

## INTERVIEW



### *Harry Clifton*

Harry Clifton was born in Dublin in 1952, and educated at University College Dublin. He has lived and worked in Africa, Asia, England, Germany, Italy and (most recently) France. He has published five collections of poetry with Gallery Press, of which *Night Train through the Brenner* (1994) is the latest. A selected poems, *The Desert Route*, was published in 1992; a selection in French translation, *Le Canto d'Ulysse*, has just appeared from Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux. He has received the Patrick Kavanagh Award, and has been Poet in Residence at The Frost Place, New Hampshire. This interview with David Wheatley took place on 16 August 1996 in Trinity College Dublin, on one of the poet's occasional visits to his native city.

*DW: One reviewer has described you as commanding his respect because of your exceptional presence in contemporary poetry: you are "almost invisible". How do you think this perception of you comes about, and is it one you are happy with? Could you even be said to have cultivated it, to some extent?*

*HC:* That's a question I might answer in the first place in an Irish context. During the last twenty to twenty-five years that I've been writing or trying to write poems, it seems to me that there have been perhaps three or four major Irish themes. First, the Northern Irish troubles. Second, the new wave of women's poetry. Third, Irish-language revivalist poetry. And a possible fourth, the emergence of a Dublin working-class literary consciousness. It so happens that I do not fit in to any one or other or even a combination of those, and therefore for many years of my writing life I have been virtually invisible in an Irish context. However, the concept of Ireland and what constitutes Irish poetry (and what constitutes Irish society too) has been changing radically in the last five or eight years. When I began to publish in the late seventies and early eighties, the kind of poetry I was writing, out of African or Asian experience, was completely off the agenda. Now both in poetry and in fiction it is entirely acceptable for writers to write out of Japanese, Argentinian or American experience and for all of that to be included in their Irishness; and I think my work, perhaps coincidentally, has become more understandable to people as the

society itself and the concept of Ireland have changed and certain issues are less on the agenda. So I would say that I am less invisible now than I used to be. That's one aspect of the question. Another aspect is one's personal attitude to invisibility. I think Cyril Connolly has said that there are writers who write best "with the sun in their eyes", in other words writers who need their work and their changes to be public at all times. I am by temperament hermetic and prefer to work for myself and maybe a few other poets, and I've always felt more comfortable doing my work when the world is looking the other way. So there are positive and negative aspects to "invisibility".

DW: *The question of travel has always loomed very large for you. Would you like to comment on the dialectic in your work between Ireland and the other countries where you have lived? I'm thinking of the poem "Experience" where you speak of "find(ing) your way back, through a complex of fates / You used to call Ireland once (...) / in the relative states / We will never again call home".*

HC: An important point to be made here is that my background is a split background, in that my paternal ancestry is very strongly and even nationalistically Irish, whereas my maternal ancestry is South American. I grew up therefore in a society where I saw a very strong correspondence to one side of my personality, the paternal side, but I had to go looking for the other side. So I think that the travels I have undertaken have in many ways been an attempt to complete my personality, to find its second half, the part that didn't correspond to external Irish life. Another important point that I would make in this respect is that the more I have travelled, the more I have come to see the poet's true home as language rather than place. I would now describe myself more as a citizen of a language rather than a citizen of a place.

DW: *Although you speak of completing yourself in your travels, it seems to me that throughout your work—your first collections maybe more than your most recent book—there is an elegiac, even valedictory note which would put up a strong resistance to any eventual closure or completion of the self. Perhaps your treatment of Ireland is symptomatic of this resistance?*

HC: I think it is important to draw a distinction between the first four collections and the most recent book. I think anybody looking into those first four collections would probably note the number of poems that have to do with either arriving in Ireland or departing from it, notably the poems that come at the beginning and the end of collections. I think that this is a question that doesn't have a specific answer but resolves itself in

some way over time... In my most recent book I deliberately avoided the question of returning to Ireland or leaving Ireland and excluded poems that related to that as much as possible, with one exception—"Dostoyevsky to his Publisher Stellovsky", which is a poem that circles the idea of eventual return to Ireland, and tries to look at the idea of return without illusion, without idealising the home place. But in general in the last collection I felt freer of this old dialectic.

DW: *To dwell on the earlier books a little longer, one area in which your elegiac style seems to excel is your treatment of sexuality and human relations, in poems like "Trial Marriage", "Monsoon Girl" and "The Distaff Side", with their mixture of wistfulness and scepticism towards the possibility of human fulfilment. Are those themes as relevant to you now as they were then?*

HC: I would say that many of my earlier poems about sex are poems of the intense instant, whereas the poems that I've written more recently have tended to be love poems in a broader sense, in the sense that Donne's "Love Progress" is a love poem, one that allows for the gradual evolution of things. I think that even "The Distaff Side" is slightly different from the other poems you mention since, like the poems in *Night Train through the Brenner*, it is less purely sexual than about the fuller unfolding of a relationship.

DW: *Another theme you return to frequently is religion. Would it be accurate to say that orthodox belief loses out for you to what, in "Eclogue", you call a "lucid despair / that is older than any religion"?*

HC: I think that anybody who has read my poems will probably have noticed my interest in deserts: real deserts, as in "The Desert Route", or metaphorical deserts, as in "The Walls of Carthage". Where I live at present in Paris is for me a desert, and I use the word desert in a positive sense. For me the desert is a place of clarity and emptiness, and a point of departure; I don't see it in terms of desolation. One of the things I like about French life, strangely enough, is that it is completely, or almost completely, post-religious in the conventional sense. It seems to have reached a kind of nadir that Ireland has not yet reached, and instead of creating problems that somehow clarifies things for me. To live in France is to live at a point of ending and a point of new beginning, a point where there is nothing left of the old religious clutter and nothing new has really begun. I recently wrote a poem called "God in France" which takes off from a remark of Saul Bellow's in an interview with *Le Monde* where he was asked what he would most like to be in life and he answered: "I would like to be God in

France". When the interviewer asked him why, he said: "because in France nobody believes in God any more". Therefore as God you would have no responsibilities in the conventional sense towards people: you wouldn't have calls made upon you, you would be free to exist and hang around cafés... That idea interested me because it seemed in a very casual way to encapsulate what Dietrich Bonhoeffer said about the "spiritual adulthood" of the human race, the idea that we have reached a point where mankind doesn't need God as a paternal presence any more but has to find some new way of living.

DW: *Maybe this is the reverse side of Hamm in Beckett's Endgame, praying to a God that he doesn't believe in. From God's point of view it might come as something of a relief not to have to exist, like being given a day off.*

HC: Precisely. But that day off may last for a very long time, and it may be the beginning of a new spirituality, more authentic...

DW: *Nevertheless conventional religion remains a strong iconographic presence in your work.*

HC: I would say now that I am trying to unclutter that aspect of my work. I have lived in countries where the iconographic clutter is considerable, Ireland being an example. I think for me religious experience is clarity rather than fog, and what I find in Ireland is that the religious side of life is fog, an overcluttered religiosity dying on its feet. It's the clarity I'm looking for, and I find that in other places which perhaps have reached a further point of "desertification" than Ireland has yet reached.

DW: *Your search for alternative religious perspectives has led you to adapt a variety of personae with religious dimensions to their characters—Hopkins, Kierkegaard, Thomas Merton. Do you find personae a useful device for exploring your own beliefs and assumptions?*

HC: Yes. I think that the first poem of that kind which I wrote was "Death of Thomas Merton". It was one of those poems where I needed an objective correlative for a complex of feelings I had when I was living in the Far East in 1980 to 1982. On the one hand I was engaged in a very ethically high-minded activity, administering refugee aid programmes, but on the other I had a strong sense of compromise as a Westerner living in what in some ways was a vassal state of the United States. The ambivalence between spirituality and political reality seemed to be summed up in Thomas Merton, so I wrote a poem about his last days in the Far East

which was also in a certain sense a reflection on my own being there. So I think unconsciously, after that poem, I began to hunt for other alter egos. Dag Hammarskjöld, again very obviously in the ethical realm, for his attempt to do good and his haunting superego. Gerard Manley Hopkins perhaps more for the sense of estrangement within Ireland. I think that these are people who change; as one's life changes, one projects oneself into other lives differently. A figure who has become very important for me is the Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti. I very much admire the separation in his life between the almost monk-like seclusion of his artistic activity and his occasional forays into the more social life of Montparnasse at the time. He for me is an exemplary figure. That's how I see the artistic life: as an austerity and as a dedication, with its public side also, but one which is entered into reluctantly.

DW: *Obviously the austerity you speak of influences your work as a whole, but your turning away from the public side of art makes me think of your dislike too of what you have called "claustrophobic domesticity". For you, the domestic is rarely enough per se, any more than the public sphere is. As you write in "Meltwater": "Somewhere behind all this / I sense the glacier". Perhaps you are the Captain Oates of Irish poetry, stepping outside the warmth of the social or the family group into the existential cold beyond both?*

HC: For me "Meltwater" is a very personal poem, and doesn't really reflect on things social and asocial, but I very much take your point. I would say that this comes down to one's idea of poetry and the life of the poet. It's an old cliché but one I believe in: poetry is concerned essentially with sex and death, no matter how intellectualised those things are. The basic forces are there. It seems to me that in the early part of a poet's life, the sex instinct or the life instinct is what informs most poems, and it is the body that is writing the poems. But towards the end of life it is the confrontation with non-existence that becomes the big thing, and it is the mind or the spirit that is writing the poems, as in late Yeats poems or late John Donne. But in between the early and the late there seems to me to be a long middle period when a poet is integrated socially. The mind and the body are in a state of balance, and the self and society are also in a state of balance: the period, say, of childrearing or career in a social sense. But this is often a period when the muse does not seem to be present. I suppose my suspicion of "claustrophobic domesticity" is really a suspicion of this middle period, when it is so difficult to stay in touch with the muse, although you may be most integrated socially and most effective in other ways. I often see it as an excellent time for prose but a bad period for lyric poetry, because the forces are too deeply buried or repressed. My way of

negotiating it has been to move from place to place and to renew my vision through changing the angle.

DW: *And also to start writing a little fiction?*

HC: Yes. I think that's definitely been helpful for me. I've a very clear idea of why I'm writing fiction at the moment, although I hope it never becomes a primary thing. For me it's a secondary thing, but it's a way of standing outside myself for once in my life, and I think this is the period to do it.

DW: *You seem equally at home with free verse and with rhyme and complex stanza forms. Is writing in one or the other a conscious decision for you?*

HC: I feel that this again is a life question as well as an art question. I began, almost accidentally I suppose, by working in forms, and found that the tension between stanzaic writing and the experiences I was having was an exciting tension for me. At the same time I was quite obsessed with the inevitable social compromise of having to hold down a job. So external form in both poetry and life were important to me through much of my earlier writing life. Now I feel that the idea of internal form is important, and I'm tending to write freer poems that evolve out of a floating line that seems to have certain melodic possibilities that I allow to develop more naturally. At the same time my actual life is also freer, perhaps less concerned than it once was with the superimposition of a career structure or a job structure. So I would see myself as having made a gradual change from the external to the internal in my attitude to the question of form.

DW: *In a recent review of John Fuller you wrote that "instead of playing the spinet in the parlour" he should "twang his Hank Williams guitar in the woodshed a bit more". Do you have any similar advice for younger Irish poets writing today?*

HC: My fear is that we now seem to live in a period when university-educated people, very well-read, are able to write a poem with a high degree of technical proficiency but which manages to a great extent to avoid experience. My fear is that young poets would move too much in the direction of technique, and exist in a state of fear of life. What Yeats said about learning your craft is a vital thing, but it needn't be to the detriment of the "perfection of the life" he sets it up against. For me, perfection of the life doesn't necessarily mean something ordered or harmonic; it might mean an openness to experience, a willingness to let unpredictabilities

blow through your life. As for advice to Irish poets... I feel that Ireland is a very good nurturing ground for a young poet, but there are certain dangers. One danger I see for young poets is that recognition can come too soon. There are too many people on the watch for young Irish poets, and too many people ready to pounce as soon as a poet has published half a dozen poems. So my advice to a young Irish poet would be to have the strength of character to lie low until at least the age of thirty, if possible. What I'm suggesting is that a poet needs time to find his or her voice, and can be thrown off track by too-early recognition. In a society that's as poetically self-conscious as this is, that's a real danger.

DW: *What direction do you see your work moving in now?*

HC: I think that as you go on writing, you discover that you are working around the same themes rather than progressing in a linear sense. The movement is more a circular than a linear one. Again, I would see the figure of Giacometti as exemplary for me, as someone who spent the last twenty-five years of his life remaking a few things that were absolutely important to him, remaking them in the light of a philosophical problem he had with them. More and more I see my own work as a kind of circling of certain obsessions that have run right through my work, especially the great problem of existing in a world of relative values and always wanting to find absolute values. That, for me, I would say is probably the most important thing.

DW: *"Here I am, a priest in my late forties, still / In the desert, still / Relativity's fool", as you wrote in "The Walls of Carthage"...*

HC: Very much so.