

Thomas McCarthy

**POETRY, MEMORY
AND THE PARTY**

Journals 1974-2014

1977

February 9th Theo was at Glenshelane for the weekend. Had a fascinating time of gossip and wild planning with him. His girlfriend, Mary B, was with him. She is an amazing person. All Theo's women are exceptional; he attracts the most brilliant and lovely people. He really is a very blessed person.

February 10th Long discussion with Theo on his lack of poetry. A very serious discussion. Theo thinks that a stay in an Anglo-Irish house was rather like 'poetry', like the 'poetic life' that we should all aspire to. He said why bother writing down the poems when one is just living within them. I was very confused by this question and couldn't give him a decent answer.

Recently, when we were in Bill Ludgate's pub, Patrick Crotty said that moments in life are fleeting anyway, even the happiest, fullest moments are fleeting. Even in the most perfect Revolutionary society, Crotty said, there would be Death. Even the most loving and kind system in the world will still end with our deaths. We have to accept this ultimate absurdity of the human condition, the nothingness of the grave. Perhaps we construct poems in lieu of an answer to this riddle, this absurdity, at the heart of life. To write a great poem is to spit upon the spitefulness of the grave. I wish I'd been able to recall Crotty's words when I was talking to Theo at Glenshelane. Crotty has been reading a lot of Beckett, most recently *Watt*, *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, and this reading has made him very insightful on the big questions of life. Beckett has effected even his speech pattern — he now talks more quickly, but in shorter sentences. He has lost the idleness of 1976, the languid idleness of Leonard Cohen's LPs. I love

listening to his conversations with the brilliant Marie Baker, him holding a copy of Beckett or Marcuse and she intensely involved in the *Irish Times* cryptic crossword. They sit together in the Kampus Kitchen and being with them is like sitting in on the rehearsal of a Beckett play. They are two of the cleverest people I know. Marie must be the most brilliant woman ever to pass through the corridors of UCC. To be so bright and so good-looking is an astonishing good fortune; in these things she is the female equal of Theo. I notice that Theo and Marie avoid each other like dominant lions, but very politely, as if they recognize an alpha intensity in the other.

February 17th Talked to Seamus Heaney in College today. My first time meeting him in person, though I feel I know him well from his poetry and his publicity. He had read my pamphlet *Warm Circle* and thought it good— 'accomplished' was the word he used. (Montague must have given it to him, fair play to old Montague.) He said he felt terrific poetic vibes down here in the South, and said he would like to do a Poetry Workshop with us at some time in the future. Terrific. 'Your work is not what I expected,' he said to me, 'Not at all like the work of Patrick Galvin. It's like Ulster stuff,' he repeated this as he read through my pamphlet again. It's funny how the word 'Ulster' has become a byword for excellence, for achievement.

February 19th Poem in *Icarus*. Also got a letter from *Cyphers* saying they would like to use two old poems, 'Chiselled Rock' and 'The First Convention'. Amazing. Two more years of apprenticeship to these quarterlies and I'll be ready for a book.

Feb 21st For the last week I've been reading Doctorow's *Ragtime* and David Jones' *Epoch and Artist*: both brilliant in entirely different ways.

1981

Jan 7th Letter from Ambassador Shannon. He'll be staying on for a few months, even after Reagan comes into office. He wants me to come to Dublin to stay at the Ambassador's residence for a few days.

January 8th-9th Sore throat has turned into flu. All last night I sweated with fever. How horrible it must be to be chronically ill, to be an invalid. Sickness takes one back to the world of the body. I could read Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton right now. They are all body.

Winter sunlight shining into my room: always when I'm ill I get winter sunlight, that strong white sheen on the glass unlike the yellowness of summer. Light like ice. I want to read Gide's or Stendhal's diaries, but I must get some sleep. Both authors are lying at my bedside. I'm like a child who has to have his favourite toy soldiers or train set in full view before going to sleep.

January 10th Seán Ó Tuama said to me that Heaney is now leaving Ireland to teach at Harvard for four years. Heaney is forty-one or forty-two years old, time to spread his wings, to test himself against huge competition in the biggest poetry amphitheatre on earth, the American campus. It's sad but perhaps inevitable that Ireland would lose Heaney to American academe, and it's also inevitable that Heaney should choose to go West where fame and wealth await him. As Anthony Cronin said, Nothing succeeds at home like the rumour of success abroad. Heaney's fame in Ireland will only be increased by our hearing of his victories in Harvard, New York and Notre Dame. He was born for this, this great fame that's

already brewing around his work. He is becoming more Greek as the days go by, I think, more like Seferis in his mixture of social distinction and national purpose. He carries himself already like the patient plenipotentiary of some as yet undeclared Republic, like the Seferis of 'Last Stop' — 'And if I talk to you in fables and parables / it's because it's more gentle for you that way; and horror / really can't be talked about because it's alive, / because it's mute and goes on growing . . . ' Yes, Heaney is definitely our Seferis.

Sunday Catherine phoned. She is going to the Michael Hartnett/Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin reading in Mallow. I'd hoped that she would come to visit me.

January 19th We stayed in bed until 11 a.m. We bought wellies. Catherine has a funny blue pair. She spent all the afternoon jumping into puddles (with a great sense of purpose). Catherine and Una and Seán Dunne and Maurice Riordan went to Limerick to give a reading. Eamon O'Donoghue has borrowed £5 from me, Seán Dunne has borrowed £2. In the last two weeks I've frittered away the £80 I was carrying around to put into the bank.

Claud Cockburn had a mild stroke. It has affected his eyes, but Patricia says that he is in great spirits. His life is a victory over the body. I hope he doesn't die before May Day when I intend to organize a committee of trade unionists and poets to visit him.

Molly Keane's new book should be out soon from André Deutsch. They seem very excited about it. I hope it's a triumph: after twenty-five years of silence. The Brigadier says that it's better than any book Molly has ever written, better than *The Rising Tide* or *Two Days in Aragon*. Everyone's so excited for her, excited and terrified. If this book isn't well received it'll be a crushing blow for her. It will kill her, I'm sure of it. I can't imagine a writer being silent for twenty-five years, except in death. John Banville's new book on Kepler has been

getting fantastic reviews in the English papers, as well as in the new *Sunday Tribune*.

February 11th Spent the whole evening working on *The Sorrow Garden*. All of this work done in response to two letters from Anvil Press. I had hoped to work on a story. Beginning to get worried about *The Solitude of the Party* until I found this statement in Camus: 'It is in order to shine sooner that authors refuse to re-write. Despicable. Begin again.' Camus was twenty-six when he wrote this.

Rev Ian Paisley was suspended from the House of Commons. He called the Northern Ireland Secretary a liar. In the Dáil Mr Haughey suggested that Ireland was shifting from its position of pure neutrality. Great worries now that Ireland may drift into a Western Power Bloc position.

February 19th John Jordan was in Cork for a lecture on Patrick Kavanagh. As usual he didn't want to return to Dublin afterwards and spent two days in Moore's Hotel. His lecture was superb, much better than in 1976. He himself looked twenty years younger. I met him again on Wednesday at noon in The Long Valley; he had already been drinking in Moore's Hotel and Canty's. Even Seán Dunne was astonished by his capacity for drink. I sat with him for two hours but had to return to the library at around 3 p.m. When I took leave of Seán and Jordan they had managed to get as far as Crowley's pub on Bridge Street, beside the Triskel Arts Centre, where Tina Nealon, the editor of *The Cork Review*, had arranged to meet them. Jordan was full of scandalous stories about most writers. He affected an interest in all homosexual affairs all the time and he began to rub my forehead and my arm. All of which made Seán Dunne squirm in terror. But he was just being playful, I thought, and what harm could come of it. I was ecstatic about the Heaney poem, 'The Names of the Hare'. Jordan seemed very worried about Katherine Kavanagh also, who, he confided in me most pointedly, may

have had a hysterectomy. She has been ill for some time, stricken down and worn out, Jordan said, 'by the insane jealousy of her brother-in-law'. John was delighted when I produced copies of the old *Poetry Ireland* series. He read out the lines from Kavanagh:

*Nae gane, nae gane, nae fram us tarn
But taking a rest like John Jordan.*

That was in Number One, and he said that he had gained immortality by being mentioned by Kavanagh in a poem. 'Even as a living young man I was made immortal.' Then I showed him the issue with Heaney's 'Valediction', 'End of a Naturalist' and he said forcibly, 'I was the first to give him the international audience.' Indeed. Success has many fathers. Why shouldn't John Jordan feel that he was one of Heaney's fathers?

Seán came into the library tonight looking exhausted and shattered. 'He left at eight o'clock last night. Or I left him. He's not in here, is he?' Seán was afraid that he mightn't have taken the Dublin train. 'Even Montague couldn't keep up with that guy's drinking,' said Seán in desperation.

Friday John Jordan is still in Cork. When I arrived at the Triskel Arts Centre today I asked (jokingly) if John Jordan was still around — the reply was a resounding, 'Yes!' I met Seán this evening and he had stuck his head nervously into The Long Valley just in case Jordan was there.

Found these statements in Camus' *Diaries*, both mean the same thing: 'One must encounter love before having encountered ethics' and 'I chose creation to escape crime.'

February 28th A very pleasant evening when I met John Montague in The Long Valley. He seemed so crestfallen with news of the Heaney tour of America (its success, etc) that I offered to walk home with him.