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# **“A Forest of Intertextuality”: The Poetry of Derek Mahon**

**Brian Burton**

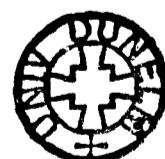
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Submitted as a thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Durham

Department of English Studies

2004



11 JAN 2005

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### **Declaration**

I declare that no part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other university.

Brian Burton

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### Note on the Text

Throughout this study I have used those versions of Mahon's poems which were first published in his individual collections. Mahon is an inveterate reviser, frequently altering texts and titles whenever his work is republished. This may allow for authorial freedom and authority, but in a study of this nature some fixity is required. To parry the risk of textual indeterminacy, therefore, I have avoided using revised versions for the sake of uniformity. I have only referred to revised poems and titles on the rare occasions when it seemed germane to do so for reasons of clarity or to make a particular point.

I have used double quotation marks to indicate quotations taken directly from texts, and single quotation marks for titles and words used in a special sense, e.g. when discussing Mahon's understanding of what is meant by 'home'.

## List of Abbreviations

Full bibliographic citations for these abbreviations are provided in Works Consulted.

### **Abbreviations for works by Derek Mahon.**

<u>NC</u>	<u>Night Crossing</u>
<u>L</u>	<u>Lives</u>
<u>TSP</u>	<u>The Snow Party</u>
<u>P</u>	<u>Poems 1962-1975</u>
<u>THBN</u>	<u>The Hunt by Night</u>
<u>TC</u>	<u>The Chimeras</u>
<u>SP</u>	<u>Selected Poems</u>
<u>THL</u>	<u>The Hudson Letter</u>
<u>J</u>	<u>Journalism</u>
<u>TYB</u>	<u>The Yellow Book</u>
<u>RS</u>	<u>Roman Script</u>
<u>CP</u>	<u>Collected Poems</u>
<u>SC</u>	<u>The Seaside Cemetery</u>
<u>RD</u>	<u>Resistance Days</u>
<u>B</u>	<u>Birds</u>

### **Abbreviations for other frequently cited sources.**

<u>ACP</u>	W.H. Auden, <u>Collected Poems</u>
<u>EA</u>	W.H. Auden, <u>The English Auden</u>
<u>FE</u>	Charles Baudelaire, <u>The Flowers of Evil</u>

<u>BCDW</u>	Samuel Beckett, <u>The Complete Dramatic Works</u>
<u>Proust</u>	Samuel Beckett, <u>Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit</u>
<u>Trilogy</u>	Samuel Beckett, <u>Three Novels by Samuel Beckett: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable</u>
<u>CCP</u>	Hart Crane, <u>Collected Poems</u>
<u>MCP</u>	Louis MacNeice, <u>Collected Poems</u>
<u>YCP</u>	W.B. Yeats, <u>Collected Poems</u>

Each one, so liberal is the law,  
May choose whom he appears before,  
Pick any influential ghost  
From those whom he admires the most.

W.H. Auden

## Introduction

T.S. Eliot, in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, warns against the critical preoccupation with originality and the tendency to praise “those aspects of [a poet’s] work in which he least resembles anyone else.”<sup>1</sup> For Eliot, it is preferable to approach a poet’s work without the prejudice of looking for signs of isolation from poetic tradition, and he claims that it is through association with writers of the past that “not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.”<sup>2</sup> In the case of Derek Mahon, Eliot’s remarks acquire a particular veracity. Mahon’s poetry gains much of its force from asserting the presence of literary precursors, creating a dialogue of poetic transmission that gathers impetus and authority from his relationship with them. But this is not to say that Mahon’s own voice is swamped by those of his forebears: his individual voice can always be heard as a counterpoint to others that filter through his poems. He accepts influence not as a peril of his art but as an enabling feature of it. Like every other writer, Mahon is involved at some level with at least one artistic community or line of literary tradition, and his identity is sustained by that tradition. Influence for him is not a bar to originality; indeed, part of his originality stems from his handling of source materials. Mahon is an excavator of knowledge, incorporating it into his work as a way of generating or extracting particular meaning or significance.

The purpose of this study on influence and intertextuality in Mahon’s poetry is to explore and assess the various ways he uses the works of writers who have influenced his idiom and ideas, his poetic consciousness, and his aesthetic sensibility. Much ink has been spilled on lists of those writers considered important to Mahon, but comparatively

little has been written on how, why or to what extent other writers have contributed to his work. My choice of major influences – Albert Camus, Louis MacNeice, Samuel Beckett, W.H. Auden, Hart Crane, Charles Baudelaire and Gérard de Nerval, although numerous others are dealt with more fleetingly – has been dictated both by Mahon himself and by his critics, most notably Edna Longley who has, at various times, mentioned each of these writers in relation to Mahon. Of this list, all bar Crane and Nerval are the subjects of celebratory, critical or review essays in Mahon's collection of occasional writings, Journalism, where MacNeice and Beckett merit four essays each while the others receive one each. This is not to say, however, that their importance for Mahon is in any way lesser or marginal, and Mahon has described MacNeice and Camus as “paradigmatic writers”.<sup>3</sup>

Influence studies have come under attack in recent years as being old-fashioned, retrogressive or irrelevant, and many critics have dismissed influence as little more than coincidence or repetition. Harold Bloom's The Anxiety of Influence has been instrumental in discrediting influence studies through its delineation of an Oedipal struggle with a strong precursor. Bloom insists that strong poets can only compete with other strong poets: allusions to minor poets, contemporaries and non-literary sources show up in the poetry of successors as weaknesses. For Bloom, influence emerges from the sublimation, repression or denial of previous poets through a process of intellectual revisionism. It is essential to Bloom's theory that strong precursors be dead, but Auden and Beckett were very much alive when Mahon's first collection, Night-Crossing, appeared in 1968, and his earliest published poems predate the deaths of Camus and MacNeice in 1963. Patently, Mahon could not possibly have forecast the arrival of The

Anxiety of Influence in 1973, but his creation of a personal canon which relies so heavily on certain anti-Bloomian tenets can, to some extent, be seen retrospectively as contesting Bloom's ideas. Bloom's 'negative' model ignores the more positive aspect of influence as "a complex process of human (inter)cultural activity in spaces and times including those of subsequent readers. Texts are productions of multiple agencies and a plethora of intentions, from pleasure to instruction, exemplification to enlightenment."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the acceptance of influence is a historical strategy, linking the present writer with other writers across temporal and geographical boundaries. By openly recognising those writers, influence opens up possibilities for cultural renewal since it "confounds any programmatic or even systematic mode of textual criticism."<sup>5</sup> Influence is concerned with agency but not intention, and is therefore more like a transmission between two or more writers than a process of usurpation. Furthermore, it provides a way of clearing a path for an understanding of both precursor and successor.

Bloomian theory has deservedly come under attack recently from several quarters. Christopher Ricks has described all writers and critics whose work has appeared since The Anxiety of Influence as both beneficiaries and victims:

Beneficiaries, granted his passion, his learning, and his so giving salience to the impulse or spirit of allusion. Victims, because of his melodramatic sub-Freudian parricidal scenario, his sentimental discrediting of gratitude, and his explicit repudiation of all interest in allusion as a matter of the very words.<sup>6</sup>

Ricks further insists that influence as manifested by allusion is "due acknowledgement of other creators from whom good things continue to flow".<sup>7</sup> What Ricks emphasises here is

the way successors are actually thanking their precursors as debts of honour, allying themselves with writers of the past as an act of homage rather than trying to usurp precursors through Oedipal conflict. Taking issue with Bloom's notion of Milton as "the great Inhibitor",<sup>8</sup> Ricks refutes the idea that instead of disabling the work of Dryden and Pope, their work was positively enabled by Milton's example, turning it to their own advantage and "making it serve [their] purposes in allusion".<sup>9</sup>

Edna Longley has made a remarkably similar point, claiming that, "Bloom does not consider the function of tradition in alleviating anxiety, in empowering rather than emasculating, in promoting collectivity as well as competition, in maximising the resources of the craft".<sup>10</sup> The strongest precursor for any Irish poet is, of course, Yeats, although Bloom denies even Yeats the status of "Titanic figure".<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Mahon has gone on record as saying, "I was never oppressed by Yeats".<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that Mahon has never engaged or become entangled with Yeats; but his refusal to be dominated means that Yeats does not stand as a preventative or limiting barrier either to Mahon's poetic consciousness or to his success or failure as a poet. Yeats is, for Mahon, "at a distance" and "a splendid monument" that does not cast an overbearing shadow across his own work.<sup>13</sup> Longley uses the example of Yeats to support her own attack on Bloom, and she damns the "unduly *macho* psychology" that lies behind The Anxiety of Influence as,

individualism and Romantic subjectivism (which Yeats contested) run mad. In opposition to such a model we might give Yeatsian weight to the workings of tradition in Irish poetry: to how poets have reinterpreted ideas, images, structures, forms in changing historical conditions. Creative

transmission may liberate as much as it imprisons. MacNeice thought that Yeats's real message was: '*Go thou and do otherwise*'.<sup>14</sup>

Longley's formulation of reinterpretation in the light of tradition chimes with Linda Hutcheon's formalist description of post-modern intertextuality as "a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context".<sup>15</sup> Between them, Ricks, Longley and Hutcheon suggest a more positive and fruitful way of reading Mahon that involves the reader as an intermediary between past and present texts, between precursor and successor. Mahon's reader feels almost compelled to actively search out and refer back to his original sources, while recognising what Shane Murphy calls "the multivoiced potential inherent in his use of source material".<sup>16</sup> Murphy also asserts that intertextuality, as an oblique practice conferring an ironic perspective, is valuable on another significant level. While paying homage to esteemed precursors is itself an important act, "the appropriated texts also provide [Mahon] with a critical shorthand to mark [his] own rereading of those texts".<sup>17</sup> This intertextual practice encourages the reader to "produce readings located in between the present poem and past context" and thus engage with the present poem as part of a discourse with changing historical situations.<sup>18</sup> This is especially true of Mahon's interpretations of Baudelaire, Nerval and Crane, where he adapts perceptions of mid nineteenth-century France and early twentieth-century America to illustrate both local and international conditions with regard to the late twentieth century. On the other hand, Mahon's reading of MacNeice allows him to see that the passing of time is no guarantor of historical change, and that problematic questions of community, identity and politics remain permanent obstacles to the Irish poet.

Nevertheless, Mahon's commitment to poetry compels him to pursue his vision irrespective of the possibility of failure, and the influence of Beckett is instructive here. Mary Orr has written, "In the teeth of extreme adversity, the positive influence of art may also revive a will to survive, to hope, to endure".<sup>19</sup> Having witnessed the Troubles, alcoholism, and failed relationships, Mahon's adversities have indeed been extreme, and Beckett's work stands as a beacon that provides Mahon with the strength to 'go on' despite whatever history and personal circumstance might throw at him.

Mahon was born in the Belfast suburb of Glengormley, which is satirised in his first collection, Night-Crossing, as a place where "the principle of the watering can" (NC 5) holds more fascination for its inhabitants than the self-reflection that gives rise to poetry. Raised without siblings, Mahon realised from an early age that he was "A strange child with a taste for verse" (THBN 9), a taste that immediately set him apart from most of the inhabitants of his hometown. After leaving school, he went to Dublin to study English, French and philosophy at Trinity, during which time he also spent a year at the Sorbonne. Mahon was attracted to French literature from an early age: some of the first poems he published were translations of Baudelaire and Corbière, while, in 'Death and the Sun', he recalls reading Camus as a schoolboy. The titles of many of his poems indicate that philosophical enquiry has always played a part in Mahon's aesthetic and moral outlook – 'Consolations of Philosophy', 'How to Live', 'As It Should Be', 'Tractatus', 'Heraclitus on Rivers', 'Schopenhauer's Day' – and he shares with Camus, Beckett and Auden a particular fascination with the ideas of existentialism. Mahon's attraction to existentialism can be related to his sense of isolation from home soil. A compulsive itinerant, his pattern of exile has been governed by a relentless series of

leave-takings and homecomings. Mahon has spent much of his adult life ‘on the road’, living and working in, amongst other places, London, Paris and New York, and his exilic and cosmopolitan wanderings have likewise been reflected in the titles of his works.

Night-Crossing, The Hunt by Night, ‘Gipsies’, and ‘Night Drive’, for example, all suggest a desire for escape from Northern Ireland through surreptitious movement both away from and towards something immediately indefinable. Yet Mahon has always returned to Ireland, usually only briefly, in an enactment of what Guiseppe Serpillo terms a “Ulysses complex”, whereby the poet is

perpetually attracted towards their starting point, like Homer’s Ulysses, only to be driven outwards again, like Dante’s Ulysses, in a perpetual ‘quest’ for something which defies all boundaries...searching what he may never find. His very seeking will, however, change the general parameters of interpretation of reality as well as the interrelationship between the individual and the community to which he belongs, between history and the present.<sup>20</sup>

Mahon’s journeyings are characteristic of the “dissociated sensibilities” he identifies in other Northern Protestant poets such as James Simmons and Michael Longley in the essay, ‘Poetry in Northern Ireland’.<sup>21</sup> Here, Mahon claims that such poets (and this includes Mahon himself) are concerned less with “Ireland as a distinct cultural entity” than with “a diffuse and fortuitous assembly of Irish, British and American models” (and, given Mahon’s own preoccupations, we might add French models).<sup>22</sup>

With the eruption of the Troubles in 1969 one year after the publication of Night-Crossing, Mahon discovered “the curious sense / Of working on the circumference” (P

111) which confers on his poems the wistful, resigned reticence that seems to have offended Seamus Deane. Deane appraises Mahon's poetry in a cool light, criticising Mahon's characteristic irony and evasiveness which, in the face of the situation in Northern Ireland, Deane sees as deflecting attention away from history and responsibility. Viewing art as being necessarily conditioned by violence, Deane remarks that, "contact with violence is regarded by some [and this, presumably, includes Deane] as a stimulus to the deep energies of creation. Avoidance of it is regarded as a form of imaginative anaemia."<sup>23</sup> Deane complains that Mahon's desire to be "through with history" (TSP 9; THBN 16) is a rather disingenuous feature of an "urbanity" that "helps him to fend off the forces of atavism, ignorance and oppression which are part of his Northern Protestant heritage".<sup>24</sup> By avoiding the historical forces which to some extent forged his own consciousness, Deane suggests that Mahon is not sufficiently engaged, unlike Seamus Heaney, in a full-frontal condemnation of the violence. But separation and violence are not just aspects of Northern Irish history and identity; they are fundamental to human experience *in toto*. The list provided by Deane of other Irish "citizens of the world by profession" includes Denis Devlin, Sean O'Faolain, James Joyce, Louis MacNeice, and Samuel Beckett.<sup>25</sup> This latter pair is particularly significant from Mahon's point of view because MacNeice and Beckett constitute two of his most abiding influences. Writing of Mahon's early poetry, although the claim still holds today, Maurice Harmon has commented that Beckett's example, like that of MacNeice, provides Mahon with "a means of writing about Northern Ireland, indirectly, shielding himself from direct description, filtering experience through the language of others, ironical, detached, impersonal".<sup>26</sup> As a result, "violence, " in the words of Ben Howard, "is not so much

presented as overheard” in Mahon’s poetry.<sup>27</sup> Violence certainly lurks behind many of Mahon’s poems, but whereas Deane seems to believe that art must confront history as a way of understanding it, Mahon prefers to engage with the *effects* of that history. Edna Longley, a critic no less contentious than Deane, has described Mahon’s poetry as “enact[ing] some process of atonement or retribution for historical guilt” in the search for “redemptive epiphanies”.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, Mahon’s aesthetic is immediately aligned with that of Auden, who similarly sought a form of salvation in art. Mahon’s poetry identifies not with those in the day-to-day battles incurred during times of violence, but with “the outcast and the damned” who have been forgotten by history, and one of the ways he achieves this negotiation is through intertextual allusion.<sup>29</sup>

Intertextuality has featured in Mahon’s poetry since the onset of his career, and Bruce Stewart is convincing in his claim that ‘Girls in their Seasons’, the opening poem of Mahon’s first collection, owes its “chiliastic note” to MacNeice’s ‘An Eclogue for Christmas’.<sup>30</sup> But finding allegiance with precursors as a strategy for poetic enabling is only one of the ways Mahon negotiates a route through his poetic inheritance. Another is to engage in a discourse with significant works of the past to assess the critical and cultural co-ordinates which feature as part of that inheritance. ‘A Kensington Notebook’ (SP 90-95), for example, is a pastiche of Ezra Pound’s Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, a poem, according to Rainer Emig, that addresses a “self-conscious coming to terms with the past, with dead poetic traditions”.<sup>31</sup> ‘A Kensington Notebook’ sets the lives of some of the founding fathers of literary modernism – Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Ford Maddox Ford – against a culture of disintegration and loss of confidence. The poem evokes nostalgia and anxiety simultaneously: nostalgia for the role of the artist and, as Pound

puts it, “the dead art / Of poetry”; anxiety for the late twentieth century’s slide into what Mahon calls in The Yellow Book “the pastiche paradise of the post-modern” (TYB 19).<sup>32</sup> These same themes are broached in ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ (TSP 19-20) where Mahon’s “palace of porcelain” recalls the fragility of aesthetic and cultural values as conveyed by Pound’s ‘The Age Demanded’: “The glow of porcelain / Brought no reforming sense / To his perception / Of the social inconsequence”.<sup>33</sup> Mahon thus engages with the concerns of high modernism as a means of delivering a barbed attack on what he sees as the aesthetic denigration of post-modernism, a critical position that refuses to lament the fragmentation of existence, the collapse of selfhood, and the undermining of old values.

Yet there is also an ambivalence at the core of Mahon’s attitude towards Poundian modernism. Edna Longley has noticed that Auden and MacNeice, two of the most powerful influences on Mahon, “were considered reactionary by Modernists (and still are)”, and ‘A Kensington Notebook’ likewise assumes a subversive, reactionary stance through its framing of an astute and double-edged irony.<sup>34</sup> Section II of Pound’s poem opens with the phrase “The age demanded”. By the time it is repeated two stanzas later and as the title of the poem’s penultimate section, it is enclosed in ironising quotation marks, signalling its passage into cliché. But when Mahon quotes the phrase in the lines “(Not Dowland, nor Purcell / ‘The age demanded’, / But the banalities / Of the *Evening Standard*)”, the use of parentheses ironises the phrase further, emphasising the reduction of Pound’s cliché to a mere banality. The demands of the age are thus satirised as susceptible to historical flux. If, as Section II of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley suggests, the artist is a practitioner of a restricted (in the sense of ‘art for art’s sake’) form of art which

omits much of life, then ‘A Kensington Notebook’ seeks to retrieve those omissions in an affirmation of optimism and potential: “*Un rameur*, finally, / *Sur le fleuve des morts*, / Poling his profile toward / What further shore?” This further shore, like Mahon’s reading of Pound, is ultimately evasive since irony and (ironically) Poundian detachment confer on his poetry an uneasy association with the legacy of modernism.

Intertextuality, in its broadest, non-Kristevan sense, has come to encompass not only influence but also quotation, allusion, translation and imitation, all of which feature strongly throughout Mahon’s work.<sup>35</sup> Quotation never operates self-sufficiently; rather, it signposts a material kind of intertextuality that makes a connection with another text, another author, and another period of time, denoting an interplay between identity and difference. An example of this is found in ‘Penshurst Place’ (SP 75), a poem named after the home of Sir Philip Sidney, which ends both of its stanzas with the line “come live with me and be my love.” Although unacknowledged, this is a quotation from Marlowe’s ‘The Passionate Shepherd to His Love’, a pastoral lyric that speaks of a return to an Edenic way of life. Marlowe’s poem was later parodied by Raleigh and Donne, who based their satires on the notion that we live in a fallen world. Mahon extends this idea of fallenness, but instead of relying on sexual connotations he creates a political scenario involving England (Penshurst Place), Ireland (Kinsale), and Europe (Spain and France). Hugh Haughton has identified one of the poem’s themes as “the survival of earlier cultural forms in the present”, an idea reinforced by Mahon’s subtle references to Wordsworth, Keats, Proust and Jaccottet, and possibly several others besides.<sup>36</sup> But it also points forward to two other poems by Mahon, ‘Kinsale’ (A 34) and ‘‘Christmas in Kinsale’ (TYB 56-57). Each of these poems reminds us that we do indeed live in a fallen

age: while the former laments, “The kind of rain we know is a thing of the past”, the latter paints a vision of Yeatsian apocalypse.

‘Penshurst Place’ is just one instance of the connection made by Mahon’s poems to a complex system of other texts, other places, and other cultures. Quotation and allusion confer permanence on texts by making those texts part of a surviving tradition. Allusion is an equally self-conscious process of reference that operates “at one remove from its referent.”<sup>37</sup> It is arguably Mahon’s favourite intertextual device, and we would be hard-pressed to find no trace of it in any of his best work. If quotation provides a dialogue with the source text, then allusion constitutes a knowing, whispered aside. While quotation – and this includes Mahon’s frequent use of epigraphs – engages in a trans-historical, trans-cultural discourse, allusion subtly and less conspicuously “borrows a mood and announces a debt.”<sup>38</sup> We see evidence of this in ‘The Attic’ (P 102), a poem discussed at greater length in the chapter on Beckett:

I who know nothing  
 Scribbling on the off-chance,  
 Darkening the white page,  
 Cultivating my ignorance.

There is a loud echo here of the “rigid whiteness” of Mallarmé’s ‘Un Coup de Dés’ (‘A Throw of the Dice’), which derives its title from Pascal’s wager.<sup>39</sup> All three of these texts have at their centres the problem of establishing meaning in a meaningless universe from which the gods have seemingly disappeared and where order is reduced to chance occurrence. Mahon has long been critical of some of Mallarmé’s ideas, but the allusion is reminiscent of the allusions in Eliot’s early works to Tennyson and Whitman. Eliot

dismissed these poets in some of his essays, but as James Longenbach points out, “Eliot’s allusions were part of a self-consciously political program. Whitman and Tennyson were crucial, Eliot knew, to his personal life as a poet; but they could not be part of his public mission to alter the terms of his literary culture.”<sup>40</sup> By publicly spurning Tennyson and Whitman, Eliot was effectively excluding them from his own pantheon, distancing himself from them in order to focus attention on those literary traditions he was more keen to publicise (Shakespeare, the Metaphysical poets, and French symbolism, for instance). Unlike Eliot, however, Mahon is generous in his acknowledgement of his precursors. Rarely is there any sense of unconscious echoes in his work as he is all too aware that the language of poetry has a history of dissemination and transference. Mahon’s attitude towards Mallarmé, for example, is not so much political as personal, being based on “Mallarmé’s noxious belief that the world came into existence in order to finish up between the covers of a book” (J 193). It is understandable that Mahon should take offence at this deluded notion, less so that he should choose to exclude Mallarmé from his long list of translations of symbolist poets given their shared sympathies: the use of similar imagery, antagonism towards the philistine, dedication to the art of poetry, and an impersonal tone to name but four. But even Mahon’s objection to Mallarmé’s preciousity cannot prevent the Frenchman’s presence from manifesting itself in ‘The Attic’, and what emerges is a debt of difference that still registers Mallarmé’s importance to Mahon’s aesthetic.

Not all of Mahon’s allusions operate in this fashion, of course. One case in point is the similarity between titles – another way a poet can allude to a predecessor – of Mahon’s poems and those of MacNeice. Setting them in pairs brings out the significance

of Mahon's (probably) conscious debt to MacNeice: 'Belfast' / 'In Belfast'; 'Carrickfergus' / 'Glengormley'; 'Death of an Actress' / 'The Death of a Film Star'; 'Autobiography' / 'Autobiographies'; 'The Return' / 'The Return'; 'Nostalgia' / 'Nostalgias'; 'Woods' / 'The Woods'; 'Death of an Old Lady' / 'An Old Lady'. These pairings do not necessarily deal with the same themes or ideas, but there is more than mere coincidence at work here: these titles, along with the commemorative 'In Carrowdore Churchyard (at the grave of Louis MacNeice)' (NC 3), constitute part of Mahon's ongoing homage to a poet whose life and work encompassed the same religious, political and cultural concerns, and who laid the groundwork for Mahon's investigations into his own Anglo-Irish Protestant psyche. Without the influence of MacNeice it is hard to imagine Mahon finding such a powerful voice so quickly.

Brian John has described Mahon's translation work in these terms: "The intertextual practice of allusion is of a piece with Mahon's preoccupations with forgery and parody or pastiche, just as his own translations from Villon, Corbière, Rimbaud, Molière and others are, amongst other things, assumptions of personae."<sup>41</sup> Again, these performances are acts of homage, which transcribe an earlier poet's work onto the pages of contemporary history. Translation can be a form of interpretation, and whether it takes liberties with another author's work or simply re-arranges that work in some way, translation establishes a historical solidarity that carries the precursor's work into another age where associations between different eras might be elucidated and clarified. It also formulates an intertextual, trans-historical discourse with a community of other authors. Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre', for instance, has been translated many times, each with its own aesthetic agenda. Mahon's version joins a long list, including those by Robert

Lowell, Samuel Beckett, and Ciaran Carson, and as part of what seems an ongoing fascination among poets with Rimbaud's poem, Mahon's translation becomes "part of a larger cultural history."<sup>42</sup> Apart from translating Ovid, Horace, Pasternak and Brecht among others, the vast majority of Mahon's most familiar translations have come from French literature; but more recently he has produced versions of the Italian poets Ariosto, Michaelangelo, Pasolini and Montale, all of which are found in the Collected Poems. Translation therefore offers Mahon the opportunity to participate in and live vicariously through other cultures, thereby exposing the possibilities offered by a life elsewhere. Poetry of the Other provides an insight into experiences beyond those of living in Ireland, an escape into another world, and a point of reference to which the Irish experience can be compared, contrasted and ultimately understood in terms unlimited by parochial restrictions. But this is not to say that translations offer a view of a more acceptable reality. Terence Brown describes Irish poets' fascination with translations as a political, as well as a cultural, strategy:

translations are the stuff of poetic imagining, ways at best of coping with the untranslatable awfulness of our current condition. In translating Ireland, our poems are, it seems to me, in quest of some means to comprehend that condition so that we might be more fully at home in the language of our feelings about this place which is the only home we have.<sup>43</sup>

Translation, then, is both a way for Mahon of understanding his 'homelessness' and a way of feeling at home among a larger community of other writers: "Translation puts me within their [other writers'] context, and invites them into the Irish context."<sup>44</sup>

Because of the nature of poetic influence, it is neither practical nor efficacious to attempt a study based on chronology. The influence of Camus, MacNeice, Beckett and Auden has been present in Mahon's consciousness ever since his first collection. Only my discussions of Crane and Baudelaire lend themselves to chronological placement, being based on Mahon's most recent collections of wholly new material, while it seemed sensible to bracket Nerval alongside Baudelaire as an adjunct to considerations regarding Mahon's overall relationship with French poetry. Occasionally, certain poems are discussed in different contexts to illustrate how these poems incorporate different aspects of influence. For example, 'In Belfast' contains MacNeicean and Beckettian overtones, necessitating discussion in each chapter, while 'The Sea in Winter' deserves consideration in the light of its reliance on Mahon's understanding of both Camus and Auden.

As I mentioned earlier, my choice of influences on Mahon's work has not been arbitrary since each of them has played his part in forming Mahon's poetic consciousness by providing the sources on which his intertextual practices are grounded. Mahon has made clear his philosophical sympathies, describing himself as "a make-believe existentialist" ('Dawn at St. Patrick's', SP 104-6) and "an open-minded existentialist."<sup>45</sup> Broadly speaking, existentialism is the philosophy of dark times, constructing an opposition to rationalist doctrines which assume that the universe is governed by an ordered system. Mahon's attraction to existentialism is informed by his affinity with the equally sceptical, yet equally optimistic, Camus. Camus's own brand of existential thought colours almost everything Mahon has written to some extent, especially with regard to his quest for personal authenticity and his perceptions of a fundamentally

absurd universe. In its Heideggerian form, the concept of authenticity pertains to the condition of understanding the existential structure of life whereby the individual's identity is derived from their social situation. Authenticity involves critical self-reflection on the nature of identity and assuming personal responsibility for choosing or creating one's own identity. According to Heidegger, some degree of inauthenticity is always unavoidable since the practical necessities of everyday life often take priority over self-reflection. Authenticity is therefore akin to the notion of Christian salvation or redemption (as discussed in the chapter on Auden), as individuals cannot guarantee the success of their endeavours. Nevertheless, personal authenticity, and the striving to attain it, is concerned with fulfilling the individual's potential in the world. Camus advocated the need to confront the meaninglessness at the centre of existence – i.e. the absurd – while proclaiming that, “To create is...to give a shape to one’s fate”, despite artistic creation being the most absurd of all pursuits.<sup>46</sup> The absurd is, for Camus as it is for Mahon, that which is beyond the scope of rationality in spite of its apparent amenability to reason. It is the awareness of existence’s lack of meaning or purpose which leads to metaphysical anxiety and the illogicality of experience. In Mahon’s work, this attitude translates into a frequent tendency to describe poetry – albeit ironically – in dismissive or pejorative terms; “All farts in a biscuit tin” (P 112), for example. Ideas derived from Mahon’s reading of Camus permeate his entire corpus. The prominence of Camus in my opening chapter is designed as preparation for further explorations of authenticity and absurdity in subsequent chapters, especially those on MacNeice, Beckett, Auden (all of whom had strong interests in existential thought) and Nerval.

Mahon's reverence for MacNeice is apparent from his repeated inclusion of the elegy, 'In Carrowdore Churchyard (at the grave of Louis MacNeice)', in all of his selected and collected volumes, and its position as the opening poem of his first pamphlet, Twelve Poems. Edna Longley has indicated the importance of MacNeice in Mahon's development, stating that Mahon "reacts to and against an environment which is the antithesis of poetry and therefore compels it at a deep level", before concluding that Mahon "start[s] at the point where MacNeice leaves off".<sup>47</sup> As one of Mahon's paradigmatic writers, MacNeice provided a model on which Mahon based his early development. Richard York has identified the political basis of MacNeice's appeal for Mahon as essentially pluralistic: "[Mahon] shares with [MacNeice] the sense that there is no monolithic, authoritative pattern of things. In these respects...both stand against the dogmatic conformism that is not uncommon in Northern Ireland, and both explicitly denounce it."<sup>48</sup> In MacNeice, Mahon has found a precursor whose relationship with Belfast in particular and Ireland in general mirrors his own, similarly "mingl[ing] a sense of belonging or quasi-belonging, of respect and concern, with a sense of restriction, of illiberalism and discomfort, of the need to be elsewhere."<sup>49</sup> This dual identity is most apparent in Mahon's meditations on alienation and what he understands by what is meant by 'home'. 'Home' becomes a prominent feature of the bulk of his translations, many of which juxtapose nineteenth-century French socio-cultural contexts and conditions with those of twentieth-century Ireland.

Beckett is a near-ubiquitous presence in Mahon's work, and he represents the prime example of the artist struggling to come to terms with personal failure and an authentic response towards death. But Beckett is also much more than this: to Mahon he

is “a friendlier, matier kind of voice” that inspires humour and the strength to ‘go on’.<sup>50</sup> Auden likewise deals with artistic failure within the context of his relationship with his audience, and Mahon finds in Auden a source of inspiration to withstand Beckett’s bleaker moments and to go in search of personal redemption. Mahon sees in Crane’s work the realisation that life relies on the kind of optimism brought about by retrieving a sense of the mythical past and planting the seeds of hope in a present grown cynical and reliant on the more insidious aspects of capitalism and technology. Finally, the presence of Baudelaire’s influence in Mahon’s work also provides him with a way of investigating the possibility of personal renewal in a hostile world, while he uses Nerval to incorporate into his poetry aspects of autobiography, personal loss, a deep-seated psychological connection with the natural world, and confrontation with the absurd.

Along with authenticity and the absurd there is another major concept which emerges regularly in Mahon’s work that requires a note of explanation: silence. This is one of the most complex issues to feature in Mahon’s poetry since it is confronted on a number of different, although interconnected, levels. Firstly, silence is presented as a failure of language to express or communicate, a move that allies Mahon with Beckett. This art of failure is based on the idea that language is contaminated and impure, due in part to its usage by precursors. “It’s scarcely possible for the artist to write a word,” writes Susan Sontag, “that doesn’t remind him of something already achieved.”<sup>51</sup> One of the consequences of this principle is that the failure of language severs the dialogue with an audience, necessitating the creation of a personal audience of other artists (*à la* Auden) who share in the same linguistic corruption and whose language(s) can be incorporated by Mahon into a strategy for intertextual enabling. This gives rise to a second level on

which silence operates, namely that of irony. The failure of language leads Mahon to conclude that it is perhaps

Better to contemplate

The blank page

And leave it blank

Than modify

Its substance by

So much as a pen-stroke. (THBN 41-42)

This acknowledgement of the futility of creation is, on one hand, an avoidance of the demands placed on the poet by the world at large (a theme also broached by Camus and MacNeice). On the other hand, it can be considered an assault on the validity of writing poetry in sectarian Belfast. Yet the very act of writing an admission of failure ironises such issues, and Mahon, like Beckett, continues to remain compelled to break the silence of the blank page. Irony prevails over the notion of the failure of language since Mahon's resolute commitment to writing actually signifies a high esteem for language. This ambivalent impulse to confront both the irrepressible and the inexpressible is, according to Sontag, "the subliminal idea that it might be possible to out-talk language, or to talk oneself into silence".<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Sontag's theory on the aesthetics of silence is especially instructive here, and she concludes that,

silence is likely to remain a viable notion for modern art and consciousness only if deployed with a considerable, near systematic irony...The present prospect is that artists will go on abolishing art, only to

resurrect it in a more retracted version.<sup>53</sup>

The third form of silence encountered in Mahon's poetry is of the existential variety. According to Heidegger:

*Keeping silent* is another essential property of discourse, and it has the same existential foundation. In talking with another, the person who keeps silent can 'make one understand' (that is, he can develop an understanding), and he can do so more authentically than the person who is never short of words.<sup>54</sup>

In other words, silence can be an authentic mode of communication that helps speech attain seriousness and integrity. Authentic silence can counteract the 'idle talk' of what Heidegger terms 'das Man', the inauthentic social majority that sanctions the corruption of language as a reflection of their own 'falleness'. This leads to Mahon's fourth, and perhaps most important treatment of silence, the silence of reticence. As suggested earlier, silence cannot be ahistorical since language – and therefore speech – is historically formed. As 'idle talk' signifies an absence or renunciation of thought, so silence-as-reticence becomes a moral stance refusing to engage in the processes and procedures of 'idle talk'. When applied to political conditions, such discretion circumscribes partaking of direct discourse on matters such as the Troubles. The artist cannot intervene in violence since violence is beyond comprehension and reason, and is not available to narration. Language is unable to fully or even faithfully express violence and its consequences, as violence is literally "unspeakable" ('Rathlin Island', THBN 16). Silence therefore symbolises artistic unease and the inability to aptly convey outrage.

Yet Mahon also examines a different kind of reticent silence, one that, through self-censorship, describes the behaviour of Belfast's citizens in the aftermath of sectarianism rather than the violence itself. In 'In Belfast' (NC 6), he writes of "The spurious mystery in the knowing nod", a coded sign that, despite its silence, still reveals partisanship and barely-concealed loyalties. In this sense Mahon's strategy is similar to that of Seamus Heaney who, in 'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing', decries facile journalistic clichés which say nothing new and therefore say nothing of worth.<sup>55</sup> But Heaney also pours scorn on himself for his complicity in "a conspiracy of evasion and compliance, which has made co-existence possible, but has left bigotry intact".<sup>56</sup> Mahon likewise feels guilty for his own complicity in keeping his own counsel ("we keep sullen silence" – emphasis added) out of reticence and self-preservation. But whereas Heaney writes of the actual violence ("Men die at hand. In blasted street and home / The gelignite's a common sound effect"), Mahon provides no such descriptions as though registering that language cannot adequately communicate meaning with regard to politically motivated violence. Mahon prefers to address violence indirectly and evasively through poems such as the deeply ironic 'Glengormley' (NC 5), which opens with a line from Sophocles's Antigone before obliquely detailing the effects of violence and ironising both his ostensible safety from monsters and the deaths of "heroes". This intertextual practice reflects the poet's silence as a loss for words, yet by speaking through others Mahon is able to convey the truth of his experiences.

Because this study is concerned predominantly with influence as the transmission of *ideas*, Mahon's use of and attitudes towards poetic *form* must necessarily take a back seat. Edna Longley, in an excellent essay on the formal aspects of Mahon's poetry, has

rightly complained that Mahon's poetry "has sometimes suffered the slings and arrows of context-fixated" criticism, while "nearly all Mahon's poetry, wears form new".<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, the analysis of form has not been a primary motivation here. As a result, his formal diversity is signposted only as and when it seemed either essential or apposite to do so. For example, his experimentation with prose poetry is dealt with in relation to French poetry (especially Rimbaud and Baudelaire), and his octosyllabic verse epistles are discussed in the chapter on Auden, while his frequent use of the three-lined stanza in earlier poems (which seems indebted to William Carlos Williams) and the long lines of his later poetry are mentioned at appropriate junctures.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, ed. and introd. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975) 37.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot 38.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Haughton, “‘Even now there are places where a thought might grow’: Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon,” The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland, ed. Neil Corcoran (Bridgend: Seren, 1992) 91.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Orr, Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts (Cambridge: Polity, 203) 84.

<sup>5</sup> Orr 87.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Ricks, Allusion to the Poets (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Ricks 84.

<sup>8</sup> Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 32.

<sup>9</sup> Ricks 33.

<sup>10</sup> Edna Longley, “Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art,” Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature, ed. Michael Kenneally, Studies in Contemporary Irish Literature: 2, Irish Literary Studies: 43 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1995) 282.

<sup>11</sup> Bloom 32.

<sup>12</sup> Terence Brown, “An Interview with Derek Mahon,” Poetry Ireland Review 14 (1985): 18.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, “Interview” 18.

<sup>14</sup> Longley, “Derek Mahon,” 282.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (New York: Routledge, 1988) 118.

<sup>16</sup> Shane Murphy, “Obliquity in the Poetry of Paul Muldoon and Mebdh McGuckian,” Éire-Ireland 31.3-4 (1996): 77.

<sup>17</sup> Murphy 97.

<sup>18</sup> Murphy 97.

<sup>19</sup> Orr 86.

<sup>20</sup> Giuseppe Serpillo, Kingfishers, introd. Brian Arkins (Newbridge: Goldsmith, 2001) 93.

<sup>21</sup> Derek Mahon, “Poetry in Northern Ireland,” Twentieth-Century Studies 4 (1970): 92.

<sup>22</sup> Mahon 92.

<sup>23</sup> Seamus Deane, Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980 (1985; London: Faber, 1987) 162.

<sup>24</sup> Deane 156.

<sup>25</sup> Deane 156.

<sup>26</sup> Maurice Harmon, rev. of Courtyards in Delft, by Derek Mahon, Irish University Review 12.1 (1982): 103.

<sup>27</sup> Ben Howard, “Secular Believers,” rev. of Provinces, by Czeslaw Milosz, Selected Poems, by Derek Mahon, Saints in their Ox-Hide Boat, by Brendan Galvin, and As If It Matters, by Eamon Grennan, Poetry 161.4 (1993): 227.

<sup>28</sup> Longley, “Derek Mahon,” 298, 301.

<sup>29</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, “Introduction: The Critical Context,” The Poetry of Derek Mahon, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Ulster Editions and Monographs: 11 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 2002) 15.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce Stewart, “‘Solving Ambiguity’: The Secular Mysticism of Derek Mahon,” Andrews 74.

<sup>31</sup> Rainer Emig, Modernism in Poetry: Motivations, Structures and Limits (London: Longman, 1995) 110.

<sup>32</sup> Ezra Pound, Selected Poems 1908-1959 (1975; London: Faber, 1984) 98.

<sup>33</sup> Pound 109.

<sup>34</sup> Edna Longley, Poetry in the Wars (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1986) 171.

<sup>35</sup> For Kristeva, intertextuality “has nothing to do with matters of influence by one writer upon another, or with the sources of a literary work; it does, on the other hand, involve the components of a *textual system* such as the novel. It is defined in La Révolution du langage poétique as the transposition of one or more *systems* of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position”. Leon S. Roudiez, introduction, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, by Julia Kristeva, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (1981; Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 15.

<sup>36</sup> Hugh Haughton, “‘The Importance of Elsewhere’: Mahon and Translation,” Andrews 161.

<sup>37</sup> Orr 139.

<sup>38</sup> Louis Menand, Discovering Modernism: T.S. Eliot and his Context (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) 16.

<sup>39</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, Collected Poems, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 134.

<sup>40</sup> James Longenbach, “‘Mature Poets Steal’: Eliot’s Allusive Practice,” The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot, ed. A. David Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 180.

<sup>41</sup> Brian John, “Derek Mahon’s Letters from America,” New Hibernia Review 3.3 (1999): 23.

<sup>42</sup> Haughton, Andrews 145.

<sup>43</sup> Terence Brown, “Translating Ireland,” Krino 1986-1996: An Anthology of Modern Irish Writing, ed. Gerald Dawe and Jonathan Williams (Dublin: Gill, 1996) 140.

<sup>44</sup> Qtd. in Andrews 314, n.10.

<sup>45</sup> Brown, “Interview” 15.

<sup>46</sup> Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O’Brien (1955; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 106.

<sup>47</sup> Qtd. in Richard York, “Louis MacNeice and Derek Mahon,” Louis MacNeice and his Influence, ed. Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock, Ulster Editions and Monographs: 6 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1998) 85.

<sup>48</sup> York, Devine and Peacock 90.

<sup>49</sup> York, Devine and Peacock 86.

<sup>50</sup> Brown, “Interview” 18.

<sup>51</sup> Susan Sontag, Styles of Radical Will (London: Vintage, 1994) 14.

<sup>52</sup> Sontag 27.

<sup>53</sup> Sontag 33.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (1962; Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) 208.

<sup>55</sup> Seamus Heaney, North (1975; London: Faber, 1979) 57-60.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Parker, Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) 145.

<sup>57</sup> Longley, Poetry 170, 171-72.

## 1. ‘Death and the Sun’: Mahon and Camus

### 1.1 ‘Death and the Sun’

Although separated by geography, time and religious inheritance, the experiences of Mahon and Albert Camus have much in common: both came from working class origins (which, in the case of Camus, entailed abject poverty); each grew up in suburban areas of their respective countries’ major city within communities riven by religious sectarianism; and, even though Camus was raised by his illiterate, partially deaf mother who “almost never thought”, as boys they were considered precociously intelligent.<sup>1</sup> Michael Longley, who attended the Royal Belfast Academical Institution at the same time as Mahon, remembers the “amazingly accomplished verses” Mahon had published in the school newspaper by the time he was 16.<sup>2</sup> Camus, on the other hand, was admitted to Bab-el-Oued grammar school thanks only to the concerted efforts of a dedicated primary school teacher named Louis Germain. They were also blessed from a young age with extraordinary degrees of self-possession: Longley remembers Mahon’s appearance as being “very cocky”, while Germain had been struck by Camus’s reserved thoughtfulness and a supreme ability to concentrate – “his attention never strayed”.<sup>3</sup> This self-possession would be eventually transformed into a form of individualism, each man shunning attempts to affiliate him with any kind of movement or ideology. Admittedly, Camus had a brief flirtation with the Communist party, and his attempts to dissociate himself from the existentialist circle led by Sartre may, at the time, have seemed fairly disingenuous, but he did possess a fierce aversion to being labelled with the Marxist tag worn so proudly (and so conspicuously) by Sartre. Camus saw the danger of conflating political and philosophical thought, and he sought to avoid any sort of pigeonholing.

Nevertheless, he remained staunchly left wing throughout his life, instinctively reacting against the rhetorical invective used by intellectuals in the name of ideological prescription. His political ideas – and these include his involvement during World War II with the resistance journal Combat – emphasised the rights of individuals, irrespective of social class or cultural background, to be given access to the essential pleasures of life. Similarly, Mahon has never explicitly professed allegiance to any political agenda, and as such has never shouldered the responsibility of acting as spokesman for any social group in the manner ascribed to Heaney and Kavanagh, for example. As a result, Mahon, like Camus, has exercised individual freedom and chosen to live the life of the exile, the ‘outsider’, commenting on – rather than participating in – the collective life of the community.

Camus came to expound the great virtues, as he saw them, of the community in which he had grown up: tenacity, stoicism, and the mute acceptance of the brutality and illness concomitant with the deprivations associated with poverty. The Plague, arguably his finest work, eloquently tells of collective struggle against an assault on the town of Oran by uncontrollable external forces that ravage the town’s overwhelmed population. By contrast, Mahon has rarely been quite so overt in his writings. His skewed, ironical perspective on Belfast’s community is that of one who stands apart from it, observing its mechanisms without feeling an integral part of its operations. While Camus spent increasing periods of time away from Algeria, especially during the war, his affinity for the Mediterranean lifestyle never abated and it permeates his writings. By comparison, Mahon left Northern Ireland as soon as he completed his degree, seldom returning, and

for the most part any allusions to Belfast that we find in his poems are couched in negative, pessimistic, or grimly grotesque terms.

Yet despite these differences in attitude towards conceptions of ‘home’, Mahon perceives a deep consanguinity between himself and Camus. For him, Camus, like Louis MacNeice, is a paradigmatic writer whose ability to express the rigours and terrors of modern existence, without the atavistic appeals to archaeology and mythology of Heaney and Yeats, transcends historical limitations. In ‘Death and the Sun’ (A 35-37), Mahon’s commemoration of Camus, an indissoluble relation is forged between the Irishman and the Algerian. Mahon begins by reporting on the events of January 4 1960 – the date of Camus’s death – from his own distanced perspective:

When the car spun from the road and your neck broke  
 I was hearing rain on the school bicycle shed  
 Or tracing the squeaky enumerations of chalk;  
 And later, while you lay in the *mairie*,  
 I pedaled home from Bab-el-Oued  
 To my mother silently making tea...

Aware of his own individuality, Mahon is careful not to identify completely with Camus. Rather, he juxtaposes his vaguely remembered (as signalled by the first stanza’s two lines beginning “Or”), eighteen year-old schoolboy self against the imagined activities of an adolescent Camus. The opening line is delivered flatly and objectively, confirming Mahon’s physical distance from the tragic event. The statement’s sobriety and curious impersonality belie the senseless horror of Camus’s demise. While the journalistic tenor conceals Mahon’s emotional impulse, it nevertheless reveals striking similarities with

Camus's own narrative style: unrhetorical, bereft of false sentiment, a brutal adherence to honesty and truth. We can see these qualities in this description, from The Plague, of Father Paneloux's death:

His temperature rose. Throughout the day the cough grew louder, racking the enfeebled body. At last, at nightfall, Father Paneloux brought up the clot of matter that was choking him; it was red. Even at the height of his fever Paneloux's eyes kept their blank serenity and when, next morning, he was found dead, his body drooping over the bedside, they betrayed nothing. Against his name the index-card recorded: 'Doubtful case'.<sup>4</sup>

From the poem's opening, however, Mahon develops a relational conceit that gives him the leeway to investigate not only his own sense of kinship with Camus but also the political parallels existing between Northern Ireland and Algeria. Indeed, Bab-el-Oued provides on two counts a rather serendipitous springboard from which Mahon can launch his exploration of the geographical and temporal ties between the two countries. Initially the town name provides the second – following "I was hearing rain" – of several climatic references that Mahon builds on to elucidate the aforementioned parallels, 'Oued' being the French word for a water course that only comes into creation during the North African rainy season. One of Mahon's favourite technical devices is to transport the reader backwards and forwards through time and space in an attempt to produce his own distanced, ironic posture, while the image of rain, repeated in his description of Belfast as "a northern land of rain and murk", provides a metaphorical grounding for Mahon's meditation on the conflicts of nationalism endured by each country.<sup>5</sup> Thus we are transported from Belfast, starved of "a blinding desert sun", to Algeria's "climatic

privileges”, and back again as Mahon establishes the now familiar imagery of light and water that pervades both his own poetry and Camus’s novels.

Yet there is no evidence here to suggest that the strangulated Irish light is sufficiently “capricious” to include the “form of grace” that Dillon Johnston identifies in the sequence ‘Light Music’.<sup>6</sup> If anything, the light serves to emphasise the darkness and limitations of the Irish imagination that cause Ulster Protestantism’s spiritual corruption – “All souls leprous” – which in turn leads to the inability to see the wood for the trees, to be “blinded by truth”. At first, Mahon ironically situates himself as the archetypal Ulster Protestant who is imaginatively transformed into “Plato’s neolithic troglodyte”, ignorant of his absurd relationship with the realities of the outside world and the possibilities it affords. But then comes the revelatory moment when the shadows of “his dark cinema” release their stranglehold on the perceiving mind and he is able at last to see “Tangible fact ablaze in a clear light / That casts no shadow”. Enlightenment is not, however, revealed by any illuminative quality particular to Ireland; there is no “MacNeicean country sun-shower worth waiting days for” here (J 100). Instead, Mahon turns to the Mediterranean sun so enjoyed by Camus. Mahon considers the Mediterranean lifestyle as more conducive to authentic existence than the transient summers of Northern Europe which see “The dead on holiday, cloth caps and curlers, / The shoe-shine and the thrice-combed wave / On Sunday morning and Saturday night”. The imagery of these lines has a very distinct temporal context, the post-war “night of Europe” having provoked youth rebellion and Teddy-boys (Mahon even manages to incorporate an oceanic image in the pun on “wave”), and the literature of the ‘Angry Young Men’, to which Alan Sillitoe’s dark 1958 novel of rebellious individualism, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, was a

major contribution. Alliteration reinforces Mahon's contempt for the holiday habits of "the dead" and the death-in-life existence of 1950s sectarian, philistine society.

Nevertheless, "These were the things to treasure", he writes, acknowledging the limited pleasures of the working-class community he cannot wholly escape. Yet the "we" of the third stanza's "Deprived though we were of his climatic privileges" is not the same "we" as that of the previous stanza's "How we read you then". While the later collective pronoun ties Mahon inexorably to social conditions he would gladly trade for Camus's authentic, energising North African coast, its primary use creates a prioritised sense of belonging to an aesthetic community.

Following the demonstrative, individuality-asserting "I" of the poem's second line, this initial use of "we" alerts us to Mahon's true communal allegiance, that of the large yet intellectually select group who, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, fell under Camus's remarkable influence. Camus, writes Stephen Bronner, "was the single most popular writer during the student revolt of the 1960s. This indeed was only logical, given his emphasis on personal responsibility and identification with the oppressed, his pacifism and belief in democracy, his individualism and bohemian sensualism."<sup>7</sup> And in 1960, eight years before the student revolts, John Cruikshank described Camus as "one of the chief mentors of a new generation".<sup>8</sup> It is hardly surprising, then, that Mahon, whose degree studies took him to the Sorbonne during the early 1960s, should fall under Camus's spell. Camusian themes such as radical humanism in a godless world, a profound awareness of the "Absurd and anxious" nature of an existence deprived of meaning, and a profound knowledge of the plague-like "familiar foe" of human violence all infiltrate much of Mahon's writings. The formal structure of 'Death and the Sun'

therefore exhibits Mahon's hierarchy of loyalties, moving from the "I" which opens the second line, through membership of a similarly-minded intellectual community, to being a troubled member of a society for which, it would seem, he holds little feeling. This gradual weakening of Mahon's identificational position displays a certain unease with the conditional definitions of existence as formulated and imposed by a society that, despite its internal segregations, still eyes the individual with suspicion. Recognising the need to perpetually confront "The *cordon sanitaire*, the stricken home, / Rats on the pavement, rats in the mind", the barriers both visible and invisible that constrain imaginative possibilities, Mahon turns towards the consciousness-awakening sun of the Mediterranean that shines beyond the "dark cinema" of the collective, unenlightened Belfast mind wherein these "rats" have been allowed to gnaw away at the moral and intellectual foundations of truth and understanding.

This leads to the second, and more metaphorical, implication carried by the name Bab-el-Oued. Bab-el suggests Babel and, by extension, the problems of language. Both Ireland and Algeria have been forced to endure the linguistic and political conflicts associated with national dispossession through colonisation and the subsequent usurpation of indigenous languages. While Mahon never makes his feelings towards dispossessed Gaels explicit (it is hard to imagine him having a Protestant docker "drop a hammer on a Catholic" – ironically or otherwise – *à la* Heaney), he repeatedly and longingly makes references to a typically idealised west of Ireland where the Gaelic language survives alongside symbolic permanencies of the landscape which might afford brief transcendental glimpses of an ideal society.<sup>9</sup> By comparison, Camus outwardly sympathised with the impoverished Arabs with whom he had been in daily contact during

his youth and, at the risk of estrangement from other French-Algerians, enjoyed good relations with them. At the time of Camus's death, Algeria's first language was French (a situation which only changed in 1962, following the Algerian War of Independence, when the official language reverted to Arabic), despite the fact that Arabs outnumbered the French colonisers by more than ten to one. Throughout his life, however, Camus, despite his fame and reputation, was unable to bring his influence to bear against the persistent and unsolvable difficulties of colonial violence. Matters were not helped either by the facile rhetoric of intellectuals such as Malraux for whom the Arabs were "no longer historically significant", or by the outright hostility of previous generations of *pied-noir* writers such as the right wing racist Louis Bertrand, who had provoked hostility between the French and the Arabs by insisting on a constant cycle of conquest over the Arabs lest they rise up in defiance of French rule. Bertrand regarded the prime virtue of colonialism as having "a sense of the enemy", an attitude shared by many of the English and Scots planters who colonised Ulster during the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted, however, that not all the planters, or their descendants, have been of this mind. Hugh Roberts, in Northern Ireland and the Algerian Analogy, points out that while many of the original French settlers in Algeria were transported there as undesirables, most of the settlers in Ulster were "independent, voluntary migrants from the Scottish Lowlands".<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Roberts claims that the Protestant community in Northern Ireland has "repeatedly supported democratic reform and, in particular, Catholic enfranchisement and emancipation", whereas French Algerians "opposed every democratic reform in the Muslim interest".<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of these rather large claims, sectarian violence in the North has not abated regardless of the apparent support

of Protestants for wholesale integration. Mahon has compared Northern Irish poets with the Fugitive poets of the American South, describing their respective situations as “morally ambiguous”.<sup>13</sup> Mahon has also remarked that these Northern, Anglo-centric poets (among whom Mahon himself must number) share an “ambiguous ethnic and cultural situation”.<sup>14</sup> They are

Protestant products of an English educational system, with little or no knowledge of the Irish language and an inherited duality of cultural reference. They are a group apart, but need not be considered in isolation, for their very difference assimilates them to the complexity of the continuing Irish past... Whatever we mean by ‘the Irish situation’, the shipyards of Belfast are no less part of it than a country town in the Gaeltacht.<sup>15</sup>

The complexity of the Irish situation is manifested in ‘Death and the Sun’, which is infused with the underlying tensions and violent potential of colonial separatism. Its language draws on the events of The Outsider, Camus’s most famous work, while reinforcing Mahon’s shared knowledge of “the familiar foe”. “Gunfights under a blinding desert sun” evokes the central episode of The Outsider – Mersault’s motiveless killing of the Arab – and the poem goes on to build a sense of impending horror through words such as “bayed”, “scream”, “blaze”, and “stricken”. Mahon speaks of admiring the stranger’s (i.e. Camus’s) “frank composure” in the face of increasing hostility from France’s – or, more specifically, Paris’s – intellectual community who, as “dogs”, were deaf to the frequencies of Camus’s humanism, his integrity, and his authenticity. Just as Mersault was judged harshly at his trial – judge and jury being more concerned with his

inability to cry at his mother's funeral than with his true crime – so Camus was lambasted for his lack of philosophical rigour in The Myth of Sisyphus, despite the self-acknowledged fact that he was a novelist and playwright rather than an out-and-out philosopher. Camus and Mersault may have been judged correctly, but for entirely the wrong reasons, each having been hounded by those who chose to view their actions as lacking a suitable level of conformity.

There is a wealth of intriguing allusions in the final lines of the first stanza, as Mahon envisages himself watching “an old film on television – / Gunfights under a blinding desert sun, / Bogartian urgencies in the cold Ulster night”. Although the image of the blinding sun recalls the bedazzled Mersault’s killing of the Arab, the murder was committed with a knife, not a gun. This seems to make little sense until we realise that the “old film” may be Casablanca whose star, Humphrey Bogart, bore a striking resemblance to Camus. Admittedly, the film is set in Morocco rather than Algeria, but the North African wartime context is still apposite, and it effectively conjures images of the hostilities in Northern Ireland. By twice directing the reader in the previous stanza towards The Plague, a political allegory of occupation and resistance, Mahon foregrounds the Irish and Algerian experiences of colonialism, violence and death which, alongside the battery of violent language, emphasises the horrors of war. But Mahon is reluctant to risk allowing this mood to continue and possibly dominate his commemoration, and so he injects the poem with a *frisson* of knowing humour. Although “Stripped to a figure of skin and bone” may most obviously refer to Mersault’s swim prior to his murder of the Arab, but it also puns subtly on Camus’s early love of football, a point later intensified by mention of “the goalie who refused suicide”.<sup>16</sup> This line also pertains to Camus’s belief

that ‘stripping oneself bare’ to a state of nakedness “is for a greater life (and not for another one)...Being naked always has a sense of physical liberty.”<sup>17</sup> Mahon’s humour is designed to signal Camus’s paganistic attitude towards physical pleasure, especially of the sexual variety, and personal freedom.

Mahon’s conflation of Camus with Mersault comes as quite a surprise given the stark contrasts that exist between the two. While Camus subscribed to a set of firmly held moral beliefs, Mersault is essentially amoral, showing little concern for human life. His abject complacency towards the emotions either of himself or of others gives no sense of any personal commitment or socially derived ethos. He sheds no tears at his mother’s funeral, an attitude at odds with Camus’s statement, “I believe in justice but I will defend my mother before justice.”<sup>18</sup> Also, he shows no remorse at his killing of the (unnamed) Arab, and responds to Marie’s suggestion of marriage by asserting that, like love, marriage “really didn’t matter”.<sup>19</sup> Mersault, writes Cruikshank, “lacks any real system in his ideas and actions”, resulting in a moral indifference that places him outside the norms of accepted social behaviour; in this respect we begin to detect the reasoning behind Mahon’s conflation.<sup>20</sup> However, Mahon prefers to focus not on Mersault’s ethical shortcomings but on the treatment he receives at the hands of the over-zealous court. The prosecutor accuses Mersault “of burying his mother like a heartless criminal”, while “the people [the jury] hardly listened” to the defence witnesses.<sup>21</sup> Deprived of a fair, objective trial, Mersault is thus condemned not for his sin against human life but for his emotional neutrality. The injustice meted out to Mersault is a travesty which is itself unChristian. In this regard, Mersault is more sinned against than sinning. He is an unfortunate victim of circumstances, of his strangeness, and of his fundamental honesty:

He is innocent in the sense that he is harmless, unaware of the injury which his truth might do to himself or the discomfort which it might cause others. It is an innocence untouched by Original Sin; Mersault has no Christian sense of guilt whatever. His truth is not only amoral – it is anterior to any concept of morals.<sup>22</sup>

Mersault is dissociated from conventional Christian ethics because they are the very same ethics which cruelly and hypocritically condemn him, turning him into a sacrificial victim whose death will appease the corrupt consciences of a society hell-bent on conforming to its own unjust rules. Mersault must die because society – as opposed to God or the law – demands it.

By condemning the unjust mechanisms of the Algerian legal system, Camus indirectly denounces the dominant ideology from which, at the time, it was derived: Catholic France. Mahon exploits the ethical implications of colonialism in his reference to “the just and the unjust” which, by extension, may be applied to Belfast, a city founded by Protestants and where one religion-based system of ethics replaced another, resulting in the now familiar violence of sectarianism. Mahon’s similarly indirect criticism of English Protestantism signifies a view parallel to that of Camus, i.e. that the overturning of established, indigenous culture leads to the denigration of a nation’s fundamental, authentic nature. In The Outsider, the French legal system inherited by Algeria proves anathema to the instinctual mode of life enjoyed by the predominantly Muslim North African population described (in somewhat racially stereotypical terms) by John Cruikshank. “For these North Africans”, writes Cruikshank,

words such as ‘sin’, ‘virtue’ and ‘repentance’ have no absolute meaning although they do, of course, practise a certain day-to-day morality – which he [Camus] calls an automatic ‘code de la rue’. They take their unreflecting pleasure mostly in groups and in public places, and their ethics are based on the elementary rules of such communal living.<sup>23</sup>

This elementary or ‘primitive’ morality is sanctioned not by religion but by society, finding consolidation in Camus’s atheism.

‘Death and the Sun’ plays on the fact that Mersault is a literary vehicle designed to exhibit the authentic potential of the immediacy of physical pleasure while reflecting ideas the author considers inexorably true. Mersault’s life and death obviously constitute a “work of art” in that he is a work of imaginative fiction: Mersault’s entire existence is “Conceived in the silence of the heart”. Mahon puns both on the cod-romantic emotionalism of “heart”, showing that, though primitive, Mersault’s existence is governed by a genuine love of life, and on the “silence” that radiates from his metaphysical dislocation and directs his ontological honesty. Camus’s atheism means that neither he nor his creation ever look beyond the realities of temporal, mortal existence in order to find either meaning or happiness. Camus, like MacNeice, believes that taking pleasure in quotidian ordinariness underpins a recognition of the truth of these realities, and while Mahon does not necessarily share either Camus’s affection for other people or his idea that “Enjoying oneself alone is impossible”,<sup>24</sup> the poem does contain a sympathetic note:

He would merely have taken a rush-hour tram  
To a hot beach white as a scream,

Stripped to a figure of skin and bone  
And struck out, a back-stroke, as far as he could go.

The tone here even seems to suggest that Camus, more than Mahon himself, has the right idea when it comes to enjoying the simple, animal pleasures of life, whether it be swimming in the Mediterranean, mixing with crowds of strangers, or making love (Camus famously married twice and had a string of affairs). Camus recognises a beauty in life that goes hand-in-hand with art and authenticity: “If I need my art...it is because it cuts itself away from no one and allows me to live, as I am, at the level of all.”<sup>25</sup> Literary creation is, for him, both a mode of existence and “a privileged means of communication”, each of which contrives to foster adherence to the archetypal French ideals of liberty, fraternity and equality.<sup>26</sup> Mahon, of course, is not so forthright, preferring to ironise his own literary achievement:

I who know nothing  
Scribbling on the off-chance,  
Darkening the white page,  
Cultivating my ignorance. (*'The Attic'*, P 102)

Such self-effacement can, however, be seen as a deliberate tactic on Mahon’s part to cultivate not ignorance but an authentic mode of communication, one in which poetic expression can assume a level of meaning not ordained by the limitations of language. Eamon Grennan has written convincingly of Mahon’s poetry as “a firm commitment to speech itself”, but there is also a sense in which Mahon aspires, like Camus, to give a voice to silence.<sup>27</sup> The allusion in ‘Death and the Sun’ to Camus’s ‘silent’ mother indicates her importance in the Algerian’s life: “Merely by its silence, its reserve, its

natural and sober pride, this family, which did not even know how to read, taught me my most valuable lessons, which I still remember.”<sup>28</sup> This silence, claims Camus, provided him with the emotional and intellectual stability to perceive within the North African community, with its attendant privations, a stoical acceptance of the conditions of working-class life that demands respect. Some of his novels’ most memorable characters – for instance, Mersault, Dr. Rieux, his mother, and the autobiographical Jacques Cormery in *The First Man* – are not strictly inarticulate, yet through their restrained and limited speech they exemplify the qualities Camus so admired: dignity, strength, tenacity, honesty. And it is these indomitable qualities which fashion both the authenticity of these characters and the alternative reality they inhabit, for they are all ‘outsiders’ living apart from general society, confronting the hostilities of the world without self-regard. Separation from society means that the battle for authenticity cannot be fought in the external public realm, the realm of language, but privately, internally and in silence. There is certainly an element of Socratic irony at play in the line “I who know nothing” considering the extraordinarily broad reach of this supremely erudite poet’s knowledge, yet it is surely better, in Mahon’s opinion, to “know nothing” and say nothing than to buy into the lies and inauthentic delusions pedalled by mutually antagonistic and violent political factions.

## 1.2 Silence and Ethics

Despite his ironical take on silence as an authentic mode of existence, Mahon similarly expresses the essentially internal nature of the individual’s search for a form of discourse that will eradicate the corruption of language by the inauthentic social majority

that Heidegger termed ‘das Man’. The point is suitably illustrated in Mahon’s translation of Jaccottet’s ‘Ignorance’:

I sit in my room and am silent. Silence  
arrives like a servant to tidy things up  
while I wait for the lies to disperse.<sup>29</sup>

The harsh realities of experience have, like Camus’s family before him, taught Mahon the invaluable benefits of keeping silent, of erecting a barricade of seclusion against the corrupting influence of inauthentic speech. ‘Ignorance’ continues the thought first uttered at the end of ‘The Attic’: “The older I grow the more ignorant I become”. Mahon employs the condition of ignorance in a subtly ironic way, implying neither destitution of knowledge nor lack of skill but an inability to bring himself to share fully in the lives and experiences of the majority of people within his community. Recalling Camus’s predilection for “terse understatement”,<sup>30</sup> ‘Ovid in Tomis’ (THBN 37-42) reiterates the need for silence which, when set against the insufficient capacity for expressing authentic intentions of prepositional or everyday language, becomes a gesture of self-preservation within a realm of existence impervious to others:

Better to contemplate

The blank page

And leave it blank

Than modify

Its substance by

So much as a pen-stroke.

Silence, then, becomes a form of avoidance of the historically-formed demands of a native community with which, *contra* Camus, he feels little kinship.

In ‘Brighton Beach’ (THBN 34-35), the poet looks inland from “the far end of the pier”, knowing full well that places such as Belfast and Brighton are dilapidated ‘last resorts’ that “are dead / Or nearly”. Brighton is the final bastion of “the spirit of empire”, which, like Belfast, has become a terminal boundary of ideological and nationalistic decrepitude. The ethical and emotional polar opposites, “casual” and “rancorous”, provide the perimeters of Mahon’s complex, and frequently ambiguous, attitude towards concepts of home, and oblique confrontations with such contrary emotions as these occasionally render Mahon (metaphorically) speechless. His withdrawal into silence is itself an articulation of the inexpressible and “a way of avoiding compromise”, a route towards authentic ipseity that circumvents both his own psychic divisions and the social institutions that would stand in his way.<sup>31</sup> The final stanza of the original version of ‘In Belfast’ which first appeared in 1964, four years before the publication of Night-Crossing and five before the upsurge of the Troubles, makes this more explicit:

Poetry and fluent drivel, know your place –  
 Take shape in some more glib environment  
 Away from shipyard gantry, bolt and rivet.  
 Elsewhere assess existence; ask to what end  
 It tends, wherefore and why. In Belfast live it.<sup>32</sup>

Most interpretations of this earlier, unrevised version tend to perceive an impulse on Mahon’s part to satirically identify poetry with “fluent drivel”. Yet the conjunctive “and” seems to suggest that rather than conflating the two, Mahon is making a distinction

between the art of poetry and the idle talk of ‘das Man’. The world has a place for both, but as users of language we must not only learn the difference between authentic and inauthentic speech, we must also recognise when each is being deployed and the different purposes to which they are put. Commenting on Heidegger, Albert Hofstadter writes, “The voice of thought must be poetic because poetry is the saying of truth, the saying of the unconcealedness of beings.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, while “fluent drivel” or idle talk will always remain inauthentic, poetry must be true to itself and to its intentions. Mahon prefers to look ‘elsewhere’, to the silent, isolated life of the authentic poet rather than to the everyday life of the community as a means of assessing existence. “In Belfast live it” indicates a realm of possibility, another space, which again devolves the onus of freedom onto the individual whereby existential choices are available, but it is up to the individual whether or not to take personal responsibility for them.

In The Fall, Camus presents a similar position viewed from the opposite angle. Mahon, following the opinions of Conor Cruise O’Brien, proclaims The Fall Camus’s “finest novel” (J 152).<sup>34</sup> The novel’s central character, Clamence, is isolated from both “a moral code of social conduct” and society itself.<sup>35</sup> Unable to make the connection between intentions and consequences, Clamence fails to realise that private thoughts can manifest themselves as public actions. His intrinsic inauthenticity is shown, in a radical diversion for Camus, by the narrative form of a monologue. Clamence’s prolix verbosity is corruptive, inveigling those who listen to him – including the reader – into complicity with his immorality. Yet Bronner misses the point that Clamence lives beyond society. Clamence is alone, having contact only with the strangers he occasionally encounters. He is the ironic, self-exiled ‘judge-penitent’ who lacks a social conscience but nevertheless

sets himself up as “an exemplar” of that social conscience: “I would be decapitated [for stealing the painting, The Just Judges], for instance, and I’d have no more fear of death; I’d be saved. Above the gathered crowd, you would hold up my still warm head, so that they could recognize themselves in it and I could again dominate.”<sup>36</sup> Clamence’s aspiration to dominate is a corruption of Nietzsche’s ‘Will to Power’ whereby authenticity is realised “not in the discovery of one’s ethical code but in the creation of one’s own moral values”.<sup>37</sup> Clamence imposes his will on others without consideration for their emotional response to his confession; and while his personal morality bears no relation to traditional moral concepts, nor does it find a correlative in society. Clamence’s confession is not so much an example of idle talk as a repudiation of silence. Camus endorses Nietzsche’s view that conventional morality originates in the dictates of religion and is the cause of human alienation, and he chooses, through his atheistic humanism, to shun appeals to preternatural or transcendental aid, finding value purely in human experience. Moreover, while Camus posits ethical choices within the subjective inner realm of the individual, life finds value and meaning in the public, communal world of intersubjectivity.

The Fall also provides Mahon’s main point of reference in ‘Rage for Order’ (L 22-23). The poem’s title, taken from Wallace Stevens’s ‘The Idea of Order at key West’, ironises that poem’s concept of a “Blessed rage for order” and transforms Stevens’s ideal of revealing reality into a proclamation of self-disgust.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, irony is the defining characteristic of Mahon’s poem and it operates on several levels. The poem’s opening image suggests the poet’s separation from a devastated Belfast street:

Somewhere beyond

The scorched gable end  
 And the burnt-out  
 Buses there is a poet indulging his  
 Wretched rage for order.

This opening stanza seems impervious to concrete interpretation, its slippery evasiveness being awash with irony. Initially, the poet might be identified as Mahon himself until we register that the line, “And this in the face of love, death and the wages of the poor” is an unacknowledged quote from The Fall. (In the revised version of the poem the quotation is signalled by inverted commas. See P 44.) The poet, then, turns out to be Camus, or rather what appears to be an ironic conflation of Camus and Mahon. This amalgamation is placed in hostile territory, which could just as easily be Belfast or war-torn Paris (Camus played a heroic and dangerous role in the Resistance during World War II).

The poet’s posture is “Grandiloquent and / Deprecating”, and the caveat “like this” enforces the classification of poetry as “a dying art” that cannot impose order on the historical moment. “This ironizing of the potential scope of poetry,” writes Neil Corcoran,

is itself, however, also ironized at the end of the poem, when the speaker knows he will soon have need of the poet’s ‘desperate ironies’. It is at what might well seem this virtual vanishing-point of ironic contact between poetry and history that Mahon’s own work proceeds...This sometimes takes the form of setting a violent history in large temporal or mythological perspectives.<sup>39</sup>

Camus enters the poem more directly through “talk of justice and his mother” and “The rhetorical / Device of a Claudian emperor” (Camus’s play, Caligula, is an indictment of philosophical absolutism and self-interest, and it suffers on occasion from rhetorical excess).

John Goodby has claimed that, in this poem, “Mahon briefly ditches Camus” as a touchstone, before referring to the quarrel between Camus and Sartre and speculating that, “Mahon may have been siding with Sartre out of resentment of [his] mother”.<sup>40</sup> This quarrel came to a head following a coruscating dismissal, written by one of Sartre’s acolytes, of The Rebel. Camus was left distraught by the subsequent publication in Sartre’s journal, Les Temps Modernes, of personal attacks by Sartre and Francis Jeanson, the reviewer of The Rebel. Camus responded privately, saying to a friend, “I never know what to say when people attack me personally. I feel incapable of replying. What am I to do?”<sup>41</sup> This episode is dramatised by Mahon in terms that, rather than signalling a break with Camus, suggest a defence of his quiet dignity:

If he is silent  
It is the silence  
Of enforced humility,  
If anxious to be heard  
It is the anxiety of the last word.

Mahon certainly alludes to the importance of Camus’s mother but not, I think, in a way that supports Goodby’s argument. (The question of Mahon’s relations with his own mother is discussed in Chapter 6.) The absence of a mother relates to the corruption of human values, as contained in Caligula, while “His talk of justice and his mother” points

to the press conference Camus gave, following his acceptance of the Nobel Prize, in which he condemned the use of terror. The speech was intended as a riposte to the FLN (Front de la Libération Nationale), which had sought to either recruit or silence Camus, but had instead incurred his wrath by murdering an Arab neighbour of his mother. It is therefore difficult to see where exactly Mahon sides with Sartre. In a review of Ronald Hayman's book, Writing Against: A Biography of Sartre, Mahon actually criticises Sartre's shortcomings as a person and as a novelist:

He talked too much and didn't feel enough. Thus, though he 'won' the argument with Camus about Algeria, since history was on his side, he lost it artistically; for out of that experiment Camus, who suffered in silence, wrote *La Chute*, a finer thing than Sartre was capable of or would have bothered to attempt (J 148).

Mahon's praise for The Fall tends to suggest that he also supports the way the novel offers both ironic self-caricature (a central feature of 'Rage for Order') and a parody of the Sartrean existentialism. In The Fall, Camus distances himself from the Sartrean ideas espoused by Clamence, the self-proclaimed judge-penitent. Central to the novel is the concept of the Other whose gaze reduces the subject to the status of object. This theme is pursued throughout the novel with heavy irony. Clamence, too, talks too much, and his rhetoric is less capable of conveying authenticity than would his silence, since silence is the source of his fears. Once his confession is complete, Clamence would cease to exist, and he is compelled to employ a variety of roles and voices (e.g. the abandoned Christ and the false prophet) which allow his monologue to continue.

For both Camus and Mahon, then, silence, ethics and authenticity are all interconnected, albeit with sometimes polarised consequences. For Camus, silence is an authentic way of enduring life's hardships that simultaneously attests to the purely human values he ascribes to a familiar, admired community: his “most precious memories were enveloped in silence”, writes Germaine Brée.<sup>42</sup> Mahon, on the other hand, frequently regards silence as a reticent form of escape, either from a hostile home environment or an inauthentic community which threatens to overwhelm him or both. Ronan Bennet has remarked that for many Protestant writers, “to find artistic fulfilment [they] would have to look beyond the confines of the Protestant world”.<sup>43</sup> Escape through silence is a politically grounded form of self-censorship which prioritises the written word of poetry over “fluent drivel”. Mahon formulates his literary silence against a socio-historical backdrop, presenting a conflict between the intellect (“Elsewhere assess existence”) and tribal instinct (“In Belfast live it”), between what is learned and what is experienced. But Mahon can also convert this conflict from a politically motivated compulsion towards exile into an aesthetic *modus operandi*.

### 1.3 ‘Preface to a Love Poem’

‘Preface to a Love Poem’ (NC 13) manifests his circumspection as “a circling”, a process that seems to reveal an almost pathological desire to continually return to, then turn away from, his point of origin:

This is a circling of itself and you –  
 A form of words, compact and compromise,  
 Prepared in the false dawn of the half-true

Beyond which the shapes of truth materialize.

In a most impressive essay, Kathleen Mullaney remarks that the poem “can be read as a declaration of love to a cherished individual”, and while this may be true to a certain extent, most other critics wisely avoid making such a concrete association between the poem and any one person.<sup>44</sup> Each stanza, bar the last, begins “This is...”, thereby conferring a degree of autonomy on each consecutive statement. It is feasible, therefore, to speculate that the “you” of the first line is not necessarily the “you” of the final stanza. The poem thus has no single, over-riding meaning, leaving it open to multiple interpretations. Although ostensibly an apology for not writing an actual love poem (which, by definition, is impossible anyway), the central concern of ‘Preface to a Love Poem’ is not love but language. Here, the “blank page” of ‘Ovid in Tomis’ is transformed into “A *form* of words” (emphasis added), a discourse free of direct language that harbours the possibilities of both speech and silence. Mahon’s stringent use of the word “form” is exacting in its concealment of Plato’s epistemological theory of ‘Form’ – wherein ‘Form’ and ‘Idea’ are interchangeable terms – which asserts that things and concepts become intelligible only when the abstract nature of form is engaged by the intellect. Evasion through metaphor has the ability to convey what is at root inexpressible: only poetry can transform the ethereal ‘form’ of words into comprehensible, yet indescribable, “shapes of truth”, Mahon suggests. Silence, as conveyor of truth, is situated in an intangible metaphysical “beyond” where it is safe against the potentially damaging artifice of everyday language. Here we detect a return to the implied barbarity of the spurious mystery and knowing nod of ‘In Belfast’, whereby that city’s sullen silence is again realised as “the false dawn of the half-true”. Falsity and

half-truth reinforce the inauthenticity of Belfast's nefarious hold on the lives of its people, language being one source of its community's dislocated sense of identity.

The love poem does not exist other than within the space of possibility created by the preface. That is, 'Preface to a Love Poem' plays host to the discursive possibilities that inhabit this space in readiness to be called upon by the poet to give expression to his imagination. We hear a multitude of sounds, including "Birds crowing, wind whistling off pale stars", "A ghostly echo from the clamorous dead / Who cried aloud in anger and despair", and the confessional vocative "I love you", all of which adumbrate the very conditions of existence: the worldly and the metaphysical; fear and death; love and life. Yet these sounds are merely sibilant whispers, indistinct noises whose origins and destinations cannot be specifically located; they are "neither here nor there". They stir in the darkness of night, "the silent hours", without recourse to the language-governed domain of human presence. In spite of his attempt to escape the entrapment of language, Mahon nevertheless has little choice but to defer to its prefigured demands – "Words never choosing but the words choose them" – language being the only tool at his disposal for articulating thought. He must therefore generate his own silent realm, aware that the limitations and imperfections of language can only provide a compromised mode of communication, "a substitute / For final answers", and that he must situate himself "at one remove" from the unattainable absolutes propagated by Belfast's religious and political factions. Thus, for him to say "I love you" would be wholly inauthentic as it would be said out of indolence – the easy way out – and because the actual voicing of the sentiment would shatter the authentic silence with which he has surrounded himself. Knowing that there can be no substitute for such an expression – it is "beyond

paraphrase” – Mahon hides his true, ambivalent feelings, either towards an individual or towards Belfast, behind his self-constructed veil of silence. Hence the non-existence of the actual love poem. Words ache “in their own pursuit” to speak, to catch and attach themselves to one another, to form and formulate in obeisance to grammatical rules, to provide inarticulacy with a voice. But in ‘Preface to a Love Poem’, Mahon registers the fact that words are not our only means of communication:

In order to gain perspective, Mahon locates himself outside the centre, preferring to consider that there is more falseness than truth in the humanist position that wishes to place man at the centre of the universe. In so doing he avoids seeking for final answers, he negates the need to explain, to describe, to qualify, to master...

This is a way of airing my distraught

Love of your silence. You are the soul of silence.

“A way”, not the only way; “airing”, not describing; “distraught”, not confidently circumscribable. The poet loves the silence that poetry provides...<sup>45</sup>

Mahon manipulates language in such a way as to evoke meaning through circumscription without resorting to an attempt to merely describe reality. The workings of his mind provide a viewpoint from which we can glimpse – though not observe fully – an understanding of his need to put distance between himself and the centre of a culture that is itself at the mercy of cyclical, “circling”, historical forces. An escape into silence therefore gives Mahon the freedom to observe without participating, to give voice to the workings of his mind in the most authentic way possible, to refuse to say “I love you” if

the sentiment is not felt authentically. Mahon feels that the only way to say “I love you” is spontaneously and “without forethought” while, in an ironic gesture, “Drifting inconsequently” between the various locations of his exile. And so the poem predicates the replacement of brutally impassive reason with authentic, intuitive silence, just as reason in Belfast has been usurped by the unreason of destructive historical processes.

The world for Mahon is “so much more” (*‘Tractatus’*, THBN 23) than mere Wittgensteinian ‘facts’; it is also “Everything that is the case imaginatively”, an assertion made strenuously on behalf of the creative spirit’s attempt to engage with a potentially overwhelming reality that makes few concessions to the urge to find love in a society crippled by a plague of the mind. ‘Preface to a Love Poem’ thus displays the inherent tensions between, and the difficulty of giving balance to, the sheer intellectualism of form and formalisation, and the emotional demands of intuition and imagination.

‘Preface to a Love Poem’ is strewn with the language of torment – “blind”, “anger and despair”, “aching”, “distraught” – signifying Mahon’s own painful attitude towards home, and the final stanza harbours an image to which he recurrently returns that denotes his plangent desire to be ‘elsewhere’. His regular and various use of the sea as symbol of boundary, void, ontological determiner, and means of transportation for the imagination, ultimately relies on an attempt to “define the limits of locality, the relativism of any notion of ‘home’”.<sup>46</sup> This maritime imagery, along with images of the sun, light and wind, owes something to Camus’s influence. For Camus, these elemental images symbolise the values he cherishes, perceiving them as the aspects of the natural world and therefore conferring meaning on human existence. The Mediterranean Sea is

the constant solace, the source of refreshment in a burning climate. It is the arena of youth and hence, of life, in so far as life can be equated with youthful vigor and the beginnings of the sexual cycle...The waters of the sea, glimpsed at the turn of each street in Algiers, are a reminder of relief from the dust and the hot stone. The mineral landscape at Oran conveys the sense of the permanence of nature in its massive inertness...but this permanence suggests death,...whereas the sea ("une mer toujours égale," [an unchanging sea] ) also conveys the notion of permanence but in the context of perpetual renewal.<sup>47</sup>

The Fall is Camus's only novel not set in North Africa and consequently the sea plays no significant role. Rather, the canal system of Amsterdam provides an appropriate backdrop to Clamence's descent into degeneracy by representing the Dantean circles of hell. The contrast with the warm, sun-drenched, life-enhancing atmosphere of Algiers could hardly be more forcibly realised.

In The Plague, the sea becomes a diminished presence in the minds of Oran's inhabitants as the beaches are closed and the town is progressively shut off from the outside world owing to the increasing virulence of the epidemic. Incarcerated and alienated, the towns-people are forced to retreat both physically and emotionally from the free, happy lives they once knew. As the plague – and the fear it brings – tightens its stranglehold on the town, so the sea, as symbol of freedom, becomes increasingly remote: what was once a residual feature in the people's lives is relegated to a distant memory as plague, death and terror develop into the only permanent features, the only tangible realities to which they can relate. Yet towards the end of the novel, the writer introduces a

glimmer of hope. Dr. Rieux and his friend Tarrou earn a temporary respite from the harrowing rigours of a day confronting death, and in the serene atmosphere of late evening Tarrou confesses his motives in helping to fight the plague, the confession eliciting a deeper respect, understanding and intimacy between the two men. Suggesting they go for a swim, a situation permitted only by virtue of their having special permits to access the beach, Tarrou complains, “Really it’s too damn silly living only in and for the plague. Of course a man should fight for the victims, but if he ceases caring for anything outside that, what’s the use of fighting?”<sup>47</sup> Realisation of life’s transience provokes a profound desire to re-experience the freedom only the sea can provide, even if it is just a temporary respite. In one of his most lyrical passages, Camus describes the intense pleasure such freedom can bring:

Once they were on the jetty they saw the sea spread out before them, a gently heaving expanse of deep-piled velvet, supple and sleek as a creature of the wild. They sat down on a boulder facing the open. Slowly the waters rose and sank, and with their tranquil breathing sudden oily glints formed and flickered over the surface in a haze of broken lights. Before them the darkness stretched out into infinity. Rieux could feel under his hand the gnarled, weather-worn visage of the rocks, and a strange happiness possessed him. Turning to Tarrou, he caught a glimpse on his friend’s face of the same happiness, a happiness that forgot nothing...<sup>49</sup>

A phenomenon that is frequently and easily taken for granted is here transformed into a thing of great beauty, a living entity whose ostensibly limitless possibility revitalises the friends, invigorating their collective memory with its shifting, seductive presence. The

overt masculinity of Rieux and Tarrou prevents reading the description of the swim as in any way homoerotic: rather, their bonding and comradeship are qualities that men who share the fear of death discover under siege conditions. The sea's capacity for unfettered liberty provides release from the quotidian drudgery of urban existence and tensions arising from conflict. The passage assumes an aura of ritualistic purification as the men are temporarily cleansed from the plague's evil and filth, and freed from its pernicious domination over their lives: "The sea that has been hidden, remote and ineffectual, suddenly becomes actual and effective as a symbol of freedom in the heart of a city subjected to the arbitrariness and the brute determinism of the plague."<sup>50</sup>

The Plague can, on one simplistically obvious level, be read as a parable of wartime occupation. On another, it can be interpreted allegorically as a damning indictment of the vainglorious pretensions and the psychological collapse of an entire community when limited by the torpidity of habit. Nature is noticeably absent from Oran, and its people, self-satisfied in their materialistic, vapid, routine-governed lifestyles, are (with few exceptions) utterly bereft of imagination. They, like the town, which is symptomatically described as backing onto rather than facing the sea, are presented as lifeless. Only when the town is unsettled by the epidemic are they animated into an existential awareness of the patterns of their lives. Even so, the community still resorts to new forms of monotonous routine once the plague is established as though finding solace in repetitive action, the most indicative example being the old man who spends his waking hours moving peas between two containers in a grotesque parody of timekeeping. Camus's descriptions of mindless, unimaginative repetition in a beleaguered, lifeless

town may be regarded almost as the template on which Mahon bases his perceptions of Belfast.

#### **1.4 The Terminal Democracy**

Belfast's vulnerable surface, battle-scarred by decades of violence, conceals a collective consciousness – a “nerve-centre” (*'An Unborn Child'*, NC 25) – whose traits Mahon translates into an uneasy complexity of personal feelings towards the city that continues to pervade his own consciousness. Mahon tends to view the resilience of Belfast's populace as a feature of their intrinsic insularity, a feature that characterises their collective siege mentality's inability to come to terms with reality. The city may be “impervious to dreams”, as Edna Longley suggests, but it also exhibits an imperviousness to the nightmare that haunts its fragile streets: it is “a palace of porcelain”, “a world of / Sirens, bin-lids / And bricked-up windows” (*'The Last of the Fire Kings'*, TSP 10).<sup>51</sup> The bricking-up of windows – the window being another of Mahon's favourite images, used to emblematise an imaginative point of observation – presents the citizenry of Belfast as shutting out the world as though hoping that what they can't see or hear can't hurt them. More crucial, however, is the developing impression that Mahon has at last discovered some common ground with his community. A number of Mahon's poems about Belfast contain instances of this communal knee-jerk reaction to the outside world wherein the poet's own sense of isolation is transfigured into a homogenous affliction. Nevertheless, he remains loathe to associate himself fully with the people of Belfast. ‘Going Home’ (TSP 5-7) intimates, yet ultimately rebuts, an alliance between the poem's speaker and his community:

Extraordinary people  
 We were in our time,  
 How we lived in our time

As if blindfold  
 Or not wholly serious,  
 Inventing names for things

To propitiate silence.  
 It is silence we hug now  
 In the indigestible

Dawn mist which clings  
 All afternoon  
 To the south bank of the Humber.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly this is not the same silence that Mahon and Camus consider an authentic mode of discourse. Rather, it is the fearful silence that lurks behind the metaphorical bricked-up windows of minds closed off from the realm of possibility offered by authentic thought and action. It is a form of silence that relies for its existence on the construction of a false reality which is itself dependant on a lack of vision. The modification of “hug” to “clings” indicates a final act of desperation borne of fear rather than love, a pitiful attempt to hold on to a bygone way of life as though registering its impending death. But this silence is misleading. Any remaining traces of an authentic life of “recipes, rhyming

slang / And archaic ailments” has already been “foreclosed”, and all that remains is a collective memory of lost opportunities. The dispossessed shift workers may have their “lunch boxes and / Papers of manumission”, but all they have achieved is to trade one form of slavery for another; no longer obliged to the demands of historical inheritance, they have instead become ensnared by the demands of material production. Their destiny is a “blank Elysium” that excludes any true concept of ‘home’.

‘Going Home’, addressed to the poet Douglas Dunn, affiliates Hull (where Dunn was once based) and Belfast, coastal cities with long-standing relations with the sea. The recurrent use of “we” and “our” throughout the poem provisionally indicates unity amid entropic social decline and communal extinction. But “this is the last / Homecoming, the end / Of the rainbow”, and the appeal to history of the Audenesque “in our time” is destined to fall on deaf ears, that history having already been consigned to “file” and “tape”, artefacts of a bureaucracy that serves to obstruct meaningful discourse through blind officiousness. (The corruption of language by the mechanisms of officialdom features more resonantly in The Plague when the authorities recoil from using the word ‘plague’ to describe the disease.) Even the deflation of Belfast’s shipbuilding industry (a subject no doubt close to Mahon’s heart) finds an echo in the image of the “sunken barge” which,

rots

In the mud beach  
As if finally to discredit

A residual poetry of

Leavetaking and homecoming,

Of work and sentiment.

The irony of the poem's title permeates the entire poem, creating a tense, cloying atmosphere of dejection and deathly hopelessness. However, while Mahon deprecates his society's inauthentic response to the outside world, its unimaginative psychological constriction, decaying material culture, and the insecure ontological condition of homelessness, he conditionally retains a note of compassion in recognising that his poetry is "residual" to the travails endured by that society. Nevertheless, he has no desire to become a slave to, or consumed by, this restrictive atmosphere and opts instead for self-imposed exile. Whereas Heaney moved south into the more Catholic-friendly Republic, Mahon looks further afield towards cultures more conducive to his own psyche; this inevitably leads him towards the sea, its sheer physical vastness offering greater potential for his unique modes of expression than the north of Ireland's physical and mental circumscription.

Mahon's continual fascination with the sea stems from his own liminal existence, torn between a familiar yet emotionally barren environment he guiltily feels he should love, and the lure of an environment that exists at least partially in his fecund imagination. Like Camus he was raised within the sea's proximity, but *contra* Camus, whose two major novels are set on the Algerian littoral and are presided over by the presence of the sea, Mahon looks both out to sea and inland to establish distinctions between Irish insularity and the possibilities of elsewhere. His peripherality provides a privileged multiple perspective: on the bleak actualities of the interior's given life; on a realm 'beyond the pale' of ideational opportunity; and on the shoreline, the point at

which these often mutually hostile worlds collide. In ‘The Return’ (P 98-99), Mahon speaks of leaving the bountiful English countryside and returning to an Ireland whose blemished landscape is deprived of imaginative potential:

But where I am going the trees

Are few and far between.

No richly forested slopes,

Not for a long time,

And few winking woodlands.

Deforestation by the English during previous centuries robbed Ireland of a major part of its cultural heritage when they used Irish timber to build ships, since the names of trees stand as the letters of the Gaelic alphabet.<sup>53</sup> Finding a kindred spirit in Ovid, the poem’s speaker evokes the exilic detachment associated with this bleak interior with “nothing to recommend it” except, in a Camusian twist, “its harsh tenacity”. Only a single tree remains standing in this stolid terrain, its stoical existence a testament to the “Augustinian austerities of sand and stone” of ‘Death and the Sun’:

Out there you would look in vain

For a rose bush; but find,

Rooted in stony ground,

A last stubborn growth

Battered by constant rain

And twisted by the sea-wind.

Yet the tree has only limited animation and is close to death, its description as “Crone, crow, scarecrow” an existential reminder of diminishing mortality. Significantly, it is the

sea which provides a greater sense of capability and movement, its wind twisting this “last stubborn growth” into an unnatural shape. But the wind, given palpable force by the battering-ram of plosive alliteration, short vowels, and staccato rhythm, has a pitiless, distorting malevolence that violates even the possibility of identifying the tree: it is nothing but a “growth”. It is worth noting at this point that “twisted” also connotes mental sickness and linguistic corruption, while “rooted” can imply both implanted and extracted, as in ‘rooted out’, a semantic ambiguity that spreads throughout the poem. Does the tree, for instance, symbolise Ireland itself, as claimed by Arthur McGuinness, or does it, following Heaney’s interpretation, represent Mahon’s own rootlessness and his despair at Ireland’s desolate plight?<sup>54</sup> Each reading seems perfectly viable, although the tree’s benighted existence, “Between the blinding windows / And the forests of the sea”, would appear to privilege the notion that the tree stands as a figure for the stunted, phlegmatic intellectual and moral development of the island. Indeed, the grain of optimism indicating a form of continued survival contained in the final lines –

it stands

On the edge of everything

Like a burnt-out angel

Raising petitionary hands –

tends to favour McGuinness. Nevertheless, this optimism remains minimal given the words of the local resident in ‘The Archaeologist’ (L 12): “You must be / Mad, he will say, to suppose this rock / Could accommodate life indefinitely.”

‘The Return’ casts the sea both as villain (in the sense of its assault on the tree) and as hero (its “forests” sustaining life where land cannot). The shoreline, however, has

few – if any – redeeming features in Mahon’s scheme of things. It is “the terminal democracy of hatbox and crab, of hock and Windowlene” (*The Apotheosis of Tins*, TSP 27) where the detritus of modern, bourgeois existence and the objects of nature coalesce, inevitably to the latter’s detriment. The shoreline, *in extremis*, represents “that despairing frontier of mind from which exile poetry speaks”.<sup>55</sup> We can also discern this frontier in the short poem ‘The chair squeaks...’ where, “In a tiny stone church / On the desolate headland / A lost tribe is singing abide with me” (TSP 22). Kathleen Shields interprets the poem as an expression of both the poet’s desire to join his people and his inability to do so.<sup>56</sup> The image of the desolate headland is striking in its suggestion of being apart and ‘on the edge’, the lost tribe – like the tribes of Israel – estranged from its mother nation. The tribe’s hymn may well be directed towards God and maybe even the poet, but each is too remotely situated to provide genuine hope or assistance. Rather, it seems to be a desperate plea signalling isolation, loneliness and an unattainable desire to be reunited with distant communities. The poem dictates a need for a return to origins:

The chair squeaks in a high wind,  
 Rain falls from its branches,  
 The kettle yearns for the  
 Mountain, the soap for the sea.

At the risk of over-reading, it could be argued that “the soap” (which has its origins in whale fat yet would be eroded by the water) is a metaphorical device designed to signify the tribe’s desire to have their sins ‘washed away’, in which case we see that their prayer is directed not upwards towards God or inland towards a distant community, but out towards the sea which may offer some hope of spiritual rejuvenation. This mood is

maintained in the equally short “Songs of Praise” (SP 119) where “The proud parishioners”, living in “outlying parts” next to the coast, are delighted at the arrival of the television programme’s crew. But their songs are destined to fall on deaf ears, the outside world impervious to the meagre pleas of man:

Outside, the hymn dies among the rocks and dunes.

Conflicting rhythms of the incurious sea,

Not even contemptuous of these tiny tunes,

Take over where our thin ascriptions fail.

The church, like the coastline, is effectively trapped in the metaphysical nowhere between land and sea, its parishioners’ singing, along with the religion it praises, equally ineffective against either the onslaught of modern science and technology emerging from the silent laboratory or the music of the whale, itself “benighted” by the products of technology. In a typically ironic *volte-face*, Mahon turns the parishioners’ jubilant music from songs of praise into siren-songs heralding an apocalyptic image of lives, both on land and in the sea, impaired by the baneful artefacts of the modern world.

Mahon’s coastlines are Beckettian last places, scenes of isolation, destruction and death. They are terminal borders physically attached to both land and sea, yet spiritually separated from either. The lost tribe and its desperate petitions may have earned Mahon’s sympathy and compassion, but the mournful sound and rhythm of “Trombone dispatches of the beleaguered whale” indicates an indignant contempt for a science which makes terrestrial human life more tolerable only at the expense of the natural world. “We might be anywhere”, he states ruefully in ‘A Garage in Co. Cork’ (THBN 56),

But we are in one place and one place only,

One of the milestones of earth-residence  
 Unique in each particular, the thinly  
 Peopled hinterland serenely tense –  
 Not in the hope of a resplendent future  
 But with a sure sense of its intrinsic nature.

The deeply ironic pun on “milestones” (millstones?) complements the oxymoronic “serenely tense”, capturing the implicit tone of lamentation for a restricted existence on the brink of extinction. There can be no “resplendent future” if the present threatens to disappear, sucked into oblivion by events of the past.

These poems show that Mahon is not entirely alone in his circumferential existence: religion and nature have each been consigned to a moral hinterland by the delusions of scientific ‘progress’. In this sense, we can perhaps view Mahon’s political motivations as sharing with poets such as Hughes, Wordsworth and Kavanagh a certain ‘green’ sensibility which assumes existential import in its authentic recognition of mortality. It also shares with Camus a correlation between the quasi-religious mysteries of biological processes – “birth, growth, sexual bonding, nurturing, ageing, sickness and death” – and the cyclical ebb and flow of death and regeneration found in nature, and especially in the sea.<sup>57</sup>

## 1.5 The Mediterranean

‘An Image from Beckett’ (L 8-10) opens with the following image: “In that instant / There was a sea, far off, / As bright as lettuce”. At times in art there can be a remarkably fine line between the sublime and the ridiculous, and this is a particularly

good example, defying the logic of reality in order to create an imaginative and self-referential poetic logic befitting the poem's title; a poetic logic, we might surmise, that Beckett himself would have been proud of. This brief stanza combines with stunning concision many of the elements that Mahon, in later poems, draws on at greater length in his meditations on the impact of the sea on his poetic consciousness. Firstly, the temporality of "instant" sums up the duration each individual enjoys on earth compared to the "Biblical span" of human history and the millions of years since the earth's creation. Secondly, this one word exemplifies the Beckettian (and Camusian) notion of the meaninglessness of life, especially when juxtaposed against the timelessness of the sea whence all life originated. The sea is "far off", phenomenologically removed in time and space to a point where it can only be imagined by the poet. Thirdly, the sea is "bright". This is neither particularly original nor particularly interesting in itself, but light and its effect plays as important a role in Mahon's aesthetic as it does in Camus's. Both Mahon and Camus write about contradictory, even conflicting, experiences pertaining to light and the sun. In Camus's early poem 'Mediterranean', he effuses, "Light! Light! man is consummated in it", while the sea is described in terms relating to the light that reflects from it: "Bright morning on enameled sea / Latin pearl that gleams like lilies: / Mediterranean."<sup>58</sup> Camus's attitude towards impoverished Algerian neighbourhoods, and his perception of their nobility in the face of desperation, can be traced to his celebration of the sun, its light conferring on the poor a certain grandeur, an equality with more affluent neighbourhoods who could not fully appreciate its munificence:

Poverty, first of all, was never a misfortune for me: it was radiant with sunlight. Even my revolts were lit up by the sun. These revolts were

almost always...revolts on everyone's behalf, aimed at lifting up everybody's life into the light. Quite possibly my heart was not naturally disposed to this kind of love. But circumstances helped me. To correct my natural indifference, I was placed half-way between poverty and the sun. Poverty prevented me from thinking that all is well under the sun and in history; the sun taught me that history is not everything. Change life, yes, but not the world which I worshipped as my God...In any case, the radiance and warmth which shone over my childhood freed me from all resentment. I lived with very little money, but also in a kind of rapture...[I]n Africa the sun and the sea cost nothing.<sup>59</sup>

An aversion to the processes of history; a reliance on solar and maritime imagery; a love of the natural world: it is barely surprising, given how this statement mirrors Mahon's own world-view, that he finds Camus's work paradigmatic.

Yet Camus's acknowledgement of the sun's life-affirming qualities is not entirely unconditional. He is all too aware that it can also be a hostile entity which causes men to lose control of their rational and moral faculties, that it can inspire a pulsating violence whose rhythms accord with a seething heart and racing blood. In The Outsider, Camus's descriptions surrounding Mersault's killing of the Arab are framed by images of death and the sun. Rays of light become blades; light reflected by the Arab's knife is seen by Mersault as "a long, flashing sword lunging at my forehead", and as a "dazzling spear"; light turns the colour of the sand blood red, foreshadowing the impending violence; and all the while the oppressive weight of the sun's blinding heat overwhelms Mersault's will as though it, rather than the Arab, were the true assailant.<sup>60</sup> By extracting Mersault's will

and ratiocination, the sun reduces him to something less than human, an elemental force of nature for whom the moral implications of personal responsibility are wholly expunged. This power of nature is the fourth aspect of ‘An Image from Beckett’ that Mahon, borrowing heavily from Camus’s vivid evocations, incorporates into his own work. The trope of the lettuce – while initially seeming somewhat absurd – takes on an unusual yet cogent significance once placed in its poetic context. Mahon positions the simile between the far-off sea, with which it is directly associated, and “A northern landscape” whose “sweetness and light”, “rich earth”, and “soft rush of its winds” seem initially to imply a natural fertility on a par with that of the distant, possibly Mediterranean, landscape. However, ‘An Image from Beckett’ ultimately concerns itself with mortality and death, the temporality of human civilisations, and quiescent, amoral historical processes that bear witness to the tragic fate of mankind. While the climatic conditions of the distant landscape may be conducive to nature’s perennial lifespan, Irish weather is less amenable to constant growth. As Mahon has shown in ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ (TSP 36-38), nature can decay into “a foetor of vegetable sweat” if left unintended when grown in artificial conditions. While Camus sees an excess of sunlight as potentially damaging to the human mind, Mahon views a dearth of natural illumination as having the same effect.

In ‘Mediterranean’, Camus describes the sea thus:

Noon on the immobile, ardent sea:

Accepts me without cries: silence and a smile.

Latin spirit, Antiquity, o modest veil upon the tortured cry!

Latin life that knows its limits,

Reassuring past, oh! Mediterranean!

Voices that were silenced still triumph on your shores,

Affirmative because they denied you!

Enormous and so light,

You steady and satisfy and murmur the eternity of your minutes.

Oh! Mediterranean! With the miracle of your history

Enclosed so completely

In the explosion of your smile.

This could not be considered great poetry, but it is deeply and honestly felt. What Camus succeeds in communicating is his attitude towards a way of life intrinsic to his homeland, a way of life that has more in common with an Islamic mode of existence than with the ‘rhythms’ of Western life. He was no lover of French industrial cities, and he long held a particular dislike for Paris and its literary cliques that hovered around Sartre and de Beauvoir. His deepest affinity, as the poem attests, was to the classical world. (Although ‘Mediterranean’ looks towards Italy, his “true spiritual motherland was classical Greece”.)<sup>61</sup> Camus sings the praises of the sea’s ability to rejuvenate the spirit by casting its explosive aura on the “smile” of the surrounding lands. This “Inalienable virgin”, constantly remaking itself in Heraclitean manner, is the incorruptible source of the spiritual “plenitude” that shapes the character of the populations who inhabit its seaboard. Unlike the turbulent waters and bleak shorelines surrounding Ulster, the Mediterranean furnishes its people with “nought but unnameable, / immobile communion”: it becomes a “cradle” in which they can find spiritual and moral sustenance through a mythic union

with nature (“Man is joined to tree”). The poem’s final section reiterates these notions of union and rejuvenation:

Dust of sun, sparkling of weapons,  
Essential principle of bodies and the mind,  
By you worlds are polished and made human,  
By you we are restored and our pains made noble.

Oh, antiquity impelling us!  
Mediterranean, oh! Mediterranean Sea!  
Naked, alone, without secrets, your sons await death.  
Death will return them to you, pure at last, pure.

The theological undercurrent of the last two lines serves as a reminder of Camus’s instinctive impulse towards the divinely-wrought immanence of nature. His notion of divinity, however, is not that of ‘the one God’ but of something much older, something that originated in the ancient civilisations surrounding the Mediterranean. Camus’s appeals to the mythic symbolism of the sea (as well as that of light, wind, sky and stones) are based on a paganistic world-view requiring only the empirically factual features of terrestrial existence to derive inspiration and, ultimately, happiness: “The message of these gospels of stone, sky and water is that there are no resurrections...[E]xcept for my love and the wondrous cry of these stones there is no meaning in anything. The world is beautiful, and outside it there is no salvation.”<sup>62</sup> Rejecting all the things he regards as merely spurious trappings of Christianity – especially reincarnation, redemption, hope, and collective human guilt for an unknown sin committed beyond our ken – Camus

places what faith he has in whatever can be realised and understood on a purely human level by locating immortality and truth in the continuing presence of the world and by finding happiness in the physical liberty to indulge somatic pleasures. By contrast, artistic creation is considered “a rebellion against the limitations of physical existence and the fact of death” in its desire to renounce “the logical interpretation of reality”.<sup>63</sup> The artist accepts the phenomenal world as the only reality, yet he must ultimately reject it as insufficient for the total expression of his ideas. In other words, the artist tries to replace reality with art. But art also enables the act of creation and, in this sense, rather than replacing or changing the world, art provides an imaginative alternative to it. For Camus, then, art is an aspect of revolt in that it both accepts and rejects the world. In this respect, every artist pursues a rivalry with God by seeking to replace His creation with art and, simultaneously, to replace Him.

These complex, interrelated facets of Camus’s writings have not gone undetected by Mahon. A clear affinity with the classical world is similarly found in ‘The Sea in Winter’ (P 109-14), yet, as we shall see, Mahon’s poem makes some radical detours from the path outlined by Camus’s ‘Mediterranean’. Here, Mahon is tempted to submit to the lure of the Mediterranean and disassociate himself from the demands of a philistine native locale, but this is precisely what he refuses to do since he can find illumination even in the darkest and most desolate of locations. Although stationed in Portstewart, Mahon “imagine[s]” the town as Greek and “pretend[s] not to be here at all”. Following his description of nature’s entropic death-throes, he writes,

This is where Jimmy Kennedy wrote  
‘Red Sails in the Sunset’. Blue

And intimate, Elysian  
 And neighbourly, the Inishowen  
 Of Joyce Cary and Red Hugh  
 Gleams in the distance. On a clear day  
 You can see Jura and Islay  
 Severe against the northern sky.

Considering what has gone before, the stanza feels as though it should be preceded by a qualifying ‘But’. Mahon is fully aware of the possibilities Ulster can provide when given the chance, the juxtaposing of popular song, literary art, and Protestant myth connoting a vast historical and cultural wealth. However, the description of the island of Inishowen is even more poignant. The word “Blue” (Wallace Stevens’s metaphor for the imagination), positioned at the end of the line while coincidentally beginning a new sentence, prepares the reader for a temporary, transcendental respite from the previous stanza’s pessimism. Along with “intimate” and “neighbourly”, Mahon endeavours to present a revised view of Ulster which, when combined with the implication of cultural and artistic success, is designed to contradict his prior assertions. But perhaps it is “Elysian” that really establishes Mahon’s intention, for Elysium was, according to Greek and Roman myth, the abode of the blessed and virtuous dead, a place of ideal happiness. When placed in conjunction with the mention of Red Hugh, the heroic Protestant prince, Mahon reimagines Ulster in the guise of a sophisticated, civilised, courageous culture affiliated with the societies of Mediterranean antiquity.

But Mahon’s dream out of time is all too brief. Ulster has reverted to a state of barbarism and the landscape ruined by its inhabitants. Now, “Policed by rednecks in dark

cloth / And roving gangs of tartan youth” while the heroes of ancient myth have been transformed into the legislative totalitarianism of the RUC, it has become “*Un beau pays mal habité*” with no sign remaining of its previous glories. Moments of transcendence are fleeting – “There *is* that rather obvious sunset” – but what is also obvious is the fact that Mahon cannot fully escape his inheritance, and the poem graphically illustrates his inability to be “through with history”. We cannot help but feel that pragmatic reality lurks behind every ironic turn of phrase: for each “The stones speak out, the rainbow ends”, there is “a cat knocking over a milk bottle / On a distant doorstep by moonlight”. Even the hope that “the long winter months may bring / Gifts for Diana in the spring” conceals the fact that votive offerings frequently entail some form of sacrifice, and Mahon’s sacrifice is total freedom. Ulster may be Elysian but it remains a place of death nonetheless, the living being excluded from its province. He is forced to register history’s power to enslave, being both “trapped as much as they / In my own idiom”, and

slow

To come to terms with my own past

Yet knowing I could never cast

Aside the things that made me what,

For better or worse, I am.

While Mahon pines for an “ideal future”, historical processes continue unabated. The (then) impending “year two thousand” threatens to find him rooted to the same spot, unable to sever ties with either his past or his place in the world. And so we discern the dual sense of Mahon’s alienation: although trapped in society, intuitively feeling “disgust

/ At their pathetic animation”, he remains isolated from it – “Why am I always staring out  
 / Of windows, preferably from a height?”

The eremitic lifestyle presented in ‘The Sea in Winter’ contains none of the virtues associated with Elysium. Intractably resolved to straddle the gulf between self and society, Mahon’s “own condition” registers the same disgust he feels towards ‘das Man’, a condition that menacingly endangers his hope of attaining a wholly authentic existence. Whereas Camus’s poem is life-affirming, drawing from the intensely lived experience of the sea the nobility and strength to return to a society “consummated” by the water and the light reflected by it, Mahon’s poem is life-negating, his eremiticism removing him from a world open to imaginative transformation to one where he feels the need to pretend to be elsewhere. ‘The Sea in Winter’ exhibits little of the sense of “necessity” of living in Ulster as found in the early poem ‘Glengormley’ (NC 5). Rather, it is as though Mahon has succumbed meekly to a crisis of conscience and confidence. We could try to ascribe the poem’s weakness to his own apparent debilitation, as implied in the following lines:

I found myself  
 Unnerved, my talents on the shelf,  
 Slumped in a deckchair, full of pills,  
 While light died on the choral hills –  
 On antabuse and mogadon  
 Recovering, crying out for the sun.

The loss of courage and self-control implied by the strongly positioned “Unnerved”, alongside words such as “Slumped”, “died”, “Recovering” and “crying”, would certainly

account for the poem's Puritanical self-remorse, and perhaps it would be unfair on Mahon to judge the work too harshly. After all, he rightfully acknowledges the difficulty of authentic being-in-the-world from the outset, citing Rimbaud's epigraph "*Nous ne sommes pas au monde; / la vraie vie est absente*" as evidence for the dichotomy between being physically grounded in the reality of place and being intellectually and emotionally sundered from it.<sup>64</sup> Yet the air of self-pity persists, and in the final stanza we find him complaining, "I who know nothing go to teach / While a new day crawls up the beach". We could easily read these lines as echoing a similar sentiment expressed in 'The Attic' and 'Ovid in Tomis'. In each case Mahon assaults the validity of writing poetry in post-industrial, sectarian Belfast. But while the "I who know nothing" of 'The Attic' plays on a self-effacing Socratic irony, the exact same phrase in 'The Sea in Winter' initially sounds carping and somewhat disingenuous. Writing of 'Beyond Howth Head', John Redmond makes an observation that could apply equally to 'The Sea in Winter': "The problem with it is that the long sentences, the numerous allusions, the sonorous, Latinate diction which sustain the poem, lead us to expect something grander."<sup>65</sup> Mahon remains in Portstewart ostensibly to foster the kind of relationship he shares with the poem's addressee, but while Camus can look directly and subjectively across the sea towards his spiritual domain, 'The Sea in Winter' maintains a detached, objective, cold perspective on the world. The poem is infused with neither the warmth nor the passion normally associated with the Mediterranean. Mahon glimpses the sea only imaginatively – "I think the redemptive enterprise / Of water" (emphasis added) – insisting that "distance is the vital bond" that figuratively connects temporal reality with the timeless metaphysical

world of the imagination. This distance also insists on an interim condition, “Between the window and the wind, / While equilibrium demands / A cold eye and deliberate hands”.

But journeying back and forth, whether between physical locations or mental states or a combination of the two, is hazardous and can leave the individual stranded in a nightmarish limbo where nothing connects. However, with few exceptions the poem is constructed around octosyllabic rhyming or near-rhyming couplets which, aided by frequent fluent enjambment, impel the poem ever onwards towards the aforementioned denouement where he asserts the need to renew himself on a daily basis. Mahon believes that connections can still be made despite the poem’s pendulous internal movements. His conviction that art itself permits the making of connections infuses these final two lines with an even deeper irony than that found in ‘The Attic’, an irony that ultimately derails any supposition of disingenuity. For here we find a deeply earnest, rather than a self-mocking, portrait of the artist as evinced by the two poems’ verbal oppositions. While Mahon is to be found in ‘The Attic’ “Scribbling on the off-chance”, the “new day” of ‘The Sea in Winter’ “*crawls* up the beach” (emphasis added). The frenetic activity of scribbling is transformed into a deliberately slow and painfully realised crawling, conferring on the motion a certain gravitas that imposes itself onto the poem’s internal toing and froing as an authentic need to cast aside any “doubts / About this verse-making”. Mahon is fully aware that art, like political change and the processes of history, can be painfully slow to come to fruition, a combination of ignorance, indolence, and even illness contriving to restrict the limitless possibilities of the future through a fear of repeating the past. But whereas Camus was quick to respond to current affairs, Mahon is

more reticent, choosing to both accept and oppose his “quiescent desuetude” through the careful, measured balancing act of the poem’s internal contradictions.

Following Camus’s lead, Mahon searches relentlessly for signs of beauty in the world, whether in a sunset, in the “Chaste winter-gardens of the sea / Glimmering to infinity”, or even in words that,

will find their mark  
And leave a brief glow on the dark,  
Effect mutations of dead things  
Into a form that nearly sings.

Words especially seem to hold a certain redemptive power, not only as the poet’s one essential tool but also as the one device which might combat the “something rotten in the state” that prevents peace and an end to Ulster’s internal strife. Mahon returns to this theme in ‘Rathlin Island’ (THBN 16), a poem about a visit to a bird sanctuary lying off the Irish north coast. The question of current Irish politics is not broached by the poem undisguised but is implicated in the opening stanza:

A long time since the last scream cut short –  
Then an unnatural silence; and then  
A natural silence, slowly broken  
By the shearwater, by the sporadic  
Conversation of crickets, the bleak  
Reminder of a metaphysical wind.  
Ages of this, till the report  
Of an outboard motor at the pier

Fractures the dream-time, and we land

As if we were the first visitors here.

Mahon shares with Camus and MacNeice the sense of being a tourist in his own land, and ‘Rathlin Island’ reflects the attitude of someone eschewing one form of exile for another only to be continually reminded of his country’s past. The poem alludes to the Rathlin massacre of 1575 when its inhabitants were slaughtered on the orders of the earl of Essex.<sup>66</sup> While the speaker assumes the role of social commentator recalling historical events of “unspeakable violence” (a subtly clever pun where the inability or unwillingness to ‘speak’ becomes yet another form of silence) which counter Mahon’s now-familiar dream of being “through with history”, the poet’s art is never far away. Sibilant descriptions of the past evoke both silence and danger, reminding us of man’s technological disturbance of nature’s authentic “natural silence”. The boat’s outboard motor “Shatters the dream-time” of the sea-crossing, while on land, “Bombs doze in the housing estates” and the speaker imagines “the screams of the Rathlin women” from centuries earlier. Mahon thus contorts Camus’s “explosion of your smile” into something altogether more insidious. Amid the sea’s “pitching surfaces”, “Only the cry of the shearwater / And the roar of the outboard motor / Disturb the singular peace.” The emblematic sea bird’s cry becomes a clarion-call to reverse the barbarous cycle of history. Mahon’s problem, however, lies in the fact that even the most historically remote events are surrounded by violence. If the poet wants to revert back, as it were, to a more peaceful state of existence, he is nevertheless compelled to ponder the lengths to which civilisation must go to escape the irreversible narrative of history. His long perspective acknowledges the human need to invent – or re-invent – its past through myths: hence the

women's screams are carried by the "metaphysical wind" across an unspecific stretch of time into a historical phase where little has changed. But history's continually haunting presence looms large over peace-inhabited dreamtime, threatening to submerge such dreams beneath the waves of "the turbulent sea". Pitching surfaces emphasise the underlying aggravation and upheaval caused by opposing forces that shatter the brief glimpses of hope and transcendence offered by the natural silence. What seems a place of refuge is therefore simply yet another aspect of a nation in crisis, this small island, caught in the cross-currents between the Atlantic and the Irish Sea, symbolising persistent mainland turmoils that defy the civility of reason. Even Mahon's invocation of Red Hugh and Somhairle Buidh is fraught with danger as these figures' retention of ideological resonance attributes to the poem a deep insecurity. The poem has none of the retributive, almost sanctified power of Camus's appeals to Virgil and pastoral serenity, although this lack does serve to underline Mahon's determination to confront directly the truth of history.

Camus's juvenile poem creates its own myth of Mediterranean civilisation while denying (or at least ignoring) the bloody history of the Greek and Roman empires. Admittedly he did write the poem six years before World War II and almost two decades prior to the Algerian War – whereas Mahon's writing benefits from hindsight – and his early naïve idealism eventually gives way to the harsh realism of the novels. But while Camus abstains from speaking outright of this violence in his earliest work, Mahon, by comparison, finds it "unspeakable" in the dual sense of it being both a rebarbative affront to all that is civilised and, quite literally, inexpressible. Nevertheless, despite these differences we can still discern another of Camus's contributions to Mahon's imaginative

and philosophical development, for it is inexpressibility, along with the unreason found in acts of violence, which constitutes the absurd: “the absurd is unreasonable and inexplicable; thus *the language of absurdity is silence*” (emphasis added).<sup>67</sup> The absurd is characterised by “the absence of correspondence or congruity between the mind’s need for coherence and the incoherence of the world which the mind experiences”.<sup>68</sup> That is, the absurd is a relational concept involving the individual mind and the external objects experienced by it. This wholly subjective response to the world is therefore neither universal nor absolute, being contingent on the psychological currency of values held meaningful by the individual mind, and as such any *sense* of absurdity cannot be ascribed wholesale as a feature of collective consciousness. Experiences of the absurd tend generally to emerge in one of four ways (or in any combination thereof): the individual’s questioning of existence borne of mind-numbing, mechanical routine; the passing of time leading ineluctably towards death; an awareness of the progressively alien nature of the world which, fuelled by arbitrariness and contingency, generates an inability to connect with the world’s increasing hostility; and an intimation of estrangement and isolation both from other human beings and from one’s own sense of self.<sup>69</sup> Thus it is readily apparent that there is a remarkable similarity between recognition of the absurd and the advance toward authenticity. Indeed, it would appear that one must be – or at least striving to be – authentic in order to recognise the signs of absurdity. Even by Camus’s reckoning, any attempt to negate the absurd would involve an inauthentic response to it. As the absurd is a relationship, its negation would involve the destruction of one of the two existences on which it is predicated. If reason – that which experiences the world – is rejected, then the mind turns its quest for a meaningful form of existence towards a

divinely-crafted afterlife (i.e. Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith') and Camus refers to this as 'philosophical suicide'; if, on the other hand, the unreason of the world is too much for the individual mind to bear, then physical suicide must ensue. Camus, who is incapable of viewing either transcendence or suicide as reasonable, considers neither of these options viable and he is fated to accept the absurd and to deal with it on its own terms. The absurd, therefore, demands the continuation of living if the individual is to retain any semblance of authenticity; there can be no such thing as 'authentic suicide'.

### **1.6 'As God is my Judge'**

Mahon confronts this situation in 'As God is my Judge' (NC 31), detailing the effect of the aftermath of the sinking of the Titanic on Bruce Ismay (who 'signs' the poem), the manager of the White Star Line who owned the ship.<sup>70</sup> Mahon is attracted to this character not because he was universally reviled for having failed to go down with the ship (although he was under no moral obligation to do so), but because he confronted the absurd and lived to tell the tale. Even before the inquiry into the disaster Ismay had been branded a selfish coward, having saved himself by joining the final lifeboat to leave the scene. His subsequent vilification weighed heavily on his shoulders and he spent the last twenty five years of his life in seclusion before succumbing to a stroke in 1937 aged seventy four. Yet some reports have suggested that rather than self-preservation, this was an act of sheer pragmatism. Ismay could see no one else on deck and the lifeboat had room for more passengers. Nevertheless, the public's response to Ismay's deed was, to him, entirely incoherent and unjustified, causing him extreme confusion and, ultimately, despair. Mahon successfully taps into Ismay's consciousness, the poem eliciting

sympathy for someone who was otherwise a rather unremarkable man, and for whom dying would surely have been far easier than surviving and having to face inquiries and the families of the dead. The poem's haunting, punning introduction establishes Ismay's dismay:

They said I got away in a boat  
 And humbled me at the inquiry. I tell you  
 I sank as far that night as any  
 Hero.

Ismay is not only "humbled" but also humiliated by the accusation of having "got away", the connotation being that he somehow committed a crime and 'got away with it'. His psychological and emotional sinking – repeated at the end of the poem – accurately conveys his lack of comprehension when faced with an outraged public for whom heroism is reserved for the dead.

Ismay's tendency to do everything 'by the book', along with his apparent officiousness, would have almost certainly contributed towards preventing him from understanding what he was supposed to have done wrong, while any attempt to rationalise his actions would have fallen on deaf ears. Ismay's subsequent solitude –

Now I hide  
 In a lonely house behind the sea  
 Where the tide leaves broken toys and hatboxes  
 Silently at my door –

reflects two of the characteristics which obtain in experiences of the absurd: isolation from others and, through the overturning of everything Ismay had previously held dear

(“my costly life”), a sense of being stranded in an alien world. His private hell is further compounded by Mahon’s reference to the “pandemonium of / Prams, pianos, sideboards, winches, / Boilers bursting and shredded ragtime”. These domestic and mechanical artefacts imply subtly the routine nature of existence which leads us to question the validity of our lives – a third characteristic of the absurd.

These lines also stand in condemnation of an Ulster culture which viewed the building of the Titanic as a great material, economic and indeed political success. Built by the loyalist-run Harland and Wolff shipyard (where Mahon’s father and grandfather worked), the Titanic symbolised Protestant supremacy in Belfast. According to myth, even God could not have sunk the ship, such was the workers’ confidence. The Titanic retains potency to this day in the Ulster Protestant imagination, not least because it represents a culture which, unlike Ismay or Unionist ideology, did go down with the ship: “the loss of the Titanic has come to symbolise unconsciously the thwarted nationhood of Ulster Protestants, …[and] at the level of community dreamwork the foundering of the ship and the founding of Northern Ireland were intertwined.”<sup>71</sup> The ship’s demise was, for its builders, incomprehensible, absurd even, although more fundamentalist Protestants managed to discern evidence of divine intervention as retribution for the (mythic) blasphemy. Mahon labours under no such illusions, although his perception of absurdity in this tragic course of events is two-fold; for not only was the treatment meted out to Ismay beyond the realms of reason, but the loss of life, rather than being seen as an act of God, was a similarly incomprehensible injustice of fate.

At no point does Mahon allow his attention to detail to drift from his depiction of the absurd’s action on human existence. While the gardener can describe Ismay’s

solitude, Ismay himself is incapable of giving voice to his responses to the world: “The showers of / April, flowers of May mean nothing to me, nor the / Late light of June”. The world is rendered incomprehensible to Ismay as long as the beauty of nature co-exists with the irrationality of his detractors. Moreover, the awareness of time’s passing (April...May...June) entails the fourth characteristic regarding the feeling of the absurd. The speaker’s meditation moves gradually away from the past and the “thundering” collapse of his life into the present where a silent tide washes up the sea’s detritus, and his soul’s disembodied silent scream of fear, anger and frustration is released into the night.

‘As God is my Judge’ has the tone of a suicide note, especially in the final request to “Include me / Honoris causa in your lamentations”. But Ismay refused to take the easy way out through suicide and in so doing exhibited the strength to confront the absurd. Mahon recognises Ismay’s authenticity, just as he recognises Camus’s and we recognise Mahon’s, via the absurd’s compulsion towards solitude and isolation. In ‘Death and the Sun’, Camus is “the goalie who refused suicide”, the artist who “Trades solidarity for solitude” following the public humiliation he endured after his falling-out with Sartre and the widespread hostile criticism levelled at his philosophical works, The Myth of Sisyphus and The Rebel. Ismay was similarly blighted and shared Camus’s estrangement from his community. The authentic man, in order to retain his authenticity, must contend with the absurdity inherent in communal being-with-others and, in so doing, run the risk of being isolated from it. The plague of absurdity affects all lives equally, but its indiscriminate nature results in a tension between the communal life and solitary experience which cannot be resolved authentically by choosing death over life.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in Germaine Brée, Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment, rev. ed. (London: Calder, 1974) 62.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Longley, “The Empty Holes of Spring: Some Reminiscences of Trinity Days and Two Poems Addressed to Derek Mahon,” Irish University Review 24.1 (1994): 51.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Longley 51; Patrick McCarthy, Camus (New York: Random, 1982) 15.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Camus, The Plague, trans. Stuart Gilbert (1947; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 191.

<sup>5</sup> In Mahon’s Selected Poems (1990), “murk” is amended to “muck”. This revision succeeds less well than the original which finds more resonant rhymes with the subsequent line endings “in the dark” and “stricken home”.

<sup>6</sup> Dillon Johnston, Irish Poetry After Joyce, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997) 249.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Eric Bronner, Camus: Portrait of a Moralist (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999) 143.

<sup>8</sup> John Cruikshank, Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt (1959; New York: Galaxy-Oxford UP, 1963) 2.

<sup>9</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Docker,” Death of a Naturalist (1966; London: Faber, 1991) 28.

<sup>10</sup> Qtd. in McCarthy 65; R.F. Foster reminds us that the poet Edmund Spenser believed that “Irish nationality had to be uprooted by the sword”. See R.F. Foster, Modern Ireland 1600-1972 (1988; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989) 8, n.vii.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh Roberts, Northern Ireland and the Algerian Analogy: A Suitable Case for Gaullism? (Belfast: Athol, 1986) 53.

<sup>12</sup> Roberts 67.

<sup>13</sup> Harriet Cooke, “Harriet Cooke talks to the Poet Derek Mahon,” Irish Times 17 Jan. 1973: 10.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Mahon, introduction, The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry, ed. Derek Mahon (London: Sphere, 1972) 13.

<sup>15</sup> Mahon 14.

<sup>16</sup> In Selected Poems, “goalie” has been amended to “artist” in an apparent attempt to lessen colloquial levity, and while each word has its merits and functions, “goalie” – being the original expression – serves my purposes better.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Camus, Selected Essays and Notebooks, ed. and trans. Philip Thody (1970; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979) 97.

<sup>18</sup> Qtd. in McCarthy 294.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Camus, The Outsider, trans. Joseph Laredo (1942; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 44.

<sup>20</sup> Cruikshank 143.

<sup>21</sup> Camus, Outsider 93, 91.

<sup>22</sup> Brian Masters, A Student’s Guide to Camus (London: Heinemann, 1974) 28.

<sup>23</sup> Cruikshank 36.

<sup>24</sup> Camus, Selected Essays 24.

<sup>25</sup> Qtd. in Brée, Camus and Sartre 76.

<sup>26</sup> Brée, Camus and Sartre 76.

<sup>27</sup> Eamon Grennan, “‘To the Point of Speech’: The Poetry of Derek Mahon,” Contemporary Irish Writing, ed. James D. Brophy and Raymond J. Porter (Boston: Twayne, 1983) 15.

<sup>28</sup> Camus, Selected Essays 19.

<sup>29</sup> Philippe Jaccottet, Selected Poems, trans. Derek Mahon (Harmondsworth: Viking-Penguin, 1987) 41.

<sup>30</sup> Brée, Camus and Sartre 64.

<sup>31</sup> Damian Grant, “The Voice of History in British Poetry, 1970-84,” Études Anglaises 38.2 (1985): 165.

<sup>32</sup> Qtd. in Edna Longley, “The Writer in Belfast,” The Irish Writer and the City, ed. Maurice Harmon (Gerrards Cross: Smythe; Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes, 1984) 66.

<sup>33</sup> Albert Hofstadter, introduction, Poetry, Language, Thought, by Martin Heidegger, trans. Albert Hofstadter (1971; New York: Harper, 1975) x.

<sup>34</sup> See Donald Harman Akenson, ed., Conor: A Biography of Conor Cruise O’Brien: Volume II: Anthology (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1994) 172. O’Brien describes *La Chute (The Fall)* as “Camus’s last and perhaps his best novel”.

<sup>35</sup> Bronner 125.

<sup>36</sup> Albert Camus, The Fall, trans. Justin O’Brien (1956; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) 107.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph McBride, Albert Camus: Philosopher and Littérateur, (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992) 61.

<sup>38</sup> Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Vintage, 1982) 130.

<sup>39</sup> Neil Corcoran, After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 147. Corcoran uses the revised version of the poem, which replaces the original “Germinal ironies” with “desperate ironies”. See P 44.

<sup>40</sup> John Goodby, “‘The Soul of Silence’: Derek Mahon’s Masculinities,” The Poetry of Derek Mahon, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Ulster Editions and Monographs: 11 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 2002) 225, 226.

<sup>41</sup> Qtd. in McCarthy 258-59.

<sup>42</sup> Brée, Camus and Sartre 62.

<sup>43</sup> Ronan Bennett, “Don’t Mention the War: Culture in Northern Ireland,” Rethinking Northern Ireland: Culture, Ideology and Colonialism, ed. David Miller (London: Longman, 1998) 210.

<sup>44</sup> Kathleen Mullaney, “Derek Mahon’s Poetry,” Politics and the Rhetoric of Poetry: Perspectives on Modern Anglo-Irish Poetry, ed. Tjebbe A. Westendorp and Jane Mallinson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995) 50.

<sup>45</sup> Mullaney 51.

<sup>46</sup> Michael O’Neill, “A Partial Dark,” rev. of The Hunt By Night, by Derek Mahon, Poetry Review 73.1 (1983): 58.

<sup>47</sup> S. Beynon John, “Albert Camus: A British View,” Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Germaine Brée (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1962) 135-36.

<sup>48</sup> Camus, Plague 209.

<sup>49</sup> Camus, Plague 209-10.

<sup>50</sup> John 142.

<sup>51</sup> Edna Longley, The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994) 87.

<sup>52</sup> Not to be confused with the poem ‘Going Home’ in Selected Poems, which is a revised version of ‘The Return’ found in Poems 1962-1978.

<sup>53</sup> See Arthur E. McGuinness, “Cast a Wary Eye: Derek Mahon’s Classical Perspective,” Yearbook of English Studies 17 (1987): 141.

<sup>54</sup> See McGuinness 142, and Seamus Heaney, “Place and Displacement: Reflections on Some Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland,” Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Elmer Andrews (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 135.

<sup>55</sup> John Kerrigan, “Ulster Ovids,” The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland, ed. Neil Corcoran (Bridgend: Seren, 1992) 261.

<sup>56</sup> Kathleen Shields, “Derek Mahon’s Poetry of Belonging,” Irish University Review 24.1 (1994): 72.

<sup>57</sup> Fraser Harrison, The Living Landscape (London: Pluto, 1986) 32.

<sup>58</sup> Albert Camus, Youthful Writings (Cahiers II), trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (1973; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980) 156-58.

<sup>59</sup> Camus, Selected Essays 18.

<sup>60</sup> Camus, Outsider 60.

<sup>61</sup> Henri Peyre, “Camus the Pagan,” Brée, Camus 67.

<sup>62</sup> Camus, Selected Essays 98, 100.

<sup>63</sup> Cruikshank 145.

<sup>64</sup> Although Rimbaud's original is in prose form, this quotation follows Mahon's layout.

<sup>65</sup> John Redmond, "Wilful Inconsistency: Derek Mahon's Verse-Letters," Irish University Review 24.1 (1994): 108.

<sup>66</sup> Rathlin has seen numerous massacres, from the attack by Viking raiders in 795 to those of 1557, 1575 and 1642, all of which were carried out by English soldiers.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Lehan, A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism and the Modern American Novel (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP; London: Feffer, 1973) 21.

<sup>68</sup> Cruikshank 41.

<sup>69</sup> See Cruikshank 54-55, and Arnold P. Hinchliffe, The Absurd (1969; London: Methuen, 1977) 36.

<sup>70</sup> The poem was later revised and twice re-titled, firstly as 'Bruce Ismay's Soliloquy' (P 32-33) and then as 'After the Titanic' (SP 29).

<sup>71</sup> John Wilson Foster, "Imagining the *Titanic*," Returning to Ourselves: Second Volume of Papers from the John Hewitt International Summer School, ed. Eve Patten (Belfast: Lagan, 1995) 333.

## 2. ‘In Belfast’: Mahon and MacNeice

### 2.1 From Carrickfergus to Glengormley

It is a simple, though hardly commendable fact that for many years the reputation of Louis MacNeice was overshadowed by the daunting figure of Auden. MacNeice’s problem was that critics and readers were unable to bracket him convincingly and solely within either of the literary traditions to which he apparently belonged. Despite numerous allusions in his poems to Belfast and a mythologised West of Ireland, he was seen neither as sufficiently ‘Irish’ for readers of Yeats and Kavanagh, nor as ‘English’ as Auden and Spender, poets with whom he was bracketed, along with C. Day-Lewis, under the derisory epithet ‘MacSpaunday’. However, during the 1960s and 1970s a new breed of young Northern Irish poets emerged, hailing MacNeice as a major formative influence on their own writing. Michael Longley and Paul Muldoon have been vociferous in their praise of MacNeice, and each has played his part in the campaign to establish MacNeice within the pantheon of modern Irish poets.<sup>1</sup> But Mahon was to take MacNeice’s example furthest in his poetry. A common religious and social background links the two, certainly, but MacNeice’s presence lurks among much of Mahon’s work on several far deeper, and more significant, levels. MacNeice’s legacy exerts itself in Mahon’s poetry not only in their respective treatments of similar themes, but also in matters of form and technique, such as an abiding tendency towards irony and scepticism, a carefully crafted ambiguity that frequently defies paraphrase, and an elegant virtuosity of verse form and construction. Each of these qualities is present in their writings on home and alienation.

MacNeice was destined to become something of an outsider: “I was the rector’s son, born to the Anglican order, / Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor”

(‘Carrickfergus’, MCP 69-70). By dint of his Anglo-Irish, Ulster Protestant heritage, MacNeice could not hope to share the thoughts, experiences or feelings of the Catholic minority in Ulster: yet nor is there any suggestion in ‘Carrickfergus’ of true or complete allegiance to “the Anglican order”. Being “born to” a social position usually carries the inference of natural or presumptuous acceptance (‘to the manor born’, for instance), but in this case MacNeice implies an inheritance over which he has absolutely no control, and over which the figure of his father looms large. Hemmed in by the Norman-built city walls and a continuing sense of enslavement with the return of soldiers, MacNeice is surrounded by the masculine values that keep him ostracised from his fellow countrymen. Female influence is completely lacking in the poem, the poet being separated from his mother, his governess, “the mill girls”, and, he seems to imply, the feminine, Catholic dimension of ‘Mother Ireland’. It is as though he is suggesting that disconnection from home can be equated with the lack of stability produced by the absence of a maternal figure. Yet we find no sentimentality in these lines, just a matter-of-fact resignation at the recognition that separation is, so to speak, ‘the way things are’ in Belfast and the way they are likely to continue to be. The strongly positioned “Banned” reinforces MacNeice’s own sense of segregation, while the poem’s opening gambit – “I was born in Belfast between the mountain and the gantries” – establishes his position as a kind of ‘nowhere man’ incapable of finding any sense of belonging among either the indigenous Gaelic population, for whom ideas of land, home and nationality go hand-in-hand, or the Protestant community whose unwavering commercialism and industrialisation of the province has exacerbated religious and political tensions. ‘Carrickfergus’ is a deceptively complex poem, and MacNeice is careful not to make explicit his feelings towards either

the Protestant or the Catholic inhabitants of Ulster. The Irish Quarter, a liminal home for dispossessed Gaels, is a deprived area (“a slum for the blind and the halt”), while the Protestant community – exemplified by the privileged family interred in the crypt of his father’s church – is guaranteed “their portion” in the afterlife. Although speculation may conclude that MacNeice’s sympathy lies with the impoverished Catholics, the poem refuses to draw an entirely clear picture regarding his perspective on and attitude towards his fellow Protestants. Like Beckett and Joyce, MacNeice “reject[s] political formulations about humanity”, endeavouring instead to present a balanced view of humanity stripped of ideological trappings.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one of the defining features of MacNeice’s poetry is a stubbornly contained “evasive honesty” that frequently makes it almost impossible to pin down accurately any firmly held political or religious position.<sup>3</sup> This quality may well have been inherited from his Anglican bishop father who preached pacifism while, paradoxically, expounding Home Rule, but there is no doubt that it was also passed on by MacNeice to Mahon whose work is similarly elusive, often infuriatingly so.

The early poem ‘Belfast’, the direct poetic ancestor of Mahon’s similarly titled ‘In Belfast’, takes on a far more sinister aspect than anything found in ‘Carrickfergus’:

Down there at the end of the melancholy lough  
 Against the lurid sky over the stained water  
 Where hammers clang murderously on the girders  
 Like crucifixes the gantries stand. (MCP17)

The juxtaposition of violence, religion and industrial commercialism rams home MacNeice’s measured, denunciatory response to profit-orientated culture. The northerner’s “hard cold fire” provides neither warmth nor light; it is “cowled” amid the

“gloom” of an inimically intransigent regime that prefers its religious iconography to be aesthetically primitive artefacts of “buyable beauty” rather than symbols of authentic worship. MacNeice avoids the reductive oversimplification of ascribing blame for Belfast’s condition to either religious faction. Scenes derived from the Protestant-dominated shipyards and the sound of “Orange drums” are set against traditional Catholic images of “the garish Virgin” and the Madonna. Edna Longley has claimed that the last line of this stanza “fuses industrial and religious oppressiveness, to symbolize Protestant rule”.<sup>4</sup> But this judgement does not quite ring true, the crucifix being a predominantly – though not exclusively, of course – Catholic image.

‘Belfast’ also utilises the harsh, clanging consonance remembered from childhood, and later reprised in ‘Carrickfergus’, as a device to heap barely modulated scorn on an increasingly materialistic culture that has scarred the landscape with its technology of mass production. The fabric of the poem is designed to articulate the character of both the city and its people, the phraseology echoing the solidity of the city walls described in ‘Carrickfergus’: “the hard, solid diction is part of the meaning of the poem”.<sup>5</sup> The city’s church may take “the form of a cross”, but its walls are designed to isolate it from the countryside, the rest of Ireland proper, and its Catholic inhabitants who had become the Norman’s “slave”. However, ‘Carrickfergus’, published six years after ‘Belfast’, shows a more mature MacNeice taking a less antagonistic approach to elucidating the enslaving effects of Belfast’s turbulent history. The depiction of social misogyny contained in the earlier poem – “the male kind murders each its woman” – regresses to a more latently simple, though no less effective, sense of absence, while the contrived, unpunctuated syntax of the above-quoted stanza would eventually make way

for the more journalistic style of reportage he came to employ, most famously in Autumn Journal. Undoubtedly influenced by Eliot's enabling acceptance of the modern city as ripe material for poetry, in MacNeice's hands this style proves remarkably productive: "It can accommodate contradictions without sounding contradictory: faithful to the moment, to time passing, to capturing and holding the 'ephemeral' on 'tangent wings'."<sup>6</sup>

Faithfulness and honesty – no matter how evasive – contribute to the poem's balanced registering of a covertly perceptible recognition that MacNeice, irrespective of personal feelings towards the city and its inhabitants, has a fundamental responsibility to present his impressions in a wholly sincere manner.

These themes of isolation, a disjointed religious inheritance, and the sense of being physically attached to a home city yet feeling spiritually and intellectually divorced from it, provide recurrent motifs in Mahon's poetry. Like MacNeice, Mahon was born to the Anglican order. He was raised in the Church of Ireland, the Irish branch of Anglicanism that has its roots in the religion of the British establishment. In this respect, Mahon's religious inheritance is grounded in the Protestantism of the Ascendancy and the Anglo-Irish gentry who viewed with suspicion the dissenting tradition of Presbyterianism, which was imported to Ulster by Scottish settlers. For this reason, Mahon's poetry does not service "the dominant stereotypes of the Northern Irish Protestants", and it frequently "disengages itself from the political stereotypes of Protestant identity by acknowledging both their potency and their inadequacy".<sup>7</sup> Anglicanism is a denominational minority in the North, and the poetry of both Mahon and MacNeice exposes the ambiguous and inconclusive complexities of Protestant identity-discourse. As the son of an Anglican bishop with nationalist sympathies,

MacNeice was exposed to these complexities from an early age, leading him to exclaim despairingly while domiciled at an English boarding school, “Oh this division of allegiance.”<sup>8</sup> Mahon, strangely, never mentions his father in his poetry, preferring instead to eulogise other male relatives – all working-class – such as his grandfather and his ‘wicked uncle’. The absence of Mahon’s father is hinted at in Section XI of The Hudson Letter, ‘Chinatown’ (THL 58-60): “I need hardly speak to you in praise of women / since you grew up amongst them. (So did I / but there’s a tale will keep indefinitely.)” Mahon’s silencing of his father conflates reticence with something incommunicable. The father represents home, but also an uneasy metaphysic of identity. Reluctant to speak of his sense of loss, dispossession usurps the idea of belonging to a religio-political ‘family’.

One of Mahon’s earliest poems, ‘In Belfast’ (NC 6), is indebted to MacNeice, resonating as it does with the ideas which preoccupied his poetic forerunner. The poem begins, “Walking among my own this windy morning / In a tide of sunlight between shower and shower”. While MacNeice’s poem opens with an image of a cold-hearted, indeterminate northern ‘everyman’ without direct reference to the poet or to the poem’s speaker, Mahon immediately situates himself centrally amidst the community to which he (ostensibly) belongs, establishing his position from the outset as a means of conferring a more authoritative perspective on the poem than that provided by MacNeice. While MacNeice’s speaker retains the position of ‘outsider looking in’, Mahon is *in medias res*, walking among his fellow citizens. However, the ambiguity of “my own” means that we cannot be entirely sure as to whether Mahon is writing of all the citizens of Belfast, all the Protestants, or just the Anglican minority: his enlightened position as privileged recipient of poetic inspiration (“a tide of sunlight”) instantly singles him out from each

one of these social groups. The welter of climatic and meteorological images compounds his isolation: while the poet associates himself with “sunlight”, the rest of this divided society is afflicted with the darker aspects of stormy weather (for instance, “shower” – with its inversion of the “gold shower” image of MacNeice’s ‘Ode’ – and “wet”). It is also interesting to note Mahon’s use of the word “tide”. For quite apart from representing his constant ebbing and flowing away from and back to Belfast, an aspect of his cosmopolitan lifestyle that undermines any concrete concept of ‘home’, Mahon also uses the word in a context completely antithetical to that suggested by MacNeice’s ‘Belfast’. While MacNeice allegorises the tides of the sea – “the salt carrion water” – as the means by which parasitical industrialists make their fortunes, in Mahon’s hands the image is transformed into a rather different kind of transport. The escapist potential of the sea here becomes a transcendental, imaginative escape into poetry, a form of beauty unappreciated and misunderstood by the greater part of Belfast’s citizenry. Expressions such as “resume” and “Once more” help to reinforce Mahon’s chosen itinerancy, suggesting repeated rueful returns to the darkness of unreason signified by Belfast. He cannot belong completely without reneging on his principles and ideals, or without abandoning the warm, nourishing light of reason for “The cold gaze of a sanctimonious God”.

‘In Belfast’ resembles ‘Death and the Sun’ in its structure of hierarchical allegiances. Although Mahon writes “we keep sullen silence in light and shade” seemingly out of communal spirit, there are actually two different referents for “we” here – the ‘we’ of the small, illuminated artistic community to which he truly belongs, and the darker social collective from which he is isolated. This is the same brutal society described by MacNeice in ‘Belfast’: “The sun goes down with a banging of Orange

drums / While the male kind murders each its woman / To whose prayer for oblivion answers no Madonna”.

MacNeice’s view of Belfast is informed by a savagely ironical apprehension of shame and disgust, yet it is precisely the antinomies contained within this ironic stance which foreground the nature of his revulsion. The Strings Are False, MacNeice’s unfinished autobiography, exposes an honest, unabashed tendency towards snobbishness in his inability to understand fully the lives of those for whom intellectual and aesthetic endeavours are not of paramount importance. He admits his failure to recognise that the northern temperament has been forged by material necessities beyond its control; he also confesses to his intrinsic ignorance, brought on by detachment, of the macho shipbuilding community whose activities contrast so sharply with those of the almost exclusively female linen workers (the “shawled factory-wom[e]n”). When MacNeice speaks of “us who walk in the street so buoyantly and glib”, “buoyantly” providing a simple yet effective pun on the efficiency and success of the ship-workers’ labours for which he had little real understanding or sympathy, he is nevertheless making a poignant, pointed comment on the lack of either buoyancy or glibness in the northern character. His remarks also constitute a coming to terms for MacNeice, a realisation that, whatever his social circumstances, whether as an Anglo-Irish Protestant in Ireland or as an Irishman in England, he is fated never to feel truly at home. The opening line of ‘Carrickfergus’ (“I was born between the mountain and the gantries”) scrutinises the duality of connection and dislocation, not just in the juxtaposition of Belfast’s rural and urban landscapes, but equally importantly in the ambiguous preposition “between”. This could paradoxically suggest both entrapment and the enabling perspective of being able to see the landscape

in its entirety, and, indeed, both sides of the political divide. Mahon's poem, however, exhibits no such ambiguity. He also positions himself in a position of betweenness, but rather than being allowed a dual perspective, Mahon is hemmed in and stifled by the featureless majority who, as "shower[s]", take the brunt of his intellectual derogation. Consequently he considers himself inexorably set apart from his allotted community and their pernicious influence.

These differences go some way towards explaining Mahon's revision of the final stanza of 'In Belfast' from the version that originally appeared in the magazine, Icarus. We have already seen how this stanza relates to Camus, but MacNeice's presence is even stronger:

Poetry and fluent drivel, know your place –  
 Take shape in some more glib environment  
 Away from shipyard gantry, bolt and rivet.  
 Elsewhere assess existence; ask to what end  
 It tends, wherefore and why. In Belfast live it.<sup>9</sup>

The irony-tinged scepticism that throws into question the value of art amid a philistine environment will be discussed at greater length later. But it is clear that the alliteratively mocking language of "glib" and "gantry" emerged from a poetic consciousness that had absorbed MacNeice's imagery and terminology almost wholesale. Mahon reinforces MacNeice's observation that the frivolity usually associated with glibness has no place in an environment so oppressively antagonistic towards artistic creativity. The ingenious rhyming of "rivet" and "live it" also owes a debt of gratitude to MacNeice who, especially when reflecting on Belfast from elsewhere, could wittily rhyme "among the



buses” with “sarcophaguses” (*Museums*, MCP 20-21), and “Platonic Forms” with “fickle norms” (*Birmingham*, MCP 17-18). The scrupulous command “In Belfast live it” captures precisely the essence of Mahon’s – and, indeed, MacNeice’s – argument that objective imaginative or intellectual reflection has no place here, that Belfast is a domain of immediate subjective existence purged of all rational thought, and that questioning loyalties through art will not be tolerated.

It may be that this version of the stanza was wholly revised because Mahon realised that it exhibits an excessive ‘angry young man’ attitude towards Belfast, and that with four more years of maturity came an understanding that the city requires compassion rather than derision (hence the subsequent rhyming of “city” with “pity”, although pity does tend to infer an attitude of superiority). If this is indeed the case, then Mahon, rather than moving away from MacNeice’s influence by revising the poem so substantially, approaches it yet more closely. Brendan Kennelly has written that MacNeice “proposes an alternative to prejudice in the North...A humanistic alternative to piosity.”<sup>10</sup> Mahon has evidently absorbed this humanism during the period between the poem’s two versions, shifting the emphasis away from frustrated denigration in favour of an attempt to understand more fully the truth of his predicament; hence the later version’s assertion, “One part of my mind must learn to know its place”, the implication being that learning will allow Mahon to “remember not to forget” whence he came.

Memory also plays a vital role in MacNeice’s feeling of being enslaved. Haunting, haunted images confer on ‘Carrickfergus’ an abiding air of loss and regret: “The yarn-mill called its funeral cry at noon”, “a drowning moon”, “Banned for ever”, “the sentry’s challenge echoing all day long”, “the gate-lodge / Barred to civilians”, “lost

sirens". Yet even though MacNeice escaped to an English boarding school, the poem contains little in the way of reprieve. The boat that took him to England, as with the soldiers' uniforms on the train from Carlisle, are "camouflaged", an indication that MacNeice's movements – albeit during wartime – must be conducted under a cloak of suspicion, deception and concealment. Moreover, "the world of parents / Contracted into a puppet world of sons" which he found in provincial Dorset proved to be a further reminder of his own background, his own social estrangement, his own inheritance. The poem ends almost as it begins, the military restrictions conveyed by "the soldiers with their guns" echoing the claustrophobic confinement of "the bottle-neck harbour collects the mud which jams / The little boats beneath the Norman castle", while the fiscal implications of "Contracted" recall the economic ramifications of 'Belfast'.

'Glengormley' (NC 5) is to Mahon what 'Carrickfergus' is to MacNeice. Each poem is a dramatic indictment of the Belfast suburbs where the poets spent their early lives and which subsequently shaped their respective perceptions of life in the province. MacNeice's dialectic of a fractured identity inhabiting a cold world where past and present collide can be equally located in Mahon's consciousness. The light, satirical rhythms of 'Glengormley' bring to mind another early MacNeice poem, 'Sunday Morning' (MCP 23), which describes the routine banality of a suburban existence that "deadens and endures". But Mahon's delicate wit conceals an underlying bitterness he directs towards a community which, like MacNeice's contracted "puppet world", suffers from closed mindedness and a displaced collective memory shut off from violent reality, blithely hiding itself in ignorance behind trimmed hedges, manicured lawns, and mundane domestic neutrality. A sense of mythic history has been all but expunged from

the Belfast milieu these poems depict. While MacNeice relies on tangible historical artefacts – the Norman walls and the tomb of the Chichesters – to provide evidence for perpetuated barbarism, Mahon invokes the mythical past, but only subsequently to cast it from memory. His suburban sanctuary is safe from the monsters and giants “Who tore up sods twelve miles by six / And hurled them out to sea to become islands”; but at the same time there are no longer any saints or heroes who might offer some protection against the new era’s “dangerous tokens”. We find here an ironic allusion to MacNeice’s diatribe in Autumn Journal against the verbiage propounded by nationalist myth-makers: “The land of scholars and saints: / Scholars and saints my eye, the land of ambush, / Purblind manifestos, never-ending complaints” (Canto XVI).<sup>11</sup> MacNeice paints Ireland as a self-deceiving “world that never was” that cannot stand alone either culturally or economically, blaming in part “the sentimental English” who have helped foster false perceptions of Ireland through a combination of historical guilt, romanticised ignorance, and mercantile superiority. Moreover, he regards Ireland as complicit in this spurious identity, trading on its history through the sale of garish Virgins while peddling its sectarian differences as narcotic inducements to its own people:

I would pray for that island; mob mania in the air,  
 I cannot assume their easy bravery  
 Drugged with a slogan, chewing the old lie  
 That parallel lines will meet at infinity. (‘Ode’, MCP 54-58)

This poem was written from the geographically distant perspective of Birmingham, but ‘Valediction’ (MCP 52-54) also exhibits its own form of detachment with MacNeice proclaiming his impending departure from the legacy of “arson and murder” in search of

a life more suited to his civilised sensibilities: “I will acquire an attitude not yours / And become as one of your holiday visitors, /.../ Farewell, my country, and in perpetuum”. Yet MacNeice, as he freely admits, “cannot deny my past to which my self is wed”, and the tone of this section displays an attenuated bitterness that resents the way his own identity links inextricably to that of his mother country. He still admires the landscape, Ireland’s natural beauty appealing directly to his aesthetic sense, but his choice to become no more than a tourist allows him the freedom to disengage himself from the concealed reality of historical violence and to “see Sackville Street / Without the sandbags”.

Mahon is certainly far less vehement when ascribing blame, but he too acknowledges the fact that when it comes to sectarian violence in Ireland, English influence is rarely far away. Indeed, Belfast’s established order is rooted in the English model of commercial expansion and territorialism, and colonial conquest is mocked through the word “tamed”. But Mahon differs from MacNeice in his acceptance of Belfast as the proper place in which to do battle against forces hostile to the imagination. In what sounds curiously like a sly dig at MacNeice, he divides responsibility for Ireland’s culture equally between political barriers and the way Irish writers have helped perpetuate the artificial myth of Ireland as home of the literary muse:

The suburbs of Belfast have a peculiar relationship to the Irish cultural situation inasmuch as they’re the final anathema for the traditional Irish imagination. A lot of people who are important in Irish poetry cannot accept that the Protestant suburbs in Belfast are a part of Ireland, you know. At an aesthetic level they can’t accept that.<sup>12</sup>

‘Glengormley’ operates on a number of primarily ironic levels, both criticising and accepting contemporary reality and the ostensibly civilising effects of colonialism, while seeming to regret the passing of an ancient – if barbaric – order. But the poem is ultimately characterised by circumspection, and the humorous beginning deflates any possibility of condemning outright the very people who constitute his tribe. Mahon cannot bring himself to ascribe culpability to those for whom a quiet life equates tentatively with universal peace, so his real anger is directed at the damage caused by nationalist propagandists and a form of language which can be just as debilitating and destructive as guns and bombs. “Only words hurt us now” ironises the lack of pacifying political action in a place where small dogs and watering cans have come to symbolise a new order of conformity and the dread of collective responsibility.

By contrast, ‘In Belfast’, the poem preceding ‘Glengormley’ in Twelve Poems (although the order is reversed in Night-Crossing), confronts and attempts to define the relationship between Belfast and artistic responsibility. We can distinguish a different Mahon here, a Mahon whose attitude towards Belfast has altered slightly – though significantly – from the previous poem. Whereas ‘Glengormley’ links the self with the necessity of spatial and temporal existence, ‘In Belfast’ undergoes a shift in attitude. Necessity is associated here with only “One part of my mind”, while responsibility is relegated from outright compulsion to a moral contingency (“Should”). Moreover, Mahon, like the MacNeice of ‘Carrickfergus’, chooses to shun the social and historic realms of myth in order to focus on the diurnal realities of Belfast’s sectarian divisions. While ‘Carrickfergus’ carries the narrative of violence through the centuries, from Norman invasion to World War I, Mahon contracts the threat and fear of insurgence into

a single line: “The spurious mystery in the knowing nod”. Mahon is therefore familiar with and, indeed, complicit in this knowledge, the only alternative to which is a reversion to “sullen silence”, a renunciation of collective responsibility that fails to engage direct involvement in physical hostilities. (It should be remembered that this collected version of ‘In Belfast’ predates the Troubles by at least a year and therefore cannot be regarded as a direct comment on them.) Such knowledge is but one aspect of Mahon’s “old conspiracy” with his place of origin and with the Protestant values that constitute “the unwieldy images of the squinting heart”. If the heart must squint it is because open communication in Belfast is so problematic. The internal rhyme of “unwieldy” and “yield” ironises the possibility of a fruitful discourse accessible to all, especially given the extent of sectarianism in the North. This ironic function is cemented by the religious language of stanza two: “We could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill / At the top of every street, for there it is, / Eternally, if irrelevantly, visible”. The collective pronoun allies Mahon to the community in a purely ironic sense. For if one eye only is open to the possibility of salvation, then it is natural to conclude that the other must be remain closed permanently in blithe ignorance of that possibility. Mahon, in other words, registers what the inhabitants of Belfast are confronted with every day – the struggle between acceptance of abstract, irrelevant religious inheritance and the practical realities of the external world and ordinary life. Although the imagery and iconography of religion are solidly tangible, diurnal necessity renders the spiritual significance of such objects obsolete and ultimately unfelt, while the conditional “could” ultimately denies the possibility of salvation, at least in MacNeice’s conception of it, as a transcendental absolute. The subtlety of Mahon’s exposition serves as a reminder of MacNeice’s deep

impact on his poetry as he attempts to attain a similarly rigorous balance between emotive desires and perceptual truth.

Robyn Marsack has claimed that in ‘Carrickfergus’, “there is nothing introspective”, and given the dominance of sense impressions in the poem it is easy to see why she should make this assertion.<sup>13</sup> But it is clear that MacNeice’s descriptions of historical events, along with the prominent imagery of death (“crucifixes”, “carrion”, “murders”), mask some deeply personal responses to the events surrounding him. Indeed, the poem’s structure serves as a kind of camouflage for the poet’s ingrained alienation, his peripherality emphasised by his absence from the poem until the “us” of the penultimate stanza. Nevertheless, both ‘Belfast’, with its complex, tough, unyielding syntax, and ‘Carrickfergus’ can be seen not so much as expressions of desire for escape from the pressures and problems life in Belfast brings, but as direct confrontations with those difficulties, confrontations which might afford some entry – no matter how slight or frustrated – into both the collective Belfast psyche and MacNeice’s own attitude towards the mechanisms of confinement that conspire to enslave individual minds.

Likewise, the revised final stanza of ‘In Belfast’ raises the ante on Mahon’s gamble to return home by introducing a moral imperative:

One part of my mind must learn to know its place –  
 The things that happen in the kitchen-houses  
 And echoing back-streets of this desperate city  
 Should engage more than my casual interest,  
 Exact more interest than my casual pity.

That “must” speaks volumes for Mahon’s compulsive drive towards authentic behaviour. He has found silence in the Belfast of his childhood, but it is “sullen” and belongs to the darkness inhabited by “spurious mystery” and “the knowing nod”, thinly-veiled references to sectarian divisions that intimate the perpetuation of fear and intimidation. It is interesting to note Mahon’s use of the word “sullen” here. In ‘Once Alien Here’ by John Hewitt, another Ulster Protestant, the first two stanzas contrast the “urgent labour” and commercial interests of English colonisers with “The sullen Irish limping to the hills”.<sup>14</sup> The indigenous population, having been deprived of their land, still carry with them their enchantments, spells and rich mythic heritage, unlike the populace of Belfast’s suburbs where such myths have been extirpated. Hewitt confers a degree of dignity on the usurped Irish, while Mahon’s colonisers are reduced to fearful, shadowy figures aware of their lack of rootedness. MacNeice, Hewitt and Mahon thus all point in their own individual ways to the problems created by the distancing effects of an unassimilated Protestant consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

Ethical necessity and its concomitant fight for self-preservation denote a mind divided by the disparity between the rational self-consciousness that contrives to dwell within a cocoon of authentic need and the bad faith of inauthenticity that submits, without question, to “the unwieldy images of the squinting heart”. Like Camus – but unlike MacNeice – he is intimately familiar with his native environment (“the kitchen-houses / And echoing back-streets”), but Mahon does not outwardly share Camus’s respect or admiration. He cannot close the space between the boy he was and the man he has become, yet it is precisely this space that allows Mahon the freedom to make his own existential choices. While the guilt of being divided between loyalty to self and loyalty to

home *should* raise more than casual interest or pity, he holds emotion and sentiment in check for fear of submitting to the external demands of inheritance. The first indication of this inner turmoil is provided by the strongly positioned caesura, which leaves the question hanging in tense irresolution; the second is shown by the equally strongly positioned “Should” which qualifies both the unstressed moral imperative “must” and the powerful rhyme of “city” and “pity”. Here Mahon acknowledges the responsibility he, as artist and Protestant, feels towards his community by conflating objective reality with subjective emotion. However, his commitment to such a project falters in the face of two things: a personal need to remain authentic, and the self-reproaching knowledge that pity implies superiority in the way it looks down on those it is intended to aid or save. He understands that any “prayer for oblivion”, to use MacNeice’s phrase from ‘Belfast’, must invariably fall on deaf ears given the irrelevance of “a sanctimonious God” (itself an image of self-righteous superiority): hence the defiance of “There is a perverse pride in being on the side / Of the fallen angels and refusing to get up”. The juxtaposition of “pride” with “side” betokens an affiliation between one of the deadly sins and shared communal activity: as the rhyme implies, choosing a side when loyalties conflict so hazardously is never easy. Mahon’s intimate knowledge of Belfast – not something to which MacNeice could lay sufficient claim – should provoke moral outrage and something more than “casual interest”, but it fails implacably to do so. The subtle diminution of the moral imperative from “must” to “Should” reflects the choice Mahon has made, and his forthright decision to be loyal to his own consciousness holds sway, favouring an authentic recognition of empirical mortal existence over the contingent “astute salvations” offered spuriously by history and religion. In order to achieve

personal salvation, the poet's mind *must* be divided between the unreason associated with the obfuscatory gloom of place and people, and the ratiocination of self-knowledge as a means of keeping separate the emotions of subjective feeling and intellectual enlightenment. That is, it is the poet's duty to see clearly by keeping both eyes open in his twin pursuit of truth and an authentic mode of existence, balancing sensory perceptions against an understanding of both external reality and personal requirements.

The whole tone of this final stanza is one of determined, dispassionate detachment – further echoing MacNeice's 'Belfast' – mediated by an air of moral ambiguity which refuses to yield any concrete resolution to the psychological need for self-realisation in a climate hostile to the free-thinking individual. The shift from first person singular in the first stanza, through the collective pronouns of the second and third, and ultimately back to the first person in the final stanza denotes Mahon's stalwart refusal to conform to an imposed form of identity which adheres to "fickle norms" ('Birmingham', MCP 17-18). Mahon is rightly critical of poets (at least those from Ireland) who refuse to explore the possibilities offered by such metaphysical issues, blaming their attitude on the persisting influence of Yeats and "the shadows of the Celtic Twilight cast by [his] own early poems": he despairs of these poets' "reverence for a poetry which evaded the metaphysical unease in which all poetry of lasting value has its source".<sup>16</sup> The transition from the uncertainty of "could" to the moral directive "Should" addresses Mahon's uneasy refusal to rise to the bait laid down by a Protestant orthodoxy that claims to offer moral certainty and "astute salvations", but confers only intellectual and emotional paralysis. Abnegating the conscience that would incur such self-destruction, Mahon promises to "remember not to forget", thus providing himself with a salient reminder that

those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it. Yet this unease seems destined to persist, despite his apparent belief in the power of memory to overcome the horrors of the present and provide a means of escape into a more optimistic future. For we are unable to escape completely from any past constituted and defined by subjective memories: as MacNeice states in ‘Valediction’, “history never dies”. By the same token, however, the events and experiences we recall through memory are also subject to flux. While the past itself cannot be changed, one’s view of it can alter when experience is interpreted through self-reflection. But, equally importantly, future choices can only be made in the light of the past. The ethical constituent of the poem’s could-must-should structure balances precariously on the knife-edge of memory, continually defying Mahon’s self-determining attempt to assert his individuality. He registers the fact that the repeating of history can only be avoided once the search for existential freedom results in the choice to abandon forever the constraints of a society which has itself abandoned the right to choose.

The language and construction of ‘In Belfast’ expand further on Mahon’s discontent, especially with regard to the poem’s presentation of temporal movement. In the first stanza, the phrases “I resume” and “I remember not to forget” establish a retrospective perspective through their present relation to past events. However, a phrase contained in the last stanza – “One part of my mind must learn to know its place” – alludes to a future event while again being set in the present. Although the shift from remembering (and the suggestion that something has already been learned) to learning implies a form of regression, the sense of the past contained in “resume” and “remember” still vies for dominance with the anticipated futurity of “learn”. This structural aspect of the poem is remarkably complex, yet it illuminates an essential aspect of Mahon’s

aesthetic and his ironical attempt to elude historical flux. The poem's structure is itself a form of escape from the limitations forced on him by a society towards which he is reluctant to show either responsibility or sympathy. Mahon has no need to emulate MacNeice's attempt to confront and understand the social forces of Belfast as he is already in possession of that knowledge. Nevertheless, Mahon's reluctance is still tempered by an act reminiscent of MacNeice's critique of what Heaney has called Belfast's "agnostic world of economic interest".<sup>17</sup> For both Heaney and Mahon, the word "interest", repeated over the poem's last two lines, conjures capitalist ideas regarding a contractual obligation to repay a debt while reiterating MacNeice's scornful attack on commercialism in 'Belfast'. But repaying society by giving himself completely to his environment and his community – a theme later covered in 'The Last of the Fire Kings' – runs the risk of ontological bankruptcy through a total loss of self once his identity is subsumed by anonymity and rejection.

## 2.2 Authenticity and the Other

MacNeice broaches a similar theme – the desperate urge towards self-assertion amid the faceless majority – in a late poem, 'Memoranda to Horace' (MCP 539-43). In the first canto he asks,

Being confined to the usual and frozen  
 Channels, communicants in frozen sperm,  
 Caught between cosmic and comic radiation,  
 Against which world we have raised a monument  
 Weaker and less of note than a mayfly

Or a quick blurb for yesterday's detergent?

The “frozen sperm” is an image of future potential and hope, but when juxtaposed against the mayfly and its brief lifespan it also serves to negate that futurity. Condemning a society that places greater importance on transient, commerce-generated advertising – the quick buck – than on the lasting monuments of art, MacNeice laments that society’s easy capitulation to the myopic entrapment and disabling stasis which hamstring the individual mind and compel acquiescent uniformity. That “we” allies MacNeice with Horace and is an assertion, like that of Mahon’s ‘Death and the Sun’, of the poet’s need to belong primarily to an aesthetic, rather than a purely social, community. For authentic artists the building of monuments can be achieved only through art or, more specifically in the case of poets, through “The gap reducible only by language”. Solely within this context of artistic freedom can MacNeice be truly himself:

Which yet means relief from the false identity  
 Assumed in the day and the city, the pompous  
 Cold stereotype that you in your period  
 Tried to escape in your Sabine farmhouse.

The lives led by ‘das Man’ are thus seen as disingenuous, politically motivated attempts to conceal individualistic modes of existence from themselves and from others, while simultaneously denying the existence of hidden truths which might offer some worthy release from the inexorability of time’s ravages. MacNeice refuses to pander to such an attitude, defying instead the continual assault of complacency which threatens his individual freedom: “there are monsters / To come and corrupt me”. This is made more explicit in the earlier poem, ‘Hidden Ice’ (MCP 76-77):

Those who ignore disarm. The domestic ambush  
 The pleated lampshade the defeatist clock  
 May never be consummated and we may never  
 Strike on the rock beneath the calm upholstering.

As suggested by the title, the poem provides a comment on the dangers inherent in ignoring the exigencies of external physical reality. The repeated warning “may never” underscores the possible loss of spiritual love if the sexual dimension of the marital bed remains unconsummated. (There is a suggestion of something similar in ‘Memoranda to Horace’ when that poem establishes the polarity between “the false identity / Assumed in the day and the city” and the possibility of a true form of identity existing in the domestic bed at night. One aspect of MacNeice’s poetry not assimilated by Mahon is MacNeice’s frequent talk of sex and the physicality of love.) MacNeice intends ‘Hidden Ice’ to be a tribute, written “in praise of ordinary people who live by routine,...members of the routine world who fall away from their allegiances”.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, MacNeice is aware of the danger of sitting “between the clock and the sun”, the two symbols both of time passing and of habitual *laissez-faire*. There is a certain fatal attraction, suggested by the language of violence (“disarm”, “domestic ambush”), in doing nothing to oppose the onrush of time, but the subsequent defeatism instilled by the hidden ice of unforeseen hazards can, for MacNeice, find its conclusion in one or other of the only alternatives available to those who fail to confront the absurd: “suicide or the asylum”.<sup>19</sup>

The great opponent of habitual routine is Camus, who views such torpid behaviour as a negation of both authenticity and freedom. The inurement created by daily life’s mechanical repetitions dulls the senses to the point that, once it is realised that there

is no profound reason for living, the individual is so overwhelmed that only two options are available: to continue living and acknowledge authentically the intrinsic absurdity of life for what it is, or to accept blithely the ultimately fatal condition of total futility and suffer the consequences. Authentic awareness, however, brings its own problems. Once that awareness becomes manifest there comes a concomitant sense of existential exile, of feeling a stranger in a once familiar world and sharing it with other people – i.e. a community – for whom that world remains securely familiar. But while Camus is openly critical towards attitudes which fail or refuse to address the absurd in favour of mute capitulation, MacNeice lends a sympathetic ear to those for whom ordinariness provides reassurance in an uncertain world. He admires “the human animal’s endless courage” (man’s “mild bravado in the face of time” as he puts it in ‘Hidden Ice’) and the diligent dreamers who, in Autumn Journal, “let no dead dog nor death be final” (Canto II). The “fear of life” can prove greater than the fear of death, and regular recurrences of familiar activities serve to stave off the moment of oblivion by offering fleeting apprehensions of meaning amid a tapestry of life woven with “colourless thread”:

Spider, spider, spin  
 Your register and let me sleep a little,  
 Not now in order to end but to begin  
 The task begun so often.

These sentiments are in stark contrast to Mahon’s caustically satirical “Wonders are many and none is more wonderful than man” (‘Glengormley’), a line derived from Sophocles’s Antigone.<sup>20</sup> Mahon finds little in the generalised and largely anonymous “human animal” of everyday Belfast with which to sympathise, preferring instead to

aggrandise characters who belong to personal history and using them as springboards from which to launch into “meditations on a theme removed from the complexly human”.<sup>21</sup> He shares with Camus and MacNeice an antipathy towards any mode of existence based on habitual behaviour. Although this is not made explicit in the poem, ‘Glengormley’ opens with a series of images recalling Yeats’s ‘Long-Legged Fly’ (YCP 381-82). But whereas Yeats’s injunction to “Quiet the dog” (a pacific response to the metaphor ‘dogs of war’, perhaps) is part of a greater scheme to prevent the sinking of civilisation, Mahon’s images provide an ironical commentary on mundane routine that is itself an affront to truly civilised behaviour: dog-walking (“tamed the terrier”), garden maintenance (“trimmed the hedge”), and laundry (“Clothes-pegs litter the window-ledge”). Mahon possesses a profound aversion to the trappings and personae of dull suburban middle-class life, finally opting to identify with characters whose behaviour flies in the face of convention, coercion and, in the case of ‘Grandfather’ (NC 7), time itself:

They brought him in on a stretcher from the world,  
 Wounded but humorous. And he soon recovered –  
 Boiler-rooms, row upon row of gantries rolled  
 Away to reveal the landscape of a childhood  
 Only he can recapture. Even on cold  
 Mornings he is up at six with a block of wood  
 Or a box of nails, descreetly up to no good  
 Or banging round the house like a four-year old –  
 Never there when you call. But after dark

You hear his great boots thumping in the hall  
 And in he comes, cute as they come. Each night  
 His shrewd eyes bolt the door and set the clock  
 Against the future, then his light goes out –  
 Nothing escapes him. He escapes us all.

This poem seems comparatively straightforward on first reading, but closer scrutiny reveals a dark vein of unease that could only have emanated from Mahon's – rather than his grandfather's – consciousness. His grandfather's childlike, unpredictable behaviour belies a "shrewd" and active mind alert to the dangers of the outside world, dangers possibly experienced first-hand in Belfast's shipyards. His actions encompass a new-found freedom from years of workaday drudgery, although the habit of rising at six o'clock still proves too strong to break and acts as a point of contact between the stultifying past and an invigorating present. The point is that Mahon's grandfather has earned the right to buck the trends of conformity following a lifetime of experiences "Only he can recapture". He has reached a pole of consciousness that gives him an identity as individual as that of his grandson, despite its having been founded on repetitive labour, hardship and orthodoxy. Mahon plainly admires his grandfather's own "endless courage", but his atavistic reversion to a more innocent state is viewed as yet more preferable.

Gerald Dawe regards the subject of 'Grandfather', along with the practical joke-loving figure of 'My Wicked Uncle', as "challeng[ing] the community out of which they come in a way similar to the poet's own art and irony. They are renegades, like the poet, raiding the inarticulate and respectable Protestant anonymity."<sup>22</sup> These champions of the

authentic self are few and far between, however, and as such constitute a community of their own; they, like Mahon's aesthetic community, constitute MacNeice's "Kingdom of individuals":

These, as being themselves, are apart from not each other  
 But from such as being false are merely other,  
 So these are apart as parts within a pattern  
 Not merged nor yet excluded, members of a Kingdom  
 Which has no king except each subject, therefore  
 Apart from slaves and tyrants and from every  
 Community of mere convenience. ('The Kingdom', MCP 248-54)

Such men, MacNeice asserts, are "innocent"; they vindicate history and expose – though do not necessarily break through – the social and linguistic barriers between self and Other. Puritan restraint is shunned by the kingdom's inhabitants as they defy the strict limitations of time, place and a condemnatory world where "The minority [is] always guilty" (Canto XVI).

MacNeice's humanism precipitates discovery of an attachment, or even an allegiance, to people via the commonality of shared experiences expressed in Canto I of Autumn Journal. Here, he shows that experience is limited neither to the Hampshire middle-classes with "all the inherited assets of bodily ease", nor to "the hiking cockney lovers with thoughts directed / Neither to God nor Nation but each to each". No distinction is made between the experiential potential of rural, city or suburban dwellers, each of whom can enjoy "bacon and eggs" just as easily as suffering "all the inherited worries, rheumatism and taxes". Yet, as is so often the case with MacNeice, both 'Hidden

Ice' and Autumn Journal are carried along by an undercurrent of prospective doom, a warning of hazards unforeseen which owes its veracity to his persistent debt to Heraclitus. Familiar, ritualistic experiences quickly turn into the soporific anodynes which deceive us into believing that commonality is a perfectly acceptable condition of existence. Canto II begins,

Spider, spider, twisting tight –  
 But the watch is wary beneath the pillow –  
 I am afraid in the web of night  
 When the window is fingered by the shadows of branches,  
 When the lions roar beneath the hill  
 And the meter clicks and the cistern bubbles  
 And the gods are absent and the men are still –  
*Noli me tangere*, my soul is forfeit.

Discomfort generated by the incursions of external, everyday reality leads to a disturbing image of MacNeice attempting to retreat from the world and the ensuing loneliness of self-abnegation. The Latin tag (possibly derived from Thomas Wyatt's paean to Anne Boleyn, 'Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind') translates roughly as 'Do not touch me' or, more poignantly, 'Do not affect / move me'. This may be a plea for escape and solitude, but once extracted from the company of others MacNeice's soul becomes isolated and forced to relinquish its hold on what, in Canto XXI, he terms "A life beyond the self but self-completing".

Canto II employs the image of the spider four times in a parodic deflation of Blake's intense, vivacious tiger. Here, the normally diligent, industrious spider – no

doubt meant to recall Robert the Bruce's arachnid encounter – becomes a symbol of wasted, repetitive, meaningless effort. While asleep, time, like "the gods", ceases to exist in any meaningful sense; it is "absent". MacNeice is therefore consigned by physiological necessity to become one of "the others",

who with a grin

Shake off sleep like a dog and hurry to desk or engine

And the fear of life goes out as they clock in

And history is reasserted.

But the reassertion of history also suspends understanding, and the workings of the mind as mechanical repetition – also suggested by the engine and the clock – take control once more. The absence of understanding thus shapes sensory perceptions to such an extent that they fail to register fully what is presented to them. Recalling a maxim of Heraclitus ("Not understanding, although they have heard, they are like the deaf. The proverb bears witness to them: 'Present yet absent'"), MacNeice registers the deception of eyes and ears blind and deaf to the truth.<sup>23</sup> As with Mahon's description of poetry as "this lyric lunacy" ('Father-in-Law', P 59-60), so MacNeice is just as ironically sceptical of the value of poetry in such a historically-forged social environment. Viewing the spider as symbolising the ultimate futility of poetry and its inability to affect the hearts and minds of a society in perpetual need of consolation against the fear that time is its enemy, allows us to witness his compulsion to wonder whether either speech or writing is capable of serving the communication of truth once mindless routine and pacifying distractions take hold:

memories are stamped with specks of sunshine

Like faded *fleurs de lys*,

Now the till and the typewriter call the fingers,

The workman gathers his tools

For the eight-hour day but after that the solace

Of films or football pools

Or of the gossip or cuddle, the moments of self-glory

Or self-indulgence, blinkers on the eyes of doubt. (Canto III)

The opening sections of Autumn Journal demonstrate the intimate, introspective thoughts of a mind wanting to assert its individuality and achieve a coherent and temporally grounded sense of self, while struggling simultaneously with and against the basic precepts of being-with-others. MacNeice is admirably honest in his ambitions for the poem, stating its nature in the poem's prefatorial note "to be neither final nor balanced". Without this honesty, MacNeice would not be able to address directly the contradictions either of quotidian life or of locating the self – no matter how vestigially – among others: "Why not admit that other people are always / Organic to the self" (Canto XXVII). The flux of time, perception and experience is praised ironically in 'Hidden Ice' as

our inconceivable stamina

Who work to the clock and calendar and maintain

The equilibrium of nerves and notions,

Our mild bravado in the face of time.

However, in Autumn Journal it is viewed – at least initially – as a combination of a Kierkegaardian ‘leap in the dark’ and an almost epiphanic, Heraclitean realisation that glittering hope and solipsistic despair co-exist in eternal conflict:

It is this we learn after so many failures,  
 The building of castles in sand, of queens in snow,  
 That we cannot make any corner in life or in life’s beauty,  
 That no river is a river which does not flow.

Change is therefore unavoidable, the constant ebbing and flowing of experience refusing to allow the mind sensitive to life’s absurdity to settle for either egotistic self-absorption and retreat from the world, or the mind-numbing sterility of routine behaviour. The poet, MacNeice says, can afford to neither luxuriate in “academic sophistry – / The original sin” (Canto XXIII) nor succumb to the bathetic palliatives that lead to both an unfulfilled life and a rueful death.

Heraclitus claimed that “Those who sleep are workers and share in the activities going on in the universe”, implying that the workings of the universe are determined by all men. But there is always a sting in the tail of these aphorisms, and the key word here is “sleep”. All men sleep, of course, but three more of his apophthegms suggest more clearly the direction Heraclitus, and subsequently MacNeice, intend their ideas to take:

We must not act and sleep like men asleep.

To those who are awake, there is one ordered universe common (*to all*), whereas in sleep each man turns away (*from this world*) to one of his own.

It is hard to fight against impulse; whatever it wishes, it buys at the  
expense of the soul.<sup>24</sup>

Heraclitus thus equates sleep and impulse with unconsciousness and the darkness of unreason, while wakefulness denotes conscious, rational, enlightened thought that leads to both personal and collective responsibility. Impulse especially fails to take into consideration the consequences of actions; it ‘ignores’ and, in the case of ‘Hidden Ice’, compels the individual to “disarm”, to let down one’s guard against the incursions of time (the “defeatist clock”). But whereas Mahon, in ‘Heraclitus on Rivers’ (P 107), sees the negative side of perpetual flux, MacNeice turns the stasis of sleep and inaction into an affirmation of praxis and shifting experience. ‘Variation on Heraclitus’ (MCP 502-3) adapts the much-quoted aphorism “It is not possible to step twice into the same river” to suit a wholly positive purpose. The poem is comprised of two long and difficult sentences spread over twenty two lines of surreal imagery, obtuse stress patterns, and taxing, logic-defying syntax:

While the books on the shelves keep reeling  
Their titles out into space and the carpet  
Keeps flying away to Arabia nor can this be where I stood –  
Where I shot the rapids I mean – when I signed  
On a line that rippled away with a pen that melted  
Nor can this now be the chair – the chairoplane of a chair –  
That I sat in the day that I thought I had made up my mind.

The difficulty of articulating thought, as contained in the exhausting last-quoted line, is designed specifically to denote the limitations of reason and the inevitable floundering of

scientific method as it tries to capture transient experience (“But none of your slide snide rules can catch what is sliding so fast”). For MacNeice, the perpetual flux of life cannot be contained or fully comprehended by systems of order which rely for their verisimilitude on some degree of perceptual fixity. Following the example of Heraclitus, MacNeice became in the final stage of his career an exponent of the idea that language itself must be used in unusual ways to demonstrate the true nature of things. The next poem in the Collected Poems, ‘Reflections’, with its imagery of infinite regression (“The fire in the mirror lies two rooms away through the window”), “syntactically enacts its meaning by setting mirror-image clauses more and more elaborately on the march”.<sup>25</sup> MacNeice, through his verbal dexterity, seems to relish the fact that the mysteries of life cannot be distilled by scientific investigation, and they require instead the skill and trickery of the poet’s art to capture the merest grain of their essence through which the reader might share in those mysteries. Life, he seems to be saying, should be enjoyed and experienced, not explained away until all that is left is an equation or a number.

By contrast, Mahon’s ‘Heraclitus on Rivers’ looks at the dark underbelly of flux. While “your changing metabolism / Means that you are no longer you” could be considered as signifying the constantly evolving metaphysical state of Becoming, the death of the body’s cells, the shifting planets, the loss of love, and the image of “perishable” bronze all suggest a bleak downhill slide towards entropy. Ultimately, even language will turn to dust:

Your best poem, you know the one I mean,  
 The very language in which the poem  
 Was written, and the idea of language,

All these things will pass away in time.

But this is essentially closer in spirit to MacNeice's poems of the thirties. 'Heraclitus on Rivers' echoes the internal rhyming of 'The Sunlight on the Garden' through its repetition of words and sounds: "The same river is never the same / Because that is the nature of water". Each of these poems "achieves an exhilarating poise between fear at the passing of time", while "intimat[ing] the precious fragility, the vulnerability...of the moment".<sup>26</sup>

Much of MacNeice's poetry revolves around an irresolvable tension or "doubleness" that refuses to absolve the poet of his responsibilities towards either his private function or his public role.<sup>27</sup> It reveals a constant strain between the one and the many, between the 'I' who "will escape, with my dog, on the far side of the Fair" ('The Individualist Speaks', MCP 22) and the socially sympathetic, public spirited persona who nevertheless must fight against a society that prefers to cheapen its artists by pigeonholing them into abstraction rather than endorsing or valuing them: "They have made of me pure form, a symbol or a pastiche, / Stylised profile, anything but soul and flesh" ('An Eclogue for Christmas', MCP 33-36). This division of consciousness between feeling and reason resists simple or explicit political categorisation. While Auden, Spender and Day-Lewis were happy to throw their hats into various political rings, MacNeice's detachment from utopian idealism confers on his poetry a tenacious, common sense resilience. His refusal to accept any system offering convenient quick-fix solutions results in a fierce scepticism that can withstand the Marxian "mass-production of neat thoughts" as well as the vacuous elitist verbiage of "the theory-vendors" ('Turf Stacks', MCP 18-19). There is a prescience about MacNeice's best work in its

recognition of the initial attraction, but also the ultimately transient nature, of political ideals: “This poise is perfect but maintained / For one day only” (*‘To a Communist’, MCP 22*). He rebukes facile intellectual calls to arms in favour of pleading for the preservation of the dignity of the individual.

A refusal to make political allegiances explicit when confronted with political turmoil is a problem Mahon similarly feels compelled to address. Unwilling to tether himself to partisan loyalties, yet unable to escape fully an inbred sense of political responsibility, Mahon’s poetry occupies an equivocal ground that relies for its effect on the distance between action and reflection, and he continues to regard poetry as “an exemplary politics because of the resistance it offers determinism”.<sup>28</sup> In an oft-quoted, but still important discussion of Northern Irish poetry, published just over a year after the outbreak of the Troubles, Mahon writes of the war between

the fluidity of a possible life...and the *rigor mortis* of archaic postures, political and cultural. The poets themselves have taken no part in political events, but they have contributed to that possible life, or the possibility of that possible life; for the act of writing is itself political in the fullest sense. A good poem is a paradigm of good politics – of people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level. It is a light to lighten the darkness; and we have had darkness enough, God knows, for a long time.<sup>29</sup>

Mahon’s words have obviously struck a chord with his contemporaries. In a 1986 interview, when questioned whether poetry had a place in political involvement, Heaney replied, “It’s necessarily involved.”<sup>30</sup>

### 2.3 ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’

In ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ (TSP 9-10), one of Mahon’s most impressive and important poems, he considers the conflicts inherent in asserting individuality whilst situated within the context of a community that places rigid demands on him, even though that community also knows that his position as figurehead and spokesman is likely to be short-lived. ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ envisions its speaker as a mythical ruler of the kind found in Frazer’s The Golden Bough.<sup>31</sup> Frazer has described the symbolic significance of fire in pagan cultures as having both positive and negative consequences: while it was used to deter the evil spirits which pagans believed affected prosperity and protection from disease, it was also associated with rituals involving human sacrifice. Fire’s twin symbolic functions could not be separated, based as they were on the vagaries of religious superstition, and Mahon uses the poem to trace a historical continuity between an imagined past and a personally experienced present where communal fear and murder still prevail. While the poem was published in the 1975 collection The Snow Party, it first appeared the previous year in a little-known periodical, Lace Curtain, as simply ‘Fire-King’. This means that when Mahon writes “Five years I have reigned...”, he is making explicit a poignant political parallel between ancient mythic barbarism and a period in contemporary Irish history that included the Shankhill Road riots, Bloody Sunday, and Bloody Friday. Despite the caprices of temporal flux, cruelty and human powerlessness remain intractably constant.

Transposed to the modern world, the Fire King finds that his tribal responsibilities – seemingly outmoded conventions of a bygone age bearing little relevance to contemporary society – merely help to propagate the continuation of “The barbarous

cycle" with which he seeks to break. The inflexible role imposed on him by rank and responsibility leads him towards a dream of assuming a fluid identity that permits the freedom of movement and self-expression:

I want to be  
 Like the man who descends  
 At two milk churns  
  
 With a bulging  
 String bag and vanishes  
 Where the lane turns,  
  
 Or the man  
 Who drops at night  
 From a moving train  
  
 And strikes out over the fields  
 Where fireflies glow,  
 Not knowing a word of the language.

John Redmond has claimed that "What the real Mahon wants is...to be omniscient and grandiose and he does not want these qualities to be undermined."<sup>32</sup> Yet this seems an extremely speculative view given that, having identified Mahon with the figure of the Fire King, Redmond then ignores the speaker's wish to be an ignorant ("Not knowing...") itinerant with few possessions and no power over anyone but himself, an

adventurer who can “strike out” in any freely-chosen direction without foreknowledge of his final destination. Nevertheless, Redmond is surely right to conflate poet and speaker when we consider the poem’s allegorisation of the opposition between individual artist and tribal philistinism. Mahon certainly endeavours to take some form of control, and thereby deflect any undermining of his power, but only control of his own destiny. By asserting his individual will in defiance of communal demands and expectations, he hopes to “elude categorisation” and dictate his own future rather than the futures or behaviour of others.<sup>33</sup> Satisfied with knowledge only of his own language (i.e. the language of poetry), Mahon wants to follow in MacNeice’s footsteps as “A tourist in his own country” (qtd. in J 25).

Responsibility towards the tribe is not so easily shrugged off, however. The poem turns on the speculation that the desires of the many far outweigh the requirements of the individual. This idea is not exactly new. Baudelaire, in one of his pithy ‘Squibs’, notes the distinction between the free-thinking individual and the superstitious, easily-mesmerised majority: “The masses are born fire-worshippers.”<sup>34</sup> Having expressed his desire to be “Through with history” and to escape the limited – and limiting – world of the tribe, Mahon states,

But the fire-loving  
People, rightly perhaps,  
Will not countenance this,  
  
Demanding that I inhabit,  
Like them, a world of

Sirens, bin-lids  
 And bricked-up windows –  
  
 Not to release them  
 From the ancient curse  
 But to die their creature and be thankful.

Such utilitarianism is, however, part of neither Mahon's aesthetic nor his intellectual make-up. That inconspicuously self-mocking aside “rightly perhaps” fails to alleviate his concerns regarding not so much the inevitability of usurpation as facing up to a life bereft of freedom and the loss of authenticity. The “creature” the Fire King becomes after his fall from power resembles MacNeice's “automaton” in ‘An Eclogue for Christmas’: stripped of all authority, he is transformed into one of the usurped to be controlled as the tribe sees fit.

Mahon implies, through the telling way the poem is addressed both to the fire-loving people and to the anonymous reader, that such tensions can never be resolved to the satisfaction of all. While he dreams of “Perfecting my cold dream / Of a place out of time, / A palace of porcelain”, the heavy alliteration scoffs at and subverts such a possibility. John Goodby suggests that Mahon's attempt to be through with history represents a withdrawal into “the ivory tower of artistic transcendence”.<sup>35</sup> However, echoing MacNeice's critique of “academic sophistry”, any withdrawal would stand as an inauthentic mode of existence, a refusal to confront the reality of his situation. So in one sense Redmond is right when he says that Mahon does not want to be “undermined”, although it is not so much his authority for which he fears as his individuality. The poet

wishes nothing more than to resist the directives of the majority who are reluctant to free themselves from the placatory, ritualistic habits of “the ancient curse”. They would rather force routine quiescence on the Fire King while continuing to rely on him, as they will come to rely on his replacement, for guidance. Nevertheless, the poem’s dual perspective and Mahon’s characteristic irony deflate any hard judgement on Mahon’s position of the kind made by Redmond at the very moment that that position is asserted. Dillon Johnston states that, “Mahon is not so concerned with history’s indeterminacy...as with its determinism.”<sup>36</sup> But in this poem at least, Mahon deals with the dramatic enactment of the eternal struggle between pre-ordained destiny and self-determination, between an inauthentic form of being and authentic becoming. By opposing the potential joy and freedom of the adventurer against the despairing pain and unfulfilment of the one who stays behind to face an inevitable and premature death, ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ becomes a distillation of the dilemma between the fear of death and the even greater fear of failing to live in accordance with personal integrity.

Mahon is aware of this situation from the start, registering his position as little more than a pawn in the tribe’s game of control. Words such as “descends”, “vanishes” and “drops” signal not so much an escape from a historical situation and its incumbent brutal, ritualistic practices, as the collapse, disintegration and, finally, the disappearance of the self. While the tone of the first half of the poem appears to grow in confidence, culminating in the assertive defiance of “I shall / Break with tradition and / Die by my own hand”, the very language of the opening stanzas subtly undermines the speaker’s authoritative effusions, creating a bridge to the second half of the poem where the truth of his “fear” becomes apparent. We witness the speaker’s individuality submerging

gradually beneath the collective weight of tribal responsibility and historical necessity. In Marxian terms, existential self-determination struggles against the impossibility of escaping history: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”<sup>37</sup> The Fire King’s tragedy is that he can never be through with history in the sense that he is fated to be governed by a form of existence of which he is merely the recipient rather than the controller. He is forced into complicity with “the ancient curse” that extends its stranglehold into the nihilistic present and into a world to which, “rightly perhaps”, he truly belongs. Self-attainment is finally denied him by what Sartre defines ontologically as Being-for-the-Other, a state of perpetual struggle and conflict wherein self and Other are mutually antagonistic towards their respective freedom. The poem illustrates this by switching regularly between the self-conscious “I” and the indeterminate “them”, which also encompasses “the usurper” and “the fire-loving / People”. As each wants to take possession of the other, three behavioural possibilities arise, all of which result in hopelessness: mutual indifference; appropriation by the self of the Other through violence; consenting to the Other’s objectification of the self. The Fire King’s eventual concession to tribal demands (“rightly perhaps”), signals that it is the third possibility which threatens to be his undoing.

Despite his monarchical status, the Fire King cannot elevate himself to the position of absolute subject, thereby leaving the way open for the tribe to objectify him as “their creature”. Under siege from the danger of possession and immolation, he becomes an uncomprehending paranoiac who devotes his remaining time to dreaming and

prowling the limited religious world of “the sacred grove” rather than striking out towards freedom. At the same time, his fear of the usurper is essentially fear of the Other’s unknowable mind: his insomnia is derived from not knowing when or where he will be murdered or even who his murderer will be. The only thing of which he can be sure is how he will die; “by the sword”. The manner of his death is therefore beyond his control and no longer a “free choice of finitude”.<sup>38</sup> Abject hopelessness is the Fire King’s destiny, his contingent position predicated on the fickle demands of a belligerent society that believes blindly in the very values that have reduced it to its current chaotic condition. The situation is plainly absurd, self and Other craving incompatible forms of order neither is capable of providing. Their respective actions are ruled by absurdity, chance and the ungovernable incoherence of diurnal reality. This is not, however, a transcendental absurdity brought about by the death of God, but rather the Sartrean kind which is “social, historical, and temporal”.<sup>39</sup> To compensate for the uncontrollability of the situation, Mahon gives his experiences order through stanzas that exhibit meticulous control. This three line, haiku-like structure is one of Mahon’s favourites, and it is utilised frequently during the course of his career. Typically, he uses it when speaking of last things and the termination of existence (‘April on Toronto Island’, ‘Going Home’, ‘Matthew V. 29-30’, ‘An Image from Beckett’, for example), and these poems, with their recurrent nihilistic motif, surely owe something to the MacNeice of ‘Bar-room Matins’, ‘Invocation’, and the exquisite – if somewhat inscrutably impenetrable – ‘Coda’, each of which expresses some aspect of finality. Although MacNeice probably has the edge when it comes to handling stanzaic form, Mahon still possesses an adroitness and subtlety few can emulate, especially when he chooses to eschew regular rhyme schemes and stress

patterns as a means of carrying his terminal vision. Given their underlying theme, this stanzaic brevity lends a particular urgency to all of these poems, driving home their internal ironic tensions and reinforcing their grimly comic effect. We need only compare ‘Matthew V. 29-30’ (TSP 13-15) and its “the offence continued” refrain, with the singsong technique of ‘Bar-room Matins’ to get an idea of how each poet creates an effect “at ironic cross purposes with the sombre subject matter”.<sup>40</sup> This comic note is similarly present in ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’. The plosive-heavy alliteration has already been mentioned, but the comedy is also carried forward by the polysyllabic obscurity of “frugivorous” and his futile dream of being “far from the sea” (and possibly far from Belfast). The cumulative effect is to make absurdity *sound* ludicrous.

Mahon’s solution to the conflict between the individual and society is a familiar one: irony. Though thoroughly impracticable on a social, historical or political level, irony nevertheless allows the artist to have the last laugh. When the battle between the violent given life and the instinctive life of art threatens to lead to the sacrifice of poetry, the very act of writing reaffirms the individual will in heroic defiance of tragedy. Irony, writes Arnold Hinchliffe, can “commit itself to that which it criticizes and it is therefore suitable as a mediator between what [Ihab] Hassan describes as ‘the hero’s outrageous dream and the sadness of human mortality’”.<sup>41</sup> Irony can subsequently establish new values, at least within the artist, which have been lost or forgotten. David Galloway, writing of American novelists such as Updike and Salinger, points to a quality found in these writers’ respective heroes which is equally appropriate to Mahon’s Fire King:

These heroes all begin their quests with a vision of the apparent lack of meaning in the world, of the mendacity and failure of ideals, but they

conclude with gestures of affirmation derived explicitly from their realization of the significance of love.<sup>42</sup>

It may be stretching a point to say that Mahon *loves* his community, but when ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ ends on the deeply ironic “die their creature and be thankful”, a profound desire for companionship can be discerned. To have struck out towards a land where effective communication was impossible would have left him utterly alone; by staying put he is guaranteed – at least in the short term – some form of human intercourse. Here then is a rare occasion when Mahon appears to contradict Camus. The feeling of hope, no matter how small or misplaced, is a fundamental human instinct and not, as Camus claims, a redundant philosophical dilemma that pays no heed to the existence of the absurd. When Mersault, on acknowledging the inevitability of his death, hears “a scream of sirens” (and perhaps this is the source of Mahon’s “world of / Sirens”) he regards them as “announcing a departure to a world towards which I would now be forever indifferent”.<sup>43</sup> The Fire King, on the other hand, is not afflicted with the same indifference, as objectification by the tribe is still a way of affirming, even ironically, his largely insignificant existence. According to Camus, the man sentenced to death – a description well suited to the Fire King’s plight – actually “counters the …indifference of human beings to the lives of others”.<sup>44</sup>

Characteristically, however, the situation is not entirely so straightforward. For just at the moment when the poem is at its most playful and recognises the absurd most strongly, Mahon complicates matters further. The tribe demands that he share their exclusive “world of / Sirens, bin-lids / And bricked-up windows”, but this too is a world non-conducive to language and communication. ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ thus

continues the project begun in ‘Glengormley’ where ordinary men are ironically transformed into heroes struggling against the sacrificial / suicidal nooses “of their finite being”. “By / Necessity, if not choice, I live here too” expresses precisely the necessary – if inauthentic – acceptance of all the existential limitations incumbent on a society which is itself “ambiguously ensnared”, as Seamus Deane puts it, by the repressions of colonialism.<sup>45</sup>

‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ embodies a series of paradoxes and contradictions to which no completely satisfactory answer can be given. It also illustrates the Camusian formulation that “from a human standpoint the world exists both as it is and as it ought to be and as it is and as it ought not to be”.<sup>46</sup> Intimating a personal view of ethical responsibility, the poem hinges on the ambiguity of “By / Necessity, if not choice...”. If the statement is a flat denial that choice exists in this situation, then little more need be said as neither responsibility nor freedom can become an issue. The death of Mahon-as-Fire-King constitutes not an escape from history but a concession to the tribe’s blind faith in historical determinism. If, however, “if not choice” is meant to carry an inflection denoting a contingent expression of freedom and therefore a choice freely made, then his decision to stay with the tribe is wholly authentic. This choice lets him see his own vulnerability and isolation as reflecting a society that would be hopelessly lost without their stringent prescriptions and primitive beliefs. If this is indeed the case, then Mahon follows Camus’s postulation of “an ethic of commitment rooted in human emotions and solidarity”.<sup>47</sup> No matter how he tries to escape the anxious clutches of the tribe and its history, he cannot bring himself totally to eschew the demands of either. Whether as

creator (poet) or as conqueror (usurper), Mahon-as-Fire-King becomes the embodiment of Camus's absurd hero.

## 2.4 The West of Ireland

“The North was tyranny”, writes MacNeice in Zoo, an eclectic amalgam of journalism and memoirs.<sup>48</sup> For MacNeice, the North was associated with exactly the kind of absurdity and grim determinism outlined by Mahon in ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’, and it is Mahon who identifies most perceptively the fact that MacNeice could never truly be considered an exile from Ireland: “Whatever his sympathies, he didn’t, by class or religious background, ‘belong to the people’. How then, not sharing the general constraints, could he free himself from them?” (J 25). Unlike Mahon’s Fire King, MacNeice could never be regarded as one of the fire-loving people’s creatures. Nevertheless, MacNeice still managed to find a small corner of Ireland, miles from the turbulent atmosphere of Belfast, he felt he could lay claim to as his own. The West of Ireland became for him an almost childlike imaginary world that somehow managed to defy the fixity and predetermination of Ulster. This fantasy was derived mainly from his father whose family had come from Connemara. In 1945 MacNeice wrote a group of poems commemorating the West; these include ‘The Strand’, ‘Littoral’, ‘Last Before America’, Under the Mountain’, and ‘No More Sea’. In ‘The Strand’ (MCP 226), he describes his father as “A square black figure whom the horizon understood”. This sense of his father’s rootedness in place and time, his at-oneness with the landscape, embodies the “private romance” (J 29) MacNeice cultivated regarding his heritage. The solitariness

and the wildness of the West and, by association, his father, caused MacNeice to formulate his own dream of origins in childhood:

from a very early age I began to long for something different, to construct various dream worlds which I took it were on the map.

The first of these dream worlds was ‘The West of Ireland’, a phrase which still stirs me, if not like a trumpet, like a fiddle half heard through a cattle fair. My parents came from that West or, more precisely, from Connemara, and it was obvious that both of them vastly preferred it to Ulster. The very name Connemara seemed too rich for any ordinary place. It appeared to be a country of windswept open spaces and mountains blazing with whins and seas that were never quiet, with drowned palaces beneath them, and seals and eagles and turf smoke and cottagers who were always laughing and who gave you milk when you asked for a glass of water...But I was not to visit Achill or Connemara until I had left school. So for many years I lived on a nostalgia for somewhere I had never been.<sup>49</sup>

His sister, Elizabeth Nicholson, later recalled that Connemara, became for us both a ‘many-coloured land’, a kind of lost Atlantis where we thought that by rights we should be living, and it came to be a point of honour that we did not belong to the North of Ireland. We were in our minds a West of Ireland family exiled from our homeland.<sup>50</sup>

It is clear, then, that for each MacNeice sibling the West represented freedom and an atavistic return to origins for which they fostered an allegiance of mythic proportions.

Distancing himself from the North became for MacNeice a deliberate strategy of self-creation:

Where I was born,  
Heckled by hooters and trams, lay black to the west  
And I disowned it, played a ticklish game  
Claiming a different birthplace, a wild nest  
Further, more truly, west, on a bare height  
Where nothing need be useful and the breakers  
Came and came but never made any progress  
And children were reborn each night. ('Day of Renewal', MCP 309-313)

Fantasy, idealisation and myth-making cannot displace the reality of estrangement, however, and they fuse in MacNeice's poetry into a portrayal of the West that symbolises the place as "a state of yearning rather than of fulfilment: a means of questing".<sup>51</sup> The western landscapes of Connemara, Mayo and the Aran Islands function for MacNeice "as a topography for metaphysical inquiry", an inquiry Mahon has adopted for his own particular quest.<sup>52</sup>

Mahon turns as frequently as MacNeice to the West for inspiration and to investigate what Edna Longley calls an "unstable metaphysical locus where variations of Romanticism mingle with variations of Protestantism".<sup>53</sup> Mahon's poems of the West are, like MacNeice's, returns to origins, spiritual journeys that formulate a territorial claim, since the population of the Aran Islands, his favourite western setting, is partly descended from a settlement of Cromwell's soldiers. (It is ironic that, as one of the last refuges of spoken Gaelic, the Irish language will most likely die in the mouths of 'Englishmen'.) 'In

the Aran Islands' (L 5) employs a MacNeicean discourse of dream symbolism to provide an aesthetic response to the place. Mahon watches the folksinger, who is "earthed to his girl" while he sings "the darkness into light", and envies this "Hand-clasping, echo-prolonging poet" for his rooted identity. Unable to connect with the alien environment, Mahon can only "dream myself into that tradition". The Aran Islands' physical separation from the mainland symbolises the disembodiment Mahon feels all too keenly. Although his "fearful admiration" involves lowering himself from his more familiar lofty heights (Mahon is usually to be found looking out of windows in towers or attics), he still cannot bring himself into contact with the islands or their inhabitants. "I close the pub door gently and step out" denotes his separation from this isolated, innocent, primitive society, and he is left alone with the "hoarse inchoate / Screaming" of a lone gull which itself feels no sense of communal ties ("Friend to no slant fields or the sea either"). The poem echoes the imagery of MacNeice's western poems to signify the failure of Mahon's mission to achieve an "imagined self-transcendence and union with the natural symbols".<sup>54</sup> Mahon's "nacreous sand" compounds a vision of both illusion and reality, much like the disappearing footprints in the "mirror of wet sand" of MacNeice's 'The Strand', while his "forming waters" plays on the "foam" evoked by MacNeice in 'The Strand', 'Littoral' and 'Under the Mountain' to give a more urgent impression of impermanence. The sea's constant motions remind Mahon that he can never appropriate for himself the tradition of which he dreams. His "Fifty winters off the land" re-works the "Sixty-odd years behind him" of 'The Strand' to convey the simple but irrefutable fact that the "light-years of the imagination" cannot match the absurd brevity of physical existence.

Mahon's craving for a rooted community in which he could feel at home and escape the bourgeois constraints imposed on the modern self recalls this passage from J.M. Synge's The Aran Islands:

I could hear nothing but a few curlews and other wildfowl whistling and shrieking in the seaweed, and the low rustling of the waves. It was one of the dark sultry nights peculiar to September, with no light anywhere except the phosphorescence of the sea, and an occasional rift in the clouds that showed the stars behind them.

The sense of solitude was immense. I could not see or realise my own body, and I seemed to exist merely in my perception of the waves and of the crying birds, and of the smell of seaweed.<sup>55</sup>

Synge's privately experienced discovery of self drew the conclusion that he still did not belong in the islands: he was cut off as much from the islands and their inhabitants as from the more 'sophisticated' population of the city. All the islands can confirm, either for Synge or for Mahon, is their shared sense of eternal isolation.

The same conclusion is reached in all the poems where Mahon imagines himself into an environment he hopes might trigger a connection, or even transform exile into belonging. In the prose poem 'A Hermit' (TSP 26), later re-titled 'The Mayo Tao' to punningly configure the West and the eastern philosophy of surrendering the self to the environment as the road to truth and enlightenment, Mahon has "abandoned the dream kitchens for a low fire and a prescriptive literature of the spirit". Conferring with nature and "listening to the sob story of a stone on the road", he discerns the numinous world contained in inanimate objects, "the stars in the mud". But even empathy with the

“immanence in these things” fails to spur him on to poetic activity: “I have been working for years on a four-line poem about the life of a leaf. I think it may come out right this winter”. The West is figured as a symbol of failure where the poet cannot perform. Similarly, ‘Achill’ (A 29) sees the poet struggling with his “disconsolate labour”, having produced little more than “a few thin pages”, while wishing he was surrounded by his family who might “lift the weight from my heart” and release him from “the solitude locked in my mind”. ‘Recalling Aran’ (NC 28) appears to cancel out Mahon’s scepticism and despair, but all is not as it initially seems:

A dream of limestone in sea-light  
 Where gulls have placed their perfect prints.  
 Reflection in that final sky  
 Shames vision into simple sight –  
 Into pure sense, experience.  
 Four thousand miles away tonight,  
 Conceived beyond such innocence,  
 I clutch the memory still, and I  
 Have measured everything with it since.

Again we detect a sense of the numinous, so important to Mahon’s aesthetic, but while other aesthetic principles are brought into focus – perfection, simplicity, purity – they are simultaneously blurred by empirical experience and scientific measuring. The poet’s “vision” is diluted by the fictive “dream”, the fallible “memory”, and the guilt implied by “Shames”, all of which dilute the apprehension of reality into a purely imaginative

construct. ‘Brighton Beach’ (THBN 34–35), recalling a visit to Donegal with a friend, compounds Mahon’s feeling of separation:

Remember the time we drove  
To Donegal and you talked  
For hours to fishermen  
You had worked with, while I,  
Out of my depth in these  
Waters, loafed on the quays?

Mahon’s experiences of the West are not, generally, happy ones. Mythically Edenic it may appear, but it also represents the terminal point of a quest voyage from Belfast that has shown Mahon, as it showed MacNeice before him, that connection with his native soil remains as elusive as ever.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry, edited by Paul Muldoon, allocates over 60 pages to MacNeice's work, more than any other anthology.

<sup>2</sup> Dillon Johnston, Irish Poetry After Joyce, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Syracuse UP, 1997) 225.

<sup>3</sup> See G. S. Fraser, Vision and Rhetoric: Studies in Modern Poetry (London: Faber, 1959) 179-92.

<sup>4</sup> Edna Longley, Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study (1988; London: Faber, 1996) 20.

<sup>5</sup> Terence Brown, Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision (Dublin: Gill; New York: Barnes, 1975) 169.

<sup>6</sup> Michael O'Neill and Gareth Reeves, Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 185.

<sup>7</sup> Peter McDonald, Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 85.

<sup>8</sup> Louis MacNeice, The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography (1965; London: Faber, 1982) 78.

<sup>9</sup> Qtd. in Edna Longley, "The Writer and Belfast," The Irish Writer and the City, ed. Maurice Harmon, Irish Literary Studies 18 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1984) 66. The first version of 'In Belfast' was originally published in the student magazine Icarus in 1964. The last stanza was subsequently revised and the poem reappeared as 'Poem in Belfast' in the pamphlet Twelve Poems the following year. This revised version survived

as the poem which appears in Mahon's first full collection, Night-Crossing, as 'In Belfast' in 1968.

<sup>10</sup> Brendan Kennelly, Journey into Joy: Selected Prose, ed. Åke Persson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994) 128.

<sup>11</sup> All references to Autumn Journal (MCP 101-53) will be followed in the body of the text by canto numbers only.

<sup>12</sup> Harriet Cooke, "Harriet Cooke talks to the Poet Derek Mahon", Irish Times, 17 Jan. 1973: 10.

<sup>13</sup> Robyn Marsack, The Cave of Making: The Poetry of Louis MacNeice (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982) 14.

<sup>14</sup> John Hewitt, The Collected Poems of John Hewitt, ed. Frank Ormsby (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1991) 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> See Gerald Dawe, Against Piety: Essays in Irish Poetry (Belfast: Lagan, 1995) 94-95.

<sup>16</sup> Derek Mahon, ed., The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry (London: Sphere, 1972) 12.

<sup>17</sup> Seamus Heaney, Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978 (1980; London: Faber, 1984) 57.

<sup>18</sup> Louis MacNeice, Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 175, 176.

<sup>19</sup> MacNeice, Modern Poetry 176.

<sup>20</sup> One translation of the original reads, “Wonders are many on earth, and the greatest of these / Is man”. Sophocles, The Theban Plays: King Oedipus, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone, trans. E.F. Watling (1947; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) 135.

<sup>21</sup> Dawe 159.

<sup>22</sup> Dawe 159.

<sup>23</sup> Maurice Friedman, ed., The Worlds of Existentialism: A Critical Reader (1964; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1973) 22.

<sup>24</sup> Friedman 22, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Longley, Louis MacNeice 128.

<sup>26</sup> O'Neill and Reeves 69.

<sup>27</sup> John Redmond, “Wilful Inconsistency: Derek Mahon’s Verse Letters,” Irish University Review 24.1 (1994): 113.

<sup>28</sup> Elmer Andrews, “Introduction,” Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Elmer Andrews (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 17.

<sup>29</sup> Derek Mahon, “Poetry in Northern Ireland,” Twentieth Century Studies 4 (1970): 93.

<sup>30</sup> Qtd. in Eileen Cahill, “A Silent Voice: Seamus Heaney and Ulster Politics,” Critical Quarterly 29.3 (1987): 55.

<sup>31</sup> See Sir James George Frazer, The Illustrated Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, abr. Robert K.G. Temple (N.p.: Softback Preview, 1996) 153-178.

<sup>32</sup> Redmond 113.

<sup>33</sup> Elmer Andrews, “The Poetry of Derek Mahon: ‘places where a thought might grow’,” Andrews, Contemporary Irish Poetry 252.

- <sup>34</sup> Charles Baudelaire, Intimate Journals, trans. Christopher Isherwood, introd. W.H. Auden (London: Panther, 1969) 33.
- <sup>35</sup> John Goodby, Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 169.
- <sup>36</sup> Johnston 229.
- <sup>37</sup> Qtd. in Justin Repogle, Auden's Poetry (London: Methuen, 1969) 47.
- <sup>38</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (1972; London: Routledge, 1995) 533.
- <sup>39</sup> Arnold P. Hinchliffe, The Absurd (1969; London: Methuen, 1977) 90.
- <sup>40</sup> Brown, Louis MacNeice 152.
- <sup>41</sup> Hinchliffe 95.
- <sup>42</sup> David Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction (Austin: U of Texas P, 1966) 171.
- <sup>43</sup> Albert Camus, The Outsider, trans. Joseph Laredo (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 116.
- <sup>44</sup> Germaine Brée, Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment, rev. ed. (1972; London: Calder, 1974) 199-200.
- <sup>45</sup> Seamus Deane, Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980 (1985; London: Faber, 1987) 159.
- <sup>46</sup> Brée 136.
- <sup>47</sup> Brée 200.
- <sup>48</sup> Louis MacNeice, Zoo (London: Joseph, 1938) 79.
- <sup>49</sup> MacNeice, Strings 216-17.

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Nicholson, "Trees were Green," Time Was Away: The World of Louis MacNeice, ed. Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: Dolmen, 1974) 14.

<sup>51</sup> Longley, Louis MacNeice 31-32.

<sup>52</sup> Longley, Louis MacNeice 32.

<sup>53</sup> Edna Longley, "Looking back from The Yellow Book," The Poetry of Derek Mahon, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Ulster Editions and Monographs: 11 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 2002) 42.

<sup>54</sup> John Wilson Foster, Fictions of the Irish Literary Revival: A Changeling Art (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1993) 109.

<sup>55</sup> J.M. Synge, Collected Works: Volume II: Prose, ed. Alan Price (1966; Gerrards Cross: Smythe; Washington, D.C.: Catholic U of America P, 1982) 129-30.

### 3. “Darkening the white page”: Mahon and Beckett

#### 3.1 Beckett and Failure

For Samuel Beckett the success or failure of art depends on its relation to the individual self, but the instant we start talking of ‘success’ when approaching Beckett we encounter a distinctly idiosyncratic problem since Beckett’s entire aesthetic is founded on an “art of failure”. This phrase, borrowed from Richard N. Coe’s still important study of 1964, encapsulates the central difficulty of any attempt to formulate or give shape to what Beckett sees as the function of art:

Art, in fact, is the elucidation of the impossible. The human condition is that of an indefinable *Néant* within, conscious of a possible relationship with an equally indefinable *Néant* without, yet invalidating that relationship by the very fact of its consciousness. The artist is driven – by the very fact of being an artist – to realise, to create in art, that which is not, which cannot be, because, as soon as it is realised in concrete terms...it ceases to be itself. Consequently, it *must* fail. Beckett’s own art likewise is an art of failure: it is by definition trying to do something that it cannot conceivably do – to create and to define that which, created and defined, ceases to be what it must be if it is to reveal the truth of the human situation: Man as a Nothing in relation to all things which themselves are Nothing.<sup>1</sup>

This drive to create in art is doomed to failure on two further counts: firstly, because “the truth of the human situation” is an absurd conjecture as the human situation is itself absurd; secondly, because the only tools at the artist’s – especially the writer’s – disposal

are themselves insufficient and are incapable of expressing truth other than through metaphor. Sensory perceptions have no outlet for the writer other than through the words he manipulates in an attempt to express his experiences, and it is language itself which proves the greatest obstacle to expression. The complexity of perceptions of the world has no correlation in language. Likewise, it is impossible to put the ‘nothingness’ of the *Néant* into words. Language is subject to over-simplifying this level of complexity in order to make perceptions comprehensible, even if this results in reducing those perceptions to some sort of lowest common denominator of experience. In this way, the truth content of artistic expression is similarly reduced, giving an incomplete or even fallacious expression of the artist’s sense data. Beckett is therefore compelled to accept the artist’s inevitable failure to communicate fully his experiences and the impossibility of meaningful communication, even though, as an artist, he is compelled to try: “there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (Proust 103). Beckett negates all that is seemingly within the artist’s sphere of control – suitable subjects for art, the language of expression, the consciousness that absorbs sense-data, or the objectionable and foolhardy desire to express when faced with absurdity – apart from his obligation which, along with his vision or dream, belongs to a realm beyond the reach of human will. The artist is therefore limited in what he can accomplish, and he must ultimately come to accept that ignorance and impotence are the true tools of the artist’s trade, that he is condemned to strive for meaning in a meaningless universe, that “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion” (Proust 125).

Failure for Beckett is the only artistic goal, the single act of expression it is worth trying to articulate. Words constitute “the chief ingredient of the art of failure; they form that impenetrable barrier of language which forever keeps us from knowing who we are, what we are”.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, words are only capable of expressing their own failure to express, and so the quest for self-knowledge will never succeed. It is hard enough trying to communicate sense-data of the external world, but any attempt on the part of the artist to speak directly of the workings of the mind and the inner sensations gleaned through introspection becomes impossible as he must rely on wholly metaphorical language mediated by subjectivity and the imperceptible mind’s conscious modelling or re-modelling of linguistic limitations. But the artist’s compulsion to express, to write, is strong and irresistible: “Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried” (Trilogy 194). So says Malone, phrasing his compulsion in terms of creation while recognising the futility of the task. Beckett’s heroes, most notably those of the trilogy, know what it is to fail; indeed, they know nothing else. Molloy, for instance, is subject to the obligation to write but cannot explain why. Writing is an unwelcome chore to be “dashed off with loathing” (Trilogy 63). Rather than perform the meaningless task of writing, he would prefer to “obliterate” all words, leaving only a black void staring menacingly back at the reader:

you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to  
 blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat  
 and the whole ghastly business looks like what is, senseless,  
 speechless, issueless misery (Trilogy 13).

Obliterating texts, blackening margins, darkening the page, obscuring the written word *in perpetuum* just as speech obfuscates thought – these are the ways in which Beckett seeks to express the misery of being human, and they comprise one aspect of his legacy to Mahon.

### 3.2 ‘The Attic’

‘The Attic’ (P 102) returns us to a setting familiar in Mahon’s work, the lonely garret, from where he contemplates the “dockyard fluorescence”. He equates this fluorescence with an inspirational “Muse-light” which irradiates both the city and the poet’s punningly described “world of heightened sense”. Mahon initially seems to find consolation in his lonely activities as he addresses an invisible presence (the reader perhaps?) with the words, “Listen, can you hear me / Turning over a new leaf?”, but this serves only as a prelude to the speaker’s increasing sense of isolation. The space occupied by the speaker gradually shrinks from “A world” to the attic itself, until the only space that remains is a mind conscious of its own smallness and finitude:

I who know nothing  
 Scribbling on the off-chance,  
 Darkening the white page,  
 Cultivating my ignorance.

But escape from the world carries its own painful price and the poet still feels the need to be remembered and to have found purpose in life. As with Beckett, the price Mahon’s speaker has to pay for freedom, for being through with history, is ignorance. Like Molloy, he is “free”, but as Molloy says, “I don’t know what that means but it’s the word

I mean to use, free to do what, to do nothing, to know, but what..." (Trilogy 13).

Mahon's speaker echoes Molloy's predicament as he knows neither what constitutes knowledge, nor what knowledge he possesses, nor what he desires to know. His decision to scribble on the off-chance that he might actually discover something worth expressing, or better yet, an actual means of expression, indicates a mind at odds with itself, a mind tortured by the obligation to express yet not knowing how or why. Following in the wake of the Unnamable, Mahon's speaker searches in vain for words that will eventually define his identity. The act of writing, the darkening of the page, is simply the outward manifestation of this harrowing obligation enacted compulsively in response to the urgings of an inner voice. But as Mahon recognises in 'Preface to a Love Poem' (NC 13), it is not man who controls language but language which insensibly and impassively determines man: "Words never choosing but the words choose them". Without understanding the nature of the obligation or why it exists, inner experience and the possibility of knowing anything at all prove elusive. All Mahon's speaker possesses is ignorance and all he can do, in the satirical manner of Voltaire, is cultivate it.

Patently there is an element of Socratic irony at play in 'The Attic' that similarly inheres in Beckett's works, but it is deployed in the cause of making a serious point. The aesthetic principles outlined above illustrate the difficulty of using words as a tool for creation. For as Mahon and Beckett's people are all too aware, language does not belong to them; it is an inheritance over which they have neither power nor influence. The Unnamable is tyrannised by an unseen malevolent force known only as "they" whose voices provide the words for his every utterance: "...all the words they taught me, without making their meaning clear to me, that's how I learnt to reason, I use them all, all

the words they showed me..." (Trilogy 407). As words belong, in some sense, to other people, and as all thoughts are made up of words, then identity and self-knowledge are determined by others. "There is nothing but quotations left for us", writes Jorge Luis Borges, "Our language is a system of quotations."<sup>3</sup> The narrator of How It Is argues that the essential self has no distinct voice of its own; only the 'I' possesses a voice, but the 'I' is a pseudo-self which learns the words it uses from others. The 'I' is therefore constituted by inherited language, literally becoming the words it speaks.

The question "can you hear me...?", by presupposing an independent listener, is an absurd gesture, for only the speaker is aware of the words spoken. The speaker has the ability to talk but has nothing to say as he knows nothing; he is obliged to speak and write but he has nothing to express. He could turn over an indefinite number of new leaves but the result would always be the same: a personality constructed from and dictated by the words of others. All he understands is what is locked up in the attic – or prison – of his mind, and this is given form and structure only by the barrier to self-knowledge that is language. Reading the poem in this way allows us to see the encounter between speaker and addressee not only as one dictated by the pure chance of a meaningless universe, but also as evidence of "the immaterial aspect of consciousness... incessantly renew[ing] itself in ever-recurring [self-]perception".<sup>4</sup> It presents an image of the artist's consciousness struggling to find both an individual identity and a means by which it might forge a way of expressing and communicating its perceptions, even though the artist knows that each objective is destined to fail.

### **3.3 Silence and the Blank Page**

The only alternative left to the writer, given the failure of darkening the page, is to leave it blank, a position Mahon considers in ‘Ovid in Tomis’ (THBN 37-42):

Better to contemplate

The blank page

And leave it blank

Than modify

Its substance by

So much as a pen-stroke.

But if the act of writing is by its very nature a way of proclaiming the ambitious folly of needing to be remembered, and if the artist is obliged to write in order to create a lasting legacy, then to retreat into silence and say nothing at all might be interpreted as a negation of the artistic self, as well as a thesis on the art of failure. Any evasion of the demands of language simply comes to express the overwhelming futility of the creative impulse.

One way around this problem is to treat silence as an authentic response to failure. “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence”, writes Wittgenstein, proclaiming his own sceptical doubt regarding the efficacy of language as an adequate tool of expression.<sup>5</sup> The moral obligation implicit in the word “must” provides a reminder of Mahon’s own use of the word in ‘In Belfast’ where he speaks of “The spurious mystery in the knowing nod” while maintaining a “sullen silence in light and shade”. The authenticity of silence plays a pivotal role in the aesthetic thinking of Beckett as well as Mahon, while Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Wittgenstein have all explored its more

philosophical aspects. Each has considered the most important things in life to be inexpressible in direct terms, authentic selfhood manifesting itself only through a form of indirection. The repercussions of this are twofold. Firstly, indirection can be used as a method for concealing the egocentricity of the self: “it removes the embarrassment of having to say I, I, I or me, me, me all the time”.<sup>6</sup> Any emphasis on the human voice is removed as the authority of the poet’s own words diminishes, thereby allowing things to speak for themselves in poems such as ‘The Mute Phenomena’ and ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’. Mahon knows the power language holds over us, stating confidently in ‘Glengormley’, “Only words hurt us now”. But words do not just hurt the listener: the speaker is also affected as there is a moral constituent to speech which dictates that the speaker take responsibility for his words. Silence therefore becomes a sort of moral purgation in the quest for authentic discourse. Words can only ever be “imperfectly understood”, so silence has to arrive “like a servant to tidy things up / while I wait for the lies to disperse”.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, neither propositional nor everyday language can sufficiently convey authentic desires, perceptions or experiences, and so the metaphor of ‘seeing-as’ involves a form of silence that inhabits the space between what is written and what is understood. The silence of the blank page becomes, if not a type of speech, then at least an authentic form of communication. According to Heidegger, “silence is another essential possibility of discourse, and it has the same existential foundation. In talking with one another, the person who keeps silent can ‘make one understand’...and he can do so more authentically than the person who is never short of words.”<sup>8</sup> Heidegger’s view of silence therefore mirrors Mahon’s and Beckett’s in the way it becomes an intrinsic

feature of poetic discourse via its ability to disclose the world, befitting the subjective experience of the speaker.

The Unnamable, however, would like to see himself as anti-Wittgensteinian, claiming defiantly that he must follow an inner compulsion to vocalise: “I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak...I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never” (Trilogy 291). His ideal would be to “speak and yet say nothing, really nothing”, although he eventually comes to register the enormous difficulty of the task: “But it seems impossible to speak and yet say nothing, you think you have succeeded, but you always overlook something, a little yes, a little no, enough to exterminate a regiment of dragoons” (Trilogy 303). The Unnamable wants to remain silent, especially about himself. He is not in possession of a language that could capably express his authentic self, and he fears that the slightest omission might turn nothing into something and thereby transform silence into speech. His words – his act of literary creation – have no reference to the world beyond the text itself: they are, in Mahon’s phrases from ‘Preface to a Love Poem’, “a circling” which lies “Beyond paraphrase”. This peripheral stance requires the intuitive, rather than the logical apprehension of “the shapes of truth”. Because it is “at one remove”, the poem is an evasion since it can do no more. It is not an expression of love because emotions are too abstract and intangible to be put into words which can express precisely. Subsequently, love may give meaning to existence, but if love cannot be defined then neither can meaning. The poem is left to concern itself with poetry’s relations with silence. Poetry becomes a compulsion to break that silence (it is a “stirring in the silent hours”), and Edna Longley has, perhaps unwittingly, identified the

poem's Beckettian tenor through her remark about the poem being a series of "dark silences between death and birth".<sup>9</sup>

The problem here is that silence avoids compromise because it avoids the compulsion to speak or write. Both Mahon and the Unnamable are trapped in this evasive process of circling. Mahon "uses language to praise a state beyond language", but he can never attain to that state as long as he refuses to abandon words and the "prescriptive literature of the spirit" ('A Hermit', TSP 26).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, this does not prevent him from trying to reduce art to a purely minimalist act cleansed of language. In 'A Hermit', Mahon is reluctant either to taint the whiteness of the "snow-lit silence" enveloping his world, or to disturb "the silence of crickets". Although surrounded by the phenomena of nature in which he detects "an immanence", an inexpressible noumenal presence that lurks behind these objects and is imperceptible to most others, he is driven "despite [his] scepticism, almost to the point of speech". That "almost" is vital as it takes on the importance attributed by Beckett to the word 'perhaps'.<sup>11</sup> Speech is Mahon's temptress but he resists her charms by staving off her advances through circuitous evasion. "I have been working for years on a four-line poem about the life of a leaf", he concludes, "I think it may come out right this winter". Of course, the reader senses that the poem is unlikely ever to come out at all. The continual act of deferring the poem's completion signals the importance Mahon ascribes to the noumenal possibilities of silence. Later in the same collection, this theme is restated in 'The Banished Gods': "thought is a fondling of stones / And wisdom a five minute silence at moonrise" (TSP 30-31).

'A Hermit' is located in an isolated landscape where "The nearest shop is four miles away", a sufficient distance to reduce the possibility of chance encounters with

other people. Withdrawal, whether it be to a place beyond human reach or to an attic (Beckett's Murphy is also a habitual attic-dweller), has silence as its natural by-product. This removal allows for the luxury of a self-suppression or self-distancing that in turn becomes a retreat from history. By approaching reality "at one remove", Mahon's poetry becomes "a substitute / For final answers" ('Preface to a Love Poem'). Mahon airs his "distraught / Love of...silence" as an ironic means of posing problems rather than providing solutions. This technique echoes Beckett's statement in an essay on Denis Devlin where he deems the task of art to be one of contemplation and introspection rather than one of problem solving:

Art has always been this – pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric – whatever else it may have been obliged by the 'social reality' to appear... The time is perhaps not altogether too green for the vile suggestion that art has nothing to do with clarity.<sup>12</sup>

Beckett's verse in particular is especially problematic, although his entire corpus of work reflects a fascination, shared by Mahon, with allusion and indirection. These are the side effects of the failure to communicate efficiently; they are also the outcomes when the difficulty of thought is complicated by the impossibility of expressing because the human condition on which the mind dwells is itself a failure.

Another consequence of the inability to communicate is alienation. We have already witnessed how MacNeice, most notably in 'Carrickfergus', considers himself estranged from the apron strings of 'Mother Ireland', but Beckett goes even further than MacNeice in his self-disenfranchisement, reducing the whole body politic to the symbol of the maternal body. Beckett's pessimistic view of existence is one of interminable and

irremediable suffering. Only birth and death are significant existential episodes while existence itself is pointless and its ambitions meaningless. Pozzo's oft-quoted statement, "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" captures succinctly Beckett's attitude towards all points between the experiences of birth and death (BCDW 83). And when Molloy says, "Throes are the only trouble, I must be on my guard against throes", birth and death become one and the same thing since "throes" applies equally to the pains of each event (Trilogy 179). Death for Beckett is a sort of re-birth; it is fascinating because of its unknowable possibilities, yet it terrifies because it might mean a return to the absurdly illogical agonies of life. Life is seen as a form of punishment wherein, "We are alone. We cannot know and we cannot be known" (Proust 66). The great symptom of life is its tragedy which, once stripped of any concern with "human justice", is reducible to "the sin of having been born" (Proust 67). Parents are criminals for committing the sin of procreation and visiting upon the offspring a lifetime of pain, but Beckett saves Molloy's most withering ire for the mother; for Molloy, the term 'mother' is nothing short of an obscenity. Pain and suffering also seem to provide evidence for the existence of the self: 'I suffer therefore I am', so to speak. According to Samuel Johnson, "The only end of writing is to enable the *reader* better to enjoy life or better to endure it" (emphasis added).<sup>13</sup> But for Beckett, it is the *writer* who finds the strength to go on through writing, a sentiment echoed in Mahon's 'The Poet in Residence' (P 103-6): "I write, therefore I am". Like birth and suffering, writing is compelled by forces other than those contained within the self. In Beckett, birth and death – both creative, both destructive – represent physical and intellectual disintegration just

as the author, by darkening the page with a world of his own invention, creates “a reality that destroys *reality*”.<sup>14</sup>

### **3.4 ‘An Unborn Child’ and ‘Exit Molloy’**

Beckett still sees the womb as a place of safety and protective calm ('calm' is another of Beckett's favourite words). Estragon, Belaqua, Murphy and Malone all feel nostalgic for a return to the womb where they will be spared their daily agonies. Even Molloy confesses to the same desire – “I longed to go back in the forest” – before resigning himself to staying “where he happened to be”, suffering in a ditch. (Trilogy 91) Mahon is similarly fascinated by this womb image, likening the imminent expulsion from the womb with artistic creation as it is wrenched kicking and screaming from the artist's mind.

‘An Unborn Child’ (NC 25-26) could be viewed as the third poem in a sequence beginning with Yeats’s ‘A Prayer for my Daughter’, and continued by MacNeice in ‘Prayer Before Birth’. Edna Longley has drawn convincing comparisons between the three poems, observing that each one posits birth as “embryonic of troubled future history” while providing a meditation on the ‘radical innocence’ of the childhood self.<sup>15</sup> But there are also essential differences between these poems, which indicate that Mahon does not rely entirely on the other two for his inspiration. Certainly there are formal similarities between ‘A Prayer for my Daughter’ and ‘An Unborn Child’: Longley has picked out for special attention the way each poem “plays syntax against stanza to stake out a dramatic situation”.<sup>16</sup> But the Yeats poem, by asking how the child will escape the forthcoming violence predicted by ‘The Second Coming’, is basically a plea for

innocence presented through an appeal to custom and tradition. ‘An Unborn Child’ is linked thematically to ‘Prayer Before Birth’, and Michael Allen considers it an “imaginative reconstitution” of the MacNeice poem whereby MacNeice’s central concern relates to the unborn child’s fear of the impending destruction of its individuality (“O fill me / with strength against those // who would dissipate my entirety”).<sup>17</sup> But ‘An Unborn Child’, with its depiction of birth as the first tottering step towards death, owes its thematic impetus more to Beckett and Dylan Thomas.

The poem opens in ominous mood: “I have already come to the verge of / Departure. A month or so and / I shall be vacating this familiar room”. The central tension of birth-as-death is established by the surprising first line-break, along with the sequence of alliteration and assonance enforced by the words “already”, “departure”, “verge” and “vacating”. Mahon conflates these moments through a series of antitheses: the “fabric” of the womb becomes “the white shrouds / Of my apotheosis”; epistemological certainty (“In me these data are already vested; / I know them in my bones”) gives way to pure guesswork (“I imagine only”); the “sunning” of light and life is extinguished by the “mooning” of darkness and death; and the warm grip of absolute solipsism, provided by the pre-natal “metropolis” of the womb, will eventually be relinquished to the social “encumbrances” of the city. As with MacNeice’s poem, birth entails renunciation of the individual self and tries to demand integration into the chaotic world of others. But Mahon’s tone of stoical resignation indicates a far greater understanding of existential absurdity. He shapes life as a temporally reductive and finite drop in the infinite ocean of the universe. A month becomes numbered “days”, which in turn become “the small hours”.

The poem is a tapestry of intertextual allusion. Although primarily a re-working of the words of Job (“Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down” – Job 14.1-2), it also brings to mind Auden’s ‘1929’, Dylan Thomas’s ‘If my head hurt a hair’s foot’, and two works by Beckett; the poem beginning “my way is in the sand flowing”, and the dramatic fragment, A Piece of Monologue (BCDW 425-29).<sup>18</sup> In the Beckett poem, the speaker “live[s] the space of a door / that opens and shuts”, while the splintered, excruciating soliloquy of the dramaticule truncates birth and death into a single instant: “Birth was the death of him”. The play’s kaleidoscopic series of dissociated images – “Socks. Nightgown. Window. Lamp” – provides the model for Mahon’s “twisted / Kitten that lies there sunning itself / Under the bare bulb, the clouds / Of goldfish mooning around upon the shelf”. These images serve little purpose other than to set up another antithesis and to blur the distinction between subject and object, solipsistic self and outside world. The mother too is part of this pattern, and she is no less derided than the mother of Molloy. “[T]he sewers of my mother’s body” surely owes its power to Molloy’s recollection of his birth: “Unfortunately it is not of them I have to speak, but of her who brought me into the world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct. First taste of the shit” (Trilogy 16).

Such graphically repugnant imagery accentuates Beckett’s view of birth as an imposition of parental will through the original sin of sex, for which life is the inevitable punishment. Subsequently, only death can expiate the crime of being born. His attitude is both a critique of Calvinistic predetermination, which deposits man in an inescapably private hell, and a recommendation of pre-natal existence. Time inside the womb is

beyond the limits of life's normal tenure, and it is the only period of existence Beckett finds endurable. As the temporal span between birth and death is so brief, Beckett sees these terminal events as almost synonymous, all points in between being merely a succession of habits. The rhythms and short semantic units of A Piece of Monologue are designed to convey an implicit sense of racing pulse, but Mahon's poem is more overt in its description of the ebb and flow of "the warm red water" that courses through the "nerve centre" of the mother's womb. Here, the foetus can temporarily enjoy exploring "these hollows in discreet rehearsal" for his looming incipience, since this is his only moment of truly pleasurable freedom in what is destined to be a lifetime of painfully exilic wanderings.

According to Jungian psychology, the fear of death is engendered at the moment the umbilical cord is cut. Jung's work was of great and longstanding interest to Beckett, and he believed that the separation of the child – especially the son – from the mother is an important step in the way the child learns to deal with and develop the unconscious regions of the mind. The child's departure from the comfort and security of the mother is necessary if it is to become an autonomous being. In the case of Mahon's unborn child, the struggle for autonomy compels the foetus to "Produce in my mouth the words I WANT TO LIVE". (This yearning to experience life first-hand illustrates the desire to be free of the mother, and in some respect this theory could apply metaphorically to Beckett's and Mahon's separation from 'Mother Ireland' – a place neither writer found comfortable or secure – as instrumental in their artistic development.) The irony, of course, is that these words do not constitute an utterance: the unborn child has no voice. Elmer Andrews has argued that the poem is not entirely successful on the grounds that it

“lacks any piercing emotional authority and its metaphorical ingenuity leaves some visible poetic stretch-marks”.<sup>19</sup> Yet while the claims of the poem are not based on direct observation or experience, emotional deficiency is surely its point. The speaker uses language ironically because, lacking a voice, it is not at his disposal, and the declamation “I WANT TO LIVE” is an act of imagination belonging solely to the poet. Though sparingly deployed, the poem’s occasional scientific diction (“data”, “bones”, “nerve centre”, “filament”, “caul”) is enough to detach the poetic voice from any emotional involvement. Mahon’s language may govern the form, shape and sense of the poem, but it cannot decree the circumstances of existence. Art, existence and the compulsion to write are artistically one and the same thing – “I must compose myself” – but whereas authentic self-creation is dictated by the artist, the facts of his birth are not. If the poem lacks any authority it is because the events of which it speaks are beyond the control of either poet or child. These unspoken words belong primarily to the mother, and they herald the fall from innocence of which the mother is also guilty. “[E]verything I do / Or say is couched in the affirmative” articulates the misplaced optimism that the horror of death and the “things with which I am to be encumbered” can be somehow avoided. Andrews misses the fact that the poem is not simply an exercise in “punning wit” or “verbal performance”.<sup>20</sup> The poem’s authority stems not from an appeal to emotion but from its authentic response to being-toward-death and the absurd cruelty of fate: “give / Or take a day or two, my days are numbered”. The tone of ‘An Unborn Child’ is one of stoical resignation, expressed in hindsight from the vantage point of experience. Imagining the frantic “rat-race” of existence as an inevitable consequence of birth, the poem accepts the inevitability of failure and death to which the only true response is

provided by Beckett in the trilogy: “What am I to do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed?...The best would be not to begin. But I have to begin. That is to say I have to go on” (Trilogy 291,292).

‘Exit Molloy’, the fourth section of ‘Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc’ (NC 17-18), is similarly written with an air of resigned detachment attenuated by a note of bewilderment:

Now at the end I smell the smells of spring

Where in a dark ditch I lie wintering –

And the little town only a mile away,

Happy and fatuous in the light of day.

A bell tolls gently. I should start to cry

But my eyes are closed and my face dry.

I am not important and I have to die.

Strictly speaking, I am already dead,

But still I can hear the birds sing on over my head.

Characteristically, Mahon makes a variety of cross-references and self-references in this section. The line “I am not important and I have to die” is derived from the third part of Auden’s New Year Letter (“man is weak and has to die” – ACP 236), while the last line echoes the “splitting light above / My head” of ‘An Unborn Child’. Furthermore, the title of ‘Exit Molloy’ is not the poem’s only allusion to Beckett: the ditch reminds us of the place where Estragon sleeps and where Molloy comes to rest, while the birds may refer to the “skylarks” Molloy can hear circling above him (Trilogy 91). More significant, perhaps, is the way the poem associates Beckett and Mahon with Donne and Hemingway,

two writers who also related “a life-style to an art-style”.<sup>21</sup> Although Molloy can see “the towers and steeples” of a nearby town (it is only “a mile away” in Mahon’s poem), there is no mention of ringing bells. “A bell tolls” therefore provides a concise intertextual allusion that stimulates the reader to recognise a connection with these other authors for whom an awareness of mortality, braced by tensions between the individual and society, held a powerful fascination.

Although both Beckett and Mahon may claim ironically that they have nothing with which to express, their language possesses an authentic recognition of finite, contingent existence and of being-toward-death. In Heideggerian terms, they spell out a resoluteness in their attitudes towards the ineffable demands of being-toward-death, attitudes which denote a capacity for avoiding inauthentic self-deception when confronting death. Authentic resoluteness is also a commitment to ‘going on’ and accepting personal responsibility when everything is at stake. It is at root a running towards death, represented in Beckett by the birth / death synonymy and by Molloy’s attempt to return to the womb, and in Mahon by both the knowledge that his “days are numbered” and an enduring need to continue whatever the cost: “I who know nothing go to teach / While a new day crawls up the beach” (*‘The Sea in Winter’*, P 109-14). Going on, a persistent theme in Beckett, is a continual striving to “Try again. Fail again. Better again.”<sup>22</sup> Heidegger understood language to be a mode of being whereby silence and speaking each possesses an ontological structure capable of disclosing the world of being. In words that accord with Beckett’s thinking, Heidegger saw language as prior to existence and therefore prior to the human voice: “For, strictly, it is language that speaks.

Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal.”<sup>23</sup>

‘Exit Molloy’ is just such a response. The speaker is, “Strictly speaking” (a wonderful joke) “already dead”, and like the unborn child is incapable of giving voice to language. Yet the speaker’s voice continues after his death through the writing of the poem, and the language by which he is constituted prevails. In Beckett’s The Calmative, speech again continues after the ostensible death of the body.<sup>24</sup> Following a remarkable opening sentence – “I don’t know when I died” – the anonymous narrator-hero tells himself stories to pass the time. As in Endgame, where language and history invent the characters as much as the characters invent language and history, constant story-telling mocks the creative act as an absurd and futile endeavour, satirising the artist’s attempts to apprehend and engage with reality. The narrator-hero becomes alienated from the physical world by his death and from the mental world by his increasingly futile bid to create. Mahon manipulates these ideas in ‘Man and Bird’, the second section of ‘Four Walks’. The human-avian encounter sought by the speaker is doomed to failure since “All fly away at my approach”. The birds are conditioned by years of experience to avoid contact with humans at all costs, and their dispersal

irritates my amour-propre

As an enlightened alien,

And renders yet more wide the gap

From their world to the world of men.

The poem continues:

So perhaps they have something after all –

Either we shoot them out of hand  
 Or parody them with a bird-call  
 Neither of us can understand.

The speaker is stranded in a strange environment, set apart from meaningful contact by a mutual failure to communicate. Allying himself with “the world of men”, he laments the human tendency to mock or annihilate whatever cannot be instantly understood. Mahon considers disregard for the boundless possibilities offered by the outside world as typical of a barbarous and uncaring society. The speaker’s birth in the first section, ‘Early Morning’, is initially parodied as a miraculous event – “No doubt the creation was something like this” – but the response of the old woman (a nurse or midwife, perhaps) to his arrival in the world is insouciantly impersonal: “She has seen perhaps / Ten thousand dawns like this, and is not impressed”. Birth is not so much a cause for celebration as the start of a cycle of disregard. From the moment of his delivery, the speaker is condemned by society to a lifetime dominated by alienation and being ignored.

In its entirety, ‘Four Walks’ sketches the journey from birth to death through four poetic vignettes of varying form and structure, reflecting the disconnected surface of personal history. By the time we reach the third section, ‘After Midnight’, experience of the unfeeling brutalities committed by ‘das Man’ against the natural world drives the speaker to impose his fears onto that world:

They are all around me in the dark  
 With claw-knives for my sleepy anarch –  
  
 Beasts of the fields, birds of the air,

Their slit-eyes glittering everywhere.

The transformation from terror of man in ‘Man and Bird’ to terror of animals initially seems utterly irrational, belonging more to the realm of nightmares than of reality. But the animals are themselves transformed into the hostile and bestial “They”, the one-time playmates who “ran / In and out of my dirty childhood” and would now, as hunters, “gnaw my body to the bone”, thereby threatening the speaker’s sense of self. No longer surrounded by friends, the speaker is driven to assert his own existential ipseity: “I am man self-made, self-made man”. But even this self-authentication threatens to collapse since, in ‘Exit Molloy’, his apparent death provides a warning that all he has accomplished in life can disappear on the breeze like the sound of a tolling bell or a bird taking flight.

As with Beckett’s heroes, the speaker of ‘Four Walks’ fails on two counts. Firstly, he fails to achieve unity between mind and body. This Cartesian dualism, a recurring feature of Beckett’s work, figures in ‘Early Morning’ as poles of existence instigated at the moment of birth: “First there is darkness, then somehow light”. The dualism inherent in the *Cogito Ergo Sum* propounded by Descartes “has its roots in a need to exist even if only for oneself and all attempts to prove one’s existence must stem from that need”.<sup>25</sup> But the problem of existing only for oneself is that of solipsism and of becoming “completely egocentric”, in the words of ‘An Unborn Child’. Mahon tries to go some way towards resolving this mind-body dualism in ‘Four Walks’, claiming “as I know, I am not alone”, but this merely raises more questions: does he mean that he acknowledges his role as part of a greater community, a body politic? is he reiterating his allegiance to a much narrower community of like-minded, authentic artists? or is it the case that, like the

narrator of The Calmative, Mahon's speaker is telling himself a story about the singing birds as a way of staving off the extinction of the mind? Representing both matter and idea, the singing birds symbolise the artist's struggle to 'go on', and the continuation of the mind while the body expires is linked to the artist's desire for his legacy to survive his own death. Like Murphy, 'Four Walks' is in part about escaping the prison of the body which traps us in the world. Yet this desire is part of the dualistic paradox whereby becoming nothing contrasts with the need to have lived for a purpose. And it is this paradox that provides the second aspect of failure, for if the body dies there is then no means at the mind's disposal to express its thoughts and ideas.

Taken together, 'An Unborn Child' and 'Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc' do not elucidate a single or coherent philosophical position. While the latter views knowledge of the outside world as being derived from direct experience, the former indicates that such knowledge is deposited in the pre-natal mind's subconscious ("Certain mysteries are revealed to me / Through the dark network of my mother's body"). If the Molloy simulacrum, still 'speaking' after his death, evinces the persistence of memory, then the unborn child archly suggests that memory is an illusion and that all knowledge of the world has an innate aspect. However, the two poems not only delineate an aesthetic of failure, they also represent different sides of the same coin, a coin minted from ideas contained in Waiting for Godot. The numbered days of the unborn child echo Pozzo's famous speech:

POZZO: [Suddenly furious.] Have you not done tormenting me with  
your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is  
that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he

went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day  
 we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same  
 second, is that not enough for you? [Calmer.] They give birth  
 astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once  
 more. [*He jerks the rope.*] On! (BCDW 83)

The Book of Job is again recalled through the image of the meaningless gleam of light. For Pozzo there is no point discussing time since the duration of worthwhile existence can be reduced to a single instant before life is cruelly snuffed out. Time, which is contrasted with “an instant”, can be tolerable, but only when it is given the illusion of value. Light brings hope, but that hope is extinguished before anything of lasting worth can be achieved. Days can have little value if the light of hope gleams only for a tiny fraction of one of them, and one second is sufficient for Pozzo – perhaps even too much – because beyond that period of time there is only endless suffering and pain.

By contrast, Vladimir views life in contradictory terms, as an infinite repetition of time. In his final long speech he repeats Pozzo’s imagery, but this repetition serves a wholly different purpose:

VLADIMIR: Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? [ESTRAGON, *having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again.* VLADIMIR stares at him.] He'll know nothing.

He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. [Pause.] Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. [He listens.] But habit is a great deadener. [He looks again at ESTRAGON.] At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. [Pause.] I can't go on! [Pause.] What have I said? (BCDW 84-85)

Vladimir's probing questions point towards a revelation of his true self, but unlike Mahon's flatly-stated "I am man self-made, self-made man", no answer is forthcoming apart from the contradiction to Pozzo: "We have time to grow old". For Vladimir, the tragedy of life lies in its infinitude, and his final question backhandedly asserts the necessity to authentically 'go on'. In this respect, Vladimir finds his poetic equivalent in the 'I' of 'Four Walks'. Throughout the poem we find evidence of habitual behaviour designed to keep the world at bay, from the daily routine of the old woman, the birds' "ancient fear", and the repetitious cycle of "In and out...", to the blind, unthinking fatuity of the town and its inhabitants. The collapsed eternity of "Ten thousand dawns" is re-expanded in the phrase "time out of mind", which extends temporality both further back from and further into human history, i.e. into eternity. The poem is also deftly constructed to accentuate this feature, ending as it begins on a parable of creation. 'Exit Molloy' takes this even further, the present tense of its opening word, "Now", being stretched into uncharted territory by the ambiguity of the final line's "But still...". Just as Waiting for Godot ends on the promise that the dramatic cycle will be re-enacted every day

thereafter, so ‘Four Walks’ refuses to be drawn to a satisfactory conclusion. Mahon and Beckett walk in the footsteps of Job, seeking but never receiving (nor, unlike Job, do they expect to receive) final answers.

### 3.5 ‘Leaves’

Waiting for Godot has proved a rich source of inspiration for Mahon. Apart from his investigations into the dialectic between the infinite and the infinitesimal of existential anxiety, Beckett’s most famous play also provides the basis for the poignant lyric ‘Leaves’ (TSP 3). The poem is worth quoting in its entirety:

The prisoners of infinite choice  
 Have built their house  
 In a field below the wood  
 And are at peace.

It is autumn, and dead leaves  
 On their way to the river  
 Scratch like birds at the windows  
 Or tick on the road.

Somewhere there is an afterlife  
 Of dead leaves,  
 A stadium filled with an infinite  
 Rustling and sighing.

Somewhere in the heaven  
 Of lost futures  
 The lives we might have led  
 Have found their own fulfilment.

The opening line seems to take the following claim by Shelley, scrutinising it through the existential formulation of freedom-as-constraint: “poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions...It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos.”<sup>26</sup> Infinite choice stands not only as a paradigm of moral and behavioural decision-making; it also becomes the poet’s word selection process. It carries the taint of infinite pluralism designed to contrast liberty and limitation, reason and unreason, order and chaos, subject and object. There is therefore a profound irony in the line “And are at peace”, peace being an unattainable condition when situated against the possibility that potential other lives might have been more complete. The chaos of the familiar world can find order through the poet’s words, but it is a fragile, tenuous order subject to the brevity of life, exposing itself only as unfulfilled desire.

‘Leaves’ operates on two distinct but related levels: the humanistic and the aesthetic. Elmer Andrews has described the poem as conveying “the vast longing and regret of lost souls”, a claim that instantly associates it thematically with ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’.<sup>27</sup> Andrews sees the poem in terms which reclaim lives lost to history, where the individual self is freed “from its own circumstances”.<sup>28</sup> In this way, ‘Leaves’ takes up the challenge laid down in Waiting for Godot to make sense of lives

disappointed by self-delusion and the continual deferment of responsibility. We can see from the following passage, extracted by Mahon for his anthology of modern Irish poetry in recognition of its intrinsic lyricism, the extent to which Mahon's poem is indebted to Beckett:

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like sand.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

[Silence.]

VLADIMIR: They all speak together.

ESTRAGON: Each one to itself.

[Silence.]

VLADIMIR: Rather they whisper.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

VLADIMIR: They murmur.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

[Silence.]

VLADIMIR: What do they say?

ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives.

VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it.

VLADIMIR: To be dead is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON: It is not sufficient.

[Silence.]

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like ashes.

ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

[Long silence.] (BCDW 58-59).<sup>29</sup>

Beckett, as Mahon acknowledges, is not a great poet (“He is a minor and idiosyncratic poet, though an interesting one”), but he is right to regard this extract as achieving “the condition of music” (J 50, 53). This condition has similarly been identified by John Redmond as belonging to ‘Leaves’:

The intensity is conveyed by the delicacy of the sound-effects and the combination of unvoiced fricatives with thin vowel sounds, faithfully evoking the light friction of leaves. The sense of abstraction is conveyed by the diction, which has a marked utopian expansiveness: “infinite” (used twice), “afterlife”, “heaven”, “futures”, “fulfilment”.<sup>30</sup>

‘Leaves’, like the Beckett passage (Mahon names it ‘All the Dead Voices’), is in essence an “existential lyric”, which “shares certain characteristics (not least its brevity) with the imagist poem, though it is free of the imagist preciosity” (J 52). Beckett’s dead voices, making “a noise like wings”, recall the dead voice and the presence of birds at the end of ‘Four Walks’. It is an image of lost lives haunting the insistent, overwhelming memory of the still-living which tries – but fails – to repair what Mahon calls the “metaphysical disjunction between ‘subject’ and ‘object’,...the perceiving sensibility and everything

external to it" (J 56). In his own poem, Mahon likewise attempts to make this connection across time ("Somewhere there is an afterlife") and space ("Somewhere in the heaven..."). But the repetition of "Somewhere" emphasises the impossibility of making such a connection, and the leaves are consigned to merely imagining their "lost futures". On the aesthetic level, the pun on 'leaves' as pages of a book implies the pages of written works of art in general, and Mahon's own collections of poetry in particular. But these leaves are "dead", and the word "might" spells out the enormity of the task faced by art if it is ever to either breach the metaphysical divide or continue to find an audience. Mahon is a dab hand at ironic self-effacement, frequently conjuring phrases that pursue his conviction that poetry is never likely to make anything happen (his description of poetry as "All farts in a biscuit tin", from 'The Sea in Winter', would surely find favour with the expletive-loving Beckett). But he, like Beckett, is committed to going on, irrespective of whether or not his voice is heard. Mahon's words can only "Scratch" or "tick". The leaves' 'voices', like the voices of poets, are too insubstantial to communicate anything, while their susurrous "Rustling and sighing" is more likely to be extinguished by a gentle breeze than be heard by the living. Such is the fate of poetry.

### **3.6 'An Image from Beckett'**

We have seen how Beckett's imagery, diction and method of repetition and reiteration have filtered into Mahon's own idiom as a way of making connections between different poems and collections. In 'An Image from Beckett' (L 8-10), effectively a gloss on the poems already discussed, we again witness the birth / death

synonymy through the figure of “the gravedigger / Putting aside his forceps”, while the ironic post-death voice of ‘Exit Molloy’ and ‘Leaves’ is once more resurrected:

They will have buried  
 My great-grandchildren, and theirs,  
 Beside me now  
  
 With a subliminal  
 Batsqueak of reflex lamentation.

That “subliminal / Batsqueak” could, perhaps, be viewed as equivalent to Beckett’s shortest exercise in dramatic minimalism, Breath, wherein the barely audible sigh symbolises the brevity and unrelenting pain of existence (BCDW 371). Breath is framed by two identical cries of birth and death. These cries, or throes, represent the twin poles of existential anguish between which there lies only despair. ‘An Image from Beckett’ is not, however, so bleak or so endless as Breath. Mahon infuses the poem’s “northern landscape” with an ideal of hope: it is a place where a thought might grow, a place where “grave / Cities” can still provide suitable backdrops for the physical and moral uprightness of “Utilities and schoolchildren”.

Nevertheless, Mahon’s vision of the future is contingent on there being “time, / And light enough” for the speaker’s artistic gift to posterity to be read. His voice rises plaintively from the grave, wishing that the “lasting monuments” of art will not be engulfed by the collapse of history and time into the existential transience of “that instant”. Deprived of any sign of God (the capitalisation of “There is No-one to blame” is significant here, and in the revised version, “one” is also capitalised), the whole of

civilisation is absurdly reduced to a momentary existence which ironises the notion of “The Biblical span” of three score years and ten. Having been abandoned to the caprices of an indifferent universe by God’s disappearance, man, like the washing, has been euphemistically “hung [out] to dry”. The poetic “will”, dictated by language and the decaying voice of memory, must face the ensuing darkness which is destined to swamp the Arnoldian “sweetness and light” of transcendence and return to the *Néant* at the very moment of its inception.

Bill Tinley has remarked that, in ‘An Image from Beckett’, “Mahon is trying to come to terms with such Beckett themes as the relentless onset of the end, the Bible, the ambiguity of light as a symbol, the voice behind death.”<sup>31</sup> These themes do not belong exclusively to Beckett, of course; rather, they form part of a framework of like-mindedness, and Mahon appropriates Beckettian ideas as a way of exploring shared preoccupations. ‘An Image from Beckett’ must be seen in the light cast by all the other poems that take their cue from Beckett. For example, the repetition we find at the heart of Beckett’s and Mahon’s writings is, in Bloomian terms, a “recurrence of images from [the writer’s] own past, obsessive images against which [the writer’s] present affections vainly struggle”.<sup>32</sup> Repetition is, in other words, a barrier the author cannot traverse, preventing him from seeing beyond his epistemological limitations. Yet nothing pejorative is intended by this since repetition becomes a schema that enables the author to work through those preoccupations towards an understanding of them. Beckett’s imagery comprises part of Mahon’s past not just in terms of his education and reading, but as an aspect of his heritage as an Irish Protestant. Bloom’s following assertion is apposite:

British and American poetry, at least since Milton, has been a severely

displaced Protestantism...Poetry whose hidden subject is the anxiety of influence is naturally of a Protestant temper, for the Protestant God always seems to isolate His children in the double bind of two great injunctions: ‘Be like me’ and ‘Do not presume to be too like me’.<sup>33</sup>

Mahon may not try to conceal the extent or anxiety of Beckett’s influence, but he is just as confused at having been cast into this psychological limbo. Most of his Beckett-inspired poetry reduces existence to a continual stasis of waiting, exemplified by *Vladimir and Estragon*, where the lack of certainty condemns man to perpetual angst which only death or regression to the womb can appease. Following Freud, Bloom concludes that repetition is “primarily a mode of *compulsion*” (emphasis added), and a means of freeing the self from religious constraints.<sup>34</sup> For Mahon, this takes the form of refusing to refer directly in these poems to God: only the (metaphorical) “heaven” of ‘Leaves’ and the “Biblical” of ‘An Image from Beckett’ allude specifically to a divine presence. Paradoxically, however, the post-death voice of ‘Exit Molloy’, ‘Leaves’ and ‘An Image from Beckett’ endeavours to resist the failure of art by transforming the poems from deeply ironic or even comic commentaries on existential absurdity into something altogether different. Exhorting the persistence of art in a world where the act of creation is an act of revolt, these poems become prayers. For both Beckett and Mahon, the Word is not so much the Word of God but of art. But their art, by ironically conferring a voice on the dead – a process Mahon also uses when writing of mute phenomena such as the mushrooms of ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ – fails to express because what they are trying to express cannot be known. The artist is compelled

to create, but he fails because the things he is trying to express can only be known by God. And God is no longer there.

Nor, on some level, is Mahon. Brendan Kennelly asks, of what he considers Mahon's best poem, 'The Poet in Residence (after Corbière)' (P 103-6), "Where is [Mahon] in this poem, where is the writer in it? Nowhere, everywhere."<sup>35</sup> The poem provides an example of "Self-denial", of "indirection", of emptying the self to accommodate "passing ghosts who, perhaps out of gratitude for being made welcome where welcome was not expected, offer to sing of those troubles that the mere self might endure but scarcely express".<sup>36</sup> Beckett is one such ghost, and Mahon's ability to allow his precursor to speak on his unselfconscious behalf illustrates both the precursor's authority and Mahon's own strength as a poet in not allowing his works to become subsumed by that authority. If we cannot establish Mahon's identity in 'An Image from Beckett' it is because Mahon wanted it that way. He has chosen to adopt the Beckett persona, while adapting Beckett's diction, imagery and ideas to examine personal preoccupations, as a means of liberating himself from his own identity. Eamon Grennan has recognised that identity in the poem is constituted predominantly by "a tone of voice".<sup>37</sup> I would go even further than Grennan and say that the poem's voice, with its epiphanic moments of lyric intensity drawn out to infinity by lugubrious polysyllabic rhythms and descending cadences, is instantly recognisable and is typical of Mahon's overall poetic. His individual voice can be heard behind every allusion, every laconic irony, and every rhetorical compression. This latter is due in part to the compact three-line stanza – short in length, long in syllable count – so often deployed by Mahon ('The Dawn Chorus', 'A Lighthouse in Maine', 'The Woods', and 'The Joycentenary Ode' are

just a few of the poems that spring to mind). Although it may cast an eye towards William Carlos Williams, this attenuated form has become such an indispensable weapon in Mahon's armoury that it is now difficult to dissociate him from it.

It must be admitted, however, that 'An Image from Beckett' is complicated even further by the presence of yet another precursor lurking in the poem's background. It ends:

Still, I am haunted  
By that landscape,  
The soft rush of its winds,

The uprightness of its  
Utilities and schoolchildren –  
To whom in my will,

This, I have left my will.  
I hope they had time, and light  
Enough, to read it.

These lines recall several of the linguistic and figurative devices in Yeats's 'The Tower' (YCP 218-25), of which this is only a partial list: "What shall I do with this absurdity"; "Bring up out of that deep considering mind / All that you have discovered in the grave"; "It is time that I wrote my will; / I choose upstanding men"; "I leave both faith and pride / To young upstanding men". Nevertheless, Mahon's purpose in invoking Yeats is not to seek validation for his own ideas but to parody Yeats's. The description of poetry in 'The

Tower' as "This sedentary trade" chimes with Mahon's ironic propensity for subjecting his vocation to ridicule. But for the elderly Yeats, the description makes perfect literal sense. The theme of 'The Tower' deals with the decaying effects of time on the ageing body. Yeats sets the world of vision and imagination (mind) against the world of the actual (body), eventually finding his place in the realm of the immaterial:

Now shall I make my soul,  
 Compelling it to study  
 In a learned school  
 Till the wreck of body,  
 Slow decay of blood,  
 Testy delirium  
 Or dull decrepitude,  
 Or what worse evil to come.

That first line provides an echo for the existential formulations of 'An Unborn Child' and 'Four Walks', but the comic note that sounds throughout Mahon's poems is missing here. Yeats's answer to the overwhelming absolutes of infinity and eternity is reincarnation, but neither Mahon nor Beckett is prepared to put their trust in a similar notion. While Yeats was comparatively untroubled by the notion that his art would be forgotten or overlooked, the dead voices of Beckett and Mahon make it clear that artistic failure is a more believable proposition. Parodying the possibility of unifying mind and body (he can conceive no conflation of "imagination, ear and eye"), Mahon "eschew[s] the metaphysical in the name of the material".<sup>38</sup> There is no sign of transcendental optimism

at the end of ‘An Image from Beckett’ as there is at the close of ‘The Tower’, only the faint hope that his poetic “will” can provide a fitting legacy.

### 3.7 ‘Matthew V. 29-30’

‘Tithonus’ (A 23-27) likewise deals with the body’s decay, although its mordant humour – along with one of its two epigraphs and its sly allusion to Echo’s Bones – owes more to Beckett than to Yeats. Having been condemned to immortality, Tithonus’s terrestrial existence is a living hell to which complete physical and mental annihilation would be preferable. His Sisyphean struggle against eternity becomes a quest for extinction. Commenting on Tennyson’s poem of the same name (which is itself indebted to Wordsworth), Christopher Ricks remarks, “To Tithonus, death was the mercy of eternity”.<sup>39</sup> But Tithonus’s impulse to suicide, foreshadowing the failed attempts by Vladimir and Estragon to hang themselves, is not an option open to him. Like Beckett’s heroes, Mahon’s Tithonus is destined to wither indefinitely and await his absurd transformation into a cricket. Only speech, the great delaying tactic of Waiting for Godot, can alleviate the pain of living. Exhibiting a less than subtle build-up of colloquialism, paradox, blasphemy and repetition (“Perhaps” occurs three times), the poem underlines Mahon’s debt to Beckett:

Nattering on

As my habit is,

God knows why:

An impulse merely,

Perhaps, to break  
The unquiet silence.

The answer to this nightmare of immortality is “Beckett’s bleak *reductio*” (‘Beyond Howth Head’, L 33-38), a position outlined by Mahon in ‘Matthew V. 29-30’ (TSP 13-15). This blackly comic allegory on the dream of the ideal society is an absurd satire on ideals of perfection. Depicting self-negation as a form of self-knowledge, it shows, through its macabre humour, that the quest for perfection is wholly destructive. Although the poem has not garnered as much critical attention, in spite of its comic attractions, as some of Mahon’s work, it has managed to provoke some contrary reactions. Jerzy Jarniewicz sees the poem as a conflict between religious belief and common sense that finally promotes acceptance of “the life we know” or the given life: by contrast, Michael Allen reads it as being about how the individual rails against being conditioned and, more importantly, defined by society.<sup>40</sup> Such differing opinions illustrate the poem’s inability to be interpreted conclusively. It is significant, however, that Mahon should choose to explore the absurd and its logical consequences in a poem which, like Nerval’s ‘Christ on the Mount of Olives’, has religion at its core. The poem begins in a provocatively humorous mode:

Lord, mine eye offended  
So I plucked it out.  
Imagine my chagrin

When the offence continued.  
So I plucked out

The other but

The offence continued.

In the dark now and

Working by touch, I shaved

My head, the offence continued.

Removed an ear,

Another, dispatched the nose,

The offence continued.

Imagine my chagrin.

By repeating the key phrases “Imagine my chagrin” (which points to a knowledge on Mahon’s part of Balzac’s La Peau de Chagrin where the fantasies of the character Raphael take him ever nearer his demise) and “The offence continued” at strategic points throughout the first ten stanzas, the grim comedy is maintained as the speaker’s body is gradually reduced limb by limb, organ by organ, until only “A wreckage of bones” is left. From this point, however, the poem takes a more serious turn, systematically describing the destruction of lifelong achievements, works, even thoughts, before the rest of the universe is caught up in the cataclysmic maelstrom and Creation is reduced to a silent void.

The poem’s speaker resembles the archetypal Beckettian anti-hero. Molloy, Malone, and Mahood all suffer similar fates; their bodies and senses are progressively

eroded until those senses are freed from the determinism of sensory impressions, albeit at the expense of a ‘living death’. By eliminating the features that determine what is recognisably human, the ‘I’ becomes detached, but we might ask where does it become detached *to*? Once separated from the self it can do nothing but seek its void, its absolute. In this sense ‘Matthew V. 29-30’ is, to some degree, a poeticised version of Beckett’s trilogy, which takes as its starting point the near-Socratic premise, “I, of whom I know nothing”, and reaches its transformational apogee in the dictum, “Faith that’s an idea, yet another, mutilate, mutilate, and perhaps some day, fifteen generations hence, you’ll succeed in beginning to look like yourself, among passers-by” (*Trilogy* 306, 317). These passers-by are the societal Other from whom we learn the words necessary to give form to our thoughts, words which constitute and define the ‘I’. But whereas the ‘I’ is the finite home to consciousness, and therefore knowledge, the Beckettian self is an infinite void, and neither can ever understand or take precedence over the Other, “save in the act of its own annihilation. But a knowledge which annihilates itself is no longer knowledge, a word which is silence is no longer a word, no longer a thought. The objective, therefore, is literally impossible.”<sup>41</sup> This is because, standing outside the physical mechanics of time and motion, the self, in order to know itself, must continue to think. But apart from the fact that self-destruction debars thought, thought is constituted by words and words belong, in part, to the Other. Here we see another aspect of Mahon’s obsession with being through with history. But in this case history belongs to the realm of the absurd since the act of putting the poem into words is, in the first instance, a compliance with the Other, and, in the second instance, a futile gesture whereby words themselves ultimately fail to

grasp and describe what they are intended to signify. The poem represents an ordering of the self from the chaos of identity, only for that self to be returned to the chaos of society.

But the poem's deep irony is double-edged and its closing line – "Only then was I fit for human society" – registers a responsibility towards society, a necessity to be seen as "fit". Suitability ("fit" as 'appropriate'), conformity ("fit" as 'fitting in'), and the demands of society through which the self is abrogated, all struggle with the need for self-definition. The poem's central conceit stems from a strictly literal reading of Christ's utilitarian ordinance that the self be denied for the sake of the greater good. But the conclusion reached by this supposition provides an indictment of literal readings of scripture, which in turn give rise to religious fanaticism and "the life-denying aspects of Calvinistic Protestantism" (another manifestation of the Other).<sup>42</sup> In its confusion, the self is so destabilised as to be annulled; moreover, it again loses contact with all it believes to be true and so, psychologically, it also destroys all of its knowledge, intuitions, presumptions and ideas. In this sense the poem is a fantasy of individualism that involves an escape from reality and the supposed obligations owed to those who would not necessarily care whether or not the individual lives or dies. By destroying the 'I' in order to become part of a homogenous 'we' sharing the same words and thoughts, the self, and any form of individual identity, also cease to exist. Exhibiting once more a desire to be through with history, the aesthetic adventure of the self is doomed to inevitable failure. Writing of Beckett, although it applies equally to this poem, John Pilling observes that, "the satiric mode", into which category 'Matthew V. 29-30' indubitably falls, "requires a total abandonment of the offending society as the pre-requisite to holding up one's own clean hands".<sup>43</sup> Any return to society, therefore, results in a complete failure to assert the

self in a wholly authentic manner. Through this wonderfully intriguing poem, Mahon, like Beckett and Nerval before him, fails, but he fails gloriously.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard N. Coe, Beckett (Edinburgh: Oliver, 1964) 69.

<sup>2</sup> Coe 11.

<sup>3</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, Collected Fictions, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Penguin, 1999) 463.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Esslin, introduction, Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1965) 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, introd. Bertrand Russell (1961; London: Routledge, 1994) 74.

<sup>6</sup> Brendan Kennelly, Journey into Joy: Selected Prose, ed. Åke Persson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994) 134.

<sup>7</sup> Philippe Jaccottet, Selected Poems, trans. Derek Mahon (Harmondsworth: Viking-Penguin, 1987) 41.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (1962; Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) 208.

<sup>9</sup> Edna Longley, Poetry in the Wars (1986; Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996) 174.

<sup>10</sup> Michael O'Neill, “‘Holding Nature up to Art’: The Poetry of Derek Mahon,” Poetry Now: Contemporary British and Irish Poetry in the Making, ed. Holger Klein, Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Wolfgang Görtschacher (Tubingen: Stauffenburg, 1999) 219.

<sup>11</sup> Beckett once declared, in an unusually helpful moment, that, “The key word in my plays is ‘perhaps’.” Qtd. Michael Worton, “Waiting for Godot and Endgame: Theatre

as Text," The Cambridge Companion to Beckett, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 67.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Beckett, Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment, ed. Ruby Cohn (1983; London: Calder, 1983) 91, 94.

<sup>13</sup> Qtd. in W.H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays (London: Faber, 1963) 338.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Federman, Journey into Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1965) 200.

<sup>15</sup> Longley 176.

<sup>16</sup> Longley 176.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Allen, "Louis MacNeice and Michael Longley: Some Examples of Affinity and Influence," Louis MacNeice and his Influence, ed. Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock, Ulster Editions and Monographs: 6 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1998) 102.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Beckett, Poems in English (1961; London: Calder, 1968) 49.

<sup>19</sup> Elmer Andrews, "The Poetry of Derek Mahon: 'places where a thought might grow,'" Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Elmer Andrews (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 238.

<sup>20</sup> Andrews 237, 238.

<sup>21</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, The Modern American Novel, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 94.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Beckett, Worstward Ho (1983; London: Calder, 1999) 8.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. and introd. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper, 1975) 216.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Beckett, The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989, ed. and introd. S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1995) 61-77.

<sup>25</sup> John Calder, The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett (London: Calder, 2001) 37.

<sup>26</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, Shelley's Poetry and Prose, ed. Donald H. Reiman, and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977): 505.

<sup>27</sup> Andrews 249.

<sup>28</sup> Andrews 249.

<sup>29</sup> See also Derek Mahon, ed, The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry (London: Sphere, 1972) 114.

<sup>30</sup> John Redmond, "Wilful Inconsistency: Derek Mahon's Verse-Letters," Irish University Review 24.1 (1994): 114.

<sup>31</sup> Bill Tinley, "'Harmonies and Disharmonies': Derek Mahon's Francophile Poetics," Irish University Review 24.1 (1994): 93.

<sup>32</sup> Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 80.

<sup>33</sup> Bloom 152.

<sup>34</sup> Bloom 80.

<sup>35</sup> Kennelly 134.

<sup>36</sup> Kennelly 134.

<sup>37</sup> Eamon Grennan, "'To the Point of Speech': The Poetry of Derek Mahon," Contemporary Irish Writing, ed. James D. Brophy and Raymond J. Porter (Boston: Twayne, 1983) 23.

<sup>38</sup> Stan Smith, “The Twilight of the Cities: Derek Mahon’s Dark Cinema,” The Poetry of Derek Mahon, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Ulster Editions and Monographs: 11 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 2002) 252.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Ricks, Tennyson (London: Macmillan, 1972) 129.

<sup>40</sup> Jerzy Jarniewicz, “Derek Mahon: History, Mute Phenomena and Beyond,” Kennedy-Andrews 91; Michael Allen, “Rhythm and Revision in Mahon’s Poetic Development,” Kennedy-Andrews 127.

<sup>41</sup> Coe 69.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Bradley, “Literature and Culture in the North of Ireland,” Cultural Contexts and Literary Idioms in Contemporary Irish Literature, ed. Michael Kenneally, Studies in Contemporary Irish Literature 1, Irish Literary Studies 31 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1988) 46.

<sup>43</sup> John Pilling, Samuel Beckett (London: Routledge, 1976) 182.

#### 4. “the redemptive enterprise”: Mahon and Auden

##### 4.1 Light Verse and Verse Letters

If Mahon’s debt to Beckett is founded on an aesthetic of failure that sets the futility of writing against the compulsion to continue doing so, then the influence of Auden goes some way towards providing a counterbalance. Mahon’s verse letters exhibit little of the existential musings of poems such as ‘Matthew V. 29-30’ and ‘An Unborn Child’, favouring instead a more casual and conversational voice which would, in the later works, ‘The Hudson Letter’ and The Yellow Book, develop into his predominant style. These verse letters – ‘Beyond Howth Head’ (L 33-39), ‘The Sea in Winter’ (P 109-114), ‘The Yaddo Letter’ (THL 27-31), and ‘The Hudson Letter’ (THL 37-77) – do not just deal, in the words of John Redmond, with “the big themes of society and history, space and time”; they also explore the nature of identity and the workings of the poetic mind as it deliberates over poetry’s worth.<sup>1</sup> Redmond is nevertheless right to say that Auden “is crucial to these verse-letters – in fact, they are unimaginable without his example”.<sup>2</sup> Auden’s ‘Letter to Lord Byron’ (ACP 70-113) and New Year Letter (ACP 199-243) provide the epistolary templates for Mahon’s own experiments with a form Auden considers a variety of light verse, and which, as a response to social conditions, could be used to carry political and sociological levels of meaning. As Auden defines it, light verse is characterised by language that is “straightforward and close to ordinary speech”, and in this sense it is a vehicle perfectly suited for the personal form of address belonging to verse letters (EA 363). This is not to say, however, that Auden sees light verse as being in any way trivial or frivolous:

Light verse can be serious. It has only come to mean *vers de société*,

trioletts, smoke room limericks, because, under the social conditions which produced the Romantic Revival, and which have persisted, more or less, ever since, it has been only in trivial matters that poets have felt in sufficient intimacy with their audience to be able to forget themselves and their singing-robés (EA 364).

The question of audience is a familiar one to readers of Auden. It is probably fair to say that Mahon likewise hankers after a wider audience, but unlike Heaney he is unwilling to take the reins of spokesmanship. He knows, as did Auden, that his true audience will mainly comprise fellow poets, critics, students and other intellectuals interested in his work. Indeed, about twenty percent of Mahon's poems are addressed or dedicated to specific members of an artistic audience or community, and this figure does not include those 'portrait poems' where he evokes the presence of, or imitates the voice of another artist; 'Van Gogh among the Miners' (NC 19), for instance. But while Mahon might agree with Auden that one of the central problems faced by the modern poet is "how to find or form a genuine community, in which each has his valued place and can feel at home", it is less likely that he would endorse fully Auden's claim that, "[w]ithout a secure place in society, without an intimate relation between himself and his audience, without, in fact, those conditions which make for Light Verse, the poet finds it difficult to grow beyond a certain point" (EA 367-68; 366-67). Mahon knows only too well that, for the poet at least, there is no such thing as "a secure place in society", and his work frequently shows society and the poet's audience to be polar opposites. And herein lies his own dilemma. While the verse letter has at its heart a concern for audience and is fully conscious of its intended reader, there is a danger that by addressing an epistle to an

individual reader the poet could alienate any potential larger audience. Private and personal allusions, usually the bedrock on which verse letters are built, can easily restrict the understanding of any reader not privileged enough to be ‘in the know’. Nevertheless, Mahon’s verse letters go some way towards counteracting Beckettian pessimism in the way they justify writing as worthier than silence. As Ben Howard notes, “under Mahon’s aegis, the verse letter becomes less a vehicle for social criticism than a mode of lyrical utterance; and the form that for Pope served a didactic purpose becomes an outlander’s communiqué, an exile’s cry”.<sup>3</sup> In other words, these verse letters express the very alienation that might be experienced by the poet’s audience. In fragmentary (e.g. Ulster) or evolving (e.g. Ireland) societies, the poet usually tries to communicate both a sense of shared traditions and his own revisionary insights. But the epistolary form deliberately limits such an approach by privileging an individual or a selective audience over a larger and more inclusive mode of address. Verse letters, by convention and definition, try to bypass normal routes of reception by confiding in an almost guaranteed audience by appealing directly to that audience’s friendship or even its vanity. Dedications become personal addresses that rely on sharing common attitudes and experiences, and “render the poems confidential and the addressee complicit in a poetic idea”.<sup>4</sup> Personal knowledge of a specific audience, whether it is comprised of friends or fellow artists, becomes “a defence against the wider world” that protects the poet’s insularity.<sup>5</sup>

Included within this wider world are the interlinked arenas of society at large and economic necessity, realms of existence that provide constant sources of conflict for the authentic poet. In a revealing interview with Willie Kelly, Mahon claims to abhor the notion of poetry as a “business”:

I went through a period when the whole business sickened me. Peripheral things impinged too much on the fact of poetry itself. I was increasingly aware of literary politics, jockeying for position, and this undignified stuff seemed to be encroaching on what was essentially a pure activity.<sup>6</sup>

Mahon's less generous critics may, with some justification perhaps, point towards a degree of envy in the phrase "jockeying for position" as regards the amount of success enjoyed by Heaney, while those peripheral things might include Mahon's own excursions into translation, writing plays, adapting for television, and his frequent forays into reviewing and journalism. But Terence Brown, in his introduction to Journalism, a selection of Mahon's prose writings, discerns a serious intent behind Mahon's occasional writings, a seriousness that carries over into his poetry:

Throughout one senses that the part of himself that Mahon has most fully put into his literary journalism, as well as his urbane yet invincibly curious intelligence, his warm affection for people as well as their poems and novels, his good humour and impatient scorn for the enemies of decency everywhere, is a respect for those who have accepted deracination of one kind or another as a condition of twentieth-century life and made it an inspiration (J 18).

In the same essay, Brown also notes that "Mahon writes for an audience who he hopes will share, without making too much of a thing about it, his evident relish for words employed with panache, zest and accompanying aesthetic scruples" (J 14). In an interview conducted nine years after the one with Willie Kelly, Mahon confesses that, "I've been journalising for years now...and I enjoy it."<sup>7</sup> But he remains suspicious of the

institutional commercialism of writing, and his discomfort with writing for public consumption has resulted in a reductive, or even elitist, desire to narrow his audience to something more manageable on a personal level: “I invoke a circle of friends, a reading society.”<sup>8</sup> This quotation comes from a fairly recent interview where Mahon also apologises for his lack of contact with the larger community as well as his solipsistic desire “[t]o be essentially solitary (this is all very selfish, I realize that) – not without community, exactly, but a slight distance all round, so that one is dealing with community on one’s own terms. And that’s the way I live today.”<sup>9</sup> What these interviews disclose is a difference in attitudes between writing for a large audience who may be totally unfamiliar with Mahon and his poetry, and writing for a select group with whom he can share his innermost thoughts and feelings. Verse letters, encapsulating both public document and private correspondence in their complicity with an audience, bear a resemblance to diary entries; they are pieces of writing expected to be read by very few, though often it is secretly hoped that they will reach a far larger audience.

The verse letters and ‘portrait poems’ seem to provide evidence that, given half a chance, Mahon would rather abnegate all written contact with the wider world in favour of communicating solely with an inner circle of confederates and confreres. This might suggest either elitism or a lack of confidence or both were it not for a tendency towards ironic self-deprecation; but what these poems certainly defend is the poet’s freedom to compose as he sees fit. And what Mahon considers an appropriate subject for poetry is poetry itself. Writers in general, and poets in particular, are natural outsiders who rely on sympathy and understanding from other writers, and even if an audience for their work does not exist they will try to create one. Hence Mahon’s gravitation, either through his

verse letters or through his ‘portrait poems’, towards “a community of imagined readership”.<sup>10</sup> But Mahon’s verse letters are also, in the manner of Auden’s ‘Letter to Lord Byron’ and New Year Letter, his most autobiographical poems: they are personal meditations on the tribulations of the poet’s life and art, his isolation, and his concerns about the value of poetry.

#### **4.2 ‘Beyond Howth Head’**

Like New Year Letter, both ‘Beyond Howth Head’ and ‘The Sea in Winter’ are written in tightly organised octosyllabic couplets, a form well suited to light verse thanks to its sing-song rhythm, even though that rhythm and the overall levity of tone belie the sober intent behind the poems. The formal attributes of the verse letter give Mahon the leeway to be simultaneously broad in his discursive sweep across life in general and narrowly focused in his comments on Irish life in particular, in a manner akin to Auden’s ‘Letter to Lord Byron’. By demanding that he “take a form that sheds for love / that tight-arsed, convent-bred disdain”, Mahon consciously echoes the diction of ‘Letter to Lord Byron’ where Auden requests “a form that’s large enough to swim in”. Again in Audenesque fashion, these poems contain a self-consciously promiscuous smattering of place names, bringing into relation not only “the place written from and the place written to”, but also mythically and symbolically significant places which extend both the poet’s imagination and levels of meaning within the poems.<sup>11</sup> ‘Beyond Howth Head’, as is explained in the notes at the end of the original version, “was conceived as a letter, from Dublin, to a friend [the novelist, Jeremy Lewis] in London”. It is an apt title for a poem that casts its gaze across the entire northern hemisphere, taking in Cheltenham, Birnam

Wood, North Wales, Denmark, the Cyclades, Russia, Cambodia, Tōyama, Kyoto, Cape Cod, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, along with other more specific Irish locales.

Likewise, ‘The Sea in Winter’, addressed to the Irish poet and translator, Desmond O’Grady, looks first to the Mediterranean (O’Grady taught in Egypt for two years) before venturing to various elsewhere, all the while returning repeatedly to particular Irish settings, as though Ireland, in Mahon’s imagination, serves as an inescapable touchstone.

But this place naming also imposes on the poem an unsparing view of Ireland as just another place on an atlas; “It might be anywhere”, as he writes in ‘A Lighthouse in Maine’ (THBN 43-44). ‘Beyond Howth Head’ elicits a dual perspective on the peripatetic instability of calling anywhere ‘home’. On the one hand he describes his fascination with being intractably drawn to a single point in space:

Centripetal, the hot world draws  
its children in with loving claws  
from rock and heather, rain and sleet  
with only Kosangas for heat  
and spins them at the centre where  
they have no time to now despair.

On the other hand there is a constant implication of centrifugal detachment that drives him away from Ireland every time he pauses to contemplate it. These verse letters both focus attention on and divert attention away from Ireland as the point of the poetry’s origin. Local perspectives dissolve into a more global perspective before once more returning us, breathless and dizzy, to Mahon’s meditations on the forging of national identity.

‘Beyond Howth Head’ opens with an image of words carried by the wind:

The wind that blows these words to you  
 bangs nightly off the black-and-blue  
 Atlantic, hammering in its haste  
 dark doors of the declining west...

Words-as-birds (or vice versa) is a comparatively familiar figure in Mahon’s poetry. In ‘The Poet in Residence (after Corbière)’ (P 103-6), for example, page and sky are conflated to convey language’s insubstantial flimsiness:

The sun rose; he gazed at his letter,  
 Laughed and then tore it up...

The little bits of white  
 Looked, in the mist, like gulls in flight.

We see it again in ‘The Banished Gods’ (TSP 30-31), where “birds sing with a noise like paper tearing”. Breath and wind are equated in ‘The North African Campaign’ (TSP 17) – “A light wind touches the dust / Of my confidence and dismay / And is almost like voices” – while “windfall” is synonymous with “silence” in ‘The Antigone Riddle’ (TSP 16). Words carried on the wind like birds do not always, however, indicate liberty or an outpouring of emotion. In ‘The Sea in Winter’ words fly like an arrow only to dictate a hope for release from entrapment and to bring about change:

For I am trapped as much as they  
 In my own idiom. One day,  
 Perhaps, the words will find their mark

And leave a brief glow on the dark,  
 Effect mutations of dead things  
 Into a form that nearly sings,  
 Or a quiescent desuetude –  
 Indolence more than attitude.

In each of these cases, a debt of gratitude is due to Auden who, in New Year Letter, depicts a similar scene to that in ‘Beyond Howth Head’, although Auden makes it clear that he hopes to find a wider audience:

This private minute for a friend,  
 Be the dispatch that I intend;  
 Although addressed to a Whitehall,  
 Be under Flying Seal to all  
 Who wish to read it anywhere,  
 And, if they open it, *En Clair*.

What all of these examples show is a mode of anxiety both for the poet’s audience and for his *craft*. The poet uses, manipulates and controls language but he can never take possession of it, language being too evasive and taking flight from the writer as soon as the pen is put to paper. Words flee from the poet and disappear, just like the birds of ‘Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc’. Their passage is assisted by the wind which, in ‘Beyond Howth Head’, grows in intensity. It gathers force and momentum as it swiftly changes from a friendly greeting (“blows”) to an insistent harbinger of something more sinister (“bangs”, “hammering”). And when Mahon pauses briefly to consider parenthetically the “lost townlands on the crumbling shores / of Europe”, we are

confronted with an entropic motif which permeates the poem. Terminality is prophesied and hardened by diction carefully chosen, albeit with an ironic nod towards cliché: “*fin de siècle*”, “blank pages of an empty book” (a satirical reference to what Mahon considers “Mallarmé’s noxious belief that the world came into existence in order to finish up between the covers of a book” – J 193), “the writing on the wall”, “Beckett’s bleak *reductio*”, “swan-sons” (surely a pun on ‘swan-song’). Meanwhile, the poem climaxes on a grim, apocalyptic note reminiscent of the end of Pope’s *Dunciad*:

and the moon rattles the lost stones  
among the rocks and the strict bones  
of the drowned as I put out the light  
on Mailer’s *Armies of the Night*.

This apprehension of finality reaches its zenith when Mahon writes of the usurpation of Celtic myth by Christianity:

I woke this morning (March) to hear  
church bells of Monkstown through the roar  
of waves round the Martello tower  
and thought of the swan-sons of Lir  
when Kemoc rang the Christian bell  
to crack a fourth-dimensional  
world-picture, never known again,  
and changed them back from swans to men.

It calls as oddly through the wild

eviscerations of the troubled  
 channel between us and North Wales  
 where Lycid's ghost for ever sails  
 (unbosomings of sea-weed, wrack,  
 industrial bile, a boot from Black-  
 pool, contraceptives deftly tied  
 with best regards from Merseyside)

and tinkles with as blithe a sense  
 of man's cosmic insignificance  
 who wrote his world from broken stone,  
 installed his Word-God on the throne  
 and placed, in Co. Clare, a sign:  
 'Stop here and see the sun go down'.

Meanwhile, for a word's sake, the plastic bombs go off around Belfast.

The destruction of ancient traditions, pollution of the sea, industrial carnage in the wake of capitalism, and sectarian violence (there is also a hint towards the American War of Independence in the allusion to crossing the Delaware) are all associated with the advent of organised religion. Even the stones on which are carved the Ten Commandments are "broken", as though the stones themselves are indicative of something fundamentally flawed, or even corrupt, at the heart of Christian morality. One of the causes of these problems is language itself, a fact reflected in the logocentricity of the "Word-God" who,

unlike the sceptical poet, values ethics more highly than aesthetics. All this is not so far removed from the Auden of New Year Letter who ascribes blame for the world's ills to the Protestant "Empiric Economic Man" who "found the key / To Catholic economy, / Subjected earth to the control / And moral choices of the soul". The machine economy described by Mahon, with its "vacuum cleaners, / empty Kosangas containers, / bread bins, car seats, crates of stout", has, as New Year Letter also argues, "replaced the bonds of blood and nation by a personal confederation of subjects whose loyalties are global, not local".<sup>12</sup> No longer attached by roots to one particular place, everyone has been left insular and isolated, the machine age having destroyed any sense of community.

Mahon takes the aesthetic, ethical and religious themes of New Year Letter and, like Auden, uses them to repeal the self-interested false consciousness of ideological discourses during a time of political upheaval ('Beyond Howth Head' was written shortly after the onset of the Troubles). But whereas the third part of New Year Letter takes the form of a metaphysical argument, explicating Auden's burgeoning acceptance of religious faith as ingress to a new kind of community, Mahon chooses inconclusively to parody Margaret Fuller's acceptance of the universe where we die, "as we dream, alone". He cannot allow himself to comply with the prescriptive strictures of religion, asking,

and who would trade self-knowledge for  
a prelapsarian metaphor,  
love-play of the ironic conscience  
for a prescriptive innocence?

The answer is, of course, no-one, or at least no-one who values individual freedom and the power to determine the course of their own lives. One interpretation of these elusive

lines might be to see the “prelapsarian metaphor” as the heavily ironised Word of God where the Word is a literal form of language untainted by figuration. The subsequent lines are even more opaque, unless Mahon intends play and prescription, conscience and innocence to constitute two pairs of antitheses designed to illustrate the necessity of entering into sin, rather than avoiding it, and an escape from religious dogma as guides to self-understanding. This may sound a long way removed from Auden’s Kierkegaardian ‘leap of faith’ into Christian belief, but each poet sees the necessity of freedom as a way of creating and solidifying the authentic self.

“Freedom dwells because it must, / Necessity because it can, / And men confederate in Man”, states Auden’s wish for a more democratic society, but it also speaks of the need to communicate. When Mahon claims that violence in Belfast might end “for a word’s sake”, he is identifying the root cause of sectarian violence as a problem of language rather than one of politics or religion. ‘Beyond Howth Head’ crystallises the difficulty, in Beckettian terms, of trying to express what may be inexpressible. The poem compounds the problem by using diction extracted from six languages (seven if we include the archaic spelling of Spenserian English): English, Latin, French, Irish Gaelic, German and Japanese. Foreign tags and names, quite apart from representing inexplicability and the quest for clarity, are ways of alienating a less erudite readership by refusing to adopt completely the language of one particular society. Even the two Gaelic phrases (“*aisling*” and “*cailín bán*”) are outweighed by seven expressions taken from other languages, thereby deflecting attention even further from the place of the poem’s origin. Admittedly, these are comparatively well-known phrases (“*joie de vivre*”, “*bourgeois*” and “*realpolitik*”, for example, have become familiar to

most English speakers), but the poem is engineered to overturn any demands made of the poet by the wider world through its inability to express simply in a single language Mahon's thoughts and feelings. The same device is noticeable throughout New Year Letter and 'Letter to Lord Byron' as Auden similarly struggles to phrase his ideas in ways that do not exceed the bounds of the poems' controlled structures. If anything, Auden's poems are less immediately comprehensible than Mahon's, employing some quite obscure diction taken from French and Latin as well as German and Italian. In this sense, both Auden and Mahon provide concrete evidence for Thomas Kinsella's argument that "pending the achievement of some total human unity of being, every writer in the modern world, since he can't be in all the literary traditions at once, is the inheritor of a gapped, discontinuous, polyglot tradition".<sup>13</sup> No other writer has given Mahon a greater sense of this polyglot inheritance than Auden, not even Beckett who was equally well-versed in several foreign languages.

Multi-lingualism is, however, only one aspect of Mahon's and Auden's attempts to reinforce the seriousness of light verse. Writing of the tensions between poet and audience, and between poetry and society, Auden makes several important statements, some of which have already been touched upon but require further comment:

Lightness is a great virtue, but light verse tends to be conventional, to accept the attitudes of the society in which it is written. The more homogeneous a society, the closer the artist is to the everyday life of his time, the easier it is for him to communicate what he perceives, but the harder for him to see honestly and truthfully, unbiased by the conventional responses of his time. The more unstable a society, and the more detached

from it the artist, the clearer he can see, but the harder it is for him to convey it to others. In the greatest periods of English Literature, as in the Elizabethan period, the tension was at its strongest. The artist was still sufficiently rooted in the life of his age to feel in common with his audience, and at the same time society was in a sufficient state of flux for the age-long beliefs and attitudes to be no longer compulsive on the artist's vision (EA 364).

Following the collapse of the patronage system and the rise of Romanticism, Auden notes: "As the old social community broke up, artists were driven to the examination of their own feelings and to *the company of other artists*" (emphasis added) (EA 365). Finally, Auden complains that, "The problem for the modern poet, as for every one else to-day, is how to find or form *a genuine community*, in which each has his valued place and can feel at home...For poetry which is at the same time light and adult can only be written in a society which is both integrated and free" (emphasis added) (EA 367-68).

These statements add up to a manifesto for the production of light verse, its requisite political conditions and the existence of a ready-made audience. What Auden realised is that with poetry's increasing marginalisation and decreasing popularity, an audience composed of members of the wider world is not readily available. If the modern poet is to find a suitable audience it must be constructed from a community of other artists. Simply addressing his epistles to a single like-minded soul is insufficient; he must invoke the presence of precursors and contemporaries who will share his interests, ideas and preoccupations. Throughout his verse letters he names a formidable arsenal of other artists, both living and dead, whose presence both confers authority on his own work and

provides him with a natural audience. In the first part alone of ‘Letter to Lord Byron’ he calls on, among others, A.E. Housman, Jane Austen, Joyce, Chaucer, Belloc, Lawrence and Hemingway, while in New Year Letter we encounter an even greater number, mainly in the third part, including Mozart, Edmund Burke, Luther, Blake, Kierkegaard, Rousseau, Baudelaire, Edward Lear, Plato, Wagner, Kafka, Henry James, and Zola. These are only some of the “great masters who have shown mankind / An order it has yet to find”, artists whose lasting legacy to artistic order is something Auden is keen to share in and maybe even become part of.

New Year Letter was written between January and April 1940 when Auden had gone to America, abandoning England to the perils of war. Similarly, ‘Beyond Howth Head’ was written not long after the outbreak of sectarian violence in Belfast. Each poem was composed against a backdrop of social instability at a time when, in accordance with Auden’s remarks, both poets were sufficiently detached from the immediate political situations and could see their respective situations clearly while experiencing difficulty communicating their concerns and ideas to others. Light verse permits Mahon the freedom to share his concerns with an audience of his own choosing. The internationalism of the poem’s diction and list of names – both people and places – extends his chosen aesthetic community beyond the confines of Kavanagh-like parochialism. Beckett, Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Lenin, Chomei, Thoreau, Spenser, Margaret Fuller, and Norman Mailer are all name-checked in the poem, while a variety of quotes and allusions indicate the quiet presence of Shakespeare, Chateaubriand (“*l'outre-tombe*”), Voltaire, the unknown ninth-century author of ‘The End of Clonmacnois’, Joyce, Pope, Arnold and, significantly, Auden himself (“we are changed by what we

change’). All this free association of places and writers imitates Auden’s practice of citing an inventory of “great masters” as a sort of tribunal who sit poised to deliver their verdicts on Auden’s and Mahon’s own poetic achievements.

In each of these epistles, poetry is shown to comprise a plethora of voices filtering through the past into the modern world as if to say that poetry is little more than a palimpsestic process of re-transmission, every poet adding to all that has gone before through imitation. Robert Lowell has described this process accurately as “one voice running through many personalities, contrasts and repetitions”, where voice is defined by a quality of “tone”.<sup>14</sup> If the plurality of linguistic diversions contained in ‘Beyond Howth Head’ and New Year Letter takes centre stage in the dramatisation and mockery of national identity, then the polyphony of voices found in these poems serves to remind us, as did Beckett, that personal identity is to some extent inherited from others.

New Year Letter is divided into three sections which are generally regarded as interrelated meditations, derived from Kierkegaard, on aesthetics, ethics and religion. Mahon takes a line from Part Two of Auden’s poem – “we are changed by what we change” – and relates it to his self-deprecating evaluation of the poet’s craft. When applied to the making of poetry, Auden’s maxim carries serious implications for Mahon’s search for authenticity. Authenticity must spring from within the self – as Mahon makes clear in ‘Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc’ – making the poet, or any individual striving for authenticity for that matter, responsible for self-change. Self-deprecation and depreciation of the value of poetry are nothing new in Mahon’s work, but part of this attitude stems from Auden. Expressing his concerns for poetry as a utilitarian art form, Mahon says, “I’m not convinced of the value of poetry...Poetry is a craft, but

not one that provides something useful for the community.”<sup>15</sup> Mahon’s inability to reconcile the act of creation with providing a socially useful service boils down to an understandable lack of trust in the poet’s role in a hostile society. If poetry is unimportant as far as the wider world is concerned, then so must the poet be. The litany of voices provided by the fellow artists invoked in these verse letters threatens to submerge those of Mahon’s and Auden’s, making the quest for authenticity an even greater struggle. Each is faced with anonymity as the burden of the past buries them beneath a weight of expectation neither feels they can live up to.

In New Year Letter, Auden voices a view of art that expresses this very concern. In Part One he describes an aesthetic agenda belonging more to a distant past than to the present:

For art had set in order sense  
And feeling and intelligence,  
And from its ideal order grew  
Our local understanding too.

To set in order – that’s the task  
Both Eros and Apollo ask;  
For Art and Life agree in this  
That each intends a synthesis,  
That order which must be the end  
That all self-loving things intend  
Who struggle for their liberty,

Who use, that is, their will to be.

There is an overwhelming suggestion here of the Nietzschean dialectic between life and art that contains an underlying unity resulting in the ‘will to power’. As an expression of the fundamental nature of life, art has value only to the degree that it assists in the practical tasks of living. By setting Eros, rather than Dionysus, in conjunction with Apollo, Auden implies that love has the ecstatic artistic power to call into existence the world of phenomena, while the power to transfigure that world belongs to the lyric poet. The Apollonian relates to the ethical and social consequences of modes of consciousness, while Eros provides a potent adjunct to the civilising effects of Apollonian opposition to barbarism. But the rage for order that would bring art and life into a synthetic harmony is, in the modern world, far from achievable. Auden recognises that “Art is not life and cannot be / A midwife to society”, and he is further forced to admit that order-through-art can neither forecast nor determine a model for living since art, as mimesis, only ever presents images of the past through “Already lived experience”. Moreover, artistic autonomy must be an illusion if it is derived from “convention”, while once “unique” artists now inhabit a “new field” where order is created not by the imagination but from the “abstract model” of science.

Mahon shares Auden’s fears for the future of art in ‘Ovid in Tomis’ (THBN 37-42), where he asks plaintively,

Are we truly alone  
With our physics and myths,  
The stars no more

Than glittering dust,  
 With no one there  
 To hear our choral odes?

Mahon's primary worry is that poetry will become extinct, killed off by the unfeeling forces of science and materialism. The stanzaic form of this poem is designed to convey the idea of rapid thought processes as though these short-lined triplets confirm the poet's apprehension of transience. The poet's need for brevity and concision is driven by a portent of his imminent extinction. His secondary concern – for poets themselves – betrays the fear that they will continue to write only to find that their work is becoming increasingly inaudible. His belief that life and art are coterminous, feeding off and into each other for the enrichment of both, comes under threat from the kind of social conditions that end in ignorance, hatred and violence; but this does not prevent him from bringing his imagination to bear on a world he perceives as chaotic and terminal, to produce a tentative sense of order:

Somewhere beyond  
 The scorched gable end  
 And the burnt-out  
 Buses there is a poet indulging his  
 Wretched rage for order –

Or not as the  
 Case may be, for his  
 Is a dying art,

An eddy of semantic scruple

In an unstructurable sea. ('Rage for Order', L 22-23)

We have already encountered the Camusian dimension of this poem, but on another level, equally ironic though more Audenesque, it shows the poet as wholly detached, inhabiting a distant elsewhere "far / From his people", while drawing upon "Germinal ironies" in an attempt – itself ironic – to re-establish and "build up / With a desperate love" an imaginative order that might provide a suitable riposte to the self-inflicted fragmentation of his community. But it is a doomed enterprise and Mahon castigates the poet's "Grandiloquent and / Deprecating" posture as an ineffectual "rhetorical / Device". The poem is plagued by doubt about the artistic enterprise, and the words "indulging" and "Wretched" provide sufficient evidence of "the poet's guilt that poetry by definition is not enough".<sup>16</sup> Positioned at "his high window", the poet seems too far removed from the world to really come terms with Stevens's dictum, "It is life that we are trying to get at in poetry."<sup>17</sup> But this is precisely the point that Mahon, ever the ironist, is reinforcing by situating his poet as an anxious, silent observer who is powerless to effect change through his art. Poetry is unable to speak against the social and historical forces which hold it to ransom, and so it can only keep a silent vigil and wait to be set free. As 'Rage for Order' makes clear, the poet operates at one remove from both the inhabitants of the city and the culture of violence permeating it. Subsequently, Mahon's poetry does not so much try to 'get at life' as expose the culture of violence that constitutes only one mode of life, a mode that is hostile to another, more life-affirming mode which embraces the activities of the artist. Poetry cannot frame or encapsulate this hostile mode – it can only describe its

effects in such a way as to offer the faint hope that the poet and his audience might find a more worthwhile life elsewhere.

Mahon shares with Auden an existential temperament that posits choice as a compulsory fact of existence, and where will, decisions, and accepting the consequences of those decisions are central to being free. This position extends itself into the Heideggerian realm of ‘dwelling’ and defining what is meant by ‘home’. Auden’s ‘In War Time’ (EA 460-61) contains a phrase that Mahon, ever conscious of his own isolation, has borrowed and adapted for two poems, ‘A Garage in Co. Cork’ (THBN 55-56) and ‘A Lighthouse in Maine’ (THBN 43-44). Auden’s poem describes home in terms of the freedom to choose; it is “A sort of honour, not a building site, / Wherever we are, when, if we chose right, we might / Be somewhere else, yet trust that we have chosen right”. In Mahon’s hands, “we might / Be somewhere else” is transformed into “We might be anywhere”, diluting the possibility of ever finding a freely-chosen fixed abode into a vague notion of involuntary displacement or enforced migration. Mahon’s proclivity for ranging widely across geographical boundaries and terrains destabilises thoughts of geographical rootedness as intrinsic to personal identity. For Auden, the figure of the wandering exile provides a way of exploring the “opportunity for poetic self-assessment and self-positioning inside the canon of English literature...Geographical displacement is used for asserting rather than unsettling cultural and personal identity.”<sup>18</sup> Mahon similarly envisions the quest motif as a chance to assert self-definition in terms of his poetic achievement. But whereas Auden – at least in ‘Letter to Lord Byron’ and up to his departure for America – asserts his Englishness with something approaching pride, Mahon uses displacement merely to accept his nationality. His is more a poetry of

compulsive searching, exploring and chronicling the political, cultural and social history of his people as a way of understanding the relationship between man and environment, and how consciousness might be shaped by that relationship. As a result, Mahon's imaginative comings and goings reflect on national identity as a feature of destiny – unavoidable but not something whose value cannot still be scrutinised and questioned. He finds rootedness elsewhere, in the world of art.

Mahon's poems shine an interrogation lamp in the face of poetry. In a commentary on 'Courtyards in Delft' (THBN 9-10), John Goodby describes admirably Mahon's aesthetic sensibility as in one sense a response to violence:

In a Leavisite/New Critical sense, the purpose of the poem – any poem – is to achieve rich and ironic ambiguity and 'tension', productive of proper balance, and this is best served by hinting at, rather than spelling out, the violence inherent in the 'morally ambiguous position' Mahon explores... Like all of Mahon's best poems, then, this one asks questions about its own perfection as an aesthetic object, although in doing so it has to invoke the violence it would oppose.<sup>19</sup>

In this poem, Mahon associates art with violence, presenting himself as "A strange child with a taste for verse, / While my hard-nosed companions dream of war / On parched veldt and fields of rain-swept gorse". 'Beyond Howth Head' similarly finds Mahon wedged between a violence-ridden society and a world of beauty made private by its being ignored by a philistine public. But it is not only physical violence that is registered by the poem; Mahon is just as concerned with the violence perpetrated against art by the forces of popular culture. Three symbols in particular show the war between "The good,

the beautiful and the true" ("The Sea in Winter") and cultural barbarism. Firstly, Birnam Wood, the site of BBC television and radio transmitters, becomes the source of cultural decay. Described ironically by Mahon as "heliotropic", the light of art is bent away from, rather than towards this ancient site in the direction of "the radio sets" that litter the airwaves with "night music". (Mahon's often overlooked capacity for comedy is demonstrated in his reference to being "bored to tears" by Radio Telefís Éireann, colloquially known by its near-anagram, 'definite radio snore', which lampoons the idea of "*vox populi vox dei*"). Birnam Wood also forms part of the witches' prophecy in Macbeth as the means by which Macbeth will meet his downfall. So by conflating these two elements in a single image, Mahon cleverly establishes the tensions between high and popular art, and between physical and cultural violence. Secondly, we find an allusion to 'The End of Clonmacnois', a ninth-century poem that describes the Danish sacking of a major monastic seat of learning and speaks of foxes, "Gnawing at the guts of men".<sup>20</sup> Thirdly, and most notably, the mention of Anna Livia, the 'Spirit of the Liffey', frames a further tension between high aestheticism and the popular. This statue, personified by Joyce in Finnegans Wake as the archetypal mother-heroine, has been nicknamed by the local population as 'the floozy in the jacuzzi', but for Mahon it becomes a reminder of his own distress at the collapse of art and tradition:

where Anna Livia, breathing free,  
weeps silently into the sea,  
her small sorrows mingling with  
the wandering waters of the earth.

The suggestion here of Heraclitean flux denotes just how far popular culture has degenerated over the years (Shakespeare was, after all, considered popular in his time). That the statue is situated near the GPO in O'Connell Street, scene of the 1916 Rising, also tends to imply the idea of a running battle between lofty idealism and base popularity. Taken together, these three symbols illustrate the continual problem faced by light verse in general and the verse epistle in particular. Auden framed the tensions between *vox dei* and *vox populi* in totalitarian terms:

A society which was really like a good poem, embodying the aesthetic virtues of beauty, order, economy and subordination of detail to the whole, would be a nightmare of horror for, given the historical reality of actual men, such a society could only come into being through selective breeding, extermination of the physically and mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class kept out of sight in cellars.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, Mahon has adopted a more humane perspective, defining good poetry as “a paradigm of good politics – of people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level”.<sup>22</sup> “The ‘good poem’,” writes Elmer Andrews, “is opposed to fixity, entrenchment and political dogmatism; it demonstrates the possibility of fluidity, balance and resolution. Clearly, this is a position which comes under severe pressure in a period of political upheaval and social breakdown.”<sup>23</sup> In spite of the obvious differences between the attitudes held by Auden and Mahon, Mahon nevertheless seems to agree with Auden’s claim that lightness can only combine with seriousness in a society “which is both integrated and free” (EA 368). If this is the case, then the ability to communicate

ideas through the medium of the epistle is severely limited and leads inexorably towards the diminution of both self and poetry. This theme is re-addressed in ‘The Sea in Winter’.

#### **4.3 ‘The Sea in Winter’**

We have already seen how Camus’s presence inhabits ‘The Sea in Winter’, but Auden has played an equally strong role in establishing the poem’s methods and direction. In a change of tactic from ‘Beyond Howth Head’, where the addressee is not named directly until the eighth stanza, ‘The Sea in Winter’ opens with the correspondent’s name, a device that immediately invites the reader into the private world of the poet. Were it not for the poem’s dedication, ‘Beyond Howth Head’, whose first line ends with “you”, might be thought to speak (at least initially) to the reader: there is no such ambiguity surrounding the later poem. This primary address – “Desmond, what of the blue nights...?” – is certainly nostalgic, but whereas ‘Beyond Howth Head’ perpetually looks back to the past, ‘The Sea in Winter’ gazes forward into a nightmarish vision of the future where cultish ritual continues in spite of the universe threatening to collapse in on itself: “From door to door the Ormo van / Delivers, while the stars decline”. A similar note is struck in ‘Letter to Lord Byron’, where Auden’s fear for the future focuses on technological advancement:

Preserve me from the Shape of Things to Be;  
 The high-grade posters at the public meeting,  
 The influence of art on industry,  
 The cinemas with perfect taste in seating;  
 Preserve me, above all, from central heating.

It may be D.H. Lawrence hocus-pocus,  
But I prefer a room that's got a focus.

But for all this, Auden's distaste for new-fangled gadgetry, the national grid, and Aertex underwear is delivered in too jokey a manner – the poem "prefers to delight rather than teach" – to be considered a wholly serious condemnation of the modern world.<sup>24</sup> Its portrayal and mockery of the absurd is closer to a description of life's silliness and inconsequentiality than it is to an exposition on existential dread. In contrast, Mahon's poem is all but bereft of outright comedy, although his characteristic wit is still in evidence.

As we have already seen in the chapter on Camus, the Irish north and the Mediterranean represent far more for Mahon than simply contrasting topographies; they stand for polarised states of mind that bring into sharp relief different attitudes and value systems. While the Mediterranean nights are "calescent", Portstewart is "cold" and "frosty", its only illumination provided by the artificial neon fluorescence of promenade shops. The poem thus gestures towards Arnold's 'Dover Beach', which contrasts "this distant northern sea" with Sophocles's Aegean and concludes that, "the Sea of Faith has ebbed, leaving the human subject stranded on the shore in postmodern disenchantment".<sup>25</sup> 'Beyond Howth Head' makes the same gesture, closing on Mahon's "*Dover Beach / scenario*" where he is to be found reading Norman Mailer's Armies of the Night, a novel which takes its title from the final line of Arnold's poem. A powerful link associates 'Beyond Howth Head', 'The Sea in Winter', 'Dover Beach', and New Year Letter: in each case the poet makes a point of criticising the provincialism, sectarianism and utilitarian materialism of their respective home countries. Looking out

across the sea towards a Europe whose cultural golden age was in decline, all of these poems divert attention away from their points of origin in imitation of their authors' migratory, wandering lives, searching for a form of stability. Mahon's Ulster and the England of Arnold and Auden are portrayed as philistine nations devoid of the intellectual curiosity they feel is more likely to be found on the continent.

In the tradition of English poetry, as well as in Auden's beloved Nordic myths, the north represents the dwelling place of evil forces. 'Letter to Lord Byron' comically ironises the north as "never...your cup of tea; / 'Moral' you thought it so you kept away". But as we shall soon see, Mahon also finds a strange affinity with the thoughts of Jung for whom the north "is associated with isolated, even malign, intellect", while the south represents "feeling submerged in unconsciousness".<sup>26</sup> By looking south to the Mediterranean from his northern viewpoint, Mahon makes an appeal to the south in its capacity as "an agent of emotional healing, capable of restoring harmony between intellect and feeling" in much the same way as Auden, in 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', describes poetry that "flows on south" as a way of surviving.<sup>27</sup>

'The Sea in Winter' takes the form of a searching dialectic, alternating between the specifically northern Irish littoral and the more general environs of the middle east. Originating in the Coleraine triangle, it makes return journeys to the contemporary settings of northern Greece, a Cycladic island, and the Hebrides, along with more antiquated destinations such as Nineveh, Tyre and Damascus, before finally coming to rest on a northern beach. (One more specifically named place, the Harbour Bar, may, like Ward's Irish pub mentioned in 'Beyond Howth Head', be another of Mahon's old drinking holes.) Another similarity with the earlier epistle is found in the cacophony of

voices we hear throughout the poem as it names or refers to Ibsen, Thomas Mann, Pindar, Wallace Stevens, St. Paul, Dante, Botticelli, Matthew Arnold (again), and Auden (again).<sup>28</sup> The poem is helpfully glossed by one of Mahon's prose pieces, 'The Coleraine Triangle', which illuminates many of the poem's more obscure references. Here, Mahon skims over his unhappy tenure at the University of Ulster in favour of describing the local inhabitants, his view across the North Channel to Islay and Jura, and the political tensions that plague these small, comparatively isolated northern towns. As Mahon tells us in the essay, there is a religious split between the mainly Protestant Portrush (where the "RUC rules") and the "more Catholic" Portstewart (J 218). One of the final stanzas of the poem contains the quotation (unacknowledged in the revised version), "Forsake the grey skies for the blue". This comes from a piece of graffiti that Mahon admires "because of its weird poetry": "*We shall never forsake the blue skies of Ulster for the grey skies of an Irish Republic*" (J 218). Mahon likes it because "it throws an interesting light on the Ulster Protestant pathology" (J 219), a pathology in which seems to be contained something of Wallace Stevens's metaphorical equating of the colour blue with the imagination. The poem opens with a succession of references to blue and some of its various shades:

Desmond, what of the blue nights,  
 The ultramarines and violets  
 Of your white island in the south,  
 'Far shining star of dark-blue earth',  
 And the boat-lights in the tiny port  
 Where we drank so much retsina?

The quotation from Pindar's 'Processional Song on Delos' is deceptive, as is the Mediterranean setting, for as the poem later makes clear Mahon is actually making a cleverly concealed plea for the inhabitants of Ulster to put aside their prejudices and grievances and retrieve their creative, imaginative impulses. He describes the Coleraine triangle as "*Un beau pays mal habité*", but goes on to offer hope for the future if a new beginning could only be acceded to:

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'.

This stanza is in danger of sinking under the sheer weight of optimistic quotations and allusions, calling on the aforementioned Protestant graffito, St. Paul's conversion to Christianity on the road to Damascus, a line from Thoreau's Walden (itself a treatise on individualism, the potential of the self, and the creative spirit), and a reference (via an inversion of Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith') to Auden's 'Leap Before You Look' (ACP 313-14). But optimism – or rather its ironical surfeit – is what finally keeps it afloat. The Auden / Kierkegaard reference privileges intuition and belief, of which optimism is a variety, over reason. Optimism becomes affiliated with chance and risk-taking as a way of fending off bland conformity. Auden's poem begins, "The sense of danger must not

disappear”, and this sentiment is continued by Mahon’s strident refusal to accept the easy life: “To find the narrow road to the deep / North”. Meanwhile, the graffito is deployed ironically as a hopeful message of unification rather than a call to arms in the name of sectarianism. The graffito becomes an appeal to a creative Protestant consciousness that now lies dormant, overwhelmed by and submerged beneath prejudice, hatred and violence. Taking a line from Stevens’s ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’, Mahon calls on harmony to overturn the province’s disorder: ““Ghostlier demarcations, keener / Sounds’ are needed more than ever”.

‘The Sea in Winter’ follows Auden’s advice that verse letters provide a poetic response to social and political conditions. The speaker’s lonely solitude, cast in “the grim, arthritic coasts / Of the cold north”, gives vent to a voice that imposes imagined colour on an austere, monochromatic landscape where “long winter months” leave the speaker “crying out for the sun”. John Byrne has observed this quality in a number of Mahon’s poems, reflecting the poet’s emotional state as one determined by an oppressive physical landscape. The topography is impenetrable, defying attempts by the probing poetic mind to see through its inscrutable and unchanging surface. In ‘Afterlives’ (TSP 1-2), a poem written three years before ‘The Sea in Winter’, Mahon uses the same colour imagery as the graffito to denote the political tensions of his home city: “But the hills are still the same / Grey-blue above Belfast”. Byrne comments on “the insistent tension in Mahon’s work, generally, between the colourful observable world of ordinary life and the interiorised landscape which is characteristically oppressive and neutral”.<sup>29</sup> We see further evidence of this in ‘The Snow Party’ (TSP 8), where a microcosmic picture of a society is hemmed in by a monochrome landscape that prevents perception of the world

beyond. The façade of civilised behaviour – “There is a tinkling of china / And tea into china, / There are introductions” – soon gives way to the party crowding the window to observe the falling snow which, eventually, will neutralise the outside world. Using a cinematic, perspective-shifting technique similar to that of Auden’s ‘Consider’, the poem then draws away from the narrow enclosure of the party to show that this apparent civility is not a global phenomenon: “Elsewhere they are burning / Witches and heretics / In the boiling squares”.

‘The Snow Party’ calls to mind Auden’s ‘The Fall of Rome’ (ACP 332-33), with its shared panoramic sense of desolation that reaches across history to implicate contemporary society in the insecurities of the past (both poems are written in the present tense). Mahon’s poem, which ends, “But there is silence / In the houses of Nagoya / And the hills of Ise”, contains an echo of Auden’s final stanza:

Altogether elsewhere, vast  
Herds of reindeer move across  
Miles and miles of golden moss,  
Silently and very fast.

Each poem projects a montage of collapse based on failed leadership that eclipses Auden’s vision of natural fecundity and regeneration. While Auden writes of “the muscle-bound Marines” who “Mutiny for food and pay” while “Caesar’s bed is warm”, Mahon, in lines reminiscent of ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’, comments on the logical outcome of social decline: “Thousands have died since dawn / In the service / Of barbarous kings”. Neither poem contains any sign of personal reference, and their subsequent detachment contributes to the feeling that for both Mahon and Auden social

collapse is “curious and unexpected rather than cataclysmic or horrific”.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, there is something fundamentally absurd regarding the formal impersonality of the snow party and the indolence of Auden’s clerk who, anxiously benumbed by his job, “writes I DO NOT LIKE MY WORK / On a pink official form”. The clerk, like the snow party, is frozen into inactivity by a lack of both self-examination and creativity. They all possess the herd mentality of sheep: the clerk does what he is told while the party follow each other to the window. Such blind acceptance of social conditions and conditioning destroys individualism and enslaves the one to the many.

A remarkably similar situation is formulated by ‘The Sea in Winter’. Here, the many are portrayed as “souls in torment” who,

are most of life, and not  
 The laid-back metropolitan lot,  
 The ‘great’ photographer and the hearty  
 Critic at the cocktail party.

Again we can detect a trace of Auden’s ‘Consider’, which similarly contrasts the fortunes of the hedonistic bourgeoisie with those of the working class who reflect Mahon’s “own condition”. The rapid augmentation of desolate, ominously portentous images – dying winds, dying sea-weed, dying tides, dying stars – projects a gruesome picture of abject ruination, of nature experiencing the gross indignity of being snuffed out “while the stars decline”. Mahon takes little comfort from the knowledge that man and nature are impotent against the tide of political history:

The sea in winter, where she walks,  
 Vents its displeasure on the rocks.

The something rotten in the state  
 Infects the innocent. The spite  
 Mankind has brought to this infernal  
 Backwater destroys the soul;  
 It creeps into the daily life,  
 Sunders the husband from the wife.

Mahon's mythical view of the sea as the supreme force in nature casts it in the role not only of boundary and void but also of transporter of the fertile imagination. This is in marked contrast to Auden's malevolent attitude towards the sea, described in The Enchafèd Flood:

The sea, in fact, is that state of barbaric vagueness and disorder out of which civilization has emerged and into which, unless saved by the effort of gods and men, it is always liable to relapse. It is so little of a friendly symbol that the first thing which the author of the Book of Revelation notices in his vision of the new heaven and earth at the end of time is that 'there was no more sea'.<sup>31</sup>

Mahon has often displayed an attitude similar to Auden's, especially when writing of the "conspiring seas" ('Glengormley', NC 5), which "serve at once as defining boundary and an insistent reminder of the other", or of the "wrapped-up bourgeoisie" who have become "Hardened by wind and sea" ('North Wind: Portrush', THBN 12-13).<sup>32</sup> But just as frequently he regards the sea as a positive, life-enhancing force that stands as a metaphor for creativity and the workings of the isolated poetic mind. In 'Midsummer' (P 84), the first of Mahon's 'Surrey Poems', the littoral is the arena of introspection and inspiration,

“where the quietest waves / will break...when the people have gone home”, while ‘The Sea in Winter’ posits meditation on the sea as “the redemptive enterprise”.

If art poses the problem of justifying existence in the face of absurdity and terror of the void (*à la* Beckett), then redemption is the affirmation of life. To restore the value of art in a world where both it and the artist are constantly bombarded with indifference or even enmity, is to restore the value of life and to redeem life from its descent into barbarism and egocentric hedonism. One answer to this descent might be forged through an appeal to religion, but this will not serve Mahon’s purpose at all since religion is, to some degree, founded on principles of asceticism. ‘The Sea in Winter’ satirises the ethos of self-imposed deprivation, casting a passing glance at “the convent wall”, but it is in ‘Beyond Howth Head’ where Mahon makes a particularly scathing attack on religious eremeticism, writing of “that tight-arsed, convent-bred disdain / the whole wide world knows nothing of”. Associated with the static traditionalism of Yeats’s hill-men, such an oppressive regimen can only be conquered by a liberating *aisling* that sets the mind free from the fruitless solitude experienced by religious ascetics whose lives are divorced from the *vita practica*. But there is also a danger that philosophical or poetic asceticism can likewise prove detrimental to the life-affirming poet since melancholia is a symptom of withdrawal from the world. Mahon’s question in ‘The Sea in Winter’, “Why am I always staring out / Of windows, preferably from a height?”, expresses the isolated poet’s conundrum. For while the splenetic initial line seems to indicate that the privileged, theoptic perspective is preordained by the poet’s vocation or destiny, the word “preferably” suggests that the assumption of such a lofty position is determined by choice. (This is also a central theme in Auden, especially his early work: “As the hawk

sees it or the helmeted airman" (ACP 61) details the same privileged elevation.) Where, Mahon seems to be asking, does the poet actually stand in relation to both his audience and his art? How can the artist redeem his art and his life if his calling is not a matter of will? If the pursuit of art is a freely taken choice, then how can the artist resolve his isolation other than by reneging on art? These are important questions, but they are destined to remain unanswered.

Mahon nevertheless appears to suggest a way around these difficulties through an idea propounded by Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, individuation is redeemed through the Apollonian principle of beauty, and the phenomenal world is likewise redeemed by being experienced aesthetically. Mahon postulates a possible solution during the course of two otherwise unremarkable stanzas in terms that relate directly to his experience of the sea. Through cleverly manipulated diction he describes a transformational aesthetic journey as it passes through the egotistical sublime with its incumbent clichés ("The creamy seas and turbulent skies / Race in the bloodstream where they pass"), through the picturesque ("A fine view may console the heart"), until finally reaching a transcendental vision of the beautiful ("Chaste winter-gardens of the sea / Glimmering to infinity"). Returning always to the sea, Mahon retains the mystery at the core of the sea's noumenal existence without offering either an alternative to ritualistic or politicised religion, or recourse to orthodox theology. In this sense, 'The Sea in Winter' shifts away from the idea contained in 'Beyond Howth Head' that sin provides a route towards self-understanding since Christian redemption is itself anchored in notions of sin and guilt, which in turn represent self-abasement and self-loathing. From the elevated vantage point on his coastal hinterland, Mahon is poised between "spiritual lack and need".<sup>33</sup> But he distrusts any

notion of a messiah sent to lead the way to a promised land. The photographers of ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’, for example, are deprived of their messianic potential because no redemption is forthcoming. The poem closes with the mushrooms temporally suspended in a permanent ‘now’, any hope of epistemological certainty having been deprived them by the photographers’ immobility and their “light meter”.

Auden had, in the early 1930s, claimed that “a redemptive poet could release mankind”, but this view was eventually (and wisely) rejected because it falsely propagated the concept of the poet as messianic hero.<sup>34</sup> A number of poems from this period that endorsed this view were eliminated by Auden from his corpus, and by 1936 he had almost completely abandoned Freud, Marx and Homer Lane as his guides to redemption. He eventually looked instead to the great artists of the past to authorise his profession (and Auden was certainly a professional, writing to order and turning his hand to journalism, criticism, occasional pieces, libretti and plays with almost equal aplomb). Edward Callan has suggested that Auden’s pantheon was chosen more for psychological reasons than for poetic ones: “Freud supplied a cast of characters; Auden invented a poetic vehicle”, implies that Freudian case studies provided a way for Auden to unlock his own anxieties regarding artistic precursors, while the verse letter became a form of self-analysis.<sup>35</sup>

This poetry-as-therapy theory could equally apply to ‘The Sea in Winter’ where Mahon self-mockingly describes the painful, continual process of recovery from alcoholism:

Also the prodigal son in *Ghosts*,  
Back on the grim arthritic coasts

Of the cold north, where I found myself  
 Unnerved, my talents on the shelf,  
 Slumped in a deckchair, full of pills,  
 While light died in the choral hills –  
 On antabuse and mogadon  
 Recovering, crying out for the sun.

Mahon sees his disease as a form of insanity where his mind and senses inhabit a twilight world that associates the poet with the madman. He is defined by marginality, both rejected by and seeking freedom from society. Madness and the sea have long been associated in European culture: Bosch's fifteenth-century painting, The Ship of Fools, represents in graphic detail the customary relation between madness and embarkation, for instance.<sup>36</sup> Madness is the condition of excess, whether it be an excess of imagination or of alcohol. It is itself a schizophrenic condition, simultaneously inexplicable in rational terms as something beyond the reach of the mind, and wholly explicable as a delusional state ascribable to psychosocial prior causes. Writing of Foucault's exegesis on madness, Roy Boyne describes this division as being "between the Other and the Same, between the transcendental and the empirical, between the sublime and the mundane, between fear and control, and ultimately perhaps between the bright hope of difference and the monotony of bourgeois reason".<sup>37</sup> Each of these antinomies figure in 'The Sea in Winter' to some extent: the Other could be O'Grady, the "roving gangs" or the RUC, all of whom are either complicit in or a threat to Mahon's sense of security, while the Same is identified as the pantheon of artists; the transcendental is the "Elusive dawn epiphany" while the empirical is the "familiar sea"; the sublime is the "creamy seas and turbulent

skies" while the mundane is "a cat knocking over a milk bottle"; fear manifests itself in "crying out for the sun" while control is shaped by the poem itself; difference is posed by the poet's isolation while the monotony of bourgeois reason, a scientific concept designed to combat excess and restore the Aristotelian 'Golden Mean' of right behaviour, is designated by the unemotional "equilibrium" of poetry-as-craft which requires "A cold eye and deliberate hands". Mahon's purpose here seems to be to provide an ironical riposte to Yeats's injunction that poets learn their trade since poetry, as "a deliberate exercise", tends to negate the emotional spontaneity of inspiration and the ability to create order from the chaos of words.

Auden's attitude towards the sea is founded on notions of order and chaos, and it veers between covert admiration and outright hatred stemming from a preoccupation with poetic shape that contrasts with the formlessness of the sea. For Auden, the sea represents isolation, violence, terror and "living barbarism"; but it is also a "symbol of potentiality" and a place of freedom "from both the evils and responsibilities of communal life".<sup>38</sup> He deploys the image of the sea as a "metaphor for the inexpressible historical world" where poetic order is set against the chaos of political and cultural conditions.<sup>39</sup> In other words, poetry is a rational way of bringing order to the emotional flux engendered by the sea. But for Mahon, poetry is itself a form of 'madness' and as such it offers an alternative to the reign of reason, science, and Keatsian "cold philosophy".<sup>40</sup> Because freedom is associated with solitude, quest, artistic inspiration, and death, it comes as no surprise when Mahon identifies with the mentally over-stimulated and imaginatively overwhelmed painter who, in 'Van Gogh among the Miners' (NC 19), must travel south to "paint what I have seen", or with the murdered "mad bastard" of 'As It Should Be' (L

25) who is figured as the ostracised, sacrificial artist unable to find a suitable place in “a world with method in it”. In this world, unfettered rationalism clashes headlong with poetic inspiration and fleeting visions of truth. Mahon emulates the Wanderer persona who inhabits many of Auden’s early poems as the physically isolated man on a quest for a semblance of order. Measuring his own sanity against the lunatic, Mahon is on the verge of suffering the same fate as Van Gogh, whose “dying light of faith” prognosticates rejection of the psychological restraints and conventions of the metropolis and the subsequent descent into madness. Early Auden would have considered this descent a psychosomatic attempt to repress the creative impulse. In ‘1929’ (ACP 45-49), Auden describes the vexed thoughts of “the frightened soul” who, “insecure” with his place in the world, confronts life as the “finer perception of the mad and ill”. The creative mind is quashed as “the loud madman / Sinks...into a more terrible calm”. This poem’s apocalyptic vision may even have provided the inspiration for the title of ‘The Sea in Winter’ and its juxtaposition of insanity, death and the sea:

Sea frozen buzzard flipped down the weir  
 And carried out to sea, leave autumn,  
 See winter, winter for earth and us,  
 A forethought of death that we may find ourselves at death  
 Not helplessly strange to the new conditions.

Mahon’s description of himself as “Unnerved, my talents on the shelf” – a pun, perhaps, on the underwater continental shelf that slopes towards the sea’s abyss – projects a sympathetic portrait of the artist in steep decline. From Desmond O’Grady’s perspective as addressee and friend it seems as though Mahon’s agonising recovery, in

conjunction with the poem's ironic attitude towards the value of poetry, finds a perfect analogue in Auden's lines about "A friend's analysis of his own failure, / Listened to at intervals throughout the winter / At different hours and in different rooms". Small wonder, then, that Mahon should feel like Tonio Kröger, the hero of Thomas Mann's novella that depicts the opposition between art and life. The focus of attention of Mann's story is the life of the artist himself as he faces the conflict between conformity and his intrinsic nature. The artist's vocation, his solitude, the quest for self-knowledge, the Schopenhauerian doctrine of art being the self-abnegation of the will as the end product of the will, and the realisation that "one must die to life in order to be utterly a creator": these are the themes of Mann's story and they provide a motif which runs through 'The Sea in Winter'.<sup>41</sup> Mahon's illness and his recovery from it form part of the pattern of growth into self-knowledge, which in turn brings awareness that the artistic life is necessarily solitary and peripheral. Such knowledge is marked by Mahon's self-deprecating tendency to question his role in life:

And all this time I have my doubts  
 About this verse-making. The shouts  
 Of souls in torment round the town  
 At closing time make as much sense  
 And carry as much significance  
 As these lines carefully set down.  
 All farts in a biscuit tin, in truth –  
 Faint cries, sententious or uncouth.

The echo of Auden's "frightened soul" captures the sense of separation and exile reflected in drunkenness: drinking, like the writing of poetry, can be a lonely, self-indulgent business designed to escape from and shut out the realities of the world, and one of the effects of drink is its ability to limit the power to communicate. In this stanza Mahon once again poses the now-familiar questions of whether or not poetry, as a form of expression, possesses intrinsic worth and whether it shares equal value with all other forms of expression, be they slurred, shouted or sworn. Certainly these questions are asked in an ironic voice, but they do formulate a genuine concern for poetry's continuation as a living mode of communication and as an escape from the technological determinism of "dream machinery". His theoptic viewpoint both posits a centre that is elsewhere and amplifies the millenarian anxiety that he and his art may still perish unfulfilled:

And will the year two thousand find  
 Me still at a window, pen in hand,  
 Watching long breakers curl on sand  
 Erosion makes for ever finer?

Auden had already described poetry as an ephemeral and ethereal artefact. Throughout his poetry and prose writings we meet examples of disparagement, aesthetic reticence, and a dispassionate reluctance to sing the praises of poetry, "this unpopular art" ('The Cave of Making (In Memoriam Louis MacNeice)', ACP 691-94), as a worthwhile endeavour. In stating that "Art is not enough", Auden is asserting both the greater importance of life and the necessity of confronting reality and his own true feelings.<sup>42</sup> Art may be the mirror which reflects reality but it is not reality itself. Hence poetry becomes

“a game of knowledge” where the notion of play precedes the discovery of truth and relies on an element of luck as well as skill, discipline and dedication.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Auden even goes as far as to define Art as “The most difficult game conceivable to man.”<sup>44</sup> In these situations there can be no overriding message: ideas are less important than either the emotions that accompany them or the manner in which those emotions are communicated. Auden’s condition is that of the ‘double man’ (the American title of New Year Letter), “oscillating insecurely between the attraction of Art for Art’s sake and the conviction that art is a mere game and irrelevant to the culminating moments in history”.<sup>45</sup> The first of these poles is reflected in the high-mindedness of New Year Letter, where the lofty poet is in danger of adopting the fraudulent “preacher’s loose immodest tone”; the second supposes poetry to be little more than a form of entertainment such as we find in ‘Letter to Lord Byron’:

Art, if it doesn’t start there, at least ends,  
 Whether aesthetics like the thought or not,  
 In an attempt to entertain our friends;  
 And our first problem is to realise what  
 Peculiar friends the modern artist’s got;  
 It’s possible a little dose of history  
 May help us in unravelling this mystery.

Auden’s condition illustrates “his repeated suspicion that Art can delight but not teach”.<sup>46</sup> His reluctance to take himself too seriously is a reminder of his conviction that art’s capacity for didacticism is severely limited. For Auden, the purpose of poetry is not to seek after one absolute, objective truth but to relate and share private feelings with an

audience who might find in those feelings some common ground. As he writes in an essay first published as the introduction to The Poet's Tongue, "Only when it throws light on our own experience...does poetry convince us of its significance. The test of a poet is the frequency and diversity of the occasions on which we remember his poetry" (EA 327-28). The secret of poetry's memorability and significance rests in its own diversity and the poet's ability to combine styles and methods in order to make repeated things seem new. In 'Letter to Lord Byron', he writes:

By all means let us touch our humble caps to

La poésie pure, the epic narrative;

But comedy shall get its round of claps, too.

According to his powers, each may give;

Only on varied diet can we live.

The pious fable and the dirty story

Share in the total literary glory.

Here we see the basis of Auden's attraction to light verse and the verse letter, for only impure poetry can permit the poet the necessary freedom to pull his audience's leg, to indulge his love of slapstick humour ("Just read *Don Juan* and I find it fine. / I read it on the boat to Reykjavik / Except when eating or asleep or sick"), or to express more serious considerations ("man's no centre of the universe"). Poetry, in other words, must be "democratic" and open to all (an idea Baudelaire and Mallarmé would have hated), and one of the ways the poet can realise this intention is through self-mockery.

Mahon has adopted this tendency towards self-ridicule with equal relish.

Although it is found in many of his earliest poems, it is most visible in his most

Audenesque collection, The Hunt by Night. A significant number of these poems question the value and efficacy of poetry: in ‘Courtyards in Delft’ (THBN 9-10), Mahon is “A strange child with a taste for verse” as though a love of poetry were somehow inexorably alien or even contemptible; in ‘North Wind: Portrush’ (THBN 12-13), “Prospero and his people never / Came to these stormy parts”; in ‘Rock Music’ (THBN 25), literature is “obsolete bumf”; the elitist position of ‘Another Sunday Morning’ (THBN 28-29) links millenarian priggishness with “The private kite of poetry”, which in turn becomes “A pure, self-referential act” that contrasts with the idle talk – “Their plangent conversational quack” – of ‘Girls on the Bridge’ (THBN 32-33); ‘Ovid in Tomis’ (THBN 37-42) sees Mahon as “Not poet enough / To make the connection”; and in ‘The Globe in North Carolina’ (THBN 61-63), the poet’s confusion is proverbially “A wood invisible for its trees”. But the collection’s title poem constitutes Mahon’s strongest assessment of poetry’s inability to act against dominant cultural forces. ‘The Hunt by Night’ (THBN 30-31) views the purpose of art as having been transformed over time from didactic utility to one that now adorns “nursery walls”. Inspired by Uccello’s painting, The Hunt in the Forest, the poem details the transformation of hunting as means of survival – “Where man the maker killed to live” – into an aristocratic pastime that has become “some elaborate / Spectacle put on for fun / And not for food”. The original viewers of the picture would have recognised certain symbolic associations, such as a paganistic allusion to Diana, the goddess of hunting (who receives a name-check in ‘The Sea in Winter’), and the hunt as a form of chivalric joust or tournament that also captures the courage and bravado of men in battle. But tracking a defenceless animal for sport is not the same as following “Swift flights of bison” in the search for food. Moreover,

where the earlier event was depicted on cave walls for the purpose of displaying the thing itself, Uccello's commissioned painting is an allegorical and highly stylised mimetic representation, a copy of a copy, and as such contains none of the authenticity found in the Neolithic paintings. The "mysteries" of Uccello's painting are "pleasant", containing little of the harsh reality of suffering endured by both men and beasts during stone-age hunts, while chivalric and heraldic diction – "courtly", "rampant", "pageantry" – provides an ironic comment on the ostensible civility of such bourgeois pursuits.

There is a striking resemblance between this poem and Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts' (ACP 179). Both poems share peculiar similarities – "slim dogs go / Wild with suspense" (Mahon); "the dogs go on with their doggy life" (Auden) – but beneath their linguistic surfaces there lies a more pressing concern with the normalising of suffering, as depicted in famous works of art, that mutates suffering into a tragic parody of existence. In both Brueghel's painting and Auden's poem, Icarus has high ambitions but crashes and burns while the reality of an indifferent world continues unabashed: personal tragedy is ignored by an uncaring society. Mahon similarly shows brutality to be an aspect of everyday life in certain quarters of society, and art's problem is that it cannot reconcile suffering and normality. Even Auden's beloved "Old Masters", who apparently knew all there is to know about the "human position" of suffering, are powerless to prevent its occurrence.

Likewise the poet. As Auden puts it in 'September 1, 1939' (EA 245-47), "All I have is a voice" (which is itself a reminder of Wilfred Owen's 'Preface' – "All a poet can do is warn"), albeit without knowing whether that voice will ever be heard, much less listened to.<sup>47</sup> But in 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' (ACP 247-49) he expands on this

position, stating, in a line quoted so frequently it has attained the status of cliché, “For poetry makes nothing happen”. This is, *prima facie*, a heartbreakingly desolate assertion, but a positive message emerges from it. The line is not always quoted in its entirety and critics often forget to include the last two words, “it survives”. Poetry is distanced from personal, pragmatic and utilitarian interests, since it is its own way of happening, by the sheer force of its continuing to exist. “The survival of poetry”, writes Rainer Emig,

lies in the very fact of its uneasy position between private and public, in its challenge to the reader to engage with it on its own terms. The ‘valley of its making’ is not so much the personality of an author as the realm of communication, signification, and discourse that determines both the poetic text and its interpretation. Only by an engagement with poetry on these terms does poetry become ‘A way of happening, a mouth’. It remains productive even – or exactly – after the death of its author.<sup>48</sup>

So poetry cannot change the world, especially not “Mad Ireland”, but as long as it has an audience – no matter how small – it still possesses enough residual, resonant power to inform, warn, persuade, or even instruct.

Mahon tends to be more sceptical of any notion of permanence, settling instead “for the struggle of searching and shaping, for it is only in the continual attempts to order and to question that the poet approaches meaning”.<sup>49</sup> Yet ‘The Sea in Winter’ ends on a surprisingly positive note, indicating a hint of potential spiritual rejuvenation:

In Botticelli’s strangely neglected  
Drawings for *The Divine Comedy*  
Beatrice and the rest proceed

Through a luminous geometry –  
Diagrams of that paradise  
Each has his vision of. I trace  
The future in a colour-scheme,  
Colours we scarcely dare to dream.

One day, the day each one conceives –  
The day the Dying Gaul revives,  
The day the girl among the trees  
Strides through our wrecked technologies,  
The stones speak out, the rainbow ends,  
The wine goes round among the friends,  
The lost are found, the parted lovers  
Lie at peace beneath the covers.

Meanwhile the given life goes on;  
There is nothing new under the sun.  
The dogs bark and the caravan  
Glides mildly by; and if the dawn  
That wakes us now should also find us  
Cured of our ancient colour-blindness...  
I who know nothing go to teach  
While a new day crawls up the beach.

The quotation from Ecclesiastes 1.9 implies that, as there is no longer anything new under the sun, then life without God is utterly futile.<sup>50</sup> Yet Mahon counters this in the final line: days are not, strictly speaking, anything new, but they do offer a new set of possibilities as regards the choices we make during the diurnal course of our lives. Free will is the foundation on which existentialism, the source of many of Auden's and Mahon's ideas, is built, and it is only through freedom that the individual can find redemption. Personal regeneration is the key to the Dantesque *vita nuova*: life begins afresh and emerges new from the sea, in a trope of evolution that refutes the Biblical creation myth. The example of Auden, like that of Beckett, re-affirms for Mahon the knowledge that freedom is not acquired through political activity or communal engagement; nor is freedom to be found "in the heat of the turbulent and blighted world of war, structuralist linguistics, decayed Georgian Dublin. The only freedom left is that of writing even though the audience is that of the inner group, the chosen few."<sup>51</sup> Like Beckett's insistence that writing is derived from a compulsion, the freedom to write provides relief from any determining influence. By opposing determinism, Mahon effectively offers his support for another of Stevens's aphorisms: "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."<sup>52</sup> Admittedly this may only be a secular form of redemption, but it is redemption nonetheless. Auden's preacher might have a "loose, immodest tone", but it is Mahon's preacher (sounding remarkably like the preacher of Ecclesiastes), who asserts that all, including poetry, is vanity. Mahon knows, after Auden, that poetry cannot change the world, but it nevertheless has the power to change the individual and the way they perceive the world, and that is poetry's greatest hope. As Auden puts it, "The primary

function of poetry, as of all the arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us. I do not know if such increased awareness makes us more moral or more efficient: I hope not" (EA 371). (This "I hope not" is typical of the impish later Auden who does not want to be caught out being earnest.)

#### 4.4 Portrait Poems

While Mahon's verse letters are dominated by an ironic sense of futility and artistic failure, his 'portrait poems' try to redress the balance by bringing the production of art into the limelight. Part elegy and part parody, these poems are modelled on the somewhat unconventional tributes written by Auden. Written between 1938 ('Rimbaud', 'A.E. Housman') and 1941 ('At the Grave of Henry James'), these poems cover the period that includes Auden's move to America, and they deal predominantly with figures of alienation, migration and exile. 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' has already been mentioned with regard to poetry's inability to effect political or social change, but it also provides an exemplary appraisal of the cumulative power of a great poet's work. The poem is not, however, an uncritical assessment of Yeats's achievement. In 1964 Auden declared:

I am incapable of saying a word about W.B. Yeats because, through no fault of his, he has become for me a symbol of my own devil of unauthenticity, of everything which I must try to eliminate from my own poetry, false emotions, inflated rhetoric, empty sonorities...He makes me whore after lies.<sup>53</sup>

Auden had already perceived in Yeats a strain of utopian idealism non-conducive to telling the truth, and he was sufficiently moved by the idea that his own poetry might be propagating dishonesty as to eventually expunge two of his most important poems, ‘Spain 1937’ and ‘September 1, 1939’, from his collected poems. The tone of the Yeats memorial is one of finely modulated, unemotional detachment that nevertheless implicates Auden himself in the “Intellectual disgrace” which renders him “silly”. Yet Auden would also like to share in Yeats’s ability to “persuade us to rejoice” through the “healing fountain” of poetry. Equivocation dominates throughout, as the argument veers between artistic success and human failure before concluding that freedom and slavery are both necessary contingencies of human existence, contingencies which allow us to recognise what is valuable:

Sing of human unsuccess

In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart

Let the healing fountain start,

In the prison of his days

Teach the free man how to praise.

Another form of “unsuccess” is demonstrated by ‘In Memory of Ernst Toller’ (ACP 249-50), a more conventional elegy that sets the “need to write” against the backdrop of European politics and war. Toller was a German poet and playwright living in New York at the time of Auden’s arrival in America, and who committed suicide shortly thereafter. Auden reasons that Toller was driven to take his own life either by a

traumatic childhood incident or by the horrors of Nazism and “the Europe which took refuge in your head”. The compulsion to write in the face of persecution becomes a show of defiance where the threat to personal safety is outweighed by the authentic drive to provide “an example to the young”. Like Toller, Voltaire (celebrated in ‘Voltaire at Ferney’, ACP 250-51) acquired “enemies” through his writing. Here, Auden makes explicit an attitude – unfamiliar in his earlier work – that suggests that art can indeed change the world for the better. While living, Voltaire was powerless to effect change, but as long as he continued writing there was at least a glimmer of hope:

Soon he would be dead,

And still all over Europe stood the horrible nurses

Itching to boil their children. Only his verses

Perhaps could stop them: He must go on working.

Even more optimistic is ‘In Memory of Sigmund Freud’ (ACP 273-76) which deposits Freud among Auden’s Great Masters, “those who were doing some good, / who knew it was never enough but / hoped to improve a little by learning”. Perhaps it is this poem, with its appeal for love to be given to the dispossessed and the marginalized, that inspired ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’. Auden writes:

With large sad eyes

its delectable creatures look up and beg

us dumbly to ask them to follow:

they are exiles who long for the future

that lies in our power, they too would rejoice

if allowed to serve enlightenment...

These “exiles who long for the future” seem to provide the model not only for Mahon’s mushrooms, but also for the historical negotiation between past, present and future they encounter with their potential saviours, the photographers.

Yeats, Toller and Freud were all exiles who died far from their home countries. Only Voltaire died on home soil, but only after spending many years migrating between Britain, Germany, Prussia and Switzerland (Ferney is close to Geneva). Auden could easily sympathise with such exilic wanderings. His introduction to the Faber Book of Modern American Verse sheds light on his own migratory impulse as being based on a retreat from unfavourable circumstances:

In America...to move on and make a fresh start somewhere else is still the normal reaction to dissatisfaction or failure...To be able at any time to break with the past, to move and keep on moving lessens the significance not only of the past but also of the future which is reduced to the immediate future, and minimizes the importance of political action.<sup>54</sup>

This attitude of moving on is an aspect of the “devil of unauthenticity” through which he allies himself with Yeats and, in turn, makes him ‘sick’. Nevertheless, we can detect a positive outcome in Auden’s retreat if we view this sickness in terms that chime with his previous ironic remarks on art. This sickness tends to deflate the myth of art, rendering both himself and the subjects of his portraits comic and absurd. “The people in all Auden portraits”, writes Justin Repogle, “are caricatures, and they are all, whether flagrantly or faintly, sick”.<sup>55</sup> As a result, this self-effacing mockery “produces humility, tolerance, love

for all those, like himself, who are flawed and absurd".<sup>56</sup> And this is precisely the effect Mahon chooses to emulate and imitate in his own portrait poems.

Mahon's portraits stand out as examples of relinquished autonomy. All written in the first person, the 'I' or persona of each poem is moulded as a fictional construct that merges details from each artist's life and work with Mahon's own preoccupations. Tensions arise in the poems between the authenticity of artistic vision and indifference towards the society which condemned the subjects of his portraits for their 'sickness', their *faux pas*, and their frailty as humans. What these poems have in common is a faith in the artistic spirit to 'go on', irrespective of the inevitability of failure. Although the compulsion to write will ultimately prove futile (it provides, in lines from 'Ovid in Tomis', "a sense of purpose, / However factitious"), it partially liberates, especially under the guise of an adopted persona, the artist from his own identity. These portrait poems possess an unequivocal degree of artifice which "disguises their personal and political origins", although this disguise becomes little more than an ironical diversionary tactic once we remember that, at least in the cases of Van Meegeren, Knut Hamsun and Ovid, politics was at the root of their ostracism.<sup>57</sup> This tactic gives Mahon the means to write indirectly about Belfast as his own place of exile, his detachment providing an ostensibly impersonal comment on the reception of art and the treatment of artists in the province. Mahon has frequently admitted to feelings of guilt regarding his breaking of ties with Belfast, as can be seen in such early poems as 'Afterlives' and 'Glengormley'. Nevertheless, his later poems, especially those written in the early 1980s, increasingly exhibit the trajectory away from a direct personal commentary on Northern Ireland in favour of a more dispassionate approach. Although The Hunt by Night includes many

poems dealing either directly or indirectly with Mahon's relations with the province, less than a third of them (excluding the portrait poems) contain the word 'I', compared with over half of those contained in Night-Crossing. The Hunt by Night also invokes a much larger artistic community than previous collections by way of severing ties with both the self and the body politic of Mahon's homeland. Translations of Brecht, Rimbaud, Horace and Pasternak mingle with poems inspired by Joyce, Wittgenstein, Voznesensky, Ovid and Hamsun, along with the painters Munch, Uccello and de Hooch, freeing Mahon from the constraint of continuously foregrounding his own self.

The neurotic, pathological sickness of the subjects of Auden's early portraits – Rimbaud, Housman, Lear, for example – filters through Mahon's portraits, especially those contained in Night-Crossing and The Hunt by Night. In 'De Quincey in Later Life' (NC 16), the individual voice is drowned out by the din of society as the isolated poet searches for "some such panacea" where he might find the requisite peace to pursue "his literary leisure". This is a familiar enough attitude that Mahon returns to time and again in his own search for inner peace. But de Quincey, like Mahon at the time of 'The Sea in Winter', was also troubled by addiction. His "Decanter of laudanum", positioned next to domestic everyday objects ("Hearth rugs, a tea-pot"), serves as a reminder of the dangers brought by reliance on narcotics and artificial stimulants. While de Quincey, like Coleridge, helped propagate the romantic notion of laudanum as a source of artistic inspiration and a barrier to society's unwanted incursions, it nevertheless distracts the artist from reality and causes physical and mental degradation. Mahon is all too aware of the danger of trusting in de Quincey's opium dreams, ironically citing the Latin tag "*Mens sana, / In corpore sano*" ('healthy mind, healthy body') as a direct echo of

Beckett's belief in the Cartesian dualism of mind / body separation. This is reinforced in the subsequent stanza: "Wood crackles better / In a head removed, and fresh water / Springs wiselier in a heart that is not sick..." The language of sickness, along with diction reminiscent of later Auden ("Springs wiselier"), is ingeniously incorporated into the sentence's "elaborate archaic manner" that, along with the opening line ("Tonight the blessed state, that long repose") and the poem's overall florid idiom, imitates and parodies de Quincey's own style.<sup>58</sup>

De Quincey's anguished cry, "I WILL SLEEP NO MORE", is a plea for escape from opium's entrapment. Similarly, van Gogh, in 'Van Gogh among the Miners' (NC19), seeks release from another sort of captivity, that of the "Over-zealous" lay preacher confronted with the loss of faith while moving among the miners who are likewise "caged" by necessity. As the extent of van Gogh's sickness, i.e. his insanity, would not manifest itself fully until several years later, he can still prophesy the painting of future works of art that capture the truth of reality instead of preaching a sort of truth that appears at one remove from reality:

And the light on my forehead

Is the dying light of truth.

God gutters down to metaphor –

A subterranean tapping, light

Refracted in a glass of beer

As if through a church window,

Or a basin ringed with coal-dust

After the ritual evening bath.

Written in the form of an epistle addressed to the penniless artist's brother, Theo, the poem opens up from the circumscription of "the darkness / Pits, slag-heaps, beetroot fields" into a vision of "golden light" that transforms the artist's perception of the world. But it ends by hinting at the artist's rejection of this perception as Mahon reveals the possibility that even genius is incapable of penetrating the "disguise" created by the very light the artist hopes might actually disclose the truth.

No such fear is apparent in 'The Forger' (NC20-21), which leaps to the defence of van Meegeren and his selling of counterfeit Vermeers to occupying German forces during World War II. Although accused of betraying his nation and undergoing a trial for collaboration, the forger nevertheless boasts of his skill and dishonesty:

When I sold my fake Vermeers to Goering  
 Nobody knew, nobody guessed  
 The agony, the fanaticism  
 Of working beyond criticism  
 And better than the best.

Remarkably, those last three lines illustrate just how closely the relation can be between the compulsion to produce art and the endorsement of a totalitarian ideology that seeks to appropriate art for its own purposes. Arrogantly dismissing the critics as "frauds" and claiming to have "revolutionized their methods", the forger is shown to be heroic by paradoxically displaying "his guilt as a proof of innocence".<sup>59</sup> His incredible disclaimer, "To hell with the national heritage, / I sold my *soul* for potage", underlines the dichotomous situation of fraudulence and authenticity existing side by side in all works

of art. Yeats casts a shadow of inauthenticity over Auden's work, and Mahon extends this to include all artistic precursors. The poem questions the notion of artistic truth as contingent on an audience's ability to apprehend and understand it:

And I, too, have suffered  
Obscurity and derision,  
And sheltered in my heart of hearts  
A light to transform the world.

Without an audience to purchase the produce of his skill and imagination, the artist must make a pact with the devil and sell his soul if he is to survive.

Survival, or going on, is the key to 'Knut Hamsun in Old Age' (THBN 20-21). Always temperamentally aloof from the masses, Hamsun deceived himself into believing that Nazism would bring about an end to the left-wing radicalism he despised, and he subsequently made the tragic error of agreeing to meet and "[shake] hands with Hitler". His work was misinterpreted by the Nazis as supportive of their ideologies (a fate which also befell Nietzsche), and he was subsequently branded a traitor, while his sons suffered imprisonment by the Norwegian authorities after the war. But Mahon sees in Hamsun a heroism that went undetected, or at least unacknowledged, by his detractors. Mahon writes of Hamsun as commanding a wilful resolution with regard to his own life:

Besides, did I not once, as a young man,  
Cure myself of incipient tuberculosis  
Inhaling four sub-zero nights and days  
Perched on the screaming roof of a freight train?

More important is the way Mahon identifies in the unnamed hero of Hamsun's novel, Hunger, a character who obeys his impulses at every step as a means of bridging conscious and unconscious states of mind. Although physically and spiritually starving, this hero does not fall prey to self-pity; his irrational faith in his ability to sustain himself purely through his writings never waives, and the suffering he is determined to withstand assumes an ontological quality associated with his compulsion to write.

Mahon is rather more forgiving than Auden when it comes to describing the characters of his portraits. Although all are, in one sense or another, absurd, there is also something heroic about each of them. By having them admit to their failings as he admits to his own in 'The Sea in Winter', Mahon is advocating tolerance of the foibles of flawed human nature as though asking, through these portraits, for forgiveness for his own weaknesses. The portraits are in essence pleas for the wider world to accept the authenticity of humble artists who believe that their actions are conducted in good faith. It might be tempting, however, to see an element of bad faith at work in the way Mahon identifies with each of the subjects of these poems. The implication that the extent of Mahon's own suffering is somehow on a par with the abject poverty of van Gogh or of Hamsun's hero seems overstated. But while there is something distinctly dubious about identifying genius with drunkenness, addiction, hunger or insanity, Mahon's intentions are admirable. In 'An Bonnán Buí' (TYL 26-27), Mahon wonders, in terms that recall Auden's Just City, if love and epistemological certainty are still attainable in a world without madness:

No dope, no 'Kubla Khan'; no schizophrenia, no *Chimères*,  
do we love one another and build the shining city

renouncing the sublime for a quieter beauty  
 or fight to the death about the nature of reality?

The poem takes us a step further from the exploration of the poet's own madness in 'The Sea in Winter'. Now he resents the deceptively comfortable world of armchair psychiatry and ersatz therapy that sees madness as a form of individualism that deserves to be quashed:

It used to be, with characters like us,  
 they'd let us wander the roads in wind and rain  
 or lock us up and throw away the key;  
 but now they have a cure for these psychoses  
 as indeed they do for most social diseases.

At peace in my patch of sunlit convalescence  
 with vitamin pills and a bottle of mineral water,  
 forced on the dry too, should I not be bitter?

What do psychiatrists *want*? – An age of prose;  
 except for Anthony Clare, a 'shrewd repose',  
 a world-clinic where the odd learn to renounce  
 their singularity for a more communal faith.

We must remember that Mahon is a supreme ironist, and this moralistic concatenation of art and suffering is undermined in 'Afterlives' (TSP 1-2) where he confesses to being one of the "middle-class cunts" whose "privileged ideals" can be afforded precisely because he does not feel the hunger pangs of his poetic subjects. The ideological resonances of 'An Bonnán Buí' are also encountered here as the poet subjects himself to a crude and

savage lambasting for “surrendering to the privileged idealism of bourgeois fantasy, and elevating it to the status of ‘divine wisdom’”.<sup>60</sup> Mahon subverts many notions of ‘reality’ through an appeal to the potential benefits of addiction, insanity and poetry, each of which constitutes an evasion of political responsibility, as ways of asserting artistic individuality.

Mahon’s portraits are therefore related to his verse letters through the way each set of poems sets out to invert or disrupt established hierarchies. The problem with this position is that by invoking the presence, persona or voice of other artists, Mahon runs the risk of exposing himself to the inauthenticity he seeks to avoid. By calling on or imitating past voices, Mahon’s own voice, like that of Auden, is replaced by a multiplicity of perspectives and biased voices. But another way of looking at this would be to consider that, in the tradition of modernist writing, Mahon’s propensity for the comic mode is distinguished by a sort of wilful cheerfulness. Even at his most serious the modernist poet can make fun of himself by championing, in an ironic manner, the underdog. As a result, the authentic voice takes second place to the alliance between the poetic successor and the dispossessed, neglected or ill-treated precursor by *confessing* to this inauthenticity in much the same way as Auden in the Yeats elegy. Auden identified this position not as a fault belonging exclusively to himself but as one that belongs to every poetic successor, calling it “the sin / Peculiar to his discipline” (ACP 204). Committing this sin is part of the quest for identity that provides the springboard for discovering the authentic voice. The quest for identity is not, however, limited to an excavation of the self that discloses identity after a specific period of time; it is an ongoing process that may never reveal the full extent of identity. In this sense, the quest

is a crucial stage on the route towards existential awareness, and which provides no guarantee that a final destination might ever be reached. Indeed, there can be no such thing as security where the existential quest is concerned since the inner experience of self-awareness can never reach completion.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Redmond, "Wilful Inconsistency: Derek Mahon's Verse-Letters," Irish University Review 24.1 (1994): 96.

<sup>2</sup> Redmond 97.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Howard, The Pressed Melodeon: Essays on Modern Irish Writing (Brownsville: Story Line, 1996) 136.

<sup>4</sup> Dillon Johnston, Irish Poetry After Joyce, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1997) 237.

<sup>5</sup> Redmond 109.

<sup>6</sup> Willie Kelly, "Each Poem for me is a New Beginning," interview with Derek mahon, Cork Review 2.3 (1981): 10.

<sup>7</sup> Eileen Battersby, "Made in Belfast," Sunday Tribune 26 Aug. 1990: 25.

<sup>8</sup> Eamon Grennan, "Derek Mahon: The Art of Poetry LXXXII," Paris Review 154 (2000): 175.

<sup>9</sup> Grennan 177

<sup>10</sup> Kelly 11.

<sup>11</sup> Neil Corcoran, Poets of Modern Ireland: Text, Context, Intertext (Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1999) 148.

<sup>12</sup> Stan Smith, W.H. Auden, Writers and their Work (Plymouth: Northcote, 1997) 11.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Kinsella, "The Divided Mind," Poetry and Ireland since 1800: A Source Book, ed. Mark Storey (London: Routledge, 1988) 214-215.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Lowell, Imitations (1962; London: Faber, 1971) xi.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly 10.

<sup>16</sup> Edna Longley, Poetry in the Wars (1986; Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996) 173.

<sup>17</sup> Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, rev. ed., ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Vintage, 1990) 185.

<sup>18</sup> Rainer Emig, W.H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000) 122.

<sup>19</sup> John Goodby, Irish Poetry since 1950: From Stillness into History (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 220.

<sup>20</sup> Frank O'Connor, trans., Kings, Lords, and Commons: Irish Poems from the Seventh Century to the Nineteenth Century (1959; Dublin: Gill, 1991) 46.

<sup>21</sup> W.H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays (London: Faber, 1963) 85.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Mahon, "Poetry in Northern Ireland," Twentieth Century Studies 4 (1970): 93.

<sup>23</sup> Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, "Introduction," The Poetry of Derek Mahon, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Ulster Editions and Monographs: 11 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 2002) 14.

<sup>24</sup> Justin Repogle, Auden's Poetry (London: Methuen, 1969) 125.

<sup>25</sup> Stan Smith, "The Twilight of the Cities: Derek Mahon's Dark Cinema," Kennedy-Andrews 254.

<sup>26</sup> Edward Callan, Auden: A Carnival of Intellect (New York: Oxford UP, 1983) 151.

<sup>27</sup> Callan 151.

<sup>28</sup> Strangely, the epigraph, taken from Rimbaud's Une Saison en Enfer, is inverted. In the original the lines run, "La vraie vie est absente. Nous ne sommes pas au monde", but what the significance of this change could be can only invite speculation. See Arthur Rimbaud, A Season in Hell and Illuminations, trans. Mark Treharne (London: Dent, 1998) 22.

<sup>29</sup> John Byrne, "Derek Mahon: A Commitment to Change," Crane Bag 6.1 (1982): 68.

<sup>30</sup> Allan Rodway, A Preface to Auden (London: Longman, 1984) 132.

<sup>31</sup> W.H. Auden, The Enchafèd Flood, or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea (1951; London: Faber, 1985) 17.

<sup>32</sup> Colin Graham, "Derek Mahon's Cultural Marginalia," Returning to Ourselves: Second Volume of Papers from the John Hewitt International Summer School, ed. Eve Patten (Belfast: Lagan, 1995) 241.

<sup>33</sup> Edna Longley, "Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art," Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature, ed. Michael Kenneally, Studies in Contemporary Irish Literature 2, Irish Literary Studies 43 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1995) 30.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Mendelson, Early Auden (New York: Viking, 1981) 256.

<sup>35</sup> Callan 6.

<sup>36</sup> It is probably fair to assume that Mahon would be familiar with this painting given his admiration for the work of Uccello, a near contemporary of Bosch. Uccello's The Hunt in the Forest provided the inspiration for Mahon's 'The Hunt by Night'.

<sup>37</sup> Roy Boyne, Foucault and Derrida: The Other Side of Reason (1990; London: Routledge, 1996) 16.

<sup>38</sup> Auden, Enchafèd 27, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, “Twilight” 258.

<sup>40</sup> John Keats, “Lamia,” Complete Poems, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Bellknap-Harvard, 1982) 357.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Mann, Death in Venice, Tristan, Tonio Kröger, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (1955; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 149.

<sup>42</sup> Qtd. in Richard Hoggart, “Introduction to Auden’s Poetry,” Auden: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Monroe K. Spears (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1964) 123.

<sup>43</sup> W.H. Auden, Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose: Volume II, 1939-1948, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 2002) 345.

<sup>44</sup> W.H. Auden, New Year Letter (London: Faber, 1941) 89.

<sup>45</sup> Carlo Izzo, “The Poetry of W.H. Auden,” Spears 137.

<sup>46</sup> Replogle 174.

<sup>47</sup> Wilfred Owen, Selected Poetry and Prose, ed. Jennifer Breen (1988; London: Routledge, 1992) 81.

<sup>48</sup> Emig 108.

<sup>49</sup> Robert F. Garratt, Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989) 273.

<sup>50</sup> The same quotation, paraphrased but serving an identical purpose to Mahon’s, provides the first sentence of Beckett’s Murphy: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new”. Samuel Beckett, Murphy (1938; London: Pan-Picador, 1980) 5.

- <sup>51</sup> Seamus Deane, Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980 (London: Faber, 1985) 158.
- <sup>52</sup> Stevens 185.
- <sup>53</sup> Qtd. in Mendelson 206.
- <sup>54</sup> Qtd. in Barbara Everett, Auden (1964; Edinburgh: Oliver, 1969) 70.
- <sup>55</sup> Replogle 134.
- <sup>56</sup> Replogle 136.
- <sup>57</sup> Bill Tinley, “International Perspectives in the Poetry of Derek Mahon,” Irish University Review 21.1 (1991): 117.
- <sup>58</sup> Marilyn Butler, Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981) 163.
- <sup>59</sup> Richard York, “Derek Mahon and the Visual Arts,” Kennedy-Andrews 137.
- <sup>60</sup> Elmer Andrews, “The Poetry of Derek Mahon: ‘places where a thought might grow’,” Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Elmer Andrews (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992) 246.

## 5. “the voyage is never done”: Mahon and Crane

### 5.1 A Letter from America

In 1970, Mahon published an essay that sums up his general attitude towards the inability of Irish poets to “come to terms with ‘the twentieth century’.”<sup>1</sup> The essay explores the various responses of northern poets to the religio-political situation in the North, focusing on MacNeice, Seamus Heaney, John Montague, and Michael Longley. But hidden among these thumbnail portraits is a reference to a poet just as close to Mahon’s heart as these northern poets. In a brief aside he writes, “Reading Hart Crane’s ‘All afternoon the cloud-flown gantries turn; / Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still,’ it was possible to endow the shipyards of Belfast with an immanence of poetic life they had never had before.”<sup>2</sup> Although these lines from Crane’s The Bridge are misquoted (perhaps his discussion of MacNeice was still fresh in Mahon’s mind, leading him to write “gantries” rather than Crane’s “derricks”), it is clear that Crane’s apprehension of immanence in inanimate objects was to leave a lasting impression on Mahon’s poetic consciousness, and this impression was to manifest itself most strongly 25 years later in ‘The Hudson Letter’.<sup>3</sup> Neil Corcoran and Hugh Haughton have both compared ‘The Hudson Letter’ with Eliot’s The Waste Land, but in many ways it is more fruitful to read the poem in relation to Crane’s The Bridge (CCP 63-105).<sup>4</sup> Of course, this idea relies on the rather large assumption that it is Mahon’s *intention* to re-work Crane’s sequence in a more contemporary light; but while Mahon’s allusions may not necessarily stand on their own without this assumption, his thematics certainly emerge once the bigger picture is allowed. Mahon’s debt to Crane has long been acknowledged, and Edna Longley states quite rightly that there are “deliberate allusions to Crane in ‘The Hudson

Letter’’.<sup>5</sup> But ‘The Hudson Letter’ provides much more than a series of references to either The Bridge or Crane’s work in general. Crane believed that he was creating “the Myth of America”, looking always towards the past “in terms of the present”, as a spiritual rejoinder to the material values engendered by a burgeoning capitalist ethos.<sup>6</sup> In his own way Mahon has tried to create something remarkably similar, the difference being that Mahon takes a degenerative present and projects it into a possible future of complete social disintegration on a worldwide scale. His themes of homelessness and lost love in late twentieth-century America point, through the McLuhanesque image of the global village, towards universal entropy mediated by economic tyranny. Crane is concerned with spiritual redemption, but Mahon combines this with an ethics of communality unheard of in his earlier work

In a wide sense, Crane’s influence on Mahon has been profound. Like Crane, Mahon is fascinated by the possibilities offered by brief yet intensely piercing flashes of light which, throughout his work, stand metaphorically for the *lumen naturale* of human understanding. He has always sought to see straight *through* the actual to a truth-disclosing dimension invisible to the naked eye in a manner reminiscent of these lines from Blake that Crane found so inspirational: “We are led to believe in a lie / When we see *with* not *through* the eye”.<sup>7</sup> Anyone, as it were, can *see*, Blake seems to imply, but only the poetic mind blessed by the imaginative capacity to transmute the everyday into something extraordinary possesses sufficient visionary power to visualise the truth behind and beyond those things that complacency demands we take for granted. Mahon is spiritually energised by the entropic degeneration of the actual world, which in turn creates a clearing that permits the entrance of illuminating, transfiguring light. In

'Autobiographies', he describes an instant that, to the uninformed, might seem preposterous:

Yet the place really existed  
 And still can crack a smile  
 Should a sunbeam pick out  
 Your grimy plastic cup  
 And consecrate your vile  
 Bun with its parting light. (P 87-91)

Later in the poem, Mahon uses imagery drawn from Crane's 'Paraphrase', which records the experience of being dead:

Of a steady winking beat between  
 Systole, diastole spokes-of-a-wheel  
 One rushing from the bed at night  
 May find the record wedged in his soul. (CCP 39)

In the final stanza of 'Autobiographies', Mahon breathes life back into Crane's image to relate the fate of a bicycle for which he has no further use, nevertheless discovering a means of ascribing to it a meaningful permanence:

It went with me to Dublin  
 Where I sold it the same winter;  
 But the wheels still sing  
 In the memory, stars that turn  
 About an eternal centre,  
 The bright spokes glittering.

Such “visual epiphanies”, in the words of Terence Brown, “remind us in Mahon’s work that consciousness, whatever else it is, is a visual construct, an ordering of the random stuff of the world’s reality where light and the eye conspire to suggest a formal synthesis in an otherwise chaotic experience”.<sup>8</sup> Mahon’s mode of transfiguring the quotidian is entirely human and not reliant on some form of divine intervention.

According to the poem ‘A Lighthouse in Maine’, this transfiguring light is, at least in theory, available to all:

The north light

That strikes its frame

Houses is not

The light of heaven

But that of this world. (THBN 43-44)

Each of these quotations recalls the closing lines from Crane’s poem ‘Chaplineseque’: “but we have seen / The moon in lonely alleys make / A grail of laughter of an empty trash can” (CCP 33).

Like Crane, Mahon takes Keats’s assertion that poets “consecrate what’er they look upon” as the foundation for seeking to perceive something extraordinary in commonplace objects.<sup>9</sup> In Mahon’s early poetry, this transfiguring light assumes a quasi-religious significance as the light of poetic inspiration. Yet such confidently composed lines as those quoted above belie the self-doubt that has plagued Mahon throughout his career. Having previously described poetry variously as “this lyric lunacy”, “my disconsolate labour”, and “All farts in a biscuit tin”, Mahon’s characteristically ironic

mode serves to question the value both of poetry itself and of the endeavours which go towards its creation. There is more at work here than merely self-effacing or sleight-of-hand mockery, however. Mahon seems to have a profound fear of what he terms in ‘The Attic’ “the blank spaces” and “the white page” that betray abandonment by this poetically inspirational light. While fully aware of the importance of poetry, he is nevertheless riven by the dread that his own creative powers are not up to the task of conveying that message in Ulster’s philistine climate. In ‘Ovid in Tomis’ he writes,

The Muse is somewhere

Else, not here

By this frozen lake –

Or, if here, then I am

Not poet enough

To make the connection. (THBN 37-42)

This poem comes from The Hunt By Night, the last full collection before The Hudson Letter, and the fear it expresses – combined with the then recent failure of his marriage – can be viewed as both explaining Mahon’s interim comparative inactivity and his desire for escape to a foreign country. But this physical journey constitutes only one aspect of Mahon’s quest to revitalise his poetic powers. Although he refers in ‘The Yaddo Letter’ to his offspring as “Children of light”, a move which associates children with the products of inspirational and transfiguring creativity, the title sequence nevertheless registers a shift away from those transient, illuminating moments when the world is forever altered by the power of understanding. Indeed, ‘The Hudson Letter’ is

characterised by darkness, most of its eighteen sections having as their backdrop images of night, hell, stormy weather, the moments immediately before sunrise or after sunset, and other variants on what Mahon calls “the restless dark”. Given the emotional and psychological darkness he must have been suffering at the time, it seems apparent why Mahon should have turned his back on the light-as-muse symbolism.

Rather more perceptive than Longley’s passing aside is Michael O’Neill’s observation that ‘The Hudson Letter’ is a “pervasive and deeply felt...response to the work of Hart Crane” that “engages in cunningly oblique dialogue with Crane’s poetry”.<sup>10</sup> I would take this even further and say that ‘The Hudson Letter’ is in a sense a closely scrutinised re-working of The Bridge. Although Mahon’s language and syntax are not as richly-textured or as densely-packed as Crane’s, there are several structural similarities between the sequences. Each winds its way backwards and forwards through time and space in odysseyan, almost chaotic representations of the quest journey, and each weighs in at around forty pages, comprising a substantial number of distinct sections (The Bridge has fifteen, ‘The Hudson Letter’ eighteen). Both Mahon and Crane are preoccupied with matters of form, but unfortunately it is form that limits their success. While The Bridge tries “to crowd more images into each poem – more symbols, perceptions, and implications – than any few stanzas could hold or convey”, ‘The Hudson Letter’ over-ambitiously stretches its ideas across loose-limbed eclogues, carrying little of the rhetorical force of Mahon’s more tersely-structured early poems.<sup>11</sup> Its less restricted form conforms to the conventions of the verse letter, being based on fluid pentameters, rhymes that tend to provide decoration rather than function, and a chatty, conversational tone, and is designed to let in a more personal voice than we are accustomed to in Mahon. We still

occasionally see some of Mahon's ingenuity when it comes to surprising rhymes ("lofts and desperate 'hoods / to Lorca's 'urinating multitudes'", for instance), but these are outweighed by more obvious examples that tend to flag under the weight of the large stanzas. Seamus Deane has remarked that the great advantage of the lyric sequence is that it "can pass beyond the experience of interiority and enrich it by contact with other worlds", but because 'The Hudson Letter' is also a verse letter (or, rather, a series of verse letters), Mahon refuses to let this happen.<sup>12</sup> Following the translation of Ovid in Section VIII where Tereus eats his own son, Mahon addresses his own children and jokes to his son, "Uneaten, you call home while I take a rest". (This poem, Section IX, makes another allusion to filicide through the reference to Atreus.) The problem here is that Mahon never fully admits the voices of the children into the poem: we get no direct comment, no alternative viewpoints, and no challenge from outside the self to that self's supposed authority. Mahon's children are effectively overwhelmed or *consumed* by the father's imagination. 'The Hudson Letter' therefore falls between two stools: as a lyric sequence, it cannot accommodate the less restricted or self-centred conventions of the verse letter; as a verse letter, it loses contact with other worlds.

However, despite these shortcomings, Mahon is rather more successful when it comes to re-envisioning Crane's sequence in a post-modern light. Similar themes are presented throughout both sequences, and 'The Hudson Letter' reads as though Crane's personal epic was at the front of Mahon's mind during its composition. 'The Hudson Letter' demonstrates the after-effects of the machine age, offering a coruscating critique of how the combination of the rise of capitalism, technological advancement, and population growth has conspired against human dignity. But before we consider the

impact of The Bridge on Mahon's methods it is worth looking at the circumstances behind the writing of their respective sequences.

## 5.2 Crises of Confidence

The Hudson Letter was published in 1995, and it was Mahon's first full-length collection of poetry for thirteen years. He was not idle during this period, producing a steady stream of work – a translation of Nerval's Les Chimères, a short interim collection entitled Antarctica, two single-poem pamphlets, three dramatic adaptations, translations of selected poems by Philippe Jaccottet, and a second selection of his own poems which received his customary revisionary treatment – but few of these works were as consistent or as original as his readers had come to expect. No doubt these projects kept him well occupied, but the chronicler of Mahon's career cannot help but feel that for the most part there is an element of distraction in operation here. Mahon's marriage collapsed during this period, and The Hudson Letter contains three direct addresses to his estranged children. In the mournful verse epistle 'The Yaddo Letter' he laments separation from his family – "What I lost was a wife, a life, and you" – while straining to recover the impetus to work, to create, "to figure out", as he puts it, "the dancers from the dance". The quotation from the final line of 'Among School Children' (YCP 242-45) provides an allusion to the Yeatsian dilemma of the isolated artist forced to choose between art and life: does he pursue the permanence of the aesthetic act, or, as a dancer, does he crave the near-limitless possibilities of fluctuating and insecure existence? This too is Mahon's conundrum, as he struggles to get his life back in order so that he might work once more.

Crane likewise had suffered a breakdown of belief in his own abilities. In a letter to Waldo Frank written in 1926, three years after the initial conception of The Bridge and three years before its completion, he describes his fears for a future apparently condemned to the evils of commercialism:

The form of my poem rises out of a past that so overwhelms the present with its worth and vision that I'm at a loss to explain my delusion that there exist any real links between that past and a future destiny worthy of it... The bridge as symbol today has no significance beyond an economical approach to shorter hours, quicker lunches, behaviorism and toothpicks... If only America were half as worthy today to be spoken of as Whitman spoke of it 50 years ago there might be something for me to say...<sup>13</sup>

Crane's critique of industrial materialism indicates an underlying sense of spiritual desolation in America, while the plangency of tone and language ("at a loss", "my delusion", "If only"), along with his apprehension of the collapse of America as both historical and mythic entity all add up to a crisis in confidence. That The Bridge was almost never completed and was only presented for publication on the assurance that future editions would contain additional material and revisions, shows the extent of Crane's self-doubt and the length of time during which he suffered the travails of diffidence. Matters weren't helped when Allen Tate and Yvor Winters, poet-critics whose opinions Crane valued and trusted, each lambasted certain aspects of The Bridge upon its publication. Although Crane, to quote Albert Gelpi, "was still worried that the poem had not achieved adequate form and articulation", he nevertheless felt disappointed that Tate

and Winters should have considered it necessary to object to his apparent over-reliance on Whitman's vision of American life and consciousness, while also accusing the poem of lacking structure, coherence and focus.<sup>14</sup> Despite the tributes – admittedly guarded in many cases – paid to the lyrics of White Buildings, his first collection, Crane, they concluded, had finally over-stretched his talent, a decision that Crane was ultimately forced to concede. In a letter to Winters, he went so far as to confess to a degree of understated concern that his ambitions for the poem had not been entirely successful: "The results", he was compelled to write, "have not been as satisfactory as I had hoped for."<sup>15</sup>

Crane, however, had not always been so sceptical of his own abilities. Though a great admirer of Eliot, he regarded the dark pessimism of The Waste Land as essentially defeatist, a succumbing to the material forces of the modern world that made little allowance for the possibilities of human spirituality. In a letter of 1923 he wrote:

There is no one writing in English who can command so much respect, to my mind, as Eliot. However, I take Eliot as a point of departure toward an almost complete reverse of direction. His pessimism is amply justified, in his own case. But I would apply as much of his erudition and technique as I can absorb and assemble toward a more positive, or (if I must put it so in a sceptical age) ecstatic goal.<sup>16</sup>

'For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen' culminates in a formulation of this "ecstatic goal", which transcends both the real and the imaginative worlds, as a resolutely optimistic view that the imagination and beauty, as symbolised by the poem's characters,

can survive the divided mind and the technological depredations created by the modern world:

Distinctly praise the years, whose volatile  
 Blamed bleeding hands extend and thresh the height  
 The imagination spans beyond despair,  
 Outpacing bargain, vocable and prayer. (CCP 48-52)

Crane's identification with Faustus as the imaginative, poetic man for whom the greatest imperative is love, denotes the importance of the poet's attempt to capture and find salvation not merely in physical beauty but in the imaginative potentialities offered by the "metallic paradises" of the modern city. As we have previously seen with Mahon's work, the modern city, even with its squalor and death, can still provide visions of beauty and ecstasy to the sensitive poetic mind. Crane calls those who lack the imagination to share the poet's vision the "accepted multitudes", yet he still feels the need to try and communicate his ideas, viewing his actions as an act of generosity: "The lavish heart shall always have to leaven / And spread with bells and voices, and atone / The abating shadows of our conscript dust".

These "bells and voices" indicate Crane's fascination, shared by Mahon, with the revitalising power of music. Crane's poetry teems with the terminology and sounds of music, from the "constant harmony" of 'Legend' (CCP 25) to the sonorous tolling of 'The Broken Tower':

The bells, I say, the bells break down their tower;  
 And swing I know not where. Their tongues engrave  
 Membrane through marrow, my long-scattered score

Of broken intervals . . . And I, their sexton slave! (CCP 173-74)

Music's harmony, unity and beauty provided Crane with what was for him a symbol of supreme good. This supreme good is also represented in The Bridge by the seagull whose purity, harmony and almost effortless motion point towards a form of redemption. The gull's "inviolate curve" both mirrors the bridge's construction as a dramatic incarnation of transcendental liberty and beauty, and it presages the "curveship" that will ultimately and epiphanically "lend a myth to God". Crane's affiliation of beauty with a moral imperative, if assimilated with the admittedly problematic identification of beauty with truth in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', provides an insight into Mahon's own personal system of values; a system, as he writes in 'The Yaddo Letter', that integrates in true Enlightenment style "the true, the beautiful and the good". This value system is not just a personal aesthetic upon which Mahon constructs his poetry, however. 'The Sea in Winter', a poem originally published in 1979, similarly makes reference to "The good, the beautiful and the true" as a statement relating to the power and worth of human relationships. By juxtaposing this ternary system with the twin background of artistic creativity and the human need for personal interaction, Mahon exposes further his allegiance with Crane – especially Crane in the guise of Faustus – in his deep-seated belief, frequently concealed behind the mask of irony, that love is the truest source of poetic inspiration. And it is love that finally provides the impetus to retrieve his poetic impulse and begin writing again.

### 5.3 Invocation of the Muse

The duration of The Bridge is one day, lasting from the dawn of ‘To Brooklyn Bridge’, through the night of ‘The Tunnel’, to the midnight of ‘Atlantis’. Although many other days and nights occur during the poem, the structure as a whole can be envisaged as “an imaginative re-creation in the consciousness of the poet as he himself goes through one day of life in New York, ending at midnight in the middle of Brooklyn Bridge”.<sup>17</sup>

Exactly the same thing can be said of ‘The Hudson Letter’ as it progresses from the dawn awakening of Sections I and II, through the “9.00 p.m. London time” of Section IX and the “racketey sunset” of Section XI, ‘Chinatown’, to “the hour of the locked door and the shut gate of Section XVIII, ‘The Small Rain’.

The first section of ‘The Hudson Letter’ (THL 37-38) opens with a probing, though desperate-sounding, question: “Winter; a short walk from the 10<sup>th</sup> St. Pier - / and what of the kick-start that should be here?” Having left his family in England, Mahon has journeyed to the city that had previously provided Crane with the necessary stimulus to find not only what he hoped would prove an adequate symbol to represent his vision of America, but also an idiomatic voice through which to express that vision. Mahon has awoken in a rented New York apartment overlooking the harbour, much like Crane’s protagonist in ‘The Harbor Dawn’. He is dismayed to discover that the “light to transform the world” that once “sheltered in [his] heart of hearts” (‘The Forger’, NC 20-21) is also absent here, obscured by the winter of his discontent. In these unfamiliar surroundings he pleads despairingly, “Oh, show me how to recover my lost nerve!” Nevertheless, while Mahon realises fully the possible futility of writing, he is still driven by a need to persist with the struggle poetry requires, despite the disappearance of his guiding light.

Restorative inspiration comes from a source which, for Mahon, is quite unusual given his frequently dismissive attitude towards technological artefacts. Listening to the radio he hears ‘Nightingale’, the fourth movement from Respighi’s suite, The Birds. Struggling to hear the music which is in danger of being swamped by interference and conflicting signals, he is overwhelmed by the realisation that the radio might yet “illustrate / the resilience of our lyric appetite”. Mahon seems to be remembering the episode from ‘Cape Hatteras’ (CCP 85-91) where, “from above, thin squeaks of radio static, / The captured fume of space foams in our ears”. As with the bridge, Crane casts the radio in a positive light, and it becomes a symbol of hope as he tries to reach out to an audience he did not have. The ubiquitous presence, “in offices, lofts and desperate ‘hoods”, as Mahon puts it, of the radio offers a potentially widespread audience access to the same moment of inspiration as that discovered so fortuitously by the poet. But there is an element of chance here: inspiration may be available to all, but until individuals learn to recognise and decipher music’s power to inspire it is destined to remain a mere potentiality. Mahon accepts the challenge laid down by the music and the section ends with a simple and self-deprecating declamation, “but first the nightingale. Sing, Muse”.

Mahon’s invocation of the muse serves the same purpose as Crane’s deliberate use of the second person pronouns “Thee” and “Thy” in ‘To Brooklyn Bridge’ (CCP 63-64). Although addressing the bridge itself, Crane is also establishing a religious frame of reference, and by ending this opening poem on the word “God” he focuses attention on his pantheistic world-view. By contrast, Mahon’s muse testifies to a more ironic and secular attitude towards the divine. Having prayed God to give rest to Dylan Thomas, Mahon immediately proclaims that “there’s something missing here / in this autistic

slammer, some restorative / laid like a magic wand on everything". What is missing from both the city and the poem is the religious symbolism, hinted at by the "inviolate curve" shared by Crane's seagull and bridge, which might yet conjoin past, present and future, life and death, and the old and new worlds.<sup>18</sup> While Crane's vision transforms the bridge into a spiritual symbol, it is the music on Mahon's radio that amends his own vision of "dawn's early light on bridge and water-tower" into an image of potential. For Crane, the bridge's symbolic status is assured; for Mahon, the imitated song of the nightingale is yet to establish completely "the resilience of our lyric appetite".

As the sun begins to rise, "Manhattan faces east once more". Facing east towards Europe, rather than into the American interior, recalls Crane's 'Ave Maria' (CCP 65-67) where Columbus, thinking of home, stands on the deck of the *Santa Maria* with the setting sun "Once more behind us". Columbus is looking towards a future bright with possibility as the adventurer is transformed from conqueror to poet-seeker set "to restore a spiritual attitude which a blind devotion to material conquest...had suppressed or threatened to suppress".<sup>19</sup> Columbus, too, had been exiled from his home, but with his return he anticipates a new future: "It is morning there". Mahon's New York morning is far less welcoming, having awoken "to the first bird and the first garbage truck", where the noise of the truck would surely drown out any bird-song. (The protagonist of 'The Harbor Dawn' (CCP 68-69) is similarly disturbed: "And then a truck will lumber past the wharves / As winch engines begin throbbing on some deck"). But the pull of the east, where his family and native soil lie, is strong in Mahon's consciousness and it, along with the call of his muse, gives him the strength to see out one more day.

### 5.4 The Nightingale

Mahon's appetite is fed, but not sated, by his adoption and adaptation of the Keatsian muse, indicating what Earl Wasserman, in writing about 'Ode to a Nightingale',<sup>20</sup> has termed "the poet's chaos".<sup>21</sup> 'The Hudson Letter' shares with the Keats poem a sense of inner turmoil as it attempts to work through poetry towards a form of resolution via the shifting symbolism of the nightingale. Yet resolution is provided by neither poem: while for Keats the desire for self-immolation is finally suppressed by confusion – "Do I wake or sleep?" – Mahon, by the end of 'The Hudson Letter', is still exiled from "the greater community" of the city and is incapable of understanding fully the mocking "secret voice" of the nightingale. Each poem begins with the respective poets in a state of dejection, set apart from the world of communal activity while searching for a fuller awareness of what it means to share in the lives of others. But it is solitude, not solidarity, which constitutes a precondition of vocative poetry's compulsion to fuse and harmonise the ostensibly conflicting states of desire and despair. As 'The Hudson Letter' has homelessness and dispossession for one of its overarching themes, so Keats depicts the artist as utterly alone and reduced to abject solipsism: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!"

Mahon's initial encounter with the nightingale is through a musical representation of its voice and not the voice itself. So although the bird's song is destined to remain "secret", 'The Hudson Letter' can be seen as the first step in an attempt by the poet to seek out the joy and ecstasy contained within the nightingale's song while also confronting existential isolation and the inevitability of death as heralded by Keats:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,

To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
 In such an ecstasy!

The magnitude – and, for that matter, the irony – of the task is not lost on Mahon whose “lost nerve” is forced to rely for its retrieval on the “serendipity” of modern technology. Thus we discover a more tentative, exploratory, and even apologetic tone than we are accustomed to hearing from Mahon. The confidence of Mahon’s earlier work has now given way to a more beseeching manner as found in this hesitant plea for acceptance in Section III, ‘Global Village’ (THL 41-42), that nevertheless tries to distance Mahon from America in a gesture towards his Irish roots:

Obviously I don’t mean  
 to pen yet one more craven European  
 paean to the States, nor would you expect me to,  
 not being a yuppie in a pinstripe suit  
 but an Irish Bohemian even as you are too.

Both Keats and Mahon equate the nightingale with the imagination and creativity. ‘The Hudson Letter’ repeats the literary and cultural allusions of Mahon’s other verse letters. Century-spanning references to music (from Baroque opera to Gershwin, from Schubert to Janis Joplin and Guns ‘n’ Roses), as well as the naming of other artistic visitors to New York (Auden, MacNeice, Lorca, J.B. Yeats), filter through the poem, providing a litany of focal points designed to keep the poet on task, so to speak, in his quest to regain his earlier confidence. Railing against “the virtual realities of the mind” engendered by popular culture and the world-dividing problems caused by war and the

horrors of so-called ‘ethnic cleansing’ – “Bosnia, famine, drought, / whole nations, races, evicted even yet” – Mahon calls on the nightingale-as-muse in five of the sequence’s eighteen sections, each time allocating to it a slightly different function, yet ultimately endowing the symbol with an imaginatively, spiritually and morally unifying power.

The technique is reminiscent of Crane’s use of avian imagery throughout The Bridge. Ten sections of Crane’s poem name birds directly, of which four sections – ‘To Brooklyn Bridge’, ‘Ave Maria’, ‘The Harbor Dawn’, and ‘Cutty Sark’ – employ the seagull as a symbol of purity (it is always “white”) and harmony. By contrast, Mahon conceives of the seagull in an altogether different sense, associating it variously with freeloading (Section V), street-wise urban violence (Section VI), temporary places of refuge for the homeless (Section XII), and the pain and terror of childhood (Section XVII).

Section VIII (THL 51-52) is a version of an episode from Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Here, Philomela, having endured rape and the cutting out of her tongue by Tereus, is transformed into a nightingale and instantly recovers her voice; not her original voice perhaps, but a voice nonetheless through which, despite her appalling travails, she descants her joyous freedom. It is clear that Mahon’s deployment of the myth serves to illustrate his growing confidence in the act of writing. In Sections XIII, XVII and XVIII his ideas begin to come to fruition as the nightingale is made to represent, respectively, the Sapphic arbiter of love and affection that speaks against tyranny and oppression, a Keatsian ecstatic intensity whereby the bird’s spiritual essence is manifested through its song towards a conjunction of beauty and truth, and, finally, the voice of optimism that provides an outlet for the voiceless exiled and dispossessed. This relates to Crane’s use of

the seagull in ‘To Brooklyn Bridge’, where it makes him “think of cinemas” and the people who go there to escape reality “in the dumb and constantly disappointed hope of some ultimate and permanent revelation”: “With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene / Never disclosed, but hastened to again, / Foretold to other eyes on the same screen”.<sup>22</sup> Just as the radio possesses the potential to expose a mass audience to the poet’s vision, so the cinema represents the poet’s unfulfilled desire that his vision will be disclosed to other eyes.

### 5.5 Resident Aliens

The second section of ‘The Hudson Letter’ (THL 39-40) features the first mention of the dispossession that haunts the entire sequence. The “picturesque abuse” of “some psycho” that Mahon endures while “grading papers”, “the lunatic upstairs”, and the drunk in the alley “shivering for a drop of gin” all provide echoes of “the mad bastard” of ‘As It Should Be’ (L 25) and Crane’s bedlamite throwing himself from the bridge to the callous jeers of the drivers below. All of these events are depicted simply as parts of urban life in a society grown complacent to the torment of others. Only the poet cares enough to see these incidents as worthy of comment, and this opening meditation closes on an ellipsis that leaves the fate of these tortured souls hanging in the balance. It is followed by eight lines that establish a complex series of intertextual allusions pointing both to the rest of the poem and to various episodes from The Bridge:

...Dawn; the kick-start as some heroine  
 draws on her gloves for the Harley-Davidson dream trip  
 to Provincetown, Key West or Sunset Strip.

Tired vents exhale; cloudy windows condense;  
 vague vapours pearl fire hydrant and chain-link fence;  
 and the homeless gaze with satire or indifference  
 from cardboard boxes on a ‘commercial site’  
 as she sets out on her epic expedition.

Subverting social stereotypes, it is significant that Mahon should put a woman in the motorcycle’s seat; that she is also a “heroine” forges a link with Crane’s ‘The Dance’ (CCP 76-79). Crane’s protagonist leaves the city via the river and travels back in time to a mythic past. Here he encounters a tribal dance where Maquokeeta, a captured warrior, is ritually burned at the stake and, in death, is married to Pocahontas; that is, he is united with the American soil. Pocahontas symbolises the American land that, for Whitman (Crane’s primary influence), was sacred. But she also represents, through marriage to an English settler, John Rolfe, interracial union and peaceful co-habitation. Through its presentation of the conjoining of the Old and New worlds, ‘The Dance’ deals with the individual’s spiritual awakening and their sharing in the lives of others. This theme is also dealt with in ‘The River’ (CCP 72-75), which opens with a fragmentary vision of nature and the protagonist in the company of hoboes. “The hoboes”, writes Yvor Winters, “are the intercessors: they introduce the [protagonist] to the soil, to Pocahontas, since they are among the few people left who will take the time really to know the land and its old gods.”<sup>23</sup> The hoboes, criss-crossing the country in their aimless wanderings, have come to know and understand America better than anyone:

With racetrack jargon, – dotting immensity  
 They lurk across her, knowing her yonder breast

Snow-silvered, sumac-stained or smoky blue –

Is past the valley-sleepers, south or west.

The “dream trip” of Mahon’s heroine (the phrase ambiguously conflates ideas of ‘trip of a lifetime’, journey of the imagination, and maybe even drug-induced fantasy) is just such a spiritual awakening that could take her east to Princetown, south to Key West, or east to Sunset Strip in Los Angeles.

The mention of Key West drives us onwards into Mahon’s sequence to the eponymously titled Section XVI (THL 69-71) where Mahon and his lover conduct their own journey backwards in time to more innocent days, “in search of love and poetry”. Cultural allusions to the jazz of Louis Armstrong and the Humphrey Bogart film, Key West, are reminders of the possible conjunction between high and popular aesthetic values that have now been undermined by magazines such as Key Design and its spurious dream of ideal homes. But no home is ideal, and “any structure / presumed permanent” is still at the mercy of natural forces, “a trickle of sand, to a breath of fresh air”. The poem is a comment on man’s forgotten relationship with the earth, with the forces of nature yearning to be “close to the Earth as if murmuring to return”. The mythic simile Mahon forges between ‘El Niño’ and Christ becomes an apocalyptic trope of the terrestrial and the divine combining to prefigure imminent global destruction.

The “epic expedition” of Section II recalls ‘Ave Maria’ and ‘The Dance’, but it is Mahon’s reference to “the homeless” living in “cardboard boxes on a ‘commercial site’” that provides the poem with its central image. In Section IV, ‘Waterfront’ (THL 43-44), Mahon, “having come so far from home”, becomes one of the “Chaste convalescents from an exigent world”, while in Section III, ‘Global Village’, he portrays himself as just

another “undesirable ‘resident alien’ on this shore”. Detachment and dispossession dictate both his solitude and his professed allegiance with the homeless denizens of New York. Section XII, the punningly titled ‘Alien Nation’ (THL 61-62), opens with a barrage of capitalised legends from billboard hoardings, neon signs, and graffiti, which suggest Times Square as the poem’s location. The arch commercialism of the setting provides a stark contrast to the plight of the homeless who Mahon and the reader, made guiltily complicit by the collective pronoun, see in the park:

...We come upon them in the restless dark  
 in the moon-shadow of the World Trade Centre  
 with Liberty’s torch glimmering over the water,  
 glued to a re-run of *The Exterminator*  
 on a portable TV in a corner of Battery Park.

(The pun on “glued”, with its implication of solvent abuse, reinforces the idea of the homeless being ‘stuck’ with their situation.) Mahon takes the language of the impoverished dispossessed and directs it at the reader in an appeal for sympathy and understanding. Alluding to Pound’s ‘Canto LI’ and its denunciation of the capitalism of usury, Mahon writes, “Spare a thought, friend; spare a dime, bud; spare the price of a Bud / for the fourth world of Napoleon’s ‘fifth element’, mud”. Mahon claims to have “no problem calling you my brothers / for I too have been homeless and in detox”. While confession to addiction is commendable – though less subtle than in ‘The Sea in Winter’ – his claim to homelessness, without the ironising benefit of scare quotes, rings hollow. Mahon’s homelessness is metaphorical and metaphysical, unlike the appalling reality suffered by these “wretched buggers”. Stating in his own voice, rather than in one

designed to accommodate a genuinely homeless presence, that “with nowhere to call home / . . . / we are all survivors in this rough terrain” is rather off-key. (Notice the more self-effacing reference to ‘In Belfast’: “We could *all* be saved by keeping an eye on the hill”.) More persuasive is his assertion that homelessness is *almost* as much a question of physical distance from native territory as it is of not having a roof over one’s head: “We are all far from home, be our home still / a Chicago slum, a house under the Cave Hill / or a caravan parked in a field above Cushendun”. Another inauthentic voice emerges in this section and in Section XVIII, ‘The Small Rain’ (THL 75-77). Having referred to the idiolect of “baaad niggas ‘n’ crack hoes” in ‘Alien Nation’, the following lines from ‘The Small Rain’ try to incorporate the experiences of Afro-Americans into the structure of marginalization: “*Hey, man, they got us niggas by the nuts, / Gotta get with the program move our butts*”. But the experiment is unsuccessful and the lines sound contrived and condescending, limiting black experiences by the very brevity of the references. Mahon has tried to invoke and draw attention to the tide of Crane’s “floating niggers” who, ambiguously, either are the victims of violence and injustice who “swell” the river with their bodies, or who provide the voices that “swell” with the haunting spiritual, ‘Deep River’, as a way of staving off the fear of dying, but he has failed spectacularly.

Despite these shortcomings, Mahon’s observations of homelessness are clearly coloured by Crane’s depiction of the hoboes in ‘The River’. “They win no frontier by their wayward plight, / But drift in stillness, as from Jordan’s brow” confers on the hoboes a spiritual nobility dignified by their child-like demeanour and their ability to “touch something like a key”. Their empathy and solicitude for the land makes them the natural inheritors of the soil previously stolen from native Americans to feed the

commercial interests of predominantly European settlers and businessmen. The children of those settlers are now the passengers of the subway train in ‘The Tunnel’ (CCP 99-102), and are separated from the soil and the land’s natural inhabitants by their wealth and privileges. The subway train symbolises the ruin of the land by its linking of homes with the bedlam of Manhattan’s commercial hub. Scenes of death abound in the poem, and the passengers are shown as the walking dead making their way, via the infernal tunnel, to the grave:

For Gravesend Manor change at Chambers Street.

The platform hurries along to a dead stop.

The intent escalator lifts a serenade

Stilly

Of shoes, umbrellas, each eye attending its shoe.

This image is taken from The Waste Land, which in turn borrowed liberally from Dante:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.<sup>24</sup>

The accumulated images of death culminate in a poignant reminder that, should the passengers fail to re-acquaint themselves with the folk of the land, their lives will prove meaningless and spiritually unrewarding:

Here at the water’s edge the hands drop memory;

Shadowless in that abyss they unaccounting lie.

How far away the star has pooled the sea –

Or shall the hands be drawn away, to die?

The hands that once worked the soil now ply their trade in the name of a false god, Mammon, and in a brilliant pun, Crane sees the hands “unaccounting” for their crime of having forgotten their true purpose. To avoid the fate of dying ‘unaccounted for’, he implies that the passengers re-discover their connection with the soil and find that true purpose by resurrecting themselves from a hellish existence:

And yet, like Lazarus, to feel the slope,

The sod and billow breaking, – lifting ground,

–A sound of waters bending astride the sky

Unceasing with some Word that will not die...!

Crane and Mahon both feel that they have become victims of the technology and financial interests that exclude any areas of humanity who do not conform to the demands of the modern world. But whereas Crane perceives the loss of the land in terms relating to the loss of his own poetic inspiration (“Impassioned with some song we failed to sing”), Mahon, in ‘The Small Rain’, prefers to equate the loss of home with the loss of domestic trappings: “the house, the stove in the kitchen, the warm bed, / the hearth, *vrai lieu*, ranged crockery overhead – / ‘felicitous space’ lost to the tribes”. Again Mahon uses self-reference, in this case to ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’, to illustrate his predicament, but unlike the earlier poem he has never truly belonged to the tribes of New York’s homeless. He takes his argument too far in his search for an alliance with the street-dwellers: theirs is an admittedly admirable cause, but the poetry itself fails to convey the truth of his privileged position as free to choose.

## 5.6 The Love of Women

There is a noticeable shift in the tone and quality of his poetry when Mahon deals with the other major themes of ‘The Hudson Letter’, love and women. Whereas female presences in The Bridge act as little more than symbols for the homosexual Crane, Mahon’s invocations of the female are grounded in a desire to make contact with another side to his own consciousness. He seems far more comfortable when describing actual relationships as opposed to imagined or metaphorical ones, and whether addressing his ex-wife, his daughter or his lover, the poetry feels genuine and unforced. We have already seen how Section VIII incorporates one of Mahon’s lapses into an inauthentic voice, but it is also important for introducing the love theme to the sequence. Dealing with the destruction of family, it pits woman against man, wife against husband, as a metaphorical re-enactment of Mahon’s divorce. The poem is designed to illustrate the fact that when a marriage turns sour it is the children who suffer most, and it prepares us for the conciliatory gestures towards his offspring in Sections IX and XI. Having served Tereus with a meal of his own son, the sisters Procne and Philomela turn into a swallow and a nightingale, lyric birds that “convert sex and violence into the winged currency of aesthetic metamorphosis”.<sup>25</sup> It is easy to see how Mahon identifies with Tereus who himself changes into a bird, a hoopoe, “and is furious still”. The poem is a commentary on ‘two wrongs don’t make a right’ morality since revenge ensures that no-one escapes suffering. Mahon tries to divert attention from familial suffering in the autobiographical closing lines, concentrating instead on love’s often unresolved tensions:

...Never mind the hidden agenda, the sub-text;

it’s not really about male arrogance, ‘rough sex’

or vengeful sisterhood, but about art  
and the encoded mysteries of the human heart.

One of these mysteries is the way that, in the minds of many men, love and lust are inseparable, a theme dealt with by Crane in ‘National Winter Garden’ (CCP 94). Section VIII finds a further echo in Crane’s ‘Indiana’ (CCP 80-81) which, written from the perspective of a female pioneer describing her adventures to her son, tells of the bond between mothers that men can never hope to share. Seeing “A homeless squaw” with her baby, the pioneer presents her own child in a gesture of connection and solidarity:

I held you up – I suddenly the bolder,  
Knew that mere words could not have brought us nearer,  
She nodded – and that smile across her shoulder  
Will still endear her.

The conclusion of Section VIII also seems to point towards Crane’s ‘Atlantis’ (CCP 103-5), which states that art (in this case music) and love, when brought together, create unity and harmony: “Make thy love sure – to weave whose song we ply!”

Two other aspects of love, both centring on female presences and values, are found in Section XIII, ‘Sappho in ‘Judith’s Room’’ (THL 63-64), and the following section, ‘Beauty and the Beast’ (THL 65-66). The first of these deposits the Lesbian poet in a modern-day feminist bookshop before revisiting images of the nightingale and the homeless. The poem invokes Sappho’s acolytes – Cydro, Gongula and Anactoria – who are associated with the cult of Aphrodite, and a more contemporary “Sapphic coterie” in the shape of “Djuna, Janis, Gloria, Brooke and Kim”. This conflation of real and mythic women may owe something to Crane’s search for the divine Pocahontas who is

contrasted with the “false avatars” Eve, Magdalene and the Virgin Mary in ‘Three Songs’ (CCP 92-95).<sup>26</sup> These three women, traditionally held up as exemplars of divinity, fail to answer the protagonist’s need for a divine beloved in human form, and along with the “simian Venus” they are all depicted in negative terms: Eve, the first mother, is “homeless” and “unwedded” (Mahon alludes to this in Section X, where he writes in political and geographical terms of being “far from Mother, in the unmarried city”); Magdalene is “the burlesque of our lust – and faith”; and Mary is completely inaccessible. Crane’s women invite lust but not love (“Outspoken buttocks in pink beads / Invite the necessary cloudy clinch / Of beady eyes”), but Mahon portrays his women rather differently. The poem is written almost entirely in the voice of Sappho, but the closing couplet lets in Mahon’s own voice – the only real male presence – as a guide to his own feelings. “Girls all, be with me now and keep me warm – / didn’t I say we’d live again in another form?” is yet another reference to one of his earlier poems, ‘Girls in their Seasons’. Mahon wants ‘Sappho in ‘Judith’s Room’’ to lay claim to the justice of the feminist idea that “Men without women grow stupid”, but the same problem that impedes ‘Alien Nation’ and ‘The Small Rain’ recurs here through what John Goodby calls the failure of “representing otherness with which there is no real engagement”.<sup>27</sup> While Crane tries to make spiritual contact with his goddess, albeit in vain, Mahon cannot overcome the distance forced on him by their sexuality. We get little sense of *understanding* on Mahon’s part since the women are still characterised as “bad girls” performing their “dirty dances” for the benefit of eyes other than men’s. If the poem represents in some way Mahon’s attempt to subvert or overturn female silence (figured by the silent mother of ‘Death and the Sun’) or the murderous masculinity of MacNeice’s

'Belfast', then it fails. Because of its voyeuristic refusal to revolt against the Puritanism that fosters masculine superiority, women are seen as "a threat to the integral, creative male self embarked on an artistic quest".<sup>28</sup> The late addition of Mahon's own voice is an intrusion which suppresses the Sapphic voice and renders the poem a deliberately contrived accommodation of the female: it effectively silences the female voice having first idealised it and brought it forth. While Crane's "gendering of the national territory as female...recognise[s] a female dimension to human experience", Mahon's poem seeks to take control of that territory.<sup>29</sup>

Section XIV, 'Beauty and the Beast', takes its inspiration from King Kong and is again a meditation on male attitudes towards women. Mahon would have us believe that Kong, the outsized figure of male sexuality, "really loves" the Fay Wray character, but once more he cannot avoid the incursion of chauvinism into his appraisal of the film. He quotes Noël Coward's admittedly witty remark that Kong holds Wray "like a suppository" before addressing her as "old girl". Mahon then claims that she "existed most forcibly when faced with terror", as though women only come to life when subjected to the potential horror of excessive or aggressive male sexuality. There is something obscenely lurid about the lines, "Sensitive Kong doesn't interfere with her sexually / though he does *paw* and sniff his fingers, actually, / eyes bright with curiosity", that fails to take account of a female response to such attention. "It's all inconsistent, of course, and disproportionate" is intended as a light-hearted critique of the film's primitive cinematography, but it could just as easily serve as a response to the poem.

Other variations on the love motif are found throughout 'The Hudson Letter'. Section V, 'To Mrs. Moore at Inishannon' (THL 45-46), shares its theme – emigrant

child leaves home to explore the wider world – with Crane's 'Indiana'. The poem could almost stand as a letter from Mahon to his own family as it pokes fun at serious-minded Protestants and describes the migrant's first impression of the New World, which "is like a glimpse of Hell". The poem carries an echo of the opening chapter of Joyce's Finnegans Wake where a letter from an exiled Irishwoman is discovered, and the allusion is probably meant to accentuate the sense of bewilderment also experienced by the reader's first encounter with that novel. Section XI, 'Chinatown' (THL 58-60), portrays a meeting between the poet and his son "under the fairy lights of Brooklyn Bridge". Mahon, the "Polonius of the twilight zone", tries to give advice to Rory, especially regarding the virtues of women, but finally realises that the best he can offer is to "disbelieve / the cynic who tries to tell you how to behave / for, as Confucius said, fine words are seldom humane". This self-mockery is indeed timely, rescuing the poem from the excessive *politesse*, so often found in courtly or devotional lyrics, of Section XV, 'Domnei' (THL 67-68):

Perhaps all this was a deplorable thing,  
a vicious fiction or a coercive myth;  
'but when the earth renews itself in spring  
and whitethorn flowers to hear the blackbird sing  
I too sing, although she whom I admire  
finds little to her taste in what I write.

More successful by far are Mahon's paeans to fellow artists – Section X, 'Auden on St. Mark's Square' (THL 56-57), and Section XVII, 'Imbolc: JBY' (THL 72-74). Comradeship and fellow feeling are the forms of love that dominate in these poems. Like

'Cape Hatteras', where Crane calls on Walt Whitman to lead him onwards in his quest, and 'The Tunnel', in which Crane encounters the ghost of Poe, Mahon's poems use the examples of Auden and Jack B. Yeats to show him "what the examined life involves". Although "a victim of nothing but irony" (itself an ironical remark), Auden might yet hold the key to Mahon's survival:

and if you were often silly  
 or too 'prone to hold forth', you prescribe a cure  
 for our civilization and its discontents  
 based upon *agape*, Baroque opera, common sense  
 and the creative impulse that brought us here,  
 sustaining us now as we face a more boring future.

These lines refer us back to Auden's own elegies to Freud and W.B. Yeats who, to some extent, had taught the young Auden the courage to be himself, "however ridiculous". The allusion to the Yeats elegy prepares the reader for the penultimate poem of 'The Hudson Letter' where Mahon addresses Yeats *père* as "pilgrim father". Mahon's allegiance with J.B. Yeats is partly founded on their both being "recovering Ulster Protestant[s]", which humorously conflates alcoholism with retreat from native soil and religious inheritance. Mahon claims to have learned from Yeats "the priority of the real", the value of the authentic life that will nevertheless prevail on him to live and die "an exile and a stranger".

'The Hudson Letter' hinges on this section's acknowledgement that potentially overwhelming creative atrophy need not be as fatally debilitating as Mahon had once feared, and he can take strength from Yeats's embattled spirit. At long last he appears to

be recovering both the “lost nerve” which had stifled the urge to write for such a protracted period and a spiritual sensibility that would propel him from one of the bleakest periods of his life into a new realm of poetic vision. And only now, employing a quote from W.B. Yeats, can Mahon begin to appreciate fully the voice of the nightingale whose suffering voice exemplifies the pain of creation: “The nightingale sings with its breast against a thorn, / it’s out of pain that personality is born”. This ontological revelation allows Mahon to share J.B. Yeats’s understanding of “the priority of the real” and thereby renew his own vision of life and love. This section further resembles ‘Cape Hatteras’ through its imaginative return to the poet’s homeland, “to perceive once more”, as R.W.B. Lewis puts it, “the mythic beauty of his native earth eternally available beneath the features of the iron age”.<sup>30</sup> When Mahon writes, “I can see a united Ireland from the air” he is not propounding a localised ideological dream, but offering a distanced perspective from which might be gleaned the power to envision and thence transfigure the world in its entirety. Yet this imaginative journey also presents an inward venture whereby the poet achieves an encounter with his younger self. His previous despondency is set to abate with the realisation that “the universe might be *really* ‘magical’”, that the ecstatic possibilities the world affords can far outweigh any despair and terror engendered by the fear of stagnating imagination.

Crane likewise discovered new depths to his mental resilience towards the end of The Bridge. ‘Cape Hatteras’ bears witness to Crane’s tragic vision of humanity’s attempt to conquer terrestrial reality and escape into the stratosphere:

Dream cancels dream in this new realm of fact  
From which we awake into the dream of act;

Seeing himself an atom in a shroud –

Man hears himself an engine in a cloud!

Scientific method signals the impending death of imagination and correspondingly reduces man to a wholly insignificant “atom” without purpose or function. Yet towards the end of ‘The Tunnel’, the penultimate section of The Bridge, Crane begins to ascend from the psychological hell symbolised by the subway tunnel and he “imagine[s] a personal resurrection”<sup>31</sup> that has the hallmarks of divine intervention:

And yet, like Lazarus, to feel the slope,

The sod and billow breaking, - lifting ground,

- A sound of waters bending astride the sky

Unceasing with some Word that will not die...!

Lewis has made the observation that “The Word is the word of perfect love, perfectly and enduringly realized in poetry”.<sup>32</sup> Crane’s transparent exultation at having first survived the decline of his abilities and then having glimpsed the truth of love as eternal and eternally invigorating, leads him to rejoice – at least temporarily – in his survival, twice iterating the line, “Kiss of our agony thou gatherest”.

‘Atlantis’, the concluding section of The Bridge, extends this visionary ecstasy of the eternal beyond the ravages of history towards what Crane terms “Everpresence, beyond time”, at which point he proclaims, “O Love, thy white pervasive paradigm...!” But the reality of the temporal cannot be abandoned completely, and the seasons, as indicated by the “ripe fields”, continue “Revolving through their harvests in sweet torment”. This conjunction of the eternal and the temporal indicates an acknowledgement on Crane’s part that, to quote Lewis once more, “the creative imagination, arises from the

knowledge that vision is precarious at best, and that it is never final. It scarcely endures beyond the moment of its utterance; one must always struggle to recover it and then go beyond it.”<sup>33</sup>

Such transience introduces the final section of ‘The Hudson Letter’, which begins “Once upon a time it was let me out and let me go - / the night flight over deserts, amid cloud, / a dream of discipline and fit solitude”. That desire for escape into solitude has passed, however, and the older and wiser Mahon now demands “take me back and take me back in”. That line is addressed to the fold of humanity he now wishes to rejoin. Mahon, however, is not oblivious to the fact that poetry which seeks to rescue desire from despair requires solitude. Hence we find him returning at the close of the sequence to familiar ground. Fusing the image of light, both natural and artificial, with Crane’s hellish tunnel, Mahon writes, “Neon and cold stars / light up the Trump Tower and the United Nations, / the marble halls of finance, the subway walls of the brain”. The temporal reality of capitalism is unavoidable, but Mahon can still proclaim optimistically that “all will survive somehow” thanks to his rediscovered capacity for love.

Both The Bridge and ‘The Hudson Letter’ contain numerous examples of the many forms of human love: maternal, paternal, fraternal, heterosexual, homosexual, Sapphic and platonic love are all on display in these two lyric sequences. But for Mahon, merely rediscovering the delights of a mutually harmonious relationship is not enough. He knows he must also learn to stave off the insidious incursions of complacency that kill emotion as surely as they destroy poetic inspiration. The search for “love and poetry” of Section XVI, ‘Key West’, is both telling and poignant. For the search to find, capture and retain love is, like the quest for poetic vision and inspiration, never-ending. Like Crane,

Mahon wants to redeem the past, but this cannot be achieved until man has redeemed the present; until the dispossessed and disenfranchised (the homeless, women, ethnic minorities) receive recognition of their humanity; until man develops his receptivity to mystical and spiritual experiences. In other words, modern man must learn to cultivate and understand immanent reality, while improving his spiritual consciousness by recognising his intrinsic weaknesses: he must allow himself to become vulnerable and allow love into his life. Salvation does not rely on God but on taking part in the lives of others. ‘The Hudson Letter’ ends with a series images, all recounting pathos, nostalgia and redemption, that reinforce the difficulty of this eternal quest:

I'd say make all safe and harmonious in the end

did I not know the voyage is never done

for, even as we speak, somewhere a plane

gains altitude in the moon's exilic glare

or a car slips into gear in a silent lane...

I think of the homeless, no rm. at the inn;

Far off, the gaseous planets where they spin.....

When does the thaw begin?

We have been too long in the cold. – Take us in; take us in!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Derek Mahon, “Poetry in Northern Ireland,” Twentieth Century Studies 4 (1970): 90.

<sup>2</sup> Mahon 91.

<sup>3</sup> Because The Hudson Letter is the title of both a collection and a long poem contained within that collection, I have chosen to underline when referring to the book and to use single quotation marks when referring to the poem. Although contravening conventions of MLA citation, I hope this will reduce the confusion and clumsiness that would doubtless arise were both to be underlined.

<sup>4</sup> See Hugh Haughton, “‘The Importance of Elsewhere’: Mahon and Translation,” The Poetry of Derek Mahon, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Ulster Editions and Monographs: 11 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 2002) 165; Neil Corcoran, “‘Resident Alien’: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon,” Kennedy-Andrews, 245.

<sup>5</sup> Edna Longley, ‘Looking Back from The Yellow Book,’ Kennedy-Andrews, 42.

<sup>6</sup> Langdon Hammer and Brom Weber, eds. O My Land, My Friends: The Selected Letters of Hart Crane (New York: Four Walls, 1997) 345.

<sup>7</sup> Qtd. in R.W.B. Lewis, The Poetry of Hart Crane: A Critical Study (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967) 14. Lewis’s quotation is a corruption of a couplet from Blake’s ‘Auguries of Innocence’: “We are led to Believe a Lie / When we see not Thro the Eye”. William Blake, Blake’s Poetry and Designs, ed. Mary Lynn Johnson, and John E. Grant (New York: Norton, 1979) 212. Whether the corruption is the fault of Lewis, Crane or someone else is unknown.

<sup>8</sup> Terence Brown, “Derek Mahon: The Poet and Painting,” Irish University Review 24.1 (1994): 39.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Gittings, ed. Letters of John Keats (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970) 73.

Strictly speaking, Keats is alluding to Shelley’s ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ here:  
 “Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost consecrate / With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon /  
 Of human thought or form, – where art thou gone?” See Percy Bysshe Shelley, Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Donald H. Reiman, and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977): 93-95.

<sup>10</sup> Michael O’Neill, “John Montague and Derek Mahon: The American Dimension,” Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations 3.1 (1999): 59, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Qtd. in Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade, rev. ed. (New York: Free-Macmillan, 1965) 258.

<sup>12</sup> Seamus Deane, “Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism,” Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1975) 19.

<sup>13</sup> Hammer and Weber 259.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Gelpi, A Coherent Splendor: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-1950 (1987; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 418.

<sup>15</sup> Hammer and Weber 430.

<sup>16</sup> Hammer and Weber 117.

<sup>17</sup> James E. Miller, Jr., The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction: Whitman’s Legacy in the Personal Epic (1979; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981) 177.

<sup>18</sup> See Yvor Winters, In Defense of Reason, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: Swallow, 1947) 591.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis 259.

<sup>20</sup> John Keats, Complete Poems, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard, 1982) 279-81.

<sup>21</sup> Earl R. Wasserman, The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems (1953; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967) 179.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis 247.

<sup>23</sup> Winters 592.

<sup>24</sup> T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (1963; London: Faber, 1990) 65.

<sup>25</sup> Haughton 167.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis 342.

<sup>27</sup> John Goodby, “‘The Soul of Silence’: Derek Mahon’s Masculinities,” Kennedy-Andrews 223.

<sup>28</sup> Goodby 208.

<sup>29</sup> Goodby 208.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis 326.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis 364.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis 364.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis 373.

## 6. “the delights of modern life”: Mahon, Baudelaire and Nerval

### 6.1 The Poets of the Nineties

‘Dowson and Company’, the third poem in Mahon’s first full collection, Night-Crossing, is an irreverent ‘celebration’ of late nineteenth-century aestheticism. The poem ostensibly pokes fun at “important carelessness”, the hallmark of decadence and dandyism, while questioning the lasting historical significance of these poets (“I had almost forgotten you had been”), and their own self-important, self-deluding aspirations: “Perhaps you found that you had to *queue* / For a ticket into hell, / Despite your sprays of laurel” (NC 4). Along with Yeats, Richard Le Gallienne, Lionel Johnson, and Arthur Symons, Ernest Dowson was a member of the Rhymers Club, a group of London-based poets which might be seen as a distant forerunner of Philip Hobsbaum’s Group of 1960s Belfast, which similarly met informally but exercised rigorous critiques of each other’s work. Although friendly with many of its number, Mahon was never a paid-up member of the Group, and his natural aversion to such coteries hovers quietly behind this particular poem. From the Belfast Group sprang a new generation of young Northern Irish poets, among them Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, although to date it has been the Rhymers Club which has had a more far-reaching influence. Indeed its impact on the literary scene of the 1890s could be said to have heralded the advent of modernism. Numbering among their associates such members of the Pater-inspired Aesthetic movement as Wilde and Beardsley, their remit was straightforward – to abandon the prolixity and moral rhetoric associated with Victorian literature in favour of “the unpretentious pursuit of pure song”.<sup>1</sup> Their chosen task was not merely to simplify poetry or either reduce its status or limit the formal aspects of its composition, however;

what they sought to create was technical lyric perfection stripped of the maudlin sentimentality and flabby rhetorical devices they discerned in the work of Browning and Tennyson. Construction of an aesthetic mandate that would bring English poetry into line with the ‘pure’ poetry of their French precursors and counterparts, most notably Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine, was their ultimate goal.

At first glance Mahon’s poem strikes a derisory pose towards the tenets of orthodox religious faith, asking, “Did death and its transitions disappoint you, / And the worms you so looked forward to?”, while simultaneously demanding that Dowson and his cohorts “ask no favour of reincarnation”. Religion cast a long shadow across the nineties poets; Symons’s father was a Methodist minister, while Dowson, Johnson and Beardsley were all converts to Catholicism. In a quasi-autobiographical turn the poem registers a degree of empathy for the “helpless wisdom” of the movement’s main exponents. For the nineties poets, poetry itself became a form of religion that relied for its truth not on strict moral rectitude but on life lived in accordance with the self’s authentic quest for emotion-driven experience. Mahon characterises these artists as asserting their individuality by retiring weary from a world that refused or was unable to see beyond their self-constructed, self-alienating façades. The dandyism they wholeheartedly embraced had, since Baudelaire, been an affectation of aloof insensitivity towards the world. It took sartorial elegance and personal grooming as ways of setting the poets apart from the general run of men in order to reinforce their cult of the self. The nineties poets inherited from the French Symbolists the desire to expose, articulate, and even embody the tendency towards a consciousness of rupture and separation, an inclination to challenge accepted social and cultural norms. Even Yeats affected “a dignity and

courtliness of manner” in line with pure poetry’s reliance on abstraction and intellectualism.<sup>2</sup> Dandyism’s pose of excessive refinement represented a backlash against a civilisation with which the nineties poets were bored, and these outward signs of sophisticated extravagance concealed an unprecedented tolerance toward suffering. Yeats labelled them ‘the tragic generation’, partly in recognition of a significant proportion of their number dying young, mainly through alcoholism, but also, one suspects, because of their jaded view of a world where the new held no shock. Mahon describes their eyes as being “Bleak from discoveries”, although this characterisation is later modulated by an ascription of naïve innocence: “You were all children in your helpless wisdom”. This line suggests the intrinsic disorder and lack of control exhibited by the nineties poets, an attitude exemplified by Dowson’s predisposition towards self-pity: “I was not sorrowful, but only tired / Of everything that I ever desired”.<sup>3</sup>

Outward appearance masked a serious collective intellectual purpose, however. We can detect in their work, particularly when taking into consideration Wilde’s iconoclasm, a continuation of Baudelaire’s formulation of the dandy as a character in revolt against triviality. The dandy occupies a strangely contingent position as he wants to rebel against the facile maunderings he discerns in mainstream society while craving acceptance by it, even though this means acceptance on his own terms. This stance assumed the status of a cultural crusade in that the dandies’ calculated affectations of appearance and demeanour reflected a need to deviate from social norms; this included rebellion against conventional morality, which would in turn create a space for the renewal of aesthetics and poetry. For Baudelaire, dandyism was an inevitable

consequence of social transition that would foster the advent of “a new sort of aristocracy”, and this aristocracy would be comprised of the poets.<sup>4</sup>

But in 1890s England any attempt made by the ‘aristocratic’ poet to forge a new, mercurially sophisticated form of identity was destined to be short-lived. The country was in a period of transition, certainly, but the austere temperament of Victorian England was more inclined to see such characters as eccentrics or lunatics than as artists finding a vent for authentic self-expression. Only in France was such behaviour tolerated, for only in France could “the dandy ideal...become an abstraction, a refinement of intellectual rebellion”.<sup>5</sup> Mahon’s attitude to their self-delusion seems to be one of pity, a sympathetic response to their failed ideals: “For you, if anyone, / Have played your part / In holding nature up to art...”. The ellipsis and equivocation speak volumes for a project that ultimately failed to emulate the success of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine and Rimbaud. While the final stanza speaks of the beauty of nature and gives the dead poets the assurance that “the day / Will be all sunlight”, it nevertheless concludes with an intimation of time’s inexorable (“dutiful”) cyclicity. Nocturnal and cosmological images denote darkness and infinity broken only by the stars’ random spots of dimly-illuminating florescence, the implication being that artistic endeavour will prove ultimately futile when set against the universe’s unstoppable march towards oblivion. Mahon understands their tragedy all too clearly having shared in their privileged middle-class ideals (see ‘Afterlives’, TSP 1-2) and the struggle to promote a form of identity which reacts against a reductive society’s simplistic demands for conformity:

And I, too, have suffered  
Obscurity and derision,

And sheltered in my heart of hearts

A light to transform the world. ('The Forger', NC 20-21)

For the likes of Dowson, Johnson, and John Davison, poetry similarly became a refuge from both the chaos of their private lives and the public's perceptions of them, but ultimately even poetry failed to provide restitution: "for each of them either circumstance or temperament or both made too deep a gulf between the creative spirit in him and the life he lived, and this left him nothing to believe in, so that poetry withered and life became meaningless".<sup>6</sup>

Mahon returns to this theme in 'Remembering the 90s' (TYB 28-29), section VIII of The Yellow Book, a lyric sequence which, at 57 pages long, seems deliberately designed to poke fun at the nineties poets' creed of brevity. The collection's title is itself borrowed from the most famous literary magazine of the 1890s and, in its depiction of cultural decadence and its premonition of society in decline, ironically juxtaposes the *fin de siècle* epoch with its equivalent of a century later. Here, Mahon's portrayal of the nineties poets is rather more forthright than that of 'Dowson and Company', making explicit references in an up-to-date context to the alcoholism and taboo-defying moral values displayed by various members of their company:

A long time since the hearties and the aesthetes,  
 imperious questors and saint-faced degenerates,  
 old boys of Yeats's 'tragic' (pathetic) generation  
 in cricketing blazers and inept bow-ties  
 who ate the altar rails, pawned pride for drinks,  
 who died of thirst *auprès de la fontaine*

or tumbled from high stools in the Rose & Crown.

There is, of course, a tongue-in-cheek quality to all of this, not least because of Mahon's own slide into alcoholism in the 1970s, and he soon chides himself into proclaiming them "heroes" while describing himself as "a decadent who lived to tell the story". (This may also be a backhanded allusion to Yeats who was the only member of the Rhymers Club to survive into old age without succumbing to alcoholism or, as in the case of Arthur Symons, insanity.)

'Remembering the 90s', whose opening lines bring to mind the first stanza of Yeats's 'Among School Children', is a catalogue of allusions, both explicit and implicit, to many of the main figures involved with French Symbolism and the English Aesthetic movement. Yeats, Dowson, Johnson, Le Gallienne, and Symons are all named directly, while Dowson's poem, 'Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae', and Symons's seminal critique The Symbolist Movement in Literature, the first work in English dedicated to an assessment of French poetry from Balzac to Maeterlink, provide blatant references. Although the real point of the poem is to express his millenarian fear for the continued existence of the printed word when faced with "the known future" of computers and the global domination of technology, Mahon is still sceptical of the lasting value not only of the nineties poets' work but also of his own, proclaiming their "indolent, restless gift" to be

at best makeshift,  
burning without warmth or illumination,  
each verse co-terminous with its occasion,  
each line the pretext for a precious cadence,

I keep alight the cold candle of decadence.

The poem ends on a translation of Verlaine's famous dismissal of any writing not possessing the quality of music, '*Et tout le reste est littérature*'. Yet even as the poem draws to a close, Mahon cannot resist the temptation of parody. By bracketing the second 't' of "lit(t)éature" he creates a three-way play on the word. First, he draws ironic attention to the French word, ensuring that the reader familiar with Verlaine's remark is in no doubt that this is a translation of the quotation; second, he pokes fun at both himself and the nineties poets by parodying the secondary meaning of *littérature* as a man of letters; third, he compounds the parody through the neologistic conflation of 'litter' and 'literature'. Bemoaning a technological age when books have become relics of a bygone era and are useful only to the superstitious and the truly wise ("astrologer and mage"), and where the litter of "*real* books" lie unread and gathering dust, "like vintage wines surviv[ing] / among the antiquities", the poem's irony resides in showing that technology (as much a form of artifice as "most of what we did and wrote") has the capacity to preserve the written word for eternity. The poem ironically questions the relevance art has in the real world, while staking a more straightforward claim for art's continuing importance. Although destined to become "a futile project since, in the known future, / new books will be rarities in techno-culture", he hopes that books will still be written "for love" rather than "for prize-money". As an aesthetic dictum, this bears more than a passing resemblance to Beckett's claim that "wisdom...consists not in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire".<sup>7</sup> The outcome of this "ablation" is the abandonment of self and the seductions of ambition to self-understanding and the communication of emotion.

Another example of Mahon's flair for word play occurs earlier in the poem through his allusion to "*les amours jaunes*". Literally 'the yellow loves', the phrase functions as a referent both to the colour which came to symbolise the decade (hence The Yellow Book) and to Corbière's only collection. But, when translated as 'the jaundiced loves', it also comes to signify the nineties poets' degradation, their "apostasies", and their "celibacy or satyriasis". The poem's note of sardonic mockery is directed at the cult of preciousness that pervaded their calculated and haughty aestheticism – "the most of what we did and wrote was artifice". Moreover, by associating himself with the nineties poets through the collective pronoun, Mahon satirises his own struggle to come to terms both with his poetic heritage and with the fear that it is no longer possible to express anything original in poetry: "surviving even beyond the age of irony / to the point where the old stuff comes round again". Yet the cold aestheticism Mahon satirises did not belong exclusively to, nor even originate with, the nineties poets; exclusiveness of style, manner and temperament had been promulgated previously in Baudelaire's The Painter of Modern Life.

## 6.2 “Echoes of equinoctial snores”

Before we consider Mahon's debt to Baudelaire and Nerval, it is worth looking first at the impact other French poets have had on his work. Even before the appearance of Night-Crossing Mahon had been steadily engaged in a discourse with the radically alienated poets of the French Symbolist movement. Much like existentialism, Symbolism eludes precise definition, being a movement rather than a fully formulated theory or code of practice. It developed in an age which had lost much of its belief in traditional

religious systems, although the poetry of many of its practitioners, most notably Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine, retained certain elements of Christian teachings (Baudelaire's diabolism, for instance, can be seen as an inversion of Catholic dogma). Symbolism was construed as a 'religion of art', expounding a belief in a transcendental, mystical order through which an ideal world could be apprehended in the here and now. As Edna Longley puts it, Symbolism was effectively "an effort to get beyond words and discursiveness, to figure a dimension beyond tangible reality", and we find evidence for Mahon's ironic take on this idea in such poems as 'The Mute Phenomena', 'An Image from Beckett', and 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'.<sup>8</sup> The Symbolist poet eschews society which, because of its transience and vulgarity, forces the poet into a state of withdrawal. This disenchantment characterises Mahon's adopted role as *poète maudit*, where he relinquishes communality in favour of residence – either real or metaphorical – in various attics and ivory towers. For Mahon, Symbolism presents an opportunity for restraint and even reticence, and it allows his poetry to intimate rather than express outright. His affinity with the French Symbolists is compounded by scepticism towards the English aesthetes of the 1890s and his modernist bearings, as mediated by Yeats, Eliot, Stevens and Pound. Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley is in one sense an ironic take on the preciousness and cold aestheticism of the nineties poets, and in another sense a satirical rejoinder to the display of artifice exhibited by dandyism. Hugh Selwyn Mauberley is concerned with "the self's presentation" and "its display of surface", which helps establish "the revelation of...numinous objects".<sup>9</sup> Such objects, again, constitute the mute phenomena of Mahon's ironically proposed ideal world which forms one aspect of his own highly personal symbolic strategy.

In the early 1960s, several poems were published in the journals Icarus, Dubliner and The Dublin Magazine that betrayed Mahon's Francophile leanings: they included translations of Baudelaire's '*De Profundis Clamavi*' and 'Élévation', one of two poems by Corbière called 'Épigraphe', and the appositely titled original composition, 'Poete Maudit'. None of these poems were subsequently re-published, but Night-Crossing does contain one poem, 'Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc', which alludes to the town where Corbière went to school, along with an abridged imitation of Villon's 'Le Lais'. His most recent work has continued this trend, resulting in the publication of The Seaside Cemetery, a version of Valèry's 'Le Cimetière marin', and Birds, a close translation of Oiseaux by Saint-John Perse. Each poem retains the balance between detachment and desire, and between the natural world and human consciousness, that are recurrent features of his translation work.

The Seaside Cemetery deals with what is attainable both in poetry and in life. Its focus of attention is neither the seaside nor the cemetery but the forces of nature: the sun provides the link between pure light and human understanding where a change in the quality of light equates with a change in the nature of experience; the sea is identified with both variety and order, its tidal unpredictability being the very thing that defines its constancy; and the seemingly motionless sky intensifies both human variability and the relative stability of consciousness. The equilibrium of motion and immobility is reflected in the mental equilibrium figured by the conflict between the external and internal pressures of being and knowing:

The future, here already, scarcely moves.

A quick insect scratches the dry leaves;

everything is exhausted, scorched by the air

into I don't know what rigorous form.

Dazed with diversity, the enormous swarm

of life is bitter-sweet and the mind clear. (TSC Section XII)

Mediating between presence and absence, the poet ascertains the field of the possible as belonging to the world and within mortal bounds: the derangement of the senses created by the world's "diversity" can only be comprehended once the mind has achieved clarity.

But this is not to say that clarity leads to poetic purity, since purity ends only in disillusionment and detachment from life, so the poet wants the "sun-dazzled pages" (TSC Section XXIV) of his notebook to fly away so that he might re-enter and re-acquaint himself with the physical world.

Mediation is similarly at the heart of Birds. A *méditation poétique* in prose rather than a fully-fledged poem, it equates poetic creation with the shapes of flight: "Birds, conceived by a first inflection and destined for long resonance, move like words to a cosmic rhythm, inscribing themselves instinctively in the great vagrant poem of the evolving earth" (B 23). Just as a bird can span the open skies in free disassociation from the terrestrial, so the poet explores *la distance intérieur* of his imagination. "Each is a wanderer", writes Roger Little, "each a mediator, dwelling in ambiguity, with a twofold allegiance to earth and air, body and spirit."<sup>10</sup> Mahon has always been fascinated by the metaphorical opportunities afforded by birds and the avian symbolism of poetic vision. He takes up this theme in Section VI of 'The Hudson Letter' (THL 47-48) where, having escaped from the Bronx zoo, a group of seabirds "flap in exhilaration and growing fear" above New York. Now homeless, the birds are identified with the dispossessed people

living on the streets below. Posing the rhetorical question “where on earth can they go?” Mahon fears for their safety “in the fight for survival on the city street / with urban gulls, crows, and other toughs of the air”. The association confers on the human homeless a relation with the poet; they are free to travel (as the poet is free to imagine) yet they are also trapped by poverty (as the poet is limited by language). This sympathy with the disenfranchised is also found in his earlier translations.

‘Legacies’ (NC 35-38), a shortened version of Villon’s ‘Le Lais’, is a witty and irreverent monologue on the writing of the poet’s last will and testament. Its conversational tone prefigures Mahon’s later verse letters while establishing a thematic reference point also taken up in ‘An Image from Beckett’. Villon’s will heaps scorn and contempt on the uncaring world which has rejected him, and Mahon’s version holds fast to the features that make the original such a barbed denunciation of society: bawdiness (“to kick against the pricks” – an explicit allusion both to Pound’s poem, ‘Mr. Nixon’ and to Beckett’s short story cycle); cliché (“to pull myself together”); colloquialism (“she treated me like scum”); and pointedly ironic humour:

And to the barber I bequeath  
 My accumulated locks of hair,  
 And these in full and outright gift –  
 My old shoes to the shoemaker,  
 My old clothes to the ragman when  
 I finally get through with them,  
 Eaten away by moths and lice –  
 At rather less than retail price.

The poem also pokes fun at the possibility of the speaker-as-lover joining “the amorous elect” in the afterlife through ironic sexual metaphor that reveals a distrust of language:

And if I choose to misconstrue  
 A casual word or lingering glance  
 That charged my body through and through  
 As having some significance,  
 I have surely learnt my lesson now –  
 My heart is torn out by the root.  
 Now I must turn elsewhere and put  
 Some other pasture to the plough.

But Mahon’s concerns extend beyond the literary and the pleasures of the flesh, and by taking up the cause of the alienated and dispossessed the poem stands as a rehearsal for his translations of Baudelaire. “I can find no cure at all, / My best bet is to go away” figures death as ostracism from a society too preoccupied by its own selfish demands to care about a starving poet.

Villon “offers the model of ironic destitution, his perky bravado a rebuke for less debonaire poetics and ways of life”, writes Terence Brown.<sup>11</sup> But despite the obvious attraction Mahon feels towards Villon, this did not prevent him going in search of a more “debonaire poetics” in his third volume, The Snow Party. Here we find, on consecutive pages, ‘The Window’ (TSP 25), ‘A Hermit’ (TSP 26), and ‘The Apotheosis of Tins’ (TSP 27), three poems whose origins can be traced to French poets. ‘The Window’ is an ideogram based on the Calligrammes of Apollinaire. Windows are integral features of Mahon’s poetry, providing him with a means of observing the world, usually from on

high. The shape of the ideogram is formed by rows of “woodwoodwood” and “windowwindowwindow” to give the vestigial outline of the object, while a single “wind” blows through the centre of the ‘frame’. The words are shaped to provide a ‘window’ onto the world, but the immediate visual impact is lost as soon as the words are read. Reading the ‘poem’ dismantles the identification of the object that the word-shapes suggest. Though an interesting experiment, it is “too much a work of poetics to have at stake what makes a good poem”.<sup>12</sup>

‘A Hermit’ (later re-titled ‘The Mayo Tao’) and ‘The Apotheosis of Tins’ suffer a similar fate. Modelled on the experimental prose poems of Baudelaire and, to a lesser extent, Rimbaud, they make little or no recourse to harmony and rhythm, the poetic effect being related more to the poet’s emotions. As a result, they replicate the same problem faced by Baudelaire: an excess of lyric tenderness. Their common theme, vocalising abandoned and forgotten ‘mute phenomena’, is both absurd and touching as the voices of stones and tins express their immanence and dignity. However, their discursive flow is rather too melancholic, and Mahon must have realised this for himself since they were both revised and re-configured into irregular stanzaic forms for inclusion in Poems 1962-1978 (they have been re-jigged again for the Collected Poems). Mahon’s revisions have significantly toughened the poems up: their lineation now privileges phrases such as “a snow-lit silence”, “the stars in the mud”, and “pathos of mackerel”, accentuating the “immanence of these things” and their quiet integrity and detachment.

Mahon continues to spotlight the cause of underdogs and scapegoats through his translations of poems by Corbière. ‘The Poet in Residence’ (P 103-6) takes ‘Le poète contumace’ and, by whittling down the original by almost half, constructs a more focused

discourse on the poet's futile attempts to express himself. Like all the other poems in Les Amours Jaunes, 'Le poète contumace' tends towards anonymity and silence. It is dominated by self-effacement and an evasive irony, destabilising the lyric 'I'. Mahon is just as indirect, and he wants us to believe that he refuses to be identified completely with the "feral poet" living in "the one-eyed tower". But the self-mocking intratextual allusion to the monocular perspective of 'Ecclesiastes' ("close one eye and be king") and 'In Belfast' ("keeping an eye on the hill") prevents this from being totally convincing. The same perspectival device is found in 'Old Roscoff' (SP 128-29) which, through subtle changes to Corbière's wording, transfers the observational vantage point from mid nineteenth-century Brittany to late twentieth-century Ulster. Political histories commingle as Franco-English conflicts are re-imagined to suggest an Irish context. Roscoff is sleeping "with your one watchful eye / On England these three hundred years", but while Corbière envisages an end to hostilities, Mahon can only imagine an uneasy peace from the point of view of "dream-ensnared" childhood:

Your cannon, swept by wintry rain,  
 Lie prostrate on their beds of mud.  
 Their mouths will never speak again;  
 They sleep the long sleep of the dead,  
 Their only roar the adenoidal  
 Echoes of equinoctial snores  
 From the cold muzzle pointing still  
 At England, trailing a few wild flowers.

When Mahon trains his own watchful eye on anywhere other than Ireland it is still with “an Irish eye”; but when looking at Ireland directly, his other eye casts around always on the lookout for a distant elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Curiously, he refuses to be drawn into a political diatribe in ‘The Poet in Residence’, even though it is ripe for such treatment. Corbière’s poet, standing at his window, is ignorant of the people in the street below but is observed by them. Disconcerted by his solitude they speculate as to whether he is a leper or “more likely an Englishman”.<sup>14</sup> Mahon is reluctant to be so specific, preferring to describe the poet as “a foreigner of some kind”. Whether this is because Mahon does not care to pass comment on his Anglo-Irish heritage or whether he is simply trying to empathise with the misanthropic poet is unclear; but the dramatic tension of the original abates and Mahon’s version is the weaker for it. He does, however, keep a line from the original that indicates a recurrent theme in his work, and that theme will be explored in greater depth in the chapters on Beckett and Auden. Perverting Descartes’s *Cogito ergo sum* as an ironic justification of existence, the estranged poet, in a letter to his (imagined?) lover, begins, “I write, therefore I am”. Self-flagellating attacks on the poet’s compulsion to write occur as frequently in Corbière’s work as in Mahon’s, and examples include “Bungler of life without scope”, “I would sing (as usual, off-key)”, and “Poet, despite his verse”.<sup>15</sup>

Mahon’s translation of a selection of stanzas from Rimbaud’s ‘Le bateau ivre’ is rather less self-ironising. In ‘from The Drunken Boat’ (THBN 53-54) Mahon concentrates on the elements of Rimbaud’s poem that provide a quasi-autobiographical reading. The poem juxtaposes an apocalyptic vision of mankind’s future with the solitary personal adventure of the poet in search of absolute liberty, speaking of the poet’s

willingness to be subjected to every kind of experience. But the quest can be dangerously deluding. The sea's derangement of the poet's senses leads him to a paradoxical conclusion that conflates determinism and free will: "I let / The current carry me where I choose to go". Cast adrift in the drunken boat of poetry, the poet's solitude results in a disenchantment more poignant than the self-effacing dismissal of poetry we find in Corbière, and he turns to memories of his youth to remind himself of a more stable and sheltered – if constricting – existence. Echoing the early memories of 'Courtyards in Delft' (THBN 9-10) – "I lived there as a boy", "A strange child with a taste for verse" – 'from The Drunken Boat' returns its "only child" to the pond where he once sailed "a toy canoe". Although the pond is landlocked, symbolising entrapment, the lonely child is nevertheless hopeful enough to launch the canoe in the first place. The poem therefore ends on a starting point, triumphing over failure as the wistful, now mature poet vows to carry on with his quest for freedom.

By extracting and translating only particular stanzas from the original, Mahon transforms the poem into a personal meditation on the self which simultaneously figures Belfast as a place of entrapment. It is a characteristic strategy, combining physical and imaginative restlessness in a paradoxical trope of longing for home and desire to escape its limitations. But thoughts of returning home are banished in 'The Travel Section' (THL 19), a version of Laforgue's 'Albums'. Laforgue's original parodies both urban and pastoral life, refusing to allow the poet a place in the world, and Mahon transforms it, from his New York viewpoint, into an "ironic critique of the romance of rural America".<sup>16</sup> In the process he satirises his own sense of place in the land of Mark Twain (Mahon parodies himself as "a sort of post-literate, Huck Finn child of nature / or

existential citizen of the future") and Zane Grey (notice the quiet reference to Grey's popular Western, Riders of the Purple Sage) by looking longingly towards Europe:

And if fond memories of the Place Vendôme  
 or the high hopes of my contemporaries  
 should tempt me into thoughts of going home  
 or the rocky buzzard come to symbolize  
 the infinite, as opposed to the purple sage,  
 I'll start a new cult of the Golden Age  
 with its own code based on holistic books,  
 blithe and post-modern, for the post-pastoral folks.

Mahon's most sustained dialogue with a French poet is found in his brilliant translations of Philippe Jaccottet. 'Three Poems after Jaccottet' (P 83-84), comprising 'The Voice', 'Ignorance' and 'The Gipsies', appeared initially in Poems 1962-1978, but it was with the publication of Jaccottet's Selected Poems (later abridged and re-titled Words in the Air) that Mahon's affinity with the Swiss-born Frenchman is fully realised. Mahon is a fine critic of Jaccottet's work, and his penetrating introduction to the Selected Poems illustrates admirably their shared belief in the power of natural phenomena:

He is a secular mystic, an explorer of '*le vrai lieu*' ('the real place'). 'The natural object is always the adequate symbol', said Pound; and Jaccottet's symbols are the elemental, pre-Socratic ones: tree, flower, sun, moon, road, mountain, wind, water, bird, house, lamp. He is fascinated by light, especially what John le Carré calls 'the religious light between dawn and morning'; and by lamplit twilight, *l'heure bleue*. His characteristic posture

is that of a man alone in a garden watching the sun rise, '*rebaptisé chaque matin par le jour*' ('rebaptized each morning by daybreak'), or seated at his desk at dusk *à la clarté déserte de sa lampe*.<sup>17</sup>

Reading this list of Jaccottet's poetic characteristics it is easy to see why Mahon is drawn to him: natural phenomena, light, diurnal renewal (see the last line of 'The Sea in Winter', for instance), and the image of the solitary poet "seated at his desk at dusk" are all characteristic of Mahon's work too. Mahon also identifies the role played by silence, similarly exploited by Mallarmé and Beckett, in Jaccottet's poetic in the way it communicates a note of existential authenticity:

Jaccottet's poems take place, characteristically, in the absence of other noise. Existential lyrics [a phrase Mahon also applies to Beckett's poems], minimalist and disabused, they leave, in Beckett's phrase, 'a stain upon the silence'. But to the tentative birdsong, running water and rustling leaves of the Jaccottet landscape one might add an intellectual music, what Dryden would have called the music of the spheres.<sup>18</sup>

Although Jaccottet's work lacks certain qualities we have come to expect from Mahon – "humour, the demotic, the abrasive surfaces of the modern world"<sup>19</sup> – they each have a keen eye for minute observations regarding landscape, climatic change, and the way poetic truth emerges from meditations on elusive encounters with the physical world:

Night is not what we think, the reverse of fire,  
sun-death and the negation of the light,  
but a device to discover  
whatever remains invisible in daylight. ('Daybreak')<sup>20</sup>

Charged with epiphanic promise, these lines echo the potential revelation of the world's mysteries and ecstasies contained in Mahon's 'Epitaph for Robert Flaherty' (NC 29):

The relief to be out of the sun –  
 To have travelled north once more  
 To my islands of dark ore,  
 Where winter is so long  
 Only a little light  
 Gets through, and that perfect.

Terence Brown has stated that it would be a mistake to consider Jaccottet Mahon's "identical French poetic twin...In fact Mahon's attraction to the work of the French poet is as much a discovery of otherness as it is the identification of a poetic double."<sup>21</sup> But Jaccottet and Mahon are closer in spirit than Brown seems to realise. Like Mahon, Jaccottet is drawn towards poetry that refuses to attract attention to itself through excessively strange or convoluted syntax, form or subject matter; all the features, in other words, that poets of the symbolist tradition use to draw attention to themselves. Finely modulated and humbly conversational, Jaccottet's poetry stands at the opposite end of the spectrum to the self-conscious poetics of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Apollinaire.

If anything, Mahon's discovery of otherness owes more to the other French poets he has translated than to Jaccottet. France "serves Mahon as an imaginative escape route from the tedium of the provincial and the fixity of an inherited or achieved identity"; it also shines a light on his destabilised sense of belonging that originates in his self-exile from Ireland.<sup>22</sup> Otherness, as an attraction of opposites or near-opposites, provides Mahon with a contrasting viewpoint from which he can scrutinise and make sense of his

place in the world, and in this sense Baudelaire and Nerval are particularly significant. Mahon adapts and disrupts the work of these two notoriously problematic poets as a way of apprehending and revealing his own sense of difference and dispossession in an absurd universe.

### 6.3 Mahon and Baudelaire

Baudelaire's aristocratic poets embellished their appearance in order to "lay bare with a brutal brush all the brutalities, all the filth, which are at the base of our society".<sup>23</sup> Such an attempt to embrace and personify the beauty they saw within the filth and detritus of the modern world signifies a sensitive compassion rather than sheer nihilism, an empathy between the artist and the objects of pain, suffering and decay. This theme emerges regularly in Mahon's work, especially in poems such as 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' where fungi, one of the most basic forms of life and often associated with filth and decomposition, stand for the God-forsaken, marginalized, excluded victims of disaster, both natural and unnatural. The gruesome imagery – "pale flesh flaking / Into the earth that nourished it" – conveys Mahon's empathic humanism while demanding a sympathetic response in the reader. The poem is nothing less than a visionary plea for selfhood, a portrayal of corruption and negated individuality set against an uncaring society. But where the English poets of the nineties failed in their chosen task by slipping into degradation and *becoming* objects of decay, Baudelaire was more successful. Swinburne was the first critic to identify the ethical basis of Baudelaire's ethos of dandyism, later to be echoed by Eliot: "There is not one poem of the Fleurs du Mal which has not a distinct and vivid background of morality to it."<sup>24</sup> Latterly, Mahon too has

acknowledged the moral background to Baudelaire's poetry, although his observations are rather more qualified than Swinburne's: "Baudelaire needed the consolation of Christian doctrine, however perversely applied" (J 130). This qualification tempers Mahon's overall judgement of Baudelaire's achievement, especially when he declares Les Fleurs du Mal to be "a great book of poems" (notice, not 'a book of great poems') while also stating that in the final analysis Baudelaire is not quite a great poet: "There is too much missing. 'Young men and maidens, old men and children' are absent from his work which, though sublime at best, is deeply egocentric" (J 130). Judging by the subjective tone of these remarks it seems that Mahon finds something deeply objectionable about Baudelaire, although it is not instantly clear whether the problem lies with the poems or with the man. Although Baudelaire "despised the mob and took a dim if ambiguous view of women" (J 130), Mahon still finds a deep affiliation with Baudelaire's ability to reproduce in his poetry "the extraordinary redemption he found in art" (J 131). By making a religion of art, both Baudelaire and Mahon strive to live "with the consequences of our thoughts and actions, however deranged" (J 129).

Mahon sees fit to include in The Yellow Book two adaptations of Baudelaire's poems, the prefatory 'Landscape' (TYB 11) and section XIII, 'Dusk' (TYB 39-40). The reasons for this will soon become apparent, but at this point I should explain why I have chosen the term 'adaptations' rather than 'translations'. It is not always easy to distinguish between translations and adaptations, but in Mahon's case this difficulty tends to be clarified by three devices. The first and most obvious way in which Mahon signals to the reader that a poem is an adaptation is by placing in brackets after the title 'after Baudelaire', 'after Villon', 'after Corbière', etc. We can go as far as to say that the closest

Mahon has come to actual translation is with his impressive selection from the work of Philippe Jaccottet; even The Chimeras, his other single-volume collection taken from a French author – in this case Gérard de Nerval – is cited on the cover as “A *version of Les Chimères...*” (emphasis added). His second device is to represent himself through identification with the author of the original poem, as we find in ‘The Poet in Residence’ (P 103-6), a version of Corbière’s ‘Le poète contumace’. Mahon’s third – and most striking – strategy when adapting from another language is either to juxtapose the setting of the original poem with a recognisably Irish location, as he does with ‘Old Roscoff’, or, as with ‘Landscape’, to extract the poem from its original setting entirely, thus transforming the poem into a highly personal response to his own social context. R.A. York describes the technique in terms of extraction:

His predilection for the foreign may be viewed in two ways; on one hand it expresses his discontent with what he sees as the provinciality and inflexibility of the culture of Northern Ireland, and the search to transcend home, class and history...; on the other hand, the figures through whom Mahon chooses to represent himself are often figures of exile, Romantic outsiders..., or displaced Modernists.<sup>25</sup>

One further point to note here regards Mahon’s slight but significant revision of The Yellow Book with relation to its inclusion in the recent Collected Poems. In the original text, the title of ‘Landscape’ is followed by the epigraph, ‘(after Baudelaire)’. However, in the collected version there is no title provided for ‘Landscape’, the poem being preceded instead by the title of the entire sequence and the epigraph ‘(*context: Baudelaire*)’ (emphasis added). Mahon thus signals to the reader that the relationship

between the individual poems of the sequence has assumed a wholly new context, the translation of ‘Paysage’ now significantly constituting just one part of a greater, Baudelaire-inspired whole.

#### 6.4 ‘Landscape’

Baudelaire’s early poems indicate that as a young man he would have belonged to York’s category of Romantic outsider, but by the time of ‘Paysage’ (FE 166), the basis of Mahon’s ‘Landscape’, he was clearly experiencing some degree of alienation from society due to his elevated ideals.<sup>26</sup> Here, his attempt “pour composer chastement mes églogues” [to compose chastely my eclogues] is nothing less than a quest for poetic purity, and in order to best facilitate this quest he has retired from the streets and daily life of Paris and shut himself away in a garret (“ma mansard”) where he can be closer to “les grand céls qui font réver d’éternité” [the great skies which inspire a dream of eternity]. The Parisian *paysage* is reduced to a background feature of the poem, but a feature which nevertheless determines his meditations on a pastoral reverie that tries to oust urban reality and the human riot (“L’Émeute”) from his consciousness. The poem is, for the most part, set in an imagined future, which relies for its veracity of vision on a four-line sentence following the opening octet that catalogues in the present tense various phenomena capable of transfiguring any scene, whether earthly, ethereal or transcendental. The sentence ends on an image of the personified moon sadly pouring out its pallid spell: “la lune verser son pâle enchantement”. However, this is not simply an idyllic dream of escaping into a transcendental otherworld free of human influence and everyday banality. Certain images, namely the sound of singing emerging from the atelier

and the riot of noise, bind the poet's physical existence firmly to the living present. Baudelaire's romantic irony ensures that the poem recognises its own limitations as a work of art, while the poet understands "that he cannot 'preserve himself against the destructive power of the whole' by retreating into pure subjectivity, for to content oneself with the outpourings of individual inspiration is to lack a sense of the universal".<sup>27</sup> In other words, only by grounding himself in the world can the poet achieve – no matter how ironically – some distance from it. Having been plunged into his delight, Baudelaire sees it as his duty to exercise his mind, his subjective ego, in an act of God-like creation by conjuring the spring, hauling a sun from his heart, and finally making of his blazing thoughts his own environment. Yet the incursions of the real and the present ironise his desires: man may have an infinitely free imagination but his actions are shackled and limited. We see, in Muecke's words, "the ineluctable realities of life ironizing man's compelling need to reach towards perfection" (in Baudelaire's case a fairy palace), while at the same time "man can express his spirit's independence of the world with disdainful or insouciant irony", revealed by Baudelaire in terms of the riot's futile storming at his window.<sup>28</sup>

Much of this is still contained within Mahon's version, but he also makes several distinct departures from the original which alter the poem's tone and meaning significantly. His version of 'Paysage' is an apposite choice with which to open the collection, its first line alerting the reader to the fact that by writing a series of eclogues Mahon is remaining firmly within the territory occupied previously by 'The Hudson Letter'. But whereas 'Paysage' opens with a dream of purity, 'Landscape' introduces a moral dilemma that hovers tensely behind the rest of the poem. The first and last words

of the opening line, “Chastely to write these eclogues I need to lie”, establish a conjunction, which even manages to carry a sexual connotation, between virtuous ethical purity and the compunction towards deception. From the outset Mahon makes it clear that he has adapted Baudelaire’s poem to suit his own needs. As Edna Longley has indicated, since Night-Crossing Mahon’s “sensibility remarkably conflates the ‘desperate city’ with the Baudelairean city”.<sup>29</sup> Likewise there is no trace in ‘Landscape’ of a recognisable geographical setting: the poem’s location, to quote ‘A Lighthouse in Maine’, “might be anywhere” (THBN 43-44). But when we consider the implication of physical intimacy suggested above and the references in the subsequent three lines to places of estrangement and isolation (“an attic”, “church spires”, “up here in my apartment block”, “my ivory tower” – this last is particularly telling and again recalls ‘A Lighthouse in Maine’), it may not be too far from the truth to venture the idea that here we have a reference – albeit a fairly oblique one – to Mahon’s tortured relationship with Belfast. This speculation gains further credence from the lines, “I can see workshops full of noise and talk, / cranes and masts of the ocean-going city”, while the image of the rioting mob, adapted from the original to imply more than mere noise, accrues significance with regard to the Troubles. The fact that Mahon’s version is presented entirely in the present tense also diminishes the transcendentalist dimension of the original and compounds the idea that here we have a description of a contemporary, ongoing reality which, because of its political connotations, ironises and destroys any possibility of building “faerie palaces in the night”, an idea emphasised by the archaic, Spenserian spelling of “faerie”.<sup>30</sup> Mahon advances the poem’s political discourse even further by making a greater number of explicit references than Baudelaire to the perceptual acts of hearing and seeing, as well as

to the workings of the imagination. This increases the tension between the lyrical, poetic ‘I’ and its antithetical Other, the workmen of the atelier. As the atelier is a place of craftsmanship rather than of art, the poet’s gaze from on high serves as a kind of pre-emptive strike by objectifying the Other to determine his subjective superiority and dominance. This is the decisive moment, emphasised by Baudelaire, of a class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeois artist whereby neither life encroaches substantially on the other: “L’Émeute, tempêtant vainement à ma vitre, / Ne fera pas lever mon front de mon pupitre; / Car je serai plongé dans cette volupté” [The riot, raging vainly at my window pane, / Will not make me raise my forehead from my desk; / For I will be plunged into this exquisite delight]. The Other is transformed into an absence, unseen and ignored by the thought-engrossed poet. Mahon, however, chooses to frame the mob’s collective riotous noise between an image of his “infantile imagination”, an indicator of purely solipsistic subjectivity, and the closing line, “my thoughts blazing for want of a real fire”. “[R]eal” is a key word here as it stresses the unreality of the imagination’s play. The line “no mob distracts me from my writing desk” must therefore be taken ironically, especially as Mahon shows that the chastity of the poet’s privileged position is little more than a decadent artifice that serves to prevent him from sharing in the verbal intercourse of the outside or “real” world. Torn between the need to write and the desire to partake of the workers’ unity and loyalties, Mahon, unlike Baudelaire, is cast by caprice, his “whims”, into a void of uncertainty and ignorance.

While he retains the predominant aspects of Baudelaire’s language and imagery, Mahon has transformed with grace and subtlety the sense of the poem from a prolegomena to a transcendental vision into a picture of an inescapable urban absolute.

Baudelaire's vision of reality as a wan, smoke-stained paradise is further transformed by Mahon into an altogether more mournful, even hopeless, scene. Where Baudelaire's hymns are solemn ("solennels"), Mahon's are "grave"; where Baudelaire's snow is "monotones", Mahon's is threateningly "silent"; while Baudelaire's skies inspire, the act of "dreaming about eternity" is not performed by Mahon himself but by the impersonal "vast cloud formations". From here we see the most significant difference between the two poems and, for that matter, the two poets, for whereas Baudelaire presents himself as a God-like creator whose will and fortitude strive to extract perfection from an impure world, Mahon, with typical irony, denigrates poetry and the powers of imagination as "my usual tricks". Baudelaire's "enfantin" imagination is childish, innocent and naïve, but this is transcribed by Mahon as "infantile" with all its connotations of foolishness and lack of mental development. The pleading final line, "my thoughts blazing for want of a real fire", omits any suggestion of the transfiguring glory of "et de faire / De mes pensers brûlants une tiède atmosphère" [and make of / my burning thoughts a balmy atmosphere], and the poem ends on a deflated, muted note.

Nevertheless, there are two vital ingredients in 'Paysage' which are also integral to 'Landscape', and which suggest some form of empathic bond between Mahon and Baudelaire. One is the moral undercurrent running through each poem, which emphasises the eternal value of love, and from which is derived a notion of Beauty as an aesthetic ideal: the other is a shared consciousness forged by an essentially Christian outlook. It has already been noted that Mahon condemns Baudelaire's integration of Christian doctrine into his poems as "perversely applied", but while he never committed himself fully to Catholic dogma his imagery has an easy spontaneity that brings Mahon closer to

Baudelaire than he would perhaps care to acknowledge on the strength of these comments. Indeed, the hymns, belfries, steeples, stars, and “firmament” of ‘Paysage’ prove irresistible to Mahon whose own perceptions of his home city are coloured by the ideas and symbols of religion. If Baudelaire simply accepts the belfries and steeples as features of a skyline dominated by religious artefacts borne of national culture, the tensions inherent in ‘Landscape’ lend the poem a more strained tenor. There is an air of Catholic ritual about Mahon’s observation of “smoke rising into the firmament like incense”, but his elevated, estranged position suggests the inability to engage directly with the phenomenon in much the same way as MacNeice’s ‘Carrickfergus’ configures Protestant banishment from such rituals. Moreover, the notion of cosmological unintelligibility, contained in “firmament” and the moon’s dispensing of “mysterious influence”, may be incomprehensible to Mahon. Any attempt to understand these mysteries becomes little more than a vanity analogous to the writing of poetry. The irony of his privileged elevated position, “in an attic next the sky”, is that he lacks – or at least can only offer a parody of – Baudelaire’s determination to break free from the terrestrial.

The main structural difference between these two poems lies in the poets’ respective approaches to the confines of form. Baudelaire maintains an *almost* strict adherence to the conventional twelve syllable line of the alexandrine. (I emphasise ‘almost’ because apart from seven of the poem’s twenty six lines containing either eleven or thirteen syllables, Baudelaire also departs on occasion from the classical French system whereby enjambment was inadmissible and a mid-line caesura essential.) By contrast, Mahon’s line lengths differ more or less on a line-by-line basis, veering between ten and thirteen syllables throughout. In ‘Dusk’, his adaptation of ‘Le Crépuscule du

soir', he goes one step further and adds a line to Baudelaire's thirty eight. This is in keeping with his declaration, made in a 1990 interview, that his formal sense had previously been "too polished" and that future collections would become "more conversational, floppier, looser".<sup>31</sup> In an earlier interview he stated, in relation to Thomas Kinsella's adoption of a freer form of writing,

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...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.<sup>32</sup>

Mahon has, at least since The Snow Party, struggled with and against form on a regular basis, but the two collections to have appeared since 1990, The Hudson Letter and The Yellow Book, have certainly subscribed to his newly-discovered philosophy of formal freedom. Mahon's poems have always been reined in by a dignified allegiance to formal structure. Whether shaped to please the eye through stanzaic form – see, for instance, 'St. Eustace' (SP 144), 'The Hunt by Night' (THBN 30-31), and 'Girls on the Bridge' (THBN 32-33), all, significantly, inspired by paintings – or the ear through carefully cadenced and balanced rhymes, Mahon's faith in form had never wavered until these more recent developments. But in The Yellow Book and the title poem of The Hudson Letter he has abandoned his fruitful lyric brevity in favour of a series of eclogues linked by the shared thematic bond of cultural decadence. Seamus Deane has described the fondness for lyric sequences held by John Montague and Thomas Kinsella as indicating "a certain uneasy consciousness of the limitations in this form...which can pass beyond

the experience of interiority and enrich it by contact with other worlds".<sup>33</sup> Something similar could be said of Mahon who has never been afraid to confront and engage with "other worlds", regularly shifting his attention from Belfast to Dublin, London, New York, and beyond, or from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic: "Twinkletoes in the ballroom, / light music in space" ('Light Music', P 92-97). Just as 'Paysage' (and thus 'Landscape'), turns slowly from pre-existing external reality towards self-generated internal dream, so The Yellow Book becomes a gradual interiorising of the world, beginning with an objective journalistic view of external reality – "Rain all day; now clear; a brief sun, the winds die" – before ending with a dream of a possible home. Yet in spite of the expanded, seemingly limitless possibilities afforded by the eclogue and the lyric sequence – further evidence, perhaps, of the abiding influence of MacNeice, especially in his handling of form – 'At the Chelsea Arts Club' (itself an ironic take on aesthetic cliques), tries to counter suggestions that this looser style detracts from Mahon's intrinsic craftsmanship, expressing his residing faith in the formalism of poetry: "Maybe I'm finally turning into an old fart / but I do prefer the traditional kinds of art, / respect for materials, draughtsmanship and so on" (TYB 35-36).

Even his earliest work, and its reliance on traditional forms, displays a maturity that shows that Mahon has always had something of the "old fart" about him. The combination of wit and passion in the above lines, the switch from self-derision to heartfelt sincerity, is inherited from a tradition in English poetry that stretches back to at least the sixteenth century, and it marks The Yellow Book as an honest, if somewhat ambitious, project designed to lament the passing of an idealised past while deriding a far from ideal present: "Not many / in the trade now can decently impersonate / the great

ones of the tragic repertoire" ('At the Gate Theatre', TYB 30-32). Mahon sees this as his own condition, reduced to invoking and parodying those writers of the past whose depictions of the human predicament he considers exemplary. The Yellow Book is inhabited by many such writers, including Wilde, Juvenal, Huysmans, and Austin Clarke. (Admittedly, Juvenal predates the others by some considerable time, but his satirising of the vices of his age provides Mahon with a springboard from which to launch an attack in a manner similar to Juvenal's first satire, in 'At the Chelsea Arts Club', on the social and cultural chaos that threatens to overwhelm his senses.) Each in his way exercised a reaction against society by pitting the individual imagination against established social mores. Yet Mahon knows that even the highest aesthetic ideals cannot counter society's inevitable production of unfortunate victims who fall prey to the vanity of human wishes – the marginalized, the inarticulate, and the outcasts for whom the most unprivileged and least self-asserting existence is a constant struggle.

### **6.5 'Dusk'**

This is the theme of 'Le Crémuscle du soir' (FE 192-95), a poem populated by prostitutes, pimps, thieves, gamblers and the sick, and which takes society's ignoble and ignominious minorities and makes art of them. Mahon has always been attracted to outcast figures, counting himself as one of their number and treating with disdain the parasitic, judgemental moralists who exploit and feed on the misery and misfortune of others. Both 'Le Crémuscle du soir' and 'Dusk' conflate the simile of the claustrophobically threatening sky as a bedroom with the mutation of men into uncontrollable beasts. Following the suggestive juxtaposition of sex and violence,

however, we see the first of several important differences between the two poems. In the original, a second, distinctively personal manner intrudes on the scene to commend the hard-working, menial labourers – honest (“sans mentir”) in Baudelaire, “unfortunate” in Mahon – who are eventually broken by their daily routines. But while ‘Le Crépuscule du soir’ depicts these spirits as consuming a savage grief (“Les esprits que dévore une douleur sauvage”), which suggests that the labourers are literally worn away or eaten alive by sorrow, ‘Dusk’ paints a more politically-orientated picture of materialistic “servitude” whereby these “victims” are “sacrificed to arduous lives”. Baudelaire would have us see these victims as martyred souls consumed by their inability to attain the same level of imaginative or transcendental escape as himself: the broken worker (“l’ouvrier courbé”) only finds some semblance of relief from his labours on retiring to bed where he can at least dream. By contrast, Mahon’s version insists on a considerably bleaker portrayal of post-industrial cultural despair poisoning every level of society (“the body politic”). The “vampires and werewolves” which replace Baudelaire’s “bête fauve” are potentially lethal, bringing “release”, with its implication of death, in the night.

In accordance with the eclogue structure of each section of The Yellow Book, Mahon does not retain Baudelaire’s division of ‘Le Crépuscule du soir’ into four unequal parts of four, twenty four, eight, and two lines. If the formal dislocation of the original is meant to evoke Parisian disharmony, then ‘Dusk’ retains the notion of the disparate yet continuous, ongoing reality first encountered in ‘Landscape’. Hence Mahon once again brings Baudelaire’s mid nineteenth-century vision to bear on the present, although unlike ‘Dusk’ there is nothing here to suggest that the Parisian context has been moved to a specific location such as Belfast. Rather, Mahon uses the poem to illustrate a general,

universal condition of urban existence wherein mortality is placed in opposition to eternity, and where the concept of ‘home’ contrasts with “being outcast in this life”.

The final ten line section of each poem cements each author’s intentions and, apart from a slight but significant modulation of tone and perspective at the beginning and end of the section, Mahon stays faithful to the original. The passage begins, “Recueille-toi, mon âme, en ce grave moment” [Collect yourself, my soul, in this grave time]. The phrase ‘to collect oneself’ speaks of a rational pulling together of emotions, a process of calming down, relaxing. Mahon translates the expression as “Be still”, a phrase superficially synonymous with the original but harbouring a more extreme connotation. Whereas Baudelaire’s poem contains the image of “Le savant obstiné dont le front s’alourdit” [the obstinate scholar whose head hangs heavy], Mahon imagines “the driven thinker with his ashen face”. The words “driven” and “ashen”, particularly as they constitute an internal rhyme, alert us to ideas of compulsiveness, mental obsession and corporeal sickness, ideas which recur in the closing section through the night’s maddening “incessant roar” (which recalls the riotous mob of ‘Landscape’), the cries of the sick (and there is no reason to suggest that the generalisation does not include the physically *and* the mentally ill), and finally death. “Be still”, therefore, seems a plea from the speaker for “release” from the sickness of the world. It is not just a quelling of fear that the speaker demands but a permanent quiescence, a casting into the void of nothingness (“the great gulf”) from which there is no return.

One final point emerges from the closing lines of the two poems. ‘Le Crémuscle du soir’ ends with the exclamatory couplet: “Encore la plupart n’ont-ils jamais connu / La douceur du foyer et n’ont jamais vécu!” [Still the majority of them have never known /

The sweetness of the hearth and have never been true to life!]. The lines refer to the sick and the dying of the previous octet and it is clear that Baudelaire has distanced himself from them, as indicated by the references to “Leur”, “leurs” and “ils” in the closing sestet. His direct presence is felt on only two occasions during the course of the poem: “Aujourd’hui / Nous avons travaillé!” and “Recueille-toi, mon âme”. Nowhere else do we find a personal pronoun. Yet Mahon’s version ends thus: “for some of us have never known the relief / of house and home, being outcast in this life”. The previous five lines contain references to “them”, “their” (twice), and “they”, much in accordance with the original, so it initially comes as something of a surprise to suddenly encounter the “us” of the penultimate line. But The Yellow Book in its entirety is a response to cultural and spiritual malaise in the late twentieth century, and when we also consider Mahon’s predilection for allying himself with the world’s outsiders this initial shock abates. It is a deceptively simple and easily overlooked strategy, but it does help to re-construe the significance of two seemingly opposed statements: “for now the sufferings of the sick increase. / Night takes them by the throat; their struggles cease / as one by one they head for the great gulf”. *Prima facie* these “sufferings” appear to be purely physical considering the “aches and groans” of daily servitude, but the proximity of the rhyme, combined with the threat of annihilation in the void, reveals them to have a more metaphysical or spiritual dimension. No such connotation is made by Baudelaire, an indication that Mahon has conclusively shifted the emphasis away from Baudelaire’s ivory tower egocentrism and his self-absorbed perspective that sees only the workers’ physical agonies, towards a more humanistic understanding of the workers’ very real existential anxiety and pain. This simple, yet effective, difference between the two poems

is itself an indicator of the major difference between the two poets. On the one hand, Baudelaire is generally regarded as a ‘transcendental Symbolist’, a poet who uses concrete images of the real world as symbols for an ideal world of which the real is merely an imperfect representation. ‘Le Crémèscule du soir’ takes the real world as its starting point and depicts it as a complete antithesis to the ideal. On the other hand, Mahon plays down Baudelaire’s synaesthetic devices in a deliberate attempt to reduce the transcendental dimension of the poem. While ‘Le Crémèscule du soir’ is peppered with alliterative and rhyming references to sound and noise – “volant”, “vent”, “siffler”, “ronfler”, “soupirs”, “glapir” – ‘Dusk’ relies on rather more subdued effects such as the long vowels and sibilance of “groans”, “uproar”, “blare”, “buzz”, “whistle” and “cries”.

Mahon, however, has not always been so immune to the allure of ideas relating to possible other worlds. Prior to his ‘conversion’ to the looser style of ‘The Hudson Letter’ and The Yellow Book, his poetry shared remarkably similar traits to that of Baudelaire. In the heavily revised version of ‘Consolations of Philosophy’ (SP 42), a bleak and hopeless future is set against the continuing life of the imagination: “There will be time to live through in the mind / The lives we might have lived”. Similarly, ‘Leaves’ (P 59) expresses the pain of unfulfilled desire which belongs to an afterlife “Of lost futures”, again prophesying the imagination’s ability to reconstruct “The lives we might have led” in a reclamation of the mind’s poetic and visionary powers. In a third poem, ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ (TSP 9-10), he reiterates the ironically mannered wish to escape the historical moment and perfect “my cold dream / Of a place out of time, / A palace of porcelain”. Lost futures, possible lives, geographical situations not at the mercy of time: Mahon’s early concerns were remarkably similar to Baudelaire’s concerning the horrors

of life encountered by the poets during their own epochs. Georges Poulet, writing about Baudelaire, sums up this preoccupation unequivocally:

If the ecstasy of life is the ecstatic acceptance of the present moment,  
the horror of life is, on the contrary, the movement by which, in  
rejecting the present, the human being from his very origin begets a  
sort of future time.<sup>34</sup>

Yet there is an awareness of the futility of such an enterprise in each poet, their cold dreams finally being predicated on an ironical acceptance of the real. Consequently, the ironical suggestions of transcendence contained in these poems have, by the time of The Yellow Book, given way to a more hard-nosed pragmatism, a refusal to rely on the contingency of possible other selves or other worlds and instead focus on the realities of a conditional present. These earlier poems also contain something of Baudelaire's fragmented self, as well as aspects of accounts provided by Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rimbaud of their attempts to escape the real world by creating ideal worlds superior to the domain of empirical experience. These are the worlds of art and, as Mahon puts it, the "dead leaves" of poetry provide a form of continued existence long after the poet's death.

We can still sense the marginal in The Yellow Book, only now it is tempered by the refusal to emphasise the otherworldliness of Baudelairean transcendentalism. The evocation of twilight in 'Le Crénuscle du soir' is designed to expose the propensity of darkness to reveal man's hidden primal predispositions, the unconscious operations of the psyche. Mahon takes this idea up in 'Night Thoughts' (TYB 12-13), where he writes, "Night thoughts are best, the ones that visit us / where we lie smoking between three and four / before the first bird and the first tour bus". Here he endorses the sleep-deprived

workings of the mind as a rich source of inspiration and imaginative transport, while setting the image of night thoughts against the ironical “first tour bus”, a symbol of fatuous escapism. Subsequent images – the child, the “dark sea”, war-time navy ships, the paradisiacal park garden – recall Baudelaire’s ‘Le Voyage’, a poem of departure that ironises “the illusions of restless *déplacement*”.<sup>35</sup> Mahon even goes so far as to replicate “the long, nervous, solemn yet exultant rhythm” of Baudelaire’s poem, while the frequent enjambment lurches inexorably towards the poem’s closing litany of domestic images both comforting and sinister.<sup>36</sup> Although a condensed translation from Laforgue’s ‘L’Hiver qui Vient’, this section fits perfectly the poet’s desire to shut out “the new world order” and, in an allusion to Rimbaud, “read the symbolists as the season dies”:

*November brings  
statistics, albums, cocoa, medicine, dreams,  
windows flung wide on briny balconies  
above an ocean of roofs and lighthouse beams;  
like a storm lantern the wintry planet swings.*

The figure of “My attic window” extends the image previously found in the prefatory ‘Landscape’, signifying that once again Mahon finds himself back in familiar surroundings where he can conduct his meditations in relatively reflective peace. It is as though he has taken to heart this directive from the penultimate section of ‘Le Voyage’ (FE 282-93) and has chosen to obey Baudelaire’s lesson:

Amer savoir, celui qu’on tire du voyage!  
Le monde, monotone et petit, aujourd’hui,  
Hier, demain, toujours, nous fait voir notre image:

Une oasis d'horreur dans un desert d'ennui!

Faut-il partir? rester? Si tu peux rester, reste;  
 Pars, s'il le faut. L'un court, et l'autre se tapit  
 Pour tromper l'ennemi vigilant et funeste,  
 Le Temps!

[How bitter, what we learn from voyaging!

The small and tedious world gives us to see  
 Now, always, the real horror of the thing,  
 Ourselves – that sad oasis in ennui!

Must one depart? or stay? Stand it and stay,  
 Leave if you must. One runs, one finds a space  
 To hide and cheat the deadly enemy  
 Called Time.]<sup>37</sup>

For Baudelaire, the authentic life entails doing constant battle with ennui, the deadliest of all sins. It is “the sin of acquiescence in spiritual defeatism, and most serious of all, the defeatism of the artist”.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Mahon intends that his forthright contempt for the trappings of the modern world, especially those of youth culture (“aliens, space invaders clicking at the front door, / goofy in baseball caps and nylon leisurewear”), will not interfere either with the mechanics of writing, or with the apprehension that there are still places where a thought might grow which are not too far removed from ‘home’: “my biro

breaks the silence and something stirs". His compulsion to write from on high echoes Baudelaire's own combination of aloofness and passion, the need to write being matched only by the need to be alone while surrounded by the often inane activities of mass society. Three of the poems in The Yellow Book, 'Landscape', 'Night Thoughts', and 'Axel's Castle', contain attic images; five contain window images (derived as much, one suspects, from the ever-present influence of MacNeice as from Baudelaire); four depict images of towers, doubtless mediated by Yeats; and a remarkable nine poems concern themselves with viewing the world from a panoptic vantage point. Thus, in The Yellow Book, Mahon is observing the ills of the world with an even cooler, and more detached eye than may have been the case in earlier collections. By positioning himself above both the world and the fleeting historical moment, Mahon sets out to make poetry of a highly personal nature "infused with his own feelings, ranging between the poles of *extase* and *spleen*".<sup>39</sup>

## 6.6 'Axel's Castle'

There remains a danger, however, that this elevated solitude is harmful to the poet's well being: "I'm going crazy up here on my own", he writes in 'Axel's Castle' (TYB 14-15). Mahon has often been called a modern-day *poète maudit* whose affinities with Baudelaire, Corbière and Nerval suggest more than mere influence or precedent, but rarely has he made such forceful statements as those contained in The Yellow Book on a world whose aesthetic and ethical values have diminished to the extent that even language seems redundant: "foreign investment conspires against old decency, / computer talks to computer, machine to answering machine" ('Axel's Castle'). Moral

order has, at the end of the modern age, degenerated so radically as to have moved beyond nineteenth century *fin de siècle* decadence towards an apocalyptic vision that allows for no human presence. The expression “foreign investment” especially intrigues as, when set against “old decency”, it points to the global rise of capitalism and its effect on the collapse of socially-minded morality. Like the Oscar Wilde of ‘Rue des Beaux-Arts’ (TYB 41-43), Mahon “pine[s]...for the right kind of solitude / and the right kind of society”. And again in ‘The Idiocy of Human Aspirations’ (TYB 33-34), a version of Juvenal’s Tenth satire that takes its title from Samuel Johnson’s The Vanity of Human Wishes, he exposes the futile ways in which “instant gratification” and material desires have conspired to render the intellect impotent, while also causing an atavistic reversal to a primitive condition among modern, so-called civilised, societies. The gods of capitalism and greed have now displaced the “heavenly gods” of old, and Mahon reflects splenetically not only on the heavy irony of Baudelaire’s desire to “Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu’importe? / Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau!*!” (FE 292), but also on the persona of de Quincey as taken from his early ‘De Quincey in Later Life’:

Ask for a sound mind in a sound body  
 unfrightened of the grave and not demented  
 by grief at natural declension; study  
 acceptance in the face of fate; and if  
 you want to worship mere materialism,  
 that modern god we have ourselves invented,  
 I leave you to the delights of modern life.

Mahon's leave-taking is wholly symptomatic of the *poète maudit* aura of his work, moving seemingly without effort between Dublin, London, Paris and New York throughout the course of The Yellow Book in an attempt to acquire the solitude necessary to work with equanimity. Yet these journeys are, at least in part, acknowledged as flights of the imagination. While the poet's corporeal self is tied to existing as part of an indifferent society, his mind is still free to wander between worlds inseparable from the real, yet which remain beyond the range of perception of the unresponsive observer: "why / travel when imagination can get you there in a tick / and you're not plagued by the package crowd? A mature / artist takes the material closest to hand" ('Axel's Castle'). In the case of both Mahon and Baudelaire, closest to hand equates with closest to mind. Just as there is a correspondence between Baudelaire's attic room (undoubtedly a metaphor for the mind) and the noisy *atelier* of 'Paysage', so we find in The Yellow Book correspondences between Mahon's own mental attic and the familiar, remembered worlds of the Belfast shipyards, the Gate Theatre, and the generic realm of social discourse, e.g. "the Rose & Crown" ('Remembering the '90s'). But whereas 'Paysage' is composed in a future tense, its verbs of intent and determination suggesting a projection of the will that might overcome the present and leave the past behind, The Yellow Book focuses on the irremediable present (one of its most frequently occurring words is "now"), a technique which fails to conceal the aesthetic, moral and political proximity between the known and the imagined. The ancient worlds of Byzantium and Greece ("I was with Xenophon / in Persia" – 'Smoke', TYB 44-45), the cinematic construct of Rick's Bar (from Casablanca), and "Kafka's Prague" ('At the Chelsea Arts Club', TYB 35-36) are all self-consciously imagined and all seem to signify distance between the

activities of the mind and the spatio-temporal location of the body. But imaginative acts they must remain; they are little more than “pipe-dreams and smoke-clouds” (*'Smoke'*). Mahon intuits the relation of these referents to the present through their points of contact with artistry and struggle, and his re-contextualising of ‘*Paysage*’ into the present tense reinforces the constant threat, succumbed to only in part by Baudelaire, of allowing the self to dissolve into a dehumanised, aestheticised landscape, while displacing the presence of Baudelaire from the poem itself. Although it has already been said that The Yellow Book is a gradual interiorisation of the world, the world is still never far away, providing a spectacle of possibility that Mahon refuses to reject completely in favour of an inner fantasy world that the poet can control unimpeachably. This is not the anti-political world of which Baudelaire has been accused of creating, but one where the ecstasy of creation relies substantially on depictions of the human.<sup>40</sup> As with much of Baudelaire, Mahon,

never allows himself to forget that the aesthetic individual lives in and depends on a society, and the implication may follow that the ideal self-expression is one which creates, imaginatively, the ideal society, one which accepts and modifies a known culture.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, the personal requires the social, not simply as an antithetical frame of reference, but as a means of establishing the limits of existence and of creating order within those limits.

But the other facet of this mental ordering is still the poet’s ability to travel imaginatively, either through an adopted persona or as an alternative aspect of the self, irrespective of the fleetingness of his visits to other times and places. Mahon, as he makes

explicit in ‘Girls in their Seasons’ (NC 1), is accustomed to travelling lightly. The string bag of ‘The Last of the Fire Kings’ may be “bulging” but it still constitutes very little in the way of personal luggage. The image assumes a larger resonance, however, if considered a trope for the mind, where redundant memories can slip unnoticed through the holes of the bag, while new experiences are allowed to enter through these gaps or spaces. Travelling lightly also eliminates the need for unnecessary encumbrances, the “pandemonium” of objects, as Mahon has it in ‘As God is my Judge’, which serves to shackle him to the materialistic society from which many of his poems want to divert attention. That poem’s description of “shredded ragtime” and “broken toys” provides another in a long line of comments on Mahon’s constant fascination with waste, filth and decay, a fascination that surely owes something to the work of Baudelaire. It exists in both Mahon’s earliest and later work, from the “slag-heaps” of ‘Van Gogh among the Miners’ (NC 19) and the stadiums of “dead leaves” of ‘Leaves’ (TSP 3), to the “peripheral rubbish dumps” of Roman Script (RS, section X). These are the sort of objects and places that constitute the known world of ordinariness and familiarity, and which most people either fail to notice or ignore completely due to their very mundanity. But they are also the places which might conceivably – at least in the ironic imagination – conceal or provide refuge for an ‘ideal world’. As the poet tends to exist outside an indifferent society, his spiritual task is to reinforce art through the high aesthetic role of “pass[ing] on the cry of humanity”, this cry being heard in ‘A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford’ through the mushrooms’ repetitive, despairing howls of “‘Elbow room! Elbow room!’” and “‘Save us, save us’”.<sup>42</sup> Mahon’s poetry shares with Baudelaire the desire to link the poet with both the everyday world and another world that cannot be separated

from the ordinary but is imperceptible to indifference and unresponsiveness. As “Magi”, the mushrooms are therefore blessed with the ability to induce a vision of an ideal realm where, as Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé all believed, “the magical incantatory power of poetry” presides.<sup>43</sup> But there is a fine imaginative line between the realm of modern urban life wherein beauty and mystery can still be found, and the lofty ideal of poetry only possessing truth in another world. Baudelaire, it seems, wanted it both ways, whereas for Mahon, the apprehension of transcendent possibilities remains wholly entrenched within the real world. Mahon’s anthropocentric imagination is ultimately considerably more philanthropic than Baudelaire’s, and as such is more tolerant and understanding of man’s struggles, mistakes and delusions. He knows that escape through transcendental visions is futile, and he chooses to accept these short-lived moments as reverie or epiphany rather than to consider them as personal goals. Transcendence for him is not an absolute but a brief experience, both disappointing and exultant, that involves an inevitable move back into history. Perhaps this is what he meant when criticising Baudelaire’s perversion of Christian doctrine, for whereas Baudelaire’s Catholicism relies on intuition and leaps of faith, sharing with Symbolism “an *au-delà* beyond immediate material reality”, Mahon’s Protestant consciousness is fuelled more by a controlled rationalism.<sup>44</sup>

Here is a further important difference between the two poets, for whereas Baudelaire’s journeys are conducted solely under the guise and power of his own ego, Mahon frequently puts himself in the place of other artistic personae such as Van Gogh, de Quincey, Ovid or Sappho. This is an essential feature of Mahon’s poetic method, for it allows him the privilege of distancing himself both from his poems and from the worlds

they visit, explore and inhabit. Such impersonality is also an essential aspect of his translations as it offers a dissolution of the self through which Mahon, according to R.A. York, can depict episodes of personal experience “in terms of an accumulated cultural tradition” while offering “a contact with other idioms” which provides an escape from the entrapment of the self as documented in ‘The Sea in Winter’ (P 109-114): “For I am trapped... / In my own idiom”.<sup>45</sup> Unlike Baudelaire, Mahon is rarely at the centre of his poems, *in propria persona*, preferring instead to take up a peripheral position whence he casts his roving ironic eye. “There is something in his art”, writes Brendan Kennelly in an essay that predates The Yellow Book yet holds a particular relevance, “which is peripheral, watchful, measured, spectatorial, ardently uninvolved, articulately sidelined”.<sup>46</sup> Rather than letting uninvolvement get the better of his poems, these qualities tend to intensify the authority of Mahon’s work. The accumulated effect, especially in The Yellow Book, is startling, for it diverts Baudelaire’s typically egocentric placement of the self away from the poetic centre and away from the reader’s attention. Nevertheless, the technique still resembles Baudelaire’s in a significant way. Writing about Mahon’s earlier work, although his comments remain pertinent, Brendan Kennelly remarks:

By removing the self from the centre of the poem, by opting for an indirect stance, by putting other poets and poems at the centre, by seeming to substitute a sophisticated deference for an aggressive statement, a new control, freedom and cunning imaginative power are achieved. And things can be said with a certain calm altruistic dignity which previously could only be said with perhaps an obtrusive

egotism, a limited, assertive sense of self. Self is freed from self so that self may become more comprehensively articulate.<sup>47</sup>

By retaining a certain distance from human communities (other than the aesthetic community of artists, the only kind of community with whom Mahon feels real kinship), Mahon can deal with those communities on his own terms, and, as he has declared in an interview, “it is important for me to be on the edge looking in”.<sup>48</sup> As a result, ‘I’ and ‘you’ become almost interchangeable in Mahon’s work, especially when the poet either assumes a new, ironical identity or addresses himself from afar as a way of investigating and understanding the experiences he commits to paper. This ambiguous technique is most obviously found in ‘Afterlives’ (TSP 1-2) where the ‘I’ exhibits the confusion of existential division – “‘I’ who might have stayed; ‘I’ who left” – and in ‘Ecclesiastes’ (E 13) where the speaker could as easily be addressing himself, a third party, or even God.<sup>49</sup> But this is not to say that Mahon is incapable of empathy or that subjectivity is relinquished completely. His return to Ireland in the closing section of The Yellow Book heralds a rediscovery of origins that poignantly anticipates his question, “Does history, exhausted, come full cycle?” (‘Christmas in Kinsale’, TYB 56-57). Exhausted or not, Mahon rediscovers here an inspirational place from which to journey imaginatively and dream of an inviting, welcoming elsewhere: “I dreamed last night of a blue Cycladic dawn, / a lone figure pointing to the horizon, / again the white islands shouting, ‘Come on; come on!’...”. Yet the inconclusive, elliptical ending suggests that the call of this elsewhere is too strong and that there is more journeying involved for the peripatetic poet.

This poem's geographical location is, I think, significant. Kinsale lies on Ireland's south coast, almost as far from Belfast as it is possible to go on the Irish mainland, and this provides Mahon with sufficient physical and mental distance to scrutinise the seemingly unstoppable events of history running their true course. He can look figuratively up at Ireland and contemplate its cultural disintegration with a degree of detached objectivity. Ally this to the explicit references to Yeats's 'The Second Coming' and 'Sailing to Byzantium', and we see that Mahon is presenting us with an image of both a passing civilisation and the loss of contact with tradition. The Yellow Book begins in war-torn Ulster and ends in Kinsale at the end of the millennium. Its structure therefore depicts both a geographical near-return to 'home' and the cyclical ebb and flow of history, as expounded by Yeats, wherein the end of civilisation returns man to a state of barbarism from where the processes of civilisation can begin again. But instead of any shadowy, incomprehensible harbinger of destruction, the "rough beast" of Yeats's poem, Mahon attributes this collapse to a youthful generation who have inherited the primeval *Spiritus Mundi* which promises to overthrow and supersede both Christianity and moral order (YCP 187). Irony nevertheless prevails, not least when the language of 'The Second Coming' is conflated with that of 'Sailing to Byzantium', and Mahon situates his entropic vision purely as an act of the terminal imagination:

The young are slouching into Bethlehem  
 as zealots turn out for the millennium  
 on Sinai and Everest, Patmos and Ararat,  
 container bodies, gaze fixed on the night  
 for a roaring wind and the promised meteorite

of fire and brimstone; Druid and Jacobite  
 will be there watching for the swords of light,  
 the *aisling* and the dreamt apocalypse  
 between an earthquake and a solar eclipse.

Following Yeats, Mahon cuts a sophisticated swathe through biblical history and religious myth to illustrate just how far from Byzantine unity Ireland, no longer a “country for old men” (*‘Sailing to Byzantium’*, YCP 193-94), has fallen in its capitulation to the crapulous impersonality of popular capitalist culture. Byzantium’s “Monuments of unageing intellect” have been forgotten by the young, who, having constructed their own monuments from the detritus of seasonal exploitation, now worship at piles of “Christmas rubbish”, those modern altars for the chaotic, unaesthetic mind.<sup>50</sup> Yeats’s golden bird, alternately “set upon a golden bough” or hovering imperiously over the world of art, is now transmuted by Mahon into a peacock, a similarly resplendent bird yet one compelled to perch ominously, and maybe even maleficently, on “a rain-barrel in Byzantium”, where its potentially inspirational magnificence cannot be observed by its desired – i.e. Irish – audience. Unlike Yeats, whose vision of destruction is fuelled more by widespread spiritual collapse, Mahon envisages cultural demise as springing from a cultural realm where material objects are valued more than the intellect.

Writing about Yeats, although his words could equally apply to Mahon, Dudley Young has commented on the “ironist’s responsibility” as being,  
 to register the collapse of culture without himself collapsing...If he is also a lyric poet...he will have domestic stories to tell, about his own attempts to occupy a particular house in a particular landscape.<sup>51</sup>

Mahon's own "stories" inevitably contain some strand of domestic particularity and familiarity, while his individual self remains intact (the ellipsis on which the poem ends indicates only the possibility, rather than the inevitability, of self-disintegration) in order to record in starkly ironical terms the downwardly spiralling cycle of existence: "soap-bubbles foam in a drainpipe and life begins". Mahon shares with Yeats an abiding understanding of "the artifice of eternity", the recurring feature of Symbolist and Decadent literature, where "what is past, or passing, or to come" designates an assimilation of the self into the collapse of historical tradition and immortality is merely an illusional aspiration, an "*aisling*" (YCP 193-94).

Yet even among the dusty, quasi-forgotten remains of tradition, be it religious, historical or cultural, Mahon still manages to impart a sense of the continuity of art, and most especially of poetry. There is an echo of Seamus Heaney's richly contemplative poem 'Exposure' in the word "meteorite", for example, which further extends the Yeatsian legacy into the present.<sup>52</sup> The fragments of the meteorite have been described variously as "those epiphanic moments which bring the self into definition", and as "hard, bright words which might open up possibilities of definition, illumination, renewal".<sup>53</sup> Self-renewal amid the fragments of a decaying civilisation is at the heart of The Yellow Book, although Mahon is obdurately reluctant to relinquish completely the steely grip of tradition. In 'Hangover Square' (CP 239-240), the revised collected version of 'Remembering the '90s', Mahon dismisses the possibility of succumbing to the effects of identity-sapping new technology, preferring to hold onto things which are trusted and even self-defining: "No doubt I should invest in a computer / but I'm sticking with my old electric typewriter" (CP 240). Indeed, 'Christmas in Kinsale' can almost be viewed as

a codicil to ‘Exposure’ through its expression of similar themes. While Heaney describes his feelings towards his abandonment of the North for a new life in Wicklow, away from ideological pressures, dissolution, violence and hate, Mahon talks of returning to the Irish mainland after a protracted period abroad. Relocation to the Republic becomes, therefore, a coming to terms for each poet not only with the past, present and future spoken of by Yeats, but also with himself. These poems are autobiographical dramatisations of uncertainty, vulnerability and self-exposure in the face of adverse historical circumstances; they expose emotions which should be resisted yet nevertheless conspire to promote feelings of personal and artistic inadequacy.

Comparing Mahon with Heaney at this stage conveniently illuminates a certain similarity of attitude towards intertextual allusiveness. ‘Exposure’ is the concluding poem of North, Heaney’s fourth volume of poems, most of which deals almost exclusively with the political situation in Northern Ireland. One of its lyrics, ‘The Digging Skeleton’, is a version of Baudelaire’s ‘Le Squelette laboureur’, while the title of the sequence to which ‘The Digging Skeleton’ belongs, ‘Singing School’, is taken from ‘Sailing to Byzantium’. Heaney employs Baudelaire’s images, which take their inspiration from anatomical drawings of skeletons, to serve a wholly different purpose, however, namely that of depicting the gruesome brutality of tribal murder. Baudelaire thus serves Mahon and Heaney equally as a modern day touchstone whereby nineteenth-century concerns are modified and transformed by contemporary poets. He represents the perpetual need for artists to confront and address their fears for the society they seek to escape from yet find themselves unable to evade completely.

Mahon's Yeatsian question, "Does history, exhausted, come full cycle?", to some extent reiterates and universalises Heaney's self-querying "How did I end up like this?"<sup>54</sup> Whether directly or indirectly, these questions address the issue of the poet's personal responsibility towards society. Mahon, whether he likes it or not, is part of history. He is a material feature of the world and is necessarily involved in its workings; he has a responsibility towards history and his position in it, and as such the question relates in part to his own return to origins. The memories stirred by Mahon's leave-taking and return ultimately require consideration of what he understands by being Irish, an extraordinarily difficult procedure complicated further by Mahon's usual slippery evasiveness. While we are left in little doubt as to Heaney's concern for betraying his tribe ("I am neither internee nor informer"), Mahon is more fearful of the subterfuge involved in facing history as an unavoidable absolute: "I feel like a traitor spying on my own past" ('At the Shelbourne', TYB 16-17). Heaney serves "the language of his tribe by exposing its hidden violent origins", but Mahon's task is motivated less by ideology and more by the "dispassionateness" and freedom from public expectations and confirmations he sees as necessary to "get outside narrow historical or political loyalties".<sup>55</sup> For him, language is a "smoke-screen of words", a desultory façade wherein "There is nothing heroic or 'patriotic'" ('At the Shelbourne'). To say that language in Ireland resonates with historical and political implications verges on facile platitude, but more than this it conceals the ideology of "a previous *fin de siècle*", a mythologised vision of "a distant past / before Elizabeth and the Tudor conquest". This absence of heroism contrasts firstly with Heaney's imagined hero, who paradoxically attempts to gain freedom by sustaining the cycle of violence (and in this respect is not unlike Mahon's Fire King), and secondly

with Baudelaire's privileged voyeur who conceives of the poet as heroic in his unironical attempts to escape the world through transcendentalist acts of the imagination and separation from the world of men. Yet Mahon, Baudelaire and Heaney are all, in some sense, outsiders looking in on a hostile world. While they have all acquired the freedom to explore intellectually the role of the poet, they have also lost the certainty which comes from belonging to a community. In the extreme cases of Baudelaire and Mahon, alienation, brought on by having to face the real and finding it lacking, results in attempts to firstly ironise and then violate the real. The ensuing division and fragmentation of the self means that the self can no longer peruse the crowd without being made aware of its "marginality and superfluity".<sup>56</sup> Mahon's belligerent refusal to relinquish completely his tenuous grasp on the real – a trait shared with Philippe Jaccottet – is perhaps the reason behind his claim that there is too much missing in Baudelaire, but Mahon is himself open to the same kind of criticism. "I live elsewhere", he writes in 'Bird Sanctuary' (NC 14-15), "expect[ing] great things". This idealised preference for other places exhibits a certain evasion of the real, an evasion implicit in the titles of many of his poems. A brief glance through the contents of Poems 1962-1978 reveals a predilection for places divorced from the reality of Ulster and 'home': Grasmere, Brittany, Belgium (the Borinage), Great Yarmouth, Toronto Island, Massachusetts, North Africa.

If consciousness and experience of the external world provide a sense of history, then Baudelaire's form of transcendentalism stands outside history as a timeless moment repeated forever. Although Baudelaire rarely loses sight of the real, his depiction of a closed existence in an ivory tower nevertheless posits the outside world as crude, inferior and chaotic; it is a world of distractions devoid of beauty. Mahon likewise ascribes these

qualities to the contemporary materialistic world of The Yellow Book, but unlike Baudelaire he envisages it, in MacNeice's words, as "incorrigibly plural" and richer than closed minds – or rather minds which close in and focus on their own activities – can detect. Although chaotic and imperfect, it remains a world loaded with the potential for detecting and creating art, beauty and life, and as such deserves to be met and even challenged on its own terms. 'Schopenhauer's Day' (TYB 20-22) ironises the artifice of escape through pure aestheticism and the cold, unearthly stance of philosophers and poets cut off or distracted from quotidian external reality. Lines such as "he stares from the window at his idea of the world" and "the heartfelt calculus of Mozart" reveal the tensions and contradictions existing between real and imagined worlds, and between genuine emotion and mathematical rationality. For Mahon there can be no authentic evasion of "life's guilt or the servitude of love and hate": these are features of the world that must be confronted, interrogated and, if necessary, opposed, irrespective of personal cost. "The only solution" to Baudelairean transcendentalism is an ironical response, which "lies in *art for its own sake*" (the italicisation is itself an ironical response to Baudelaire), an inauthentic didacticism which, in true Decadent fashion, seeks to replace the constancy of personal responsibility with the transience of intransigent egocentricity. Any attempt at self-development leads only to self-delusion and exposes the ephemerality of pure subjectivity whose circuitous pursuit of selfhood serves only to deny that self a true history. In 'Death in Bangor' (TYB 51-53), a poem documenting the death of his mother, Mahon exposes the truth of existential history in lines redolent of 'In Carrowdore Churchyard': "All artifice stripped away, we give you back to nature / but something of you, perhaps the incurable ache / of art, goes with me as I travel south". Ambiguity of

tone, driven by complexity of emotions, dominates the poem. Although his mother's love of "ornaments", "Dresden' figurines", "junk chinoiserie", and "other breakable stuff" leads Mahon to describe the elegy as "a cold epitaph from your only son, / the wish genuine if the tone ambiguous", in which we can still hear a note of sympathy. Various critics have directed attention toward the poet's "inability to forgive his mother", the "resentment of a mother", and "rage against the mother".<sup>57</sup> But these negative arguments do not paint a complete picture either of the poem or of Mahon's complex emotions. His mother grew up in "an anxious time", and Mahon despises "the plain Protestant fatalism of home" which she epitomises. The image of "washing lines" (which also appears in various ways in other poems such as 'Ecclesiastes', 'A Kind of People', 'An Image from Beckett', and 'Glengormley) embodies the atavistic ethos of cleanliness being next to godliness to which he equally takes offence. Yet he also admits that "you had your own / idea of the beautiful, not unrelated to Tolstoy / but formed in a tough city of ships and linen". Her Protestant fascination for "appearances" was derived from cultural indoctrination ("market-driven hysteria") and a mass consumer mentality dictated by "thick industrialists and twisted ministers". Although the poet cannot be sustained by such *faux* aesthetic sensibilities, he still cannot escape the love of beauty (or what is perceived subjectively as beautiful) instilled in him by his mother. Mahon finally accepts that beauty can be found in commonplace, mass-produced, or even technological objects. The image of "a final helicopter" that infiltrates the idealised picture of nature on which the poem closes returns the poet to the real world where art is as likely to exist in the everyday as in the transcendental beyond.

Mahon views transcendence as neither an eternal recurrence of stagnating selfhood, nor as an escape from the continual linear movement of time, but as an impetus to treat historical moments as individual events, and to move from one to the next no matter how disconnected those moments may appear to be. In ‘Rocks’ (L 6) – not so much a translation of Guillevic as an assimilation or synthesis of the ideas contained in that poet’s intriguingly meditative collection, Carnac – Mahon satirises any permanent adherence to an ideal as a “dream of holding fast / In the elemental flux”. Time, he seems to be saying, renders the fantasy of transcendentalist constancy impossible. So in this respect, Mahon’s concept of transcendence differs greatly from the Baudelairean model, instead reshaping history to resemble a series of new beginnings. In a poem describing a post-depression psychological state reminiscent of Lowell’s condition in Life Studies, he writes:

Soon a new year  
 will be here demanding, as before,  
 modest proposals, resolute resolutions, a new leaf,  
 new leaves. This is the story of my life,  
 the story of all lives everywhere,  
 mad fools wherever they are,  
 in here or out there.

Light and sane  
 I shall walk down to the train,  
 into that world whose sanity we know,

like Swift, to be a fiction and a show.

The clouds part, the rain ceases, the sun  
casts now upon everyone  
its ancient shadow. ('Dawn at St. Patrick's', SP 104-6)

Here the theme of personal renewal ("new leaves" and New Year resolutions) amid chaos is once again revisited and further links Mahon, the "decadent who lived to tell the story" ('Remembering the 90s'), back to the poets of the nineties and to Baudelaire. By associating the nineteenth- and twentieth-century *fins de siècle* with cultural degeneracy, Mahon manages to assimilate into his own way of thinking Baudelaire's "social mission" to "expose the filth and brutality" of the modern world in a manner that finds accord with Richard Pine's definition of the purpose of decadent writers as "one of renewal, of *re-generation* in a degenerate world".<sup>58</sup> If Baudelaire saw the poet's mission as one of self-elevation above filth, squalor and brutality, then we can also say that Mahon's not entirely dissimilar mission is to document and, in his own way, combat what he perceives as a more contemporary – though no less insidious or destructive – form of social evil, that of cultural 'dumbing down'. Mahon is fascinated and appalled by this manifestation of human irrationality. In the post-Freudian world where primitive impulses are more easily accounted for on a scientific level, though less easy to blithely accept given our burgeoning knowledge, common sense has become increasingly less *common*. In this light, his regular, irony-inflected attacks on poetry ("all farts in a biscuit tin", for example) seem to be levelled not so much at either himself or his fellow poets as at a world which has managed to almost completely disengage itself from the truth and beauty of art and the authentic struggle of artistic endeavour.

By diverting attention away from the three fundamental features of Baudelaire's poems – Paris, nineteenth century morality, and transcendentalism – and by injecting his poems with a heavy dose of characteristic irony, Mahon, in The Yellow Book, skilfully and inventively repositions their Baudelairean context to that of the late twentieth century where his versions find a newly-relevant, and wholly rational, coherence. Moreover, this is mainly achieved not by anything fundamentally radical but by a linguistic adroitness where tone or the English connotations of a single word can alter a poem's meaning significantly. R.A. York has written that Mahon, "can appropriate, making the text – by minor adjustments – into an utterance that is easily perceived as congruent with the persona apparent throughout the rest of [his] writing".<sup>59</sup> 'Appropriate' is an important word here for, as we have seen, the one vital aspect of his translating, adapting and re-contextualising of Baudelaire is his ability to illuminate Baudelaire's continued relevance for a world considerably changed. This is one of Mahon's "usual tricks" ('Landscape'), and we see its recurrence in his translations of Gérard de Nerval.

## 6.7 Mahon and Nerval

'After Nerval' (TSP 23) is a loose, early adaptation of Nerval's 'Vers dorés'. Nerval's poem was again translated by Mahon, this time more closely, for inclusion in his version of Nerval's sonnet cycle, Les Chimères under the title 'Pythagorean Lines'. Republished later as 'The Mute Phenomena', a more familiar title within Mahon criticism, 'After Nerval' "upbraids humankind for the narrowness and arrogance of its consciousness", its indignant tone mocking, in Juvenalian fashion, the vanity of human self-importance.<sup>60</sup> Unlike the poems of The Yellow Book, which speak for the most part

in Mahon's own voice, 'After Nerval' employs a poetic mode for which his earlier work shows a particular relish, an ironic mode that purports to seek clarity in possible worlds rather than in our own chaotic, dehumanising society. It provides the template for the anthropocentric prosopopoeia we have already noticed in 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' by raising the possibility of the mute phenomena communicating in their own tongue. Mahon provides them with a voice detached and distanced from the communicative methods of the human world, one which prevents understanding between pacific inanimate objects and arrogantly power-crazed humanity: "your brusque hegemony / Means fuck-all to the somnolent sun-flower / Or the extinct volcano". The bellicose tone, signalled by the sudden shift from prosody to parody and back, registers Mahon's own self-deprecation in the face of a possible realm of existence that, with its moral and spiritual susceptibility, resembles our own yet remains unencumbered by our often feeble or meaningless political obsessions. It is never transparent whether the opening word, "Your", refers to society in general or to Mahon himself, although given his frequent tendency towards irony and ambiguity it could easily indicate both. Exploiting the confusion arising from this ambiguity, Mahon reduces the status of the poetic self by *almost* disappearing from the poem and becoming little more than a mute observer of these objects' imagined activities. The poet is not a dynamic, creative presence sharing in the lives of the objects; rather, his role is that of 'critic', abstaining from history so as to best articulate his own comparative insignificance.

Similarly, 'The Banished Gods' (TSP 30-31), a variation on and extension of 'After Nerval', posits divine presence not in the realm of human perception but within the phenomena of the natural world. Having dismissed the gods as irrelevant, man has

replaced them with the objects of technology and ‘progress’. Silent and unobserved, the gods relive past glories while suffering their indignities by seeking refuge in the distant, mystical objects of nature:

It is here that the banished gods are in hiding,

Here they sit out the centuries

In stone, water

And the hearts of trees,

Lost in a reverie of their own natures –

Of zero-growth economies and seasonal change

In a world without cars, computers

Or chemical skies,

Where thought is a fondling of stones

And wisdom a five-minute silence at moonrise.

This is another manifestation of Mahon’s ideal society, a place where language has lost its dominance as a form of communication. In a move that owes something of its imagery to Beckett’s stone-sucking Molloy, knowledge is no longer formulated by words but by “a fondling of stones”, an activity constituting an innocent and intense personal contact with the natural world. A Zen-like tranquillity descends on the poem as aggressive verbs (“panic”, “seethes”, “a noise like paper tearing”) are gradually outweighed by those that speak of inactivity, joy and calm (“dreaming”, “brightening”, “shelters”, “sit”, “sing”). Yet the very presence of these aggressive verbs means that a state of total innocence can never be fully achieved. Appeals to the world of the sacred must first confront the world

– and words – of post-lapsarian man, while the poem's opening word, "Delos", although a reference to ancient religion and banished gods, particularly Apollo, also indicates the inescapability of history. Subsequently, there is a danger that an evasive retreat into silence that bypasses the true poetic self, or even despatches that self to "the arse-end of nowhere", may eventually prophesy self-destruction.

'After Nerval' and 'The Banished Gods' continue the discursive drive that lies behind the poems of Mahon's second collection, Lives. 'What Will Remain' (L 26-27), 'Consolations of Philosophy' (L 28), and 'Entropy' (L30-31) – the titles themselves provide substantial clues as to their direction – all teeter on the brink of apocalypse, predicting the disintegration of society and the subsequent resurgence of a nature seeking revenge for humankind's continual ignorant presumption that it has learned to harness and control nature for its own purposes:

What will remain after

The twilight of metals,

The flowers of fire,

Will be the soft

Vegetables where our

Politics were conceived.

It is hard not to imagine

What it must have been like

Before any of us were here

And to what dark  
Repose it will in time return.

When we give back

The cleared counties to the  
First forest, the hills  
To the hills, the reclaimed

Mudflats to the vigilant sea,  
What will remain will be  
The blank nature before

Whiskey, before scripture... ('What Will Remain')

What will eventually remain in the aftermath of social collapse is a world without the Word, "a world of silence, without language or technology, just like the beginning of the world".<sup>61</sup> Mahon extracts a great deal of nihilistic pleasure from his "bleak afflatus" ('Ecclesiastes'), gleefully prognosticating the collapse and ruin of human society and the self's subsequent annihilation. He has a pressing urge to join "the ideal society which will replace our own", a cod-utopian vision where self and language have been stripped of history, subjectivity and political impositions: a society where he can achieve – or at least attain to – the liberation of thought necessary to exercise the authenticity of existence

such freedom brings. The same existential theme is reiterated rather more explicitly in ‘The Facts of Life’, the fifth section of ‘Cavafy’ (TSP 18-20):

Reborn in the ideal society

I shall act and speak

With a freedom denied me

By the life we know.

The “life we know” is the given life, a mode of everyday existence either preordained, inherited or dictated by indeterminate, uncontrollable historical forces that resists the ontological challenge which must be met in order to achieve authenticity and freedom. By contrast, the mode of speech to which he refers is a form of linguistic usage pure in intent and meaning and divorced from euphemism, figuration or connotation, and is derived from shared cultural implications which only serve to alienate anyone uninitiated in or unfamiliar with that particular idiom. This philosophical stance adumbrates Mahon’s anxiety regarding the threat to personal identity posed both by cultural decrepitude (as explored in ‘Night Thoughts’ and ‘Christmas in Kinsale’) and by the lurking ever-present threat of the Protestant community, which endangers “the authority of the creative impulse and the autonomy of the individual self”.<sup>62</sup> Mirroring Camus and the Christ-figure of Les Chimères, Mahon views the artist as a rebel and an outcast, incapable of enjoying mutually beneficial discourse with a community with whom he has little in common and who in return fail to recognise the importance of the artist: artist and community effectively become the “immovable body” and the “ir- / Resistible force” spoken of in ‘Death of a Film Star’ (NC 10). ‘After Nerval’ is a comic articulation of Mahon’s satirical endeavour to communicate with a form of society to which he feels

greater attraction, mutual understanding, and sympathy than with anything exclusively human.

Mahon's ironic identification with the lost tribe of inanimate objects is both a recognition of the truth contained in Mallarmé's claim that the poet's role is to formulate and express the language of his tribe, and also another manifestation of his metaphysical disquietude at the prospect of having to come to terms with a world increasingly deprived of cultural and artistic values, and spiritual meaning: "God is alive and lives under a stone". John Goodby has remarked that Nerval's poem "alludes to the Pythagorean belief in the 'sympathy' possessed by all seemingly inanimate objects", but what is not made clear, either by Goodby or by Pythagoras, is whether this 'sympathy' is directed towards humans or whether it exists only between inanimate objects (one suspects only the latter applies).<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, what Pythagoras' metaphysical theory does make clear is the belief that human souls go through a series of rebirths which makes possible the acceptance of immanence, providing an "approach to the immortality previously reserved only for the gods", an idea made explicit in 'Pythagorean Lines': "Each flower in nature is an open soul" (TC 20).<sup>64</sup> By ascribing sentience, acquired through the memories of the dead, to ordinary everyday objects, Mahon is relying on a form of nostalgia to articulate his feelings of loss for a world we no longer know or understand. All of the sonnets in Les Chimères, and thence in The Chimeras, exhibit regret for what might have been, for "The lives we might have lived" as Mahon puts it in 'Leaves'. Given the nature of this theme, it is hardly surprising that Mahon is attracted to Nerval if we consider the proliferation of Mahon's poems on which it is predicated. 'Lives' ("So many lives, / So many things to remember!" – L 14-16), 'How to Live' ("The days are more fun than the

years / which pass us by while we discuss them” – THBN 36), and ‘Antarctica’ (“I am just going outside and may be some time.’ / At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime” – A 33) all examine, in one shape or another, the absurdity of existence and the fear of loss or compromise that results in missed opportunities. Yet not all is doom and gloom, for these poems provide ready preparation for the concluding optimism of works such as ‘Kinsale’ (“We contemplate at last / shining windows, a future forbidden to no-one” – A 34), the revised and expanded version of ‘Girls on the Bridge’ and its “Lost evening when / Our grandmothers...gazed at a still pond / And knew no pain” (SP 173-175), and ‘Tithonus’ (A 23-27), which begins bleakly, envisaging the long-dead gods, yet concludes on a note of unexpected revelation:

Perhaps I shall die

At long last,

Face in the dust –

Having seen,

Not that I asked,

The light in the desert.

Keenness of perception has always been one of Mahon’s hallmarks. His sharp observation of the world’s mute phenomena, along with his consciousness of himself as “A strange child with a taste for verse” (THBN 9), has its roots in infancy. Recounting his memories of the war to Eamon Grennan, he remembers,

a 1940s radio set, wireless set, and other objects with their inherent numina: a Japanese lacquered cigarette case brought back by an uncle

in the Merchant Navy [his ‘wicked uncle’, perhaps?] – the little things that you saw with a child’s eye when you were a child and that will never go away. That’s what consciousness is all about. My Aunt Kathleen’s white shoes in a rented summer house...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.<sup>65</sup>

Mahon has never lost the capacity to be aware of small, seemingly insignificant details of the world around him, and his memories provide, in Grennan’s words, “necessary anchorage” to the empirical realities of the world.<sup>66</sup> His apprehension of the numinous qualities of phenomenal objects is reminiscent of Martin Heidegger’s discussion of ‘equipment’ in the seminal essay, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’. Mahon has alluded to the aesthetics of Heideggerian ontology in the early poem ‘Van Gogh Among the Miners’ (NC 19), which describes “A meteor of golden light / On chairs, faces and old boots”. These lines refer directly to several of Van Gogh’s paintings, but it is the mention of “old boots” which particularly recalls Heidegger’s lengthy analysis of Van Gogh’s painting of a pair of old peasant shoes. The shoes belong to the world of the peasant and their status as equipment is transformed by the artist’s light into an ontological indicator of truth:

Van Gogh’s painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. This entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being...If there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work...Some particular entity, a pair of peasant shoes, comes in the work to stand in the light of its being.<sup>67</sup>

Van Gogh's painting is a disclosure of what the shoes are "in truth"; it is in and through the painting that we realise what constitutes the relationship between the peasant woman and her world.

While truth exists in the disclosure of 'things', art is the disclosure or 'happening' of truth. When Heidegger asks 'what is equipment?', the answer at one level is obvious: equipment is a useful object. But at a higher level, to be really useful a thing (e.g. a pair of shoes) has to be inconspicuous. The more something is useful the more inconspicuous it is. Moreover, the world is constituted by equipment whereby equipment gives the world a twin sense of security and identity. This reciprocal relationship between truth, world and things runs through much of Mahon's work. By illuminating the trivial, the commonplace, and the inconspicuous objects of everyday experience, he seeks to disclose truth by disclosing the numinous attributes of the world.

'Tractatus' (THBN 23) takes its inspiration from the teachings of another German philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Declaring that "The world is all that is the case", Wittgenstein asserted the need to identify philosophically the logical and formal relations between words, their meanings, and precisely what they signify.<sup>68</sup> But this is the empirical foundation of logical positivism taken to its most extreme, and Mahon subverts the apparent implications of Wittgenstein's claim, asserting that, "The world, though, is also so much more – / Everything that is the case *imaginatively*" (emphasis added). While the early Wittgenstein sought to dispense – at least in philosophical terms – with linguistic variability and ambiguity while choosing to ignore the possibility of genuinely various forms of thinking which might still be logical or conceptually factual, Mahon knows full well that these aspects of language are fundamental to the richness, depth and

artistry of poetry. In a review of John Hewitt's selected prose, Mahon makes his loyalties clear: "What of the free-floating imagination, Keats's 'negative capability', Yeats's 'lonely impulse of delight'? Literature, surely, is more than a branch of ethics" (J 94). In other words, to reduce poetry to the cold black and white philosophy of linguistic precision is to rob it of the very qualities which make it poetry in the first place.

And so it is that, in 'After Nerval', Mahon must imagine and give shape to "the revolutionary theories advanced / By turnips, or the sex life of cutlery" as he aspires to share in their reassertion of self and, through an awareness of the Pythagorean animism which links their inconspicuous existences, achieve communion with lives which might teach him – and in turn lead him to teach us – about living harmoniously. The post-apocalyptic world of 'After Nerval' is seen not as a Beckettian wasteland but as a realm of infinite possibilities that reclaims life from the grip of egotistic nihilism. By articulating and giving articulation to the useful though inconspicuous objects of the world, Mahon gives meaning to the existence of these mute phenomena.

Although both Nerval and Mahon abjure the use of the first person pronoun in their respective poems, preferring to address them to an abstract, universal "you" (named ironically by Nerval as "Homme, libre penseur!"), meaning translates into empathy in the final sentence of 'After Nerval' when the poet's ironical presence becomes apparent through his inverted, self-conscious syntax: "Already in a lost hub-cap is conceived / The ideal society which will replace our own".<sup>69</sup> The phrase "is conceived" emphasises the fact that this ideal society is both a construct of the poet's imagination and an expression of selfhood. However, while the poet's use of language expresses his own particularity and his assertion of selfhood, the suppression of the lyric 'I' is a way of negating the self,

a collapsing of the self into that ideal society. When we consider Mahon's strained relationship with home and community the political ramifications of such a contradictory stance become obvious. Peter McDonald has shown that Mahon's attraction towards 'last things' places him in a position "where the animate must face, accommodate, and finally become the inanimate".<sup>70</sup> Existing beyond and out of sight of a recognisably human historical framework is itself a leap in the metaphysical dark, as is Mahon's attempt to subvert expressions of Protestant identity, especially his own. McDonald identifies in Mahon's poetry an "intensity that [is] very nearly religious. Given this, the question of Protestant identity changes from one of banal and terminally clichéd cultural or political discourse to something more openly metaphysical in its intent."<sup>71</sup> Only by subverting these political and historical resonances can Mahon's poetic voice achieve the freedom to apparently undermine itself while strenuously asserting its own differences and individuality. The metaphysical intentions of 'After Nerval' are such that hope and foreboding dwell hand-in-hand, and Mahon's Nervalian metaphysical unease promises the salvation of selfhood while simultaneously threatening its extinction.

## **6.8 The Chimeras**

If 'After Nerval' is an expression of being unreconciled to any known society, then The Chimeras provides a conduit for a more expansive exploration of the poet's role as a potential saviour. The first sonnet of the sequence, 'El Desdichado' (TC 9), describes, in the octet, the agonies of lost love, isolation and the poet's fears for his own future. Although the Spanish title literally means 'the ill-starred man', Nerval, under the influence of Scott's Ivanhoe, takes it to mean 'the disinherited one', thus transmitting the

essence of existential angst before a word of the poem has been read. ‘El Desdichado’ distils Nerval’s personal experiences – his descent into madness and rejection at the hands of his lover – into a mythic expression of heroic survival. But whereas Nerval merely hints at the loss of a particular loved one, Mahon states more explicitly, “I am the widower – dim, disconsolate”. The speaker of both the original and of Mahon’s version is, through the mysterious and enriching cross-fertilising references to Greek, Roman and Christian myths, set apart from time, while the grief of each speaker is reinforced by feelings of total abandonment and isolation. The language and lacunae of the opening stanzas are enough to emphasise demoralisation in the face of personal tragedy – “the black sun of despair” – and Mahon cleverly retains the alliterative effects of the original in order to compound relations between the self, his grief, and the object of his grief – “My star is dead”. Divine determinism is reversed by emphasising the subject’s elevated stance; it is *his* star, to paraphrase Beckett’s Murphy, and its death, along with the death of the correspondence between star and self, condemns that self to confront the dissolution of meaning and the resulting nothingness.

For Nerval the poem is a crystallisation and condensation of some of the most important events of his life, and he intensifies these events by restricting them within the bounds of the sonnet form. Equally, Mahon appropriates the poem to serve similarly personal purposes. Nerval has described woman as “the chimera of man or his demon...an adorable monster, but a monster”, and while in the mind of the poet, woman (or rather the loss of a particular woman) is the cause of his psychological rupture, woman, in Les Chimères, is also a catalyst of unity, a powerful agent of both despair and exaltation.<sup>72</sup> In a perceptive and penetrating essay, Julia Kristeva has shown that the

underlying melancholy of the poem represents both a mourning for and an invocation of maternal absence.

The ‘I’ is thus defined in negative terms having been deprived of light, love and consolation. But there is another interpretation which lends itself to Mahon’s idea of being disinherited, of having lost any stabilising female presence in his life. Kristeva writes of Nerval’s disinheritance as being constituted by

the loss of an unnameable domain, which one might, strangely enough,  
evoke or invoke from a foreign land, from a constitutional  
exile...[T]he secret and unreachable horizon of our loves and desires,  
it assumes, for the imagination, the consistency of an archaic  
mother.<sup>73</sup>

From this we can ascertain that, when applied to Mahon, there is a suggestion that Mahon’s loss is not just limited to his family but that there is also a correlation between his disinheritance and his “domain”, i.e. Belfast, whereby the ruined tower designates the loss of connection with his home, ‘Mother Ireland’. If standing, the tower would denote dominion and control over both self and the self’s relationship with its homeland, but its ruination symbolises the wresting away of that control from Mahon’s hands. He is left to stand amid the ruins of his collapsed world, contemplating the memories of happier times when his metaphysical “hurt” was “assuaged” both literally by his wife, the maternal archetype and analogue of Graves’s White Goddess who reappears in a variety of guises – all divine – throughout The Chimeras, and metaphorically by a dream of belonging.

His loss compels Mahon to ask, “I am what childe of legend or romance?”, a witty simplification of Nerval’s “Suis-je Amour ou Phébus?...Lusignan ou Biron?”, that

confates Biron, a mythic Don Juan-like figure of French folklore, and Byron, another Romantic hero, through the word “childe”. But if Nerval-as-lover takes precedence over Nerval-as-poet, then this self-conscious and deceptively simple linguistic device deposits Mahon firmly on the side of art, the creation of which becomes an exercise in self-therapy. The final tercet witnesses his continued attempt to “Tun[e] the Orphean lyre”, even though the shift from present tense (“I am”) to past (“my dreams have visited the cave where the Siren sings”) means that poetic inspiration has been consigned to the poet’s memory. This is further intimated by the collapse of the poet’s panoptic, and very possibly ivory, tower. The dispossessed prince, writes Kristeva, “belongs to a history, but to a depreciated history. His past without future is not a historical past – it is merely a *memory* all the more present as it has no future.”<sup>74</sup> As legend and romance belong to the realm of mythic artifice, their historical domain is unnameable as it never truly existed, at least not in the form they describe. From this it seems to follow that Mahon is passing comment on his exile from a historical reality he might, had circumstances been otherwise, have been able to regard as home or motherland. “My brow burns with a queenly kiss” similarly bears the suggestion of a profound contact with a place dominated by a maternal or regnal figure (Cathleen ni Houlihan, perhaps?), but this utopian vision is just another aspect of his “dreams” of contented domicile. Irish myth reasserts itself in the closing appeal to “the saint’s rapture and the fairy’s cry”, a highly personalised and less despairing modification of Nerval’s “Les soupirs de la sainte et les cris de la fée” (translated by Peter Jay as “The sighs of the saint and the fairy’s screams”), which reminds us once more of Mahon’s affiliation with MacNeice and their shared sense of isolation from Ireland’s Catholic society.<sup>75</sup> However, the Orphean lyre provides the key

to the poet's possible release from his pains and uncertainties. While the image of the "constellated lute / Emblazoned with the black sun of despair" develops the melancholic tone, the tuning of the lyre of poetic inspiration offers hope as the poet's hands are once more put to productive use. Musical motifs have always played an important role in Mahon's aesthetic sensibility, and Nerval's poem aids his attempt to achieve a Symbolism-derived synthesis of poetry and music as part of his idealistic drive towards perceiving and re-establishing the universe as a harmonious, Pythagorean whole.<sup>76</sup>

The first sonnet establishes Christ as having a dual identity. He is divine ("the Lord"), but he is also a fragile human being whose materiality is at risk just like that of ordinary men ("his wasted hands"): he is both an aspect of God and God's representative on earth who must assume human form in order to 'fit in'. It is also apparent that Christ, through the act of supplication, is analogous with poets, and as with poets his petitioning of God is an attempt to share in the immanence of existence and, to quote Shelley, "participate in the eternal, the infinite, and the one".<sup>77</sup> The philosophical problem posed by the poem pertains to the relation between subjectivity and objectivity, as Christ, in his guise as an aspect of God, addresses the greater part of himself only to discover its absence. He is both "abstracted" from the deity and "abandoned" by man, throwing his identity as objective divinity and subjective human into question. His alienation is total: speechless before God ("his silent sorrow") and unheard by man he confronts two voids, and in facing utter nothingness, he cries repeatedly, "'There is no God!'." By a curious paradox, Christ's cry shows not, as in the poem's epigraph, that God has died, but that He never existed. Therefore, if He has never been and Christ is an aspect of Him, then surely Christ should cease to exist as soon as his awareness of this becomes apparent. In fact,

Christ does seem to realise the problem as, addressing the apostles, he confesses, “I deceived you”, while acknowledging that he has been made a sacrificial scapegoat so as to propagate the lie of God’s supposed – and his own continuing – existence. The overwhelming significance of this is not lost on Christ-as-poet as he registers at the onset of the second sonnet, “‘All is dead’.” He has “scoured / The heavens”, witnessing what he believed to be the signs of the promise of life and “its abundant hoard”, but this is disclosed as a false perception since the universe’s motivating or animating breath is absent: nothing declaratory, consoling or “vital” emerges from the mouth of God. A similar emptiness surrounds Christ’s own words which, enveloped by silence, are revealed to be just as “confused”, “vague” and empty as the galaxies. Christ is left bemused by his inability to rationalise and explain – both being aspects of human reason – the abyss left by God’s non-being. Making rational demands of the universe, Christ finds that purpose and meaning are missing, that the empty universe is a vanity on a par with the unknowable will of a non-existent God, and that the universe is absolutely and terminally absurd.

It becomes apparent that Mahon’s conception of the absurd derives not only from Camus or from the major nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers of existentialism, for, apart from the directly contemporaneous Kierkegaard, Nerval predates them all. Nerval’s Christ personifies absurdity, as does Mahon’s. While the human part of Christ fails to comprehend the cosmos, his divinity suggests that he is essentially disinterested in humanity. His divided self faces the abyss of nothingness whichever way it turns, and his anxiety is intensified by the tension between the transience of human life and the “eternity” of divine existence. The punctuation and pauses of Mahon’s version

hint at the longevity of temporal suffering (“And I deceived you. Darkness! God is gone / From the altar-stone where I, the scapegoat, lie... / There is no God, no God!” But they slept on”), although the original, containing an additional three lacunae in the initial line, makes it more explicit: “Frères, je vous trompais: Abîme! abîme! abîme!”. There is a sense in which being human – or being apprehended and portrayed in human terms – is an offence, whereby “the impurity of the lyric ‘I’”, according to John Goodby, is “tainted with selfhood”.<sup>78</sup> Such impurity, once it is seen as a rational human impulse which often fails to lead towards understanding, destabilises what is known (or at least believed) to be true and manifests itself as a conflict between self and society that condemns the subject to insanity or annihilation.

Although Christ was born to save humanity, there is no one to offer salvation to him. Suffering blindly, he is cut off from an incomprehensible, dispassionate universe. God can offer no divine protection because His presence can no longer be apprehended:

Striving to catch the eye of God, I faced  
An empty socket beaming its black night  
Over the world with ever-thickening rays.

An unexpected rainbow rings that pit –  
Threshold of chaos and the dark, a vast  
Whirlpool swallowing up the worlds and days!

The void left by God’s absence signals an entropic decline towards absolute nothingness. The Book of Genesis tells us that in creating order out of chaos, God initially required

light. But by replacing the source of this light with a bottomless pit of darkness the creation is inverted, heralding a return to chaos.

The third sonnet illustrates a significant difference between the original and Mahon's translation. Nerval groups together the remnants of God's disappearance: silence, destiny, necessity and chance. Mahon's version omits the last of these, ostensibly cancelling out the possibility of hope, and we re-encounter the ideas of fate and divine predetermination as described in 'El Desdichado'. The imminent collapse of the universe seems a foregone conclusion: Christ asks, "Is this your presence in me, father?" and concludes that if it is, then with his death, "everything must die". But by an idiosyncratic turn of the artistic screw, Mahon has already, in the first sonnet, alleviated this despair. His translation of "Dieu n'existe pas!" as "God is gone" is more vague and ambiguous than the original. It speaks of God's disappearance or banishment, certainly, but only as a potentially temporary withdrawal, and it suggests a return to the confident assertion of 'After Nerval' that "God is alive and lives under a stone". Clearly Mahon is reluctant to do away with the possibility of God's existence altogether since without God, Christ-as-poet is deprived of a meaningful existence. By identifying with Christ, and by allowing the possibility of God's return, Mahon is able to create a space that allows for self-assertion and offers up a defiant challenge to the threat of annihilation.

This potential for salvation is prefigured in sonnet two. In the original, Nerval speaks of a strange ("étrange") rainbow encircling the void, suggesting that the chaos left by God's removal has permanently altered the universe to such an extent that the truth of perception can no longer be taken for granted. But Mahon translates "étrange" as "unexpected", and his surprise harbours the glimmer of hope that something immanent

can still be rescued from the absolute blackness. The light called into being by God when He created the universe remains, if only vestigially, and the possibility of His continuing existence is reinforced by the series of rhetorical questions of sonnet three. Also, the unresolved matter of whether or not God's presence lives on in Christ offers further hope, but only as long as Christ has *faith* in such a possibility. Mahon thus speaks more loudly than Nerval on behalf of poets, who require faith in their own abilities to carry on working, and of mankind as a whole. The "vague breath" of sonnet two is transformed by sonnet three into the "vital breath" that may yet be contained within Christ.

But even faith, considering the strains it exerts on the psyche, can, when put under pressure, lead to the collapse of reason. Nerval's bouts of insanity lend an autobiographical reading to his characterisation of Christ as a lunatic. Mahon, too, identifies with Christ when, speaking on behalf of poets everywhere, he struggles to make himself heard ("Nobody heard the eternal victim cry"). In sonnet five, Christ-as-poet is correlated with figures from classical religions and mythologies; figures who, by attempting the impossible, symbolise death, rebirth and heroic struggle. Christ is transformed into a poet-saviour who "represents a mode of alienated subjectivity", and whose insanity "appears as [a] visionary condition".<sup>79</sup> Radical doubt, as exercised by poet and saviour alike, forces a move towards self-exploration by looking the absolute in the eye, so to speak. Madness, and its associated irrationality and loss of coherence, becomes a source of beauty (a position exploited by Baudelaire and Rimbaud, among others), a violent disruption of consciousness, and a reversion to chaos. Beauty can be ascertained in the rainbow surrounding God's dead eye, but meeting the eye's blank gaze is a terrifying confrontation with the void and ends in self-fragmentation. Yet by the same

token, there is a sense where the removal of a perceiving God also eradicates the Sartrean ‘gaze’ which objectifies man and deprives him of an authentic or free existence. By its very nature, ‘Christ on the Mount of Olives’ remains – as indeed it must – unresolved. It ends, “One only could resolve the mystery – / Whoever breathed life into the primal mire”, but the identity of the “One” is undefined. Both the original final line (“Celui qui donna l’âme aux enfants du limon”) and Peter Jay’s more literal translation (“He who gave a soul to the sons of clay”) are just as equivocal as Mahon’s version, since it is a commonplace to talk of “soul” as belonging to and being bestowed by artists.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, Mahon’s version seems to allude to Orpheus, the poet who sang the world into life. Hence, the figure of Christ is intertwined with the figure of the poet to create an amalgamated persona belonging to no single individual: Christ becomes a universal ‘everyman’.

‘Christ on the Mount of Olives’ gives voice to Mahon’s inner dialogue between revolt and acceptance, his meeting face to face the *reductio ad absurdum* of certain death that simultaneously mocks that very inevitability. Death is what makes life absurd; it is a consequence of being born that comes to rich and poor, wise and foolish, Protestant and Catholic. The absurdity of simply *being* extends to thoughts, actions, morality and speech, thereby consigning all human achievement to the scrap heap of wasted time. Time and death nullify all, but Mahon, in a manner similar to Nerval, Camus and Beckett, can still see the funny side of life, and a sense of humour in the face of certain annihilation provides succour and maybe even a form of salvation. Mahon’s ironic posture becomes a filter through which he processes the world and, as the ironic subject, he is released from the vanities of life. Free to exert his own authenticity, Mahon is

liberated from the pressures of present attachments, evaporating into the void where society, vanquished forever, has no hold over him.

Identifying with the alienated Christ allows both Mahon and Nerval to link the role of the poet with the role of saviour, and in so doing they attempt to retrieve the loss of intelligibility brought about by the absence of God in the modern world. In this sense the poem does not simply represent an expression of Christ's suffering; nor is it an affirmation of atheism or agnosticism. Rather, it constitutes part of each poet's ongoing dialogue with both God and their own respective faith. Mahon has indicated his belief that poets "need soul" in order to write successfully, and he admits that poetry is "a rival religious impulse" related to religion "at least in origin".<sup>81</sup> Indeed, this religious impulse percolates through much of Mahon's poetry, and his way of expressing it, even though it is mainly found in work predating his version of Les Chimères, owes much to Nerval. The Frenchman's presence can be detected in a number of works, perhaps most notably 'Glengormley' ("The unreconciled, in their metaphysical pain, / Dangle from lamp-posts in the dawn rain"), 'Ecclesiastes' ("close one eye and be king"), 'Craigvara House' ("I in my own prison / envying their fierce reason, / their solidarity and extroversion"), and 'The Andean Flute', which returns us to a by now familiar theme ("Who said the banished gods were gone for good?"). This impulse extends itself in 'After Nerval' and 'Matthew V. 29-30' (TSP 143-15) through the private act of naming (in the case of the former, the naming of objects; in the case of the latter, the naming of parts). The act is a form of redemption, an expression of Mahon's Christianity-based value system through analogy, allusion and metaphor, although it is an epistemology of perception rather than of unmediated faith. It reflects "a basic desire to rescue and redeem whatever is worth

saving in the world and in history, albeit often unrecognised by the ‘compact majority’ as vitally important for the survival of mankind or even entirely abandoned as a lost cause”.<sup>82</sup> But equally, there is a scepticism at work in Mahon that finally disallows the ready pleasure of naming the “One”, be it god or poet, a scepticism that can explore freely the space between subject and object in a world where the *deus absconditus* confers a metaphysic of silence which allows for the poet’s withdrawal and his endorsement of retreating into a realm where “the blank page” (‘Ovid in Tomis’, THBN 37-42) articulates more than words ever could.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, “Aspects of the Fin de Siècle,” The Victorians, ed. Arthur Pollard, Sphere History of Literature in the English Language Volume 6 (London: Barrie-Sphere, 1970) 373.

<sup>2</sup> A. Norman Jeffares, W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996) 80.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Dowson, “Spleen,” The Symbolist Poem: The Development of the English Tradition, ed. Edward Engleberg (New York: Dutton, 1967) 218. This original poem should not be confused with Dowson’s translation of Verlaine’s poem of the same name.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Baudelaire, My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings, trans. Norman Cameron, intro. Peter Quennell (1950; London: Soho, 1986) 57.

<sup>5</sup> Qtd. in Richard Pine, The Dandy and the Herald: Manners, Mind and Morals from Brummell to Durrell (New York: St. Martin’s, 1988) 20.

<sup>6</sup> A.G. Stock, W.B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought (1961; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1964) 76.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Beckett, Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit (1965; London: Calder, 1999) 18.

<sup>8</sup> Edna Longley, “Looking Back from The Yellow Book,” The Poetry of Derek Mahon, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Ulster Editions and Monographs: 11 (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 2002) 37.

<sup>9</sup> Ian F.A. Bell, “Ezra Pound,” American Poetry: The Modernist Ideal, ed. Clive Bloom and Brian Docherty (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995) 33.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Little, Saint-John Perse (London: Athlone, 1973) 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> Terence Brown, “Home and Away: Derek Mahon’s France,” Ireland and France, A Bountiful Friendship: Literature, History, and Ideas: Essays in Honor of Patrick Rafroidi, ed. Barbara Hayley and Christopher Murray, Irish Literary Studies 42 (Savage, MA: Barnes, 1992) 146.

<sup>12</sup> John Kerrigan, “Ulster Ovids,” The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland, ed. Neil Corcoran (Bridgend: Seren, 1992) 251-52.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Sewell, “Derek Mahon: Coming in from the Cold,” Kennedy-Andrews 201.

<sup>14</sup> Val Warner, introduction, The Centenary Corbière, by Tristan Corbière (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1975) 31.

<sup>15</sup> Corbière 129, 127, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Hugh Haughton, “‘The Importance of Elsewhere’: Mahon and Translation,” Kennedy-Andrews 165.

<sup>17</sup> Derek Mahon, introduction, Selected Poems, by Philippe Jaccottet, trans. and introd. Derek Mahon (Harmondsworth: Viking-Penguin, 1987) 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Mahon 15.

<sup>19</sup> Mahon 13.

<sup>20</sup> Jaccottet 35.

<sup>21</sup> Brown 151.

<sup>22</sup> Brown 147.

<sup>23</sup> Qtd. in Pine 61.

<sup>24</sup> Qtd. in Pine 63.

<sup>25</sup> R.A. York, “Derek Mahon as Translator,” Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses 5 (1992): 164.

<sup>26</sup> Although my copy of The Flowers of Evil is a bilingual version, I have attempted whenever possible or prudent to provide my own, more literal translations. Any translations taken directly from this volume will be indicated in a note.

<sup>27</sup> D.C. Muecke, The Compass of Irony (London: Methuen, 1969) 196.

<sup>28</sup> Muecke 192.

<sup>29</sup> Edna Longley, The Living Stream (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994) 107.

<sup>30</sup> John Breen has drawn attention to the Protestant experience of exile in Spenser’s The Faerie Queen and concludes that Spenser’s “stay in Ireland seems to be both voluntary and enforced” (236). The same dialectic gathers force in many of Mahon’s poems, including ‘Afterlives’, ‘Death in Bangor’, and ‘In Belfast’. See John Breen, “The Faerie Queen, Book I and the Theme of Protestant Exile,” Irish University Review 26.2 (1996): 226-36.

<sup>31</sup> Eileen Battersby, “Made in Belfast,” interview with Derek Mahon, Sunday Tribune 26 Aug. 1990: 26.

<sup>32</sup> Willie Kelly, “Each Poem for me is a New Beginning,” interview with Derek Mahon, Cork Review 2:3 (1981) 10.

<sup>33</sup> Seamus Deane, “Irish Poetry & Irish Nationalism,” Two Decades of Irish Writing: A Critical Survey, ed. Douglas Dunn (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1975) 19.

<sup>34</sup> Georges Poulet, “Baudelaire and Human Time,” Baudelaire, ed. Henri Peyre (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1962) 132.

<sup>35</sup> P. Mansell Jones, Baudelaire (Cambridge: Bowes, 1952) 53.

<sup>36</sup> Mansell Jones 53.

<sup>37</sup> The translation in this case comes from Charles Baudelaire, The Flowers of Evil, trans. James McGowan, introd. Jonathan Culler (1993; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 291.

<sup>38</sup> Mansell Jones 31.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Davy, Words in the Mind: Exploring Some Effects of Poetry, English and French (London: Chatto, 1965) 58.

<sup>40</sup> See Richard D.E. Burton, “Baudelaire and Lyon: A Reading of ‘Paysage’,” Nottingham French Studies 28.1 (1989): 26-38.

<sup>41</sup> York, Utterance 32.

<sup>42</sup> Mansell Jones 32.

<sup>43</sup> Davy 61.

<sup>44</sup> W.D. Howarth, Henri M. Peyre, and John Cruikshank, French Literature from 1600 to the Present. Rev. and rpt. from France: A Companion to French Studies, ed. D.G. Charlton. (1972; London: Methuen, 1974) 104.

<sup>45</sup> York, Revista 164.

<sup>46</sup> Brendan Kennelly, Journey into Joy: Selected Prose, ed. Åke Persson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994) 131.

<sup>47</sup> Kennelly 134.

<sup>48</sup> Eamon Grennan, “Derek Mahon: The Art of Poetry LXXXII,” Paris Review 154 (2004): 177.

<sup>49</sup> Fran Brearton, The Great War in Irish Poetry: W.B. Yeats to Michael Longley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 190.

<sup>50</sup> Mahon returns to this theme in Resistance Days when he writes about his “flight from corporate Christendom” and spending “the frightful season in Tangier”. His deprecatory attitude towards the commercialisation of Christmas bears comparison with Villon who, in ‘Le Lais’ – translated by Mahon as ‘Legacies’ (NC 35-38) – describes “le Noel” as the “morte saison”. See François Villon, The Complete Works of Francois Villon, trans. Anthony Bonner, intro. William Carlos Williams (New York: Bantam, 1960) 2.

<sup>51</sup> Dudley Young, Out of Ireland: A Reading of Yeats's Poetry (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1975) 100.

<sup>52</sup> Seamus Heaney, North (London: Faber, 1975) 72-73.

<sup>53</sup> Eamonn Hughes, “Representation in Modern Irish Poetry,” Seamus Heaney, ed. Michael Allen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) 90; Michael Parker, Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) 150.

<sup>54</sup> Heaney 72.

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Tobin, Passage to the Center: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1999) 139; Anthony Bradley, “The Irishness of Irish Poetry After Yeats,” New Irish Writing: Essays in Memory of Raymond J. Porter (Boston: Iona College P, 1989) 10-11.

<sup>56</sup> Roger Pearson, “Artificial Paradises,” rev. of Nouvelles Lettres, by Charles Baudelaire, Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan, by Ulrich Baer, Baudelaire and the Poetics of Modernity, ed. Patricia A. Ward, and Translating Baudelaire, by Clive Scott, Times Literary Supplement 27 April 2001: 8.

<sup>57</sup> Edna Longley, “Looking Back from The Yellow Book,” Kennedy-Andrews 43; John Goodby, “‘The Soul of Silence’: Derek Mahon’s Masculinities,” Kennedy-Andrews 227; Patrick Crotty, “Apocalypse Now and Then: The Yellow Book,” Kennedy-Andrews 291.

<sup>58</sup> Pine 61.

<sup>59</sup> York, Revista 166.

<sup>60</sup> Bill Tinley, “‘Harmonies and Disharmonies’: Derek Mahon’s Francophile Poetics,” Irish University Review 24.1 (1994): 85.

<sup>61</sup> Patricia Horton, “Degree Zero: Language, Subjectivity and Apocalypse in the Poetry of Derek Mahon,” Irish Studies Review 8.3 (2000): 360.

<sup>62</sup> Horton 361.

<sup>63</sup> John Goodby, Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 168.

<sup>64</sup> Carl A. Huffman, “The Pythagorean Tradition,” The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy, ed. A.A. Long (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 70.

<sup>65</sup> Grennan 154.

<sup>66</sup> Grennan 154.

<sup>67</sup> Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper, 1971) 36.

<sup>68</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, intro. Bertrand Russell (1961; London: Routledge, 1994) 5.

<sup>69</sup> Gérard de Nerval, Les Chimères / The Chimeras, trans. Peter Jay (London: Anvil, 1984) 36.

<sup>70</sup> Peter McDonald, Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 91.

<sup>71</sup> McDonald 87.

<sup>72</sup> Qtd. in Robert Emmet Jones, Gérard de Nerval (New York: Twayne, 1974) 65.

<sup>73</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Gérard de Nerval, The Disinherited Poet,” Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism, ed. Maud Ellmann (Harlow: Longman, 1994) 201.

<sup>74</sup> Kristeva 204.

<sup>75</sup> Nerval 15.

<sup>76</sup> For some of Mahon’s more blatant musical references, see the revised version of ‘Light Music’ (SP 65-72) and ‘Schopenhauer’s Day’ (TYB 20-22) where he refers directly to works by Mozart (K.622 and K.299, respectively); also the first section of ‘The Hudson Letter’ (THL 37-38) where he alludes to Respighi’s The Birds.

<sup>77</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977) 483.

<sup>78</sup> Goodby, Irish Poetry 165.

<sup>79</sup> Jonathan Strauss, “Nerval’s ‘Le Christ aux Oliviers’: The Subject Writes After its own Death,” Romanic Review 88.1 (1997): 127.

<sup>80</sup> Nerval 35.

<sup>81</sup> William Scammell, “Derek Mahon Interviewed,” Poetry Review 81.2 (1991): 5, 6.

<sup>82</sup> Joris Duytschaever, “History in the Poetry of Derek Mahon,” History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Literature, ed. Joris Duytschaever & Geert Leernout (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988) 100-1.

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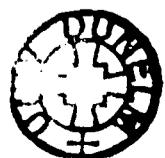
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