The Filial Art: A Reading of Contemporary British Poetry
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I am more certain that it is a duty of nature to preserve a good parent’s life and happiness, than I am of any speculative point whatever. (Alexander Pope)

My father was an eminent button maker — but I had a soul above buttons — I panted for a liberal profession. (George Colman)

I wanted to grow up and plough,
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.
All I ever did was follow
In his broad shadow round the farm.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
Yapping always. But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away.

(Seamus Heaney)

It is a little-remarked feature of the younger generation of British poets that the relationship which most concerns them is not that with a lover or spouse, not with a particular place, nor with society at large, nor with God (those traditional concerns of poets) but rather the relationship with parents. By ‘younger’ here I mean the generation of poets which came to prominence in the 1970s and early 1980s, and which spans Tony Harrison (b. 1937), Seamus Heaney, Hugo Williams, Craig Raine, James Fenton, Paul Muldoon, Andrew Motion, and Michael Hofmann (b. 1957). In the work of these writers parents have an unusual centrality and fathers seem to figure more largely than mothers. This overlap of concern tells us much about these poets as a generation; but so, too, the different ways in which they write about their parents are an insight into their distinctive achievements. By examining the filial art of each in turn, I hope to remove some popular misconceptions about the kind of writer each of these eight poets is, and also to arrive at an understanding of why this generation, more than any other one can think of, should be so obsessed with its parents.

Certainly most poets of the early twentieth century were altogether more peremptory in this respect. Their common post-Freudian assumption was that we wrestle with our parents in order to win the space to be ourselves: out
of filial revolution comes the birth of identity and of art. Yeats in *Autobiographies* speaks of getting free of his father’s influence. Eliot and Pound crossed the Atlantic to be free of the family ties they thought would inhibit their art. Lawrence liberated himself by writing *Sons and Lovers* and eloping into exile: he later came to feel that the novel’s depiction of his father had been unfair, but at the time it was a necessary injustice. The history of early twentieth-century literature is of escape from the nets of family and fatherland.

The firmness with which these writers resisted ‘obligation’ and undid family ties was intimately linked to the programme of modernism. Rejecting ancestry, overthrowing precedent, refusing to continue the line: the language of (hostile) family relations commingled with aesthetic making. ‘We have to hate our immediate predecessors to get free of their authority’, Lawrence wrote to Edward Garnett in February 1913.¹ More recently the criticism of Harold Bloom has based its theory of poetic development on the analogy of Oedipal struggle; poets become ‘strong’ by fighting and ‘swerving away from’ their predecessors: ‘To live, the poet must misinterpret the father, by a crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father.’² The conflation of ‘real’ fathers and ‘literary’ ones is typical of much modern criticism and of the literature it addresses. Given the aesthetic of modernism, we cannot be surprised by the absence of the filial in early twentieth-century poetry: both the ‘men of 1914’ and the 1930s generation looked to the future not the past; to like-minded peers and pioneers, not to precursors.

In the poets of the present generation attitudes have changed decisively, which is one reason why they have been called (though the terms raise a number of problems) both ‘anti-modernist’ and ‘post-modernist’. Their work recognizes Lawrence’s point about getting free of authority but recognizes also the Fifth Commandment. Where modernism resembles a phase of adolescent rebellion against elders, recent poetry seeks to do honour, to measure up, to grant that parents have a life beyond that of being parents: an attitude children can afford only when they themselves have grown up, or become parents (as most of these poets have, but as Lawrence and Eliot, for example, never did), or when their parents are dead. If *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* were *loci classici* for Freud and the modernists of the violent mutual destructiveness of parents and children, for the current generation they are symptomatic of more subdued feelings of filial guilt and failure: the pertinence of Oedipus is not his parricide but his agonized self-accusations, that of Hamlet not so much his anger with Gertrude and Claudius but that condition of being ‘too much in the “son”’ (1.2.67) which paradoxically weakens his resolve to be his father’s avenger. The current generation risks

seeming pious in its denial of violent Oedipal struggle. But its respectfulness does not preclude a range of ‘negative’ (unfilial) emotions: anger, resentment, fear, guilt. Hugo Williams’s ‘Death of an Actor’, for instance, from his collection *Writing Home*, mixes homage with umbrage:

Now that he has walked out again
Leaving me no wiser,
Now that I’m sitting here like an actor
Waiting to go on,
I wish I could see again
That rude, forgiving man from World War II
And hear him goading me.
Dawdling in peacetime,
Not having to fight in my lifetime, left alone
To write poetry on the dole and be happy,
I’m given to wondering
What manner of man I might be.

Williams’s description of his father as a ‘man from World War II’ is significant. For the modernists the assumption that sons must be at war with fathers was strengthened by the events of the Great War, that global expression of the violence in the father–son relationship, a war in which the ‘flower’ of youth perished through the inflexibility of old age. This is the argument developed in Wilfred Owen’s reworking of the parable of Abraham and Isaac: ‘Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him’, God urges the father: ‘But the old man would not so, but slew his son| And half the seed of Europe, one by one.’ Pound’s ‘E. P. Ode pour l’Election de son Sépulchre’ expresses similar sentiments (‘young blood and high blood’ are sacrificed for the sake of ‘old men’s lies’); so do such poems of Sassoon’s as ‘Base Details’ and ‘The General’. To a post-1945 generation, however, there must be almost opposite feelings towards fathers: they were the men who fought, on behalf of democracy and us, in the Second World War; we are children, not who were sacrificed, but on whose behalf the sacrifice was made.

There is an unspoken burden of obligation here, and though resisted and set aside in the 1960s, that decade of adolescent rebellion when most of the current generation of poets were adolescents or in their twenties, it has returned in the 1980s to weigh us down. In the 1960s it was possible to mimic the modernists and to pretend that one’s fathers were Victorian nobodaddies, stultified survivors from a bygone era, comfortable conformists. Recent poetry shows paternal figures in a less patronizing light: as adventurers and fighters, travellers and heroes, men less shackled by domesticity than our own post-feminist generation and alongside whom our own ‘dawdling’ peacetime youth cannot help but seem uneventful. In a recent collection, *Elegies*, Douglas Dunn (b. 1942) describes his as a ‘gentle generation, pacific|... No friend of ours had ever been to war’. A pacific generation may count its blessings but also feel itself to be weak and emasculated. Measuring up to their fathers, poets such as Williams,
Heaney, and Michael Longley emphasize their own (comparatively) depleted masculinity.

Heaney is the most celebrated figure of this generation and has done more than anyone to sponsor a poetry of affiliation (or, more precisely, filiation) in which a ‘literary’ and ‘over-educated’ son faces the dilemma of following or rejecting ancestry. The theme was present in ‘Digging’, the first poem of his first book, *Death of a Naturalist* (London, 1966), where the poet recalls his father’s earth-work (‘By God, the old man could handle a spade. | Just like his old man’) and awkwardly stakes a claim to continue the hereditary chain: he has a pen, not spade, but will ‘dig with it’. The same process is visible in ‘Follower’: at the start the father is seen skilfully ploughing, the boy clumsily following in his furrow; at the end the roles are reversed, the son having inherited what were always in any case quasi-artistic skills, the father stumbling in his wake as ‘subject-matter’. Both poems are self-vindications, attempts to shed a burden of filial guilt. Both reveal a poet who means to follow in his own fashion.

Following and digging are common activities throughout Heaney’s later work, but as he ‘step[s] through origins’ the notion of ‘fathers’ broadens out. Early on these fathers are the rural labourers of a preceding generation, men like his father, a pantheistic and silent breed of farmers, fishermen, thatchers, water-diviners, and so on. Now dying along with their trades, they have a lineage which goes back far into the past, as a poem in *North*, ‘The Seed Cutters’, suggests: ‘They seem hundreds of years away. Breughel, | You’ll know them if I can get them true.’ In the first half of *North* Heaney traces his ancestry still further back, to the Vikings. ‘Old fathers be with us’, he prays in ‘Viking Dublin’, but his descriptions of their culture suggest that they are all too much with us already; ‘neighbourly scoretaking killers’, ‘hoarders of grudges and gain’, their clannish violence parallels that of contemporary Northern Ireland. Similar parallels are evoked when Heaney comes to an even earlier set of forbears, the Bog People of Denmark and Jutland. ‘The Tollund Man’, Heaney has said, ‘seemed to me like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of those moustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish countryside’, and in exploring the barbarities of Iron Age culture Heaney identifies a legacy of brutalism in his own tribe.\(^3\) In the title-sequence of his most recent collection, *Station Island* (London, 1984), Heaney’s search for a father moves forward in time again to a series of meetings with ‘familiar ghosts’. Several of these are writers, and they include James Joyce, whom Heaney addresses as ‘Old father, mother’s son’. What Joyce paternally tells Heaney is to write for the joy of it and forget the ‘national question’. This Heaney does in the last section, when he speaks through the voice of his rhyming predecessor, Sweeney, an early Irish King.

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\(^3\) James Randall, ‘An Interview with Seamus Heaney’, *Ploughshares*, 5, no. 3 (1979), 7–22 (p. 18).
If the theme of ‘following the fathers’ is a constant thread in Heaney, he also inherits from his parents a set of opposed values, masculine/feminine, which have affected his aesthetic and his role as a poetic ‘conscience’. His father he associates with politics and sly defiance: see, for example, ‘A Constable Calls’ in *North*, where the boy Heaney ‘assumes’ (a characteristic pun) small guilts when his father appears to lie to an RUC policeman about the vegetables he is growing. His mother stands for religion and forbearance, a more tender and supplicant posture. Heaney has said that he considers it vital that the ‘mother’ hold the more aggressive male principle in check, but it is also true to say that ‘male’ forces in his work have the upper hand. The gentleness and domesticity of poems like ‘Limbo’, ‘Sunlight’, and ‘The Otter’ are an interesting offshoot of his work, not its main branch. Certainly Heaney associates the female principle with earth and territory as well: ‘mother ground’ is a phrase he uses in ‘Kinship’, and the mother here is a powerful and destructive force. But it is the fathers who work, and make war on, that territory who possess Heaney’s imagination, the victims and casualties, the hearth-feeders and waggon-gods whom he describes with (and to whom he attributes) such ‘manly pride’. This is an important point to bear in mind when considering Heaney’s influence on other contemporary poets, some of whom are more adamant than he is about the priority of fathers over mothers.

Phallocentrism is an undeniable feature of the contemporary scene. Residual sexism no doubt plays its part (it is evident in the absurd weighting of Edward Lucie-Smith’s 1984 edition of the anthology *British Poetry Since 1945*, where only six women out of nearly one hundred poets are represented), but when the phallocentrism springs, as I think it does, from deep-rooted assumptions about power and ‘priority’ (assumptions common among women as well as men) then I think it should be less surprising that there is still a depressing lack of women poets and, more important, of women’s poetry, in the current generation (and from the account of that generation that follows here). Carol Rumens and Elaine Feinstein have written fine elegies for their fathers; Vicki Feaver and Selima Hill have explored the tangled relationship between mothers and daughters. But there is no evidence here or among a number of other talented young women poets of a commanding figure like Sylvia Plath, whose denunciatory ‘Daddy’ was the key feminist text of the previous poetic generation; nor is there the obsessive, multi-layered filiality to be found in Heaney or Harrison. Filiality is currently a matter for sons not daughters, or so a reading of contemporary poetry (if not of the contemporary novel or short story) would suggest.

The omission of woman poets is none the less one reason why this essay cannot purport to be a comprehensive survey of current writing. There are male poets, too, who deserve to be included in any overview but whose

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achievement would only be distorted within the thematic framework of this essay. Douglas Dunn, Peter Reading, Christopher Reid, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, and Tom Paulin are among them. Longley has, in fact, written moving poems about his father. And in Paulin’s case it was tempting to develop the brief comments on his father which he makes in an interview (‘My father’s a headmaster. . . . He’s also in fascinating ways a utilitarian’ (Haffenden, p. 158)) and to link them to a pedagogic case against utilitarianism in his work. But this, I think, only illustrates how tidy parento-biographical interpretations can infiltrate and distort comparatively minor aspects of a poet’s output: in Paulin’s case ‘history’ is considered an honourable subject for a poet, but family history (as the poem ‘Descendancy’ implies) a distraction and obfuscation:

All those family histories
are like sucking a polo mint —
you’re pulled right through
a tight wee sphincter
that loses you.

In the mini-essays that follow I have tried to focus on what Leavis might have called the central ‘problem’ in a writer’s work and, while drawing where appropriate on biographical information, to heed Paulin’s warning about the dangers of becoming lost in the beguiling minutiae of family histories and filial songs.

II

I will inherit his vest,
its English rose, one petal
darned, his boxing licence
with the rusty staples,

the silver-plated cup
presented by von Ribbentrop
which stands on the sideboard,
confidently arms akimbo

but worn away by Duraglit
Touching their terror,
I gaze at them now,
longer than someone in love.

(Craig Raine, ‘A Hungry Fighter’)

It is Craig Raine’s fate, and perhaps misfortune, to have become labelled by a poem which, if we accept it as his chief contribution to contemporary poetry, classifies him as writer of light verse. Some of the responsibility for this must lie with Raine himself for having entitled his second collection A Martian Sends a Postcard Home (London, 1979), and thus accorded the poem of that title an importance he might not wish for it now; and some with James Fenton, who as adjudicator of the New Statesman’s Prudence Farmer Award
in 1978 coined the term ‘Martian school’ to describe the work of Raine and Christopher Reid: ‘a school that ought to be noticed since it has enrolled two of the best poets writing in England today’.\(^5\) Fenton has since written a manifesto against manifestos; Raine probably feels about the poem as Larkin said he did about ‘Church Going’ and Hardy did about \textit{Tess of the D’Urbervilles}: ‘If I’d known it was going to be popular I’d have tried to make it better.’\(^6\) But the label has stuck, and so (unless rescued) is Raine.

Not that ‘A Martian Sends a Postcard Home’ is a bad poem, but its inner logic does not happily survive close scrutiny. The visiting Martian of the poem has a fresh and observant eye. He also has a linguistic quirk tantamount to nominal aphasia: he knows objects by their prototype or inventor, not by their name; car and books become ‘Model T’ and ‘Caxtons’. This is a refined kind of description, and other parts of his vocabulary are more sophisticated still, as when he describes mist as making the world ‘dim and bookish\(\mid\)like engravings under tissue paper’, a simile which seems too mature in its earthly knowledge and which shows he has the word ‘book’ after all. The poem is a clever riddling comedy, with a haunting evocation of the telephone (‘If the ghost cries, they carry it to their lips and soothe it to sleep’) which is rather more than that, so that we don’t resent the inconsistencies in the narrative viewpoint: the main point is the humorous \textit{Ostro-nienie}, the world made funny and strange. But it has to be said that there is not here the same concerted application of ‘limited vision’ as can be found in a novel that certainly influenced Raine, William Golding’s \textit{The Inheritors}.

The emphasis on the ‘childlike vision’ of Raine’s writing has also been misleading. Children are, of course, important in his work: he has dated his sudden poetic fertility to the birth of his first child, and part of his distinctive contribution to the contemporary scene has been his admission of children into poetry written by men, against an orthodoxy strengthened by Larkin’s notorious hostility to ‘their noise, their nastiness, their boasting, their back-answers, their cruelty, their silliness’.\(^7\) The ‘limited vision’ of children is obviously similar to that of visiting aliens, as Raine himself implies when he describes children as ‘foreigners in our world until they become naturalised’.\(^8\) But childlike innocence of viewpoint in Raine’s poetry is more apparent than real. ‘Laying a Lawn’, for example, from that same collection and about the poet laying turf in the company of his daughter, certainly does have ‘innocent’ analogies: teeth like ‘segments of sweet-corn’, a caterpillar ‘rucked like a curtain’. But the adult subtext meanwhile accumulates images of mortality: the adjectives ‘wrinkled’ and ‘crumbling’, the image of ‘the thin charcoal crucifix\(\mid\)her legs and buttocks make’, the biblical nouns ‘earth’ and


\(8\) ‘At a Slight Angle to the Universe’, \textit{Quarto} (October 1981), p. 15.
‘grass’ which in this context summon ‘earth to earth’ and ‘all flesh is grass’. The poet ends by asserting:

For the moment, our bodies
are immortal in their ignorance —
neither one of us can read
this Domesday Book.

The ‘ignorance’ does not go very deep: assuring us that he cannot read the Domesday Book the poet simultaneously does read it, bringing us the message that life is shorter than we think. It is a poem strictly for adult consumption.

The same strategy (the poet and his daughter ‘reading’ nature, where emblems of mortality are everywhere to be found) underlies ‘Pretty Baa Lamb’ from the same collection; the ironic gap between what the innocent sees and what the adult knows is indeed one which Raine frequently occupies. So, too, ‘In Modern Dress’, from the later Rich (London, 1984), is ‘childlike’ only in the sense that children once again feature strongly. The key here is that the images all evoke the Elizabethan or Shakespearian era: the poet’s baby son becomes Sir Walter Raleigh ‘trail[ing] his comforter| about the muddy garden’, or a criminal offender

stuck in the high chair
like a pillory, features
pelted with food.

The task for the adult and (of necessity) highly literate reader is to identify the Shakespearian allusions planted in the text: from the blackbirds ‘warring in the roses’ through the ‘ruff’ on a glass of beer to (Shakespeare at another remove) the copy of ‘Sylvia Plath’s Ariel| drowned in the bath’. The conceit is ingenious, the child as explorer a persuasive thesis, the disordered home and garden neatly suggestive of the social unrest of an earlier epoch. But finally the process (or procession) of allusion is too relentless, the detection of clues too much like the solving of a crossword puzzle. It would be hard to make serious claims for Raine, other than as an ingenious light versifier, on the basis of this poem.

There is a third misconception about him which needs to be corrected: the opinion, first expressed by Derek Mahon in his review of Raine’s first book The Onion, Memory (Oxford, 1978), that he is a cold and ‘heartless’ writer. Poems that are ingenious in the manner of the Metaphysicals must always face this charge, a point Raine recognizes in his appreciation of John Donne when he notes that an early complaint against Donne was that his poetry lacked feeling: Raine defends Donne (and by implication himself) when he describes the image of the surgeon in ‘The Comparison’ as ‘genuinely tender, without wearing its tenderness on its sleeve’, a defence he would also

want to apply to his own ‘In the Mortuary’. It is indicative of how original Raine’s voice was, and how entrenched is the English equation of cleverness and coldness, that early reviewers should have reacted as they did: for, on the contrary, Raine is a warm and effusive poet, almost too prone to display his softer feelings. There are repeated images of tenderness and delicacy, albeit in unexpected places: ‘Delicately, the foreman’s tongue feels along his bottom lip’, ‘each breast, a tender blister needing to be dressed’. His portraits of children and the old come perilously close to sentimental caricature: ‘the dear old thing afraid of a khaki envelope’, ‘the child who remembers nothing, and weeps with holly-pointed lashes’. Even his tough-seeming and tightly written narratives (‘In the Dark’, about a girl becoming pregnant, or ‘Oberfeld Webel Beckstadt’, about a Nazi who has burnt Jewish corpses but whose wife, when he returns home after war, ‘will call him Otto and make him cry’) skirt the edges of melodrama, whether of a Victorian or more modern kind.

All this leads me to say that Raine is a very different poet from the one described by his reviewers. What sort of poet is he then? One hint is given by James Fenton when, in penance for his earlier Martian manifesto, he calls Raine ‘an erotic poet’. Another and fuller answer lies in the prose memoir of childhood, and in particular the account of his father, to be found at the centre of Rich. That Raine’s father is a remarkable man by any standards the second sentence makes clear: ‘In the thirties, my father had been a painter and decorator, plumber, electrician, publican and boxer, but when I was growing up, he was a Spiritualist and a faith healer, talking about his negro spirit-guide, Massa, and explaining how he knew when people were cured because he felt burning coals in the palms of his hands’. We hear more: how his father had boxed for England against Germany in 1937 at the Albert Hall, and had fought for the British featherweight title against Micky McGuire; how he was a brilliant raconteur and could peel an apple in one piece; and how, after an accident in a munitions factory during the war which required five operations on his brain, he was subject to epileptic fits. Raine’s mother is a subsidiary figure in the memoir: a devout Catholic, who took in sewing to make ends meet, she is said to have had social pretensions, ‘a classic Lawrentian mother who wanted her children to do well’, the author puts it elsewhere (Haffenden, p. 175). Raine has claimed to be influenced by both parents ‘equally’ (Haffenden, p. 176), and there are indeed an equal number of poems devoted to them: the most memorable about his mother is ‘A Season in Scarborough’, about her life as a servant among the rich; and about his father ‘A Hungry Fighter’ in Rich and the ‘Anno Domini’ sequence in The Onion, Memory, the fragmented biography of a faith-healer.

A critic-biographer in search of easy hereditary ‘explanations’ could make much of the faith-healing. Like his father, Raine specializes in miracles of the imagination: his writing, it could be said, heals and transforms through an act of faith, in his case the faith that visual analogy can be endlessly productive. Something could be made of the pugilism, too: the Raine persona is aggressive rather than receptive, actively pursuing meanings rather than waiting to be struck by them. But this is dangerous ground. What the memoir does usefully underline is Raine’s capacity for finding the ordinary world extraordinary. He is not alone among his generation in this emphasis: in the fiction of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan, and in the poetry of Fenton and Muldoon, one can detect a widespread reaction against the decent, dogged ‘ordinariness’ of the Movement generation. For Raine, Fenton, and Muldoon, backwaters run deep: one need not be bored, unhappy and resigned to them, as Larkin’s characters are, since they are awash with eccentricity and bizzarerie. (Equally, Raine implies in his domestic celebration ‘An Enquiry into Two Inches of Ivory’, one need not feel as Larkin does that ‘Home is so sad’ and that we all hate ‘having to be there’.) This looks like an anti-Movement programme, but with Raine at least the sentiments date back to childhood, as a key passage shows:

The town I grew up in was a typical, ugly small town in the north of England. . . . It felt an ordinary place, but my father’s friend, Billy Llewelyn, could play the saw, grow black carnations, go without sleep for three weeks at a time and expand his chest from thirty-six inches to fifty-two inches in three breaths. The last accomplishment and the saw-playing were features of the concert parties. When his chest was fully expanded, he was unable to speak. When he did sleep, he simply went into a trance for five minutes. The night hours he spent gardening by floodlight. I accepted all of this without thinking it in any way unusual.

Characteristically, the adult voice intrudes at the end there to register that all this clearly was unusual. But what the adult voice does not intrude is class consciousness or inverted snobbery: the paternal influence prevents Raine from patronizing or being patronized; his prose, like Beryl Bainbridge’s, leaps clean over the social (and socialist) considerations to be found in a work such as The Uses of Literacy.

This, indeed, is part of the thesis of Rich, which plays subtly and ironically with notions of what it means to be ‘rich’. We learn that, though poor and working-class, Raine went on a scholarship to public school, and that one effect of this was to make him look down on his father, whom he had formerly idolized: he didn’t have a profession or even a job, and Raine lied to conceal this before regaining pride in his father in later adolescence. These awkward truths are retailed with honesty and give shape to the book. The memoir is entitled ‘A Silver Plate’, which might seem to denote privilege but refers in fact to the plate inserted in Raine’s father’s brain during surgery. Taking their cue from this irony, the sections on either side of the memoir are called ‘Rich’ and ‘Poor’. In the first are poems about wealth, ‘high’ culture, power,
sexual fulfilment, luxury, and kingship: in the opening title-poem, for instance, to the poet’s ‘muse’, we have a Steinway piano, a thoroughbred racehorse, a snooker-table, and land. The ‘Poor’ section moves downstairs, not just into the world of the working class, but also to other kinds of ‘poverty’: exile, bereavement, illness, criminality, terror, and death. The categories are not inflexible, however, and this is Raine’s point: his book redefines richness, triumphing in the world of invention, indicating how it is possible to be imaginatively rich while being economically (or in other ways) deprived. The structure of Rich becomes an argument or dissertation, though the poems retain individual integrity.

Rich also makes clear that the key to Raine is not analogy or correspondence (as the ‘Martian’ reputation supposes) but an appetite for physical description. As a child, we learn, he enjoyed a passed-down Eagle annual not for its ‘moral rearmament propaganda’ but for its pictures, and likewise read a pictorialized version of Stevenson’s Kidnapped (he hasn’t read the novel to this day). Raine still reads and writes in pictures, and his poetry and indeed critical prose is peculiarly incapable of abstract thought, moving swiftly from one concrete impression to the next. If the weakness of this is that ‘ideas’ in his poetry tend to be few and simple, with memento mori uppermost, the strength is the resistance to cliché and convention. Accurate physical description becomes a form of candour, cutting through moral and social pieties, as in the controversial ‘Arsehole’. Simile is part of this, since what it boldly yokes together can be shocking. But Rich demonstrates that Raine’s visual powers can also focus on the thing itself, not the thing as resembling another thing or everything being like everything else. Though Rich continues to ‘fish for complements’, as he puts it, it also includes a poem called ‘Plain Song’. There is plainness too in such images as ‘the green on a fielder’s knee’, or in the description of the man ‘gardening a grave’ in ‘A Walk in the Country’:

His jacket is folded,
lining-side out,
and laid on a headstone
as he tends
to his fainted plants,
carefully unwrapping
the dark, moist newsprint.

That succeeds because so literal, just as the ‘limited viewpoint’ of a poem like ‘Again’ succeeds because so faithful and fitting to the subject, a man who has had a stroke and is paralysed down one side, and whose ‘innocent’ eye proffers neither Martian comedy nor childlike memento mori but sombrely evokes a world of pain and semi-consciousness. But there is a price to pay. As the lines above suggest, the baggy inventiveness of The Onion, Memory is replaced by stanza forms which are preeningly slim and well-achieved, a bit too pleased with their own shapeliness. The development is one which
betrays a deeper tension in Raine’s work, between a generous populism on the one hand and a narrow aestheticism on the other, a conflict which again shows up in his memoir. For Raine it is not enough that his background is rich and extraordinary: it must also be shown to be the breeding ground of the future poet. ‘Inspiration ran in the family’, he says in his third sentence, and later vindicates his father by saying that such and such a thing he did (peeling an apple in one piece, telling bedtime stories) was ‘artistic’, surely the least interesting aspect of those activities. In the same spirit there is the acknowledgements-page of Rich (‘As most readers will realise, I have freely adapted to my own purposes work by Dante, Marina Tsvetayeva, Rimbaud, the anonymous Anglo-Saxon poet of “Wulf and Eadwacer” and Ford Madox Ford’) which looks miscalculated, not because of the list itself, but because of that (naive? disingenuous?) phrase ‘as most readers will realise’. The anxiety to vindicate himself and claim the right to enter the world of ‘high culture’ is evident, too, both in Raine’s abundant and sometimes pointless use of epigraphs and in his excessive and sometimes distracting allusiveness in the texts themselves.

Against this one can set the simple and affectionate description of tradesmen in the ‘Yellow Pages’ section of The Onion, Memory and the loving use of brand-names in his poems: Johnnie Walker, Wrights Coal Tar, Imperial Leather, Duraglit, Saxone, Typhoo, Sunblest, Cadbury’s Flake, and so on. Betjeman and Larkin use brand-names too, and Raine has some of their populism. At times, indeed, his phrasemaking about ‘hearts’ and ‘tears’ is reminiscent of Cole Porter; I’d like to hear Frank Sinatra set loose to sing some of the following: ‘It is the onion, memory, | that makes me cry’, ‘It’s no use trying to be sad | about the dead’, ‘We never close | the branch line of the heart’, ‘I have a headache in my heart’, ‘trying to make love we only make adultery’, ‘Someone else, not here, someone | knows her hair is parted wrongly’.

Perhaps the best way to put this would be to say that Raine is a naturally vulgar poet trying (at times productively, at times not) to be an elegant one. ‘Vulgar’ need not be the pejorative it has widely become. ‘Nothing pleases me more than vulgar sentiments, vulgar expressions, and vulgarity itself’, G. Cabrera Infante writes in his autobiographical novel Infante’s Inferno ((London, 1984), p. 252), and proceeds to list some of the great ‘vulgar’ artists: Cervantes, Sterne, Dickens, Joyce. The list would not displease Raine either, who has been much influenced by the last two names on it, and who seems to me ‘vulgar’ in the sense of being effusive, sentimental, careless of moral and social convention, immensely physical in his imagination, and endowed with a ‘common touch’ and command of the language of common men. It is an uneasy reputation to have, and the formidable apparatus that surrounds Raine’s work strenuously plays it down. But he is that kind of writer, and nothing demonstrates it more than his supposition that his parents, his home, and, by the same token, his children, are fit and moving subjects for art.
III

Back in our silences and sullen looks,
for all the Scotch we drink, what’s still between ’s
not the thirty or so years, but books, books, books.

(Tony Harrison, ‘Book Ends’)

It is not surprising, given his conviction that being economically deprived
need not prevent us from being imaginatively rich, that Craig Raine should
have expressed reservations about the work of Tony Harrison. Both poets
grew up in working-class families in the industrial North (Harrison in Leeds,
Raine in County Durham), but where Raine in ‘A Silver Plate’ presents his
parents as participants in a colourful drama of small-town life, Harrison
treats his as emblems of class and cultural underprivilege. And where
Raine’s tone is free of resentment, Harrison’s bears grudges and (socialist)
anger. His role, rather like Heaney’s, is that of an avenger speaking for the
silent or disposessed. Yet, again like Heaney, he is also conscious of the
distance between himself and his parents, and feels guilty for having been
assimilated into a literate bourgeois culture which exploits and ignores the
likes of them. Guilt must always be a strong feeling in relation to parents,
especially when they are dead: fifty years after some apparently trivial act of
contumacy, Samuel Johnson made belated amends to his father by standing
bareheaded for an hour in Uttoxeter market, where his father had run a
bookstall. But Harrison’s is more than reparation of this sort. He casts
himself in his poems as a sort of prole-prince of Elsinore, a brooding figure
separated through education from the parental home, accusing himself of
inaction and unfiliality yet determined to avenge his father and his father’s
class.

Some of these tensions are explored in a poem called ‘Illuminations’ (the
title, in typically punning Harrison fashion, links the famous Blackpool
lights with spiritual insights), the second section of which shows him and his
parents

gripping the pier machine that gave you shocks.
The current would connect. We’d feel the buzz
ravel our loosening ties to one tense grip,
the family circle, one continuous US!
That was the first year on my scholarship
And I’d be the one to make that circuit short.

The family unity here is beautiful but dangerous, the intimacy thrilling but
also potentially fatal. Even as Harrison celebrates, and then (later in the
poem) desperately strives to preserve, his relationship with his parents
(‘Two dead, but current still flows through us three’), so he admits his
defection. His poems about his parents are more atonement than recollec-
tion. As he puts it in ‘Confessional Poetry’, ‘I’m guilty, and the way I make it

12 ‘Subjects’, London Review of Books, 5, no. 18 (6-19 October 1983), 5-7 (p. 5).
up’s in poetry’. The guilt stems not simply from ‘abandoning’ his parents, as most children necessarily do in some degree, but from practising an art which, no matter how heartfelt, fails to communicate with them. The insurmountable difficulty is set out in two lines of ‘The Rhubarbarians’: ‘Sorry, dad, you won’t get that quatrain | (I’d like to be the poet my father reads).’ ‘Turns’ puts the self-accusation more bluntly still: ‘I’m opening my trap| to busk the class that broke him.’

The point to be made here is that Harrison’s poems about his parents are more than simple elegies, and that to praise them for being ‘moving’ (as most reviewers and critics have done) is to emasculate them of their hard political edge. Philip Larkin is one admirer of Harrison, 13 and when in ‘Book Ends’ we see Harrison and his father sunk in their silences and sullen looks on the day of Mrs Harrison’s funeral, ‘books, books, books’ between them, it is hard not to be reminded of Larkin’s ‘Reference back’, where a similar emotional and cultural gap opens up between parent and child as the son, on a brief visit home, ‘idly’ plays jazz records. But the difference between the poems is instructive. The pain in Larkin’s is the illusion that mother and son could have preserved the more intimate relationship they had when he was a child, that ‘by acting differently we could have kept it so’, inevitable though it was that they would become separated. Harrison’s is a more blaming poem, without the same sense of inevitability. ‘We never could talk much, and now don’t try’: the son a ‘scholar’, the father ‘worn out on poor pay’, they have been forced apart not by the passing of time but by a system which assimilates bright working-class boys into the middle class. The poem, like many of Harrison’s, is an elegy, but it shows that the elegy need not be an apolitical form. ‘Who am I’, Douglas Dunn asks in his collection Elegies, about the death of his young wife, ‘to weep for Salvador or Kam- puchea | When I am made the acolyte of my own shadow?’. But Harrison’s different circumstances allow him to write elegies which do have a political conscience.

The political import of Harrison’s filial art becomes clearer, I think, through an examination of the structure of his major sonnet sequence, ‘The School of Eloquence’, which has grown from ten poems published in a private edition (London, 1976), to eighteen in From the School of Eloquence and Other Poems (London, 1978), to fifty in Continuous (London, 1981), to sixty-four in the Selected Poems (London, 1984). Two key points emerge. The first is that though in principle committed to an open-ended structure, like Berryman’s sonnets, capable of infinite extension, Harrison has gradually evolved a clear, thematic, tripartite frame for his sequence. The intimate commemorative family poems of Part II are preceded by the densely-wrought politico-historical poems of Part I and followed by a looser set of poems (about politics, history, art, and mortality) in Part III: the elegies at the

centre acquire their meaning from the context in which they are set. The second key point is that this context was actually uppermost in Harrison’s mind when he began to write the sequence: of the eighteen poems in From the School of Eloquence, the first public airing of the sequence, thirteen belong to what later became Part I, three to Part III, and only two to Part II. At this early stage the sequence was more blatantly and single-mindedly a thesis about political and linguistic oppression than it appears in Selected Poems.

The three epigraphs to the sequence emphasize the balance of the political and the familial. (Continuous also carries a dedication in memory of Harrison’s mother and father, who died in 1976 and 1980 respectively.) The first, explaining the title, comes from E. P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Classes (London, 1963), and illustrates what will be a major theme of the poems, the suppression of working-class speech. The second is in Latin, and is footnoted merely ‘John Milton, 1637’; in fact, the verses come from Milton’s ‘Ad Patrem’ (the date of which is problematic), the poem in which he pays tribute to his father (‘my greatest gifts could never match yours’) while also justifying his intention to become a poet: Harrison includes only the opening and concluding passages, though it is clear that much of what comes in between is also of pertinence: ‘Do not, then, I pray, persist in contempt for the sacred Muses’, for example, an invocation which ghosts such poems of Harrison’s as ‘A Good Read’. The third epigraph, Harrison’s own, merges the political and familial strains:

How you became a poet’s a mystery!
Wherever did you get your talent from?
I say: I had two uncles, Joe and Harry —
one was a stammerer, the other dumb.

These two uncles reappear later in the sequence: Harry in Part I, a deaf-mute who had ‘eloquent’ recourse to a dictionary when refuting ‘Tory errors’; Joe in Part III, a printer who could ‘handset type much faster than he spoke’. The poet’s inheritance, this epigraph implies, is linguistic struggle, awkward articulacy, ‘mute ingloriousness’, and the poems that follow are rife with imagery of stuttering, spitting, and chewing, the mouth ‘all stuffed with glottals, great lumps to hawk up and spit out’. If the metre and syntax sometimes seem strained, this is precisely Harrison’s point: his poems let us know that they have come up the hard way; they are written with labour, and out of the labouring classes, and on behalf of Labour Party aspirations.

The poems of Part I are about linguistic and political struggle, refracted (at times jokily) through Harrison’s own experiences as a scholarship boy. There are allusions to his family, but he deliberately refrains from mentioning his father, whose grand entrance in the first poem of Part II is prepared for in the final two poems of this section: both these are about miners and enlarge our notion of the tribe or community to which he belongs. Thus when Harrison refers to ‘His, his dad’s and his dad’s lifetime down below’, he is not in fact talking about his own father, a baker, but about a retired
colliery-worker. Yet the phrase alerts us to the historical realities, of lives spent ‘underneath’, in exploitation and servitude, which underlie the filial elegies of Part III. A similar emphasis is present in Part III, which after the interlude of family intimacy begins with a poem called ‘Self Justification’ that returns us to the politico-linguistic imagery of Part I. Once again there is a search for heredity, as Harrison seeks out ‘lines’ to his grandfathers (‘Fell farmer, railwayman and publican’) and is assumed into an ancient Northern ‘male’ tradition that includes such men as the paperhanger in Wordsworth’s Dove Cottage. Within the intellectual framework of this concluding section Harrison contemplates ‘extinction’: that of his parents, but also of language, art, and various species of birds and animals.

I do not mean to underplay the importance of the elegies of Part III. In the latest version of the sequence in the *Selected Poems* these make up the bulk of ‘The School of Eloquence’ (thirty-five poems out of a total of sixty-four) and provide its plainest and most powerful passages. But it is no coincidence that the opening poem of Part III should be called ‘Book Ends’: without intellectual support on each side the central section would not stand up so convincingly. Nor should one overlook the theatricality of these apparently vulnerable poems. Harrison, who has written and translated for the theatre, here transforms his home into a stage-set. His father is cast as a figure of tragi-comedy: with his football and darts, his flat cap and longjohns, his grouses against ‘Pakis’ and against his son’s long hair, and his touching refusal to believe his wife is really dead (he renews her bus pass and keeps her slippers ‘warming by the gas’), he threatens to become a ‘character’, a George Formby figure, the sad-but-funny stuff of Northern working men’s clubs. Harrison’s mother, a lesser figure, plays the wife to his Andy Capp, indignantly unappreciative of her son’s first book, *The Loiners* (‘You weren’t brought up to write such mucky books’), a cruel irony since the aggressive sexuality and low diction of that book were intended not to shock her but to épater les bourgeois. Harrison dramatizes himself, too, as a poet easily moved to tears and ends the section with an image of himself, at his writing-desk, reflected in the glass of a photo-frame of his dead parents.

The self-consciousness is an important element of the sequence: if Part I is the growth of the poet’s mind, Part II brings his schooling in eloquence, as he is made to recognize the limits of his classical education: its divisiveness (‘ah sometimes think you read too many books’, his father complains) and its failure to instruct him in life and death. In the second half of ‘Book Ends’ Harrison struggles to supply an epitaph for his mother’s gravestone; his father proves less emotionally inarticulate:

I’ve got the envelope that he’d been scrawling, mis-spelt, mawkish, stylistically appalling, but I can’t squeeze more love into their stone.

This is reminiscent of Pope’s tribute to his father in the ‘Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot’: ‘Unlearned, he knew no schoolman’s subtle art, | No language
but the language of the heart.’ By the middle of the sequence, though, when he comes to write about his father’s death, Harrison has himself learnt the language of the heart, has inherited that gift. When in ‘Marked with D.’ his politico-historical grudges reappear they have a new emotional directness:

When the chilled dough of his flesh went in an oven
not unlike those he fuelled all his life,
I thought of his cataracts ablaze with Heaven
and radiant with the sight of his dead wife,
light streaming from his mouth to shape her name,
‘not Florence and not Flo but always Florrie’.
I thought how his cold tongue burst into flame
but only literally, which makes me sorry,
sorry for his sake there’s no Heaven to reach.
I get it all from Earth my daily bread
but he hungered for release from mortal speech
that kept him down, the tongue that weighed like lead.

The baker’s man that no one will see rise
and England made to feel like some dull oaf
is smoke, enough to sting one person’s eyes
and ash (not unlike flour) for one small loaf.

Harrison is a punning poet, and the puns here go close to the bone (bone/bone up on being a pun he uses elsewhere): cataracts (heavenly waterfalls/an eye defect), daily bread (food/intellectual sustenance), and rise, which is what bread does, but what (so the atheistic son believes) the soul fails to after death, and what his father failed to do in life, too.

In that last use, the word became an accusation against the rigid social stratification of the country, a charge that there is something rotten in the state of England. Harrison’s tears do not, it seems, drown his verbal resourcefulness or prevent him coolly retreating from his own metaphors: ‘I thought how his cold tongue burst into flame|but only literally.’ As Christopher Reid remarks in a perceptive review, ‘the truth of the poem is to be found in that prosaic and killjoy phrase’.14 So, too, the understated ‘sorry’ is an expression both of deep sorrow at his father’s death and of a scarcely less passionate disappointment that his father’s (‘and his father’s, and his father’s’) social and linguistic aspirations will not now be realized. What is ‘moving’ about such elegies is that, rather than let us languish in surrogate guilt and grief, they move us to a potentially constructive anger.

‘The School of Eloquence’ is such a peak in Harrison’s writing that it is difficult to see what else he can achieve, except extend the sequence indefinitely, as the title Continuous implies he might. But he does appear to be moving away from his favourite verse-form, the Meredithian sonnet, towards a more circular and ruminative mode. The Selected Poems end with a number of pieces set in the United States. In one, ‘The Lords of Life’, an

aggressive Southern redneck neighbour identifies the poet as a ‘fairy’, just as the schoolfriends in ‘Me Tarzan’ had found him a ‘cissy’, and expresses suspicion of his Hamlet-like inaction and bookishness, just as his father had done: familiar anxieties, about effeminacy, art, and unfiliality, are here re-explored and newly dramatized. But Harrison has also returned more directly to the matter of his parents in a long and important poem, ‘v.’, which is set in the Leeds graveyard where his parents lie buried. On a brief visit home the poet finds ‘UNITED graffitied on my parents’ stone’, the work of a Leeds-supporting skinhead with an aerosol can. In dialogue with this skinhead Harrison is forced to reflect on the forces of division in British society and in himself: divisions of class, sex, religion, language, and employment (the setting is 1984, the year of the Miners’ Strike). The skinhead (or ‘skin’, one of the poem’s many wordplays) is profane, yobbish, and brutalized; but his frustrations are skilfully articulated, and the poet recognizes him as an alter ego as well as an enemy, the vandal he himself might have been and to some extent is. Harrison paints a bleak picture of contemporary England but retains the hope that the aerosolled ‘v.’ of versus, emblem of the schisms in our society, may become the ‘v.’ of victory, as those polarities merge and unite. There is comfort, then, even in the desecration of his parents’ grave, which carries the half-promise, as ‘Marked with D.’ could not, that all will ultimately be well. It is as much as any son can wish for his dead parents, and for his society:

Though I don’t believe in afterlife at all and know it’s cheating it’s hard not to make a sort of furtive prayer from this skin’s scrawl, his UNITED mean ‘in Heaven’ for their sake.

an accident of meaning to redeem an act intended as mere desecration and make the thoughtless spraying of his team apply to higher things, and to the nation.

IV

Whatever it is, it all comes down to this;
My father’s cock
Between my mother’s thighs.

(Paul Muldoon, ‘October 1950’)

Paul Muldoon’s first book, *New Weather* (London, 1973), appeared when he was twenty-one, and its dedication reads: ‘for my Fathers and Mothers’. His work has sometimes been described as ostentatious, and no doubt his detractors (those who regard him as facetious alongside Heaney, evasive alongside Paulin, lightweight alongside Longley and Mahon) would be eager to see the plural in his dedication as an example of showy precociousness. In the event, though, Muldoon here provides a clue to his subsequent achievement, pointing on one level to the different men and women who have made or shaped him, and on another indicating that his mother and
father are people who come (or come in his poetry) wearing many different guises. Muldoon is much concerned with plural genealogy: his poetry uncovers the diverse forces in his life that have brought him to this pass; it has a fascination with mixed or shifting identities. The evidence of this is already present in one of the baffling first poems of that first book, ‘The Waking Father’, which makes typical use of a real or imagined childhood memory (‘My father and I are catching spricklies; Out of the Oona river’) and then offers us an equally typical metamorphosis as the river fills with piranhas and his father; ‘maybe dead or sleeping’, becomes ‘a king’. New Weather is an elusive first book, maddening not least in its being printed in italics, which is one metamorphosis too many. But Muldoon has already marked out his territory: the tactics of the last poem, for instance, a long narrative which draws on Red Indian myth, are to be the tactics of the last poems in his subsequent books.

Muldoon’s terrain comes more clearly into view in the first of his poems in which his parents appear together. ‘The Mixed Marriage’, from his second book, Mules (London, 1977), is not as one might suppose about a marriage of mixed religion (both his parents were Catholic) but about a marriage of people from different social and cultural worlds. Muldoon has described his parents as being ‘something like the Morels’, 15 and in the poem we learn that while the father ‘left school at eight or nine’ and ‘took up the billhook and loy’ (‘loy’ being an Irish spade), the mother was a schoolmistress inhabiting ‘the world of Castor and Pollux’:

She had read one volume of Proust,
He knew the cure for fancy.
I flitted between a hole in the hedge
And a room in the Latin quarter.

All marriages are mixed to some degree, all partners can be said to be opposites. But the gap between Muldoon’s parents was unusually wide, or was felt by the son to be, and this gives him his model for poetry, a mixed marriage, a flitting Blakean progression through contraries. He is a learned and sophisticated poet, but his learning extends to country lore as well as classical allusion, and his sophistication lies in knowing how to mix things up a bit. He confesses to an interest in exploring ‘lives caught between heaven and earth’ and has a habit of juxtaposing apparently unrelated (and unsuited) themes. ‘I’ve become very interested’, he has said, ‘in structures that can be fixed like mirrors at angles to each other’ (Haffenden, pp. 131, 136). In Why Brownlee Left (London, 1980) and Quoof (London, 1983) this technique takes several different forms. Sometimes a title is enough to indicate the boldness of the juxtaposition: ‘My father and I and Billy Two

15 Haffenden, pp. 130–42 (p. 131). See also ‘A Tight Wee Place in Armagh’, Fortnight, July/August 1984, pp. 19, 23.
Rivers’. At other times the crossover amounts to little more than a Martian visual analogy: ‘the under-arm rash of sparks’ in ‘Sky Woman’ is a shooting star but also a girl pulling off a nylon or rayon blouse.

Typically, though, there will be two strands of imagery or narrative, in no apparent relation to each other yet suggestive enough to challenge the reader to discover the secret flow of intimacy between them. In ‘Whim’, for instance, two strangers with a mutual interest in translation of the Cuchulain legend pair off, get ‘stuck in each other’ (literally), and are stretched away ‘like the last of an endangered species’. Is this an allegory of Ireland and England, to be compared with Seamus Heaney’s ‘Act of Union’? It is more lightly and obliquely done, but no poem which uses the Cuchulain legend can be entirely light or oblique: Muldoon’s, moreover, begins in the Europa, a hotel in Belfast much used by English journalists (and much bombed) during the Troubles. There are similarly beguiling juxtapositions in ‘Truce’, ‘Palm Sunday’, and ‘Cuba’. In the last of these Muldoon’s father reprimands his daughter for arriving home late and skimply dressed from a dance; later she confesses a mild sexual misdemeanour to a different paternal figure, the priest: ‘He brushed against me, Father. Very gently.’ The link between this incident and the Cuban missile crisis seems to lie in an unstated or a hovering word-play: both the sexual incident and the political one have been a ‘close’ thing, a ‘brush’ with fate. If the elegance of Muldoon’s poetry gives us confidence that such connexions exist, its charge comes from the difficulty we have in discovering what exactly they are.

The progeny of a mixed marriage can be expected to have mixed feelings and Muldoon often presents himself in this way, unsure like Prufrock whether these things are right or wrong, ignorant like Larkin of what is true or right or real. To be divided in oneself need not be disabling, however, or so he is anxious to assert. ‘Mules’ is about a creature that is neither horse nor ass, ‘neither one thing nor the other’: may this not be ‘to have the best of both worlds’? Muldoon appears to think so, not least in the matter of politics. Like most contemporary poets in the North of Ireland he has come under pressure to write committed, sides-taking verse, to ‘mix it’, but he has been the one most strenuously to resist. ‘Where (I wonder myself) do I stand’, the poet asks himself in ‘Lunch with Pancho Villa’, then typically deflates and deflects the question with a change of line: ‘Where (I wonder myself) do I stand | In relation to a table and chair.’ Wondering (thinking over, but also freely imagining) is something which committed poetry makes impossible. ‘Of course there is a place in poetry for opinion’, Muldoon has said, ‘but there’s no place for the opinionated’ (Haffenden, p. 137). Opinionation, getting cross, inhibits the poet who wants to cross freely from one side to the other. Muldoon knows that in Northern Ireland today one is supposed to take sides, but asks whether it is illegitimate to sit on the fence when, as ‘The Boundary Commission’ suggests, the fence has been so arbitrarily positioned:
You remember that village where the border ran
Down the middle of the street,
With the butcher and baker in different states?
Today he remarked how a shower of rain

Had stopped so cleanly across Golightly’s lane
It might have been a wall of glass
That had toppled over. He stood there, for ages,
To wonder which side, if any, he should be on.

It is not that Muldoon’s poetry evades politics (in *Quoof*, for example, there are allusions to terrorists, hunger-strikers, dirty protesters, and the victims of tarring-and-feathering) but that it refrains from parading its colours: there is neither Paulin’s dream of a pure Republic nor Heaney’s conscience-laden search for true filiation. Muldoon’s is a poetry not of introspection but of interception, not brooding solemnly but catching things on the run. This lends it coolness and obliquity, but in the end it is no less concerned to track down ancestry than is the poetry of Heaney. ‘I too have trailed my father’s spirit’, his poem ‘Immramma’ begins, with a nod at Heaney as well as Hamlet. The father whom Muldoon locates in that poem (‘That’s him on the verandah, drinking rum | With a man who might be a Nazi’) does not bear much resemblance to his own: as he explains in an interview, it is a poem ‘about never having been born . . . the father leads a totally different life (which he might easily have done) in which I would not have figured’ (Haffenden, p. 140). This is consistent with Muldoon’s method: like mirrors set at angles to one another, his poems offer new glimpses and multiple images of the figures who appear within them.

The father in ‘Immramma’ lives in Brazil, and thus bears a resemblance to the father in ‘Immram’, who is at one point imagined ‘sitting outside a hacienda somewhere in the Argentine’: both men defect, as Brownlee also does (‘flitting’ in a different sense), and establish alternative families. The source for ‘Immram’ is a long early Irish tale called *Immram Mael Duin*, or ‘The Voyage of the Maelduns’ (you can hear why it should appeal to Muldoon), and Tennyson is one of a number of poets to have made use of it (Muldoon considers Tennyson’s version ‘dreadful’ (Haffenden, p. 139), which is no doubt why in his poem a Mr and Mrs Alfred Tennyson register at a hotel reception). In the original the hero sets out to avenge his father’s death and, after many adventures, meets a hermit who tells him to turn the other cheek. In the Muldoon version, set in contemporary California, the narrator is taunted at the outset by a black billiard-player: ‘Your old man was an asshole. | That makes an asshole out of you.’ Wanting to ‘know more about my father’ and this ‘new strain in my pedigree’, the narrator embarks on a quest which takes him to his mother (in hospital after an overdose), a club where his father used to ‘throw crap’, a sexual assignment, a Harlem church, and finally to the hotel where a Howard-Hughes-like hermit croaks ‘I forgive you . . . And I forget’.
The tough-guy narrative voice and the detective-hunt owe more to Chandler than to early Irish: there are jokes about a carpet so deep you can swim in it and about 'a mile-long white Cadillac'. One critic has written that Muldoon's version is to the original as Joyce's Ulysses is to the Odyssey, and certainly the poem is infected with an allusive (and elusive) post-modernist spirit. Little is discovered, and even that cannot be relied on:

This was how it was. My father had been a mule.  
He had flown down to Rio.  
Time and time again. But he courted disaster.  
He tried to smuggle a wooden statue  
Through the airport at Lima.  
The Christ of the Andes. The statue was hollow.  
He stumbled. It went and shattered.  
And he had to stand idly by  
As a cool fifty or sixty thousand dollars worth  
Was trampled back into the good earth.

The father in 'Immram' flees 'from alias to alias', and this is typical of a poem in which identities shift like sand: a girl goes by the name of Susan and Suzanne and Susannah; 'I already told you his name', the narrator says of one character, but he has not, or does not appear to have. The long narrative poem, 'The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants', which concludes Muldoon's next collection, Quoof, plays similar tricks: the chief figure is called Gallogly, Golightly, Gollogly, Ingoldsby, and English. (Such etymologies interest Muldoon: in 'The Right Arm' he writes of how the place-name 'Eghish' is 'wedged between ecclesia and église'.) We also have a string of women called Alice, Alice A., Alice B, and Alice B. Toklas, as well as an Aer Lingus girl 'with an embroidered capital letter A | on her breast'. The similar names create the sort of paranoid atmosphere, in which coincidences add up to suggest some underlying universal 'key', that can be found in Thomas Pynchon's novel The Crying of Lot 49. 'Gallogly' is echoed again by a homophonic vocabulary of verbs and nouns: girlie, galoot, gallivant, gallowglass, and gelignite.

In this poem, too, the hero is on a genealogical quest: he is

an Oglala  
Sioux busily tracing the family tree  
of an Ulsterman who had some hand  
in the massacre at Wounded Knee.

The poem is said (on the dust-jacket) to be 'loosely based on the Trickster cycle of the Winnebago Indians', just as 'Immram' has its mythological base, but this statement may itself be a kind of trick: like the heroes of Amerindian mythology, Muldoon likes making mischief, as that playful but bloodthirsty transformation of the cliché 'have a hand in' ('had some hand | in the massacre') makes very apparent.

Yet the three poems about his father in Quoof, for all their tricksiness, tap a deep source of filial feeling. These are anticipatory elegies (his father did not die until after the book’s publication) and thus, because open to be read by their subject, the best sort. ‘Gathering Mushrooms’ derives from the peculiar fact of his father’s work as a mushroom-grower. But the Heaney-ish evocations of paternal labour (‘He carries a knife, two punnets, a bucket’) give way to passages describing the use of the magic mushroom, psilocybin, and the hallucinatory experiences to which it gives rise. This in turn is complicated by a third strand of reference, sectarian Belfast: the ‘dirt’ where the mushrooms grow becomes the excrement of protesting prisoners in Long Kesh; and the plea ‘come back’ in the strange final section could be read as personal elegy or as invocation to the Republican goddess. The elegiac note is also present in ‘Cherish the Ladies’, which claims (unreliably) to be ‘my last poem about my father’: the father is recalled as a farmworker caring for ‘three mooley heifers’, the final image (‘the salt-lick of the world’) being a movingly expansive metaphor of tears and grief. ‘The Mirror’ is the plainest of these paternal tributes, though nothing is ever plain with Muldoon. The poem is a translation from the Irish of Michael Davitt, who wrote it in memory of his father. The primary meaning of the title has to do with the subject-matter: the father in the poem has a heart attack while taking down a heavy mirror when decorating, and the son, completing the job after the funeral, imagines the father’s ghost returning to help him. (The ‘cold paradox’ with which the poem opens (‘He was no longer my father but I was still his son’) is not dissimilar to that found in Kingsley Amis’s elegy to his father, ‘In Memoriam W.R.A.’: ‘I’m sorry you had to die | To make me sorry | You’re not here now.’) But another meaning of the poem’s title is that Davitt’s elegy becomes a mirror in which Muldoon can discover his own father’s image. Plural paternity has been a theme of his work from the start, and ‘The Mirror’ provides a final image of his father multiplied, dispersed, and re-imagined, an act of artistic revivification which offsets the mortality implicit in the closing lines:

And we lifted the mirror back in position
above the fireplace,
my father holding it steady
while I drove home
the two nails.

V

‘Hey’, I said. ‘Your dad, he’s a writer too, isn’t he? Bet that made it easier.’
‘Oh, sure. It’s just like taking over the family pub.’ (Martin Amis, Money)

Hugo Williams and Michael Hofmann are the two prosiest of our contemporary poets. Though fifteen years apart in age, they are linked in their

17 See Paul Pickering (‘Pscilly Season’, New Society, 4 October 1985, p. 21) for an interesting article on the ‘magic mushroom’ and for a possible explanation of the mysterious image of a frog being ‘squeezed’ in Muldoon’s poem ‘The Frog’.
acceptance of Cowper’s challenge ‘to make the verse speak the language of prose without being prosaic . . .’, one of the most arduous tasks a poet can undertake’. They are also, it will come as no surprise to report, obsessed with their fathers, both of whom (a departure from the pattern so far observed) were literary men who achieved modest fame. Hugh Williams was a comedy actor of stage and film who later became a successful playwright. Gert Hofmann is a German playwright and short-story writer who after years of struggle achieved success in his own country and has since been translated into English. Both fathers seem to have led insecure, changeable lives; both are strong and domineering personalities, alongside whom the sons feel to be timid successors. In recent sequences about their fathers both poets dredge up childhood memories and narrate them with deadpan authenticity. Both sequences exhibit the conflicting feelings to which a famous father must necessarily expose an emulative son (love/resentment, pride/shame, idolatry/moral superiority) and the flatness of the poetic voice is in each case a strategy to subdue intense emotion.

For Williams flatness is also a means of checking an impulse towards theatricality, camp, dressiness, performance. Early on in his career, when he practised and was associated with the minimalism of Ian Hamilton’s Review, the theatricality was less apparent. But with his fourth book, Love-Life (London, 1979), the ambiguities of his work became clear. On the one hand Williams writes with a seemingly artless candour about first meetings and final separations, romantic love and pained marriage. Reading the poems is like being forced to hear someone’s life history in embarrassing detail. On the other hand the boyish simplicity of a poem like ‘Holidays’ (‘We spread our things on the sand | In front of the hotel’) is subverted and complicated by its ending:

Our holidays look back at us in surprise
From fishing boats and fairs
Or wherever they were going then
In their seaweed head-dresses.

To whatdoes that ‘they’ in the penultimate line refer? How do holidays ‘look back’ — through photographs? What exactly are seaweed head-dresses, and can they have anything to do with the ‘seagirls wrenched with seaweed red and brown’ in Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’?

Williams’s poems often work in this way: the real suddenly shifts to the surreal, the literal turns into a literary allusion. The cupboard which ‘contain[s] the sea’ in ‘Impotence’ may be the same one which holds a glacier in Auden’s ‘As I Walked Out One Evening’; the rhythms and questions of ‘Bachelors’ (‘What do they know of love | These men that have never been married . . .?’) take us straight to the opening of Larkin’s ‘The Old Fools’; ‘Love at Night’ ends with a lover’s paradox that might have been

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used by Donne: ‘Merciless angel, it has been your task | To teach me how to live without you finally.’ Also enriching Love-Life is a motif of playing to the audience. As titles like ‘Stagefright’, ‘Once More With Feeling’, and ‘After the Show’ suggest, Williams is very conscious of putting his suffering on display: ‘And so you cry for her, and the poem falls on the page’, ‘Come, tears, and fall | For other nights like this’. In the end, for such a direct and vulnerable collection, surprisingly little hard information is surrendered: like those in Jessica Gwynne’s accompanying Expressionist drawings, the faces of Williams’s protagonists remain blurred, waiting to be filled in by our own experience.

In Writing Home (Oxford, 1985), a collection of poems devoted to his schooldays and his relationship with his father, the theatricality of Williams is more pronounced still. We watch him participate in schoolboy adventures, act out adolescent fantasies; and we learn how he wishes to become an actor like Alain Delon and of how his father discourages him, disputing his devotion to the profession (‘When I was your age I’d seen every play in London . . . | Can you say that?’). There is much concern with sartorial correctness or defiance: four consecutive poems find him in front of the mirror, parting his hair or ‘tying and re-tying ties’. Stage metaphors predominate: his father’s ‘push button’ cremation becomes a fantastic finale, a last ‘curtain call’; less obviously, coming onstage becomes a metaphor for the adolescent emerging from his father’s wings: ‘as if I could still go on and make a start in life’. There is, too, the superb mimicry of his father’s mannerisms in ‘An Actor’s War’, a ventriloquism no doubt made easier by an heirloom of letters Williams was able to draw on, but still requiring some skilful editing and inflection in the recreation of this languid, elegant, actorly voice:

Had a letter from the Income Tax
asking for some quite ridiculous sum.
Next time you see Lil tell her to write and say
I’m unlikely to be traceable
until quite some time after the war, if then.
I think when I die I should like my ashes
blown through the keyhole of the Treasury
in lieu of further payments.

The theatricality infects even the structures and strategies of the poems: their sudden lift-offs from the literal, as in the first poem, ‘At Least a Hundred Words’, where Williams recalls the surreptitious passage of a marble over his school desk-top, through an inkwell, along a system of books and rulers, ‘Then a thirty-year gap as it falls through | the dust-hole into my waiting hand’: their quiet wordplay and allusiveness; their occasional startling metaphors, as in a description of smells ‘racing ahead of us like spaniels’, retrieving the past from the present, ‘turning and waiting by a river | for their masters to come true’. Theatre in Williams’s work may be an inherited trait, but it goes beyond the subject-matter of the poems deep into
their behaviour. Like a good actor, the poetry seeks to be ‘natural’ while being carefully rehearsed. This means eschewing rhetoric and large gesture except when special occasion demands, as it does in the sly double-sonnet ‘Before the War’, which sustains a fine metaphor for the ‘gap’ between father and son, and moves from a rather confined and privileged milieu to an emotional terrain which any son should recognize:

Then you mourn the fact once more  
that you missed knowing him then,  
that you hardly recognize this man  
who somehow jumped the gun  
and started ahead of you. It isn’t fair,  
but there’s nothing to be done. The casinos are dead  
and the nights are drawing in.  
Though you follow the road map south  
on the spur of a lifetime  
you’ll never catch up with the fun  
and he won’t be back for you.  
You’re strung out like runners  
across the world, losing ground,  
in a race that began when you were born.

A journey through Europe with or in pursuit of a restless, domineering father is the sort of image that might easily be found in Michael Hofmann’s work. His one collection, *Nights in the Iron Hotel* (London, 1983), includes a short but powerful poem, ‘The Nomad, My Father’, about a man who lives in one country but works in another:

Fused with your car, a modern centaur,  
you commute to work like the Tartar hordes  
who swept across Europe, drinking their mares’ milk.  

Half the week in a neighbouring country,  
then, laden with spoils, home to your smoky tents.

Michael Hofmann is himself ‘divided’, born in Germany but educated in England. This culture-split is a less significant feature of his work, however, than its peripateticism. There is no drama of a divided soul but rather a fascination with people on the move, with *Wanderlust*; and whereas Williams has a typically English preoccupation with mobility upward or downward on the social scale (a key episode in *Writing Home* is his father’s bankruptcy), Hofmann’s is a mid-European preoccupation with movement back and forth across frontiers. His poetry ranges globally for its imagery and ideas: Japanese poets, ‘Gandhi’s Indians’, the Amazon, the Gallipoli Offensive, American and Soviet films, ‘captains of German industry’, British darts-players, ‘petrol pump attendants in Yugoslavia’: all find their way into his work.

The places that most attract him, however, are somewhere (anywhere) in Northern Europe, like the autobahn he fetches up on, its blue signpost marking the distances (‘Nurnberg 100, Wurzburg|home of the
Volkswagen) 200, Berlin 500’), and the people he writes of are people passing through: the couple in the title poem, or the industrialist and his wife ‘in a hotel in a foreign country | where the morals are different’. (Even the actress-girlfriend lovingly delineated in a poem of that title has to be part of a ‘touring company’.) Border towns, being places not to be lived in but travelled through, exert a special charm, as ‘Fürth i. Wald’ makes clear:

These strips of towns, with their troubled histories, they are lost in the woods like Hansel and Gretel. Counters at peace conferences, they changed hands so often, they became indistinguishable, worthless. Polyglot and juggled like Belgium, each of them keeps a spare name in the other language to fall back on. Only their wanton, spawning frontier tells them apart.

Hofmann is most at home with homelessness, most rooted in his art when exploring rootlessness. His language has some of the prose-like neutrality of translationese, never getting above itself, according equal status to whatever it sees flashing randomly by. There is restlessness, too, in his technique of cutting rapidly and filmically between different images, turning up bizarre correspondences in the process: the analogy between his father and Tartar hordes is by no means the boldest.

His father is glimpsed in only one other poem in Nights in the Iron Hotel, ‘Family Holidays’, where the ‘fecundity of his typing’ mixes with the sound of cicadas. But in a number of poems published piecemeal in magazines, and to appear as a sequence in Acrimony (London, 1986), the fact of his father’s writing career is explored more fully, in particular its damaging effect on the rest of the family. The tone becomes accusing (‘acrimony’ is Hofmann’s own word for it) as the father’s nomadic ways are reappraised as an act of monstrous self-gratification. The family ‘safely parked across the border’, he leads a ‘double life as a part-time bachelor’ and evades all family ties:

Like a man pleading for his life, you put novels between yourself and your pursuers — Atalanta, always one step ahead of the game.

The image echoes not only Hugo Williams’s in ‘Before the War’ but Seamus Heaney’s in ‘An Afterwards’, where the poet’s wife, betrayed by her husband’s dedication to the muse, has a similar thought: ‘You left us first, and then those books, behind.’ But the angle of vision here is different, the tone less affectionate: the son expresses not only his mother’s resentment as a wronged wife (two of the poems are spoken in her voice) but also his own as someone who deserved better, first as a dependant and intimate, then later as an equal and fellow-practitioner. The father’s absences and uncommunicative half-presences; his contemptuous dismissal of the family as ‘abasement and obligation’; his absurd egotism and remoteness (‘Once you offered me your clippings file — the human touch!’) What next: a translator’s essays,
a printed interview?’): these are the objects of the son’s acrimony. ‘Fine Adjustments’, the concluding poem of the sequence, summarizes the relationship with some bitterness:

All at once, my nature as a child hits me.  
I was a moving particle, like the skidding lights  
in a film-still. Provoking and of no account,  
I kept up a constant rearguard action, jibing, 
commenting, sermonising. ‘Why did God give me a voice,’ 
I asked, ‘if you always keep the radio on?’

It was a fugitive childhood. Aged four, I was chased 
round and round the table by my father, who fell 
and broke his arm he was going to raise against me.

In that last stanza, punning on ‘fugitive’, the father is for once pursuer, not pursued. It is not the only point at which Hofmann’s poems become a distorted mirror-image of Williams’s, indeed of most contemporary poems about fathers. Corrosively stripping the father of all glamour, they are an implicit critique of a generation of pious family homages. Yet what Hofmann, at one end of that generation, shares with Williams, Harrison, and Raine, at the other is a belief that the father has had too decisive an impact on his offspring to be neglected as subject-matter — can be more easily ignored in life, in fact, than in art.

VI

This was the code: between friends, trust;  
Between elder and younger, respect; between husband and wife,  
Distinction in position; between father and son,  
Intimacy . . .

(James Fenton, ‘Chosun’)

James Fenton might seem to be an odd figure to include in this company since there is little mention of mothers and fathers generally, and none of his mother and father in particular, in the modest output of fifteen years’ work gathered (from two separately-published titles) in his volume ‘The Memory of War’ and ‘Children in Exile’ (Harmondsworth, 1983). Yet it is precisely this absence, this apparent lack of the filial, that defines his achievement. In a television interview Fenton once said that the sort of poem he no longer wanted to see was (here he paused for a moment to find the most excruciating example) one about a father coming out of the woodshed. No such poems can be found in his work; yet the abundance of not dissimilar poems elsewhere in contemporary British poetry gives his own work its rich and peculiar vacancy. Some absences are merely absences; others, as Fenton himself suggests in ‘A German Requiem’, speak volumes:

It is not the houses. It is the spaces between the houses.  
It is not the streets that exist. It is the streets that no longer exist.
It is not your memories which haunt you.
It is not what you have written down.
It is what you have forgotten, what you must forget.
What you must go on forgetting all your life.

As with post-war Germany, so the power and character of Fenton's poems lie partly in what they omit and suppress: 'It is not what they say. It is what they do not say.' Seamus Heaney finds Fenton to be 'at his most characteristic in secluded, hinting narratives of repression and isolation.'¹⁹ The isolation springs directly from their repression of intimacy, a quality which Fenton admires in others (Raine, for example) but does not exhibit himself.

One of his pamphlets is called *A Vacant Possession*, and Fenton is particularly good at possessing vacancy, where most of us let it slip through our fingers. In a poem from that pamphlet, 'Nest of Vampires', we have a house being vacated and sold off, and a family dispersed, the father having lost his money. Though the title suggests some form of bloodsucking, and a picture in the boy's bedroom shows 'an imperial Family in its humiliation', the poem's 'situation' remains mysterious: it may be that, as one critic has argued, there has been 'mismanagement of [the] estate which has earned them [the family] the hatred of the villagers', but this seems too confident an explanation of the poem, which supplies no such obvious links between the 'story' and the feelings explored.²⁰ The poem proceeds by hints (hints of madness, loss, and guilt especially) so that for all the precise details of place the ambience remains Gothic and murky. In this the poem stays true to the viewpoint of the child who narrates it, who perceives the adult world only dimly, and whose last lines are 'I'm going now And soon I am going to find out'. The poem's movement is towards a discovery: it does not vouchsafe us one within the text. Where Craig Raine's poetry knows but isn't telling, Fenton's is still finding out: as Fenton has said in an interview, 'I do think that writing a poem is very much working into the unknown'.²¹

The pamphlet's title-poem 'A Vacant Possession' has a similar country-house setting and appears again to be about the decline of the bourgeois family, examining it at a point in history where it must surrender what it owns or, put another way, come into the ownership of nothing, of vacancy. Yet this is a poem about moving in, not moving out, and as such might be expected to be affirmative, to avoid sounding like the conclusion of *The Cherry Orchard*. A vacant house has been possessed, the gardens are being cleared, and at the end there is the sound of the house filling up with guests:

And now a slamming door and voices in the hall,
Scraping suitcases and laughter. Shall I go down?
I hear my name being called, peer over the bannister
And remember something I left in my bedroom.

²¹ Andrew Motion, 'An Interview with James Fenton', *Poetry Review*, 72, no. 2 (June 1982), 17-23 (p. 21).
Is that a happy ending? Or does the last image sabotage the affirmation of preceding ones? Are these even the right questions to ask? Fenton’s work contains so many examples of nonsense-verse and practical joking that to treat these mood-pieces or fragmented narratives as if they were decodable is to risk falling into a booby-trap. A section of The Memory of War and Children in Exile is called ‘The Empire of the Senseless’, and even poems elsewhere in the book (‘A Staffordshire Murderer’, for example, which has more to do with pottery replicas of murderers than with real ones) take delight in elaborate, ‘senseless’ free invention. The chief vacancy of ‘A Vacant Possession’ may be meaning itself, then, or meaning which can be exhausted. But against this absence is its presence of mind, its perfect command of pacing and technique: the same savage strength lies behind ‘A Staffordshire Murderer’, which shares with its assassin a power to overpower, to lead its audience by the nose or the hand. Many of Fenton’s poems take us nowhere, but they do so with sinister omnipotence. In this Fenton resembles the God of his ‘God: A Poem’, a practical joker whose cruellest trick is to fail to exist: the ultimate Absence.

Another way of describing ‘absence’ in Fenton would be to use the word ‘impersonality’. He has some of the impersonality of Eliot and the modernists, their doubts about ‘roots’, their refusal to exhibit feeling. The heart of his work is its reluctance to show the sort of heartfelt ‘family’ concern exhibited by Raine, Harrison, Heaney, and other contemporaries. Even when, in ‘The Skip’, he moves down in social class and forwards in time to a contemporary, urban, working-class world, the tone is no less alien. ‘I couldn’t stick at home. I took a stroll | And passed the skip, and left my life for dead’: the bleak irreverence here is far from Raine’s ‘Laying a Lawn’ or Harrison’s ‘Illuminations’ or Heaney’s ‘Sunlight’. Yet Fenton, if he lacks warmth, cannot fairly be accused of lacking humanity. Indeed, one of the consequences of his silence about his own family background is a concern with other families, or even with the ‘family of man’: children in exile, displaced communities, nations coming to terms with a traumatic recent past.

‘Concern’ may suggest an obtrusive caring. With the exception of ‘Children in Exile’, Fenton prefers to work more obliquely: in ‘Wind’, for example, he broaches human catastrophe through the image of a cornfield. Seamus Heaney (‘Making It New’, p. 40) has recently compared this poem with one by Ted Hughes of the same title, seeing Fenton’s orderliness as part of a hostile dialogue with A. Alvarez and his ‘extremist’ anthology The New Poetry (Harmondsworth, 1962) (a dialogue Fenton initiated many years ago in his verse-letter to John Fuller). But the more striking difference between these poems is surely their scale: the ‘we’ at the centre of the Hughes poem experience the wind as a threat to their domestic comfort and psychological
BLAKE MORRISON

stability: the disturbed elements express or reinforce inner Angst. Fenton’s poem is not inward-looking and microcosmic but takes us out into the world of history and politics:

This is the wind, the wind in a field of corn.
Great crowds are fleeing from a major disaster
Down the long valleys, the green swaying wadis,
Down through the beautiful catastrophe of wind.

Families, tribes, nations and their livestock
Have heard something, seen something. An expectation
Or a gigantic misunderstanding has swept over the hilltop
Bending the ear of the hedgerow with stories of fire and sword.

This is not Raine’s Martian view, but Auden’s airman’s, surveying more than earthlings do, but a bit aloof, in danger of sacrificing those small-scale close-ups on which the successfully panoramic poem depends. It is a problem Fenton understands. He has said that he considers certain subjects intrinsically more ‘interesting’ than others,22 and for ‘interesting’ here we can substitute ‘important’, a word he avoids as too hubristic. But how to keep big and important subjects in focus? In a review of two books about Hiroshima he implies an answer:

How can the mind possibly permit itself to imagine Hiroshima? It is hard enough to imagine the effects of a conventional war, let alone to grasp the experience of an instant holocaust. You can stand by, and see a village being burnt to the ground and its inhabitants fleeing, without actually being able to imagine the significance of this particular event in the lives of these people, if the people themselves and their lives are foreign to you. Really to imagine such an event, you have to turn the village into your home, and the fleeing villagers into your family. (‘Looking Bleakly into the Soup-spoon’, The Times, 8 August 1985, p. 9)

Fenton spent from 1973 to 1976 in Indo-China and was present during the fall of Saigon. The skill with which he draws on his Cambodian experiences in the second section of The Memory of War and Children in Exile has, I would argue, a good deal to do with the imaginative act described above (which has in turn something to do with the methods of Auden’s poems in the 1930s). ‘Cambodia’, the first of these poems, remains too much a proverb or epigram, scaling events down to individual numbers but not to individuals. ‘In a Notebook’, which contrasts (draft) descriptions of a village ‘before’ enemy attack with the narrator’s (revised) self-accusing reflections ‘after’, is a more successful scaling-down because of the more localized detail (‘In the dark houseboats families were stirring | And Chinese soup was cooked on charcoal stoves’); but the use of pastoral, evident especially in rhymes such as trees/breeze, swallows/willow, eaves/sheaves, is too obvious a vehicle for conveying the narrator’s sense of loss. ‘Dead Soldiers’, which features Pol

Pot in person, throws odd and brilliant light on a much-documented subject not so much through the absurdity of the occasion it describes (a lavish lunch on the battlefield) as through the presentation of the Cambodian conflict as a ‘family war’. The drunken aide who later confides in Fenton is Pol Pot’s brother and enemy; and Prince Norodom Chantariangse, who provides the lunch, is ‘fighting Sihanouk, his nephew’. With its gastronomic luxuriance (‘pregnant turtles, their eggs boiled in carapace, Marsh irises in fish sauce’) and the snobbish boasting of ‘connections’, the lunch is a mad parody of those once enjoyed by Roman emperors or European monarchs, and forces us to see this ‘modern’ televised war afresh.

‘Children in Exile’ is the longest and most ambitious of the poems in this section, and concerns the aftermath of war: a Cambodian family ‘once happy in its size’, now reduced to four, has been transplanted to Italy, into the care of some American volunteers. The poem observes how the children slowly ‘unfurl’, altered from cold, dislocated, nightmareHaunted exiles into inquisitive young students grappling with European language and history; they do so against a backdrop of Tuscany in spring: ‘The brave bird-life of Italy began planning families. It was the season of the selfish gene.’ The poet, who is a visitor to the house where the children are staying, describes at one point how ‘A tiny philosopher climbs onto my knee | And sinks his loving teeth into my arm’, the legacy of violence defused into a playful bite. It is a tender moment, more tender than many love poems, more tender certainly than Fenton’s own solitary love poem ‘Nothing’. And ‘Children in Exile’, for Fenton a surprisingly direct and didactic work, has as its theme the redeeming power of human love. The theme is spelt out in analysis of the jealous behaviour of the house-dog Duschko, which resents the family’s intrusion:

He thought there was a quantum of love and attention
Which now he would be forced to share around
As first three Vietnamese and then four Cambodians
Trespassed on his ground.

It doesn’t work like that. It never has done.
Love is accommodating. It makes space.

Fenton’s poetry, empty early on as the large country houses it was set in, here fills its vacancy, accommodating a family which in its hope and growth can be set against the beleaguered and decaying families of ‘Nest of Vampires’ and ‘A Vacant Possession’. It is a reconstructed and adopted family, and the poet watches it at one remove, celebrating it for its own sake, not (as Raine, Heaney, and Harrison would) because it is his own. Only the crudest sort of Christian or Marxist critic would suppose that this new fullness and optimism makes the later poem richer than the earlier ones; for myself I find the absences and mysteries of the earlier work at least as interesting and suggestive. But what these poems share as subject-matter is more important than their relative merits, for it shows that, despite an apparent rejection of contemporary codes of intimacy, it is with families too that Fenton is above all concerned.
Jumping a ditch out of a wood, my mother’s horse had stumbled and thrown her forward over its shoulder, knocking her hat off. She clung on as the horse galloped across most of a field, and when she eventually fell, it was onto a concrete farm track. She was knocked unconscious. My brother was in front of her. The first he knew that something was wrong was her horse careering past riderless... the fall had made a bloodclot form on her brain. If they didn’t operate, she would die. If they did operate, she might live, but possibly with serious brain damage... She was cut out of her clothes, her head shaved, and the bloodclot was removed. A piece of her brain broke away with it. (Andrew Motion, ‘Skating’)

In The London Review of Books (6–19 October 1983) Craig Raine began a review by asking whether some poetic subjects ‘are inevitably more interesting than others’. (‘Subjects’, p. 5). A month earlier, in the Poetry Review, James Fenton had raised the same question. ‘Have we lost the taste for subject matter?’, he asked, and wanted us to ‘imagine a poem that was so intrinsically interesting that it never occurred to people, when discussing it, to mention treatment, method, tradition, influence, forms or any other of the usual critical categories. The only thing people wanted to talk about was the subject. Would not that be, in its way, revolutionary?’ (‘A Manifesto against Manifestos’, p. 14). That same issue of Poetry Review carried a prose memoir of childhood by Andrew Motion (‘Skating’, later reprinted in his Dangerous Play: Poems 1974–84 (London, 1984)). As the above extract from it makes clear, Motion has inherited a subject-matter, his mother’s tragic accident, the grim aftermath to which he spells out a few pages further on: ‘My mother will stay more or less comatose for the next three years, then gradually recover her speech before dying without leaving hospital almost exactly ten years after her accident.’ A subject-matter like this is a mixed blessing to a writer, a fertile curse, the ‘use’ of it (as Peter Porter and Douglas Dunn acknowledge in poems about the cruelly premature death of their wives) both agony and purgation. Motion’s poetic development can best be understood as an attempt to escape his ‘given’ subject-matter and its given mode, elegy, and to embrace the free inventions of narrative.

Motion’s preoccupation with his mother puts him at odds with most of the poets discussed so far. Though his father is far from absent (he is movingly described, for example, arriving home from his wife’s bedside), he remains on the whole a cardboard figure, kindly but remote. It is she who commands Motion’s imagination, and her strong if spectral presence is one reason why Motion seems the most ‘feminine’ of the current generation of British poets, at odds with the metrical muscularity of Harrison, the metaphor-hunter gathering of Raine, the hard sophistication of Muldoon, the impersonality of Fenton. It is not only that Motion often adopts female personae (ones, moreover, which feel as the ‘gorilla girl’ does: ‘I’m through with living in the lousy world of men’), but also a matter of technique. His weak endings and enjambments; his preference for a soft and yielding vocabulary (‘fade’, ‘slip’,
‘disappear’/‘suspended’, ‘faint’, ‘lost’/‘dust’, ‘mist’, ‘shadow’, ‘silence’); his evocations of ghostly twilit landscapes; his use of Larkinesque and Edward-Thomas-like negatives, ‘un-’ and ‘never’ and ‘not’: all this makes him a gentler and more tentative poetry than theirs. The contrast with Raine is particularly striking, not just because they have in other respects followed parallel careers (boarding school, Oxford, prize-winning poem celebrity, first collections in 1978, academic jobs abandoned for careers in publishing) but because their collections of 1984, Rich and Dangerous Play, are held together by such different prose memoirs. Motion’s begins with exactly the sort of eccentric detail one finds in Raine, as he describes a photograph of himself as a baby in a pram on a frozen mill-pond, his mother wearing skates as she pushes him. But what follows is not Raine’s proletarian oddland but a world of prep school, dorms, tuck shops, riding, and large country houses, familiar from countless haut-bourgeois novels and autobiographies. Motion’s prose is looser and more conventional than Raine’s, sloppily so at times, but also as befits an impression that what it has to relate might almost be Edwardian country-house fiction.

Motion’s memoir, no less than Raine’s, is a portrait of the artist as a young man, showing the child as father to the poet. If the episodes of being bullied mark him out as a sensitive and isolated Spenderian, a posture also adopted by some of the poems, his childhood consumption of ‘bloodthirsty’ adventure tales (‘melodramatic accounts of car accidents and Indian massacres’, ‘Dennis Wheatley, then Hammond Innes, then Alistair Maclean’) anticipates the sensationalist elements in narrative poems such as ‘Bathing at Glymenopoulo’. The taste for narrative stands in interesting relation to his mother, even before her accident: ‘I can see now that the stories were ways of imagining the worst: ways of trying to prolong the idyll of her company by dreaming up some radically appalling alternative.’

Yet the fiction is not just an alternative: it infects even the ‘real’ events Motion describes, which come over as the creations of a novelist or film-maker. ‘It was straight out of Conrad but true’, one of his poems (‘The Great Man’) begins, and the prose memoir, too, occupies a shadowland between the real and imagined. The mother languidly brushing her hair each morning and taking to her bed each afternoon; the haunting, guilt-ridden ‘Freudian’ coincidence that took Motion away from home to the brink of his first sexual experience on the very day his mother had her accident; the aftermath of that accident, the riderless horse (as his poem ‘Anniversaries’ describes it) returning ‘alone to the open stable, [its] rein dragging behind’: these details are authentic only because we know them to be true; as writing, they don’t have the authenticity of, for example, Motion’s ‘irrelevant’ memory of passing a man cutting a hedge on his way to see his mother in hospital for the first time. Yet the fictional quality of Motion’s truths helps distance him from the events he unfolds, casting him as an imaginary orphan or as the tragic hero of an adventure story.
This interdependence of elegiac reality and fictional motif in Motion should caution us against any simple interpretation of his development. It is true that he draws more directly on personal experience in the early work than in the later: ‘Anniversaries’, ‘A Dying Race’, and ‘In the Attic’, all from his first book, The Pleasure Steamers (Manchester, 1978), are about his mother’s accident and death; and in the other, lesser, poems from that collection one can be confident that the ‘I’ is Motion himself. But the section in Dangerous Play which reprints some of the early poems adds three others which show narrative and drama creeping in. ‘Wooding’ is set on the eve of his mother’s funeral but withdraws to watch the bereft father and sons as an outsider might observe them, ignorant of their feelings. In ‘The House Through’ the speaking ‘I’ is the poet’s mother, returning as a ghost to her husband’s house. In ‘The Lines’ we catch the poet in the act of fictionalizing: alone after his mother’s funeral and seeking distraction, he picks up ‘a paperback you never read’, unnamed but apparently describing the laying of railway lines in the summer of 1845:

In 1845 200,000 navvies, 3,000 miles of line.  
Lost faces lift — a mania, a human alligator,  
shovels clinking under high midsummer sun.  
The heat-haze dances meadowsweet and may,  
whole cliffs collapse, and line by line  
I bring your death to lonely hidden villages,  
red-tiled farms, helpless women and timid men.

‘I bring your death to . . . ’: time and again in Motion’s later work the feelings surrounding his mother’s death (grief, anger, destitution) are brought to other less personal contexts: to ‘Anne Frank Huis’, for instance, which uses the phrase ‘her lifetime of grief’ and explores feelings of sadness, seclusion, and guilt; or to the neglected, lonely, expatriate wife in ‘One Life’, nostalgic for homely England; or to ‘Independence’, the speaker of which loses his young wife in childbirth and, like the bereaved speaker of ‘In the Attic’, sorts helplessly through her clothes. Dangerous Play, Motion calls his Selected Poems; ‘dangerous’ because his inventions draw on emotions too deeply felt to mess around with. Yet ‘play’ or narrative is a necessary escape from the repetition of his ‘given’ subject. His narrative poems seethe with the power to invent, ‘relish the act of fiction as it is being performed’: 23 the artifice is self-consciously advertised, in the manner of ‘academic’ post-modernist fiction. In ‘The Great Man’, based on a broadcast by James Cameron about his visit to Albert Schweitzer, the journalist judges the depressing truth about the man: ‘If I had said he was a fake, who would have believed me?’ The speakers of ‘The Whole Truth’ and ‘Open Secrets’ are equally if more deftly fictive, telling tales which turn out to be more true than tall:

And all of it lies, just as my pictures
of you at your kitchen table were lies —
one tender imaginary scene succeeding
another, but only to prove what is true.

(‘The Whole Truth’)

Just now, prolonging my journey home to you, I killed
an hour where my road lay over a moor, and made this up.
Florrie I sat on a grass-grown crumbling stack of peat
with the boy by her side, and as soon as she whispered
Come on. We’ve done it before, I made him imagine
his father garrotting the stag, slitting the stomach
and sliding his hands inside for warmth. He was never
myself, this boy, but I know if I tell you his story
you’ll think we are one and the same: both of us hiding
in fictions which say what we cannot admit to ourselves.

(‘Open Secrets’)

The self may be hidden but it cannot be escaped from: so the last line
suggests, admitting what it says it cannot. ‘Hiding’ for Motion takes the form
of inhabiting lives which in their confidence, adventurousness, unscrupu-
loseness, and even dishonesty are the opposite of the shy, vulnerable,
integral, painfully honest ‘I’ of the early lyrics. Hence the rather desperately
alien settings of the later work (Scottish grouse-moors, colonial Africa, South
American forests, a New York Hotel room) and a set of characters in flight
from themselves. But we come back to the same few inescapable emotions
and the same searing self-knowledge, as the gorilla girl finds when looking at
the animals is enough to start ‘the huge, involved machinery of
tenderness| and let myself be known for what I am’.

Tenderness is the least escapable of feelings in Motion’s poems, and ‘love’
a word that recurs at climactic moments: ‘the way love looks, its harrowing
clarity’, ‘telling myself it was| kindness, and might even turn into love’,
‘what hope| she had for ordinary love and interest’, ‘Whoever loves best | loves
best by remaining themselves’, ‘I love her house; I love her twins; I love (I love them a bit)
her dogs’. Yet for all these sightings of the word love, and for all the gentleness
of his lyric voice, love remains more a notion than an emotion, something
thought important rather than deeply felt. Motion is attracted to characters
and personae who know the ache and void of unrequited love, the same ache
and void of unrequited love as underlie his elegies for and memoir of his
mother. The nearest he comes to filling that void is in ‘These Days’, a poem
of aching sexual longing. Motion’s work exhibits an interest in twins, and
here there are two males (the speaker and a cat) and two women, one the
speaker wants to sleep with, the other a figure on a willow-pattern plate.
Motion also exhibits an interest in ghosts, Hardyesque female spectres, and
here it is the woman on the willow-pattern plate who, in the poem’s fluid
syllabics, comes miraculously to life:
you pour
milk in a shallow dish
for the cat, as he frisks in
out of nowhere, his hollow
lap-lap-lapping an almost
welcome distraction to stop me
pinning for you, his tongue
steadily clearing the milk
like a tiny fog, revealing
a woman crossing a blue bridge
setting out on a journey,
perhaps, or coming back,
her parasol raised in salute,
her blue cross-hatched hat
tipped to deflect the wind,
and her eyes distinctly narrowed
to blue expressionless flecks
by a sudden onrush of light.

In his memoir of childhood, Motion describes how his sexual longing for a young woman was dissipated by his mother’s accident. Here the woman on the willow-pattern plate, ‘setting out’ or ‘coming back’, appears not to frustrate the speaker’s relationship with another woman but to give it her blessing. It is a poem which has nothing to do with his mother at all, of course, but alone among Motion’s elegies and narratives it is the one which truly lays her ghost.

VIII
They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.
(Philip Larkin, ‘This Be The Verse’)

Philip Larkin’s disenchanted vignette, with its picture of misery handed down from generation to generation, remains the most incisive post-war contribution to the literature of filiality. Its ‘less deceived’ tone highlights the respectfulness and even piety of those who have come after Larkin: Heaney and Harrison, with their guilty reflections on ‘following’; Raine and Muldoon, with their heirloom of miracles and metamorphoses; Williams and Hofmann, laconically entangled with their writer-fathers; Fenton and Motion, searching among the ruins of family life for a source of stability and love. Yet theirs is not the piety of, for example, Thackeray’s daughter, who is said to have been so exasperated by the badly-executed bust of her father in Poets’ Corner that she finally commissioned a sculptor to trim the whiskers. Their portraits may look idealistic alongside Larkin’s, as almost any parental portrait must, but they do not conceal imperfections or deny the
tensions that can exist between parent and child. Indeed, one of the surprising points about this supposedly cool and anti-confessional generation is the intimacy of their pictures of family life. The inclusion of prose memoirs in Raine’s Rich and Motion’s Dangerous Play consciously echoes the structure of that most confessional of collections, Lowell’s Life Studies; Williams gives us his ‘shit-stained underpants’ and Muldoon his family’s private word for the hot water-bottle; only Fenton keeps his distance. First impressions of this generation of poets, some of them traceable to The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry, will clearly have to be revised.

A more difficult question concerns the supposed conservatism of these poets. A preoccupation with parents may indicate acceptance of inheritance, tradition, the status quo; it may also indicate a reverence for one’s literary parents, a reluctance to behave badly (as all innovative writers must) towards the preceding poetic generation. But this does not follow automatically. Heaney’s unearthing of his heritage has radicalized his work, which began in harmless neo-Georgianism and became in North a poetry of unsettling public utterance; Harrison’s parents force him to expose social division and injustice; Muldoon’s poems on his ‘fathers’ are challenging formal experiments; and even Raine, who far from ‘killing’ his poetic fathers now edits them at Faber, has none the less brought about a significant reorientation in current writing. These poets look conservative next to Pound and Eliot but they are not in all respects the worse for it. At best there is something challenging in their belief that the family and domesticity are matters with which poetry may legitimately be concerned, a belief which runs contrary to Romanticism and Modernism.

Pre-Romantic English literature does not, of course, lack examples of the filial art. In Pope, for instance, one can find tributes even the current generation might think too pious: that to his father in the ‘Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot’ (ll. 390–405) and to his mother in the ‘Essay on Man’ (iv. 109–10). We know too that Pope’s actual behaviour towards his parents was solicitous to the point of suffocation, his mother complaining that whereas ‘most children plagu’d their Parents with Neglect; that He did so as much the other way, perpetually teasing her with his Overfondness and Care, and pressing her to Eat this and that; and Drink another Glass of Wine; and so assiduous as never to let her be at Liberty, and chuse for her self. Gave her great Uneasiness this way’.24 But if Pope and others suggest a precedent it remains true that no other poetic generation one can think of has collectively been so obsessed with its parents as the present one. Nor is this obsession mere nostalgia for childhood: Heaney and Harrison, in particular, explore their adult relationship with their parents, and this gives their poetry more layers and tensions than would any simple re-creation of the past.

If critics and reviewers have paid surprisingly little attention to this aspect of contemporary poetry, among poets themselves there are now the stirrings of parodic complaint. On facing pages of the January 1985 issue of *Poetry Review* (74, no. 4, pp. 44–45) are poems by Sylvia Kantaris and Steve Ellis which pay embarrassed tribute to their Northern working-class fathers, conscious that Tony Harrison and Craig Raine have got there first. Kantaris’s ‘One Upmanship’ is a pastiche of Harrisons’s dialect, half-wanting to be a serious poem itself. Ellis’s ‘Ad Patrem’ glances at Ted Hughes’s ‘Her Husband’ and Harrison’s ‘Cremation’ (where a macho worker ‘hawks his cold gobful’ on the fire), and in the teeth of those elegies to strong men he writes a gentler elegy of his own. It has a weariness about it, a sag of the shoulders, as if it wanted to close the subject and to have, as it can do here, the last word:

Other poets have dads done in by Fate,
not feathering cosy corners;
lined men who gob in a bucket,
'thee' and 'thou' at the fire,
fill a room with rugged destiny.
I could have inherited it all,
being Yorkshire and working-class;
but though you still bike off t'club
to herd dominoes through a dour fog
of smoke and beer, remaining years
of roses and bowling-greens
seem your choice and remembrance.
You might even get a little car!
Oh Dad, watch how you go
in retirement’s renovating lake;
at least leave unchanged the bicycle-clips
for old sake's sake.