” What is striking is how strongly self-reflexive the stanza gets in the end: “The heron, like a radiant italic / Illuminating the gospel of the absurd”. If we interpret the poem itself as “the gospel of the absurd,” a place where imaginary animals can dwell, then we might also claim that the image of the heron bears with such a craft that it can illuminate its whole environment, even the poem itself. This is very similar to the image in the last stanza of “A Bright Day,” where everything “takes on a witch-bright glow.”

After having discussed a poem which deals more with imagination, let us turn to a poem entitled “The Return” (from *All Legendary Obstacles*) which deals more with memory, with the workings of it and reactions to it. The title already implies that there is a returning to something and it gets quite clear at the beginning of the poem that the speaker returns to his childhood memories:

From the bedroom you can see
straight to the fringe of the woods
with a cross staved gate to re-
enter childhood’s world:
the pines

wait, dripping.³⁰

The poetic situation is interesting. The speaker is “re-entering childhood’s world” from a bedroom, from where he can see a “cross staved gate” that enables and launches this journey. Considering that the world of childhood is a past world, one would expect that the poem would represent and narrate this world in the past tense, but it narrates it in the present tense throughout the whole poem. With this technique, it creates a kind of feeling that one is really entering, reliving a memory in the present, re-entering it through imagination like a walk in a forest where the gap between past and present ceases to exist.

This world seems to be again quite slow: “the pines / wait, dripping.” The word “dripping” may easily invoke “The Water Carrier,” where the speaker waits for the bucket to be filled. Furthermore, there are other references to “The Water Carrier” in this poem:

Crumbling black-
berries, seized from a rack
of rusty leaves...

In “The Water Carrier,” there was the “the musty smell of unpicked berries” and water was two times referred to as “rusty.” But this poem is even more explicit in referring to “The Water Carrier:”

as the bucket
fills, a bird strikes from the bushes
...
(while the wind starts
the carrion smell of the dead fox
staked as warning)

The image of the bucket that gets filled evokes the image of water and the fictive pulses which memory can generate. What is even more interesting is that “as the bucket fills, / a bird strikes from the bushes,” images from the previously discussed poem start to enter this poetic world. It was the “baby bird,” the heron which “illuminated” the previous poem called “Woodtown Manor.” The poet is again balancing with the images. So far, the re-entered world of childhood seemed an innocent one. An image appears which can be also found in “Woodtown Manner:” “Imaginary animals harbour here: / The young fox coiled in its covert, / Bright-eyed and mean.” In “The Return,” this fox appears as a “dead fox” whose smell is carried by the wind, “staked as warning.” So again, there is a kind of danger or unease that enters the poem, just like it happened in “The Water-Carrier,” or in “The Trout,” where the memory of the terror remained. The ending of the poem is also interesting in this sense:

Seeing your former

³⁰ Montague, *Selected Poems*, 29-30.

self saunter up the garden path
afterwards, would you flinch,
acknowledging
 that sensuality,
that innocence?

The rhetoric question at the end is dubious. On the one hand, the poem ends on calling attention to the sensuality and innocence of the childhood world, but the word “flinch” has a shocking and fearful implication concerning this sensuality and innocence. But this flinch is caused again by the surprising realisation of *how* sensual and innocent it was. Memory, through the imaginative journey calls attention to itself (just like in “The Water-Carrier”), leaves a recognition of its sensual and innocent nature.

The third poem in this section is the poem entitled “The Source.” This poem is from Montague’s probably most famous collection of poems entitled *The Rough Field* (1972).

Composed of a series of lyrics (eight of which had appeared in earlier volumes) and intercut with extracts from historical documents, tracts, and letters, as well as being illustrated with woodcuts, the poem ranges from the townland of Garvaghey (from the Irish garbh-achadh, ‘a rough field’) to Belfast, Dublin, Derry, Berlin, Paris, Chicago, and New York. The attempts to reconcile personal and communal experience, continuity and change, tradition and modernism, are accompanied by a sombre regret for lost possibility.³¹

The Rough Field can be considered as one long poem made up of ten chapters, or as a collection of ten sequences, but, as Sealy argues, many of the poems “seemed perfectly satisfactory self-contained entities when they appeared previously as separate publications.”³²

Montague makes the following remarks about this book:

I never thought of the poem as tethered to any particular set of events. One explores an inheritance to free oneself and others...the violence of disrupting factions is more than a local phenomenon. But one must start from home – so the poem begins where I began myself, with a Catholic family in the townland of Garvaghey, in the county of Tyrone in the province of Ulster.³³

As the title of the poem implies, the poet goes back to his origins, goes home in order to get a clear picture of himself, of his identity, of the world in which he grew up. Furthermore, the poem also serves as another kind of source, because, in this piece, a set of images and ideas appear that have been already highlighted in previous ones. There is already a connection between the title of this poem and a previously analysed one, “The Water Carrier” ends with the following stanza:

I sometimes come to take the water there,

³¹ Robert Welch, *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, 371.

³² Sealy, “The Sound of a Wound,” 1989, 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1989, 16.

Not as return or refuge, but some pure thing
Some living source, half imagined and half real,

Pulses in the fictive water that I feel.

The poet, in “The Water Carrier” returns to the “half imagined and half real” place of memory as “some pure thing / Some living *source*.” Memory is presented as a vivid source for the poet that pulsates. In the following, let us see how “The Source” as a poem can serve as a vivid, animated source for the representation of memory (in connection with the previous poems and) for the poet. This poem has a narrative frame. It starts with the reunion of some friends:

A rump parliament of old friends
Spend the lees of the night in
A mountain cottage, swapping
Stories, till cock-crow warns,
Then stagger home, drunk as coots,
Through the sleeping countryside.³⁴

After the description of the situation, the speaker starts to walk home, but before actually arriving at home, he will also step on the path of an imaginative journey through his memories.

A gate clangs, I grope against
A tent-fold darkness until
Eye accepts the animal shape
Of the hedge, the sphere of
Speckled sky, the still, damp
Fields breathing on either side.
The lane is smoothly tared
Downhill to the humped bridge
Where I peer uncertainly over,
Lured towards sense by the
Unseen rattle of this mountain
Stream...

The speaker starts his journey home. What is important is that on the one hand, darkness surrounds him, but in this darkness, the environment will get an “animal shape.” In the poem, there will be several images of animals. Furthermore, the environment, although in dark, is animated and active: “Fields breathing on either side.” The speaker is lured by the “mountain stream.” It is again a liquid substance, water, a stream that lures him. This will trigger a sequence of memories from the next stanza on.

I climbed to its source once,
A journey perilous, through
The lifeless, lichened thorn

³⁴ Montague, *Selected Poems*, 82-85.

Of MacCrystal's Glen, a thread
 Of water still leading me on
 Past stale bog-cuttings, grey
 Shapes slumped in rusty bracken,
 Littered with fir's white bone:
 Stranded mammoths! The water's
 Thin music unwinding upwards
 Till, high on a ledge of reeds
 And heather, I came upon
 A pool of ebony water
 Fenced by rocks...

The previous stanza was narrated in present tense, the narration turns into past tense in this stanza. The speaker recalls a memory: that he has once made a dangerous, "a journey perilous" to the source of the stream. This source may easily be connected with the source from "The Water Carrier:" it is the pulsating memory which gets revisited here. It is then memory, water that leads the speaker on this journey. There are many references in this stanza that can confirm this allegation: "a thread / Of water still leading me on;" "The water's / Thin music unwinding upwards;" until finally arriving at the source, "a pool of ebony water." Besides these references, there are also adjectives from "The Water Carrier" which appear in this stanza: the adjective "rusty" appears again which has now re-appeared several times, also in other poems; and we have "fir's white bone" compared to the "slime-topped stones" which were "bleakly white as bones" in "The Water Carrier," an image that also signalled some kind of danger, some unease. The following stanza is still narrated in past tense:

Legend

Declared a monster trout
 Lived there, so I slipped
 A hand under the fringe of
 Each slick rock, splitting
 The skin of turning froth
 To find nothing but that
 Wavering pulse leading to
 The central heart where
 The spring beat, so icy-cold
 I shiver now in recollection,
 Hearing its brisk, tireless
 Movement over the pebbles
 Beneath my feet...

The mentioning of "the monster trout" invokes the poem entitled "The Trout." What is interesting here is the way this memory is represented, the *how*. The speaker takes up a searching attitude: "I slipped / a hand under the fringe of / Each slick rock." This is similar to what happens in "The Trout:" "As the curve of my hands / Swung under his body... The two

palms crossed in a cage / Under the lightly pulsing gills.” The highlighted feeling that remained in “The Trout” due to the preternatural closeness was the shock, the terror. Furthermore, it was the *pulsing* that eventually triggered and brought the speaker the closest to the source of memory in both “The Water Carrier” and “The Trout,” and something similar happens here too: “so I slipped / A hand...To find nothing but that / Wavering pulse leading to / The central heart where / The spring beat, so icy-cold / I shiver now in recollection.” What happens here can be described by one of the keywords at the end of the poem “The Return:” there is a kind of “flinch” as the poet reaches “the central heart.” This is again caused by finding the “wavering pulse,” which can be also connected with the beat of the spring. There are even more references to “The Water Carrier” besides the pulsing. “The second or enamel bucket was for spring water... It ran so pure and cold, it fell / Like manacles of ice on the wrists.” Images of spring and coldness also appear in this poem, and they do in the same associative way, the spring triggering a feeling of “icy-cold.” The finding of the “wavering pulse” of memory has such an effect on the speaker that he manages to bridge the boundaries of time, the re-experiencing of memory affects the speaker in the present: “I shiver now in recollection.” Although the speaker returns to the present, this will not last for long:

Was that
The ancient trout of wisdom
I meant to catch? As I plod
Through the paling darkness
Details emerge, and memory
Warms.

This next stanza starts with a reflection on this recollected memory of visiting the source and trying to catch the trout. What is worth noticing is how the conscious reflection upon memory affects the speaker and his environment. Darkness pales, it loses of its force, “details emerge, and memory / Warms.” So there seems to be a kind of equilibrium between the journey home and the imaginative journey home to the source of the speaker’s memories. That memory warms and details emerge can be seen again as a way how the poet ritualises the details of experience by a slow exactness (like in “A Bright Day”), which recreates memory. After these lines, a new childhood memory appears, also narrated in past tense:

Old Danaghy raging
With his stick, to keep our
Cows from a well, that now
Is boarded up, like himself.
Here his son and I robbed a
Bee’s nest, kicking the combs
Free; our boots smelt sweetly
For days afterwards.

...every crevice held
A secret sweetness. Remembering,
I seem to smell wild honey
On my face.

What is noteworthy is how memory again transgresses time and space. The boys' boots smelt sweetly of honey which detail is narrated in past tense. At the end of the stanza, memory catches up to the speaker, we return to the present: "Remembering, / I seem to smell wild honey / On my face." From this point on, the narration will remain in the present, but after the recollection of these memories and their sources, there will be a noticeable change in the speaker and in his perception of his environment, of reality:

And plunge
Down the hillside, singing
In a mood of fierce elation.
My seven-league boots devour
Time and space as I crash
Through the last pools of
Darkness. All around, my
Neighbours sleep, but I am
In possession of their past
...
Marching through memory magnified:
Each grassblade bends with
Translucent beads of moisture
And the bird of total meaning
Stirs upon its hidden branch.

It seems that after the recollections, after reaching again the source, the speaker gathers strength for his journey home. He does not grope against darkness anymore as he did at the beginning of his journey but plunges in a "fierce elation," in a euphoric mood so powerful that it verges on the borders of ecstasy and hysteria. As memory managed to bridge the spatial and temporal boundaries of past and present, it seems that this ability is taken up by the speaker who can now battle the darkness that surrounded him: "My seven-league boots devour / Time and space as I crash / Through the last pools of / Darkness."

Until this point, the environment of the speaker and the descriptive scenes of the recalled memories seemed more active than the speaker, who compared to these, appeared as a rather passive, speculative character. This will start to change from this stanza on, it will be the speaker who will be in possession of his neighbours' past, "marching through memory magnified." As it turns out, with neighbours he refers to the natural scene that surrounds him. The speaker will acquire an ability "to see into the life of things." He will be able to see things, minute details so far unnoticed: "Each grassblade bends with / Translucent beads of

moisture.” An almost everyday sight gets elevated onto a dreamlike, almost transcendent level, with the element of water returning with the image of moisture. The last image of the stanza is also interesting: on the one hand, this bird is also a neighbour unnoticed up to this point, because it hid behind branches, and on the other hand, this image of “the bird of total meaning” can be paralleled with the “baby bird” which illuminated “the gospel of the absurd” in “Woodtown Manor,” both representing a transcendental, for the everyday eye and mind, an almost incomprehensible level of knowledge and perception.

As argued before, the poem has a narrative framework. The last stanza will refer to the beginning of the poem by reflecting on the speaker’s mood and will also round up the journey which the speaker went through since parting with his friends.

As I reach the last lap
The seventh sense of drunkenness –
That extra pilot in the head –
Tells me I am being watched
And, wheeling, I confront a clump
Of bullocks. Inert in grass,
They gaze at me, saucer-eyed
...
In
A far meadow, the corncrake
Turns its rusty ratchet and
I find myself rounding the
Last corner towards the black
Liquid gleam of the main road.

As this poem had also water or liquid elements as a central motif, and not only as a motif but as the first and foremost motivator for the speaker which lured him, than drunkenness can also be considered, along this line of thought, as a mood that was established through the consumption of (alcoholic in its substance but) liquid materials.

If drunkenness can be seen as “the seventh sense” than the euphoric experience in the previous stanza can be probably seen as the “sixth sense.” This feeling of becoming one with the environment is still present in the last stanza, the speaker feels the gaze of the animals on himself. This is again structurally balanced. First the environment seemed active and the poet passive, this has changed after the recollections, but finally, it seems that both the speaker and the natural world seem to occupy an active role, they are aware of each other’s presence through their gaze, both can be seen as in a unity with each other.

The last image of the poem can be considered as a condensation of the whole poem. It contains the main imagery of the poem in an intertwined way. The word “gleam” is characteristic of dreamlike visions, memories, and it also has transcendental implications. It

was the light imagery which, in the previous poems, shed light on the details of things. “Liquid” elements, water usually had the connotation of a source, a source for memory and imagination. And, particularly to this poem, this “liquid gleam” is also characterised by the adjective “black.” Darkness and blackness is an essential component of this poem, as it created the interplay between the darkness that characterised the environment of the speaker’s journey and his final achievement, to be able to overcome this darkness by “marching through memory magnified,” to finally glimpse at the main road leading home.

The next part of the research will discuss two other poems from Montague’s *The Rough Field*: “The Same Fault” and “The Cage.” These poems are centred round “the poet’s exile father...many of Montague’s best poems are about this lonely New Yorker.”³⁵ In these poems, Montague “ritualizes details” also in another way than in the previous poems. According to Jan Assmann, rituals serve to keep the identity-system of a group alive, and grant knowledge for the participants of the group for self-identification, for creating an identity.³⁶ “There is no naturally grown identity.”³⁷ Society and collective identity is not something that would be an opposite to the individual, it is part of the individual, thus, a self-identity, being a cultural construction, is also part of cultural identity.³⁸ Montague, as a spokesman for his people, is someone who, through his personal quest for an identity, shapes the collective identity of his nation as well. The poems about the loss of his father, in fact, reach back to the most elemental forms of cultural memory, because, as Assmann argues, remembering the dead is the ancient form of cultural memory.³⁹

What is interesting is that the following two poems are going to entail images that Montague has already used in his poems, and that were already discussed in the present research. A possible explanation for the conscious handling and mastering of image-sequences may be that it is through these that Montague fights against the “forms of exile.” With the idea and feeling of recurrence via the images, Montague, as a bard, a poet, creates an imaginative narrative, a permanent identity for himself.

Montague’s characteristic short-lined verse, a modernist version of bardic poetry, reflects the effort made to balance intensity and economy, as well as the struggle

³⁵ Rory Brennan, “Contemporary Irish Poetry: An Overview (1995),” in *Critical Anthology for the Study of Modern Irish Literature*, ed. Mária Kurdi (Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 2003), 215.

³⁶ Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: Beck, 2000), 143. The summaries and quotations from Assmann’s original German text appear in my translation.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

for a dignified and honest way to speak about and, if possible, redeem personal and national trauma.⁴⁰

The investigations concerning the analysis of the following poems will focus on the (possible reoccurring) imagery of the poems, and how Montague presents and represents personal and more general, national feelings and reactions via his poems. There is a tendency in these poems to bring together the universal and the local, or more precisely, presenting the universal through the local, personal and familiar. “The sense of personal loss leading to cultural loss is the essential strategy of *The Rough Field*. Family history collides with Irish history as the poet moves from his own feelings about the present and the past.”⁴¹ The poem entitled “The Same Fault” can be seen as an extraction, a condensed expression of this theme:

When I am angry, sick or tired
A line on my forehead pulses,
The line on my left temple
Opened by an old car accident.
My father had the same scar
In the same place, as if
The same fault ran through
Us both: anger, impatience,
A stress born of violence.⁴²

The second line, concerning imagery, already contains a reappearing element: pulsing, which now easily evokes the connotations of memory as being vivid and pulsating, like it appeared in “The Water Carrier.” The premises are given in the first lines: when the speaker is in an angry, sick or tired condition, a line starts to pulse on his forehead. This pulsation evokes a memory, the memory of “an old car accident.”

As the next step, the speaker tells that his father had the “same scar in the same place”. On the one hand, the line has turned into a scar, which may be seen as an image that reflects more violence, and on the other hand, the speaker and the father are likened to each other through this image. As the poem goes on, this notion of a scar is even taken further and identified as a fault. This “same fault” ran through them both. This movement gets connected with the beginning of the poem with the words “anger” and “impatience.” Although the conditions enumerated in the first line may at first reading only imply some kind of everyday tiredness and weariness, the end of the poem highlights the aggression that started to lurk in the poem: “a stress born of violence.”

⁴⁰ Robert Welch, *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, 372.

⁴¹ Garratt, “John Montague and the Poetry of History,” 96.

⁴² Montague, *Selected Poems*, 77.

Although there are no end rhymes in the poem, there are nevertheless some noticeable internal rhymes which shed light on important details. For example, “car” and “scar” rhyme, which are connected via pulsing and memory. The assonance, “accident” and “impatience” can be connected with violence. Furthermore, there are repetitions, which call attention to the same, shared nature of the speaker and the father: “same scar,” “same placem” and “same fault.”

The poem works with the elaboration of a personal, intimate memory which has a vivid, pulsating nature for the speaker. It generates a sad recognition in him, namely that he is connected with his father through the fault of shared anger violence. This recognition can be seen as a solely personal one, but it might be possible to see it as a judgement that can be extended more broadly and thus represent a national attitude and temperament. This movement from personal, local to general is what leads us to the analysis of the next poem entitled “The Cage.” This poem can be seen as an expansion of the former poem in terms of the poetic situation, the spatial aspects and the imagery. The local and the universal get even more entangled.

My father, the least happy
man I have known. His face
retained the pallor
of those who work underground:
the lost years in Brooklyn
listening to a subway
shudder the earth.

But a traditional Irishman
who (released from his grille
in the Clark Street I.R.T.)
drank neat whiskey until
he reached the only element
he felt at home in
any longer: brute oblivion.⁴³

The place is specified, by which a new spatial image is introduced, the subways in Brooklyn, “in the Clark Street I.R.T.” This poem does not start with the speaker’s, but with the father’s precise description. The poem opens with the following lines: “My father, the least happy / man I have known.” Nevertheless, he is described as a traditional Irishman, who liked drinking neat whiskey. But with drinking whiskey, “he reached the only element/ he felt at home in / any longer: brute oblivion.” This motif of drinking and reaching with it a state of

⁴³ Montague, *Selected Poems*, 79-80.

“brute oblivion” can be connected to the ending of the former poem, the “stress born of violence.” But there is also another layer introduced in the next stanza:

And yet picked himself
up, most mornings,
to march down the street
extending his smile
to all sides of the good,
(all-white) neighbourhood
belled by St Teresa's Church.

The consequence of drinking, the “brute oblivion” is presented in the first lines of this stanza. The father, on the one hand, can be seen as a heroic person, because although he may be a sad person and a drinker, he pulls himself together every morning. But on the other hand, “picked himself up” also can also refer to the cumbersome nature of his everyday life. Furthermore, another level of characteristics is introduced in this stanza. The father picked himself up to extend his smile to the, of course, all white neighbourhood. Again, the poem is very precise, it even gives the exact church of the neighbourhood. This motif sheds light on and evokes another feature, the racial and religious prejudices of the father, the “traditional Irishman.” The next stanzas describes an idyllic walk and relationship with the father. But, unfortunately, this state does not last for long:

When he came back
we walked together
across fields of Garvaghey
to see hawthorn on the summer
hedges, as though
he had never left;
a bend of the road

which still sheltered
primroses. But we
did not smile in
the shared complicity
of a dream, for when
weary Odysseus returns
Telemachus should leave.

They are connected, father and son, but they did not think and dream in the same frame of reference, as the stanza describes. It is not only that they do not share the complicity of a dream, they sadly miss one another, “for when / weary Odysseus returns / Telemachus should leave.” The adjective “weary” can give confirmation to the cumbersome nature of the father’s everyday life. Furthermore, the Greek mythological compliance may imply that what is needed in their relationship to strengthen their connection is distance, both spatially and

temporally. And there is one place where distance and ephemeral reunification can be granted at the same time, and that is the realm of memories. The last stanza connects this poem to the previous one by the memory of the scar and the old car accident which pulsates:

Often as I descend
into subway or underground
I see his bald head behind
the bars of the small booth;
the mark of an old car
accident beating on his
ghostly forehead.

The process of memory's appearance becomes more complex, pieces of memories get more intertwined. Here, the memory of the old car accident is not only evoked by the scar itself, but also by the subway, by objects of external reality. It seems that as time passes, more and more memories can be connected which evoke the memory of the father, and not just personal features, but also objects from the everyday world. There is one more aspect of this stanza which is worth mentioning. The scar, the memory of the old car accident still pulsates, but on the *ghostly* forehead of the father. The memory of the father, or at least the vividness, the pulsing of his memory is distanced. It seems that through ritualising the details of memory, the speaker is able to overcome and face these memories. "A poet, Montague himself has said, is 'someone who, through words, turns psychic defeats into victories.'"⁴⁴

The following, last section of the present research will attempt to sum up and connect the observations that have been made about Montague's selected poems, in terms of history, identity, language, imagery, imagination and memory. Concerning history, there is another kind of representation in Montague's poetry, one that is not nationalistic or personal, but universal. The poem entitled "The Wine Dark Sea" is probably the best example for this:

For there is no sea
it is all a dream
there is no sea
except in the tangle
of our minds:
the wine dark
sea of history
on which we all turn
turn and thresh
and disappear.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Christopher Murray, "Introduction," *Irish University Review (John Montague Special Issue)* 19, no. 1 (1989): 5.

⁴⁵ Montague, *Selected Poems*, 63.

This poem is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the central motif is again the liquid element: “wine dark sea.” The image of water was often linked with dream or illusion, the same happens in this poem as well: “it is all a dream.” If there is a sea, it is “in the tangle / of our minds,” only in our head, in our imagination. We create history in our head, it is the only way for a three dimensional being to process time. But then again, referring to the “sea of history” that is in our minds with the adjectives “wine dark,” this makes it again dreamlike. Of course, “wine dark” can also, besides making the notion of history dreamlike, have exact connotations: implying blood, in general, or the blood of Christ, implying with this a constant, flowing, on-going passion and suffering.

This poem is again one that balances viewpoints: once history is dreamlike, once it is exact; once it is existent, once it is non-existent. Similarly to the memories that were presented in the previous poems: once they are acknowledged as feelings and happenings belonging to the past; at the same time, they can be also considered as affections which accompany, which pulsate and have influence on a person even in the present.

The ending of the poem is also of dual nature. First it seems that the poem gives a circular nature to history: “on which we all turn / and turn,” but we finally disappear at the end. The word “disappear” itself can have two interpretations. If something disappears, it once had to have a beginning, and then it will have a point where it will end, disappear. But it can be also interpreted as something that will not have an endpoint: we fade into the sea, we become one with it, with the circularity and constant movement and waves it represents. If one considers the structure of the poem it would probably strengthen the latter interpretation of disappearing: the poem contains many repetitions and has only two punctuation marks, thus it creates a liquid, wavy feeling, which can represent “pulses in the fictive water” that represent history in “the tangle / of our minds.”

Finally, I would like to quote a passage from an interview made with the poet and summarise the essay’s main arguments in connection with it:

O’DRISCOLL: *You clearly believe that a sequence of poems can do more than a group of individual lyrics, that it is more than the sum of its parts.*

MONTAGUE: I learned from Yeats. There is a splendid essay by Hugh Kenner on Yeats where he says that, instead of looking for an explication of a particular poem by Yeats, look at the poem on the next page. Yeats often held back poems so as to put them into a particular flow.

...

I think the sequence is born out of the contemporary desire to write a longer poem but not to get hopelessly involved in an epic form. The word “sequence” means

“to follow,” so once you have started a sequence it presupposes that you are going to get the other poems.⁴⁶

The present research has dealt with poems by John Montague which mostly represent and discuss memories. I hope I have managed to describe the ways in which the poet ritualises the details of past experiences. In general, Montague recalls a childhood memory for which he creates a lyric world, poem by poem both in terms of structure and imagery. In connection with this, Montague can be likened to Wordsworth in terms of creative process: as Wordsworth argued, one needs to meditate on the feelings and thoughts that arise in a poet. This meditation is granted for Montague by the “slow exactness” through which he can recreate a memory, describe it in detail, and reflect upon it. Via balancing past and present, memory and his present self, he is able to gain an understanding of the connection of the represented recollections and his identity, thus being able to turn “psychic defeats into victories,” as he himself has argued. There is usually a point in each piece where memory starts to work in a self-reflexive way (like in “The Water Carrier”), or Montague creates an image which he bestows with such power and importance that it can turn the poem itself self-reflexive (like in “Woodtown Manor”).

As Montague implies in the interview, he likes to write sequences, like Yeats did, to put the poems “into a particular flow.” These poems about memories themselves create a kind of sequence in the oeuvre of Montague. They are in connection with each other with their shared imagery. Through this, the poet manages to create an interaction between his own poems and also manages to give a feeling of narrative continuity concerning his (quest for an) identity. The images of light, water, and fish, for example (more specifically, the trout) have been present from “The Water Carrier” on to “The Source,” even “The Wine Dark Sea” uses the imagery of water. Or the motive of pulsing (which also has its origins in “The Water Carrier”) appears in the poems about the father, in “The Same Fault” and “The Cage.” Past experiences get ritualised. They are able to bridge the temporal and spatial gap of past and present. They reach to the present state of the speaker, thus affecting his ideas, feelings, and his identity through the flow of these pulsing memories.

⁴⁶ Dennis O’Driscoll, “An Interview with John Montague,” *Irish University Review (John Montague Special Issue)* 19, no. 1 (1989): 66.

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