

## The concept of «threshold» in Macdara Woods: *From A One Way Ticket* poetry collection

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**Abstract:** This essay will examine Macdara Woods's poetic thinking about the «threshold» - which may be interpreted as the limit point of one identity, be that literary, political, or ideological - closely linked to Woods's journey to Italy. For most, a frontier, or a border, is a point of closure and separation between selfhood and alterity, but in Woods's aesthetic thinking it becomes a point in a whole structure wherein different identities can interact and interanimate creating more permeable structures of identity. Instead of being a restrictive place, the threshold becomes a creative space in his poetized structures of thinking. Ireland thus becomes a "state of mind" which will allow Woods's ideological and cultural positions to interact, intersect and enter some form of dialogue with each other.

**Keywords:** *Irish Poetry, Threshold, Irish identity, Metaphor, Metonymy, Troubles.*

### 1. But not stopping this time Captain

In March 1980, Macdara Woods is on the train, together with his wife, the poet Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. They are headed to Italy. It is a journey that will take them to Umbria, in Tavernelle near Lake Trasimeno where, after having restored an old farmhouse, they will be settle there.

He is *naisiuntacht eireannach*, an Irish citizen, but since his first stay in Italy he feels disenchanted in his land, detached and distant, recognizing himself as a foreigner in his own homeland:

There was always an element of this; in my youth I was attacked by one part of the establishment for being too Gaelic, and by another for not being Gaelic enough. Today, I feel, my sense of foreignness is absolute. My place is with the exiles and the dispossessed<sup>2</sup>.

The writer Peter Fallon edited, with Derek Mahon in 1990, the best-selling anthology *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, in which they note that Irish poetry «*speaks for itself in one or another of the many voices which have evolved over the years*»<sup>3</sup>, pointing clearly to the

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2 All the excerpts in this essay are parts of conversations over the years with the poet Macdara Woods, up until his death, on 15th June, 2018.

3 P. FALLON, D. MAHON, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, Penguin, London 1990, p. xxii.

disparate, polyvocal and chimerical nature of a good deal of contemporary Irish poetry up to 1990 and beyond. In the Republic, the economic boom of the 1990s continues unabated in the 2000s, heralding unparalleled prosperity, increased urbanisation and large-scale immigration, factors which place pressure on accepted models of a collective national perspective. Ironically, the very lack of a predominant school or voice places greater pressure on critical reflections of the nature of contemporary Irish poetry in that the diffracted nature of poetic expression makes it resistant to categorisation<sup>4</sup>. What can be said with some certainty is that among so many poetic voices that reflect the complex nature of major shifts in the traditional markers of Irish identity, Macdara Wood's is the most restless:

I abhor what has happened, and is happening in Irish society, not because I abjure change or the new, but because what is being reasserted is not new. It is a version of an old servility, an old willful ignorance.

Macdara Woods's work, *From A One Way Ticket*, translated into Italian by Rita Castigli and published in 1998, is a collection of poems written between the eighties and nineties that shows how only in Umbria, Macdara Woods is not a «foreigner». Here, he does not even feel himself in exile, he found his way along the Umbrian scrub and spent whole days and weeks walking on the hills that surrounded him.

I realized one day that the *macchia* itself, to my eyes at least, is an underwater-garden, and that I – like the sailor diving overboard from the floating ship – can move up and down the levels of the hills, can traverse continents, and go back and forth through time and will.

Woods's travelling is a free wandering, in search of ever new and increasingly open spaces; it is a perpetual journey, without a beginning and an end, where time is not made up of seconds and minutes, but of memories lived personally, which continue to live in poetry as well as in the present. Making poetry, like travelling, intensifies the awareness of differences, it is a healthy alienation that allows those who return to re-enter a present known with the new look of an outsider. The exaltation of the journey as a demonstration of freedom and as a means to achieve autonomy becomes the modern *topos* which, already evident in Wordsworth's verses evoking the situation of the wandering individual,

Whither shall I turn,  
By road or pathway, or through trackless field,  
Up hill or down, or shall some floating thing.  
Upon the river point me out my course<sup>5</sup>

reaches its peak with Woods: the reason for the pilgrimage towards “new frontiers” becomes not only an exaltation of that kind of freedom that great distances can give off, but above all a dramatic

4 S. BREWSTER, M. PARKER, *Irish literature since 1990. Diverse voices*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2009, pp. 121-122.

5 W. WORDSWORTH, *The Preludes*, in *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, Lexicos, Cambridge 2012, p. 476.

search for an essential truth that absorbs in itself a multifaceted range of meanings, unexpected resonances and intertextual cross-references:

Always hopeful of great adventure  
 I listen to their heartbeats and survey the years  
 nothing how we submerge like submarines  
 to surface maybe a decade later  
 when we are travelling down some Autostrada  
 and the rhythm sets a train of thought in motion  
 until late in the hazy afternoon  
 poised and quick on some foreign cross-roads  
 or striding some railway platform<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the archetypal journey of self-knowledge is accomplished, to arrive at the discovery of an unsuspected otherness:

you meet yourself and learn that you are someone else  
 that all these years you have been someone else<sup>7</sup>.

The voluntariness of departure, the freedom implicit in the indeterminacy of mobility, the pleasure of travel freed from necessity, the idea that it means autonomy and is a means to demonstrate what one *really* is, regardless of its context or a series of associations which define it, remain the salient features of the modern conception of the journey that we find in Woods's verses.

Since the contemporary life in Ireland is shown to be something that cannot be grasped in its totality, Woods needs to leave, to cross the border in search of the lyrical ego towards self-knowledge, the same that in the journey of Coleridge's *ancient mariner* opens a veritable Pandora's box in the subconscious<sup>8</sup>.

But no stopping this time Captain  
 We will go beneath the hills past Pisa  
 In Florence maybe have a cup of coffee  
 And make my through connection for Terontola<sup>9</sup>.

So, the central theme and the metaphor of the title, *From A One Way Ticket*, suggests the process of going beyond, platform after platform, into the rich depth of travelling, to:

this Italian roof  
 under Monte Subasio to make an act of faith  
 drinking black tobacco in the sun<sup>10</sup>.

6 M. WOODS, *Words From A One Way Ticket*, in *Biglietto di sola andata*, Mobydick, Faenza 1998, p. 20.

7 *Ibidem*.

8 P. CAHILL, *Introduzione*, in M. Woods, *Biglietto*, cit., p. 10.

9 M. WOODS, *Op. Cit.*, p. 20.

10 *Ivi*, p. 22.

But going down to Italy soon acquires a different meaning, that of going back in time, of digging into history, and more specifically into the poet's private and collective past.

In *From A One Way Ticket* the words refer first of all to the places, in the pressing succession of toponyms that mark the railway journey through Italy: Torino, Genova, La Spezia, Pisa, Florence, but they are also the words of an interior monologue of conscience and memory, since the rhythmic progress of the train, material form of transport, *sets a train of thought in motion*<sup>11</sup>.

The diversity of the places crossed, reflects the plurality of the masks, typical of the fragmented identity of contemporary man. Then Terentola, unknown to Woods, hits like an oracle amid the geography of collective memory. The small hamlet of Cortona is synecdoche of travelling to the spiritual world that fulfils together with the poet,

And Captain - when I consider it  
What else could I have done but travel on?  
Is that not all there is?<sup>12</sup>

## 2. *I can't go out: Man On The Doorstep*

*Troubles* is the euphemistic term used to describe the undeclared war that simmers in the North of Ireland between the Protestant majority, loyal to the British crown, and the Catholic minority, who seek a unified Irish state. Tensions escalated, however, in the late sixties when protests by the Catholic minority against growing economic and political discrimination led to widespread violence by the "provisional", or military, wing of the IRA. Retaliation by the Ulster Defense Association, a Protestant terrorist organization, further exacerbated the situation, leading to the deployment of British troops within the province. At the time, Northern Ireland constituted a fierce battleground of state suppression, paramilitary violence and sectarian xenophobia.

In *Lost Lives* McKittrick et al. (2008) account for more than 3700 people who lost their lives during the *Troubles* from the recrudescence of mass violence in 1968 to the Easter Agreement in 1998, on average one person every third day, and the number of injured persons goes beyond recordability<sup>13</sup>. Approximately 30,000 troops were stationed in Northern Ireland for many years, a considerable army among a population of 1.5 million people. People were murdered on the streets every day, especially if they breached the labyrinthine borders of sectarian neighbourhoods or entered the interfaces at night.

In addition to the convoluted killing fields, distinctive demarcations of political enmity, religious division and national separation entrenched the conflict.

The borders were and still are plural and complex to Irish poets, and in particular in Northern Ireland, as Heaney's self-probing questions demonstrate: «*Where do they draw the line between life and literature? Why and how? And in their literature, how do they relate to the overriding binary borders of their territory and mental activity?*»: "Two buckets were easier carried than one. / *I grew up in between*", the negotiator states in Heaney's *Terminus*<sup>14</sup>.

11 *Ivi*, p. 20.

12 *Ivi*, p. 22.

13 D. MCKITTRIDGE, et al., *Lost Lives*, Mainstream Publishing Company, Edinburgh 2008.

14 S. HEANEY, *Terminus*, in *The Haw Lantern*, Faber & Faber, London 1987, p. 5.

This poem ruminates on the ideas of borders in an Irish context: both the political border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and the more nuanced, localized borders of his own home place. In fact, as Heamus writes, the Latin word *terminus* appears as *tearmann* in many Irish place-names, meaning the glebe land belonging to an abbey or a church and signifying land that was specially marked off for ecclesiastical use<sup>15</sup>. Heaney's poetics seeks a conciliatory middle ground between aesthetic autonomy and social commitment, and between the binary structures of fierce hostility in the society from which his poetry stems.

Woods's poetry instead gets more intimate: the poet is undecided whether or not to cross the border, whether to stay on the threshold or to go out. As Andrea Gentile says:

«La soglia mette in comunicazione due luoghi, due territori, due ambiti distinguendoli. La soglia sembra così essere vicina a concetti quali confine, margine, estremità, varco, punto-limite, ingresso. In realtà, però, se ne differenzia nettamente, in quanto questi concetti implicano qualcosa che dal concetto di soglia rimane escluso e, al contempo, non riescono a esaurirne il senso. Potremmo dire che la soglia è sia "confine" che "pasaggio". La soglia delimita ed apre. [...]. La soglia è comunemente identificata con la porta, quell'apertura che la casa stessa esige, per potersi differenziare in relazione ad altro. Differenziare da che cosa? Differenziarsi innanzitutto dal mondo esterno: la soglia non solo limita, bensì anche apre»<sup>16</sup>.

The poem *Man On The Doorstep* is an example of this:

He knocks on my door at night  
the howling storm made visible  
raves at me like conscience  
come out he says come out  
come out and see the holes in the road  
the holes in the road in the rain  
it is all falling down around us  
holes full of water for children to fall in  
and he is right -  
five minutes is all it would take  
take five to walk to the bottom of the hill  
to see these children's graves in the rain

But I can't go out  
because I am minding a real live child  
I am father to a child  
who eats and sleeps and goes to school  
flies kites and brings me paintings<sup>17</sup>

15 E. O'BRIAN, *Seamus Heaney as Aesthetic Thinker. A Study of the Prose*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 2016, p. 80.

16 A. GENTILE, *Filosofia del limite*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2012, pp. 109-110.

17 M. WOODS, *Man On The Doorstep*, in *Biglietto*, *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

One of the most consistent factors in the variety of his verse has been his middle position in the responsibilities of his own art and the incessant negotiations of the borders between verse and violence, poetry and politics, lyrics and liability, as well as the sensitive treatment in his poetry of the many barriers in the society from which his poetry also crystalises. *Man On The Doorstep* was written by Woods following the experience of the secular imperial aggression, suffered once again with the tragedy of the killing of some unarmed Irish - Mairead Farrell, Daniel McCann and Sean Savage - by the British Special Air Service (S.A.S.) in Gibraltar in 1988<sup>18</sup>.

The verses «*come out and see the holes in the road / the holes in the road in the rain*» are the first instance in the poem where the deaths commonly associated with the *Troubles* can be seen. Woods's descriptions - of the man «*the howling storm made visible*», of the holes, «*full of water to children to fall in*», that remember the temporariness of life, - are rather eerie, with the conscience that shakes the poet and his standing still in the door threshold. Everything about the scene is uncomfortable, and it effectively conveys Woods's ambivalence towards the *Troubles* as a whole.

Woods never condoned the violent methods used by either side, though he was notably more sympathetic to the Irish cause, considering himself a republican and a pluralist. But here, he can't cross the door threshold because he is «*father to a child*», he is responsible of a child «*who eats and sleeps and goes to school / flies kites and brings me paintings / [...] / who is not for the moment homeless and depends on me to keep the night outside*». The image of *children's graves* as the death depicted in this poem is powerful because it shows the enduring problems that led to such a death, and the dedication of a side to bring about a change. In fact, during the 1980s, the *Troubles* inspired many Irish nationalists to create the political party Sinn Féin.

No you can't come out says the man  
but you can go to bloody Umbria -  
and what are you going to do about this  
Fascist descent into Anarchism?  
What are the artists of Ireland doing?

Safeguard your reputation<sup>19</sup>

Woods portrays himself as an outsider at this violent situation, perhaps because he is not quite as radical as many of the other Catholics, who were willing to die for the unification of Ireland. So, he doesn't come out and he chooses to leave Ireland because this is what artists in Ireland do to safeguard their reputation. In this dramatic poem the madman - the man who knocks at night - has a revelatory function, the same as all the madmen of classic tragedies.

Revelation, like a Joycean epiphany, appears in the midst of a frenetic litany of madness:

18 On March 6, the SAS shoots dead three unarmed IRA members in Gibraltar. They were suspected of being in the process of organising a bomb attack on the changing of the guard ceremony at the governor's residence in the tiny British overseas territory bordering Spain. The three IRA personnel were unarmed and no bomb was discovered in their vehicle. The SAS shot the IRA members without any prior attempt to arrest them. In 1995, the families of the three IRA members took a case to the European Court of Human Rights, which found that their human right to life had been infringed.

19 M. WOODS, *Op. cit.*, pp. 38-40.

Do you realise  
 That in the European Parliament  
 The whole of Europe is laughing at us  
 The Italians the French  
 The Greeks and Spaniards are laughing  
 laughing like drains  
 like the rain falling on Dublin they laugh<sup>20</sup>

and suddenly peremptorily, *and the British shoot us* <sup>-21</sup>. Woods uses not only images of nature, irony and Irish imagery to get his message across, but also, he uses the words themselves as the tools of the poem. This is best exemplified in the third stanza of the poem:

I was here this morning in this very place  
 in this very place today - and  
 he digs his heel into the crumbling pavement -  
 and I said to an Indian doctor  
 an Indian doctor from the College of Surgeons  
 how can people live in this  
 in this city falling apart  
 seeing this same shit day after day every day  
 head shaking like John O Gaunt  
 this same shit and nothing else  
 enough said said the doctor <sup>-22</sup>

All these lines collectively give the poem an abrasive and confused feeling, which effectively convey the emotions of the speaker during the *Troubles*. This stanza immediately brings the reader into a scene of violence in Dublin: «*how can people live in this / in this city falling apart / seeing this same shit day after day every day*», and at the same time the figure of Michael Mallin, who took an active role in the Easter Rising of 1916, is remembered. In fact, the Royal College of Surgeons, situated on St. Stephen's Green in Dublin, was occupied by the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) led by Commandant Michael Mallin. The mixture of the material and immaterial world makes the poem particularly unnerving, as it is almost as if the violence of the real world has transformed itself into the erratic and almost violent use of language in the poem: «*seeing this same shit day after day every day / this same shit and nothing else*». The language of the poem together to the descriptions of the situation and of the city of Dublin have the effect of making the poet trapped, but because of his fear and anxiety, not because of any real barriers.

Whilst this may be Woods's way of showing what life was like during the *Troubles*, as the turmoil and the laughing of the whole Europe had the capacity to make one feel trapped in one's own city, on the other Woods underlines and suggests the helplessness of many - including himself - during

20 *Ivi*, p. 40.

21 *Ibidem*.

22 *Ibidem*.

the *Troubles*. The ending of the poem suggests the solution, again, repeating the line «*Safeguard your reputation*»:

He moves away into the night -  
Safeguard tour reputation with Cess-Clean  
says the advertisement on national radio<sup>23</sup>

By refusing the static and the immutable in experience, Woods rejects also any notion that his role as a poet is somehow related to his role as a citizen of society. His is the voice which articulates the predicament of responding to a reality which is not telegenic, which will not make its way into the screaming headlines but will rather take us down the humpy lane of everyday.

When Macdara published *To be pinned on the cathedral door* in 1963, in *Arena*, he was a kind of Beat Generation preceptor in the Ireland of that time: «*Who painted faces on walls and labelled them the universal second person*»<sup>24</sup>. His declared aim at that time was to be a sort of «lone witness».

Hope, a strange bedfellow with pathos, pervades this chosen role of witness; it is his intention that each and every reader should see «hope as a state of mind, not a state of the world», as Václav Havel would have it<sup>25</sup>. In terms of such a definition, Woods faces the task of reassembling his myriad selves into a sort of past and present in one ambivalent self. It is in the extraordinary poem *The Egyptian Singer* that he than completes the creation of this “Persona poetica”:

There is a man outside my window  
lithe as a cat  
picking magic mushrooms  
walking like a cat on the wet grass  
caught up in his concentration  
I have been watching him for hours  
and for some time I thought he was picking worms  
it is all so distant  
picking worms or mushrooms  
it depends on what you want I suppose<sup>26</sup>

This distance, so apprehensively expressed by the poet, is less likely to be intuited by the reader, insofar as Macdara Woods’s poetry is pervaded by a strong tissue of consistency. In this respect, there is also an echo of the thinking of Adorno in Woods’s view, as Adorno has spoken about a moment «of unself-consciousness» wherein the subject «submerges itself in language» and wherein language speaks «not as something alien to the subject, but as the subject’s own voice»<sup>27</sup>.

Stride, stride through the world and its stories; this is the robust Chaucerian figure we encounter at every turn in Woods’s poetry, where the present self often looks down the telescope

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23 *Ibidem*.

24 M. WOODS, *To be pinned on the cathedral door*, in *Selected Poems*, Dedalus, Dublin 1996, p. 11.

25 V. HAVEL, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hoizdala*, Faber & Faber, London 1990, p. 181.

26 M. WOODS, *The Egyptian Singer*, in *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

27 T. W. ADORNO, R. TIEDEMANN, *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1, Columbia University Press, New York 1991, p. 44.

of time and bemusedly moves the gravitational pull hither and thither in contemplation of an older-younger self.

In such a way, he crosses the borders to sourcing of a place for the voice of his own identity, as well as attempting to expand the frontiers of what has hitherto been seen as a hegemonic. And, following in Yeats's idea of the importance of a dialogue between notions of selfhood and notions of alterity, Ireland becomes a 'state of mind', creating new structures which allow these ideological and cultural positions to interact, intersect and enter some form of dialogue with each other and allow for some dissipation of the conflict.

### 3. Wondering how in the end we got here

Woods's focusing technique coupled with his increasingly enchanting poetry, takes in *From A One Way Ticket* on a cinematic quality which he achieved by abandoning the metaphors of his early poetry in favour of a more metonymic approach, with the tangibility of present time and present experience, juxtaposing with an ever palpable past. In order to heighten the idea of several past souls uniting themselves in one present body it becomes necessary to let things in the concrete world stand for themselves. A world that is a stark and as alone as its witness:

*Christ* that I could disentangle  
just one dimension before the day comes back  
working like that Gaelic bard in the womb of the boat  
putting the bones of his poem in place –  
*Captain I am sleeping here below*  
below decks in the worm bitten rafters

I am putting memories in place  
and calling-in on disused expertise -  
the eel-net in the shed calls up but cannot save  
energies spilled out on sand -  
like the lost music of the Horn Concertos  
worthless as a fico secco<sup>28</sup>

Richard Kearney makes a parallel point, noting that every cultural narrative is in some way «a reinterpretation of its own history», an attempt to retell a story of the past as it «relates to the present, an act of “understanding otherwise” the motivating sub-world of symbols which informs our consciousness of the world»<sup>29</sup>.

Woods's collection poems *From A One Way Ticket* is a way of “understanding otherwise” the complexities of Irish literary identity, and all his poems underline a motivated connection between poetry and politics, not necessarily a negative one. In fact, one could see all «poetry as political in one way or another, since even the choice to eschew explicit political involvement or references

28 M. WOODS, *Tavernelle di Panicale - Figs*, in *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

29 R. KEARNEY, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, Wolfhound Press, Dublin 1988, p. 10.

constitutes a form of political action (or perhaps more precisely inaction)<sup>30</sup>:

and then I sat back and waited  
this whole peninsula was waiting  
and I was European and waiting for the Barbarians<sup>31</sup>

Flourishing beside the vines - I am  
thinking of Ireland and trying to return  
to a message for my father<sup>32</sup>

Then, *Tavernelle di Panicale*, composed of three parts - *Figs*, *Scorpions* and *Sunflowers* - is the poem where Woods turns his back on 'ad hoc lives', places experience firmly in Umbria and adds a whole new tone as well as a new dimension to the Irish experience of migration.

In his poetry collection, *From A One Way Ticket*, he chooses to place *Irish Seed-Potatoes* with a poignant ending, remembering the ships that brought Irish immigrants fleeing the Great Famine of 1845-1847 to the USA:

Fits this and fits the journeying itself:  
the starving freight of coffin-ships  
and the wasting death of Goll Mac Morna<sup>33</sup>

Reading *From A One Way Ticket* collection we can feel an understated tension and a resigned courage, courage that Woods badly needed to grapple with «the great adventure» - *I am moving into / another kind of bandit country / to learn what happens after forty-five*<sup>34</sup> - that is of crossing the threshold: physical, embodied by the boundaries of his land, Ireland, and intangible or mental, highlighting the crucial role of the unconscious in poetry, as an openness to the beyond, which exceeds the rational and makes the poem itself an inclusive field.

The trip is already under way when we joy Woods with his wife and his son at Tavernelle:

the day moves on and I am come adrift  
To come to in Tavernelle -  
we have made a shift to put our house in order  
buying beds and hoisting home a fridge  
putting a new hose on the butane cooker  
having the water analysed  
replacing broken windows<sup>35</sup>

30 R. W. DASENBROCK, *Poetry and Politics*, in *A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 2003, p. 51.

31 M. WOODS, *Tavernelle di Panicale - Scorpions*, in *Op. cit.*, p. 58.

32 M. WOODS, *Irish Seed-Potatoes*, in *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

33 *Ivi*, p. 74.

34 M. WOODS, *Words From A One Way Ticket*, *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

35 M. WOODS, *Tavernelle di Panicale - Figs*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 54-56.

William Butler Yeats, in a *General Introduction for my Work* (1937), wrote that «a poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria. [...], he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast. He has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete»<sup>36</sup>.

In Umbria Woods finds such a rebirth: *From A One Way Ticket* poetry collection contains much of his personal life and from the late nineties has begun to include much memory of his own and of his ancestors' past because all is reborn in the poet's intention:

There was a moment there I almost caught  
 when I recognized my father in myself  
 not the young man in photographs  
 foot on chair I revolutionary stance  
 but as I see him now  
 looking at me from the mirror  
 as I joke with my son about the motorcycle gobdaws  
 in the fields nearby  
 churning the red earth up

As I think we might have joked  
 reporting on the walkie-talkie  
 about the number of frogs in the irrigation ditch  
 since the coming of the water-snake  
 and gone for walks on the hill above the house  
 or dived for coins in the public pool  
 travelling together through the language  
 hand in hand  
 had we made it to Le Cigne  
 as we made it to the Shelley Banks<sup>37</sup>

I remember this  
 Middle-aged on these Italian steps  
 And understand the down-turn of your mouth  
 Under siege and quizzical  
 Echoed in my own  
 Wondering how in the end we got here

Niall plays in the sunny yard below  
 I bequeath him summer and these sunflowers<sup>38</sup>

36 W. B. YEATS, *General Introduction of my work*, in *Essays and Introductions*, Macmillan, London 1961, p. 509.

37 M. WOODS, *Tavernelle di Panicale - Sunflowers*, in *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

38 *Ivi*, p. 64.

Gone is the tone of «we carry on because there is no choice» and this evolution of Woods poetic stance is accompanied by a new music and new rhythm. In Seamus Heaney's words, although in another context, he is «swimming with the current of its form rather than against it»<sup>39</sup>.

There is, in fact, in his poems a wonderfully defiant Irishness about the peremptory, «*forty years ago - / or dying for Ireland on the stage in Dublin*»<sup>40</sup>, which draws the whole musical counterpoint of this section up to the level of the lone-witness as traveler. Here Woods takes us back to the colonial days of British occupation when Irishmen worthy of the name, refused to collaborate, to spy, to tell on others.

As Declan Kiberd writes in his *Inventing Ireland*, the example of Samuel Beckett, resident of Paris for most of his adult life, between 1960s-1990s, inspired many Irish poets:

«This is not to say that the authors named - Anthony Cronin, Seamus Heaney, Brendan Kennelly, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Macdara Woods - all endorsed his apparent indifference to society; but it is to suggest that his elevation of the estranged artist as a model had immense implications. It fostered a healthy skepticism about the politicians' embraces, all the more necessary when in 1980 the Taoiseach Charles Haughey announced the foundation of *Aosdána*<sup>41</sup>, a self-electing élite of about 150 artists, who would have a basic income guaranteed by the state as well as the prestige of membership. What followed, however, was in the case of many artists a remorseless privatization of experience, and an art which located its interest in the pathology of the alienated individual. This may explain why so many Irish poets in the period fought shy of politics and of social issues».<sup>42</sup>

What is most significant here is that *From A One Way Ticket* poetry collection could be divided ideally in two parts: the first with poems that give the image of the fleeing poet who crosses the threshold of his home and the borders of his land, in a kind of voluntary exile, in search of new spaces and a new beginning. The poet inhabits a labyrinth, the impassability of which he overcomes by presenting us with his imagined equivalent of it. It is here that we encounter the vivid potency of shifting gravity, from a past that might have gone unnoticed, to a present that is charged with hope as much as with a hovering wraith. In the second part of the collection the poet stops physically in «*here / the macchia remains / my sun-dried / underwater garden / the mountain too an island / full of voices / until walking over / all these hills / and keeping silence / itself appears invented purpose / that we survive / keep faith*»<sup>43</sup> while mental historical connections continue and through metaphors and metonymies, he is «in search of a state».<sup>44</sup> Umbria is the place where he knows comfort, love, and that sense of at homeness of which Woods writes. In this sense, what he is describing is a generic phenomenon, one described by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, as

39 S. HEANEY, *The Makings of a Music*, The Kenneth Allott lectures, Liverpool University 1978, in *Preoccupations*, 61-2, Faber & Faber, New York 1980.

40 M. WOODS, *Tavernelle di Panicale - Sunflowers*, in *Op. cit.*, p. 64.

41 From *aos* meaning a "band" and *dána* either "artistic" or "audacious". *Aosdána* is an Irish association of artists, created on the initiative of a group of writers with support from the Arts Council of Ireland that operates under no direct political constraints. Membership, which is by invitation from current members, is limited to 250 individuals. Macdara Woods was a member of *Aosdána* since 1986.

42 D. KIBERD, *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of Modern Nation*, Vintage, London 1996, p. 584.

43 M. WOODS, *Pensando Leopardi*, in *Op. cit.*, p. 78.

44 F. O'CONNOR, *In Search of a State. Catholics in Northern Ireland*, Blackstaff Press, Belfast 1993, p. 290.

the «tranquillized self-assurance, “being-at-home” with all its obviousness»<sup>45</sup>.

For Heidegger, the centrality of dwelling is part of this sense of at homeness, and indeed it looks good for Woods the statement that «we believe we are at home in the immediate circle of beings. That which is, is familiar, reliable, ordinary»<sup>46</sup>, such is their connection on this issue. The loss of such groundedness has long been seen as a concomitant of modernism and of postmodernism, and the question has been posed as to the nature of this «dwelling, this at-homeness, which we, in modernity, are said to lack»<sup>47</sup> and also of the related term «not-being-at-home»<sup>48</sup>.

In Woods’s poetic view, the new place is no more just an idea, but mind, thinking, and crossing the threshold all combine to create this concrete vision of a real place, a space of literature in Blanchot’s term, from where the old place can be observed, understood, and critiqued<sup>49</sup>:

The orioles return  
 each year  
 to light among the figs  
 ... *and I*  
*have come so far*  
*from the sea*  
 blue sloes line the ditch  
 oak apples strew the path  
 and all I have done  
 with my summer days  
 is walk and think and walk -  
 if nothing  
 comes of nothing  
 can nothing come of this  
 nothing come of nothing  
*and let there be music left*<sup>50</sup>.

45 M. HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1996, p. 189.

46 M. HEIDEGGER, *The Origins of the Work of Art*, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by A. Hofstadter, Harper, New York 1975, p. 53.

47 J. YOUNG, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 125.

48 M. HEIDEGGER, *Being*, *Op. cit.*, p. 177.

49 M. BLANCHOT, *The Space of Literature*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1982.

50 M. WOODS, *Pensando*, in *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

