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Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Global Village

Ailbhe Ní Ghearbhuigh

The city demands our attention. The foghorn that sounds at the opening of 'Global Village' announces the immediacy of 'this morning' in New York. Sure, the same foghorn has echoed throughout history too, it evokes arrivals and tired, poor, huddled masses. But here, the sound blasts us into the present: 'the sense of being right there on the spot'. It is difficult to escape that feeling in New York, better to embrace it.

The bedlam of living is documented throughout 'The Hudson Letter'; in this section the tumult is both local and international. Even events at a geographic remove acquire the illusion of proximity here, in their compilation for the *McNeil-Lehrer News Hour*. If there is unrest in the world beyond the apartment, it seems to augment the sense of introspection in the poet.

There is an intimacy in the letter form, as we eavesdrop on Mahon's unguarded musings, the gentle teasing of the lover to whom he writes, and his sardonic assessment of himself. The poem is, to some extent, a portrait of the artist in the city, an impression of the poet in reflective mode amidst the din of Lower Manhattan.

The familiarity of New York - a cityscape known to us forever, seemingly, from screens small and large - results in a kind of sensory overload, a hyperrealism, creating 'virtual realities in the mind'. Does anything exist in the absence of its being perceived? The poet considers Bishop Berkeley's assertion that 'no existence, natural or real, apart/from its being perceived by the understanding.' Máirtín Ó Direáin wrote about Berkeley's ideas, too, but in relation to his homeplace of Aran, the very rocks of which may fade from existence without anyone to behold them. Unlike Inis Mór, nothing is in such jeopardy in New York: everything exists because it is observed and grasped, haggled over and consumed.

Like many others, I was 'an amateur immigrant' over there for a while. And like Mahon, I lived just a couple of blocks from the Hudson, though I was there twenty years later and lived much further north, in West Harlem. The closest I used to get to the Hudson was taking the 1 train as it slowly rose from subterranean grot to daylight, apartment blocks and glimpses of river around 125th Street.

I could tell you a hundred insipid anecdotes that would hardly distil the essence of the place, nor capture its 'clear existential light'. And although I wouldn't want 'to pen yet one more craven European/paean to the States', that is not to say I haven't. I'll join the chorus of those who proclaim New York a place like no other. Reading 'Global Village' I recall my own sense of serene aloneness - and occasional self-consciousness - as I sat with a notebook and pen in Bryant Park, in downtown cafés or in my own studio uptown trying to generate a poem, 'to draw some voltage one more time.'