

And so we come to the last two presentations of this survey of 20th Century Poetry. In this session we shall consider a little history: some of the events in Ireland from the Easter uprising to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, and the epidemic of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) of the 1980s and 1990s. The title of the session comes from the Tony Kushner's 1993 play *Angels in America*. The painting by Paul Klee was completed just before he died. It looks back to his 1914 visit to Tunis and looks ahead to his death.

The end of a millennium is an appropriate time to consider what is of lasting significance, to look at our transient life from the viewpoint of eternity.

**Constantine P. Cavafy
(1863-1933)**

Born in Alexandria to Greek parents, Cavafy worked in the offices of the Ministry of Public Works, and wrote poems for his friends. These were only collected and published after his death. They deal with history, philosophy and homosexual love.

ΙΘΑΚΗ

Σὰ βγεῖς στὸν πηγαμιὸ γιὰ τὴν Ἰθάκη,
νὰ εὐχέσαι νᾶναι μακρὺς ὁ δρόμος,
γεμάτος περιπέτειες, γεμάτος γνώσεις.
Τοὺς Λαιστρυγόνες καὶ τοὺς Κύκλωπας,
τὸ θυμωμένο Ποσειδῶνα μὴ φοβάσαι

Portrait by Thalia-Flora Karavia, 1926

We begin the session with a poem translated from the Greek.

It is a poem about the journey of Odysseus from Troy to his home in Ithaka. This voyage, initially described in Homer's *Odyssey* has permeated the literature of the 20th Century. Pound's *Cantos* began with it; James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* moved the events to modern times; the incident of Odysseus talking to Tiresias recurs in Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Cavafy's poem asserts the idea that though the goal is important the journey is life's actual reward.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.
Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

Notes: The Laistrygonians are giant cannibals who supposedly lived in the Eastern part of Sicily. They destroyed some of Ulysses' ships, killed some of his crew and drank their blood.



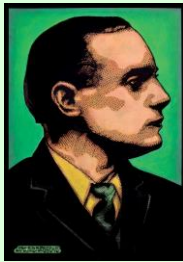
This video presents Ithaka as read by Sean Connery with music by Vangelis:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1n3n2Ox4Yfk>

Easter Rising, 1916

Led by the schoolmaster Patrick Pearce and the union-leader James Connolly, Irish nationalists seized the General Post Office and other key locations in downtown Dublin. The British overcame the rebels using thousands of soldiers and extensive shelling. The leaders of the rebellion were executed. Among them was John MacBride, the husband of Maude Gonne, and Thomas MacDonagh, a poet and teacher. The rebellion cemented the desire for Irish independence, which came to fruition in 1922.



Britain over-reacted to the Easter Rising, destroyed most of downtown Dublin in order to arrest the small handful of revolutionaries that had staged the rebellion. The rising and the over-reaction of the British enhanced the desire of the Irish for Independence. The Irish Republican party Sinn Féin (“We Ourselves”) won a landslide victory in the 1918 elections. The Irish War of Independence broke out in 1919. This ended in a truce in 1921, and the Irish Free State was created in 1922. Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom. After the partition, the status of the Catholic population in Northern Ireland remained unresolved.



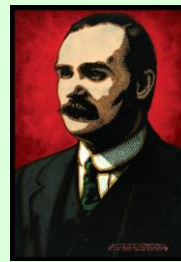
Patrick Pearce



Constance Markievicz



Thomas MacDonagh



James Connolly

MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearce
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.



Read by Jim Norton

The portraits are from posters designed by Jim Fitzpatrick:

<http://www.jimfitzpatrick.com/product-category/irish-revolutionaries/>

Yeats poem was written at the time of the Easter Rising but was not published until the War of Independence had begun.

The poem was shortlisted in the 2016 competition Poem for Ireland organized by the Irish Broadcasting Company *Raidió Teilifís Éireann* for Ireland's centenary celebration of the Easter Uprising. The winner of the competition was a sonnet by Seamus Heaney about the death of his mother in 1984:

When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
From each other's work would bring us to our senses.
So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

The most enduring lines of Yeats' poem are those which (in varying format) end three of the verses:

All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

In the second verse

That woman - Constance Markievicz. Rode to harriers – hare hunting. Her death sentence was commuted.

This man – Patrick Pearse, the acknowledged leader of the rebellion

This other – Thomas MacDonagh

This other man – Major John MacBride. Maud Gonne's husband (though they were estranged at the time of the rebellion). He had fought against the British in the Boer War.

The ending to Yeats' poem mentions "wherever green is worn." Wearing green had been a symbol of Irish Nationalism since the failed rebellion in 1798. The song *The Wearing of the Green* is a street ballad from that time. In the 19th century the British attempted to ban both the wearing of green and the displaying of the shamrock.

Auden's Evaluation of Yeats (Kenyon Review, 1948)

However diverse our fundamental beliefs may be, the reaction of most of us to all that occult is, I fancy, the same: how on earth, we wonder, could a man of Yeats's gifts take such nonsense seriously?

... he transformed a certain kind of poem, the occasional poem, from being either an official performance of impersonal virtuosity or a trivial *vers de société* into a serious reflective poem of at once personal and public interest.

Yeats released regular stanzaic poetry, whether reflective or lyrical, from iambic monotony

o o o / o / / o / o o o /
 I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
 o o / o o / o o / o / o /
 And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made

Auden provided a critical evaluation of Yeats in a 1948 essay.

His comments on the "occasional poem" are pertinent both to Yeats' *September, 1916*, and his own *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*.

Occasional poems are what poet laureates are asked to write to commemorate an event. Yeats was not a poet laureate and his occasional poems were far more personal than those commissioned by those in power.

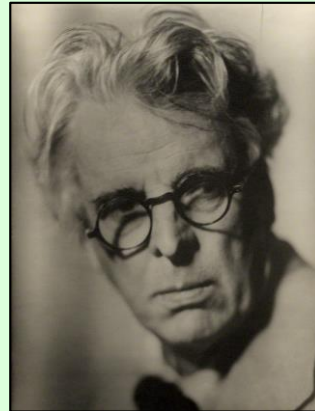
The recording shows how Yeats accentuated the stresses in his poetry.

In Memory of WB Yeats

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
 The brooks were frozen, the airports
 almost deserted,
 And snow disfigured the public statues

You were silly like us; your gift
 survived it all:
 The parish of rich women, physical
 decay,
 Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into
 poetry.

Earth, receive an honoured guest:
 William Yeats is laid to rest.
 Let the Irish vessel lie
 Emptied of its poetry.



Howard Coster 1935

Memorable Speech

Of the many definitions of poetry, the simplest is still the best: “memorable speech.” That is to say, it must move our emotions, or excite our intellect, for only that which is moving or exciting is memorable, and the stimulus is the audible spoken word or cadence, to which in all its power of suggestion and incantation we must surrender, as we do when talking to an intimate friend. We must, in fact, make exactly the opposite kind of mental effort to that we make in grasping other verbal uses, for in the case of the latter the aura of suggestion round every word through which, like the atom radiating lines of force through the whole of space and time, it becomes ultimately a sign for the sum of all possible meanings, must be rigorously suppressed and its meaning confined to a single dictionary one. For this reason the exposition of a scientific theory is easier to read than to hear. No poetry on the other hand, which when mastered is not better heard than read is good poetry.

(preface to *The Poet's Tongue*, W. H. Auden and John Garrett, 1935)

Auden's poem makes the comment

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

Auden is saying that poetry gives voice to what is happening but does not itself make anything happen.

This slide quotes an excerpt from the preface to an anthology of poetry published in 1935. Here Auden emphasizes the auditory essence of poetry. But what about the claim that poetry makes nothing happen? Perhaps Auden is underestimating the worth of poetry? By giving expression to ideas and feelings can it not change things?

Heather McHugh (1948-)

Born in San Diego, raised in Virginia and educated at Harvard, McHugh has published several books of poetry, taught writing at many US universities, and served as the chancellor of the Academy of American Poets (1999-2005). She was awarded a McArthur Genius Grant in 1999.



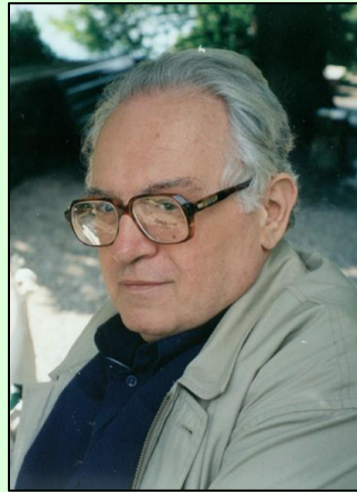
We might briefly consider the nature of poetry? As well as Auden's "a way of happening, a mouth," we have considered Frost's "that which is lost in translation"

Heather McHugh will provide us with another view.

**Fabio Doplicher
(1938-2003)**

Born in Trieste, he worked mainly in Rome as a poet and dramatist. He was a founder of the Centro Internazionale Poesia della Metamorfosi in Fano (on the Adriatic), which worked to introduce foreign poetry to Italy.

*se preparati non siete a morire
non tentate il canto.*
(if you are not prepared to die, you
should not try to sing.)



McHugh's poem *What He Thought* describes an exchange-visit to Rome. American poets get to meet Italian poets and compare notes. In a restaurant on the marketplace of the Campo dei Fiori, a question is posed "What's poetry?"



This photograph shows the Campo dei Fiori.

**Giordano Bruno
(1548-1600)**

Born near Naples, he entered the Dominican order but was accused of heresy and forced to flee. He taught philosophy at various cities in Europe, supporting the Copernican view of the universe but having a more mystical view of physics than other scientists of his era. He was arraigned before the Roman Inquisition, found guilty of heresy and burned at the stake in the Campo dei Fiori.

God is no
fixed point or central government but rather is
poured in waves, through all things.

The statue to Giordano Bruno in Campo Fiori was erected in 1889, after the Church had ceded its temporal power over the city of Rome. Even then there was much opposition.

**Grave of Robert
Louis Stevenson
(1850-1894)
Samoa**

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
*Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor; home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*

Now we shall turn to two poems by Philip Larkin.

The first is entitled *This Be the Verse*, a quotation from a famous poem by Robert Louis Stevenson.

This Be the Verse

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.

But they were fucked up in their turn
By fools in old-style hats and coats,
Who half the time were soppy-stern
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

Winston
Churchill
1912



Harold
Pinter



Larkin's poem presents a view of life less enthusiastic than Stevenson's. The poem is read by Harold Pinter – whose plays have been described as “comedies of menace.” Poetry may provide a way for us to let out our frustrations with life.

Aubades

Monségur, Cathar citadel
defeated in 1244 during
the Albigensian Crusade



Aubades are dawn-songs (French *aube*). They derive from the troubadours and serve various purposes. Most simply, they could be a thanksgiving for the new day or for the wonderful night that has just passed. In terms of the traditions of courtly love, they could denote the need for the lover to wake up and leave. As such, they could also be very mournful songs describing the end of love. Finally, they could consider the problems that need to be faced in the new day.

The second Larkin poem is entitled *Aubade*, a type of poem that goes back to the Middle Ages.

Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
 In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
 Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
 The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
 Work has to be done.
 Postmen like doctors go from house to house.



Tom Courtenay
 (*Pretending to Be Me*)

Larkin statue, Hull Railway
 Station, Martin Jennings, 2010

The illustration shows the Larkin statue at the Hull railway station. Jennings has a similar statue of John Betjeman in St Pancras station in London. The Larkin statue stems from one of Larkin's famous poems about travelling by train, *The Whitsun Weddings*.

The poem *Aubade* concerns the fear of death

This is a special way of being afraid
 No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
 That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
 Created to pretend we never die,
 And specious stuff that says no rational being
 Can fear a thing it cannot feel, not seeing
 That this is what we fear – no sight, no sound,
 No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
 Nothing to love or link with,
 The anaesthetic from which none come round.

There is little one can do to counter this sometimes pervasive fear. One goes back to work. The treatment might lie in talking with others.

Work has to be done.
 Postmen like doctors go from house to house

Poetry is another way of talking to each other.

Derek Walcott
(1930-)

Born in St Lucia in the Caribbean, Walcott initially trained as a painter. However, poetry soon became his defining art. His epic *Omeros* (1990) is a retelling of some of the episodes of Homer's *The Iliad* set in the Caribbean. Walcott won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992. He is currently the Professor of Poetry at Essex University.

Walcott died about two weeks ago. The 20th Century saw the loss of the European Empires. Colonies exploited by European powers gained their freedom and began to pursue their own national cultures. Saint Lucia, previously controlled first by France and then by Britain became a sovereign state in 1979. Often the cultures of new nations combined indigenous and colonial sources. Walcott's *Omeros* looks at the inhabitants of the Island of St. Lucia through the eyes of the Ancient Greek poetry, using some of the forms used by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*.

Notes for the poem are presented on the website

<http://academics.eckerd.edu/facultywiki/index.php/OMEROS:HOME>

Omeros

And now the villagers emerged from the green shade
of the almonds and wax-leaved manchineels, for the face-off
that Hector wanted. Achilles walked off and waited

The selection recited from the poem alludes to *The Iliad* of Homer. Hector, son of Priam and greatest warrior of the Trojans, kills Patroclus, the friend of Achilles. Achilles kills Hector and drags his body behind his chariot around the walls of Troy.

In the poem many stories intertwine with that of Achilles and Hector. The old colonial society in St Lucia is considered through Major Plunkett, a pensioned army officer who was wounded during World War II and his wife Maud. Helen worked as their maid. And the poem describes the journeys of the author Derek Walcott around the world – a modern *Odyssey*. Many different stories from history are also narrated, e.g. the 1782 Battle of the Saintes wherein the British fleet defeated the French fleet near St Lucia.

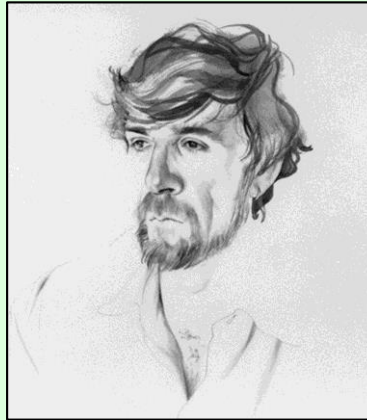
Walcott's poem uses *terza rima*. This is the style of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The classic format uses three-line stanzas with a rhyme-scheme that follows the sequence aba bcb cdc ... Italian is much easier to rhyme than English. Walcott often does not link rhymes between stanzas. He also uses slant rhymes, and often lets the rhyme scheme become irregular.

The recording has been excerpted from a BBC program:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01b9nbd>

**Thom Gunn
(1929-2004)**

Born in Gravesend, Gunn studied literature at Cambridge University. In 1954 he emigrated to the United States with his lover Mike Kitay, with whom he stayed until his death. Gunn enthusiastically took up the bohemian gay life of sex and drugs in San Francisco. His book *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992) was an elegy for all his friends who had died during the AIDS epidemic



Portrait by Dan Bachardy, 1968

Gunn died at age 75 years from “acute polysubstance abuse.” Though he enjoyed rough sex with numerous partners right up to the end of his life, he did not develop AIDS.

The first cases of AIDS in the US were reported in 1981 – five homosexual men developed a rare form of pneumonia caused by a fungus *Pneumocystis carinii*. Other cases were soon found – some with pneumonia and some with a skin lymphoma called Kaposi's sarcoma. All had a deficiency of the immune system. Over the next decade the number of cases rose dramatically, especially among homosexual men and intravenous drug users. The viral etiology of the disease was demonstrated by 1985. The first treatments did not become available until 1987. The book *And the Band Played On* (1987) by Randy Shilts, a journalist with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, documented the indifference of society and government to the epidemic. Many considered the disease a divine punishment for the sins of homosexual. Shilts died of AIDS complications in 1994.

The Man with Night Sweats

I wake up cold, I who
Prospered through dreams of heat
Wake to their residue,
Sweat, and a clinging sheet.



Death as a Skeleton
Ligier Richier, c 1550

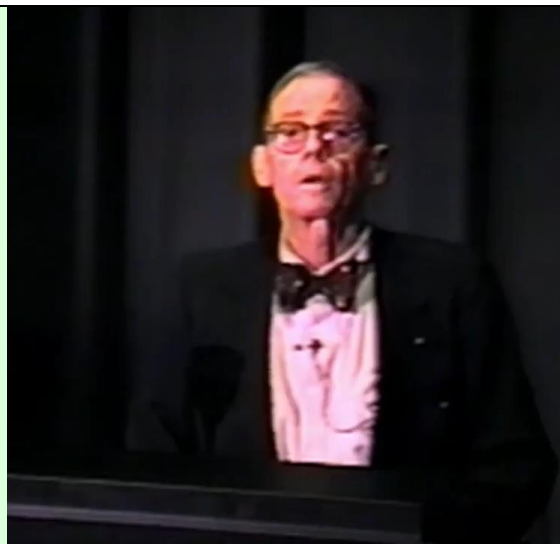


Gunn's poem describes the failure of the body that occurs in AIDS. No longer does it fight off infections; no longer does it heal itself. Everything seems futile.

The illustration shows a 16th Century sculpture of Death. The style is *écorché* (flayed). The flesh has decayed and only the bones remain intact. This illustration was used on the cover of Gunn's 1992 book which shared its title with this poem.

A Downward Look

James
Merrill



James Merrill was not as fortunate as Thom Gunn. He died from complications of AIDS in 1995. His poem *A Scattering of Salts* serves as a valediction. The reading was in 1994

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDfpgZCWQac>

A musical setting of this poem is available at:

<http://www.daronhagen.com/store/merrill-songs>

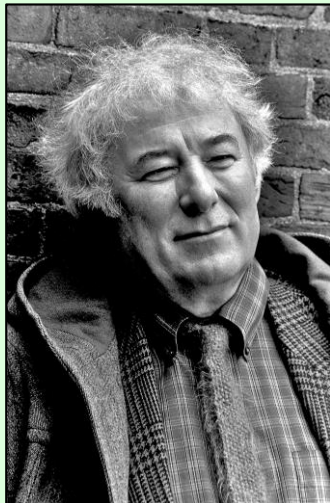
The Troubles (1969-1998)

Bloody Sunday
Derry, 1972



In the late 1960s the Catholic population in Northern Ireland began to demand equal rights with the Protestant majority, urging an end to discrimination in housing and employment. Riots began in 1969, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary reacted violently. The British government sent troops to help keep the peace. Many years of rioting, murder, bombings, and hunger-strikes followed. One of the worst episodes was Bloody Sunday when British troops fired on unarmed demonstrators in Derry. The Troubles ended with the Good Friday Belfast Agreement in 1998.

At the end of this session we return to Ireland. The Easter Rising had occurred in 1916 and the Irish Free State was founded in 1922. Problems in Northern Island simmered until the 1960s when *The Troubles* began.



Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)

Born in County Derry in Northern Ireland, he went to St. Columb's College, and then to Queen's University in Belfast. After teaching for a while in Belfast, he moved to Glanmore Cottage on the Synge estate in Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland. His poetry is concerned with family, with Ireland, and with the imagination. He received the Nobel Prize in 1995.

The English-speaking poets who have been awarded the Nobel Prize are: Kipling (1907), Yeats (1923), Eliot (1948), Walcott (1992), Heaney (1995), Pinter (2005), Dylan (2016)

Seamus Heaney was born Catholic in Northern Ireland and was acutely aware of the sectarian conflicts that led to the Troubles. However it was difficult to speak directly of these. Only by displacing the problem to a distant time and place could he gain some understanding of the pervasive need of human being to punish those who are different.



Windeby I

Discovered in 1952, in a peat bog near Windeby in Northern Germany, this body appeared to have been blindfolded and sacrificed. The body was initially thought to be female but new evidence has indicated that it was male.

Heaney was fascinated by the discovery of several mummified bodies in peat bogs in Northern Europe. These bog bodies have been dated back many different eras, some as early as 1500 BCE. The body illustrated was dated to near 0 CE. At the time of Heaney's interest the body was considered to be female. More recent evidence indicates the gender was male. What was initially considered a blindfold may actually have been a headband.



Little adulteress,
before they punished you
you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeur
of your brain's exposed
and darkening combs,
your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones:



I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,
who would connive
in civilised outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

Heaney uses the bog body to lament the way in which human beings act against those who break the rules. Such was the state of Ireland during the Troubles. Catholics and Protestants each set up closed societies and severely punished those who broke ranks.



The final poem of this session is about the West Coast of Ireland. The photograph shows the Flaggy Shore. At one point the shore is a thin strip of land separating the sea from Lough Muree.

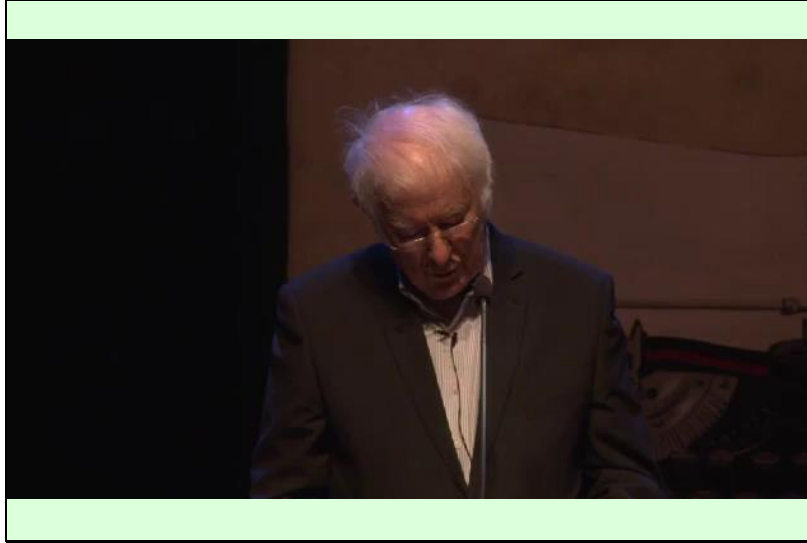


Lough Muree and its swans. The lough is a salt-water lagoon separated from Galway bay by the Flaggy Shore.

The two black swans are an anomaly. They are native to Australia. Their presence on Lough Muree is probably due to their escape from a nearby zoo.

Some photographs at:

<http://www.clivenunn.com/cn/003729.html>



Video taken in 2013 just before he died

<https://vimeo.com/73559117>



We conclude this survey of poetry in the 20th Century with a painting by Mark Rothko. We have tried to look at the poetry from a distance. From that vantage everything becomes simplified. Rothko's fields of color give a serenity that comes from rendering experience into essence.