Looking Back: A Review of *Company: A Chosen Life* and *Smashing the Piano* by John Montague

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“A Chosen Life is the first part of a memoir and, like memory itself, it weaves in and out of chronology. But be patient and, hopefully, all or nearly all will be revealed. I have assumed a certain familiarity with the streets of Dublin, Paris and the Bay Area in those hopeful days of the 1960s.”

—John Montague (Preface to Company: A Chosen Life)

Despite what John Montague writes in the preface to the first installment of his memoir trilogy, there seems to be a certain order to his personal journey. While the author doesn’t write his tales in chronological order, he does try to weave in thoughts that are important to his career and entertaining to the reader. Similar to other writers of memoir from near his Dublin circle, Montague attempts to relay the trials, the humor, the writers, and the stories from a bygone age. His type of order is driven by memory and the tales he spins are collected as he remembers them. Some are more important than others and most hold a poignancy that relates to writers from all parts of the world.

Montague’s experiences in 1950’s and ‘60’s Dublin, Paris and parts of America are in an order naturally dictated by the author while always relying primarily on the Irish use of gossip and storytelling. Montague is often telling tales that are fantastical in nature and have an exaggerated truth to them, but sometimes they also convey meaning about writers and their work and show glimpses of sincerity and reflection. Montague has been writing for the last 40 years and his two latest books contain memories which are molded by the author’s personal thoughts and desires. The more personal the reflections are, the better the writing becomes. Company: A Chosen Life and Smashing the Piano hold memoir and poetry respectively, but they often overlap in showing a poet returning to youth in order to understand later life. While the writing in both collections is sometimes uneven, the thoughts exude a sense of desire and longing on quite a personal level.

In Smashing the Piano, Montague is looking back over an
Ireland that he has experienced first hand. Many poems involve family ("The Family Piano," "Still Life, With Aunt Brigid" and "Prayers for My Daughters") or allusions to writers ("The Two Seáns," "Araby, 1984" and "The Well-wrought Urn") in order to convey a feeling of reminiscence and understanding of influence in life. A return to previous times is a common theme in these poems and the first poem in the collection, "Paths," contemplates a forgotten past.

Two gardens, the front
for beauty, the back
for use. Sleepless now,
I wander through both
and it is summer again,
the long summers of youth,
as I trace small paths
in a trance of growth:
flowers pluck at my coat
as I bend down to help
or speak to my aunt
whose calloused hands
cressing the plants
are tender as a girl’s. (12)

This last stanza is telling of the way the rest of the collection will take shape. There are many gardens in this collection and the implications of such symbolism leaves the reader to many contemplations of old vs. new, age vs. youth, and understanding through trial. Just as Company: A Chosen Life moves in and out of significant occurrences, the poems in Smashing the Piano use these times in history to push for a move towards an ageless understanding of travels though life. The fields outside of homes, the discussions in bars, and the family near the writer’s heart all play a significant role in the cultivation of an author’s life. The people that he talks about between many of these pages show the reader a kind of relevance in becoming a poet and critic influenced by many worlds of desire and fulfillment.

In Company: A Chosen Life, this influence is often seen in the anecdotal style of Montague’s stories about people like Brendan
Montague skips over passages about Berryman and Roethke quickly and devotes much attention to Brendan Behan, telling anecdotes that have been written before in biographies and other memoirs of the time (e.g. Remembering How We Stood by John Ryan and Dead As Doornails by Anthony Cronin). One way in which Montague differs from both Ryan and Cronin is that he dwells on certain aspects of his surroundings in order to bring importance to the experiences. John Ryan often relays simple ideas of the time and lets profundity speak for itself. Anthony Cronin describes a deeper analysis of similar events, but alienates the reader from ever fully entering. I will give credit to Montague for taking on a larger scheme. Since he has lived in many more places, his overall experience is mobile and therefore his writing must encompass more space. Only the next two installments of his memoir will allow us to examine this idea further.

Still, Company: A Chosen Life is best when Montague writes about teaching new friends about the Irish Sweeney Myth or laments the competitiveness of his nature or comments on the changes in Ireland. There is something quite meaningful in the way he examines his life and links it back even to his first book of poems. The stories about being a struggling writer are far more interesting than those about who he knew and when he knew them. For example, in the fourth chapter about the Dolman Press, Montague writes,

I did not fulfill their new expectations of an Irish poet—expectations that I, by helping to revive Kavanagh, had unwittingly encouraged. While celebrating country themes and imagery, I had hoped that succeeding Irish poets would move on, embracing personal, urban and indeed international subjects, as Patrick had tried to do himself. It did not occur to me that Kavanagh’s rural themes would harden into a formula, to which a new generation would be expected to hew. (80)
In this passage we see a certain ego in Montague’s understanding of Kavanagh, but also a writer’s thoughts on change, history, and writing style: styles which he often returns to in Smashing the Piano.

It is interesting to read these newest books side by side because both are most often attempting to relay thoughts on innocence and experience, life changes, and overall reflections about multiple instances which construct a life. Montague explains further in “The Family Piano.”

My cousin is smashing the piano
Grandfather installed in the parlour
to hoop his children together.
It came in a brake from Omagh,
but now lists, splintered and riven.

My cousin is smashing the piano
where they gathered to sing in chorus
‘My Bonny Lies Over The Ocean’
beneath the fading family portraits
of Melbourne Tom, Brooklyn John.

My cousin is smashing the piano
where buxom Aunt Winifred played
old tunes from scrolled songbooks,
serenely pressing the pedals, and singing
‘Little Brown Jug’, ‘One Man Went to Mow’,

Or (My cousin is smashing the piano)
hammered out a jig, ‘The Irish Washerwoman’,
while our collie dog lifted its long nose
and howled to high heaven:
John Cage serenading Stockhausen! (70-71)

These stanzas show a historical influence on the writer as well as the importance of change and remembrance. The reality of the speed of life and the stories that are contained therein show an initial move away from family relations followed by a return after aging. Images are commonly old tunes and worn pictures, people of the past and change in the future. The destruction of something
with musical, personal, and historical meaning leaves thoughts of flight and return, questions and regrets.

Montague explores his life and its expression leaks out little by little with each poem and each tale. Both *Company: A Chosen Life* and *Smashing the Piano* complement each other quite well, but they also stand apart as a memoir of an age and a new collection of poetry. Montague's career has spanned many years and his poetry has been highly regarded as some of the finest in 20th Century Irish letters, but it seems that his insights into writing and reflection are the best parts of both books. Montague's personal ideals are evident in his poetic style and his pondersome thoughts giving us an idea as to why and how he has sustained such a long career. Montague is now looking back and recording a life in two very distinct ways; a notion which is also evident in the preface to *Smashing the Piano*. Montague writes,

Fierce lyric truth,
Sought since youth,
Grace my aging
As you did my growing,
Till time engraves
My final face. (9)

Montague then quotes King Lear, ('Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief') showing not only his desire to write with profound poetic diction, but also to relay the experiences of emotion in happy times and in sad, in youth and in old age. The cyclical nature of Montague's writing shows a finality in the stages of life and a writer who depends on a public who remembers and relates to him and his writing.