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France, Angela ORCID: 0000-0001-8308-4868 (2018) Stratigraphies: The Long Poem of Place. Long Poem Magazine (20). pp. 1-9.

Official URL: http://longpoemmagazine.org.uk/

EPrint URI: https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/5953

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Angela France

STRATIGRAPHIES: THE LONG POEM OF PLACE

My own poetry collection*, The Hill*[1] began as an experiment. I had been intrigued by a Text World Theory analysis of Paul Muldoon's 'Unapproved Road'[2] by Nigel McLoughlin[3]. He showed how the poem could have resonance at different levels for readers, depending on their knowledge of a specific place. I, as an English woman with an only superficial understanding of the Irish Troubles, could appreciate the poem for its craft and language, the skill of the subtle, loose, Terza Rima form, the fresh language, and the shifts in time and place. For someone such as Professor McLoughlin, with a comprehensive knowledge of the troubles and the borderlands, almost every line carries references and allusions opaque to me. Even the title, 'Unapproved Road', carries a different meaning for someone with local knowledge; on first reading I had read it as something similar to signs I'd seen for 'unadopted' roads, i.e. unadopted by the local council and so not maintained by them. In the context of the borderlands of Ireland, an unapproved road is one that crosses the border but has no checkpoint or official border crossing. Unapproved roads were conduits for smuggling and travel for those who did not want attention from the border guards; they were often blown up by security services and just as often repaired by local farmers. The title signals, to the knowledgeable reader, a time, setting, and political tension in the poem.

I wanted to attempt something similar to 'Unapproved Road' and write a poem about a place I knew intimately, which could carry different layers of meaning for different readers. The obvious place for me to write about was Leckhampton Hill, near Cheltenham. I have walked on the hill for over fifty years and grew up with it always at the end of the road, blocking the view like a giant stone curtain. I first learned to love solitude on the hill, scrambling on the rocky paths and playing in the remains of quarry workings every weekend and school holiday from about ten years old. I grew up knowing some of the history, that there had been trouble over the quarries and there were riots over closed rights of way. Locally known history can take on the quality of urban legend in its variances and focus on a single incident; I began researching the history, using legal documents and newspapers in the county archives so that I could be certain of the details I wanted to allude to in the poem. I had planned an afternoon in the archives followed by writing a poem, or at most a short sequence, as a way of exploring what Muldoon had achieved in 'Unapproved Road'.

It very quickly became clear to me that a single, average-length poem could not render the hill as I knew it. A short poem could only be a moment in a season, a single spot in a landscape that varied from woods, to grasslands, to limestone quarries and outcrops. It was not difficult to allude to physical traces of the history in a poem because they were present in the landscape: Iron Age workings, a colony of Roman snails, and ruins of an engine house and lime kilns from quarrying. The human dramas were not as obvious on the hill itself but were preserved in the county archives. It became apparent during my first visit to the archives that my aim of blending the history with my contemporary experience of the hill would not be achieved in one, or even a few, short poems. I was

specifically looking for details of the riots in 1902. A new quarry owner closed rights of way and built a cottage for his foreman on a 'pit' where local people held fairs on holidays. A group of working men, known as the 'Leckhampton Stalwarts' and led by a clay-digger called Walter Ballinger, marched from town with around 2,000 people and demolished the cottage. The county archive holds six boxes of legal papers relating to the rights of way and the riots, letters, local news reports, and photographs. While the actual amount of material could have been overwhelming, what showed me a way to represent the story was the vitality and urgency of the voices that emerged. There was a 'List of Aged Witnesses Brought to Court', mostly working people, who testified how many generations had known and used the hill before its closure, together with transcribed witness statements from each one on the list. There were newspaper reports, including a verbatim report of the speech from the back of a cart that set off the march up the hill. There were letters from landowners and solicitors, letters to the Rural District Council, and letters to newspapers. One man wrote frequently to the local paper and became a strong presence throughout the project; William Sparrow, a road-sweeper. Sparrow's letters to the *Echo* were furious, witty, and intelligent. His language was rich and colourful, and contributed to the difficulty I was having in finding a way to enable these voices to be heard while weaving history with a contemporary account of the hill. Co-opting such language as Sparrow saying the press made a great deal of 'fustian and flapdoodle'[4] into a poem in my own voice, or in a 'found' poem would read as inauthentic at best; Sparrow needed to speak in his own voice.

I visited the archives regularly, sorting through boxes of papers and photographing documents to study at home. The story and the characters were so fascinating that I had to find a way to tell it. I have no interest in versified history, and certainly had no intention to write it, but as I spent more time with the documents from the riots I kept getting sucked into the history as if disappearing down a wormhole. I found I could not write poetry while I was in the archive, nor while directly working with the documents, but needed to take time away from the history, sometimes walking on the hill, in order to get a sense of that history as part of the present, one of the many layers that make up the now of the place. I had to also take space away from both the hill and the history at times, before I could write anything worthwhile. The introduction to 'The Footing'[5], an anthology of long poems based on 'the ideas and practices of walking', suggests that 'Landscapes are disturbed and reordered by currents of memory and history.' For me, it was as if I had to go away in order to allow all the different impressions, layers, and voices to settle within me, and away from the sources, before I could find a way to make poetry of the 'disturbed and reordered' landscape.

Once I had accepted that *The Hill* needed to be book-length, rather than a few individual poems, and that it could not be rushed I was able to settle into a rhythm of research, taking time away, and writing. Recognising the length of the project also enabled a more expansive view in which the different voices and layers of time could be accommodated and I could see form as the way the layers could be both differentiated and work together. Creating short, newspaper column-shape pieces spaced throughout enabled me to include the rioters' story, without having to resort to notes, and also provide a space for Sparrow:

Sparrow says men
from Bath Road hide in
the garden   crouch
behind brassicas skulk
in rhubarb crowns
Dale’s men waiting for
king’s men   cudgels
and sticks   fists and
boots   armed to
belabour us when we
set foot on the path
Sparrow writes the
letters   tells the world
Sparrow says the
world don’t listen   says
the press are *fustian
and flapdoodle*   no
friends of the hill[6]

If there were going to be a presiding spirit for the project, a genius loci of the hill, it should have been Walter Ballinger who was the leader of the ‘Leckhampton Stalwarts’ and who was left doing the longest sentence of hard labour as a test case. Ballinger was named ‘King of the Common’ by the press and I have written about him in that guise, but it is William Sparrow who was on my shoulder when I was writing or walking on the hill. It was Sparrow’s strength and vitality that made his voice essential in telling the story and it is Sparrow who stays with me now; as if he has more to say that I haven’t yet heard.

At this stage I became aware that there was too much focus on the riots, fascinating though they were. If the hill were to be fully invoked on the page, there needed to be recognition of its older layers of history. The flora and fauna have been there through, and before, human habitation and presented an opportunity to perform older voices. Giving creatures a voice in poetry is fraught with difficulty; there is a risk of anthropomorphism or cuteness, either of which can seem inauthentic and alienate the reader. I struggled to find a voice for the creatures of the hill until I discovered ‘Anglish’[7], which is English with the Latinate influences removed. Anglish is, admittedly, something of a gimmick but I found it feels good in the mouth and connects with something ancient, for me and for the reader.

Brock says

delve deep
under stone
claw sharpstrike into roots
and earth
find allworld below
for shelterness

my jaws make a hallowing
of sinless worm and slug

I am needful of night-swart
uncleft in my woodside ledemark

leave sun-tide
to aquern and wort-cropper
beingless to me[8]

Using form and white space expanded the possibilities for incorporating material from the county archive while continuing to make poetry. Documents I felt were critical in understanding the emotional and practical relationship local people had with the hill were the list of 'Aged Witnesses' and the corresponding witness statements. I used some of the witness statements, paraphrased for rhythm and sound, as short prose pieces and these, together with 'Anglish' poems, and the column-shaped poems above, created a narrative frame within which the more traditionally lyrical hill poems could develop.

Aged Witness #3: Sparrow Hiscock

I have walked on the hill as long as I've been alive. I was sent to learn the baker-trade from Isaac Crump. I was young and strong, carrying bread to customers over the hill and no wagoner nor squire stopped me on tramway path or stoneway. I followed the common wall track to Cubberley then to Cowley over the hill top by Hartley Bottom. Dale's no right. He's wrong to think he'll ban us from our hill. We've always walked here and we'll be there Easter; with our donkey rides and music, celebrating the people's will.[9]

The Hill has been the most absorbing, fascinating, and most difficult poetry I have written. It is hard to know where to go next. While I am still touring with the live presentation based on *The Hill* it feels as if the hill, Sparrow and Ballinger, Brock and Nadder, have not let me go. It is certainly difficult to consider putting out a book of short lyrics after this project. During the writing of *The Hill*, and since, I have been reading a lot of other poems written about place and have started to question the commonalities I find in the poems. What is it about engaging with a place closely that seems to demand a longer form? My own experience with *The Hill*, in not anticipating the length of the work, is not uncommon; I emailed some other makers of long poems to ask about their experience. Paul Henry has said that he usually writes short lyric poems, but says of his poem 'The Glass Aisle'[10] (set on the Monmouthshire-Brecon canal) 'each day, from the outset, I was writing fragments of verse that would eventually lead me towards the long poem' and Penelope Shuttle said of *Heath*[11] (a book-length collaboration with John Greening about Hounslow Heath) 'it was initially an experiment to write a few poems for a possible magazine feature, then as a pamphlet, and then we realised it was such a rich subject that we were on our way to writing a full collection.' It is as if fully engaging with a place, through thought, imagination, and research, creates a pressure that leads to the work having its own momentum until it reaches the length it needs to be.

Poets have written about place for a long time; the Romantics, in their quest for the sublime and the numinous wrote a number of long-form poems of place. Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey'[12] and Shelley's 'Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni'[13] are two fairly typical examples. There are distinct differences between the work of the Romantics and contemporary poems of place. For the Romantics, the poems were about looking *at* the landscape in search of the sublime and recording the effect on the poet, while contemporary writers are more likely to be *in* the landscape, whether urban or rural, and engaged with it. For Wordsworth, there is more about the effect of the place on him than about the place itself:

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue.—And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man

Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' is also about the effect of the view on his thoughts and emotions:

Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
To muse on my own separate fantasy

There is very little specific detail in either poem; the descriptions are quite general and from a distance. While Wordsworth notes human activity, it is seen as part of the pictorial effect and a trigger for romantic speculation with no recognition of the real human lives:

…these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.

Writing about place from a distance does not in itself signify the poetry of the Romantics. An essay by Katy Didden, 'A Poetics of Tectonic Scale: The Great Distance Poem', describes a theory by Twyla Tharp that our imaginations are fixed to a 'preferred focal length', that it is in our DNA to view close-up, middle distance or great distance.[14] Didden goes on to discuss Marianne Moore's poem about Mt. Ranier, 'An Octopus'. The difference between Moore's poem and Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' is immediately obvious in the level of detail. The Romantics offered a panoramic view, a big picture, while Moore zooms in to precise, specific detail, whether observed, researched, or imagined:

these conspicuously spotted little horses are peculiar;
hard to discern among the birch-trees, ferns, and lily-pads,
avalanche lilies, Indian paint-brushes,
bear's ears and kittentails,
and miniature cavalcades of chlorophylless fungi
magnified in profile on the moss-beds like moonstones in the water;[15]

As a poetry reader, I am no longer satisfied with the panoramic view offered by the Romantics; I want to visualise the setting, to engage with the place invoked on the page

and it is only specific detail that can enable that experience. All of the long poems of place I have read offer rich detail, regardless of the vantage point or size of place. For example, 'shining like tin, the hen-fish swishing her tail / making a little vortex, lifting the gravel' (Alice Oswald *Dart*[16]); 'in the roots of fir trees / in the brick-earth where brambles coil / from under roadside flints' (Penelope Shuttle and John Greening *Heath*[17]); 'the river's dull pewter / slow-shimmy the strait, grinding stone, / cutting shingle. Mallards perch the weir / sloped in water-gush and slugs of rain' (Angelina Ayres 'The Strait'[18]).

Reading other long poems of place has led me to question why so many of the works have layers of history, as if the stratigraphies of geology? Many of the poems also employ other voices, both historical and contemporary, in the layers that make up the whole. Alice Oswald's books *Dart* and *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*[19] both employ braided voices, of living and dead characters. The books take different approaches, *Dart* acting as a poetic census of the life and length of the river and *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* charting the effect of moonrise on different characters whose lives are bound with the Severn estuary. In both cases, the weaving of voices shows a symbiosis between river and human that intensifies and illuminates Oswald's descriptions of place. Paul Henry's 'The Glass Aisle' (title poem of his book) uses the device of a telephone engineer up a telegraph pole 'caged in a tree' to pick up lost voices. Henry has said the poem began as a ghost poem 'so some historical knowledge was important, in connecting the living to the dead' but the discovery of a census of workhouse inmates, from an old workhouse on the opposite bank, 'chillingly validated a supernatural experience and they became crucial to the poem'. The workhouse inmates provide a litany throughout the poem, sometimes just the bare details from the census:

> *John Rosel, Tinker, Carmarthen*
> *George Butcher, Weaver, Frome*
> *James Grant, Seaman, Boston.*[20]

Other times, the inmates' voices offer fragments of their stories, like bubbles rising to the surface of the canal:

> *When my boy cried in chapel*
> *they sent me to the Master's room...*[21]

The effect of these voices, for me, was indeed chilling. Their being italicised suggested a constant whisper in the background, like the sounds of the water of the canal or the creaking of the canal when frozen (the glass aisle of the title).

John Greening and Penelope Shuttle's collaborative call-and-response sequence about Hounslow Heath is a much longer work than the others I have read (183 pages). They both use a range of voices, alive and dead, some of which are friends and family as well as historical, imaginary, and legendary figures. As John Greening explained in an email:

> There's one about my uncle, an insurance salesman, who loved music, and rode his moped over the old Heath (XLI). There are several about Penny's relatives

> and ancestors. But stories from our researches or recalled from the common myth-kitty are pretty crucial to the book. Like that urban myth of the ghost at Heathrow (XLVIII), or Dick Turpin and co. Often it's a tale that appeals and the characters come with it – as with the story about Osterley Park, Gresham and Queen Elizabeth I (IV).

Hounslow Heath has changed from a broad expanse of edgelands, frequented by footpads, highwaymen, and travellers taking a drop of dutch courage at the hostelries to 'a smallish nature reserve, squeezed between high-rise flats and the Post Office depot' (John Greening), constantly crossed by flights from Heathrow. The call and response form, the time-shifts carried by the different voices and the precise and sensory detail create an impression of the older expanse of heath as a revenant, flickering in and out of vision around and over the small piece of land the poets walk in the present.

> Uninstall those lights, unsurface the carriageways, remove the factories,
> unroll the Great West Road until you come to bare clay.
>
> My Mathurin has reached his final day and puts his hand on my shoulder
> as if I were to be sent off to Mantua, to prospects of poplar and larksong,
>
> …
>
> Am I expected to get a tonsure? Tridents approach on autopilot.[22]

Some poets weave the history into the present of a place without using voices of the past. Steve Ely, for instance, in a poem about the train route from Moorthorpe to Sheffield, seamlessly blends ancient history with contemporary detail throughout the poem:

> Edwin's manor, of Godwinson
> King, where Swein and Archil held carucates
> for geld; now a halt on the Leeds
> to Sheffield line: cemetery, terrace rows,
> boarded-up shops.
> The seven-fifteen pulls away
> to Langthwaite, the Danelaw's wildwood clearing;
> past the slacky grime of the coalman's yard[23]

Returning to the questions that arise for me in reading long poems of place, it seems to me that a short poem can only be a slice of view, a moment in time, as if seen through a coin-operated seaside telescope. For a place to be fully invoked on the page, as readers we need to experience breadth and time, more than the equivalent of one foot on the path. This is not to say I don't appreciate shorter poems set in a specific place. Patrick Kavanagh's 'Shancoduff', for instance, is fresh and engaging, with gorgeous language:

> My hills hoard the bright shillings of March
> While the sun searches in every pocket.

They are my Alps and I have climbed the Matterhorn
With a sheaf of hay for three perishing calves[24].

However much I enjoy poems like Kavanagh's for their craft, music, and language, the place is a setting, rather than the place as an experience on the page. As I read more poems of place that bring human history into the poets' engagement with the language, I become less satisfied with a romantic, panoramic, view of the land. While it may not be true of larger countries, there is not a single acre of England that has not been under human management at some time. To write about any part of this country without acknowledging the effect of humanity on the land is inauthentic at best, and dishonest at worst. I discovered when writing *The Hill*, under the compulsion of the vitality and honesty of the voices that emerged from the archive, that engaging with the human history becomes a sort of social ecology alongside the natural ecology; a way of showing how the past shapes the present both physically and culturally so that the place is performed on the page.

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3. later presented at Great Writing conference, Imperial College London, June 23rd 2018
4. William Sparrow, letter to the Gloucestershire Echo, July 21st 1902
5. Lewis, Brian (ed), *The Footing* (Sheffield: Longbarrow Press, 2013) p. 8
6. *The Hill* p. 22
7. http://anglish.wikia.com/wiki/Main_leaf
8. *The Hill* p.25
9. *The Hill* p.24
10. Henry, Paul, *The Glass Aisle* (Bridgend: Seren, 2018)
11. Greening, John and Shuttle, Penelope, *Heath* (Rugby: Nine Arches Press, 2016)
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15. Moore, Marianne, 'An Octopus' https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/an-octopus/
16. Oswald, Alice, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002) p. 9
17. Greening, John and Shuttle, Penelope, *Heath* (Rugby: Nine Arches Press, 2016) p. 109
18. Ayers, Angelina, 'The Strait' in Lewis, Brian (ed), *The Footing* (Sheffield: Longbarrow Press, 2013) p. 36
19. Oswald, Alice, *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)
20. Henry, Paul, *The Glass Aisle* (Bridgend: Seren, 2018) p. 33
21. ibid p.30
22. Greening, John and Shuttle, Penelope, *Heath* (Rugby: Nine Arches Press, 2016) p. 149
23. Ely, Steve, 'Moorthorpe to Sheffield, 1983', *Englaland* (Ripon: Smokestack Books, 2015) p.111
24. Kavanagh, Patrick, 'Shancoduff' https://www.tcd.ie/English/patrickkavanagh/shancoduff.html