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DEREK MAHON: "SOUL, SONG AND FORMAL NECESSITY"

Now, nothing but claptrap
About mere technique and true vision,
As if there were a distinction –
– "The Forger"¹

"Soul, song and formal necessity:" the phrase occurs in Mahon's critical writing on a number of occasions. Awarding the Prudence Farmer Poetry Prize in the *New Statesman* in 1985, his summing-up took a disparaging view of contemporary American verse. "An American friend complained to me recently about the state of the art over there: the poets lack, he said, a sense of 'soul, song and formal necessity.'"² Not Mahon's own phrase, it has nonetheless come to serve him as a critical and creative touchstone. Seven years later, in his *Foreword* to Harry Clifton's selected poems, *The Desert Route*, he would note: "There must be three things in combination, I would suggest, before the poetry can happen: soul, song and formal necessity. Clifton has all three; he has chosen well from his four individual volumes, and *The Desert Route* will place him among the poets who matter."³ While, in reply to William Scammell's question as to why he was a formalist – this in a postal interview for *Poetry Review* in 1991 – Mahon wrote:

I am a formalist for all the usual reasons: in the words of the Latin poet Raymond Chandler, 'No art without the resistance of the medium.' But it's not a matter of conviction, more one of instinct ... You need soul, song and formal necessity, and you have to fly blind.⁴

¹ Derek Mahon, *Selected Poems*, p. 18. Hereafter: *SP*.

² "The Prudence Farmer Poetry Prize." *New Statesman* (16 April 1985): 24.

³ Harry Clifton, *The Desert Route* (Dublin: The Gallery Press, 1992), p. 10.

⁴ "Derek Mahon Interviewed," *Poetry Review* 24/1 (Summer 1991): 5.

Mahon's "formalism" is an aspect of his poetry which has consistently been highlighted by critics and reviewers throughout his career. Michael Longley has called Mahon "our bravest and most stylish wielder of the singing line"⁵; Edna Longley has praised his "extraordinary formal achievement"⁶; Neil Corcoran, in his history of *English [sic] Poetry Since 1940*, has written that a poem by Mahon is "a carefully and meticulously posed work of art"⁷; while Hugh Haughton has gone so far as to say:

I can't think of any parallels among English poets for Mahon's metaphysical unease, his sense of damage and civilisational desolation, his sense of displacement and disenchanting mobility, or indeed for the poignant elegance of his lyric music.⁸

"Derek Mahon's poetry," writes Edna Longley, "has sometimes suffered the slings and arrows of a content-fixated period (apart from the 'privileged' arabesques of structuralism, etc.) and from consequent deafness on the part of some critics, to its true stature."⁹ Such critics – mainly English – appear however to be in a minority. Few commentators would remark, alluding to Yeats's poetic last will in "Under Ben Bulbin," that Mahon has "learned it ['your trade'] too well," as Peter Porter has done.¹⁰ Critics have been inclined rather to confirm the appeal of what Mahon has termed "the formal thing" and to see in his work a challenge to the "chopped prose"¹¹ of much contemporary verse.

"When I first started writing poems I started writing in imitation of Dylan Thomas, then in imitation of Louis MacNeice, then in imitation of W. B. Yeats, and I suppose what appealed to me in every case was the formal thing and I suppose the Dylan Thomas thing has lasted with me most; the notion of tremendous feeling being channelled into strict form appeals to me greatly. You know Raymond Chandler's thing about 'No art without the resistance of the medium'. If you're not fighting against the form you're not creating art. I don't think there's such a thing as poetry without form. I don't think there's such a thing as free verse because the freest verse that is written, if it is good, is acknowledging its own sort of form."¹²

These comments, made at the beginning of 1973, post-date a discernible shift in Mahon's work towards more open forms, represented by such

⁵ *SP*, blurb.

⁶ Edna Longley, "The Singing Line: Form in Derek Mahon's Poetry," *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), p. 172. Hereafter: Longley.

⁷ Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 190.

⁸ Hugh Haughton, "'Even now there are places where a thought might grow': Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon," in: Neil Corcoran, ed., *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (London: Seren Books, 1992), p. 90.

⁹ Longley, p. 170.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 171.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² "Harriet Cooke talks to the poet Derek Mahon," *Irish Times* (17 January 1973): 10.

poems as "Lives," "What Will Remain," "Entropy" and "An Image from Beckett," collected in his second volume, *Lives*. There is a point – formally – beyond which Mahon's verse however will not go. In this sense Mahon's career is rooted in a formal technique, eschewing any technical or "developmental" novelty. Asked, nine years later, how he saw his "growth as a poet," Mahon answered, candidly and accurately, "I don't think I have grown":

I know modern poets are supposed to develop, show signs of technical novelty. Although I've made deliberate efforts – perhaps too deliberate – to write a different kind of poetry (not all of which has seen the light of day) I think I'm basically the kind of poet who doesn't develop, who doesn't change, who just writes in the same voice, with slight modification and accretions of new tones of voice and new material. The most recent poems I've written are not, in terms of form, very different from my earliest poems. I don't throw things away because I feel I've done them before; very often I throw things away because I'm conscious that I've been trying too hard to write a new kind of poem, and I know it's false. That's the only reason I'm writing it; I'm trying to do something different and it comes out wrong. If the voice, the technique, is going to change, then it'll have to happen organically or not at all.¹³

Asked then about the example of Thomas Kinsella – a poet whose dedication, Mahon and Peter Fallon assert in the introduction to their *Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, has been "exemplary"¹⁴ – Mahon commented:

I know what you mean. I've great respect for Kinsella; I believe in his integrity. He is a poet who has developed in the way I just mentioned. 'Downstream', for example, is extremely ordered and formalistic. Now, his poetry is all broken up and jagged, full of half-glimpsed, elusive things. I think I understand why he has abandoned the traditional forms that he once used, and it has often occurred to me that there's a certain intellectual attraction in that deliberate kind of progress, but I haven't yet felt able to do that myself, not until some inner compulsion makes it necessary. I enjoy the sense of struggling against a form, and that provides the creative tension that tells me that this is a real poem that I'm writing.¹⁵

In spite of an unconscious "inability" to orchestrate a like development, Mahon is on record as admiring the high formalism of Richard Wilbur and – at the other end of the formal scale – the Kinsella-like transformation of W. S. Merwin in mid-career:

I admire Wilbur, and I've learnt from him, but he is excessively formal, excessively cool. Nothing of the man himself comes into it. But that's all right; he creates that cool

¹³ "Each Poem for Me is a New Beginning," *The Cork Review* (June, 1981): 10. Hereafter: *Cork Review*.

¹⁴ Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon, eds, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. xix. Hereafter: *PB*.

¹⁵ *Cork Review*, p. 10.

artifact. A lot of people sneer at him for his preciousness. I don't: I know what he's about. I have an even greater admiration for W. S. Merwin who uses very open forms, forms dictated by the material (not unlike Kinsella, though he has a much lighter way with language). Poetry is a craft, but not one that provides something useful for the community, except perhaps by the way. You could describe it as a serious game, and people play it by different rules. I don't know if it's possible to say that Wilbur is a less serious poet than Merwin or than Lowell but he's more ludic (to use a cant word), it's more game with him than anything else.¹⁶

There are clear debts to both Wilbur *and* Merwin in Mahon's work. Mahon's celebrated poem, "Courtyards in Delft," clearly owes much to Wilbur's "A Dutch Courtyard" from his first collection, *The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems* (1947):

What wholly blameless fun
To stand and look at pictures. Ah, they are
Immune to us. This courtyard may appear
To be consumed with sun,

Most mortally to burn,
Yet it is quite beyond the reach of eyes
Or thoughts, this place and moment oxidize;
This girl will never turn,

Cry what you dare, but smiles
Tirelessly toward the seated cavalier,
Who will not proffer you his pot of beer;
And your most lavish wiles

Can never turn this chair
To proper uses; nor your guile evict
These tenants. What surprising strict
Propriety! In despair,

Consumed with greedy ire,
Old Andrew Mellon glowered at this Dutch
Courtyard, until it bothered him so much
He bought the thing entire.¹⁷

"Courtyards in Delft" opens by attending to this "strict propriety" and, in its third stanza, borrows Wilbur's observation that "This girl will never turn, / Cry what you dare":

That girl with her back to us who waits
For her man to come home for his tea
Will wait till the paint disintegrates
And ruined dikes admit the esurient sea,¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Richard Wilbur, *New and Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 362.

¹⁸ *SP*, p. 120.

In the introduction to his *Selected Poems of Philippe Jaccottet* Mahon notes that Jaccottet "has attracted the interest of a number of English-language poets; though his direct *influence* is nowhere clearly discernible, except perhaps in W. S. Merwin's *The Lice* (1969), where several pieces strike the Jaccottet note exactly. Take "The Room":

I think all this is somewhere in myself
 The cold room unlit before dawn
 Containing a stillness such as attends death
 And from a corner the sounds of a small bird trying
 From time to time to fly a few beats in the dark
 You would say it was dying it is immortal."¹⁹

Mahon is an admirer of Merwin's "light[er] way with language," his Jaccottetian strategies (if Jaccottet, as Mahon notes, is "not quite French in sensibility,"²⁰ then Merwin is not entirely American). Merwin, like Mahon, is a prolific translator of the poetry of others. At least one of the American's translations has served Mahon in a number of his own poems. I am thinking of an untitled poem by the eighth century Chinese poet, Li Po, in Merwin's *Selected Translations 1948-1968*. The entire poem runs as follows:

I wake and my bed is gleaming with moonlight
 Frozen into the dazzling whiteness I look up
 To the moon herself
 And lie thinking of home²¹

One of the more recent additions to Mahon's "Light Music," "Absence," takes Merwin's translation as its starting-point:

I wake at night
 in a house white
 with moonlight.
 Somewhere my son,
 his vigour, his laughter;
 somewhere my daughter.²²

¹⁹ *Philippe Jaccottet: Selected Poems*, Selected and translated with an introduction by Derek Mahon (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 7. Hereafter: *PJ*. In his capacity as Poetry Editor of the *New Statesman* Mahon wrote to Merwin (on 19 October 1981) to ask for poems for publication. A surprised and delighted Merwin wrote back on 5 January 1982, and submitted three poems on 4 February 1982. On 11 October 1982, with Mahon still Poetry Editor, Merwin submitted a further batch of poems. Merwin's three letters to Mahon are at Emory.

²⁰ *PJ*, p. 7.

²¹ W. S. Merwin, *Selected Translations 1948-1968* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 5.

²² *SP*, p. 69.

Similarly, another poem, "The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush," owes its conclusion to Li Po's own:

While I sit with my paper and prawn chow mein
 Under a framed photograph of Hong Kong
 The proprietor of the Chinese restaurant
 Stands at the door as if the world were young,
 Watching the first yacht hoist a sail
 – An ideogram on sea-cloud – and the light
 Of heaven upon the mountains of Donegal;
 And whistles a little tune, dreaming of home.²³

In "Father-in-Law" Mahon recalls: "When you lost your balance like Li Po / They found unfinished poems in your sea-chest."²⁴

Although Mahon is attracted to the seemingly incompatible procedures of Wilbur and the later Merwin – and the early Merwin, too, one suspects – and has, like MacNeice, "visited both the poles of traditionalism and of free-lance experimentation,"²⁵ his work has been consistently informed by the imperative of "formal necessity." Thus he regularly returns to the six-line stanza (characteristically with a variable rhyme-scheme), an eight-line "Marvellian" stanza inherited via Lowell, the villanelle (though *not*, as yet, the sestina), and his own masterly evolution of formal poetic models from Elizabeth Bishop and – again – Robert Lowell.

Throughout his career Mahon has shown an interest in the six-line stanza. No other form, in fact, occurs with such regularity in his work. With a regular or (more often) variable rhyme-scheme, it appears in every book of poetry he has published – as well as in his uncollected juvenilia. Of the latter, "Whatever Fall or Blow," "Tristan and Isolde" and "Epitaph from Tristan Corbière" [sic] all make use of the stanza, with a tight or variable rhyme-scheme.²⁶ In *Night-Crossing* the poems "Girls in their Seasons," "In Carrowdore Churchyard," "Glengormley," "Death of a Film-Star," "Bird Sanctuary," "Early Morning" (the opening poem of "Four Walks in the Country near Saint Briec"), "Day Trip to Donegal," "First Principles" and "The Poets Lie where they Fell" are all written in six-line

²³ *SP*, p. 99.

²⁴ *SP*, p. 55. Mahon has written more flippantly of "the Chinese fellow" in one of his "River Rhymes":

Drifting drunkly up the Yellow
 Went Li Po, the Chinese fellow;
 Reaching down to grasp the moon,
 He climbed too far and toppled in.

The Hudson Letter (Dublin: The Gallery Press, 1996), p. 23. Hereafter: *THL*.

²⁵ Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), p. 37.

²⁶ *Icarus*: 33 (March, 1961): 22; 36 (March, 1962): 13; 37 (June, 1962): 14.

stanzas.²⁷ Formally, a change occurs with the poems that go to make up *Lives* (where only the poems "A Dark Country" and "After Cavafy" take on the form – and this in shaped stanzas more reminiscent of the [again] six-line stanzas of "Girls on the Bridge," "The Hunt by Night" and "St. Eustace" of later volumes). *The Snow Party* opens with "Afterlives" which, together with "The Golden Bough" and "A Refusal to Mourn" in the same collection and the post-*Snow Party* poems which occupy the latter quarter of *Poems 1962–1978* ("Autobiographies," "The Return" and "The Poet in Residence"), prepares the way for a full-blooded return to the form in the eighties. *The Hunt by Night* is earthed in the form: "North Wind: Portrush," "An Old Lady," "Brecht in Svendborg," "Tractatus," "Table Talk," "One of these Nights," "A Garage in Co. Cork," "The Earth" (and later, also after Pasternak, "White Night") and "Brighton Beach".

"In Carrowdore Churchyard" (still subtitled *at the grave of Louis MacNeice*) now opens Mahon's *Selected Poems* and stands as a homage to MacNeice whose own liking for the variable-rhyme six-line stanza provides a further bond between the two poets. Mahon's preferred poems by MacNeice tend to be written in this form, be it "The Casualty" or "London Rain," and there are many more to choose from. After *Night-Crossing*, where there is a certain stylised use of the stanza – the closed, lyrical narratives of "Girls in their Seasons" and "Death of a Film-Star" – it comes to be employed primarily in the service of (auto)biographical disclosure. "Afterlives," "A Refusal to Mourn," "An Old Lady," "North Wind: Portrush" and "Autobiographies" all rely on Mahon's stanza's flexible rhyme-pattern – and what he has called (referring to Lowell's *Life Studies*) a "calculated impersonation of perfect candour"²⁸.

I am going home by sea
For the first time in years.
Somebody thumbs a guitar
On the dark deck, while a gull
Dreams at the mast-head,
The moon-splashed waves exult.

At dawn the ship trembles, turns
In a wide arc to back
Shuddering up the grey lough
Past lightship and buoy,
Slipway and dry dock
Where a naked bulb burns;

²⁷ *Night-Crossing*, pp. 1–2, 3, 5, 10, 14–15, 17, 22–23, 33–34.

²⁸ "I'd like them to say I was heartbreaking": *A Portrait of Robert Lowell, The Listener* 6 (December, 1984): 12.

And I step ashore in a fine rain
 To a city so changed
 By five years of war
 I scarcely recognize
 The places I grew up in,
 The faces that try to explain.

But the hills are still the same
 Grey-blue above Belfast.
 Perhaps if I'd stayed behind
 And lived it bomb by bomb
 I might have grown up at last
 And learnt what is meant by home.²⁹

Similarly, an eight-line (“Marvellian”) stanza is Mahon’s preferred form in the verse-letters “Beyond Howth Head” and “The Sea in Winter” where a personal drama is enacted against the backdrop of the public and the political – and always with a sense of “the lives we might have lived”:

I too, uncycled, might exchange,
 since “we are changed by what we change,”
 my forkful of the general mess
 for hazel-nuts and water-cress
 like one of those old hermits who,
 less virtuous than some, withdrew
 from the world-circles women make
 to a small island in a lake.

Choméi at Toyama, his blanket
 hemp, his character a rank
 not-to-be-trusted river mist,
 events in Kyoto all grist
 to the mill of a harsh irony,
 since we are seen by what we see;
 Thoreau like ice among the trees
 and Spenser, “farre from enemies,”

serve as models for a while
 but to return in greater style.
 Centripetal, the hot world draws
 its children in with loving claws
 from rock and heather, rain and sleet
 with only calor-gas for heat
 at the centre where
 they have no time to know despair

but still, like Margaret Fuller, must
 “accept the universe” on trust
 and offer to a phantom future

²⁹ *SP*, p. 51.

blood and bones in forfeiture –
 each one, his poor loaf on the sea,
 monstrous before posterity,
 our afterlives a coming true
 of perfect worlds we never knew.³⁰

It is Lowell who "serves as model" in both "Beyond Howth Head" and its later, *northern* Irish verse counterpart, "The Sea in Winter":

To start from scratch, to make it new,
 forsake the grey skies for the blue,
 to find the narrow road to the deep
 north the road to Damascus, leap
 before we look! The ideal future
 shines out of our better nature,
 dimly visible from afar:
 "The sun is but a morning star."³¹

Both poems are written for the most part in rhyming couplets. Two later poems, "A Postcard from Berlin" (again a poem for posting) and "Another Sunday Morning" continue to meditate on the responsibilities of the individual (and the artist) within society in the same eight-line stanza, the rhyming couplets rigidly maintained. "Another Sunday Morning" recalls Lowell's "Waking Early Sunday Morning," and is consciously cast in the earlier poem's form. Recounting Lowell's part in "the historic Pentagon March of October, 1967," Mahon writes:

The night before the march, there was a memorable event in one of the Washington theatres. Lowell read 'Waking Early Sunday Morning;' it was his apotheosis as a public poet. Most of those who heard Lowell read 'Waking Early Sunday Morning' probably didn't notice, or weren't much concerned, that he had returned to a strict form – the rhyming eight-line stanzas, usually described as Marvellian. The outstanding poems in his 1967 collection, *Near the Ocean*, are all in this form.³²

A number of Mahon's own best poems are also in this form: "An Unborn Child," "Derry Morning," "Courtyards in Delft," "A Garage in Co. Cork," "The Globe in North Carolina". "Courtyards in Delft" even borrows what Mahon has identified as "one of Lowell's principal themes: the corruption of the Protestant ethic, its perversion into cruelty and servility."³³

"For some," Mahon notes, "Lowell's poetic career ends right there [i.e. with *Near the Ocean* (1967)]; for them everything that follows is "a bore."³⁴

³⁰ *SP*, pp. 48–49.

³¹ *SP*, p. 117.

³² See note 28.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

Mahon is clearly in agreement with such an assessment, a fact confirmed by his use of formal models from only two collections by Lowell: *Near the Ocean* and (most strikingly) *Life Studies* of eight years earlier. The relevant poems here are "Dawn at St. Patrick's" (first collected in *Selected Poems*) and *The Hudson Letter's* "Noon at St. Michael's." They are connected not only by their titles, but also by a common model: Lowell's poem "Skunk Hour," the last in *Life Studies*.³⁵ "Dawn at St. Patrick's" makes explicit reference to Lowell's sequence – specifically "Waking in the Blue" – when he writes:

They don't lock the razors here
as in Bowditch Hall.³⁶

"(This is the house for the 'mentally ill.')"³⁷ explains Lowell in the course of his poem. Thematically "Dawn at St. Patrick's" borrows much from "Waking in the Blue," both poems being accounts of a period in hospital. Mahon even alludes to "the Roman Catholic attendants" in Bowditch Hall ("(There are no Mayflower / screwballs in the Catholic Church)" notes Lowell):

Meanwhile,
next-door, a visiting priest
intones to a faithful dormitory.
I sit on my Protestant bed, a make-believe existentialist,
and stare at the clouds of unknowing.³⁸

Formally, though, "Dawn at St. Patrick's" (and the later "Noon at St. Michael's") are modelled on "Skunk Hour," whose six-line stanzas form a series of rough half-diamonds (first and sixth lines shortest, centre lines longest). Typically, Mahon's "imitations" again display his improving instinct, and are typographically more regular – a series not of stanzas but signposts, as it were.

Lowell has referred to "Skunk Hour" as "a secular dark night of the soul."³⁹ Thus Mahon's two hospital poems are written in a form dictated by thematic considerations – specifically by the poet's troubled personal circumstances – and a move towards a more confessional mode. Mahon himself, however, has been critical of these imitations. Of "Dawn at St. Patrick's" he has said: "The principal weakness there is, it's too Lowellish,

³⁵ Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), pp. 89–90.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 82; *SP*, p. 105.

³⁷ Robert Lowell, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

³⁸ *SP*, p. 105.

³⁹ *Robert Lowell: A Reading* ("recorded on December 8th, 1976 at the Poetry Centre of the 92nd St. Y.")

too Life-Studies-y. The stanza form is a bit like 'Skunk Hour.' I think I've come to the end of tight, structured forms. One of my latest, 'The Yaddo Letter,' is very chatty and loose."⁴⁰ Still, the influence and example of Lowell have been important throughout Mahon's career. Neil Corcoran has written:

The influence of the Americans, particularly Lowell and Plath, on English and Irish poets since the 1960s has been wide-ranging. Lowell actually lived in England in the 1970s and a pressure from the post-*Life Studies* (1959) phase of his work, even if sometimes only temporary, is marked on such otherwise different poets as Donald Davie, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Hoffmann.⁴¹

Corcoran makes no mention of another influential American – Elizabeth Bishop. Her formal example has made itself felt in the work of both Mahon and, in his most recent work, Seamus Heaney. I am thinking of Mahon's masterly evolution of "The Woods" – and the bringing of the form (Elizabeth Bishop's early poem "Roosters" providing the model) to perfection in "Craigvara House."

Asked in an interview about his "literary enthusiasms and models," Mahon replied: "MacNeice, of course; and Beckett to some extent, if not formally, though I do like his minimalist poems. Modern poets I've had a crush on at one time or another include Graves, Hart Crane and the Auden of 'New Year Letter,' Lowell up to and including *Near the Ocean*, Elizabeth Bishop..."⁴² The latter is clearly a poet who *still* exerts an influence on Mahon's work: section XVI of "The Hudson Letter" is called "Key West" and takes as epigraph a line from Bishop – "our little wooden northern houses."⁴³ It is taken from a poem which has clearly captured Mahon's formal imagination, *North & South's* "Roosters":

Deep from protruding chests
in green-gold medals dressed,
planned to command and terrorize the rest,

the many wives
who lead hens' lives
of being courted and despised;

deep from raw throats
a senseless order floats
all over town. A rooster gloats

⁴⁰ "Q. and A. with Derek Mahon," *ILS* (Fall 1991): 28.

⁴¹ *English Poetry Since 1940*, pp. 132–133. See note 7.

⁴² "Derek Mahon Interviewed," p. 5. See note 4.

⁴³ *THL*, p. 69.

over our beds
 from rusty iron sheds
 and fences made from old bedsteads,

 over our churches
 where the tin rooster perches,
 over our little wooden northern houses,

 making sallies
 from all the muddy alleys,
 marking out maps like Rand McNally's:

 glass-headed pins,
 oil-golds and copper greens,
 anthracite blues, alizarins,

 each one an active
 displacement in perspective;
 each screaming, "This is where I live!"⁴⁴

Elizabeth Bishop's biographer, Brett C. Millier, notes that the poem is made up of "regimented three increasing-beat lines and a one-rhyme stanza form (which Charles Sanders has pointed out Bishop learned well from Crashaw's 'Wishes to his Supposed Mistress')." ⁴⁵ This is of course the three-line *aaa*-rhymed triangular stanza in which Mahon writes "The Woods" and, later, "Craigvara House." But Mahon had long been pre-occupied with three-line stanzas ("An Image from Beckett," "Lives," "Entropy," "What Will Remain," "The Last of the Fire Kings") – "clipped triplets, unrhymed and syllabically free-floating."⁴⁶ There is even evidence that he was feeling his way towards Bishop's (and Crashaw's) rigid stanza form *anyway*, that "The Woods" and "Craigvara House" grew *organically* as it were out of earlier triplet poems of his own. There are signs already in the poem "Lives" where the free-floating triplets momentarily drift into rhyme and solidify:

A tongue of bark
 At the heart of Africa
 Growing darker and darker...⁴⁷

There is a similar moment at the end of another poem from his second collection, the poem with which it begins, "Homecoming":

⁴⁴ Derek Mahon, *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991), pp. 35–36.

⁴⁵ Brett C. Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1993), p. 159. See, too, Richard Crashaw's "Wishes to his (supposed) Mistress," Helen Gardner, ed., *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin, 1957, reprinted 1985), pp. 190–194.

⁴⁶ "The discreet charm of the literati," *New Statesman* (31 July 1981): 19.

⁴⁷ *L*, p. 15.

or having seen
the pictures plain
be ever innocent again.⁴⁸

In both cases Mahon is already toying with Bishop's "triangular" stanza. In placing the later poems – "The Woods" and "Craigvara House" – next to each other in *Selected Poems*, he seems to consider them as linked *through their form*. In fact, he has said as much:

I write individual poems and then put them together in what seems for the moment at least to be some kind of sensible order, which may be simply pictorial. If you've two poems written in three-line stanzas you put them together. I'm very conscious of the page, very conscious of poetry as a visual experience, and so it may not be for narrative or sequential reasons at all that I put two things together.⁴⁹

Like Bishop, Mahon is "very much interested in typography"⁵⁰ and has spoken of how "the texture of the letter on the page makes the thing a tactile experience. The typewriter is important to me. I want to see how things might look on the page, printed."⁵¹ This is especially important in the case of "Craigvara House" and "The Woods" (as it also is in the poems "The Hunt by Night," "Girls on the Bridge" and "St. Eustace"). Both poems speak of clearly autobiographical moments in Mahon's marriage and, as such, both the form ("Craigvara House" is a later, more desolate technical repeat of – and technical improvement on – "The Woods") and their placement, even "coupling," in *Selected Poems* goes to create the sense of a narrative extending beyond the bounds of each individual poem.

Just as Mahon has sought to better his mentors, MacNeice and Beckett,⁵² so he writes new poems in moulds of earlier ones – "Girls on the Bridge," then "The Hunt by Night"; "The Woods," then "Craigvara House" – in an attempt perhaps to perfect his handling of a given form. "Craigvara House" is thus – formally – a more assured (though thematically more desolate) performance than "The Woods." The shaped stanzas – the poems'

⁴⁸ *L*, p. 1. See, too, "Enter," no. 16 in "Light Music":

The steel regrets the lock,
a word will open the rock,
the wood awaits your knock. (*SP*, p. 68.)

⁴⁹ "Q. and A. with Derek Mahon," p. 27. See note 40.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: Selected Letters*, Selected and edited by Robert Giroux (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 125.

⁵¹ See note 49.

⁵² See "How to Live" (*SP*, p. 76) and "from The Drunken Boat" (*SP*, pp. 80–81), both, in my view, conscious improvements on earlier translations by MacNeice and Beckett. Compare "Carpe Diem" in: MacNeice's, *Collected Poems*, ed. E. R. Dodds (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 550; and Samuel Beckett, *Collected Poems 1930–1978* (London: John Calder, 1986), pp. 124–137.

raison d'être, after all – are more consistent, and therefore more satisfying, in the later poem. At one point in “The Woods” Mahon writes:

Hapsburgs and Romanovs
had removed their gloves
in the drawing-rooms and alcoves

of the manor house;
but these illustrious
ghosts never imposed on us.⁵³

In both *The Hunt by Night* and *Selected Poems* these stanzas appear without the visual “gradient” achieved elsewhere in the poem through the staggered line-lengths (though, interestingly, the gradient is visible in typescript). In “Craigvara House,” however, the “triangles” are memorably maintained. An incorrigible reviser of his own work, Mahon has clearly had little to be dissatisfied with in “Craigvara House.” The ending of “The Woods” though has long troubled him: “confront” or “ponder” the darkness?

Another light
than ours convenes the mute
attention of those woods tonight –

while we, released
from that pale paradise,
confront the darkness in another place.⁵⁴

He may yet, “in another place,” opt for another verb.

Elizabeth Bishop has also been instructive in Mahon’s handling of the six-line, variable-rhyme stanza. Of her poem “The Moose,” Mahon has written:

I don’t know if it’s necessarily my favourite poem, but it’s one I like very much: ‘The Moose’ by Elizabeth Bishop. The title is a pun on ‘The Muse,’ and the poem describes a bus journey at night from Nova Scotia to Boston during which a moose appears on the road, to everyone’s delighted astonishment. It’s a poem about the magical in the ordinary, a poem about poetry itself in a sense: one of the great underrated poems of the century. I recommend it to all those who want to know what poetry means...⁵⁵

Bishop’s seventh stanza runs:

Goodbye to the elms,
To the farm, to the dog.
The bus starts. The light

⁵³ *HBN*, p. 57: *SP*, p. 154.

⁵⁴ *SP*, p. 155.

⁵⁵ *Lifelines: Letters from famous people about their favourite poem*, ed. Niall MacMonagle, foreword by Seamus Heaney (Dublin: Town House, 1992), p. 98.

grows richer; the fog,
shifting, salty, thin,
comes closing in.⁵⁶

Both verse form and diction reappear in Mahon's "Going Home":

I am saying goodbye to the trees,
The beech, the cedar, the elm,
The mild woods of these parts
Misted with car exhaust
And sawdust, and the last
Gasps of the poisoned nymphs.⁵⁷

(Bishop's, poem ends with "a dim / smell of moose, an acrid / smell of gasoline"). Mahon's illuminating comments are taken from the anthology *Lifelines*, subtitled "Letters from famous people about their favourite poem." Mahon's own poetry features in the book, with Seamus Deane choosing "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill "Antarctica" – "to show that I have no particular prejudice against formalism as such."⁵⁸ This is the third villanelle Mahon has written, a form which makes a relatively late appearance in his work (his first two villanelles, "The Dawn Chorus" and "The Andean Flute," were published in *The Hunt by Night*). The volume was Mahon's most "formalist" gathering of verse to have been compiled, and consisted for the most part of poems written in rhyming six- and eight-line stanzas, complicated stanzaic patterns ("The Hunt by Night," "Girls on the Bridge," "The Woods") and villanelles. Mahon has cited as his influences "the whole corpus of modern poetry": "Eliot, Graves, MacDiarmid, Empson, Auden, MacNeice"⁵⁹ – and it is clear that aside from American models he shares Empson's and Auden's interest in the villanelle. "The villanelle form, turning upon itself, advancing and retiring to and from a resolution, is not just a line-by-line virtuoso performance," writes Seamus Heaney, attending to Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."⁶⁰ Heaney has in recent years been drawn to the work of modern poets one might more readily associate with Derek Mahon: Dylan Thomas and ... Elizabeth Bishop. Analysing her one villanelle ("One Art") Heaney notes how "With its repetitions and revisions and nuancings, its shifts and refinements and siftings of what has already been finely sifted, the villanelle is the perfect mould for Bishop's habitual

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 99.

⁵⁷ *SP*, p. 96.

⁵⁸ *Lifelines*, p. 146. See note 55.

⁵⁹ "Derek Mahon," BBC Radio Ulster (Producer: Kathryn Porter), broadcast 15 January 1984.

⁶⁰ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 137.

method of coming at a subject in little renewed attempts and sorties."⁶¹ Heaney has yet to write (or publish) a villanelle himself, but there are indications that his recent, close attention to the work of Elizabeth Bishop has been responsible for his own first, late attempt at another form at which Bishop excels. This is the sestina, which appears in *North & South* ("A Miracle for Breakfast") and *Questions of Travel* ("Sestina").⁶² Heaney's own poem in the form, *The Spirit Level's* "Two Lorries," seems to have been urged by the example of Bishop's later "Sestina" on which he meditates at length in his essay "Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop."⁶³ The poem is "both enigmatic and entirely satisfactory."⁶⁴ Of interest here is the fact that Heaney has approached a given poetic form that one might have expected Mahon more readily to engage with. Paul Muldoon, who has also written in the form – "Cauliflowers" in *Madoc: A Mystery* – has commented on the sestina in a way which may help to explain the absence of a like poem in Mahon's *œuvre*:

Certainly it could be argued that the sestina-based form is artificial but I must say, I think that this poem has an organic – that is to say natural – life. Of course it's written in this form; but it can *only* be written in this form. Some of the inherent elements of the sestina – conventionally, the obsessive return to the same half-a-dozen words – are absolutely suited to what the poem's about. That's not to suggest, though, that I got up one morning and said to myself, 'okay, I'm going to write a poem based on the sestina and it will be about obsession.' It doesn't happen like that. It really did find its own way organically. I understand how that may seem pretty strange. You might say that can't be right, but I'm afraid it is right.⁶⁵

This connects with Mahon's own concern (in a fragment quoted earlier) that form be "organically" generated:

The most recent poems I've written are not, in terms of form, very different from my earliest poems. I don't throw things away because I feel I've done them before; very often I throw things away because I'm conscious that I've been trying too hard to write a new kind of poem, and I know it's false. That's the only reason I'm writing it; I'm trying to do something different and it comes out wrong. If the voice, the technique, is going to change, then it'll have to happen organically or not at all.⁶⁶

In Bishop's "Sestina," writes Heaney, "the six end-words have a thoroughly domestic provenance and in the first instance they seem all set to keep the poem within comfortable emotional bounds. House, grandmother, child,

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 183.

⁶² Derek Mahon, *Complete Poems*, pp. 18–19, 123–124. See note 44.

⁶³ Seamus Heaney, *op. cit.*, pp. 168–171.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 171.

⁶⁵ "Interview with Paul Muldoon," *Thumbscrew* 4 (spring, 1996): 3.

⁶⁶ See note 13.

stove, almanac, tears. They imply a little drama of youth and age, even perhaps of instruction and correction. A Victorian genre piece, almost. A decorous domestic interior, at any rate, in terms both of the setting and of the emotions. The end-words, at one level, do keep bringing to mind a conventional home situation where we would naturally expect to find a father and a mother as well as a child and a grandparent. But gradually and insistently a second realization is forced into consciousness by the inexorable formal recurrences within the poem itself. Gradually, the repetition of grandmother and child and house alerts us to the significant absence from this house of a father and a mother."⁶⁷ Heaney's own end-words in "Two Lorries" – ashes, lorry, coalman, mother, Magherafelt, load, and occasional variants thereof – do not allow for a similar appraisal. Indeed, form and diction are at times incompatible, particularly over stanza-breaks (where the rhyme is repeated): "The tasty ways of a leather-aproned coalman! // And films no less! The conceit of a coalman ..." or "[as the bolted lorry] Gets revved and turned and heads for Magherafelt // And the last delivery. Oh, Magherafelt!"⁶⁸ Muldoon's sestina "Cauliflowers" by comparison is, like Bishop's, both enigmatic and, if not *entirely* satisfying (visually, for example), at least "organically" convincing. Like Heaney's sestina, Muldoon's is preoccupied with his mother, out of whose maiden name, Regan, the poem looks to have grown (regain, jerkins, Regan [x 2], jerry-can, Oregon, original).⁶⁹ Mahon's reticence concerning the sestina rings with the conviction that the occasion has yet to present itself.

"A sense of the withheld and the restrained characterizes two of Mahon's preferred forms, the narrow, emphatic triplet, which surrounds itself with as much blank, 'Ovidian' space as it can while retaining its plaintive cadences and rhythms, and the eight-line stanza of tetrameter couplets inherited from Marvell via Lowell."⁷⁰ Thus Neil Corcoran, reviewing *The Hunt by Night*. It is not enough of course to speak of Mahon as a "formalist" and leave it at that. There is, as Corcoran here acknowledges, a career-long tension in Mahon's work between "tight" forms and as it were looser, "unravelling" structures. Foremost among the latter are the numerous poems written in this "narrow, emphatic triplet" – what Mahon himself has referred to as a "clipped triplet." A devotee of the form himself, he had nothing but praise for Craig Raine's use of a like stanza in his 1981 pamphlet, *A Free Translation*:

⁶⁷ Seamus Heaney, *op. cit.*, pp. 168–169.

⁶⁸ *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 13.

⁶⁹ *Madoc: A Mystery* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 10–11.

⁷⁰ Neil Corcoran, "Flying the private kite," *Times Literary Supplement* (18 February 1983): 160.

A Free Translation, a sequence of six poems in clipped triplets, unrhymed and syllabically free-floating, each as long as a piece of string, refines and extends the phenomenological inquiry Raine has made his stock-in-trade. The poems are moving in the seemingly dispassionate way we associate with the best short-story writers, from Chekhov to Joyce to take your pick. Nor do they lack melody, as some critics have suggested. Their music is subtle and fugitive, with a tantalising progression you come to know and enjoy. I think of an angler, reeling in and out by educated instinct.⁷¹

Mahon's own interest in the form begins, together with a declared interest in Beckett, with the pamphlet *Ecclesiastes* and those poems that were to go to make up *Lives*. From this point on the "clipped triplet" poem will be a constant in Mahon's work. With the exception of *The Hudson Letter* and *The Yellow Book*, all subsequent collections will include poems composed in this "free-floating" stanza. The importance attached to it by Mahon can be gauged by the fact that the volumes *Lives* and *The Snow Party* both take their titles from poems written in this form. Since the publication of *Night-Crossing* Mahon has put considerable effort into its possibilities, in such celebrated poems as "Lives," "An Image from Beckett," "What Will Remain," "Entropy," "Going Home" (from *The Snow Party*), "The Snow Party," "The Last of the Fire Kings," "Ovid in Tomis," "A Lighthouse in Maine" and "The Joycentenary Ode." "These triplets," writes Edna Longley of "An Image from Beckett," "collapse the big stanza as the poem collapses history into 'that instant.' Latinate or polysyllabic words, formerly reverberent within a longer line and stanza, now function as rungs of resistance on some inexorable descent."⁷² At a reading in New York less than a year before his death, Robert Lowell spoke of his poem "Skunk Hour" as "running downhill."⁷³ Mahon's poems in these airy, unravelling stanzas are characterized by a like "running down." In a review of *Peter Pan* for *The Listener* in 1972, Mahon noted that "a faint batsqueak of pain, as of a spy locked out in the cold, comes across in one or two famous incidents."⁷⁴ A similar phrase is heard in "An Image from Beckett," where the form itself mimics the brevity and inevitability of pain and lamentation:

Then the hard boards
And darkness once again.
But in that instant

I was struck
By the sweetness and light,
The sweetness and light,

⁷¹ See note 47.

⁷² Longley, p. 179.

⁷³ See note 39.

⁷⁴ "Swanning About," *The Listener* (13 January 1972): 62.

Imagining what grave
 Cities, what lasting monuments,
 Given the time.

They will have buried
 My great-grandchildren, and theirs,
 Beside me by now

With a subliminal batsqueak
 Of reflex lamentation.
 Our hair and excrement

Litter the rich earth,
 Changing, second by second,
 To civilizations.⁷⁵

Asked in an interview for radio, "Do you think there's any way in which you could summarise the qualities that you like in those poets as opposed to the poets that you don't like – I mean, what is it in general that appeals to you about the kind of poetry you like?" Mahon replied:

I think one likes poems not because of what they say or – it's because of their innate qualities, in the same way that one likes a picture or a piece of music. It's something organic. And also, I suppose, speaking as a practitioner, you're attracted to poems that could, as it were, be useful; that suggest something to you about what you yourself might do.⁷⁶

Mahon's apparent abandonment of form (or formalism) in these elusive triplets is not, I would argue, whimsical or perverse, but a formal necessity, "something organic." Mahon touched on this apparent paradox in an illuminating review of Christopher Middleton's *Carminalenia* for *The London Review of Books* in 1980:

He offers the reader little technical consolation – almost, it seems, as a matter of policy; and no doubt there is much to be said for this. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude, as philistine critics used to do of 'modern' art, that he doesn't produce well-made poems because he can't. On the contrary, one has the distinct sense that here is a poet who has chosen to write in his own peculiar, even rebarbative way because an inner logic demands that he do so.⁷⁷

"The Snow Party," "Lives" and "Ovid in Tomis" are anything but rebarbative, formally or otherwise. But rather than refer to existing formal models, they look to have been generated – collectively generated – by the demands of "an inner logic."

⁷⁵ Derek Mahon, *Poems 1962–1978* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 37–38, a version I prefer to that in *SP*.

⁷⁶ See note 59.

⁷⁷ *The London Review of Books* (5–18 June 1980): 20.

Apart from Beckett⁷⁸ and the later Merwin, Mahon's interest in minimalist endeavour extends to such contemporaries as Paul Durcan and Samuel Menashe, the latter a discovery of Mahon's. Durcan of course is not regarded primarily as a minimalist – quite the opposite – but there is a minimalist streak in his work which Mahon, as (co)editor of *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* instinctively homed in on. Accordingly the anthology's selection of poems by Durcan began with his most enigmatic couplet poem, "La Terre des Hommes" from his first collection, *O Westport in the Light of Asia Minor*:

Fancy meeting you out here in the desert:
Hallo Clockface.⁷⁹

"'La Terre des Hommes', though striking and memorable, is untypical of Durcan, being entirely visual and free of editorialising," writes Mahon.⁸⁰ Of even more appeal to him is the entirely typical minimalist verse of the little-known Jewish American, Samuel Menashe, now published in the revamped *Penguin Modern Poets* series.

Samuel Menashe (pronounced Men-ash) is an American poet of 63 who lives "alone and frugally" in New York. Not a household name, certainly; yet for more than 20 years now he has had a small but enthusiastic following on both sides of the Atlantic.

Among his admirers have been Kathleen Raine, Austin Clarke and Donald Davie. Clarke, indeed, reviewed Menashe's first collection, 'The Many Named Beloved,' published by Victor Gollancz [sic], in these very pages on October 7th, 1961. Kathleen Raine, in a foreword to that volume, remarked that 'quality in a quantitative age may easily pass unnoticed.' Clarke's review was short, confining itself to the observation that although 'most of the poems are minute and some run to no more than a dozen words or so, in general he achieves either an axiomatic or imaginative effect'; but he was sufficiently impressed to include Menashe in one of his Radio Eireann poetry programmes, comparing him to George Herbert. There have been two further collections, 'No Jerusalem But This' and 'Fringe of Fire,' and now we have the complete work to date. It is, in its own quiet way, what is known as "a major literary event."⁸¹

Thus began Mahon's *Irish Times* review of Menashe's *Collected Poems*, published by The University of Maine in 1988. A minimalist *par excellence*, Menashe epitomises all that Mahon admires in "the existential lyric."

⁷⁸ Mahon is an admirer of Beckett's minimalist verse and has been drawn to translating a number of his *Mirlitonades*, a grouping of thirty-five short, untitled poems, or fragments, first published in 1979 by Editions de Minuit and never translated by Beckett. Mahon's short selection, "Burbles," appears in *The Hudson Letter* (pp. 21–22).

⁷⁹ *PB*, p. 267.

⁸⁰ *Journalism* (Dublin: The Gallery Press, 1996), p. 115. Hereafter: *J*.

⁸¹ "Gratitude for existence," *Irish Times* (7 May 1988), *Weekend*, p. 8. See, too, *Penguin Modern Poets 7* (Donald Davie, Samuel Menashe and Allen Curnow) (London: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 53–100. "Winter" (p. 56) is dedicated "For Derek Mahon."

Beckett, again, is the yardstick here. Menashe is not an epigrammatist, "Nor has he any interest in other short forms like imagism or the haiku. He is, however, indubitably, a 'minimalist,' like the Beckett of 'Saint-Lo' and 'Dieppe'; though, unlike Beckett, he is interested not in 'havoc' but in epiphanic moments of happiness:

Reeds rise from the water
 rippling under my eyes
 bulrushes tuft the shore
 at every instant I expect
 what is hidden everywhere."⁸²

Mahon, I would suggest, is captivated not only by the form of such a poem, but also by the sensibility of the author. Like Jaccottet (whom Mahon calls "a secular mystic"⁸³) there is an acceptable "mystical note" in Menashe's work, "of a reticent kind which reminds me of Elie Wiesel's remark that there is indeed a strong Jewish mystical tradition 'but we prefer not to talk about it.'"⁸⁴ Mahon quotes Menashe: "I believe the Prophets and Blake."⁸⁵ Reviewing Kathleen Raine's second volume of autobiography, *The Land Unknown*, in 1975, Mahon had complained:

Her procedure is of a piece with her Platonism. Like Edwin Muir, with whose own autobiography hers has something in common (for Northumberland and Essex read Orkney and Glasgow), she adumbrates a dialectic of 'story' and 'fable.' To the story belong the mere facts, which are of limited interest; to the fable belongs the mythical structure, which universalises the particular life and assimilates it to the affective history of the race. Thus we are not told which government department she was bored to tears in during the war; whereas considerable space is devoted to a mystical experience with a hyacinth. And indeed her priorities are admirable. Only occasionally do the demands of the fable give rise to unintentional comedy, as when a left-wing suitor takes her to a Football League cup final:

There I saw the crowd, many-headed and pullulating, its component units seeming scarcely human and its aggregate lacking any feature of the 'human form divine,' its only voice a roar.

We are asked, here, to share a vision of the damned souls in Hell, but somehow the 'component units' remain obstinately, even leeringly, specific. 'Of Mr Blake's company,' complained his wife, "I have very little. He is always in Paradise." Miss Raine, too, is always in Paradise, and the things of this world (except for the hyacinth) get rather short shrift.⁸⁶

⁸² "Samuel Menashe," *Poetry Ireland Review* (Special North American Issue) 43/44: 160. See, too, *J*, pp. 171-174.

⁸³ *PJ*, p. 11.

⁸⁴ See note 81.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ "Exile's Lament," *New Statesman* (11 July 1975): 56.

Mahon has no such complaints regarding Menashe, whom he identifies with such admired earth-bound authors as Thomas Merton and Yves Bonnefoy: "The true place,' he says, 'is always here'; and the phrase *le vrai lieu*, the true place, or variations on it, recur throughout his work."⁸⁷ *Thomas Merton on Zen*, meanwhile, is a book Mahon found "both sensible and illuminating, accessible and distinguished – a work in the same range as Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy*." "Enlightenment," says Merton,

is not a matter of trifling with the facticity of ordinary life and spiriting it all away. Nirvana is found in the midst of the world around us; truth is not somewhere else.

Spaced-out Aquarians please note."⁸⁸ Likewise Mahon admires the poetry of Samuel Menashe because it belongs to "the European Romantic and existentialist tradition" he so values, and because it is "rooted in the real: 'It is among stars that I wake.'"⁸⁹ In his foreword to Eamon Grennan's 1983 collection, *Wildly for Days*, Mahon had written: "Not the least remarkable thing about *Wildly for Days* is the sight of such a sophisticated intelligence achieving such an elevated naiveté."⁹⁰ He might have been speaking of Samuel Menashe.

"The long neglect of Samuel Menashe is coming to an end," wrote Mahon in 1994. "In any case he has been unresentful of it – amused, rather, and perhaps exultant in his distinguished solitude: 'I did not revolt, I succeeded. This is still a free country; one can still do so ... In my hovel, I live outside the walls – the stronghold – of poet professors who, like the abbots of medieval monasteries, exchange visits, reading at each others' colleges, where they mould students in their own image.' Menashe in his 'hovel', though unfrontational, opposes a tiny light to the vast orthodoxy, confident in the knowledge of a unique vocation – 'the lost traveller's dream under the hill.'"⁹¹ Menashe, it transpires, is one of those authors who lead an exemplary artistic life, a notion with which Mahon has been preoccupied throughout his career. The words "dedication" and "example" appear again and again in his assessment of those writers and poets who have held (and continue to hold) the greatest significance for him. Mahon is aware that he is making "large claims" for Jaccottet's poetry (as he is for Menashe's) "but," he says, "Jaccottet measures up to them. In his *exemplary dedication*, in the excellence of his art, and in his

⁸⁷ "The True Place," review of *Poems 1959–1975* and *Things Dying Things Newborn* by Yves Bonnefoy, *Irish Times* (13 June 1987), *Weekend*, p. 5.

⁸⁸ "What's Your Sign?," review of *Room to Breathe* by Jenny James, *The God Trip* by John Eyre and *Thomas Merton on Zen*, *New Statesman* (25 June 1976): 854.

⁸⁹ "Samuel Menashe," p. 163. See note 85.

⁹⁰ Eamon Grennan, *Wildly for Days* (Dublin: The Gallery Press, 1983), p. 9.

⁹¹ "Samuel Menashe," p. 163.

anticipation of *la vie future*, he will, I believe, come to be recognized as one of the finest European poets of the century."⁹² Another revered model, Robert Graves, "in cogency of theory and excellence of practice, is the great modern master in this field [that of love poetry]. At eighty, in his house in Majorca, he is writing as prolifically as ever, a *paragon of dedication*, as true to the White Goddess as to, one might almost say, a vow of celibacy."⁹³ In his poem "Homage to Malcolm Lowry" Mahon addresses the novelist directly and warmly: "your deportment in those seas / Was faultless."⁹⁴ Lowry, like Jaccottet, Graves, Menashe and others, leads the exemplary life:

There's a curious resistance to Lowry in literary circles, as if he pointed in a direction we must *not* take; whereas, in fact, his example is one of the few shining beacons in a sea of mediocrity.⁹⁵

"The typical Menashe poem," writes Mahon, "is from four to six lines long, rhymed, half-rhymed, internally rhymed or assonantal, onomatopoeic, puns cleverly, often etymologically, and anticipates a number of younger poets in the surprising and apposite resuscitation of cliché, as in 'On My Birthday':

I swam in the sea our mother
Naked as the day I was born
Still fit at forty-four
Willing to live forever."⁹⁶

Mahon might here be describing his own method in the sequence *Light Music*, originally published in 1977 but revised and added to in *Poems 1962-1978* and, again, in *Selected Poems*:

28. *Waterfront*
I cover the waterfront,
its fish and chips,
while better men
go down to the sea in ships.⁹⁷

The poems of *Light Music* form a curious contrast to the remaining poems in *Selected Poems*, and are uneven. The fact that Mahon continues to write, rewrite, revise and collect them is further proof of his own dedication to

⁹² *PJ*, pp. 15-16. My italics.

⁹³ "Love Poetry," *Vogue* (December 1975): 137. My italics.

⁹⁴ *SP*, p. 56.

⁹⁵ "Malcolm Lowry - The Road to Parian," *Icarus* 43, p. 20.

⁹⁶ See note 84.

⁹⁷ *SP*, p. 71.

“the existential lyric.” Not that all achieve the “something entirely coherent and luminous” their author so admires in a classic example of the form, Beckett’s “Saint-Lo.”⁹⁸ Many, however, have the status of wry, engaging epiphanies, rising to a profundity (and musicality) absent from Menashe’s work:

A wand of sunlight
touches the rush-hour
like the finger of heaven.

A land of cumulus
seen from above
is the life to come.⁹⁹

There is, too, a tiredness about some of these poems – notably the more recent additions (“Absence,” “Bluebells,” “Loft,” “Waterfront”). They seem to have been written out of the creative impasse that followed the publication of *Antarctica* (1985), together with an increasing number of translations and adaptations of the work of others (Molière, 1985 & 1986, Raphaele Billetdoux, 1986, Jaccottet, 1987). They may pre-empt, too, a later descent into doggerel, the results of which have been collected in *The Hudson Letter* as “Anglo-Irish Clerihews” and “River Rhymes.” The clerihew “Strange Meeting” runs:

Wilfred Owen
And Elizabeth Bowen
Never met;
And yet ...¹⁰⁰

Still, these frustrated (and frustrating) quatrains can be seen as evidence of a dissatisfaction with the direction one’s work is taking – and of “intellectual impatience.” In a review of MacDiarmid’s *Complete Poems* for the *New Statesman* as long ago as 1978, Mahon had identified the dilemma:

Like Neruda, he was capable of the most strident logorrhea; like Eliot, the most astonishing doggerel. Yet these are characteristics common to many great poets, evidence of intellectual impatience.¹⁰¹

Mahon’s recent resort to light verse may also be symptomatic of a more fundamental change in his poetry. In an interview with Eileen Battersby in 1990 he said he felt his work to be “too formal” and that he was “guilty” of being “overly polished.” He was now interested in a “more conversational,

⁹⁸ *J*, p. 56.

⁹⁹ “Flying,” *SP*, p. 72; originally the penultimate poem in *TSP* (p. 35).

¹⁰⁰ *THL*, p. 26.

¹⁰¹ “Lament for the Makar,” *New Statesman* (1 December 1978): 744.

floppier, looser" kind of verse.¹⁰² Referring to his versions of Molière's *L'Ecole des maris* and *L'Ecole des femmes* and his forthcoming version of *The Bacchae* of Euripides, Mahon remarked: "I think writing for [the] stage is good practice for arriving at the kind of verse I'm aiming at now."¹⁰³ In his 1974 radio profile of Yeats, *Wild Swans at Coole*, he had explained the positive change which had come over Yeats's poetry as a result of turning to the theatre. The difference between the poems "The Falling of the Leaves" (*Crossways*, 1889) and "The Valley of the Black Pig" (*The Wind Among the Reeds*, 1899), he says,

is essentially one of movement, but also of texture. There's a harshness in the imagery which the earlier Yeats would have repudiated, or been incapable of; and a violence in the phantasmagoria which was to be part of the later Yeats's stock-in-trade. One of the reasons for this change was his work in The Abbey Theatre, which he helped to found and for which he himself wrote plays. He explained: "To me drama has been the search for more of manful energy, more of cheerful acceptance of whatever arise out of the logic of events, and for clean outline, instead of those outlines of lyric poetry that are blurred with desire and vague regret."¹⁰⁴

In a review of *Austin Clarke: His Life and Works* by Susan Halpern a year later, Mahon noted how Clarke's "development parallels Yeats's in a number of ways. Both began with the legendary Ireland of the heroic age; both later castigated contemporary Ireland for its failure to live up to the past; both abandoned poetry for verse drama and returned revived."¹⁰⁵ Robert Lowell, with whom Mahon has an affinity in this respect (both have produced versions of Racine's *Phédre*), effected a similar "conversion to looser forms and a more conversational tone" (which, notes Brett C. Millier, "he attributed ... in part to reading Elizabeth Bishop").¹⁰⁶

Asked in an interview given in 1991 about his poem "Dawn at St. Patrick's," Mahon confessed to finding it "too Lowellish": "The stanza form is a bit like 'Skunk Hour'. I think I've come to the end of tight, structured forms. One of my latest, 'The Yaddo Letter', is very chatty and loose."¹⁰⁷ All the more surprising, then, to find Mahon, four years on, returning to a "Skunk Hour" stanza for *The Hudson Letter's* "Noon at St. Michael's".

¹⁰² "Made in Belfast," *The Sunday Tribune* (26 August 1990), *People*, p. 26, and "A Very European Poet," *Irish Times* (10 November 1992): 12.

¹⁰³ "Made in Belfast." See previous note.

¹⁰⁴ "Wild Swans at Coole," BBC Radio Ulster, 26 October 1974. Written and presented by Derek Mahon. Produced by Paul Muldoon.

¹⁰⁵ "Legendary," *New Statesman* (18 April 1975): 518. My italics.

¹⁰⁶ See note 45: p. 198.

¹⁰⁷ See note 40.

Nurses and nuns –
 their sails whiter than those
 of the yachts in the bay, they come and go
 on winged feet, most of them, or in 'sensible' shoes.
 July, and I should be climbing among stones
 or diving, but for broken bones,
 from the rocks below.¹⁰⁸

After the formal innovation and emotional charge of "Dawn at St. Patrick's," "Noon at St. Michael's" comes as something of a disappointment – as if its author had already moved beyond the form's necessities. This is clear from *The Hudson Letter* as a whole, in which long lines and rhyming couplets predominate. The book's finest poems – "The Travel Section," "The Yaddo Letter" and "The Hudson Letter" itself – are written in this form – "chatty" at times, certainly, but "loose" only in that Mahon permits himself a measure of metrical flexibility. Intriguingly, the form serves on occasion as a vehicle for comment on the concept of poetic (and other) form. In "The Yaddo Letter," he writes:

I hear the big trucks flashing through the night
 like Christmas road-houses ablaze with light,
 symbols of modern movement and romance;
 but the important thing, like the man said, is *pairmanence* –
 for you, a continuity with the past
 enabling you to prosper, and a fast
 forward to where the paradoxes grow
 like crocuses in our residual snow;
 for me, a long devotion to the art
 in which you play such an important part,
 a long devotion to the difficult Muse
 your mother was, despite our difficulties.¹⁰⁹

Addressing his daughter again, in section IX of "The Hudson Letter," Mahon confides:

... You were a scream,
 therefore a born artist, but even the *being* is an art
 we learn for ourselves, in solitude, on our very own,
 listening to the innermost silence of the heart,
 prolonging the inconsequence of a gaze
 and dreaming at all times our uninteruptable dream
 of redemptive form.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ *THL*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ *THL*, p. 30.

¹¹⁰ *THL*, p. 55.

An "uninterruptable dream of redemptive form" has accompanied Mahon throughout his writing life, side by side with a fear for "pairmanence" – as he acknowledges in section XVI, "Key West:"

Why so soon in the season? Newspapers and TV
spoke of "El Nino," the fabulous, hot-tide thrust
born in December off Peru like the infant Christ
sea-changing *all* with its rough magic; and advised
of hurricanes to come, so that one feared not only
for the Cuban cabin and the gimcrack condominium
but for the 'sleek and effortless vacation home'
featured in the current issue of *Key Design*,
the "storm-resistant" dream house with its "vinyl membrane,"
a bait-fridge and "teak sailfish-fighting chair;"
for roads and bridges, lighthouses, any structure
presumed permanent ...¹¹¹

Indeed Mahon's poetry could be said to be a homage to the necessarily impermanent nature of existence and artistic activity. In *Lives* he had written:

What will remain after
The twilight of metals,
The flowers of fire,

Will be the soft
Vegetables where our
Politics were conceived.

("What Will Remain")¹¹²

In *The Snow Party*:

The recipes, rhyming slang
And archaic ailments
Of a foreclosed species –

Only a misleading fraction
Will survive on file
To show we could crack a smile.

Only an unrepresentative sample
Will persist on tape
To show what we meant by hope.

("Going Home")¹¹³

¹¹¹ *THL*, p. 70–71.

¹¹² *L*, p. 26.

¹¹³ *TSP*, p. 5.

In his 1988 Biddle Lecture delivered to the Academy of American Poets, "Freedom and Necessity in Contemporary Irish Verse," he took as his theme "the tension set up in Irish poets between the aspiration to imaginative freedom and the recognition of preordained necessities."¹¹⁴ This tension, he claimed, was "a fruitful one, and in its way a version of the artistic impulse itself." It is a tension which informs Mahon's own verse, of course, and of which he can speak on occasion with dazzling simplicity. "The pleasure in bathing or dancing, in colour or shape, is a mystical experience," wrote MacNeice, alluding to poetry's "utility."¹¹⁵ "For me," Mahon has said, "poetry is about shape and sound. It's about taking the formless and making it interesting ... creating form out of formlessness. Poems may appear to be about history or politics or autobiography, but it is essentially an artistic activity."¹¹⁶ As for its "usefulness," a poem can only hope formally for "something entirely luminous and coherent" – and "a good poem is a paradigm of good politics."¹¹⁷ Selecting his "Books of the Year" for *The Irish Times* at the end of 1994, this "very good" poet (Denis Donoghue's phrase)¹¹⁸ returned to his poetry's abiding concerns:

My book of the year is the selection of letters by Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art* (Chatto and Windus, £25 in UK), edited by Robert Giroux, which doubles, at one stroke, the quantity of her published work and the number of her fans. A contemporary, tougher Bishop, wised-up, street-smart: 'Outside, the poor work Broadway in the rain.' With Marilyn Hacker's *Selected Poems 1965–1990* (W. W. Norton, \$20.00 in US), she proves herself one of the very few exceptions on a mediocre scene. At home, the ex-patriate and insufficiently regarded Harry Clifton published a sixth volume, *Night Train Through the Brenner* (Gallery, £5.95): soul, song and formal necessity.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Ts. courtesy of Derek Mahon.

¹¹⁵ *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941; London: Faber and Faber, 1967, reprinted 1979), p. 16.

¹¹⁶ "Made in Belfast." See note 105.

¹¹⁷ "Poetry in Northern Ireland," *20th Century Studies* 4 (November, 1970): 93.

¹¹⁸ *SP*, blurb.

¹¹⁹ "Books of the Year," *Irish Times* (8 December 1994), *Weekend*, p. 7.