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Irish self-portraits: the artist in curved mirrors

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# "Random fragments of autobiography": Objects of the Self in Derek Mahon's poetry

Marion Naugrette-Fournier

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- 1 Given the somewhat discreet and secretive nature of the Northern Irish contemporary poet Derek Mahon, the mere notion of self-portrait, or even of autobiography, might seem indeed remote, or at least very much out of tune with his poetic preoccupations. "Looking for Derek Mahon", even in his own poems, is no small task, all the more so as he notoriously "maintains an almost Beckettian silence in relation to his work", as Gerald Dawe has ironically pointed out in his article entitled "Derek Mahon: Keeping the Language Efficient"<sup>1</sup> in 2006. Dawe even goes further in comparing the "shadowy presence" of Mahon in a photograph to the elusive profile of film director Alfred Hitchcock<sup>2</sup>. If Hitchcock was dubbed "the great director of filmic suspense", likewise could not Derek Mahon be dubbed "the great director of poetic suspense"<sup>3</sup>? However, in 2012 Mahon published a body of selected prose essays, some of them being book reviews in the same vein as his other prose work, *Journalism*, previously published in 1996<sup>4</sup>, but with a significant change indicated at the very beginning, in the *Author's Note*: "It could even be read as *random fragments of autobiography*. As it took shape I realized it was starting to look like *a book of memoirs*."<sup>5</sup> This, to our knowledge, is the first time that the word "autobiography" has ever been mentioned by Mahon<sup>6</sup>, and even more so the unprecedented phrase "a book of memoirs": is *Selected Prose* Mahon's long-awaited autobiographical *magnum opus*? However, we may notice that these "random fragments of autobiography" are *prose* fragments, and not fragments written *in verse*, which is typical of the autobiographical genre itself, which tends to be mainly written in prose, as Philippe Lejeune defines it in his seminal work entitled *L'Autobiographie en France: "Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité"*<sup>7</sup>. If we take a closer look at *Selected Prose*, and see if it matches Lejeune's criteria for the autobiography as a genre, we might indeed concur with Mahon's own words and infer from our study that we are indeed dealing with "*fragments of autobiography*"<sup>8</sup> only, and not with a "proper"

autobiography *per se*, that is according to Lejeune's definition of autobiography with a "retrospective (...) narrative", implying a certain length and continuity that are to be found in early examples of autobiography such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* in 1782.

## "The Poetry Nonsense: A Docudrama"

- 2 However, this retrospective type of narrative is not to be found in the essays or book reviews making up the bulk of Mahon's *Selected Prose*, except perhaps in the essay entitled "*The Poetry Nonsense: A Docudrama*"<sup>9</sup>, which is a kind of guidebook, or rather a literary voice-over commenting on the making-of of *Derek Mahon: The Poetry Nonsense*<sup>10</sup>, a documentary on Derek Mahon himself, which was fairly recently made in 2010 by producer and director Roger Greene. In this essay, Mahon plays the autobiographical game by the rules, casting a retrospective outlook on his life as he reviews the different places the team actually went to in order to shoot the documentary landmarks that have all played a crucial role in his life, such as Portrush, Co. Antrim, a famous seaside resort in Northern Ireland where Mahon lived at one point, and where he wrote several poems such as "The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush", "North Wind: Portrush", or "Craigvara House"<sup>11</sup>. The team also shoots in his hometown of Belfast and selects Mahonian key-spots such as Salisbury Avenue off the Antrim Road where he grew up, or the Harland & Wolff shipyard where his father used to work, and also where the *Titanic* was built, a place of both historical and symbolic significance for Mahon. What is interesting in this essay is the subtle merging of several autobiographical layers: the narrator explains the reason why certain locations were chosen and what they mean to him in terms of personal and intellectual development, but by doing so in the course of his narrative he also re-visits these very spots, as they appear not only in the documentary but also in his own memory, prompting him to ponder on more metaphysical reflections on old age and death, "chirpy thoughts" as he ironically calls them:

These chirpy thoughts are prompted by certain *reminiscential*<sup>12</sup> scenes in the docudrama: the West Strand in Portrush, where as a boy I found the skeleton of a seagull and understood, or thought I did, mortality; the Trinity cobbles where I knew so many beautiful people; the London places where for a few years Doreen [his ex-wife] and I, in a *folie à deux*, were hectic and thought ourselves happy<sup>13</sup>.

- 3 But, if this essay may be considered as the closest attempt at autobiographical writing that Mahon has ever produced, let us not forget that it is the film *Derek Mahon: The Poetry Nonsense* that is the pretext for these autobiographical considerations, and not the reverse, and autobiographical as it may be, the film remains what Mahon calls a "*docudrama*", that is a film based on true events, nonetheless presented in a dramatized form, thus implying that there might be gaps in the historical record, as Mahon himself acknowledges in his own essay:

I've often considered, like many another, trying to write *some kind of an autobiography*; but *we remember selectively*, and there's too much to be ashamed of. This film is the nearest I've got and, as I say, it's only *a fraction of the whole*: a cover-up job, even. Nothing about parents, really; nothing about children; nothing about the bad times, of which there were many. I spent five years in New York: nothing, or almost nothing, about New York<sup>14</sup>.

- 4 What is most striking in this sentence is Mahon's obstinate emphasis on the fact that this only attempt at autobiographical writing is a failure, since "it's only a fraction of the

whole: a cover-up job, even". In pointing to the partial and deceitful nature of autobiography ("some kind of an autobiography"), as well as of memory ("we remember selectively"), Mahon underlines the unreliability inherent to the autobiographical genre, which is also true of the memoir genre, as André Gide puts it in his own autobiography *Si le grain ne meurt*: "Les Mémoires ne sont jamais qu'à demi sincères, si grand que soit le souci de vérité: tout est toujours plus compliqué qu'on ne le dit. Peut-être approche-t-on de plus près la vérité dans le roman"<sup>15</sup>. What Gide suggests about the novel, i.e. that we come closer to the truth in a novel, might also be said of poetry, especially in Mahon's case. If Mahon in *Selected Prose* and in the docudrama *The Poetry Nonsense* has failed to abide by the rules of the autobiographical pact Lejeune has described in *Le Pacte Autobiographique*<sup>16</sup>, he may have succeeded better in his poetry, shifting to what Lejeune calls "le pacte fantasmatique", which is an indirect form of the autobiographical pact, inviting the reader to read novels not only as *fictions* relating to some truth of "human nature", but also as *fantasies* revealing individual features<sup>17</sup>. Considering this, we claim that Mahon reveals much more about himself in his poems than in the apparently more "realistic" docudrama and "autobiographical" essay mentioned earlier.

## Self-portrait vs. autobiography: the prism of objects/ subjects

- 5 The "random fragments of autobiography" Mahon was alluding to in his *Author's Note* in *Selected Prose* could in fact be much more adequately applied to the fragmentary nature of poetry, where autobiographical details might be hidden at random, that is without any chronological or pre-arranged order as in a proper autobiography.
- 6 Moreover, as Lejeune remarks in *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, one should be very careful when reading such seemingly lucid allegations on one's own failures as an autobiographer:

Ces déclarations sont donc des ruses peut-être involontaires mais très efficaces: on échappe aux accusations de vanité et d'égoïsme quand on se montre si lucide sur les limites et les insuffisances de son autobiographie; et personne ne s'aperçoit que, par le même mouvement, on étend au contraire le pacte autobiographique, sous une forme indirecte, à l'ensemble de ce qu'on a écrit<sup>18</sup>.

- 7 Mahon, by criticizing his own shortcomings as a *prose* autobiographer, implicitly invites us to give renewed scrutiny to his *verse* writings, which incidentally constitute the main bulk of his *oeuvre*, and to look for autobiographical symptoms hidden in the fragments of his poems, which, fragmentary though they are, can nevertheless be seen as part and parcel of Derek Mahon's poetic *self-portrait*, rather than autobiography. This application of the term "self-portrait" to a body of poems, that is to say to a non-narrative structure, is also in keeping with Michel Beaujour's influential definition of the self-portrait in his work entitled *Miroirs d'encre: Rhétorique de l'autoportrait*: "L'autoportrait se distingue de l'autobiographie par l'absence d'un récit suivi"<sup>19</sup>. According to Beaujour, one of the main criteria for distinguishing between an autobiography and a self-portrait is precisely the distinction between what belongs to narration on the one side—that is autobiography—and what belongs to the realm of analogy, metaphor or even poetry on the other side<sup>20</sup>, a

distinction best exemplified in Michael Riffaterre's definition apropos of Malraux's *Antimémoires*:

Des mémoires peuvent suivre la chronologie ou la logique des évènements; ils sont alors narratifs. Les Antimémoires reposent sur l'analogie (la méthode de surimposition est en elle-même identique à la métaphore); ils sont donc poésie<sup>21</sup>.

- 8 Riffaterre's definition also works perfectly well for poetry, in which analogy and metaphor are key components of the poetic writing process, so we might say that a self-portrait is perhaps best at home when written in verse, as it so heavily relies on analogy and metaphor, two devices essential to poetry.
- 9 If analogy plays such an important part in the elaboration of a self-portrait, we might then cast a new look on Derek Mahon's poems, and especially on the objects that abound in his poetic world, objects that in light of Riffaterre's definition we might consider as projected analogies of Mahon's own self, as he seems to imply in his poem aptly entitled "The Peace of Objects"<sup>22</sup>: "Defined by objects made in our own image, / through them we live our lives". Indeed, there seems to be a kind of mirror effect in the defining power linking objects to the self in Mahon's poetry, where objects are man-made, "in our own image" as he puts it, but where at the same time objects hold a control over one's own lives and mirror one's own selves when they are made, as if there had been some sort of Faustian pact agreed between objects and their human makers. Thus objects would be endowed with the power of retracing the story and evolution of the self at different times, bearing the physical, intellectual, emotional and cultural imprint of the self that created them at that very moment, thus acquiring a privileged status as intimate witnesses to our inner stories, as Mahon describes it in "The Peace of Objects": "They alone watch over our doubtful hours, / our lonely nights and days, / taking the grim colours / of our old dolours, / our unadventurous ways"<sup>23</sup>. "Taking the grim colours / of our old dolours": these beautifully-crafted rhyming lines exemplify the exchange, and even more so the identification at work between objects and the poetic self. The identification is made audible to the reader's ear with the triple end-of-the-line /ours/ rhyme "hours/colours/dolours" and the use of assonance /our/, as if the coloured patina of the endoloured self detached itself from its main body to impregnate objects with the corresponding colour, or mood.

## The defining power of objects or objects shaping the Self/-ves

- 10 The object defines the self as much as the self defines the object, as Mahon implies in his poem entitled "A Bangor Requiem", in which Mahon returns to the Northern Irish cottage of his mother after her death, making a list of her possessions, an inventory of her objects. The mother figure is associated with a consumerist society obsessed with the domination of objects, a society that might be termed as an "object-world" (*un "monde-objet"*), to use Roland Barthes's own words in his article precisely entitled "Le monde-objet"<sup>24</sup>, an "object-world" in which Mahon's mother lived:

[...] for yours  
was an anxious time of nylon and bakelite,  
market-driven hysteria on every radio,

your frantic kitsch decor designed for you  
by thick industrialists and twisted ministers [...] <sup>25</sup>.

11 We do not choose our own objects, they are chosen for us. In this line Mahon criticizes the mass production of domestic artefacts which occurred in the twentieth century, those artefacts giving the impression of reality, but more deeply being just the props of a typical *decor* of the 1950s, hence the mention of "nylon" and "bakelite". These objects corresponded to the preconceived image that "thick industrialists" (and perhaps also "twisted ministers") had of the typical housewife at that time, and to the cultural *horizon d'attente* of those women, this cultural horizon being actually pre-manufactured for them. Thus we may see how Mahon casts a deprecatory glance on his own mother as an individual, who fitted perfectly into the consumerist expectations of her time, buying objects deprived of any singular "aura", as Walter Benjamin <sup>26</sup> would have it, so that those "kitsch" objects defined her socially and personally in a way that she was not aware of.

12 However, the choice remained hers and also set her apart:

[...] and yet  
with your wise monkeys and 'Dresden' figurines,  
your junk chinoiserie and coy pastoral scenes,  
you too were an artist, a rage-for-order freak  
setting against a man's aesthetic of cars and golf  
your ornaments and other breakable stuff <sup>27</sup>.

13 In a way, Mahon's mother is an artist of sorts, even if the objects that define her are "junk", "coy" and "breakable": in purchasing these items she tried to order her domestic space as she saw it fit and proper, for it matched her own perceptions of, not a "Dutch interior" <sup>28</sup> as Mahon terms it, but of a modest, Northern Irish Protestant interior of the fifties, displaying in its arrangement a typically Mahonian obsession: the "rage-for-order", which also applies to him, and is a leitmotiv throughout his poetic work, and even the title of a poem, "Rage for Order" <sup>29</sup>. Through the lens of his mother's portrait, through the description of her belongings, we may have a glimpse of Mahon's own self-portrait hidden in this Dutch-Northern Irish interior which constitutes his matrix as a person and as a poet. Indeed, he sought to escape this maternal matrix, as he indicates in his 2000 interview with Eamon Grennan in the *Paris Review*:

My mother stopped working when she got married. That's what they did then. She became a housewife. She had only her husband and an infant to look after, but she became a housewife and *very house-proud in the obsessive way* that a woman in that position is. It's almost a question of what else she had to do? She'd keep dusting and *keep everything as bright as a new penny*. Of course, this was a bit of a strain on the child, an irritant. In fact, with my mother, no harm to her, *I think it was pathological*. But since little boys are usually rougher than house-proud mothers, there were times I would deliberately do things to be infuriating—*knock over a cup* or something <sup>30</sup>.

14 Mahon's Oedipus complex with his mother focuses on objects and the way to handle them, either to take care of them in an obsessive manner, or to destroy them in as obsessive a manner as the mother's.

15 "House-proud": the term rings a bell, and reminds us of another Oedipian poem by Mahon, "Courtyards in Delft" <sup>31</sup>, influenced by Pieter de Hooch's famous painting *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* (1658):

Oblique light on the trite, on brick and tile—  
Immaculate masonry, and everywhere that  
Water tap, that broom and wooden pail

To keep it so. *House-proud*, the wives  
Of artisans pursue their thrifty lives  
Among scrubbed yards, modest but adequate<sup>32</sup>.

16 In these opening lines, what catches the eye of the reader (or spectator, as it is an ekphrastic poem) is the spate of adjectives or nouns denoting cleanliness: "immaculate", "water tap", "that broom and wooden pail". This cleanliness is also meant as a moral cleanliness, as the phrase goes: "cleanliness is next to godliness", incarnating what Tzvetan Todorov calls "*la valeur attachée à la vie-dans-le-monde* ("*intramondaine*"), *la vie séculière*"<sup>33</sup>, which is characteristic of the 17<sup>th</sup> century protestant Dutch society and is consequently embodied in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch paintings, such as Pieter de Hooch's painting *The Courtyard of a House in Delft*.

17 In the final stanza of the poem, Mahon discloses himself when the lyrical "I" introduced in the painting claims his memory of the very special light radiating in the room, superimposing the scene in the painting and the vivid memory of another interior, craftily confusing the two. This is indeed the most faithful—if fragmentary—self-portrait Mahon has probably ever written:

I lived there as a boy and know the coal  
Glittering in its shed, late-afternoon  
Lambency informing the deal table,  
The ceiling cradled in a radiant spoon.  
I must be lying low in a room there,  
A strange child with a taste for verse [...]<sup>34</sup>.

18 Indeed, we might well surmise that the little child the woman holds by the hand in De Hooch's painting is Mahon as a boy, although it rather looks like a little girl. Moreover, the speaker in the poem locates himself *inside* the house ("I must be lying low in a room there"), which we cannot see in the painting but can only imagine—this interior might as well be in another Dutch painting for all we know, as certain details like "the deal table" seem to indicate. Objects overwhelm the self-portraitical space, and help picturing Mahon's own image in lieu of having a more conventional, physical or intellectual depiction of himself, since Mahon's ekphrastic and self-portraitical poem refers to a painting from which he is *absent*, since he is *inside* "the" house (it might be the house we see in this painting or another, it is an archetype of a house). It is almost as if his own identity were absorbed in/by the objects that surrounded him, as he remarks in the *Paris Review* interview:

I think it was important that I was an only child, an only child whose *best friends were the objects* I've been talking about. [...]. Since there wasn't any hurly-burly of siblings, I had time for the eye to  *dwell on things*, for the brain to  *dream about things*. I could spend an afternoon happily staring. [...]. I'd see other things besides, like a coal delivery, the sort of *pictorial qualities* of coal. That kind of thing—the running of cold water from a kitchen tap, the light. I had time to dwell on these things<sup>35</sup>.

19 The objects present in De Hooch's painting and in Mahon's poem are the true "*objects of the self*", the self's "best friends" but also his poetic "*alter egos*", acting as the synecdoches of the primordial maternal house, the "*alma mater*" in the old sense of the word, which in "A Bangor Requiem" he compares to the cavern in Plato's *Republic*:

The figure in the *Republic* returns to the cave,  
a Dutch interior where cloud-shadows move,  
to examine the intimate spaces, chest and drawer,  
the lavender in the linen, the savings book,  
the kitchen table silent with nobody there<sup>36</sup>.

- 20 "To examine the intimate spaces, chest and drawer": the poet has come back to examine, to penetrate the maternal space embodied by the "chest and drawer", which are emblematic of what Gaston Bachelard in *La Poétique de l'espace* calls "de véritables organes de la vie psychologique secrète":

L'armoire et ses rayons, le secrétaire et ses tiroirs, le coffre et son double fond sont de véritables organes de la vie psychologique secrète. Sans ces "objets" et quelques autres aussi valorisés, notre vie intime manquerait de modèle d'intimité. Ce sont des objets mixtes, des objets-sujets. Ils ont, comme nous, par nous, pour nous, une intimité<sup>37</sup>.

- 21 These objects define our inner mental space and participate to what Michel Beaujour with Jacques Borel (speaking of Du Bellay) names "the function of the *house* as a system for the places of memory", being also "a global metaphor likely to structure a self-portrait"<sup>38</sup>.
- 22 Thus we might conclude that, although Mahon returns to the maternal "cave" to deal with his own self, having in between realized the deceitful nature of the maternal cave as the prisoner who has escaped from the cave in Plato's *Republic* did, he remains unable to detach himself from the shaping power that objects seem to hold on him in terms of identity, even if these objects may be only the "shapes" of real things, as in Plato's allegory of the cave. When Mahon seeks to draw a portrait of himself, he somehow feels compelled to do so through the prism of objects, as the poem "The Bicycle" in his series of poems entitled "Autobiographies" (which actually bear more resemblance to miniature self-portraits) would seem to prove, where the lyrical "I" becomes "half / human, half bike, my life / A series of dips and ridges"<sup>39</sup>. Of course, if the reader looks for a proper autobiography and not for these fragmentary object portraits of the self, he might agree with Derek Mahon's father who kept asking him the following question: "When are you going to give up *the poetry nonsense*?"<sup>40</sup> An embarrassing question to which Mahon finally answered in *Selected Prose* in 2012: "I can answer him now, in my seventieth year, by saying I've finally put it behind me or very nearly. The task is done, and now *I can turn to prose with an easy mind. An easy mind?*"<sup>41</sup>. As usual, one needs to be very careful with this kind of typically Mahonian allegations, especially when his attempt to write "random fragments of autobiography" in prose turns out to be unreliable. If we want to look for a more faithful self-portrait of both the poet and person Derek Mahon, we need on the contrary to go back to the "poetry nonsense", look behind appearances and see what or who lies hidden behind the objects of the self, behind that "epiphanic bike"<sup>42</sup>.

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## NOTES

1. Gerald Dawe, "Derek Mahon: Keeping the Language Efficient", *Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 21 (2006), p. 16.

2. *Ibid.*



3. *Ibid.*
4. Derek Mahon, *Journalism*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 1996.
5. Derek Mahon, *Selected Prose*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2012, p. 11.
6. Except for his series of poems entitled "Autobiographies" (*Collected Poems*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 1999, pp. 91-94).
7. Philippe Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France* (1971), Paris, Armand Colin, 1998, p. 14.
8. Italics mine.
9. Derek Mahon, "The Poetry Nonsense: A Docudrama", in Derek Mahon, *Selected Prose*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2012, pp. 24-33.
10. "Derek Mahon: the Poetry Nonsense" (2009) was funded by the Irish Film Board and the Arts Council under the 'Documenting the Art' series. It was produced and directed by Roger Greene of Caranna Productions, and Donald Taylor Black was the production's Executive Producer.
11. These three poems are to be found in Mahon's *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 1999), p. 97, p. 100 and p. 134. One could also add another crucial poem featuring the same spots, such as Portrush, Portstewart, or Portballintrae: "The Sea in Winter", a poem that evinces different strategies at work as far as self-portrayal is concerned (*Collected Poems*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 1999, pp. 115-117).
12. Italics mine.
13. Derek Mahon, "The Poetry Nonsense: A Docudrama", in Derek Mahon, *Selected Prose*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2012, pp. 30-31.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 31. Italics mine.
15. André Gide, *Si le grain ne meurt*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. « Folio », 1972, p. 278.
16. Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Paris, Seuil, Poétique, 1975, 1996.
17. Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Paris, Seuil, Poétique, 1975, 1996, p. 42.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre: Rhétorique de l'autoportrait*, Paris, Seuil, Poétique, 1980, p. 8.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
21. Michael Riffaterre, *Essais de stylistique structurale*, Paris, Flammarion, 1971, p. 296.
22. Derek Mahon, "The Peace of Objects", in Derek Mahon, *Raw Material*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2011, p. 64.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Roland Barthes, "Le monde-objet", in *Essais Critiques*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, coll. Tel Quel, 1964, pp. 19-28.
25. Derek Mahon, "A Bangor Requiem", in Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 1999, p. 260.
26. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* (1936).
27. Derek Mahon, "A Bangor Requiem", *op. cit.*, p. 260. Italics mine.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Derek Mahon, "Rage for Order", *New Collected Poems*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2011, p. 47.

30. Interview with Eamon Grennan, "Derek Mahon: The Art of Poetry No. 82", *Paris Review* (Spring 2000), p. 151. Italics mine.
  31. Derek Mahon, "Courtyards in Delft", in Derek Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2011, pp. 96-97.
  32. *Ibid.*, p. 96. Italics mine.
  33. Tzvetan Todorov, *Eloge du quotidien: Essai sur la peinture hollandaise du XVIIe siècle*, Paris, Editions Adam Biro, 1993 ; Editions du Seuil, 1997, p. 29.
  34. Derek Mahon, "Courtyards in Delft", *op. cit.*, pp. 96-97. Italics mine.
  35. Interview with Eamon Grennan, "Derek Mahon: The Art of Poetry No. 82", *Paris Review* (Spring 2000), p. 151. Italics mine.
  36. Derek Mahon, "A Bangor Requiem", in Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems*, *op. cit.*, p. 260.
  37. Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1957, p. 83. Italics mine.
  38. Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre: Rhétorique de l'autoportrait*, Paris, Seuil, Poétique, 1980, p. 106. Italics mine.
  39. Derek Mahon, "The Bicycle" (in "Autobiographies"), in Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 1999, p. 94.
  40. Derek Mahon, "The Poetry Nonsense: A Docudrama", in *Selected Prose*, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 2012, p. 24. Italics mine.
  41. *Ibid.* Italics mine.
  42. Interview with Eamon Grennan, "Derek Mahon: The Art of Poetry No. 82", *Paris Review* (Spring 2000), p. 151.
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## ABSTRACTS

Mahon, as a poet and as a person, has always been reluctant to play the autobiographical game, maybe due to the reticence emblematic of Northern Irish poets wishing their poetry not to be identified with a 'poetry of the Troubles'. Indeed, even when Mahon refers to the Troubles in his poetry, it is often through the prism of objects, as if his own opinions on the conflict were better voiced by the silent eloquence of objects. Is it due to the fact that one can project oneself into objects quite easily, objects providing thus the possibility of new identities and at the same time acting as smokescreens for one's own self?

We might even go further and ask ourselves whether Mahon the poet sees himself as an object too, and whether in the end the multiple objects littering his poetry might not be considered as the poetic paraphernalia of the Self/-ves?

Mahon, en tant que poète mais aussi en tant que personne, s'est toujours montré réticent à l'idée de s'essayer au « jeu autobiographique », peut-être en raison de cette réticence caractéristique de certains poètes nord-irlandais qui ne souhaitent pas que leur poésie soit rangée dans la catégorie de « poésie des Troubles ». En effet, même lorsque Mahon fait allusion aux Troubles dans sa

poésie, il passe de préférence par le prisme des objets, comme si ses propres opinions sur le conflit s'exprimaient d'autant mieux à travers la silencieuse éloquence des objets. Serait-ce parce qu'il est somme toute assez facile de se projeter soi-même à travers les objets, qui permettraient alors d'endosser une nouvelle identité (voire plusieurs), et ainsi de dissimuler son propre Moi, à l'instar de paravents ?

Nous pourrions alors pousser la question un peu plus loin, et émettre l'hypothèse suivante : Mahon le poète ne se considérerait-il pas lui-même comme un objet, et dans ce cas pourrait-on admettre que les multiples objets qui jonchent sa poésie ne seraient autres que la panoplie poétique du Je lyrique et de ses avatars ?

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** autobiographie, autoportrait, objets, sujets, alter egos

**Keywords:** autobiography, self-portrait, objects, subjects, alter egos

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