LEABHARLANN CHOLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE, BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH | TRINITY COLLEGE LIBRARY DUBLIN
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

Terms and Conditions of Use of Digitised Theses from Trinity College Library Dublin

Copyright statement

All material supplied by Trinity College Library is protected by copyright (under the Copyright and Related Rights Act, 2000 as amended) and other relevant Intellectual Property Rights. By accessing and using a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library you acknowledge that all Intellectual Property Rights in any Works supplied are the sole and exclusive property of the copyright and/or other IPR holder. Specific copyright holders may not be explicitly identified. Use of materials from other sources within a thesis should not be construed as a claim over them.

A non-exclusive, non-transferable licence is hereby granted to those using or reproducing, in whole or in part, the material for valid purposes, providing the copyright owners are acknowledged using the normal conventions. Where specific permission to use material is required, this is identified and such permission must be sought from the copyright holder or agency cited.

Liability statement

By using a Digitised Thesis, I accept that Trinity College Dublin bears no legal responsibility for the accuracy, legality or comprehensiveness of materials contained within the thesis, and that Trinity College Dublin accepts no liability for indirect, consequential, or incidental, damages or losses arising from use of the thesis for whatever reason. Information located in a thesis may be subject to specific use constraints, details of which may not be explicitly described. It is the responsibility of potential and actual users to be aware of such constraints and to abide by them. By making use of material from a digitised thesis, you accept these copyright and disclaimer provisions. Where it is brought to the attention of Trinity College Library that there may be a breach of copyright or other restraint, it is the policy to withdraw or take down access to a thesis while the issue is being resolved.

Access Agreement

By using a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library you are bound by the following Terms & Conditions. Please read them carefully.

I have read and I understand the following statement: All material supplied via a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of a thesis is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or for educational purposes in electronic or print form providing the copyright owners are acknowledged using the normal conventions. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone. This copy has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

THE IRONIC CONSCIENCE:

A Study of the First Extended Phase of Derek Mahon's Poetry

- from *Night-Crossing* (1968) to *Antarctica* (1985)

Brian Dooney, B.A., M. Phil.

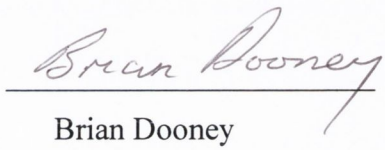
A thesis submitted to the School of English,
University of Dublin, Trinity College,
in fulfilment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

February 2009

TRINITY COLLEGE
10 AUG 2009
LIBRARY DUBLIN
THESIS
8754

DECLARATION

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree in this or any other university. I agree that the library may lend or copy this thesis upon request.



Brian Dooney

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been completed without the kindness, encouragement and support of many people. I thank especially

- the staff at Trinity for their inspiration over the years, in particular my supervisor Terence Brown for his insight, patience and great generosity of spirit
- Eve Patten, Tony Draper and Gerry Kane, for taking the time to read this text and offer helpful suggestions and advice at various stages
- my Marist friends, without whom this project would never have been realised, in particular John Hannan, David Corrigan and John O'Sullivan
- my family for helping me in so many different ways: Robby, Anne, Margaret and Sarah; my mother Mairead and my late father Reg, to whom this thesis is dedicated
- Eve Rogers, for all the conversation and hopeful reassurance that 'Everything Is Going To Be All Right'.

SUMMARY

This thesis reappraises the first extended phase of Mahon's early poetry, from *Night-Crossing* (1968) to *Antarctica* (1985), in the light of the concept of the ironic conscience. It begins by outlining an initial definition of this concept as a subtle and elusive mindset, whose strong moral vision is marked by the interaction of different modes (playful, satirical, allusive, dialectical, sceptical, visionary). It argues that all of these modes are at the service of a critical intelligence which is profoundly engaged with historical and political realities. The opening chapter addresses the key critical contexts necessary in order to appreciate the significance of this concept for reading Mahon's early poetry. These include the outbreak of violence in the North of Ireland in 1969 and changes in the institution of literature which brought about a radical reassessment of the relationship between literature, history and politics. This critical reorientation greatly influenced the reception of the poet's work. At times, the politically charged polemic resulted in crude interpretations which failed to grasp the many and subtle ways in which it addressed historical and political realities. Contrary to criticism of Mahon's early poetry as detached, the chapter argues that the ironic conscience was obliquely engaged with history, undermining stark oppositions between poetic freedom and poetic responsibility. This argument underlies subsequent chapters, which clarify its evolution and shifting modes of expression.

Chapter Two, analyses the autobiographical narrative at the heart of the ironic conscience in *Night-Crossing* (1968). Among the many artistic outsiders who feature in this volume, the figure of Louis MacNeice is singled out as a central influence, greatly informing the operation of Mahon's poetic vision. Chapter Three examines the emergence of a much more satirical and politically charged voice in *Lives* (1972), as Mahon, following the example of Auden and MacNeice, as well as the American poet Robert Lowell, turns his eye on contemporary society (most notably in 'Beyond Howth Head'). However, it also singles out Beckett as a key influence, whose mordant humour and apocalyptic 'long view' shape the satirical perspectives in this volume. Chapter Four, by contrast, highlights the visionary mode of *The Snow Party* (1975), as Mahon draws upon the work of other Anglo-Irish and European writers. It demonstrates the ingenuity of the ironic conscience as a particular mindset, whose 'secular mysticism' has an acute historical edge (it taps the natural world both as a source of revelation and a site of

satirical critique). This is particularly evident in 'A Disused Shed', his most anthologised poem, in which mute phenomena give voice to oppressed peoples across the globe.

Chapter Five concentrates on *Poems 1962-1978*, which brings together the best of Mahon's previous work as well as a selection of new poems. It traces the progression from the autobiographical narrative of displacement in *Night-Crossing* to the dialectic of place and placelessness in this volume, culminating in the existential 'crisis' of 'The Sea in Winter'. In addition, it demonstrates how this dialectic is mirrored formally in Mahon's revisions and translations, which stress the fact that his poetic vision shifts, not only between places, but between different languages and cultures. Chapter Six, which looks at *The Hunt by Night* (1982), further enforces the elusive mobility of the ironic conscience, as evident in the extensive use of *ekphrasis*, translation or creative adaptation. The volume highlights the facility with which Mahon draws upon different art forms and voices, setting up a multi-layered, inter-textual dialogue around key issues, in particular the crucial relationship between art and history. It is the finest expression of his poetic vision, encapsulating its central themes and varying modes of engagement. As the Conclusion argues, *Antarctica* (1985) marks something of a terminal point for Mahon, effectively brings this first extended phase of his poetry to an end.

CONTENTS

Introduction

1. From *Night-Crossing* (1968) to *Antarctica* (1985)
   Key Critical Contexts for Reading the Extended First Phase of Mahon's Poetry

2. *Night-Crossing* (1968)
   The Ironic Conscience and the Autobiographical Narrative of Displacement

3. *Lives* (1972)
   The Satirical Mode of the Ironic Conscience

4. *The Snow Party* (1975)
   The Visionary Mode of the Ironic Conscience

5. *Poems 1962-1978* (1979)
   The Ironic Conscience and the Dialectic of Place and Placelessness

6. *The Hunt by Night* (1982)
   The Ironic Conscience: An Elusive and Mobile Voice

Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Belfast-born Derek Mahon (b.1941) has scarcely drawn the critical attention it deserves and has been largely overshadowed by the work of other Northern Ireland poets, Seamus Heaney in particular and, more recently, Paul Muldoon.[1] Whereas Heaney's poetry has been translated into many languages and received numerous awards, including the Nobel Prize in 1995, Mahon's work has attracted much less critical and popular acclaim.[2] However, his receipt of the Cohen Prize (a biennial lifetime's achievement award funded by the Arts Council of England) in March 2007, and Hugh Haughton's masterful study, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (2007), augur well for the future.[3] Unlike Heaney, who was a Harvard and Oxford Professor, Mahon has largely avoided the academic life, although he has served as writer-in-residence at a number of colleges (including the New University of Ulster in Coleraine; Trinity College, Dublin (TCD); the Cooper Union; New York University; the University of East Anglia, and Barnard College). He has consistently shunned the more commercial aspects of poetry, declining to give any detailed commentary on his work. As he remarked in interview in 1991, regarding the purpose of the literary business:

> My answer is a quotation from Yeats, which is quite simply, "A lonely impulse of delight"...People say, you have to do this reading, and you have to invite everybody who's important, and it's not in my nature to go out and do that. I believe in the lonely impulse of delight. I hate the "business".[4]

Mahon's refusal to let *Collected Poems* (1999) out to be reviewed and rejection of an accompanying book launch, are gestures very much in keeping with this reclusiveness or

---

[1] For critical writing on Muldoon, see Tim Kendall's book *Paul Muldoon* (Mid Glamorgan: Seren, 1996); *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), edited by Kendall and Peter McDonald and *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998) by Clair Wills. The fact that Muldoon is a Professor in Princeton University and, following Heaney's footsteps, Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, has increased his audience in both the United States and Great Britain.

[2] Honours include the Irish American Foundation Award, a Lannan Foundation Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the *Irish Times / Aer Lingus* Poetry Prize, the American Ireland Fund Literary Award and the C.K. Scott Moncreiff Translation Prize for his translation of *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet* (London: Viking, 1987). His volume *Harbour Lights* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2005) received the *Irish Times* Poetry Now Award in 2006.

[3] Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Apart from the special issue of *Irish University Review* in 1994 and *Ulster Editions and Monographs:11, The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, which arose out of the University of Ulster's fourth Ulster Symposium in September 1998, there had been no full length critical study of Mahon's work in English. Haughton's book goes some distance towards redressing this deficit.

[4] James P. Myers, Jr. (ed.), *Writing Irish: Selected Interviews with Irish Writers from the Irish Literary Supplement*, p. 198. This interview first appeared in *Irish Literary Supplement* 10, 2 (Fall, 1991). All page references to this interview are taken from Myers's book.

sense of the artist as *poète maudit*. Haughton noted how, on discovering Yeats and Dylan Thomas as a teenager, Mahon 'fancied himself as the Rimbaud of the Antrim Road'.[5] For him, craving the spotlight or courting publicity is at odds with the idea of the artist as outsider, a little too complicit in what he termed 'the voice of community'. He prefers the voice of solitaries in the cold....where the human soul really is'.[6] This explains his wariness of the 'business' of poetry and valorisation of silence. As he stated in interview, facetiously distinguishing his career trajectory from that of Heaney:

> I don't write books of poems; I write individual poems. I'm slightly terrified of something I noticed in London, the kind of every-three-years-you-bring-out-a-book syndrome. I think there's something a little exceptional and distinguished about being silent for ten years and then bringing out a thin pamphlet which is hard to come by. The next best thing to being a bestseller like Seamus is being a much-sought-after-rarity.[7]

Reference to the ten-year silence alludes to the gap between the publication of *Antarctica* in 1985 and *The Hudson Letter* in 1995, during which, it must be said, Mahon was active in translating both poetry and drama (his selection and translation of Jaccottet's poems was published in 1987, while his dramatic versions of Molière's works – *High Time* and *The School for Wives* – were published in 1985 and 1986 respectively).[8] This silence effectively marked the conclusion of the first extended phase of Mahon's career as a poet. The latter, which for simplicity of reference I shall term his 'early' poetry, is the focus of this thesis. It includes the first three volumes - *Night-Crossing* (1968), *Lives* (1972) and *The Snow Party* (1975) - as well as *Poems 1962-1978* (1979), which brought together most of this early work as well as a number of new poems. It also incorporates *The Hunt by Night* (1982) and the short pamphlet *Antarctica* (1985).[9] The latter, appropriately enough, given the opening line

---

[5] Hugh Haughton in *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000), p. 159.

[6] Interview with Eamon Grennan, *In the Chair – Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Clare: Salmon Publishing, 2002), p. 124. This interview first appeared in *Paris Review* (Spring, 2000), pp. 151-78.

[7] *Writing Irish: Selected Interviews with Irish Writers*, p. 196. Apart from a two year period in Coleraine (1977-1979), Mahon spent the years between 1970 and 1985 working as a journalist in London. As well as creating profiles and screenplays for radio and TV, he wrote numerous reviews for literary journals and magazines. Many of these are included in *Journalism*: *Selected Prose 1970-1995* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1996), edited by Terence Brown.

[8] *Selected Poems* by Phillipe Jaccottet (London: Viking, 1987; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988; Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Wake Forest University Press, 1988); *High Time, After Molière* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1985); *The School for Wives*, *After Molière* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1986). All references to Jaccottet's *Selected Poems* are from the Viking edition (1987), unless stated otherwise.

[9] Apart from *Antarctica*, all of these early volumes were published by Oxford University Press. The 1985 pamphlet marked the beginning of Mahon's association with Gallery Press, which has published all of his subsequent volumes to date. Accepting this schema for Mahon's early poetry suggests that his middle period

of the title poem, 'I am just going outside and may be some time' (the last recorded words of Lawrence Oates on Scott's fated expedition) marked the beginning of Mahon's poetic silence, his spell in the wilderness so to speak, exacerbated by a struggle with alcoholism and the breakdown of his marriage.

Alongside his avoidance of the commercial aspects of poetry, this extended silence undoubtedly contributed to Mahon's marginalisation and critical neglect.[10] However, other factors have added to this oversight. The absence of an autobiography like Michael Longley's brief memoir *Tuppenny Stung* (1994) or Louis MacNeice's *The Strings are False* (1965), or indeed Heaney's critical and autobiographical reflections on poetry, adds to the difficulty in placing Mahon.[11] 'Autobiographies' in *Poems 1962-1979* is one of the few poems to sketch the contours of his growing up. By nature private and reticent, he is not given to outlining the story of his past. As he explained in interview in 2000:

> One of the reasons I haven't done much in that explicitly autobiographical line is that it's not for me to do. Others have done it; others who have been content with a documentary mode have done it better than I would ever do it.[12]

This difficulty in locating Mahon is compounded by his resistance to coteries or groups ('the voice of community'), his distancing himself not only from the Belfast Group but also from the label 'Ulster writer' or 'poet from the North of Ireland'.[13] As he stated in 'An Honest Ulsterman', a review of John Hewitt in the *Irish Times* in 1988: 'Besides, why all this about 'the Ulster writer'? What about the Munster writer, the East Anglican writer, the Scottish

---

includes *The Yaddo Letter* (1992), *The Hudson Letter* (1995) and *The Yellow Book* (1997) – all part of his experimentation with longer, more fluid verse forms. It also includes his *Selected Poems* published in 1991. His later period incorporates *Collected Poems* (1999) which, like *Poems 1962-1978*, included a number of new poems as well as the best of his previous work; *Roman Script*, with drawings by Anne Madden (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2000); *Harbour Lights* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2005), *Selected Poems* (2006), *Adaptations* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2006) and *The Life of Things* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2008), his most recent volume. *Adaptations* brings together a selection of Mahon's versions, creative adaptations or translations of works by different writers.

[10] Strictly speaking, the period of silence is not ten years if one allows for the publication of *The Yaddo Letter* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1992). The long poem, written in heroic couplets, is dedicated to Rory and Katie, Mahon's two children from his marriage to Doreen Douglas.

[11] Michael Longley, *Tuppenny Stung: Autobiographical Chapters* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1994); Louis MacNeice, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965). All further references to Longley in this text will denote Michael Longley as distinct from his wife Edna, the well-known literary critic who (as we shall see in Chapter One) was also a student at TCD in the 1960s. *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), compiled by Denis O'Driscoll, is the most recent addition to the Nobel laureate's reflections on his own writing.

[12] Mahon, *In the Chair*, p. 109.

[13] The Belfast Group, as it came to be known, will be discussed in Chapter One.

writer?'[14] The note of irritation reflects his sense of the artist as an outsider who, in MacNeice's phrase (as cited by Mahon in his Introduction to Jaccottet's poetry) remains 'outside the cliques, unbothered with the fashion', pursuing his own solitary vision.[15] From an early age, Mahon was wary of aesthetic categories or labels, recognising the need to move beyond a certain insularity or provincialism. His time as a student at TCD (where he read English, Philosophy and French) and spell at the Sorbonne, not only whetted his imaginative love affair with France and its literature, but heightened his awareness of the borderless world of art.

The cosmopolitan dimension of Mahon's early work is evident in the focus on a whole range of international artists, from classical literature (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is one of his most enduring source texts), French poetry, Anglo-Irish and European writing (Beckett, MacNeice, Joyce and J. G. Farrell figure alongside Brecht, Hamsun, Pasternak, Seferis and Cavafy). His versions or creative adaptations of works by various writers include 'Legacies (after Villon)', the final poem in *Night-Crossing*; 'After Nerval' (*The Snow Party*); 'Three Poems after Jaccottet' (*Poems 1962-1978*); 'Brecht in Svendborg' and 'from The Drunken Boat (after Rimbaud)' in *The Hunt by Night*. As he stated in his Foreword to *Adaptations* (2006):

> I've taken many liberties; but I hope these adaptations, materializing over the years with the idle intensity of doodles, will read almost like original poems in English, allowing their sources to remain audible. [16]

As Eileen Battersby pointed out in 1992 (his *Selected Poems* having won the *Irish Times / Aer Lingus* Prize for Poetry that year), Mahon is a very European poet who 'just happened to have been born in Belfast'.[17] His early poetry (in particular the title poem of *Lives*) enforces his fluid sense of identity and awareness of the trans-national or trans-cultural dimension of literature. A cursory glance through the contents of *Poems 1962-1978* reveals such titles as 'The Poets of the Nineties', 'The Death of Marilyn Monroe', 'De Quincey at Grasmere', 'Epitaph for Robert Flaherty', 'Bruce Ismay's Soliloquy', 'An Image from Beckett', 'I am Raftery', 'Homage to Malcolm Lowry' and 'The Poet in Residence (after Corbière)'. 'Van

---

[14] This review is included in *Journalism*, pp. 92-94 (the quotation cited is on p. 94). It will be referred to in greater detail later in this Introduction, in the context of Hewitt's ethical prescriptions for the Ulster writer.
[15] Mahon, Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet* (London: Viking, 1987), p. 9. All references to this Introduction are from this text, unless stated otherwise.
[16] Mahon, Foreword to *Adaptations*, p. 11.
[17] Eileen Battersby, 'A Very European Poet', *Irish Times*, 10 November 1992, p. 12.

Gogh in the Borinage' (originally 'Van Gogh among the Miners' in *Night-Crossing*) highlights the influence of the visual arts on Mahon's work, which features painters like Paolo Uccello and Edvard Munch alongside the Dutch artists Van Gogh, Van Meegeren and Pieter de Hooch.

This eclectic awareness of art and diversity of poetic influence further compounded the difficulty in placing Mahon, setting his work apart from his contemporaries in the North of Ireland. It also gave rise to some heated debate concerning the accessibility or engagement of his early poetry. A number of critics argued that the over-literariness of many poems smacked of posturing or fabricated cosmopolitanism, casting the speaker in the role of detached aesthete or disaffected *flâneur*. As Norman Vance explained: 'The elegant allusive manner of the literary patrician can be chilling, and sometimes the effect is oppressive, as if utterance is impossible without an epigraph or idea from Rilke or Rochefoucauld'.[18] Mahon's insistence on the formal aspects of poetry (the poem as a visual icon or orchestrated structure), as well as his interest in French symbolism and *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism, only served to enforce this impression of a poet for whom art is an ivory tower, at a remove from historical and political realities. The single phrase, 'I am / Through with history', from 'The Last of the Fire Kings' in *The Snow Party*, was often taken out of context and read as a kind of escapist manifesto for his early poetry.

Alternatively, there were critics who argued that Mahon's oblique perspectives and richly allusive intertextuality were an imaginative resource, a subtle form of engagement rather than a means of escape. They recognised the complex wit underlying the patrician reserve, relishing a distinctive poetic voice which brought a whole range of artists into creative alignment with our time. In this context (as Gerald Dawe pointed out), the diversity of influence in Mahon's poetry may be seen to reflect the 'gapped, discontinuous, polyglot tradition' which Thomas Kinsella deemed the inheritance of every writer in the modern world.[19] His work is exemplary in its creative adaptation of such a fragmented and plural

[18] Norman Vance, *Irish Literature: A Social History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Press, 1990), p. 221. The critical response to Mahon's poetry is outlined in Chapter One.
[19] Gerald Dawe, 'A Question of Imagination: Poetry in Ireland', in *Against Piety: Essays in Irish Poetry* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995), p. 39. Kinsella's phrase is from 'The Divided Mind', a paper delivered at the Thomas Davis Lectures in August 1971 (it is included in Sean Lucy (ed.), *Irish Poets in English* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1972, pp. 208-218).

tradition, as evident in the title poem of his second volume *Lives*, which playfully subverts the continuity or rootedness of Heaney's *oeuvre*.[20]

The intensity of critical debate regarding Mahon's early poetry is best understood in the light of two major historical developments, which greatly influenced the reception of each volume from *Night Crossing* (1968) to *Antarctica* (1985). These include the outbreak of the 'Troubles' in the North of Ireland in 1969 (a conflict which lasted for four decades) and changes in the institution of literature which foregrounded the crucial issue of the relationship between poetry and politics. This relationship was the subject of even greater scrutiny in an Irish context during the 1970s and 1980s, given that the violence in the North was at its worst during this period. Initiatives like the Dublin-produced journal *The Crane Bag* and Derry-based theatre company Field Day, both sought to confront the deadlocked cultural and political situation, advancing the notion of a 'fifth province' as a resolving alternative.[21] Such initiatives, which emerged against the backdrop of the Troubles and ideological changes in the academy, largely served to frame the cultural politics behind conflicting readings of Mahon's early poetry as detached or engaged. This divergence of opinion only added to the difficulty in placing him. It also gave rise, as we shall see, to very different interpretations of particular poems.

Finally, and most significantly, the particular vision of Mahon's early poetry resists neat classification, complicating the issue of poetic 'commitment' which dogged literary criticism during this period. Its distinct yet related elements tested the usual dividing line in Irish poetry, the opposition between Yeats (traditionalist) and Joyce (modernist), by incorporating aspects of both, alongside key influences like MacNeice and Beckett, as well as a wide range of French and other European writing.[22] While traditional in technique,

---

[20] The central significance of 'Lives' for the argument of this thesis is outlined in Chapter Three, pp. 111-116.

[21] *The Crane Bag* and Field Day are referred to in greater detail in Chapter One. The idea of a fifth province, as suggested by Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney (the editors of *The Crane Bag*), was to carve out an alternative space within which the existing four provinces of Ireland – Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connacht – might be unified. In 'Why Ireland needs a fifth province', an article in *The Sunday Independent* (22 January, 1984, p. 15), Seamus Deane, in conversation with Kearney and Ciaran Carthy, defined it as 'an equivalent centre from which the four broken and fragmented pieces of contemporary Ireland might be seen as in fact coherent'.

[22] In 'Heirs and Graces: The Influence and Example of Derek Mahon', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002), p. 54, Dawe criticises Peter Porter for following such a simplistic line of argument, linking Irish poets like Mahon and Heaney with 'the feudal Yeats' as opposed to 'the urban and demotic Joyce'. Porter's article appeared in *The Sunday Telegraph* (30 August, 1998).

Mahon's early poetry is highly modernist in sympathy, frustrating the designs of 'the critic pack' (to adopt Robert Frost's phrase).[23] As Brendan Kennelly observed, in 'Derek Mahon's Humane Perspective' (1989):

> Probably the single most difficult problem for anyone seeking to get into Mahon's poetry is trying to define the quality of his voice....There are many elements in that voice. In his best poems all these elements are held in a calm and dignified balance. It is a quiet voice, not too dramatic. It is a consciously educated voice. It is learned but not pedantic. It is self aware and self mocking. It is perhaps too ironic to be noticeably passionate, and yet there is no doubt of its intensity. It is the kind of voice that craves an eloquent linguistic precision and often finds it. It is a voice of conscience, scrupulously examined, stylishly projected, rhythmically elaborated, a pleasure to hear, mysterious to think about.[24]

While highlighting particular elements (balance, learning, irony, self-awareness and self-mockery, conscience, style or grace of expression), these observations also draw attention to Mahon's subtleties of tone ('not too dramatic...learned but not pedantic'), his way of ironising feeling or emotion, of saying and unsaying at once ('perhaps too ironic to be noticeably passionate, and yet there is no doubt of its intensity'). In identifying the element of irony, Kennelly confirmed Fran Brearton's remark that it is difficult to find any study of Mahon's early poetry that does not mention his ironic perspective, although the latter remains largely undefined. Alluding to the titles of various articles, she declared:

> ...irony is the single most noticed yet unchallenged factor in his poetry: 'a poet of ironically long-term perspectives'; a 'terminal ironist'; 'an ironic conscience at one minute to midnight'. [25]

The unchallenged factor is due, at least in part, to irony's elasticity as a critical term, which renders it a highly problematic mode of expression. As Linda Hutcheon explained in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994), the concept is the subject of scrutiny in

---

[23] Frost, cited in Rachel Buxton's study *Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 8. The American poet compared certain poetry to a kind of game: 'The game is one like Hare and Hounds / To entertain the critic pack / The poet has to leave a track / Of torn up scraps of prior poets'.

[24] Brendan Kennelly, 'Derek Mahon's Humane Perspective', in Terence Brown & Nicholas Grene (eds.), *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 148. All references to this essay are from this volume. The essay is reprinted in Åke Persson (ed.), *Brendan Kennelly, Journey into Joy: Selected Prose* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), pp.127-135.

[25] Fran Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry: W.B.Yeats to Michael Longley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 213. In a footnote to the lines cited, she wrote: 'These few examples are taken from blurbs and article titles. It would be difficult to find any study of Mahon that does not mention his ironic perspective'. 'A Terminal Ironist' was the title of Paulin's review of *Poems 1962-1978* in the *Honest Ulsterman* (June, 1980); 'a poet of ironically long-term perspectives' was the subtitle of Edna Longley's review of *Selected Poems* (1991) in *Poetry Review*, 81/2 (Summer, 1991), while 'an ironic conscience at one minute to midnight' was the title of her review of *The Hunt by Night* (1982) in *Fortnight*, 211 (December, 1984).

fields as diverse as linguistics, political science, sociology, history, aesthetics, religion, philosophy, psychology and anthropology. Its long critical history has expanded to cover virtually any disjunction at all between language and meaning. This accounts for its multi-layered definition as

> ...a keystone of poetics, a paradigm of criticism, a mode of consciousness or existence that raises questions about the self and the nature of knowledge, a philosophical stance vis-à-vis the universe, an informing principle of personality, or a way of life.[26]

Because irony is open to diverse interpretation, it invariably implies different things to different critics. It is no surprise then that it assumes shifting connotations in relation to Mahon's early poetry. Kennelly linked it with a certain detachment or dispassionate stance (with which it has a long historical association), while Seamus Deane, comparing Mahon with Heaney, aligned it with a bleaker, more sceptical vision:

> Mahon's is a bleaker world – more knowledgeable, less rooted, even a cosmopolitan but darkened contrast. Along with the sounds and gestures of MacNeice, Mahon is full of French echoes, and he is a wonderful translator of French poetry. His ambition to make poetry more real than the actual world is of a piece with Heaney's, but Mahon has more sceptical, subtle-silver ironies in his stance.[27]

Such subtle ironies are repeatedly singled out by critics in relation to specific poems and volumes. For instance, Brian Donnelly noted the 'grim, ironic wit' of 'Dowson and Company' (*Night-Crossing*), while Kennelly identified the 'dancing, mischievous, impish irony' of 'Matthew V. 29-30' (*The Snow Party*). Maurice Riordan linked *The Snow Party* with 'a mode of ironic eloquence...that invited perhaps the charge of a residual aestheticism', whereas Elmer Andrews detected a demonstrable slackening of tension in *The Hunt by Night*, where 'the equivocations of the ironic intelligence give way to simple statement'.[28]

---

[26] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 3.

[27] Interview with Seamus Deane, *In the Chair*, p. 102. The interview was recorded in February 2000. In his classic study, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 216, D. C. Muecke outlined irony's historical associations with detachment, either in terms of an adopted stance, factor of control or real deficiency of feeling.

[28] Brian Donnelly, 'The Poetry of Derek Mahon', *English Studies* 60, 1 (1979), p. 23; Kennelly, 'Derek Mahon's Humane Perspective', p. 149; Maurice Riordan, 'An Urbane Perspective: The Poetry of Derek Mahon' in Maurice Harmon (ed.), *The Irish Writer and the City*, *Irish Literary Studies*, 18 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1984), p. 176; Elmer Andrews, 'The Poetry of Derek Mahon: places where a thought might grow', in Elmer Andrews (ed.), *Contemporary Irish Poetry*: *A Collection of Critical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 257.

These remarks highlight the difficulty in defining the vision of Mahon's early poetry and the need for nuance in applying the notion of irony. Hence, the focus of this thesis on 'the ironic conscience', a composite phrase taken from the verse-letter 'Beyond Howth Head' in *Lives* (1972), which incorporates several distinct yet related elements. The combination of these elements, I will argue, is what makes Mahon's vision so elusive, accounting for such contrasting perceptions of him as a sceptical modernist, terminal ironist, detached lyricist or secular mystic; as 'the Stephen Dedalus of Belfast' (to cite Heaney), if not 'the Rimbaud of the Antrim Road'.[29] It also explains why so many poems are susceptible of different interpretations or marked by what 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' (*Night-Crossing*) termed 'solving ambiguity'. We will first provide a brief description of the concept of the ironic conscience before outlining a framework for its consideration in relation to each volume of Mahon's poetry from *Night-Crossing* (1968) to *Antarctica* (1982).

The Ironic Conscience.

The phrase 'love-play of the ironic conscience' appears in the form of a question in stanza five of 'Beyond Howth Head' in *Lives* (1972), sandwiched between references to Beckett and Edmund Spenser:

> The pros outweigh the cons that glow
> from Beckett's bleak *reductio*;
> and who would trade self-knowledge for
> a prelapsarian metaphor,
> love-play of the ironic conscience
> for a prescriptive innocence?
> 'Lewde libertie', whose midnight work
> disturbed the peace of Co. Cork...[30]

The question, as we shall see in the Chapter on *Lives*, is rhetorical given the poem's celebration of freedom, or valorisation of the creative imagination over the constraints of political and religious ideology. In a subtle sleight of hand, Mahon links conscience with irony, associating it with 'love-play' rather than prescription. Love-play has its own French echo (to pick up Deane's earlier remark) suggesting a certain *jouissance* or delight in the pleasures of the text or the possibilities of language, imbuing conscience with a playful, celebratory streak. It is the light touch or humorous mode in Mahon's early poetry which

[29] Heaney, 'The Pre-Natal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry', *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), p. 48.
[30] The phrase first appeared in the pamphlet *Beyond Howth Head* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970), p. 8. It is retained in the version in *Lives* (1972).

deflates pretension or restores balance when life is being taken too seriously. At times it pokes fun at, what Longley termed, Northern Irish middle-class Protestant respectability.[31] Alternatively, as in poems like 'Ecclesiastes' (*Lives*) or 'Matthew V. 29-30' (*The Snow Party*), it acts as an antidote to the puritanical or Calvinistic strain of his native Protestant background ('all that Adamnation / And hand-me-down of doom', as described by W. R. Rodgers in 'Epilogue' to *The Character of Ireland*). For him, it restores a certain magic, mischief or lost 'karma', to recall a phrase Mahon used in interview with Terence Brown.[32]

Humour is a central aspect of the ironic conscience in Mahon's early poetry, variously adopting different forms (satirical, subversive, bleak, mordant, playful, sharp, self-deprecating). For him, it is the signature of the free-floating imagination which resists fixity in all its forms, not least a fundamentalist or prescriptive outlook in terms of religion, politics or literature. It has little time for shibboleths, stereotypes, rhetoric or 'the *rigor mortis* of archaic postures, political and cultural' (as Mahon expressed it in an early essay), insisting rather on nuance and complexity, as well as style and grace of expression.[33] As Elmer Kennedy-Andrews noted, in relation to the relevant stanza from 'Beyond Howth Head':

> Mahon argues for a principle of self-delighting playfulness and creative freedom, for a sceptical, subversive poetry that unsettles rather than confirms, a poetry that explores doubts and uncertainties and values aesthetics above ethics.[34]

However, while Mahon's poetry is both sceptical and subversive and does, indeed, explore 'doubts and uncertainties', it is not entirely accurate to suggest that it 'values aesthetics above ethics'. As this thesis will argue, the element of conscience ensures that irony is a serious, ultimately moral way of relating to the world. The 'playfulness and creative

---

[31] As Longley, in 'The Empty Holes of Spring: Some Reminiscences of Trinity & Two Poems Addressed to Derek Mahon' in *Irish University Review* 24, 1 (1994), p. 54, remarked, in relation to his undergraduate days in Dublin with Mahon: 'We laughed a lot. A need to undermine Northern Irish middle-class Protestant respectability seemed to be at the core of our humour. Although pieties of any kind were fit targets, a posh Cherryvalley accent which caricatured the wobbly vowel-sounds of the more complacent brands of Unionism invariably focused our hilarity'. Mahon marvellously satirises the sense of doom and damnation, as we shall see, in 'Ecclesiastes' (*Lives*).

[32] Brown, 'An interview with Derek Mahon', *Poetry Ireland*, No. 14 (Autumn 1985), p. 14. Mahon remarked: 'Yes, well I think the Protestant ethic has made it its business to dispel any karma there might have been. In so far as I have written about the North what I have been about, one doesn't always know at the time what one is doing, but in retrospect I may have been trying to put back in some of the karma that bad Protestants over the generations have removed'.

[33] Mahon, 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', *Twentieth Century Studies*, 4 (November 1970), p. 93. Mahon chose not to include this essay in *Journalism*, his collection of articles, critical essays and reviews.

[34] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 8.

freedom' of the poet's work is at the service of a critical intelligence that is profoundly engaged with contemporary reality. It is not 'self-delighting' in the sense of turned in upon itself. This is particularly evident in 'Beyond Howth Head', which highlights the fact (as will be outlined in Chapter Three) that Mahon's formal ingenuity is inseparable from historical investigation. The verse-letter is exemplary in this regard, epitomising the satirical or politically subversive humour of the ironic conscience that 'unsettles rather than confirms'. It has a defiant, rebellious spark, as suggested by the poem's wry use of Spenser's phrase 'Lewde libertie'. Whereas, for the English writer, it signalled the anarchy which led to the destruction of Kilcolman castle (*lewde* in *A Veue of the Present State of Ireland* implied ignorant), Mahon uses it as a rallying cry against sexual inhibition or political and religious oppression.[35] Playfulness in this context may be seen as an expression of the poet's independent 'inner light', which pokes fun at the narrow-mindedness of political and religious rhetoric or the absolutism of ideological *-isms* (nationalism, unionism, activism or aestheticism). Here it can be linked with the Protestant tradition of dissent exemplified in MacNeice and Beckett, both of whom, as will be argued in this thesis, are major influences on Mahon's early work.[36] This independent stance finds succinct expression in the early poem 'First Principles' (*Night-Crossing*), which stated: 'With pew and pedestal / I will have no truck'.

Alongside Mahon's humour, stanza five from 'Beyond Howth Head' highlights another key mode of the ironic conscience, namely its dialectical awareness. It too is engaged in the art of subversion, as its subtle balancing of oppositions undermines rigid polarities. While end-rhyme and enjambement propel the question to its climax, internal rhymes activate all kinds of hidden correspondences (weigh / play; pros / glow; cons / ironic; Beckett / prescriptive; trade / Lewde) which blur the distinction between binary oppositions. The association of conscience with love-play or pleasure, and innocence with prescription or

---

[35] Spenser's pamphlet, which takes issue with Elizabeth's policy for Ireland (he felt the situation called for much harsher measures), was written 'during the poet's residence at Kilcolman Castle in Country Cork during the years 1587 and 1598 when the castle was burned by the Irish' (Deane, *Celtic Revivals* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), p. 158). Heaney, in 'Bog Oak' from *Wintering Out* (1972), cited Spenser's text in the context of the relationship between art and violence: 'Perhaps I just make out / Edmund Spenser, / dreaming sunlight, / encroached upon by // geniuses who creep / 'out of every corner / of the woodes and glennes' / towards watercress and carrion'.

[36] Dawe discusses this tradition of dissent and MacNeice's influence on both Mahon and Longley in his essay, '"Icon and Lares": Derek Mahon and Michael Longley', *Across a Roaring Hill* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1985), pp. 218-233. The phrase is taken from Longley's poem 'Birthmarks: for D.M' in *No Continuing City* (1969). Written in 1966, it was originally entitled 'To Derek Mahon'.

constraint, subverts our habitual associations. The interrogative subjunctive ('who would trade'), for all its rhetorical implication, resists final closure, as Mahon declines trading any one term entirely for its opposite, preferring instead to weigh the conflicting claims ('pros' and 'cons') of imagination and conscience, playfulness and seriousness, innocence and experience. Such balancing is characteristic of the ironic conscience as it negotiates conflicting perspectives, in what Neil Corcoran described as

> ...that stylish combination of composure and discomposure, of finish and process, *brio* and melancholy, that holds so many of his poems in profitably unresolved tension.[37]

This dialectical mode informs Mahon's early poetry both thematically and formally. It accounts for the way it exploits the complicity of opposites, in keeping with his sense of poetry as 'a light to lighten the darkness'.[38] For the ironic conscience knows only too well how cultural forces which appear to be opposites frequently turn out to be doubles, or (as Heaney expressed it) 'how quickly the gleam in a romantic poet's eye could convert to the glint in the eye of a sniper'.[39] Such forces, as we shall see, include order and chaos, barbarism and civility, displacement and belonging. Their complicity registers in the elusive tone or 'profitably unresolved tension' of several key poems, including 'Glengormley' and 'In Belfast' in *Night-Crossing*; 'Rage for Order' in *Lives*; 'The Snow Party', 'The Last of the Fire Kings' and 'A Disused Shed' in *The Snow Party*; 'Courtyards in Delft' and 'Girls on the Bridge' in *The Hunt by Night*. For Mahon, the element of tension or sustained ambiguity keeps meaning fluid in the sense of open to paradox, contradiction, uncertainty or doubt. It ensures that each of these poems resists fixity, generating what MacNeice termed 'an internal conflict, cross-talk, backwash, come-back or pay-off'.[40]

This pivotal stanza in 'Beyond Howth Head' thus draws attention to the ethical or moral force of the ironic conscience, which is continuously (if obliquely) engaged with historical reality. It also highlights how this specific poetic sensibility assumes different modes, in particular a playful yet probing humour and sharp, dialectical awareness, both of which feature throughout Mahon's early poetry. It also draws attention to its literary allusiveness,

---

[37] Neil Corcoran, 'Resident Alien: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon', in *Poets of Modern Ireland: Text, Context, Intertext* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1999), p. 145.
[38] Mahon, 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', p. 93.
[39] Heaney, 'The Pre-Natal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry', *The Place of Writing*, p. 44.
[40] MacNeice, 'Experience with Images' (1949), cited by Edna Longley in *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. xi.

incorporating references to Beckett and Spenser. Here the stanza exemplifies a recurring strategy, that is, the adaptation of different voices to dramatise one's own perspective. As Brown expressed it:

> For Mahon is a shape-changer, a protean artist of the disinherited modern sensibility who takes his poetic chances where he finds them: in the Alexandria of Cavafy, from a globe in North Carolina, from Ovid, Rilke, Knut Hamsun, Pasternak, from pictures, film, employing a shuffled deck of poetic *mises-en-scènes* from Portrush to Kyoto, Rathlin Island to Antarctica.[41]

Shape-changing is another aspect of the ironic conscience, part of its allusive or self-dramatising mode. It explains Mahon's preoccupation with literary 'lives' (to adopt the title of his second volume) or identification with drifters, gypsies, outcasts, rebels and suffering solitaries. This miscellany of outsiders operates as an extension of personality or a revelation of different aspects of the self. Like Yeats's masks, they provide a measure of freedom or ingenuity in self-creation, a means of ensuring identity remains fluid and mobile rather not rigid and fixed. Mahon would agree with Muldoon's assessment of the writer in this regard:

> I think a writer's job is to be an outsider, to belong to no groups, no tribes, no clubs. So far as any of us can, it's to be a free agent, within the state of oneself, or roaming through the different states of oneself.[42]

The ironic conscience relishes such free agency, adopting different voices to facilitate greater imaginative freedom. The fourth poem 'The Bicycle' in the sequence 'Autobiographies' (*Poems 1962-1978*) is typical in this regard. Here the proto-poet likens himself to a character in one of Flann O'Brien's novels, as happiness is linked with a state of mobility:

> I became like a character
> In *The Third Policeman*, half
> Human, half bike, my life
> A series of dips and ridges,
> Happiness a free-wheeling
> Past fragrant hawthorn hedges.[43]

The poem highlights Mahon's ludic disposition and facility for self-dramatisation. It also marks the trajectory of his early poetry as 'a free-wheeling' through 'the different states of

---

[41] Brown, 'Home and Away: Derek Mahon's France', in B. Hayley and C. Murray (eds.), *Ireland and France, A Bountiful Friendship* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992), p. 14.

[42] Cited by Muldoon in interview with Kevin Barry in James P. Myers, Jr. (ed.), *Writing Irish: Selected Interviews with Irish Writers* from the *Irish Literary Supplement*, p. 92.

[43] 'Autobiographies' (*Poems 1962-1978*), p. 91. 'Epitaph for Flann O'Brien' (*The Snow Party*) is another of Mahon's literary genuflections.

oneself' (in Muldoon's terms) or the 'shuffled deck of poetic *mises-en-scènes*' (as Brown put it). According to Richard Rorty, such play is partly because ironists are acutely aware of the possibility of having been 'initiated into the wrong tribe', taught the wrong language and left feeling rootless as a result of the process of socialisation. They are therefore

> ...never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus of their selves.[44]

Stanza five in 'Beyond Howth Head' is crucial in relation to the ironic conscience, for it highlights not only its allusive intertextuality but all its different modes (playful, satirical, oblique, autobiographical, dialectical, political, historical, mystical), linking them with an underlying uncertainty of identity. In so doing it illustrates how the concept, as outlined in this thesis, offers an alternative angle on the central theme of displacement in Mahon's work, a theme which has been well documented by Heaney (1984), Haughton (1992), John Kerrigan (1992), Tim Kendall (1994), Colin Graham (1995), Corcoran (1999) and Brown (2003).[45] The free-floating mobility of the ironic conscience derives from a sense of 'contingency and fragility' not simply in relation to self but also in relation to place.

In terms of place, Mahon's uncertainty of identity registers in the recurring dialectic between *here* and *elsewhere*, place and placelessness in so many of his early poems, whether Howth Head and beyond; a garage in Co. Cork and some place in London or Boston; a field of leaves and a 'heaven / Of lost future'.[46] These poems are typical insofar as they register an undercurrent of homelessness or not belonging, and a sense of place haunted by traces of time past or time future. As Kerrigan outlined: 'Almost invariably when Mahon writes about place, there is an ontological subplot concerned with man's desire to belong in the world,

---

[44] Richard Rorty, 'Private irony and liberal hope', *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.73-74.

[45] Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland' [1985], in *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays*, pp. 124-144. This essay was originally presented as the first Pete Laver Memorial Lecture at Grasmere in 1984; Haughton, '"Even now there are places where a thought might grow": Place and Displacement in the Poetry of Derek Mahon', in Neil Corcoran (ed.), *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), pp. 87-120; John Kerrigan, 'Ulster Ovids', also in *The Chosen Ground*, pp. 237-269; Tim Kendall, 'Leavetakings and Homecomings, Derek Mahon's Belfast', *Eire-Ireland*, 29, 4 (1994), pp. 101-116; Colin Graham, 'Derek Mahon's Cultural Marginalia', in Eve Patten (ed.), *Returning To Ourselves: Second Volume of Papers from the John Hewitt International Summer School* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995), pp. 240-248; Corcoran, 'Resident Alien: America in the poetry of Derek Mahon', in *Poets of Modern Ireland* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1999), pp. 137-155; Brown, 'Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness', in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2003), pp. 133-148.

[46] 'Beyond Howth Head' (*Lives*), 'A Garage in Co. Cork' (*The Hunt by Night*), 'Leaves' (*The Snow Party*).

cross-cut with colonial anxiety'.[47] Innate restlessness, metaphysical unease, colonial anxiety, a questioning uncertainty of identity, all inform the ironic conscience in Mahon's early poetry. As a result, his awareness of locale is in marked contrast to that of Heaney. As he stated in interview in 1981:

> Seamus is very sure of his place; I've never been sure of mine. My home landscape, and here I mean North Antrim where I spent most of my childhood holidays, and not Belfast from where I was born, figures largely in my poems. Aside from these poems the place that the poetry occupies is not a geographical location; it's a community of imagined readership. [48]

'Autobiographies' enforces this uncertainty, providing a template for Mahon's sense of the provisionality of place. It highlights how he takes his bearings as much from 'Stalingrad' as 'the Antrim Road', from 'Gracie Fields on the radio!' as well as the girls in the playground of 'Skegoneill Primary School'.[49] Autobiography and history are subtly intertwined as home becomes 'The Home Front' (the title of the opening section). Like 'the bright spokes glittering' in the poem's final line, Mahon's imaginative vision is constantly between places. Hence his direct, if somewhat facetious, response to Hewitt's valorisation of rootedness or regional identity:

> The Ulster writer, says Hewitt, 'must be a rooted man. He must carry the native tang of his idiom like the native dust on his sleeve; otherwise he is an airy internationalist, thistledown, a twig in a stream...He must know where he comes from and where he is; otherwise how can he tell where he wishes to go?' This is a bit tough on thistledown; and, speaking as a twig in a stream, I feel there's a certain harshness, a dogmatism, at work there. 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. What about humour, mischief, wickedness? 'Send war in our time, O Lord!'[50]

A sure hold on origins, present reality and future prospect is precisely what eludes the ironic conscience as outlined here. Keats's 'negative capability' mirrors its uncertainties and

---

[47] Kerrigan, 'Ulster Ovids', p. 260.

[48] Willie Kelly, 'Each Poem for me is a New Beginning' (interview with Derek Mahon), *Cork Review*, 2 (1981), p. 11.

[49] 'Autobiographies' (*Poems 1962-1978*), pp. 87-88. The girls are named as 'Eileen Boyd, Hazel and Heather / Thompson, Patricia King'.

[50] Mahon, 'An Honest Ulsterman', *Journalism*, p. 94. The article, written for the *Irish Times* in 1988, was a review of *Ancestral Voices: The Selected Prose of John Hewitt* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1987), edited by Tom Clyde. Hewitt's remarks first appeared in an article, 'The Bitter Gourd: Problems of the Ulster Writer', in *Lagan*, 3 (1945), pp. 93-105. Keats's 'negative capability', as formulated in a letter to George and Tom Keats in 1817, is "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.

doubts in relation to place. Little wonder then that Mahon's sympathies lie with thistledown, the image of a twig in a stream reflecting his restless or migratory imagination.

In terms of self, the poet's awareness of contingency finds expression in an intense literary and cultural allusiveness. Here, the etymology of irony is revealing in its association with masks, the Greek term *eirōneia* linking with *eirōn*, a dissembler. The ironic conscience not only shifts between places but operates with different identities. It assumes many faces, from chiliastic prophet to *poète maudit* or *agent provocateur*, turning uncertainty into a creative resource or a catalyst for self-dramatisation. Its shape-changing ensures multiple lives as Mahon draws upon art's endless array of characters, from texts like Beckett's *Molloy*, Camus's *L'Étranger*, O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* or Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830).[51] As Rorty declared, linking the ironist's reluctance to be trapped in a single idiom (to echo 'The Sea in Winter' in *Poems 1962-1978*) with a fascination for the foreign or unfamiliar:

> Ironists are afraid they will get stuck in the vocabulary in which they were brought up if they only know the people in their own neighbourhood, so they try to get acquainted with strange people (Alcibiades, Julien Sorel), strange families (the Karamazovs, the Casaubons), and strange communities (the Teutonic Knights, the Nuer, the mandarins of the Sung).[52]

The litany of 'strange people' in Mahon's early poetry includes artists like Beckett, Brecht, Camus, Cavafy, Corbière, De Quincey, Horace, Hamsun, Lowry, Munch, Nerval, Seferis and Villon, while his 'strange communities' encompass everything from the 'lost tribe' of Northern Protestantism, to gypsies, anthropologists, fire-kings, banished gods, mushrooms and other mute phenomena. Yeats's phrase 'A lonely impulse of delight', cited in the article on Hewitt, highlights Mahon's literary allusiveness. In Rorty's terms, it illustrates how he adopts and modifies the language of writers whom he has read, viewing their ideas 'as grist to be put through the same dialectical mill'.[53] The Yeatsian expression is a particular favourite of Mahon's, because it encapsulates both the ludic mode of the ironic conscience (the composite wit) and its independent stance (the outsider's resistance to the claims of any

---

[51] Beckett's character Molloy is referred to, as we shall see, in 'Beyond Howth Head', as well as in the earlier poem 'Exit Molloy' from 'Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc' (*Night-Crossing*). Camus's *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider*) features in 'Death and the Sun' (*Antarctica*), while Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (*The Red and the Black*) (1830) appears in 'An Image from Beckett' (*Lives*).

[52] Rorty, 'Private irony and liberal hope', p. 80. Stanza seventeen of 'The Sea in Winter' (*Poems 1962-1978*) opens with the lines: 'For I am trapped as much as they / In my own idiom', as Mahon links the figure of the poet with drunken revellers at 'closing time'.

[53] Rorty, 'Private irony and liberal hope', p. 76.

particular community or group).[54] Alongside Keats's 'negative capability' and the reference to 'Send war in our time', which echoes the Irish nationalist John Mitchel's prayer in *Jail Journal* (1854), also cited by Yeats in 'Under Ben Bulben', it underlines the deftness of Mahon's allusions. In this instance, they counter the harsh 'dogmatism' of Hewitt's position, as Mahon sets up his own Yeatsian dialectic between order and chaos, fixity and flux, rootedness and restlessness.[55]

The effect of this allusive mode in Mahon's early poetry is to deflect a strong sense of the implied author (as in Heaney's work). It ensures that the lyric identity is evasive, shifting and provisional, as it moves from one time, place, text or art work to another (Mahon's interest in translation, as we shall see in relation to *Poems 1962-1978* and *The Hunt by Night*, is readily understood in this context, reflecting a desire to overcome the limitations of background and culture). The title poem in *Lives* makes this mobile identity most explicit, reading rather like a manifesto for deracination. More than any other poem, it confirms Mahon's sense of the artist as 'a twig in a stream', roving across continents as well as the different states of self. In Keats's terms, cited by him in relation to Jaccottet's poetry, 'the poetical character is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing – it has no character'.[56] Here, the allusiveness of the ironic conscience meets a further mode, as the sense of contingency in relation to identity and place finds expression in, what certain critics have deemed, Mahon's 'secular mysticism' (the phrase adopts his own description of Jaccottet as a 'secular mystic' in the Introduction to *Selected Poems: Philippe Jaccottet* (1988)).[57] The terms of Brown's analysis, in an article in 1992, neatly recall the image of 'thistledown', which Mahon cited in response to Hewitt:

> A self without readily available identity finds no point of integration, neither in religious nor in political faith. Yet the overall impression that comes from this remarkable poet's work is

---

[54] Besides this passage and the interview in *Writing Irish* (1991) referred to earlier, Mahon also mentioned Yeats's phrase in 'Yeats and the Lights of Dublin', the *Dublin Review*, 8 (Autumn 2002), p. 81. There he acknowledged the Irish poet as an enabling and challenging influence: 'He has left us phrases like talismans, consolatory and inspiring ('a lonely impulse of delight'; 'our proper dark'), an ideal of audacity and empowerment, and a paradigm of transfiguration, personal and historical. His example shames and ennobles us all'.

[55] The Heraclitean doctrine of creative conflict which greatly appealed to Yeats surfaces in the reference to the gyres ('Gyres run on…') in 'Under Ben Bulben'.

[56] Mahon, Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, p. 9. Keats's words, as Mahon pointed out, are from 'the letter to Richard Woodhouse dated 18 October 1818'.

[57] Mahon, Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, p. 11. Bruce Stewart's article, ''Solving Ambiguity': The Secular Mysticism of Derek Mahon', in Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, pp. 57-81, offers a detailed analysis of this particular aspect of his poetry.

> of a strange exhilaration, a kind of lightness, a weightless, buoyant sense of the moment's possibility, of experience charged with inexplicable significance. For there is a sense of secular mysticism in the best of Mahon's writing which makes him the poet of a hard-won humanism of feeling. It is not surprising therefore that he has chosen to translate the poems of Philippe Jaccottet. Indeed Mahon's intuitive sympathy for the French poet is an indicator of his own markedly similar imaginative stance in the world.[58]

For Brown, uncertainty of identity ('a self without readily available identity') and resistance to particular belief systems fosters a certain free-floating levity in Mahon's work. He links secular mysticism with the poet's light touch ('a kind of lightness, a weightless, buoyant sense of the moment's possibility') and receptivity to the numinous ('experience charged with inexplicable significance'). In so doing, he offers an insight into the mystical mode of the ironic conscience, which like Keats's 'negative capability' is open to a dimension of human experience beyond fact and reason. In interview with Brown, Mahon described this realm as 'a sort of secular *numen*', adding:

> To me it's a random, hazardous thing, present in the world, to which we have access. But I've never tried to frame it to myself in terms of conventional religion, formal philosophy, magical systems or anything like that. I never felt the need to do any of these things. I think to do any of these things is rather to limit the possibilities that present themselves.[59]

While shedding light on the numinous in nature, these observations also reflect his resistance to systems of belief which 'limit' rather than create possibilities. In this sense, they serve as a useful reminder that the mystical element of the ironic conscience must not be overextended.[60] Rather, it must be considered in interaction with other modes, including the sceptical or subversive streak which has little truck with conventional beliefs or pieties; the dialectical awareness which exploits the complicity of opposites; the playful humour which resists taking anything, including oneself, too seriously; and the satire, whose sharp political edge, confirms the historical engagement of Mahon's early poetry. As he stated elsewhere in interview in 1991:

---

[58] Brown, 'Home and Away: Derek Mahon's France', in Barbara Hayley and Christopher Murray (eds.), *Ireland and France, A Bountiful Friendship* (1992), p. 150. In his Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet* (p. 11), Mahon wrote: 'He is a secular mystic, an explorer of '*le vrai lieu*' ('the real place').

[59] Mahon, interview with Brown (1985), p. 16.

[60] Mahon is extremely reluctant to speak about certain aspects of his work, including its spiritual dimension. In interview with Vincent Woods on RTE (Radio Teilifís Eireann) - *The Eleventh Hour* (4 May, 2007) – he remarked that the spiritual dimension is 'best left to its own devices'. To pursue it, he added, is 'a kind of mistake', for it is not 'a thing to get self-conscious about'.

> I am not any kind of mystic, though I can think of worse things to be...but I do believe poetry and religion are related, at least in origin, as are theatre and dance. When Plato banished the poets what he was banishing was the subversive Dionysian spirit, which is lyrical and unamenable to rational explanation and control.[61]

Reference to 'the subversive Dionysian spirit' highlights the fact that Mahon's peculiar brand of mysticism is not so much yearning for a place 'out of nature' (as Yeats expressed it in 'Sailing to Byzantium') as casting a cold, if not critical, eye on contemporary life. It is actively engaged in the search for alternative modes of being, often linked with more anarchic elements ('unamenable to rational explanation and control'). Such elements for Mahon, as we shall see, are associated with the bohemian lifestyle, characterised by freedom, independence, heightened states of awareness or, what Rimbaud termed, a 'systematic derangement of the senses'.[62] The French artist, a key figure in *The Hunt by Night*, is another of his celebrated outcasts, who enforces the link between the numinous and a free-floating existence, open to moments of revelation, transcendence or epiphany.

As shorthand for Mahon's aesthetic then, the ironic conscience denotes a subtle and elusive mindset with a strong moral vision, which is marked by the interaction of different modes of awareness. It revels in the play of perspective or exploration of conflicting ideas. It is alert to counter-arguments in the form of contesting narratives or competing versions of history, knowing only too well that reality, as Wallace Stevens expressed it, 'consists of the many realities it can be made into'.[63] Its peculiar slant is dialectical, exploiting ambivalence and ambiguity in the interest of nuance or complexity. Here the link between the ironic conscience and Keats's 'negative capability' or Jaccottet's secular mysticism can be seen, as 'uncertainties, mysteries and doubts' open up all kinds of creative possibilities, including receptivity to a realm of human experience beyond the purely rational. The link with MacNeice's 'sceptical vision' (to adopt Brown's phrase) is also evident, given that the sceptic is one who takes nothing at face value, suspecting the opposite may equally well be

---

[61] Mahon, interview with William Scammell, *Poetry Review* 81, 2 (Summer, 1991), p. 6.
[62] Rimbaud, cited in John Pilling, *An Introduction to 50 Modern European Poets* (London: Pan, 1982). The phrase is taken from the French poet's famous letter of 15 May 1871 to his friend Paul Démeny. Mahon's use of the phrase in interview (*In the Chair*, p. 120) is discussed in the context of Rimbaud's '*Le Bateau Ivre*' ('The Drunken Boat') in Chapter Six.
[63] Wallace Stevens, *Opus posthumous* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 56.

true.[64] Such scepticism explains Mahon's resistance to fixed positions, his dislike at being associated with the ideas or opinions of a particular group, and his affinity with artistic outsiders at odds with, or on the margins of, mainstream society. It also explains his doubts about poetry, or the ongoing dialectic in his early work between belief in the value of art and an underlying awareness of its insufficiency. His concern for, what he termed, poetry's 'Formal Necessity' may, in this context, be seen as an attempt to overcome such insufficiency, reflecting the clash between Apollonian and Dionysian elements in his work.[65]

Given the complex textual history of the Mahon canon and the changing status of poems across periodicals, magazines, pamphlets, volumes and selections, it is important at this point to clarify the procedure adopted in this thesis. In advancing the concept of the ironic conscience, it focuses primarily on poems as they appear in each successive volume from *Night-Crossing* (1968) to *The Hunt by Night* (1982). However, prior texts will be referred to on occasion for purposes of argument, clarification or contrast, in particular the earlier pamphlet version of 'Beyond Howth Head' (*Lives*), 'The Sea in Winter' and 'Light Music' in *Poems 1962-1978*, 'Girls on a Bridge' and 'Courtyards in Delft' in *The Hunt by Night*. In this way, the crucial issue of the poet's strategy of revision, his insistent rewriting, re-titling, rearrangement (extension or reduction of poems), which is foregrounded in the chapter on *Poems 1962-1978*, is enforced throughout the thesis. While passing reference is made to subsequent revisions in Mahon's *Selected Poems* (1991) and *Collected Poems* (1999), they are for the most part outside the scope of this first extended phase of his work.

Chapter One addresses the key critical contexts necessary in order to appreciate the significance of the ironic conscience for Mahon's early poetry. These include the formative influences on his development as a poet (what Brearton termed, 'the Belfast-Dublin-London aesthetic collision ground'), the violence in the North of Ireland and collapse of the Arnoldian-Leavisite consensus, all of which served to inform his aesthetic or sense of the crucial relationship between poetry and politics.[66] Contrary to certain criticism of his work

---

[64] Brown, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975). Brown argued for this view of MacNeice's poetry against those who claimed the poet lacked depth or penetration, mistaking irony or levity of tone for shallowness.

[65] Mahon, *In the Chair*, p. 117. Among the key principles of poetry, Mahon listed 'Soul, Song and Formal Necessity', the latter after Coleridge's sense that the poem should 'contain within itself the reason why it is thus and not otherwise'. The Apollonian / Dionysian dialectic is referred to in greater detail in Chapter One.

[66] Brearton's phrase is cited by Campbell in 'Poetry of the 1960s: the 'Northern Ireland Renaissance'', in Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, p. 107.

as disengaged, the chapter argues that the ironic conscience was addressing historical and political realities in oblique and subtle ways.

Chapter Two, which concentrates on *Night-Crossing* (1968), begins by offering a cultural context for reading the poems in this first volume (this procedure will also apply in each subsequent chapter). It analyses two key poems about his native Belfast in order to highlight the autobiographical narrative of displacement at the heart of the ironic conscience. Both 'In Belfast' and 'Glengormley' dramatise the poet's conflicting feelings towards home and intense personal struggle with issues of freedom and responsibility, belonging and not belonging. In this context, the chapter examines the enabling influence of MacNeice whose experience of dispossession greatly resonated with the younger poet. It reveals how 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' (dedicated to his predecessor) is both an enduring tribute to MacNeice's 'humane perspective' and a revelation of particular aspects of the ironic conscience (the poem plots their various points of intersection). The chapter concludes by looking at a number of other poems which highlight the allusive intertextuality of the ironic conscience, as Mahon dramatises his own displacement through the lives of certain deracinated or marginalised artists. They illustrate how the world of art in *Night-Crossing* may be said to offer an alternative home, anticipating the translations or creative adaptations of *Poems 1962-1978* and *The Hunt by Night*.

Chapter Three analyses the satirical voice in *Lives* (1972) as a new and further aspect of the ironic conscience. It illustrates how its oblique mode of engagement brings a greater political edge to several poems, in particular the title poem and the final verse-letter 'Beyond Howth Head', as Mahon vents his increasing frustration with life in Ireland in the early 1970s. It argues that Beckett's influence is central, linking his mordant humour and apocalyptic scenarios ('bleak *reductio*') with the volume's satirical perspectives. It also outlines how Beckett's suspicion of the aesthetic underlies Mahon's increasing doubts about art and preoccupation with the role of the poet in the face of violence. A pivotal poem here is 'Rage for Order', whose title Frank Ormsby adopted for his later anthology of poetry about the Troubles.[67] The chapter concludes with a detailed study of 'Beyond Howth Head' in order to highlight the historical and political engagement of the ironic conscience in *Lives*. The poem exemplifies Mahon's search for a more public voice, following the example of

[67] Frank Ormsby (ed.), *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992).

British 1930s poetry (notably Auden and MacNeice) and the American influence of Robert Lowell. Its intellectual range, technical proficiency, panoramic sweep and richly allusive intertextuality, mark it as one of the finest examples of this imaginative force at work in Mahon's early poetry.

Chapter Four demonstrates the visionary mode of the ironic conscience in *The Snow Party* (1975), as the satirical long view of *Lives* assumes a more detached, otherworldly aura. This is particularly evident in the title poem which, alongside a number of smaller pieces ('Leaves', 'The Antigone Riddle', 'Dead of Night', 'The chair squeaks...', 'Flying'), heightens the perception of Mahon as a kind of secular mystic. It reflects the leaning towards symbolism in this volume, as he exploits the musical possibilities of words in order to tap numinous or intangible worlds. This visionary strain is complemented by a series of nature poems ('A Hermit', 'The Apotheosis of Tins', 'After Nerval') in which Mahon, following the example of Nerval, adopts the voices of 'mute phenomena' for satirical purposes. It receives its finest expression in 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford', the volume's climax and the most celebrated of Mahon's early poems. In a detailed analysis of this text, the chapter argues that, contrary to criticism of his early poetry as disengaged, the poem speaks eloquently for oppressed peoples across the globe. It is exemplary in this regard, illustrating how the visionary perspectives of the ironic conscience are not 'through with history' ('The Last of the Fire Kings') but obliquely engaged with its cycles of violence.

Chapter Five addresses *Poems 1962-1978* which brings together the best of Mahon's work from the first three volumes, as well as a selection of new poems. The latter highlight the crucial issue of displacement for the ironic conscience as it registers in a dialectic of place and placelessness. This is a new development in this volume, an intensification of the autobiographical narrative outlined in 'Glengormley' and 'In Belfast' (*Night-Crossing*). It is as if alienation from a native place has made exile, homelessness, loss, cultural dislocation or metaphysical unease 'the defining conditions of modernity'.[68] This sense of alienation is clearly evident in the final verse-letter 'The Sea in Winter', the most significant of the new poems. In a detailed analysis, the chapter illustrates how its profound autobiographical edge enforces the extent of Mahon's displacement while writer-in-residence at the New University of Ulster in Coleraine (1977-1979). The poem marks a point of intense personal

[68] Brown, 'Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness', p. 137.

crisis in which his earlier doubts about art and the role of the poet (as outlined in relation to *Lives*) resurface. It reveals how Mahon's homecoming to the North of Ireland triggered a reappraisal of his life and work, anticipating the later and more enduring crisis in *Antarctica* (1982). Finally, the verse-letter exemplifies how the ironic conscience in this volume finds its objective correlative in elemental symbols of wind, storm, wave and sea. Alongside other key images like that of 'The Window' (the penultimate poem in this volume), they reflect the 'soul-landscape' of Mahon's early poetry.

Formally, the central issue of displacement in *Poems 1962-1978* registers, not only in the recurring imagery, but in Mahon's revisions and translations. Just as the ironic conscience is characteristically located between places, so too several poems are in an ongoing state of composition. The volume reveals how they are denied fixity, often assuming very different 'lives' or 'afterlives' (to adopt key terms in Mahon's early work). Similarly, the French translations which *Poems 1962-1978* brings together - 'The Condensed Shorter Testament (after Villon)', 'The Mute Phenomena (after Nerval)', 'Three Poems after Jaccottet' and 'The Poet in Residence (after Corbière)' - enforce this displacement, illustrating how poems oscillate not only between different versions but between different languages and cultures. As a form of creative rewriting, they mirror the strategy of Mahon's revisions. However, the practice of translation may also be seen as an extension of the allusive intertextuality of the ironic conscience, a further aspect of its shape-changing or self-dramatising mode. Thus, Corbière on the Breton coast in *Le Poète Contumace* provides a voice for Mahon's estrangement as 'The Poet in Residence' in Coleraine, while Jaccottet (in 'Three Poems after Jaccottet') allows him to continue the mystical or visionary perspectives of *The Snow Party*. These translations recall 'Legacies (after Villon)' in *Night-Crossing* and look forward to several poems in *The Hunt by Night*, which draw, not only upon French literature, but on a wide range of other European writing.

Chapter Six examines *The Hunt by Night* (1982), the most accomplished volume of this first extended phase of Mahon's career as a poet and the finest expression of the ironic conscience. It highlights its elusive and mobile voice, which subtly negotiates the contrasting spheres of art, history, religion, politics, metaphysics, autobiography and cultural critique. Central to this mobility is the practice of *ekphrasis* (creating poetry by describing a painting, picture postcard or other form of art) which brings an imaginative vitality and energy to

several poems. The chapter analyses how this mode offers striking angles on the crucial relationship between art and history, the theme of displacement and the nature of 'real life'. It demonstrates how these poems on paintings or postcards are not evidence of a 'residual aestheticism' (to recall Riordan's phrase), but obliquely engaged with issues of violence or the clash between Apollonian and Dionysian forces in art and life. This can be seen most clearly in 'Courtyards in Delft' which introduces the volume and whose opening words ('oblique light on') encapsulate its strategy of indirection. The poem is at once an ekphrastic study, an autobiographical meditation, a subversive critique of Northern Protestantism and a reflection on the aesthetic, notably on the link between barbarism and civility, the passion for order and the instinct for violence. Like 'A Garage in Co. Cork', it functions on different levels, exemplifying the ingenuity of the ironic conscience in its exploration of vastly different worlds.

The elusive mobility of the ironic conscience is also evident in *The Hunt by Night's* numerous translations and creative adaptations. More than any previous volume, it emphasises the facility with which Mahon adopts and modifies the voices of writers of different nationalities and cultures at various historical moments. These include 'Brecht in Svendborg', 'Knut Hamsun in Old Age', 'Ovid in Tomis', 'The Joycentenary Ode', 'The Earth (after Pasternak)' and 'from The Drunken Boat (after Rimbaud)'. All of these poems enforce his shape-changing sensibility, which is equally at home in Ovidian lamentation, Joycean Finneganese, the satire of Brecht or the symbolism of Rimbaud. The French writer is a central figure, highlighting Mahon's affinity with the idea of the bohemian. As the archetypal *poète maudit*, his uncompromising quest for *la vraie vie* ('the real life') singles him out as one of the most distinctive of his displaced outsiders. By contrast, the poetry of Brecht provides Mahon with an alternative voice, which reflects the satirical mode and sharp political edge of his poetic sensibility. The combination of these different voices reveals the ironic conscience at its most elusive and polyphonic, setting up a multi-layered, intertextual dialogue around such key issues as the function of art, the role of the poet and the significance of the bohemian life. Finally, *The Hunt by Night* brings the dialectic of place and placelessness in Mahon's early poetry to a dramatic conclusion. The verse-letter 'A Globe in North Carolina' intensifies the sense of exile by situating it against the vast backdrop of the cosmos. Its memorable phrase, 'Lost meteorites in search of home', encapsulates the plight of all the exiled artists who feature in his work.

The Conclusion analyses *Antarctica* (1985) as something of a terminal point for Mahon, effectively bringing this first extended phase of his poetry to an abrupt end. It argues that the wilderness of the title is a metaphor for the ironic conscience *in extremis*. As a particular mindset, it has reached an impasse, having exhausted its various modes of engagement as well as the formal and thematic possibilities of displacement. This sense of an ending is evident throughout the pamphlet, particularly in the autobiographical 'Craigvara House' which, in its focus on Mahon's struggle with alcoholism, recalls 'The Sea in Winter' at the close of *Poems 1962-1978*. It receives its finest expression in the final poem 'Death and the Sun', dedicated to the Algerian-born French writer Albert Camus. The final stanza pictures the figure of Meursault, the central character in Camus's *The Outsider* (1942), about to face his execution. His desperate plight reflects that of the pamphlet's other 'solitaries in the cold': Lawrence Oates in the title poem, Rilke or Anthony Burgess in Russia ('Night Drive', 'October'), Lear on the heath ('Dejection'), Ford Madox Ford, Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound at critical points of crisis following two World Wars ('A Kensington Notebook'). *Antarctica* thus sets up a whole network of subtle correspondences between different characters *in extremis*, drawing on a variety of images of death, failure, imprisonment, madness, breakdown and defeat. The overall effect suggests, not so much 'The death-throes of an era' ('A Kensington Notebook'), as the end of this first phase of Mahon's poetry. The ironic conscience, it would seem, had reached a certain limit, the transcendence of which, to echo the choric phrase in the title poem, took the poet 'some time'.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM *NIGHT-CROSSING* (1968) TO *ANTARCTICA* (1985): CRITICAL CONTEXTS FOR READING THE EXTENDED FIRST PHASE OF MAHON'S POETRY.

1.1 Early Influences on Mahon's Poetry: Dublin – Belfast – London - America.

Much has been written about the idea of a 'renaissance' in poetry from the North of Ireland. Most recently we have had Heather Clark's detailed study *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972.*[1] Her focus is on what she terms 'the social dynamics of creativity', examining how friendships between Northern writers, which offered opportunities for ratification and collaboration, were crucial to intellectual and artistic development. One such friendship was that between Mahon and Longley (both beneficiaries of the extension to Northern Ireland of the 1947 Butler Education Act) who, having attended the Royal Belfast Academical Institution (or 'Inst', as it is known), went on to study at TCD.[2] It was at Trinity that the two became acquainted, sharing a basement flat in Merrion Square from 1962-1963 where, as Mahon put, they lived 'in extraordinary squalor', with Longley's huge copper ashtray 'always deep in cigarette ends, dozens of them'.[3] This experience is captured in 'The Poets Lie where they Fell' in *Night-Crossing* (1968):

> One more shiftless habit,
> It joins the buttered books,

---

[1] Heather Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also Brearton's article, 'Poetry of the 1960s' (pp. 94-112) and Chapter Thirteen, 'The Poetry of Northern Ireland: Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon', in Neil Corcoran's *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993), pp. 180-191. For an earlier account, see Brown's 'A Northern Renaissance: Poets from the North of Ireland 1965-1980', in *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays* (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1988), pp. 203-221.

[2] In his article 'Yeats and the Lights of Dublin' in the *Dublin Review*, 8 (Autumn 2002), p. 68, Mahon remarked of 'Inst': 'Inst, founded in 1791, was and is a large city-centre grammar school best known for its old boys' rugby club, Instonians, which always provided at least one or two names in the Irish international XV. The school, though Unionist in ethos (the principal was always an Englishman), had a vaguely liberal tradition [its origins lay in the United Irish of the late eighteenth century], and numbered among its former pupils the poets Ferguson and Allingham. More recent old boys included one Charles Monteith, a director of Faber & Faber and a friend of Eliot. We knew about that because there were several books by Eliot in the school library signed 'for the boys of Inst' by the author himself; and the publishers' address, then 24 Russell Square, London WC1, in those rich, 'linen-bound' editions, left an authoritative imprint on those of us who took a precocious interest in such things'.

[3] Mahon, interview with Eve Patten, *Rhinoceros* 3 (1990), p. 84. His account was echoed by Longley in 'The Empty Holes of Spring: Some Reminiscences of Trinity & Two Poems Addressed to Derek Mahon' , who added: 'The persistent presence of a toothless, garrulous concierge ever eager to share with us her dental and gynaecological problems helped to make the scene a combination of Beckett and O'Casey' (p. 54).

Stale loafs and wandering dishes,
The shirts in the oven
And the volcanic ashtray.
Forgive us. This is our way,

We were born to this…

Mahon's arrival in Dublin at the beginning of the 1960 Michaelmas term (Longley arrived two years earlier in 1958) gave a new impetus to Longley's poetry, each vying for space in *Icarus*, the Trinity student magazine founded by Alec Reid (a friend of Beckett's and father figure to the two aspiring poets) in 1950.[4] Reid was something of a legendary figure, an inspiring teacher who adopted a creative approach to the curriculum. Informal tutorials frequently took place in O'Neills Bar and Lounge in Suffolk Street. As Mahon recalled, in a lyrical portrait of the city at the time:

> …I remember Alec's drawing-room in Ballybrack, where he and his wife Beatrice sometimes had us out for 'tea' (bottles of stout), and very nice it was too for a Belfast scholarship boy then kipping, unsupervised, in a back room of the unrenovated Brazen Head: unrenovated, it seemed, since Swiftian times. Dublin was full of drawing-rooms in those days, all of them in Edwardian bungalows like Alec's or in pleasant Georgian houses with windows open to gardens and birdsong, where sunlight lay perpetually on shelves of dusty first editions.[5]

Icarus offered an outlet for new writing and, between 1960 and 1963, the poetry of Mahon and Longley appeared at times to dominate its pages. Given the former's precocious talent and the outstanding technical accomplishment of his 'juvenilia', the acquaintance was both a support and challenge to Longley.[6] As he stated in 'The Empty Holes of Spring', an article which takes it title from the penultimate line of 'In Carrowdore Churchyard', Mahon's tribute to MacNeice in *Night-Crossing*:

> Mahon's uncollected juvenilia is finer than the life's work of many poets. As precociously assured as early Auden, it is matched in English only by the several poems by Keith Douglas and the few by Geoffrey Hill which each composed before he was

---

[4] In interview with Grennan (*In the Chair*, p. 114), Mahon spoke of Trinity as 'a very fertile environment, very supportive'. He added: 'Alec Reid was part of it, in a very personal way; he was great fun, and so *human*. A liberal education, was Alec'. Longley, in conversation with Mike Murphy in RTE, highlighted the significance of Reid for both his and Mahon's poetic apprenticeship in Trinity, adding: 'Our father figure was a wonderfully fat eccentric English lecturer called Alec Reid. He would have been our Philip Hobsbaum' (*Reading the Future,* p. 123).

[5] Mahon, 'Yeats and the Lights of Dublin', p. 73-74. See Beatrice Reid's *Leaves from a Greek Village* (Dublin: [the author], 1998).

[6] Haughton mentioned how Mahon's poems for the *School News* in Inst. 'are very fluent and extraordinary products of their own kind. They're not now part of a canon, but they show that this is a poet with a wonderful ear, picking up from Dylan Thomas and Lowell and Yeats and so on' (*Reading the Future*, p. 159).

> twenty. I felt overwhelmed and wanted to withdraw to a safe distance. But poets, because they should never completely grow up, must continually come of age. I began to come of age – or came of age for the first time – when I decided to embrace the pain of friendship with a younger poet who seemed already to have arrived while I was just setting out.[7]

The passage is revealing in highlighting Mahon's early 'arrival' on the scene, his poetic talent marking him out for particular notice. Eavan Boland, who met him initially in the summer of 1964, noted how his work in *Icarus* and *Dublin Magazine* had already attracted much attention and recalled her astonishment at 'the sheer verve of his idiom, the attack of his syntax, his brat-pack stance as *poète maudit* from an unassimilated capital city'.[8] His first contribution to *Icarus*, the uncollected 'Subsidy Bungalows', a witty portrait of his native Glengormley, caused quite a stir in Trinity circles in 1960.[9] Mahon has written very positively of his undergraduate days, noting how they were taken up with poetry readings, pub crawls and publication in college magazines, as well as other outlets like the *Irish Times* and *Dublin Magazine*. A 1986 article in *Image* (included in *Journalism*) indulges more than a little nostalgia in recapturing the *feel* of Trinity in the early 1960s, sketching its social life and fashions as well as its connection with 'English 'public school' men and Roedean gels':

> Trinity, in those days, wasn't much about work, though quite a lot of reading got done. The word meant several things. To the question, 'What are you reading?', one might have replied, depending on the context, 'Honours Maths', 'the racing page', or even, in exceptional circumstances, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. There was a Reading Room, now one of several since the admirable Koralek built the Berkeley Library and the new Arts Building; but not a lot of reading got done *there*. Packed to the doors like a fashionable restaurant, it was used chiefly as a pick-up joint. Girls dressed up then to go into college, the cobbles playing hell with their high heels. Men dressed up too, except for slobs like myself who wore the same sweater and jeans for four years. Front Square was like a Dior catwalk; and the two sexes sat in the Reading Room with upside-down tomes before them, sizing up the talent out of the corners of their eyes. The air crackled with sexual electricity.[10]

---

[7] Longley, 'The Empty Holes of Spring: Some Reminiscences of Trinity & Two Poems Addressed to Derek Mahon', in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (1994), p. 52. Among the influences on Mahon's early love poems were Dylan Thomas, Robert Graves and the French symbolists.

[8] Boland, 'Compact and Compromise: Derek Mahon as a Young Poet', *Irish University Review*, Derek Mahon Special Number, 24, 1 (1994) p. 62.

[9] Longley, 'The Empty Holes of Spring', p. 51. Longley was on the editorial board at the time of its publication in December 1960.

[10] Mahon, 'A Ghostly Rumble among the Drums', *Journalism*, p. 222. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is alluded to in 'Entropy' (*Lives*, p. 30), in the reference to 'reading Gibbon and old comics'.

Both Mahon and Longley recall the reading done in Trinity, the latter revealing how his friend took him on a guided tour of poetry which included 'MacNeice, Crane, Dylan Thomas, Yeats, Larkin, Lawrence, Graves, Ted Hughes, Stevens, Cummings, Richard Wilbur, Robert Lowell, as well as Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Brecht, Rilke – higgledepiggledy, in any order'.[11] They each speak of these years not in terms of a 'movement' or group, but as a time when university life merged imperceptibly into literary life, Dublin being a fertile ground for different ideas, perspectives and influences. In the June 1961 issue of *Icarus*, Longley refuted an earlier editorial claim about a poetic movement in Trinity, stating that a 'happy coincidence' of poets in one place did not constitute a movement, let alone a 'Movement' of the British 1950s kind.[12] 'The *Icarus* crowd', which included Kennelly, Boland, Jeremy Lewis (to whom the verse-epistle 'Beyond Howth Head' is dedicated), Ronnie Wathen and Edna Broderick (who married Longley in 1964) among others, was notable for its gregariousness and diversity. For Mahon, they were a mixed bunch, from places as far-flung as India and Nigeria, with particular literary tastes - 'Not all were Yeatsians necessarily: Longley and Wathen were Gravesians, and Kennelly was a Kavanagh man'.[13] He also spoke in interview of the wider literary community in Dublin; of frequent sightings of Kavanagh and Flann O'Brien; of having met Thomas Kinsella and John Montague as well as 'Padraic Colum, Frank O'Connor, Louis MacNeice, W. R. Rodgers, Austin Clarke and Brendan Behan'.[14] There was, he pointed out, a Bohemian atmosphere to the city at the time, which greatly appealed to him after Belfast which he found a little too repressive.

Dublin and TCD are important formative influences on Mahon's early poetry, a point often overlooked in readings of Northern Irish poetry from a post-1969 perspective. They are an essential part of the broader poetic context in which his work finds its place, all the more so given the prevalent, albeit mistaken assumption, concerning his membership of the so-called Belfast 'Group'.[15] He is perhaps its most famous non-participant, having (by his own

---

[11] Longley, 'The Empty Holes of Spring', p. 53.
[12] Brearton, 'Poetry of the 1960s: the 'Northern Ireland Renaissance'', p. 104.
[13] Mahon, 'Yeats and the Lights of Dublin', p. 74.
[14] Mahon, interview with Scammell, p. 4.
[15] The Belfast Group has been well documented, most recently in Chapter Two of Clark's *The Ulster Renaissance*, in which she assessed the impact of Philip Hobsbaum and his writing workshop upon poets from the North of Ireland, analysing his complicated legacy and influence. In Chapter One of *Reading Michael Longley* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), Brearton looked at the impact of the Group on Longley, in particular on his first volume *No Continuing City* (1969). For a helpful summary of issues in relation to the Group, see Chapter Three - '"This Thing Could Rule the World": Northern Writing and Idea of Coterie' - in

admission) attended only one session. However, his friendship with Longley and Heaney, both of whom were members (Longley introduced Heaney to Mahon), has forever associated him with Hobsbaum's group, much to his dismay. In a letter to the *Irish Times* in 1987, he rebuked those who insisted on recycling 'errors of fact' or 'irritating falsehoods' for the sake of symmetry rather than the more complex truth. Mahon did not share the Group's aesthetic principles, in particular their antipathy for Dylan Thomas and suspicion of the symbolist, mythic or metaphysical tropes of poets like Crane, Graves or Stevens. In another effort to set the record straight, he stated with some exasperation in interview a few years later:

> I would like to take this further opportunity to correct a few misconceptions. First of all, I am not sophisticated...I was not a member of Philip Hobsbaum's fucking Belfast group. I went *once* to Philip's group, and never again. Mind you, Philip was good fun, sure enough, but in a pub. He was no fun in his group, which was dogmatic and Leavisite to a nauseating degree. I like Philip a lot. He threw a lot of light around in Belfast where people were frightened of their own shadows. He used to say, 'Things happen wherever I go! Fights break out!' So, let's get that clear once and for all: Philip's group didn't do anybody any good, except perhaps Philip and Seamus, who carried it on after Hobsbaum left to go to Glasgow.[16]

Such remarks highlight Mahon's dislike of coteries and resistance to dogmatism of any kind. However, while not a member of the Belfast Group (in the strict sense of Hobsbaum's writing workshop), his association with Northern poets like Longley and Heaney is understandable, given their acquaintance and collaboration in numerous events, including Belfast Festival appearances, poetry readings and BBC radio programmes.[17] As Clark pointed out, the three gave more readings together in Belfast during the 1960s than any other Group configuration, 'cementing the public's perception of them as a clique, and influencing later reviewers habitually to compare their work'.[18] This collaboration invited comparison

---

Richard Kirkland's book, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland since 1965: Moments of Danger* (London: Longman, 1996), in particular pp. 77-82. He highlighted the fact that several members of the Group have, at various times, reassessed their creative position in relation to it, revealing how the Group as a concept 'occupies purely mythic territory extending beyond its brief history' (p. 77). Brearton's article, 'Poetry of the 1960s: the 'Northern Ireland Renaissance'', pp. 100-107, also draws attention to differing versions of the Group's significance for individual members, contrasting Heaney's account with that of Longley and Mahon, whose Trinity College, Dublin connection places the Group in a wider Belfast-Dublin-London context. For a summary of Mahon's stance, see Dawe's article 'Heirs and Graces: The Influence and Example of Derek Mahon', pp. 51-52.

[16] Mahon, *Writing Irish*, p. 193.

[17] The Belfast Festival at Queen's University, an annual autumn event which began in 1962, produced a series of poetry pamphlets which allowed the work of apprentice poets to receive local consideration. These pamphlets, between ten and fifteen poems each, were in many cases the poets' first 'collections'.

[18] Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 57. In Chapter Five ('MacSimmittoon') she listed some of these readings, including two in 1970 - one by Heaney, Mahon and Longley for a BBC Northern Ireland series called 'Books,

with similar literary groups such as the Movement in British poetry in the 1950s where, as Blake Morrison noted, by the end of 1952, the establishment of contacts and friendships; the initiation of correspondence; the issuing of statements and poems all contributed to the formation of a group aesthetic.[19] However, in the case of the Northern Irish poetic tradition, it must be remembered that Mahon and Longley both shared a complicating double context, Trinity acting as a kind of counter-myth to the Belfast Group. Alongside the link with London, it pointed to the cultural complexities of the province.

Mahon's formalism thus had its origins in a number of different sources. These included Ulster Regionalism, associated in particular with Hewitt whose work Mahon admired (although he resisted his ethical prescriptions for the Ulster writer) as well the formative literary environments of Belfast and Dublin. While Belfast incorporated the English / British dimension in its association with Hobsbaum's writing workshop and the BBC, Dublin reflected Anglo-Irish literary traditions, Trinity being 'an apt nursery for Mahon's affinities with Yeats, Graves, MacNeice and Beckett'.[20] Its link with Beckett was highly significant for his early poetry, particularly, as we shall see, in *Lives* (1972), Beckett having also studied French literature at TCD. His influence continued in the college through his friendship with staff members like Con Leventhal (who succeeded Beckett as lecturer in French) and Alec Reid, whose short study of Beckett's drama, *All I Can Manage, More than I Could*, was published in 1969.[21]

Plays, Poems' (broadcast on the Schools network), and another by Heaney and Longley for a BBC radio programme entitled 'Soundings'. She added: 'By this time, public readings and Festival appearances had made the Heaney-Mahon-Longley-[David] Hammond configuration a familiar one around literary Belfast' (p. 150). Hammond was a singer of Irish folk-songs whose singing accompanied the poetry at intervals.

[19] See Blake Morrison's *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (London: Methuen, 1986) for possible parallels between the Movement poets and poets from the North of Ireland. He cited the following questions as central in any assessment: 'Did the writers know each other? Is there any evidence of mutual admiration, mutual influence, or collaboration? Did the writers come from the same social background? Did they have similar political beliefs? Did they intend to write for the same kind of audience? Was there a common belief about the direction which contemporary literature should take?' (p. 5). Allowing for variance in religious and social background, Clarke suggested that the answer to each of these questions, in the case of poets from the North of Ireland during the period 1962-1972, is 'yes' (*The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 7).

[20] Edna Longley, *The Living Stream,* p. 21.The regionalist agenda of the 1940s and 1950s (associated with John Hewitt, Roy McFadden and, to a lesser extent, W. R. Rodgers among others) prioritised loyalty to the 'region' over unionist or nationalist sympathies, thereby hoping to bring about 'a culture and an attitude individual and distinctive, a fine contribution to the European inheritance' (Hewitt, 'Regionalism: The Last Chance' (1947), *Ancestral Voices*, p. 125). Hewitt's *Collected Poems 1932-1967* was published in 1968, two years after MacNeice's *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966).

[21] As Anthony Cronin pointed out in *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1997), pp. 124-166, A. J. Leventhal, or 'Con' Leventhal, as he was universally known in Dublin, succeeded Beckett who resigned from his three-year appointment as lecturer in French in January 1932 (having completed little more than a year of his contract).

This diversity of influence can be traced back to Mahon's early poetic apprenticeship as a schoolboy in 'Inst', where he encountered three kinds of poetry. As he outlined in 'Yeats and the Lights of Dublin':

> The contemporary poetry we knew at Inst in January 1960 was of three kinds: the Illustrious, the Local and the New English. (Of Clarke and Kavanagh, the Dublin poets, we as yet knew nothing.) The illustrious were Eliot, Graves, and above all, Dylan Thomas, whom we strove to imitate. The locals were MacNeice, Rodgers and Hewitt; and the New English, notably Larkin and Davie, were the ones we sometimes saw in the book pages of the London *Observer* – which, as young sophisticates, we knew we had to read or at least be seen with.[22]

London, rather than Dublin, was initially the main focus of Mahon's attention. Its newspapers were more important than the local press, the *Observer* in particular setting the standard for literary taste ('To us airy twigs the real question was: what's happening in London, where they do [*sic*] the *Observer*?'[23]). The Illustrious, Local and New English influences, however, were soon joined by other writers, as Mahon's time at TCD and the Sorbonne, and later in the US and Canada (1965 to 1967), convinced him of the need to experiment with different styles and train his voice with variety. As he stated in interview with Harriet Cooke in 1973:

> Going to the States did a lot for me. I grew up here in a sort of Anglo-Irish idiom which is all balls, and I could have stuck in that sort of thing but spending some time in the States was a very frightening experience in some ways but I think it did something for the texture of the kind of language I use. I think the adventurous use of language is in the States.[24]

American influences like Stevens, Wilbur, Lowell, W. S. Merwin and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, as well as French symbolists like Rimbaud and Baudelaire, led him away from the philistinism or insularity ('little Englandism' as Davie expressed it) of typical Movement poems.[25] This brought about a rejuvenation, if not radical mutation, of the English lyric in

---

[22] Mahon, 'Yeats and the lights of Dublin', p. 69. Both Philip Larkin and Donald Davie had connections with Ireland, Larkin having worked as a librarian at Queen's University in Belfast before moving to Hull in 1955, Donald Davie lecturing at TCD from 1950 to 1957. In 'Yeats and the lights of Dublin', p. 70, Mahon refers to Davie's volume *A Winter Talent* (1957), singling out 'Rejoinder to a Critic' as 'an emblematic Movement poem…virtually a Movement manifesto'.

[23] Ibid., p. 70.

[24] 'Harriet Cooke talks to the Poet Derek Mahon', *Irish Times*, 17 January 1973, p. 10.

[25] In interview with Kelly (p. 10), Mahon spoke of his admiration for both Wilbur and Merwin: 'I admire Wilbur, and I've learnt from him, but he is excessively formal, excessively cool….I have an even greater admiration for W. S. Merwin who uses very open forms, forms dictated by the material (not unlike Kinsella, though he has a much lighter way with language'). Davie's phrase is cited in Morrison's *The Movement*, p. 61.

his early poetry. In his hands, it is more a site of tensions than a monument of repose, the formal intensities of the 'well-made' poem being forced to grapple with the abrasive edge of modern life. The wide variety of forms - from the dramatic monologue 'Legacies' (*Night-Crossing*) to the verse-letters 'Beyond Howth Head' (*Lives*) and 'The Sea in Winter' (*Poems 1962-1978*), to the short pointed 'artesian' stanzas of 'Lives' or 'An Image from Beckett' (*Lives*), to the eight or ten line stanzas of 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' (*The Snow Party*) and 'Courtyards in Delft' (*The Hunt by Night*) - suggests that he heeded well Yeats's advice to learn the trade. However, he also sought to adapt such forms to accommodate the violence of history.

1.2 Poetry and Politics: the Impact of the 'Troubles' on Poetry in the North of Ireland.

The Belfast-Dublin-London connection in Mahon's early poetic apprenticeship challenges simplistic assumptions about the link between poetry from the North of Ireland and the Troubles. Tempting as it may be to link literary revival with historical trauma, it must be pointed out that Mahon, Longley and Heaney were all writing well before the outbreak of violence in 1969. As Matthew Campbell explained (adapting a remark from Louis MacNeice): 'while historical events may have provided the conditions in which this poetry was written, they cannot entirely account for its causes'.[26]

Though not a cause, the Troubles in the North of Ireland did have a major impact on the poetry of Mahon, Heaney and Longley, not only in terms of influencing their work but also in determining its critical reception. Corcoran argued that they may well have been 'the most single influential factor on the subsequent history not only of Britain and Ireland, but also of contemporary 'English' poetry'.[27] In the context of such violence, which claimed many lives and brought fear and terror to the Province during the 1970s and 1980s, the use and function of literature was called into question and its relationship with history and politics scrutinised. Consequently, the early poetry of Mahon, Heaney and Longley was the subject of much heated debate, as evident in the response to Heaney's *North* (1975), which highlighted, among other things, the conflicting expectations of poets. While it was largely well received

[26] Campbell, 'Ireland in poetry: 1999, 1949, 1969', in *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry*, p. 11. MacNeice, in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 23, stated: 'Critics often tend to write as if a condition were the same thing as a cause'.
[27] Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940*, p. 136.

in the English press, bringing the tragedy of the conflict home to British readers, its reception in Northern Ireland was more hostile. The volume marked a watershed in literary relations, 'the point at which poetry moved into the political arena and contesting factions began to voice their views in the pages of the *Honest Ulsterman*, *Crane Bag*, and *Fortnight*'.[28]

Heaney was dismissed by Ciaran Carson (an Irish speaker raised in West Belfast) as 'the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing', intent on displacing violence from the socio-political sphere to that of the foreordained.[29] Edna Longley deemed the volume an imaginative dead-end, arguing that a poet 'who has already articulated so much of the experience of his people and country in oblique terms has no need to prove his credentials'.[30] In fact, she added elsewhere, Heaney's attempt to take on the role of public representative and become more politically involved, saw him succumb to the very destiny feared in Mahon's 'The Last of the Fire Kings', where the people desire their poet king

> Not to release them
> From the ancient curse
> But to die their creature and be thankful.[31]

This poem from *The Snow Party* which, like *North*, was published in 1975, illustrates Mahon's heightened awareness of the communal politics underlying expectations of poets (reference to 'the ancient curse' encapsulates the sense of violence as preordained). As he expressed it later in interview: 'we're supposed to write about the Troubles; a lot of people expect us to act as if it were part of our job'.[32] Pressure of expectation was not entirely new, traditional perceptions of the writer as bardic spokesperson having long been a source of poetic capital in Ireland. However, with the onset of violence in the late 1960s, such pressure intensified, as graphically illustrated by the contrasting editorial demands of the *Honest Ulsterman*. James Simmons (who founded the journal in 1968) remarked, with a certain degree of frustration, in June 1969:

> To make it worthy of influence YOU must write or persuade the good writers that you know to send in poems, articles, stories and

---

[28] Clarke, *The Ulster Renaissance,* p. 194.
[29] Ciaran Carson, 'Escaped from the Massacre?', *Honest Ulsterman*, 50 (1975), p. 183. Conor Cruise O'Brien's remarks on *North* are referred to in Chapter Four on *The Snow Party* (1975), p. 19.
[30] Edna Longley, 'Fire and Air', *Honest Ulsterman*, 50 (1975), 1975, pp. 54-8.
[31] Edna Longley, '"Inner Émigré" or "Artful Voyeur"? Seamus Heaney's *North*', in *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), p. 169.
[32] Mahon, *Irish Times* interview with Eileen Battersby, 1992, p. 12. He added, 'it's not, unless we choose to make it so'.

> reportage (particularly that) in the Norman Mailer manner of public events, marches, meetings...Most of the good work I get is personal, lyrical, fragmentary, fine in itself; but what the magazine in particular and society in general lacks desperately is more public issues treated with this sort of seriousness. We don't get it at all in the local press, and very little in the quality papers.[33]

Here Simmons, a singer/songwriter as well as a poet, revealed his own preference for a literature that is directly engaged with public events. Hence, his regard for the efforts of the Merseyside Poets to bring poetry to a wider audience (an interview with Roger McGough was included in the first issue of the magazine). However in 1972, Frank Ormsby, who had taken over the position of editor from Michael Foley, the latter having succeeded Simmons in December 1969, favoured a Joycean obliquity (in keeping with earlier remarks about the growing irrelevance of poetry in Ulster: 'To write poetry about the troubles is to fiddle while Belfast and Derry burn'):

> In the end it is a question of staying aloof as far as possible, an essentially defensive struggle against infection. Silence, exile and cunning are still attractive alternatives, perhaps more than ever.[34]

Such contrasting positions neatly encapsulate the dilemma which confronted Northern poets in the early 1970s concerning artistic stance, a dilemma intensified by the media spotlight which accompanied the violence while also creating a wider audience for the poetry. Muldoon articulated it well when he said:

> ...the trouble with this place is that if you don't engage in it, you're an ostrich (whatever 'engage in it' means). If you do engage in it, you're using the situation as a kind of...you're on the make, almost, cashing in.[35]

His earlier poem 'Lunch with Pancho Villa' in *Mules* (1977) dramatised this predicament. Like Mahon's 'Rage for Order' in *Lives* (1972), it adopted different voices, as the political activist chastised the artist for writing rondeaux while Belfast and Derry burn:

> Look, son. Just look around you
> People are getting themselves killed
> Left, right and centre
> While you do what? Write rondeaux?
> There's more to living in this country

---

[33] James Simmons, 'What Must I Do To Be Saved?', cited by Clark in *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 101. The magazine was anti-establishment from the outset, critical of such institutions as the BBC, Queen's University and the Ulster Museum. As with other journals, such as *Northern Review* and *Fortnight*, it received financial backing from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (for whom Longley worked for many years).

[34] Ormsby, 'Coping', *Honest Ulsterman*, 35 (1972), p. 3. The earlier reference is from his review of *An Ulster Reckoning*, by John Hewitt, in *Honest Ulsterman*, 29 (1971), p. 39.

[35] Muldoon, interview in *Gown* (Queen's University Belfast student newspaper), May 1984, cited by Longley in *Poetry in the Wars*, pp. 12-13.

Than stars and horses, pigs and trees,
Not that you'd guess it from your poems.
Do you ever listen to the news?
You want to get down to something true,
Something a little nearer home.

This stanza is all the more intriguing given that Simmons (as editor of the *Honest Ulsterman*) had written to Muldoon in 1969, telling him to send poems which were 'too obscure' to more intellectual publications, keeping his 'more direct poems' for the *Honest Ulsterman*, which was a forum for more popular literature.[36] More direct here is equated with listening to the news or recording incidents nearer home, picking up the kind of Norman Mailer rapportage of public events, marches or riots recommended by Simmons (in the editorial above). However, the poem deftly undermines the activist's demands, wryly suggesting that any claim to truth is merely a representation of what is supposed to have 'really' happened:

But where (I wonder myself) do I stand,
In relation to a table and chair,
The quince tree I forgot to mention,
That suburban street, the door, the yard –
All made up as I went along
As things that people live among…

'When are you going to tell the truth?'
For there's no such book, so far as I know,
As *How it Happened Here*,
Though there may be. There may.
What should I say to this callow youth
Who learned to write last winter –
One of those correspondence courses –
And who's coming to lunch today?
He'll be rambling on, no doubt,
About pigs and trees, stars and horses.

For poets in the North of Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s, wondering where one stands was something of an occupational hazard, given the pressure to 'tell the truth' or adopt a more openly political stance. 'Lunch with Pancho Villa' points out that the issue of engagement is never clear-cut and truth, at least where poetry is concerned, is a form of mythology. It is 'All made up' after all, a matter of language framed in accordance with each writer's perspective, background and culture (local landscape and 'people live[d] among'),

[36] Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 97.

not to mention blindspots (things 'I forgot to mention').[37] Rambling on about pigs and trees, stars and horses *may* be as politically engaged, the poem suggests, as holding out in the streets, bearing witness to events as they happen (people getting killed 'Left, right and centre').

The difficulty for Northern poets was that both engagement (adopting a politically committed stance) and detachment (standing aloof or apart) could equally be deemed a form of artistic betrayal. Consequently, they often felt constrained, particularly in the early stages of the violence, to justify their stance on such vexed issues as the relationship between poetry and politics, imagination and society. In response to the jibe at perceived liberals like himself who *fiddle* while Belfast burns, Longley, in a 1969 article 'Strife and the Ulster Poet' in *Hibernia*, stated:

> ...I accept, as I must, the criticism of the slogan 'Malone Road Fiddles while the Falls Road burns', the implication that the still and heartless centre of the hurricane is the still inactivity of liberals like myself. I have to insist that poetry is an act which in the broadest sense can be judged political, a normal human activity; that my own poetry, if it is any good, will be of value in Ulster more than anywhere else, despite my lack of Irish subject-matter, despite my having been caught out by events. Anything I may write in the future is bound to be influenced by the recent turmoil. Whether the influence will be obvious or even recognisable, I couldn't say. I can't claim now, as I might have done a few years ago, that I myself have any longer a life which is my own entirely. However, as a poet I insist that the imagination has a life of *its* own, a life that has to be saved; if it isn't, everything else will be lost.[38]

The tenor of these remarks reveal just how much he was 'caught out' by the violent turn of events in the North and the pressure he felt to justify his artistic stance. The problem was how to balance different perspectives, acknowledging poetry's political element while also respecting its imaginative autonomy. For him, the artist is responsible to his imagination, only the imagination, which has 'a life of *its* own', evades prescriptive ideologies or politically correct statements. It thus assumes a vital role in society, for without its independence 'everything else will be lost'. The following year Mahon, who like Longley

---

[37] Carson, in a similar vein, noted in *The Twelfth of Never* (London: Picador, 1999), p. 89: 'These words the ink is written in is not indelible / And every fairy story has its variorum; / For there are many shades of pigments in the spectrum, / And the printed news is always unreliable'.

[38] Longley, 'Strife and the Ulster Poet', *Hibernia*, 7 November 1969, p. 11. This article was, as Brearton pointed out in *Reading Michael Longley* (p. 56), written in response to a request by the editors of *Hibernia* to suggest how 'the passions now loose in the North are likely to influence, and be reflected in, the work of Northern writers'.

was shocked by what happened in the North, outlined a similar sense of the poet's role in time of war:

> The war I mean is not, of course, between Protestant and Catholic but 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 darkness enough, God knows, for a long time.[39]

These lines recall an earlier editorial in *Icarus* in 1962, in which he opposed the 'superstition' that 'politics is somehow 'unpoetical'', firmly suggesting that the poet's business is to tune into the 'economic and psychological conditions in which people live'.[40] The statement that 'the act of writing is itself political, in the fullest sense' echoed Longley's idea of poetry as an act which 'in the broadest sense can be judged political, a normal human activity'. Like his fellow poet, Mahon is engaged in a delicate balancing act in articulating the connection between poetry and politics. The much quoted phrase, 'A good poem is a paradigm of good politics', neatly formulated this relationship, not in an abstract or theoretical sense, but in terms of people 'talking to each other'. In keeping possibilities open, such talking is a way of overcoming bigotry, prejudice, dogmatism or entrenchment ('the *rigor mortis* of archaic postures, political and cultural'). For him, the element of communication or social interaction is vital, grounding as it did his poetic apprenticeship in Trinity as part of the *Icarus* circle, and his later exchanges with Heaney and other writers. As he explained elsewhere in interview, in relation to poetry in the North of Ireland:

> There was this tremendous interest in writing poems about particular people and dedicating poems to people, thinking in terms of people rather than abstract groups. This has always been our way of talking about politics.[41]

This focus on particular people is a vital aspect of the ironic conscience, part of its social and political engagement. It is evident throughout Mahon's early poetry, following the pattern of *Night-Crossing* (1968) which features several poems dedicated to specific

---

[39] Mahon, 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', *Twentieth Century Studies*, 4 November 1970, p. 93. Mahon chose not to include this essay in *Journalism*, his collection of articles, critical essays and reviews.
[40] Mahon, 'Editorial', *Icarus*, 38 December 1962, p. 1. As we shall see in Chapter Three, this statement is particularly apt in relation to 'Beyond Howth Head', which reads the signs of the times in the light of a whole range of literary texts, including Norman Mailer's politically charged *The Armies of the Night* (1968).
[41] Mahon, interview with Harriet Cooke, p. 10.

individuals (the volume itself is dedicated to Michael and Edna Longley).[42] The sense of poetry as a form of dialogue is conclusive, only such dialogue assumes a wide variety of forms. A crucial phrase in the extract from 'Poetry in Northern Ireland' is 'honest subtlety', because of the license it affords in addressing particular issues or events. Such latitude is vital to the ironic conscience which relishes the play of different modes or the fluidity of alternative possibilities. It allows, as we have argued, for an oblique play of the Joycean kind (recommended by Ormsby) as well as the more direct engagement demanded by Simmons. Hence, the sustained ambiguity of key poems like 'Rage for Order' in *Lives* (1972), which sees the political activist clamour for more direct action only to have his claims subverted by the poet's 'germinal ironies' (here the poem prefigures Muldoon's 'Lunch with Pancho Villa').[43] For Mahon, the indirect approach can be political in the broadest sense if it facilitates an imaginative engagement with issues of violence, history, identity or culture. It operates as an antidote to the *rigor mortis* of narrow-mindedness or intolerance.

Clearly, during the 1960s and early 1970s, poets from the North of Ireland were talking to each other, whether in Trinity circles or in the Belfast Group workshop; or through the Belfast Festival, poetry readings, pamphlet and book publications, contributions to journals or magazines like *Phoenix*, the *Northern Review* or the *Honest Ulsterman*.[44] Such collaboration, as we have seen, suggested comparisons with British Movement poetry in the 1950s. For Longley, it was a crucial part of coming to terms with his confusion about identity and culture: '...as Ulstermen, we [Heaney, Mahon and Longley] share a complex and confusing culture: they help me to define myself and a culture which is for me, I think, more confusing than it is for them'.[45] His 'Letter to Derek Mahon' (1971) highlights this confusion, stressing the significance of the Troubles in their poetic apprenticeship:

> And did we come into our own
> When, minus muse and lexicon,
> We traced in August sixty-nine
> Our imaginary Peace Line
> Around the burnt-out houses of

[42] 'Bird Sanctuary' was dedicated to Jill Schlesinger, 'Van Gogh among the Miners' to Colin Middleton, 'Day Trip to Donegal' to Paul Smyth and 'Gipsies' to Nina Hutchinson.
[43] 'Rage for Order' is analysed in Chapter Three, pp. 121-125.
[44] In 'Four New Voices: Poets of the Present', in *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1975), p. 171, Brown linked the Northern Group with the *Phoenix* magazine, singling out its editor Harry Chambers (as well Michael Emmerson who directed the Queen's University Festival Committee) as important influences besides Hobsbaum. The *Northern Review*, a regional literary magazine which began in 1965, ran until 1969, offered another publishing outlet for Northern Irish poets. Hobsbaum, Heaney and Longley were all on the editorial board and, like Mahon, were contributors.
[45] Longley, 'Strife and the Ulster Poet', p. 11.

> The Catholics we'd scarcely loved,
> Two Sisyphuses come to budge
> The sticks and stones of an old grudge,
> Two poetic conservatives
> In the city of guns and long knives,
> Our ears receiving then and there
> The stereophonic nightmare
> Of the Shankhill and the Falls,
> Our matches struck on crumbling walls
> To light us as we moved at last
> Through the back alleys of Belfast. [46]

From the opening 'And', which suggests an ongoing conversation, the poem is in dialogue with 'In Belfast' in *Night-Crossing*, 'did we come into our own' an allusion to Mahon's opening: 'Walking among my own this windy morning'. Similarly, 'the back alleys of Belfast' recall the 'echoing back-streets of this desperate city' in Mahon's poem, as Longley questions the value of poetry in the face of violence ('The stereophonic nightmare / Of the Shankhill and the Falls'). Reference to Sisyphus in the context of shifting 'The sticks and stones' of animosity (a phrase which echoes 'The sticks / And stones that once broke bones' in 'Glengormley' (*Night-Crossing*)), suggests art's futility to effect change, a recurring theme in Mahon's early poetry.[47] The phrase 'Two poetic conservatives' and 'the Catholics we scarcely loved' (as originally printed in the *New Statesman*) prompted Mahon to write a letter to the journal dissociating himself from the poem's sentiments.[48] A private letter sent to Longley at the time highlights his sensitivity to sectarian issues, resistance to any 'agreed platform' and aversion to categorisations suggesting formal conservatism:

> ....but 'The Catholics we scarcely love' [*sic*] still reads to me too much like 'The Catholics we didn't much like and hadn't any time for.'...As regards the poetic tories...There's a difference between theory and practice...[and] you saying it in a poem dedicated to me, with however much irony, looks like we have an agreed platform hewn out of Yeats and Robert Graves.[49]

---

[46] Longley, 'Letters', *Collected Poems* (London: Cape Poetry, 2006), p. 58. This letter, alongside 'Letter to Seamus Heaney' (1971) and 'Letter to James Simmons' (1972), offered further evidence of mutual influence or collaboration between poets, as well as a shared language of reference and allusion.

[47] As we shall see in the Conclusion, Mahon applies the image of Sisyphus to Belfast workers on the dole in 'Death and the Sun' (*Antarctica*).

[48] See the *New Statesman*, 10 December 1971, p. 821. 'Letter to Derek Mahon' appeared in the journal alongside 'Letter to Seamus Heaney'.

[49] Mahon, letter to Michael Longley, n.d. [December 1971] cited in Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, p. 90. The combative tone of Mahon's correspondence with Longley can also be gauged from an earlier letter he sent to Longley from America (c. December 1966), bearing out the latter's remark in *Tuppenny Stung* (p. 41) that he and Mahon were more demanding of each other and 'more hurtful' than the Group ever was: 'Why, do you suppose, have you not written anything for six months? Could it be that you are working an exhausted vein, in terms of form? If the words don't just fall into place any more in accord with your preconceived notion of what a really good, genuine, solid-gold, floodlit and revolving Poem should be like, why not loosen up a bit. You did

Mahon's concerns, as we shall see, were not unfounded, such labels resulting in crude misreadings of his work which, in valuing specific agendas or ideologies over the subtleties of poetic form, failed to realise the manifold ways in which literature and politics are interlinked. Contrary to repeated criticism of his work as formally conservative or indifferent to the claims of history, the ironic conscience was addressing contemporary realities in oblique and complex ways.[50]

1.3 Poetry and Politics: the Impact of Changes in the Institution of literature on Poetry in Northern Ireland.

Alongside the Troubles in the North of Ireland, changes within the broader ideological context of literary criticism in Britain and Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s, in line with developments elsewhere in Europe and America (the so-called 'crisis' of the humanities'), challenged prevailing attitudes to the uses and function of literature. This crisis, which coincided with the Northern Troubles, brought about a radical reappraisal of the relationship between literature, history and politics. This reappraisal greatly influenced the reading of contemporary poetry, including the work of Northern poets like Mahon.

Two significant works in the early eighties, Peter Widdowson's revisionist text of British materialism *Re-Reading English* (1982) and Catherine Belsey's article, 'Literature, History, Politics' (1983), encapsulated these changes. They reflected the shift away from the formal-mimetic belief in literature as a privileged realm representing universal truths, to literature as one of many discourses in the contest for meaning (the latter included the kind of Leavisite discernment of moral possibilities in the close reading of particular texts, as practised by Hobsbaum's Belfast Group).[51] The institution of literary criticism itself became a central focus in the study of literature, involving a reassessment of the ideological models governing its relation to history and politics. As Belsey stated:

---

it before, magnificently, with 'The Hebrides' and 'A Personal Statement'. But I mean really go slack – write humorous verse, pastiche ee cummings, a new Dingleberry Song, a Hobsbaumiad, riddles. Please don't think me flippant, but I hate to have you feeling sorry for yourself because you haven't been writing, and all for want of a companionable kick in the arse…' (cited in Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, pp. 19-20).

[50] Foley, in a review of *Energy to Burn* by James Simmons, *Honest Ulsterman*, 29 (1971), p. 40, labelled Mahon, Heaney and Longley the 'Tight Assed Trio'.

[51] Peter Widdowson (ed.), *Re-Reading English* (London: Methuen, 1982). Belsey, 'Literature, History, Politics', *Literature and History* 9 (Spring 1983), p. 17-27.

> The model for the institution's conception of history as a kind of perpetual present, and its conviction of the vulgarity of politics, is Arnold's essay, 'The Study of Poetry', where it is clear from the 'touchstones' Arnold invokes that great poetry from Homer to Milton, despite minor differences of language and setting, has always taught the same elegiac truth, that this world is inevitably a place of sorrow and that the only heroism is a solitary resignation of spirit.[52]

As a result, the power of the institution was challenged and its presumed suppression of history and politics exposed. The collapse of liberal humanist notions of literary value and human nature became increasingly evident from the early 1970s. Arnold's 'Eternal Man', whose brooding, feeling presence, as Belsey declared, 'precedes, determines and transcends history', was dismissed as an outmoded construct.[53] Under the influence of theorists like Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Frederic Jameson, Jacques Derrida, Julie Kristeva and Georg Lukács, previous conceptions of a unified tradition or narrative of literary culture were scrutinised, and the ideologies behind prevailing 'facts' or so-called 'truths' exposed.

In Ireland, these changes found expression in initiatives like *The Crane Bag* journal which ran from 1977-1985 and the Derry-based Field Day Theatre Company which began in 1980, both of which called for more open debate on the role of literature and culture within the nation.[54] Richard Kearney's interest in contemporary French post-structuralist theory, and Seamus Deane's assimilation of the Frankfurt School's critique of the Enlightenment, informed the reading of established narratives concerning literature, nationalism, modernity or liberal humanism.[55] In a discussion article entitled 'The Arts and Ideology' in *The Crane Bag* in 1985, Deane stressed the political implications of art, dismissing the notion of artists as 'the true and pure thing only if they are decontaminated, if they disengage themselves from politics or society'.[56] Countering such stereotypes, he maintained, was a vital part of Field Day's attempt to re-politicise Irish criticism, stressing literature's embeddedness in

---

[52] Belsey, 'Literature, History, Politics', p. 17.
[53] Ibid., p. 17.
[54] The Field Day Theatre Company was founded in 1980 around Brian Friel and Stephen Rea (the name, in part, is based on 'Friel' and 'Rea'). Seamus Deane, Tom Paulin, Seamus Heaney and David Hammond were invited to join, and co-opted onto its board of directors. Thomas Kilroy followed subsequently in 1988. *The Crane Bag* was founded in 1977 by Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney. W. J. Mc Cormack's *The Battle of the Books: Two Decades of Irish Cultural Debate* (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1986) included a chapter on the journal. He noted that special issues were a particular feature, such as 'Media and Popular Culture', 'Irish Ideologies', 'James Joyce & The Arts in Ireland'.
[55] Deane, as we shall see, began his critique of the role of literature and culture within the nation in the early 1970s, deconstructing certain myths of the Irish Literary Revival.
[56] 'The Arts and Ideology', *The Crane Bag* (Vol. 9, No. 2, 1985), p. 62. Alongside Deane, Jennifer Fitzgerald, Joan Fowler and Frank McGuinness participated in this discussion.

history as opposed to its cultivation of a transcendent, non-ideological ('poetic') space. As he expressed it elsewhere, explicitly linking culture and politics in the context of the Troubles in the North of Ireland, the aim of Field Day was to 'contribute to the solution of the present crisis by producing analysis of the established opinions, myths and stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation'.[57] This analysis was to be a threefold enterprise, comprising theatre, the Field Day pamphlets and *The Field Day Anthology*.[58] Of the series of pamphlets between 1983 and 1988, the final three offered an international Marxist perspective on Ireland: *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment* (1988) by Terry Eagleton, *Modernism and Imperialism* (1988) by Frederic Jameson and *Yeats and Decolonisation* (1988) by Edward Said.[59]

In *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment*, Eagleton offered an analysis of the predicaments of the aesthetic / political polarity in which literary criticism was caught, re-affirming Deane's rejection of literature as a non-ideological discursive space. He also alluded to the revisionist-nationalist debate at the time, reference to 'an uncouth nationalism' reflecting the often bitter polemic:

> This is not to say...that the aesthetic as 'disinterested' mythic solution to real contradictions is not in evidence in Ireland at all. There are Irish critics and commentators who deploy the term today as a privileged mark of that decency, civility and cultivation of which an uncouth nationalism is fatally bereft. In the stalest of Arnoldian clichés, the poetic is still being counterposed to the political – which is only to say that the 'poetic' as we have it today was, among other things, historically constructed to carry out just that business of suppressing political conflict. Imagination and enlightened liberal reason are still being offered to us in Ireland today as the antithesis of sectarianism; and like all such idealised values they forget their own roots in a social class and history not unnoted for its own virulent sectarianism, then and now.[60]

---

[57] Deane (ed.), *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p. vii. These 'established opinions, myths and stereotypes' are not unlike what Mahon termed 'the *rigor mortis* of archaic postures, political and cultural' (in 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', as previously outlined).

[58] The first three volumes of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* were published in 1991, two further volumes dealing with texts by women appearing in 2000.

[59] Other pamphlets included: Deane, *Civilians and Barbarians* (1983); Paulin, *A New Look at the Language Question* (1983); Heaney, *An Open Letter* (1983); Deane, *Heroic Styles: the Tradition of an Idea* (1984); Declan Kiberd, *Anglo-Irish Attitudes* (1984); Kearney, *Myth and Motherland* (1984); Brown, *The Whole Protestant Community: the Making of an Historical Myth* (1985); Marianne Elliott, *Watchmen in Sion: the Protestant Idea of Liberty* (1985); R. L. McCartney, *Liberty and Authority in Ireland* (1985); Eanna Mulloy, *Dynasties of Coercion* (1986); Michael Farrell, *The Apparatus of Repression* (1986) and Patrick J. McGrory, *Law and the Constitution: Present Discontents* (1986).

[60] Eagleton, *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment*, Field Day Pamphlet 13 (Derry: Field Day), p. 13.

For Eagleton, the suppression in criticism of political conflict is the legacy of a bankrupt Arnoldian conception of the aesthetic, which sees the North of Ireland as an autonomous text (after the fashion of the 'well-made poem'), exemplifying the elegiac truth that world is inevitably a place of sectarianism, if not sorrow (to echo Belsey). In Lukács' terms, the objects of history appear as the consequence of immutable, eternal laws of nature as opposed to class struggles or clashes between contending powers. Deane has consistently dismissed this mindset for its fascist tendencies (he did so first in 'Literary Myths of the Revival', a paper delivered at a conference in Montreal in 1973) and for perpetuating false dichotomies like poetry and politics, civility and barbarism (to allude to the title of his Field Day pamphlet).[61] In *Celtic Revivals* (1985) he sought to re-politicise Anglo-Irish literature, critically re-reading writers from Yeats and Joyce to Mahon and Heaney. For him, every poem has a political subtext and the stalest of Arnoldian clichés is to assume that literature transcends politics. As he expressed it in an article in *The Crane Bag* in 1985:

> Essentially, we're being told that this is humanity in its pure state, and that out in the streets is humanity in its impure state. In fact that way of reading art is cross-eyed: the way we live is the way we live in the streets.[62]

The following year Paulin, in a similar vein, also exposed as cross-eyed this dualistic thinking which associates literature with a transcendent world and politics with *mere* mundane reality:

> We have been taught, many of us, to believe that art and politics are separated by the thickest and most enduring of partitions. Art is a garden of pure perfect forms which effortlessly 'transcends' that world of compromise, cruelty, dead language and junk cars which Manicheans dismiss as mere politics.[63]

The metaphor of partition neatly linked the separation of literature and politics with Northern Ireland, Paulin associating it with the methodology of Practical Criticism in the United

---

[61] It was published later in Joseph Ronsley (ed.), *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature* (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1977). Here Deane, pre-figuring Eagleton's remarks, controversially linked the aesthetic with 'the politics of Fascism': 'The aesthetic heritage with which we still struggle clearly harbours the desire to obliterate or render nugatory the problems of class, economics, bureaucratic systems and the like, concentrating instead upon the essences of self, nationhood, community and Zeitgeist. If there is any politics to be associated with such an aesthetic, it is the politics of Fascism. It is again surprising that this clear implication should pass almost unnoticed in the body of contemporary Irish writing and in the scattered convictions which many writers still possess about the so-called autonomy of the imagination' (p. 322). Longley's insistence, in 'Strife and the Ulster Poet', that 'the imagination has a life of its own' is a case in point.

[62] Deane, 'The Arts and Ideology', *The Crane Bag*, 9, 2 (1985), p. 64.

[63] Paulin, Introduction to *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 15. He added: 'Indeed, there is an influential school of literary criticism – appropriately, it dominates literary studies in the United States – which argues that the political and historical content of literature must be dismissed as 'extrinsic irrelevance''.

States. Here he echoed W. J. Mc Cormack (one of the dedicatees of *Journalism*, alongside Deane, Mahon having worked with both as editor of *Atlantis* in the early 1970s) who pointed out how frequently, in terms of literary criticism, 'nothing extrinsic to the 'text' of Northern Ireland is allowed to impinge on the integrity of the cultural artefact'. Parodying Archibald MacLeish's phrase, he noted how, for certain critics, 'Ulster should not Mean but Be' – that is, exist in a transcendent realm beyond the cruelty and compromises of the street.[64] For critics like Paulin, Eagleton and Deane, New Critical close reading with its emphasis on 'full humanity' ('humanity in its pure state'), the 'integrity' or literary 'balance' of the text (the aesthetic as disinterested), often fails to acknowledge the politics underlying such terms. The concept of balance, for instance, frequently upholds a middle-class ideology of consensus or 'middle-ground', neither reactionary nor progressive. Any neat separation of poetry and politics thus masks the fact that poetry, like any other aspect of culture, may well be politics by other means. What matters is the precise relationship between them, determining whether art, as a mode of imagination, is an agent of change or an element of design, a radical or a conservative force.

It is against the backdrop of this collapse of the Arnoldian-Leavisite consensus and attendant re-politicisation of literature that the critical debate regarding Mahon's early poetry is best understood. While this debate was by no means confined to literature in Northern Ireland, the reality of the Troubles did give it a particular urgency in relation to his work.

1.4 Poetry and Politics: the Critical Debate regarding Mahon's Early Poetry.

In this section, we will outline some of the key criticisms of Mahon's early poetry (positive and negative), in order to highlight the relevance of this much wider critical debate for an understanding of the ironic conscience as it operates from *Night-Crossing* (1968) to *Antarctica* (1985), particularly in terms of the contentious issue of imaginative freedom and imaginative responsibility. It provides a vital context for our analysis of specific poems in each of Mahon's volumes, drawing attention to the complexity of the relationship between art and history or the subtle politics of poetic form. However, we will first address his sense of poetry as a formal activity, shaping as it did individual readings of his work.

[64] Mc Cormack, *The Battle of the Books*, p. 16.

1.4.1 Formalism in Mahon's Early Poetry.

Among Mahon's earliest mentors were MacNeice, Yeats and Dylan Thomas, all of whom greatly influenced his sense of poetry's formal necessity.[65] What appealed to him most about their work was the fusion of feeling and technique or, as he expressed it in interview in 1973 in relation to Thomas, 'the notion of tremendous feeling being channelled into strict form'.[66] Such a sense of formal control marked his poetry from the outset (Longley, as previously mentioned, noted the technical accomplishment of his juvenilia). It was strengthened by his interest in the visual arts. 'Van Gogh among the Miners' in *Night-Crossing* highlighted a preoccupation with artists which has continued throughout his work. 'Edvard Munch' in *Lives* (1972) and 'Girls on the Bridge' in *The Hunt by Night* (1982) both focus on the Norwegian painter. The title poem in *The Hunt by Night* is based on an Uccello painting, while 'Courtyards in Delft' (also from that volume) draws its inspiration from a number of de Hooch's paintings, including *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* (1658). The choice of paintings, drawings or lithographs as covers for his poetry, such as Munch's 'The Lady with the Brooch' (1903) for *The Snow Party* (1975), detail from Botticelli's *Abundance* for *Poems 1962-1978*, or Uccello's *A Hunt in the Forest* (c.1465) for *The Hunt by Night*, enforces his aesthetic sense of the interrelatedness of the arts.[67] In this context, we can appreciate Mahon's obsession with the visual shape of words on the page or his awareness of poetry as a Yeatsian labour of shaping:

> It's important to me what a poem looks like on the page. I'm interested in organization. I'm interested in at least the appearance of control, orchestration, forceful activity; something intense happening, something being intended and achieved – purposefulness instead of randomness.[68]

---

[65] In interview in *Writing Irish*, p. 191, Mahon described Yeats's 'The Stolen Child' as the first poem that that really 'turned me on', and spoke of his attempts in school to reproduce the style of Thomas's early lyrics, in particular 'Where Once the Waters of Your Face' (a poem included in his recent selection of the Welsh poet's work, *Dylan Thomas: Poems selected by Derek Mahon* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004). In his Introduction to this selection, he expressed his high regard for Thomas whom he described as 'the real thing (despite his own disclaimers), the true vatic voice, if slightly overdone from time to time' (p. vii), who 'left us a faith in unfashionable notions like inspiration and genius; also a poetry not of diminished but of enhanced expectation…' (p. xviii).

[66] Mahon, interview with Cooke, p. 10.

[67] This interest in the visual arts continues in Mahon's later work. *The Hudson Letter* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1995) and *The Yellow Book* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1997), which incorporate references to a range of artists, also feature paintings on the cover page (an untitled painting by Timothy Engelland on the former, 'Mermaids' by Gustav Klimt on the latter). *Collected Poems* (1999) has 'Daylight Raid from My Studio Window' by Sir John Lavery, while *Harbour Lights* (2005), *Adaptations* (2006) and *Life on Earth* (2008) take paintings by Paul Henry ('Kinsale' (1939), Charles Tyrrell ('March 1992'), and William Crozier ('Winter Flood') respectively.

[68] Mahon, interview with Grennan, p. 117. Alternatively, as he stated in interview with Eileen Battersby ('Made in Belfast: An Interview with Derek Mahon', *The Sunday Tribune*, 26 August 1990, p. 26): 'For me,

Such purposefulness extends to the physical texture of letters on the page or the actual lay-out of poems on the right or left-hand side, as well as properties like rhyme, rhythm, pitch or syntax. All of these aspects are considered part of poetry's formal necessity, the latter understood organically, in Coleridge's sense, as the 'reason' a poem is the way it is, what sets it apart as

> ...an authoritative-looking object, as a thing that looks like something interesting – not like one of the thousands of therapeutic poems that you don't want to read because they look so boring on the page. There's nothing putting it together, there's no reason for it.[69]

Mahon admired Robert Hughes's book *Culture of Complaint* (1994), in particular the chapter entitled 'Art and the Therapeutic Fallacy', which echoed his own sentiments regarding therapeutic poems better left unread.[70] His stance in this regard is not unlike that of Derek Walcott in 'North and South', who decried the formlessness of much contemporary poetry:

> and these days in bookstores I stand paralyzed
> by the rows of shelves along whose wooden branches
> the free-verse nightingales are thrilling "Read me! Read Me!"
> in various metres of asthmatic pain.[71]

For Mahon, the work of 'free-verse nightingales' lacks the creative tension necessary to achieve something intended or complete ('No art without the resistance of the medium' as Raymond Chandler expressed it , a phrase which Mahon is fond of quoting).[72] Alternatively, he described this tension as the clash of Dionysian and Apollonian elements, with particular reference to Yeats:

> Yes. That's the combination that has the greatest potency, I think. The hissing chemicals inside the well-wrought urn; an urnful of explosives. That's what's so great about Yeats, after all: the Dionysian contained within the Apollonian form, and bursting at the seams – shaking at the bars, but the bars have to be there to be shaken.[73]

---

poetry is about shape and sound. It's about taking the formless and making it interesting...creating form out of formlessness'.

[69] Mahon, interview with Grennan, p. 119. For Mahon, all poets are formalists in the sense of working with traditionally available forms or struggling to create new alternatives.

[70] Ibid., p. 118.

[71] Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems*, 1948-1984 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), p. 407.

[72] Mahon cited this phrase from Chandler in interview with Cooke (p.10), Scammell (p. 5) and Grennan (p. 119).

[73] Mahon, *In the Chair*, p. 119.

The opposition between order and chaos is what appealed to him initially in Dylan Thomas's work (the 'hissing chemicals' and Apollonian bars recall the 'tremendous feeling' and 'strict form' referred to earlier). It reflects that dialectical awareness which has informed his work from the beginning. Here we can trace the influence of Yeats and Thomas but also that of MacNeice, who pointed out that 'In the arts bars can be cross-bars and limitations an asset'.[74] For Mahon, formal control is not only an asset but a vital prerequisite for poetry.

This insistence on formal concentration, however, led certain critics to dismiss Mahon's poetry as a retreat from history into the confines of the 'well-made poem'. To them, his writing seemed too removed from the back-streets of Belfast, his time-travelling perspectives too disengaged from life; his sustained ambivalence too evasive of direct statement. The concern for linguistic precision in well-wrought poems was deemed more an avoidance of historical and political realities, the insistence on order and control ('purposefulness instead of randomness') the mark of a suspect aestheticism.

1.4.2 Negative Criticism of Mahon's Early Poetry.

In his article 'A Terminal Ironist' in the *Honest Ulsterman* in 1980, Paulin encapsulated this view of Mahon's poetry as disengaged (echoing Yeats's line in 'The Choice'): 'At some point in his brilliant youth Mahon must have faced the choice between perfection of the life or of the work – he chose the latter and made a religion of art'.[75] Similarly, Deane accused him and other Northern poets of an apolitical stance, of addressing the Northern crisis far too hesitantly or obliquely. As he stated in a *Crane Bag* interview with Seamus Heaney in 1977:

> Do you not think that if some political stance is not adopted by you and the Northern poets at large, this refusal might lead to a dangerous strengthening of earlier notions of the autonomy of poetry and corroborate the recent English notion of the happy limitations of a 'well-made' poem?[76]

Deane took issue with what he perceived as the lack of a political sensibility in Northern poets, reiterating ideas expressed in an earlier article, 'Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism'

---

[74] Alan Heuser (ed.), *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 143.

[75] Paulin, 'A Terminal Ironist' (a review of *Poems 1962-1978*), *Honest Ulsterman* (June 1980). The article is included in his book *Ireland & The English Crisis* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1984), pp. 55-59. The opening lines of Yeats's 'The Choice', from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), read: 'The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work…' Mahon alludes to Yeats's poem in 'Knut Hamsun in Old Age' from *The Hunt by Night* (1982).

[76] Deane, 'Unhappy and at Home', interview with Seamus Heaney, *The Crane Bag*, 1, 1 (1977), p. 61.

(1975), which reflected his frustration with outmoded Arnoldian or Leavisite notions of the aesthetic.[77] There he argued that Mahon's early poetry is evasive, indicative of one 'who cannot conceive of history as anything other than something from which he should escape'.[78]

Criticism of Mahon's work continued through the 1980s and early 1990s, questioning its relation to history. In *Inviolable Voice: History and 20th Century Poetry* (1982), Stan Smith adopted a Marxist-structuralist critique of the liberal-humanist tradition of English poetry in the post-war era. He endorsed Christopher Middleton's view that:

> English poetry right now is suffering from this very dangerous cleavage of poetry from history. There are very few English poets who seem to have any sense of history as something happening in me and you and all around us all the time; they've steered themselves off into a parochial corner of the universe, and have lost the historical sense.[79]

The book thus reflected the critical re-orientation in the literary academy to the contingent (history) and strategic (politics) as opposed to the transcendent. Following Benjamin and Lukács, Smith rejected Arnoldian touchstones, debunking the notion of history as 'a kind of perpetual present', while stressing the significance not the vulgarity of politics (to recall Belsey's phrase). In his opinion, Mahon was one poet who appeared to have lost the historical sense and whose work 'could easily be mistaken for indifference before the ugly realities of life, and death, in Ulster'.[80] Citing poems like 'Preface to a Love Poem' (*Night-Crossing*) or 'History' (from the sequence 'Light Music' which first appeared in pamphlet form in 1977):

> The blinking puddles
> reflected daylong
> twilights of misery.
>
> Smoke rose in silence
> to the low sky...[81]

---

[77] Deane, 'Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism', in Douglas Dunn (ed.), *Two Decades of Irish Writing* (London: Carcanet, 1975). As he expressed it: 'Nevertheless, the salient fact remains – Northern Ireland is in political crisis and Northern Poets seem more remote from it than any other group, even when they are not writing poetry – which in some cases is seldom' (p. 14). In his view, the lack of a comprehensive national political ideology was part of the reason Irish writers did not measure up to poets like 'Shelley, Hugo, Pound, Mayakovsky, MacDiarmid, Neruda', for whom politics was also a mode of imagination (p. 18).

[78] Ibid., p. 12. Deane, as we shall see in relation to *The Hunt by Night* (1982), qualified his views on Mahon in *Celtic Revivals* (1985).

[79] Middleton, cited by Smith in *Inviolable Voice: History and 20th Century Poetry* (London: Gill & MacMillan, 1982), p. 16. Middleton's interview took place in 1964.

[80] Smith, *Inviolable Voice*, p. 189. He refers to work taken from *Poems 1962-1978*.

[81] Mahon, *Light Music* (Belfast: Ulsterman Publications, 1977), p. 4.

he questioned Mahon's literariness, which he saw as a recurrent technique for distancing the middle-class self from feelings of panic. To him, it seemed a kind of insulation from brutal realities, a comfort zone or 'interface, where a guilty but finally secure consciousness abstracts itself from its contingent world even as it concedes its implication in that world'.[82]

A decade later, Peter Porter appeared to confirm Smith's perception of Mahon, regarding *The Hunt by Night* (1982) as a form of time-travelling that evades the twentieth century. Aligning Mahon with Heaney, he wrote:

> The Irishmen seem outside time, to be playing up to a committee preparing a pantheon. 'Irish poets learn your trade, / Sing whatever is well made', wrote Yeats. They have learned it too well, they are banishing from their verse whatever parts of experience and necessity pose a problem to the shaping spirit.[83]

Once again Mahon's poetry is criticised for denying history ('outside time'), focusing on the transcendent ('preparing a pantheon') as opposed to the contingent or strategic (problematic 'parts of experience and necessity'). His shaping spirit of imagination is thus seen to be politically suspect for its selective, if not escapist, filtering of reality.

Reflecting the academic re-orientation to politics (in the wider sense of sexual politics, gender identity and power relations), Eavan Boland likewise accused Mahon of omitting crucial parts of experience from his verse. While appreciating him as 'a dark, witty and adventurous formalist' who, having readily absorbed Anglo-Irish, American and French modernist influences, subverted the traditional direction of the lyric, she is critical of his modernist obsession with the authority of the poet, which preserves maleness as a sort of caste-system within the poem.[84] Anticipating more recent gender criticism of the uncompromising maleness of Mahon's aesthetic (as evidenced in John Goodby's article, '"The Soul of Silence": Derek Mahon's Masculinities', which highlighted the fact that the personae of many of his early poems are versions of specifically masculine bohemianism), Boland argued that

---

[82] Smith, *Inviolable Voice*, p. 190.

[83] Porter, *Observer*, 19 December 1992. He repeated his criticism of Irish poets in a later, largely hostile, review of Heaney's *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* in the *Sunday Telegraph* (30 August, 1998, p. 13), which declared: '...we want more of life in its wide-ranging social, artistic and spiritual dimensions than we are given in his poetry'.

[84] Boland, 'Compact and Compromise: Derek Mahon as a Young Poet', p. 65.

> ...a radical self cannot function authoritatively in the political poem if the sexual self, which is part of it, remains conservative, exclusive and unquestioning of inherited authority.[85]

More damningly, she questioned whether his lyrical stance, for all its clarity or sophistication of cadence, does justice to the complexity of events, given that 'experience is promoted or demoted according to its ability, like a clever child, to find a winning expression for itself'.[86] The implication for Mahon's early poetry is that the medium is superior to the message, perfection of the work more important than reality, beauty more prized than truth.

1.4.3 Positive Criticism of Mahon's Early Poetry.

Such negative criticism of Mahon's early poetry did not go unchallenged. Edna Longley took Smith to task for 'faking the evidence' against Mahon by reading particular poems out of context, including 'Preface to a Love Poem' (written prior to 1969).[87] To accuse the poet of being 'neither here nor there', 'at one remove' from reality, on the basis of lines from an early love poem, seemed to her a gross misrepresentation. Adapting Mahon's oft-cited statement, 'A good poem is a paradigm of good politics', she argued: 'inaccurate criticism is a paradigm of bad politics, of propaganda'.[88] She rejected such readings which, in their superimposition of selective agendas, reduced particular poems to mere counters in literary-critical debate. Far from being escapist, she deemed Mahon's oblique perspectives a vital aspect of imaginative freedom. As she stated in an earlier article in 1976:

> Mahon's various 'scruples' in fact point to the many fine discriminations the imagination needs to make, lest involvement become exploitation (of and by the poet), self-assertion escapism, reticence indifference, or pity sentimentality.[89]

In her opinion, such fine discriminations were a prerequisite for avoiding absolutes in the face of complex reality, a way of remaining open to alternative possibilities as opposed to a refusal to engage. Reticence on political issues need not imply indifference to ugly realities. In a further essay, 'The Aesthetic and the Territorial' (1992), she pointed out how the very

---

[85] Boland, 'Compact and Compromise: Derek Mahon as a Young Poet', p. 66. See Goodby's article, '"The Soul of Silence": Derek Mahon's Masculinities', in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, pp. 205-229, in relation to the issue of masculine bohemianism. His study *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) sought to offer a more detailed history of Irish poetry of this period, in the light of newer theoretical approaches – feminist, Marxist, post-structuralist or postcolonial.
[86] Ibid., p. 66.
[87] Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (1986), p. 173.
[88] Ibid., p. 173.
[89] Edna Longley, 'Ulster Poetry and the Troubles', *Planet* 33 (August 1976), p. 10.

framing of particular questions such as Shakespeare's 'How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?', invoked by Heaney in *Preoccupations* (1980), often sets up false oppositions between poetry and politics, song and suffering, beauty and truth (Deane's question to Heaney, on the issue of political stance in the *Crane Bag* interview referred to earlier, is a prime example).[90] Concern for poetry's formal necessity, she maintained, did not necessarily imply a lack of commitment. As she expressed it in 1995, countering accusations of escapism or a denial of history, Mahon 'had been writing autobiography and history together from the outset'.[91]

Sensitive to the weight of both critical and tribal expectations, Heaney also sought to challenge the perception that Mahon's lyric stances were evasions of historical realities. In his 1984 essay, 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland', he argued that Mahon's displaced angle of vision was 'not a Nelson-like ploy to avoid seeing what he prefers not to see but a way of focusing afresh'.[92] Postcards, paintings, mythological or historically remote figures were seen to offer the poet novel angles on contemporary realities, or an oblique approach to issues of historical memory, identity and politics.

In 'The Pre-Natal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry' (1989), Heaney extended his reflections on displacement to include the whole issue of irony. Treating irony as a positive feature of both Mahon and Muldoon's poetry, he argued against those who deemed it a sign of disengagement, or a lack of serious commitment. Rather irony offered a creative space, or liberating distance, from which to re-imagine the present. Citing MacNeice as an exemplary influence, he revealed how distance,

> ...either of the actual, exilic, cross-channel variety or the imaginary, self-renewing, trans-historical and trans-cultural sort, can be used as an enabling factor in the work of art in Ulster.[93]

Heaney used the metaphor of the lever to illustrate this 'enabling factor'. It is, he pointed out, only when we consider how important the length of the arm of the lever is 'to the actual

---

[90] Edna Longley, 'The Aesthetic and the Territorial', in Andrews (ed.), *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 69. Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p. 57.

[91] Edna Longley, 'Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art', in Micheal Kenneally (ed.), *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995), p. 297.

[92] Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland' [1985], in *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 136. This essay was originally presented as the first Pete Laver Memorial Lecture at Grasmere in 1984.

[93] Heaney, *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scolars Press, 1989), p. 46. The book marked the inauguration of the Richard Ellmann Lectures in Modern Literature, delivered by Heaney.

business of moving a world', that we realise how the aesthetic and the contingent need not be opposed.[94] Taking 'Nostalgias' (originally entitled 'The chair squeaks...' in *The Snow Party*) as an example, he showed how in Mahon's hands, a chair, a kettle and 'A lost tribe' can speak volumes about marginalised groups everywhere, including the Northern Protestant community and its sense of election affirmed or assailed. What is remarkable, as he put it, is the light touch with which such material is handled – a feature of 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' in particular, where mushrooms somehow manage to encompass universal suffering.

For Heaney, irony signalled a consciousness alert to alternative perceptions, not one that keeps itself secure (*contra* Smith) or wishes to deny the complexity of experience (as suggested by Boland or Porter). It is, he pointed out, often deflected from confidence in a single position by a capacity to be affected by different, if not opposed, positions. Hence, the play of possibilities in several Mahon poems (in particular, 'Rage for Order' in *Lives*, 'The Snow Party' and 'The Last of the Fire Kings' in *The Snow Party* and 'Courtyards in Delft' in *The Hunt by Night*) as conflicting perspectives are set in dialectical tension. To reduce such poems to a single reading, in the interests of any ideology (aesthetic or political), is to deny the distinctive subtlety and complexity of Mahon's voice.

Like Heaney, Peter McDonald also viewed distance as an enabling factor in Mahon's early poetry. In 'History and Poetry: Mahon and Paulin' (1992), he argued that Mahon's displaced perspectives, which might appear an escape from the pressures of history, can be read alternatively as a subtle means of engagement.[95] Citing 'A Disused Shed' as an example, he argued that the mushrooms' plea -

> They are begging us, you see, in their wordless way,
> To do something, to speak on their behalf,
> Or at least not to close the door again...

is a 'plea *on behalf of* history' (as well as a testimony to its implacable cruelty), only history understood not in terms of grand narratives but of marginalised and forgotten voices. The poem is thus

> ...a vindication of Mahon's determinedly cold, detached perspectives, his distance which clarifies and makes more urgent.

---

[94] Heaney, *The Place of Writing*, p. 46.

[95] McDonald, 'History and Poetry: Derek Mahon and Tom Paulin', in *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1992). It appeared in a revised version, 'Derek Mahon, Tom Paulin, and the Lost Tribe', in McDonald's later work, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

> A stance which may appear abstract in its concerns enables the poet to see *more* than the close-ups of 'commitment' would make possible.[96]

Detachment need not necessarily imply disengagement but may instead be a kind of *via negativa* towards greater commitment. Here McDonald applied Paulin's insights regarding a certain form of political verse to Mahon's poetry, citing the following extract from his introduction to *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (1988):

> Such poems issue from that condition of supremely unillusioned quietism – the wisest of passivities – which is usually the product of bitter historical experience and which is temperamentally different from disillusion. To be politically disillusioned is often to be cynical; to be politically apathetic is usually to be ignorant, but to possess no illusions is to understand a spiritual reality which is religious in its negativity.[97]

In so doing, he defended him against the charge of indifference, disillusion or apathy before the brutal realities of life and death in Ulster. Like Edna Longley and Heaney, McDonald argued that Mahon's detached perspectives are not those of a formalist aesthete who rejects life for art, but of one whose outlook on history is almost religious in its 'less deceived' state. This reading provides an interesting gloss on the mystical mode of the ironic conscience in his early work and, indeed, Edna Longley's contention that the religious dimension of Ulster Protestant culture, 'devolved into aesthetics and metaphysics', conditions the extremities of Mahon's poetry.[98]

Finally, Brendan Kennelly also regarded Mahon's oblique perspectives as a positive source of imaginative energy. In his opinion, they extended the resources of his voice, allowing Mahon to enlist writers like MacNeice, Beckett, Cavafy, Ovid, Villon or Nerval in his 'private army of conscience'.[99] Far from promoting indifference, such figures served to inform the ethical 'scruple' of the ironic conscience in its engagement with both self and contemporary society.

---

[96] McDonald, 'History and Poetry: Derek Mahon and Tom Paulin', p. 96.
[97] Ibid., pp. 96-97. Paulin, it must be said, was not referring to Mahon in his introduction to *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), although his discriminations are particularly apt for his early poetry. His essay 'A Terminal Ironist', cited earlier, does not explicitly link Mahon's irony to 'that condition of supremely unillusioned quietism' outlined here. However, in linking 'Entropy' with T. S. Eliot's 'condition of complete simplicity', he hinted at Mahon's link with writers whose lack of illusion is a kind of spiritual *via negativa.* McDonald adopted Paulin's comments to further his own argument regarding Mahon's poetry.
[98] Edna Longley, 'Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art', p. 296.
[99] Kennelly, 'Derek Mahon's Humane Perspective', p. 152.

1.4.4 Imaginative Freedom and Responsibility: The Politics of Poetic Form.

The critical debate surrounding Mahon's early poetry illustrates the particular urgency of the issue of poetry and politics at the time, especially given the Northern Troubles and ideological changes in the literary academy. Two significant publications in the past two decades shed helpful light on this debate – Clair Wills's *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Ireland* (1993) in relation to the work of Muldoon, Paulin and Medbh McGuckian, and David Caplan's *Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form* (2005). The latter, which included a section on Mahon's use of the heroic couplet in *The Yaddo Letter* (1992), illustrated the fact that the discussion was by no means confined to Anglo-Irish writing. Both works addressed the subtleties of poetic form, stressing the need for close reading in literary criticism in order to attend to their shifting political and aesthetic use. From the perspective of this thesis, such subtleties are essential to understanding the significance of the ironic conscience for Mahon's early poetry.

The following passage, from the opening chapter of Wills's book, is particularly instructive in relation to the critical debate surrounding Mahon's early work. It addressed the conflict between imaginative freedom and responsibility, the focus, as we have seen, of Mahon's article 'Poetry in Northern Ireland' (1970) and Longley's 'Strife and the Ulster Poet' (1969):

> In what ways do the formal dynamics of a poem shape its ideology? How do poetic styles have political meanings? We are used to at least two principal arguments about the nature of the relationship between poetry and politics. On the one hand there is the model of 'committed' or 'engaged' literature, or literature with a specific political purpose, which is not usually associated with a distinctively 'literary' poetic form since this sets it apart from the mass of the reading public. On the other hand there is the paradigm of literature whose politics lies precisely in the fact that it is without purpose in the political world. In Northern Ireland these seemingly opposed views are inflected in a very particular manner, partly because of an aesthetic or cultural interpretation of the nature of the political sphere, which leads to an emphasis on cultural politics and on the poet's role in giving voice to, or representing, his or her community. In a certain sense, 'engaged' literature is thus deemed to be that which is rooted in a particular community (and therefore authenticated through 'experience'), but also that which, through its formal qualities, refuses to be reduced to the level of propaganda for one side or the other. The opposition between the drive towards poetic 'responsibility' to the political situation, and the desire for

> poetic 'freedom' lies at the root of almost all discussions of Northern Irish poetry.[100]

The conflicting readings of Mahon's early poetry are more easily understood in the context of the cultural politics of the North of Ireland. On the one hand, his work is not 'committed' in that it refuses to be tied to any particular community or group. Alternatively, it is 'engaged', in that, technically ('through its formal quality') it stands over and against political rhetoric, propaganda, slogans and half-truths. Poetic forms assume political meanings in different ways and may be as much a mode of resistance (in Yeats's terms, an antithetical art) as a mode of conservation (to recall Longley's description of Mahon and himself as 'Two poetic conservatives'). This thesis argues that the ironic conscience, as it operates in Mahon's early poetry, constantly mediates between 'the drive towards poetic 'responsibility' to the political situation, and the desire for poetic 'freedom''. This is one of the key oppositions that it negotiates, most explicitly in poems like 'Rage for Order' and 'Edvard Munch' in *Lives*; 'The Last of the Fire Kings' and the title poem in *The Snow Party*; 'Courtyards in Delft' and 'The Hunt by Night' in *The Hunt by Night*. As we shall see, they highlight the poet's dialectical awareness which exploits the links between light and dark, order and chaos, barbarism and civility. In so doing, they challenge the stark oppositions underlying the politically charged polemics which framed readings of Mahon's poetry in the 1970s and 1980s as formalist *or* engaged, conservative *or* subversive.[101] They also enforce the fact that the politics of poetic form is a subtle and complex issue, as much a matter of fricatives and 'spiky consonants' (to echo W. R. Rodgers's 'Epilogue' to *The Character of Ireland*) as statements or manifestos.[102] Even the simplest details of language, minor technical matters, finely intertwine the aesthetic *and* the political, public *and* private concerns. Note the use of enjambement to foreground the poet's detached elevation in 'Rage for Order':

---

[100] Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), p. 13.

[101] The polemic extended well beyond Mahon's work, as evident in the martial metaphors which were frequently invoked in order to separate writers into opposed camps. Edna Longley's *Poetry in the Wars* (1986), with its controversial statement, 'Poetry and politics, like church and state, should be separated' (a position contested, as we have seen, by Field Day critics Deane and Paulin as well as Eagleton in his Field Day pamphlet), or W. J. Mc Cormack's *The Battle of the Books* (1986), with its chapter, 'Edna Longley and the Reaction from Ulster: Fighting or Writing?', are cases in point.

[102] 'I am Ulster, my people an abrupt people / Who like the spiky consonants in speech / And think the soft ones cissy; who dig / The k and t in orchestra, detect sin / In sinfollia, get a kick out of / Tin can, fricatives, fornication, staccato talk, / Anything that gives or takes attack, / Like Micks, Tagues, tinkers's gets, Vatican'. This extract (from the never-completed *The Character of Ireland*) is cited by Dawe in 'The Parochial Idyll: W. R. Rodgers', *Stray Dogs and Dark Horses* (Newry: Abbey Press, 2000), p. 139.

He is far
From his people,
And the fitful glare
Of his high window is as
Nothing to our scattered glass.

However, this detachment (as we shall see in Chapter Three) is undercut by the ambivalent phrase 'a dying art', which serves to blur the distinction between activist and poet. Like the loaded word 'invasion' in the opening lines of 'The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush' (*Poems 1962-1978*), it is rich in ambiguity or open to manifold interpretation.[103] Such linguistic self-consciousness is characteristic of Northern Irish poetry alert to a language at once native and foreign, always *pre-occupied* (to recall the title of Heaney's first volume of selected criticism) by traces of its referents, historical undercurrents or overtones.[104] It is a particular feature of the ironic conscience, underlying Mahon's revisions, choice of poetic forms (verse-letter, prose-poem, dramatic monologue, villanelle) and adaptation of such forms to accommodate local conditions, idioms, landscape, colour. To read his early poetry thus calls for a certain nuanced understanding of literary form. As Caplan explained:

> Instead of assigning stable values to poetic forms, we need the patience to trace the forms' shifting movements, as their political and aesthetic uses accommodate new imperatives and contexts. We must attend to the complications which make poetic forms fascinating.[105]

These complications are particularly evident in the verse-letter 'Beyond Howth Head' which, as we shall see in Chapter Three, adopts the socio-political element of British 1930s poetry (Auden and MacNeice) and contemporary American verse (notably the voice of Lowell's *Near the Ocean* (1967)) to 'new imperatives and contexts'. It very clearly undermines the argument that formalism in Mahon's early poetry implies conservatism or a reactionary escape from history. Rather, it illustrates how deftly the ironic conscience negotiates the opposition between poetic freedom and responsibility, adopting not only different verse-forms but different modes or voices. All of these voices, which operate as an

---

[103] 'The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush' is analysed in Chapter Five, pp.7-8. The word 'invasion', as we shall see, points to the ambiguous status of the North of Ireland in the United Kingdom (heightened by the poem's reference to Hong Kong).

[104] Heaney, *Preoccupations* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980).

[105] Caplan, *Questions of Possibility*: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 11. For Caplan, unnuanced models of literary form falsely assume a straightforward connection between verse-structure and politics. He cited William Carlos Williams's rejection of the sonnet as 'fascistic' as an extreme example (p.10), the term recalling Deane's association of a certain understanding of the aesthetic with the politics of Fascism.

extension or liberation of self, help to create a more fluid and mobile identity, a kind of virtuoso originality. As Kennelly expressed it:

> By removing the self from the centre of the poem, by opting for an indirect stance, by putting other poets and other 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.[106]

For the ironic conscience, indirection is as an imaginative resource. It liberates the displaced subject into multiple lives, overcoming uncertainty or the constraints of a more fixed identity ('a limited, assertive sense of self'). Positioning the lyric voice obliquely ('removing the self from the centre') affords greater facility to say things with wry subtlety ('cunning imaginative power' as opposed to 'aggressive statement'). Such subtlety is evident throughout Mahon's early poetry, accounting for its various modes, play of perspective and tone, 'scruples' or fine discriminations (to recall Edna Longley). As we shall see, it has little to do with emotional withdrawal, trying to achieve a 'winning expression' (Boland's term) or an aesthetic safe space (as Smith suggested). Rather, it reflects an urgent desire to engage with history, in all its complexity, ambivalence or contradiction.

[106] Kennelly, 'Derek Mahon's Humane Perspective', p. 151.

CHAPTER TWO

NIGHT-CROSSING (1968): THE IRONIC CONSCIENCE AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE OF DISPLACEMENT

2.1 The Cultural Context of *Night-Crossing*.

'Decades', as John Montague remarked, 'are untidy things', and the 1960s in the North of Ireland was no exception.[1] By 1963, loss of jobs in both agriculture and the textile industry contributed to unemployment which was running at almost 10 per cent. Belfast resembled the bleak provincial city of Brian Moore's novels, a writer who, like Mahon, had lived on the Antrim Road.[2] Its economic and artistic life was marked by a certain stagnancy or paralysis. A sense of deprivation overshadowed Mahon's teenage years in Glengormley, making his departure for Dublin in 1960 a vital release:

> But, at the age of eighteen or so, when I left home to go to Trinity, I wasn't just going to college; I was actually leaving one life altogether and stepping into another. Throughout my teens I had a sense of the immediate community – extended family, the neighbourhood and so on – but I felt that there was something terribly amiss and lacking and skewed about this whole carry-on. It seems a very insufficient community. The question in the back of my mind all the time was, Is this all? Is this it? Is this life? These people, this place? [3]

The discovery of a poetry-writing community in Dublin was liberating for him. Unlike Belfast, which viewed the arts with suspicion, Dublin was more receptive to literary 'characters', cultivating a certain bohemian charm.[4] It was a place in which Mahon felt at home, at least initially, Southern difference underwriting his existence (to adapt Philip Larkin's poem 'The Importance of Elsewhere').[5] Before long however he opted to leave,

---

[1] Cited by Brearton in 'Poetry of the 1960s: the "Northern Ireland Renaissance"', p. 95.

[2] In interview with Eve Patten in *Rhinoceros* 3 (1990), p. 82, Mahon pointed out this local connection. Three of his articles on the novelist appear in *Journalism*: 'Back of Beyond' (from the *Listener*, 1972), 'Webs of Artifice' (from the *New Review*, 1976) and 'A World of Signs' (from the *Irish Times*, 1988).

[3] Mahon, interview with Grennan, *In the Chair*, p. 123.

[4] As we shall see, an early version of 'In Belfast' (which appeared in *Icarus* in 1964) suggested that the city regarded poetry as 'fluent drivel'. In the *Rhinoceros* interview (p. 84), Mahon talked about 'Bohemian Dublin' still going on in 1960, recalling the story about Myles na Gopaleen, Patrick Kavanagh and Brendan Behan 'standing in the Bailey, pints in hand, lamenting the fact that all the old Dublin characters had died out'.

[5] Philip Larkin, 'The Importance of Elsewhere', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 104. Written in 1955, the poem refers to Larkin's period as a librarian in Belfast. It describes how being an outsider

prefiguring the mobility which marked his future life. He availed of an opportunity to go to Paris in the autumn of 1964, where he stayed at a hotel in the Latin Quarter (Heaney's description of Mahon as 'the Stephen Dedalus of Belfast' is all the more apt in this regard). Correspondence with Longley at the time reveals his frustration at having to queue to attend lectures at the Sorbonne (the conditions of students was one of the reasons for the 1968 uprising), so more time was spent reading and writing in cafés on the Left Bank.[6] There he cultivated his own debonair image. As Clark outlined: 'In his first letter from Paris, he made a point to tell Longley he had read Sartre's *Baudelaire* and Camus's *Mythe de Sisyphe* ('in French!') and that he had heard "a pistol shot in the jazz-club down the street" the night before'.[7] After returning to Dublin in the summer of 1965, he departed for Canada in the autumn where he worked for a term at the University of Western Ontario. Realising the academic life was not for him, he moved on to Cambridge, Massachusetts. After Canada, the latter seemed a much more attractive place, a bibliophile's dream, as he described it in a letter to the Longleys, 'full of misfits and odd-bods, wandering Irishmen, wandering Jews, Boston Anglophiles with imperfect BBC accents...'[8] As a haven of artistic creativity, it greatly appealed to his romantic spirit, typifying what he described later (in 'America Deserta', Section XVI of *The Yellow Book*) as 'an older America of the abrasive spirit, / *film noir*, real jazz and grown-up literate wit'.[9] However, it also left him a little bewildered, struggling to find his own poetic voice. As he stated in interview with Eamon Grennan, with whom he stayed during this period (mentioning Louis Asekoff, to whom 'The Snow Party', the title poem of Mahon's third volume, is dedicated):

> There was this enormous poetic energy in America at that time, and I was very conscious of it around Harvard Square. First of all through Louis Asekoff, whom I'd known at Trinity. The '60s, the protests, the war. A lot of it was very strange to me, of course, and I couldn't get it at all. I suppose my taste was very conservative, perhaps it still is. The other thing I was conscious of

---

in a 'foreign' city was enabling for him, unlike being at home in England where 'no elsewhere underwrites my existence'.

[6] Mahon spent a term at the Sorbonne as *auditeur libre* (free listener). As he stated in the *Rhinoceros* interview, p. 85: 'You queued up, you got a little ticket which said '*auditeur libre*', but of course you couldn't get in! There were always forty deep on the stairs. You couldn't get into any of the lectures. This was one of the reasons for the '68 Troubles. It wasn't really a political thing – the students were fed up with the conditions they had to deal with.'

[7] Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 30.

[8] Ibid., p. 32. The letter vividly captures the bohemian atmosphere, wryly continuing : '...lobotomized pot-smokers, good-natured bad poets, known Communists who can't get served in bars, and a red-bearded Scottish graduate of forty-plus who wears the kilt and rides a bicycle down Massachusetts Avenue at rush-hour, mad as a hatter. Most of the girls are beautiful'.

[9] Mahon, 'America Deserta', *The Yellow Book* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1997), p. 47.

> was the Harvard dimension: there were people about who had just a year or two previously been taking writing classes with Lowell. So there was a lot going on. The American poetic psyche was very active. But in a way I think I was lost. I was in a transitional phase. At the time it didn't seem transitional, it seemed terminal; but I was in a phase between being a Trinity student and being whatever I was going to be next. The only constant was not being too far away from poetry and from a literary environment.[10]

Cambridge was appealing and challenging at once, forcing Mahon to confront the limitations of his Anglo-Irish idiom and experiment with different verse forms. As at Trinity, the stimulus of a creative literary environment spurred him on. As well as poems in Harvard literary magazines and a reading both at the university and on local radio station, he produced the eight-poem pamphlet *Design for a Grecian Urn*, the title reflecting his regard for the well-wrought poem.[11] However, as a letter to Longley in 1966 revealed, he had his eye on another collection, provisionally entitled *Night-Train Journey*. It is interesting, not alone for the insight it offers on Mahon's revisions, or the intense, often combative collaboration between Northern writers noted by Clark, but for its preoccupation with a volume's formal integrity:

> Go through the poems one by one, commenting as you go. If you think there's anything I should scrap, say so, with reasons…I would be interested, too, in your comments on the collection as a whole – that is to say, on any sort of unity the things might possess apart from being all written by me. I'm not really in a position to judge. Does it make sense as a 'book' as well as a 'collection'?...Also, if you don't like the title, suggest alternatives.
>
> You will be pleased to find that 'Girls in their Seasons' has been allowed to stand after all, under the title 'Night-Train Journey'…You will notice that a stanza has been excised from 'An Unborn Child'...If you want to quarrel with me about it please do, but temperately. I don't think I could take another broadside like your last….'My Wicked Uncle' remains as I have written it. I am adamant. You will come to realise that I have done right….['Night Train's Journey's'] present form, which incidentally represents a reasonable compromise between the ur-version and the re-write of it that you abominated, should leave you fairly happy, I think.[12]

Such correspondence confirms Longley's observation that he and Mahon had been more critical of each other and 'more hurtful' than the Group ever was.[13] It also confirms the

---

[10] Mahon, *In the Chair*, p. 115. At the time, the Irish poet Eamon Grennan was teaching at Harvard.
[11] Mahon, *Design for a Grecian Urn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Erato Press, 1966).
[12] Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, p. 20.
[13] Longley, *Tuppenny Stung*, p. 41.

creative exchange between them on several poems, in this case 'Night-Train Journey' (or 'Girls in their Seasons', the original title retained in *Night-Crossing*). During his time in America, Mahon stayed in close contact with friends in Ireland, Longley in particular, partly to allay his sense of being 'lost' as well as to maintain a foothold in the local literary scene. His Eric Gregory Award in 1965 ensured a measure of publicity in both Irish and English media. *The Northern Review* carried a publicity photograph of Longley and himself suitably intent on a copy of Larkin's *The Less Deceived* (Longley himself had previously won this award, his telegram to Mahon at the time, 'Checkmate Derek', highlighting their poetic rivalry).[14] Besides 'Girls in their Seasons', Mahon sent Longley copies of several poems, including 'The Poets Lie Where They Fell', with its reference to their time in digs together, and eventually the completed draft of *Night-Crossing*. Thus, well before the volume's publication by Oxford University Press in 1968, his poems had an audience in Belfast. As Clark outlined, Mahon's name appeared so frequently 'on the programmes of Belfast readings and in the pages of the local magazines that one could be forgiven for thinking he never left'.[15]

The creative environment Mahon discovered in Cambridge, Massachusetts had an unlikely counterpart in Belfast, as the deprivation of the early 1960s gave way to a literary 'renaissance' which had links, as we have seen, with both Dublin and London. The Belfast Festival in 1965 even caught the attention of the *Observer* which noted, in a promotional article that autumn, the 'cultural efflorescence' the Festival brought to the city.[16] Such publicity indicates how the idea of a poetic renewal, from the mid-sixties onwards, began to take shape in the pages of newspapers and other Irish and English journals or periodicals. Adopting the terms of the *Observer*, Longley, in *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster* (1971), spoke of the 'artistic efflorescence' that preceded the political explosion.[17] Creative energies released across the world, partly in response to pop music, cinema and an increasingly politicised youth culture – as witnessed first-hand by Mahon in America in response to the Vietnam War, and noted by him in Paris in relation to student frustration – impacted upon the region. By the close of the decade, it was the site of an intense collaboration or poetic exchange between different artists. As Dawe pointed out:

---

[14] Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 74. The awards were for £268 each, a substantial sum at the time.
[15] Ibid., p. 80.
[16] Ibid., p. 74.
[17] Longley (ed.), *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster* (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1971), p. 8.

> Van Morrison's first major album, *Astral Weeks*, appeared in 1968, the same year as Derek Mahon's first collection, *Night-Crossing*. Clustered around that year too, one can identify a new and powerful generation of Irish poets emerging out of the post-war period: Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), *Door into the Dark* (1969); Michael Longley, *No Continuing City* (1969) with its 'Words for Jazz Perhaps' updating Yeats; James Simmons, *Late But in Earnest* (1967) and *In the Wilderness* (1969); fellow-east Belfastman Stewart Parker, *The Casualty's Meditation* (1966), *Maw* (1968) (and whose 'High Pop' column in *The Irish Times* hailed Morrison's albums with bright intelligence and insight)...[18]

Reference to Van Morrison stressed the American influence, for the musician was inspired by rock, rhythm and blues as well as the Beat Generation of the Fifties and early Sixties, notably Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Far from being provincial, Northern writers looked abroad for creative inspiration, drawing upon music, film and literary sources: 'Whatever we read was more likely to come from America and England than from Ireland and it had to compete with *NME* [*New Musical Express*] and *Melody Maker*'.[19] In this context, the poems in *Night-Crossing* about Marilyn Monroe ('Death of a Film-Star') and the U.S. filmmaker Robert Flaherty are more easily understood.[20] Clearly, there was a sense of renewal or creative possibility in the air, all the more tangible given the immediate success of Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), which, for a first volume, received extraordinary critical acclaim both at home and abroad (it won the Somerset Maugham Award and the Geoffrey Faber Prize). Such success undoubtedly acted as a spur to aspiring artists, extending far beyond the reach of Hobsbaum's Belfast Group. Padraic Fiacc's article, 'Ulster Happening' (1969), cited thirty-seven contemporary Northern Irish writers.[21] The *Honest Ulsterman* captured the buoyant mood in May 1968 in billing its first issue as a 'monthly handbook for revolution' (a slogan later dropped), debating among other things 'Love, Exile, Humanism, Hashish, Courage, History [and] Louis MacNeice...'[22] The reference to MacNeice highlighted his increasing significance for Northern poets, Mahon in particular as we shall see in relation to *Night-Crossing*.

---

[18] Dawe, *The Rest is History* (Belfast: Abbey Press, 1998), pp. 57-8.
[19] Ibid., p. 94.
[20] 'Epitaph for Robert Flaherty', *Night-Crossing*, p. 29. The latter was widely regarded as the pioneer of documentary film, whose works included *Man of Aran* (1934), *The Land* (1942) and *Louisiana Story* (1948).
[21] Fiacc, 'Ulster Happening', *Hibernia*, 14 February 1969, p. 18.
[22] Simmons, 'First Steps in Revolution', *Honest Ulsterman*, 1 (1968), p. 3. After the outbreak of violence, the sub-title was removed at the request of the police, being deemed too incendiary (an editorial explaining that D. H. Lawrence's revolution had been intended).

Simmons's remarks in the editorial of the *Honest Ulsterman* in June 1968 partially explained the journal's title: 'It is a literary magazine; but literature starts and finishes with men talking to men, and the most important thing for a man talking to men is to be honest'.[23] They found an echo in Mahon's subsequent statement in 'Poetry and Northern Ireland' (1970) about 'people talking to each other, with honest subtlety'. Given the sectarian divisions which had erupted in the province, the repeated stress on honesty and dialogue may be read as an acknowledgement of the challenges which confronted artists and people alike. By the close of the 1960s, poetic renaissance was shadowed by political explosion. The setting up of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in February 1967 highlighted underlying social tensions, particularly in relation to gerrymandering or discrimination in housing and employment. The brutal suppression of a Civil Rights march in Derry (or Londonderry, according to its seventeenth century colonial title) on 5 October 1968 by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), led to violent clashes in the Bogside area. Widespread media coverage enforced the message that something was rotten in the state of Northern Ireland. Two days of rioting ensued, followed by further clashes over the next few weeks, resulting in a souring of community relations between Catholics and Protestants. A government reform package was introduced in November to try and ensure fair allocation of jobs and housing and an end to the gerrymandering of electoral areas. While such reforms went some way towards easing Catholics' sense of grievance, they also evoked hostility in certain Protestant circles. In the context of this communal tension, traditional summer parades and marches, particularly in Derry and Belfast, served only to aggravate the risk of sectarian conflict. As the Minister of Home Affairs, William Craig, stated in December 1968:

> It has been by the grace of God that civil war has not already been created in Northern Ireland. The temperature is at a boiling-point that I have never known in my lifetime. One of these days one of these marches is going to get a massive reaction from the population. Ordinary decent people have been at boiling-point for some time.[24]

His sense of apprehension was tragically borne out over the course of the following years, the untidiness of decades all the more obvious in the case of Northern Ireland in the sixties. A poetic renewal which launched the career of a number of technically gifted writers,

---

[23] Simmons, *Honest Ulsterman*, 2 (1968), p. 2. As outlined in the Introduction, Mahon entitled his article on Hewitt 'An Honest Ulsterman', neatly alluding to the magazine.

[24] This quotation, taken from *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, is cited in Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-1999* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999), p. 8.

making Belfast, as Edna Longley put it, 'Irish poetry's strangest port of call', came to be overshadowed by the awful tragedy of violence.[25] The latter, as we have seen, had huge implications for literary-critical debate, greatly influencing the reception of Mahon's early poetry. The title *Night-Crossing*, which had its origins in the night-train journey of 'Girls in their Seasons' as well as the mail-boat crossing of the Irish sea (a journey certainly undertaken by Mahon in a time preceding the era of cheap flights), might on another level evoke the province's painful transition from one decade to another, its long day's journey into night. In the context of further atrocities, the prospect of 'plunging into the dark for ever' ('Girls in their Seasons') appeared a distinct possibility.

2.2 The Ironic Conscience and the Autobiographical Narrative of Displacement.

The selection of *Night-Crossing* as the Poetry Book Society Choice for autumn 1968 enhanced Mahon's growing reputation, justifying the blurb by Oxford University Press that, at twenty-six, he 'has his own voice and a singing line rare in contemporary poetry'. In a statement to mark the occasion, Mahon picked up on a particular review by a Dublin editor which described his work as largely concerned with the 'dispossessed':

> I had never really thought about it in these terms, but I see what he meant. Owing, perhaps, to the peculiar circumstances of life in Northern Ireland, where I was born, brought up, and now live, I have always felt something that might be described as 'dispossession' – a cultural dislocation, a nostalgic (and slightly guilty) independence of community, and a resulting self-consciousness. This experience is both tragic and potentially comic.[26]

These remarks shed light on the critical issue of displacement at the core of the ironic conscience. They account for Mahon's sense of himself as an outsider, of never quite belonging or being fully at home, resulting in what he termed 'a nostalgic (and slightly guilty) independence of community'. Obviously, the theme figured strongly in his awareness, for it surfaced in two key articles he wrote during this period. In 'Poetry in Northern Ireland' (1970), he spoke of a dissociated sensibility, which he deemed an inevitable part of the Northern poet's industrial heritage (surrounded by 'what Ferlinghetti

[25] Edna Longley, cited by Clark in *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 14.
[26] Mahon, cited in Clare Brown & Don Paterson (eds.), *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their own Words* (London: Picador, 2003), p. 172.

called "the hollering monsters of the imagination of disaster"').[27] In the introduction to *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* (1972), he referred to the Northern poet's 'inherited duality of cultural reference' ('Protestant products of an English educational system, with little or no knowledge of the Irish language'), contrasting it with 'the parochial self-content' of poets in the South.[28] Whereas Catholic poets like Heaney and Montague had an established tradition from which to write or a sense of place with its own mythology and symbolism built into it, he felt somewhat displaced, torn between two cultures while struggling to find a foothold in either.

This cultural dislocation is reflected in the actual title *Night-Crossing*, which suggests a permanently transitional identity split between here and elsewhere. Hence, the journey motif which runs through the volume, evident in poems like 'Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc' and 'Day Trip to Donegal'. In addition, as Edna Longley noted, five consecutive poems ('Canadian Pacific', 'Recalling Aran', 'Epitaph for Robert Flaherty', 'April on Toronto Island' and 'As God is my Judge') enforce a transatlantic connection.[29] 'Canadian Pacific' links the artistic quest with 'the wild geese', or non-conformist forefathers, who emigrated to North America. The resonant epiphany of its final lines (testimony to Yeats's influence) captures the 'hunger' at the heart of their displacement:

> ....They will not have heard
> The wild geese flying south over the lakes
> While the lakes harden beyond grief and anger-
> The eyes fanatical, rigid the soft necks,
> The great wings sighing with a nameless hunger.[30]

This journey motif is also reflected in several poems which focus on the restlessness of individual artists. De Quincey at eighteen followed 'the dark roads of abandon' to London ('De Quincey in Later Life'); Flaherty 'travelled north once more' ('Epitaph for Robert Flaherty'), while Van Gogh moved south, away from the 'caged Belgian miners' towards the

---

[27] 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', *Twentieth Century Studies*, No. 4 (Nov. 1970), p. 92. In this article Mahon applied the terms 'diffuseness' and 'dissociation' to *Night-Crossing* and to the poetry of Simmons and Longley.

[28] Mahon, Introduction to *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry*, p. 14. In interview with Brown (1985), p. 12, Mahon dismissed this introduction as 'a terrible piece of hackwork'.

[29] Edna Longley, '"Atlantic's Premises": American Influences on Northern Irish Poetry in the 1960s', in *Poetry and Posterity* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe), p. 267. These poems evoked, for her, 'a counterpoint between transatlantic capitalism and Irish western islands'.

[30] As Vona Groarke noted in *Reading the Future*, p. 167, Mahon 'said he'd need a frontal lobotomy to get the Yeatsian line out of his head'. Several of Mahon's displaced artists, as we shall see, are driven by 'hunger' or a longing for alternative worlds elsewhere.

'golden light' ('Van Gogh among the Miners'). It is fitting then that 'Girls in their Seasons', the opening poem of *Night-Crossing*, also uses the metaphor of a journey to highlight creative unrest. Here the poet-speaker addresses the 'ghosts' of former lovers (echoing Longley's 'No Continuing City') as the train lunges north:

> Their ghosts go with me as I hurtle north
> Into the night,
> Gathering momentum, age,
> Know-how, experience (I travel light) –
> Girls, you are welcome to my luggage
> For what it is worth.
>
> No earthly schedule can predict
> Accurately our several destinations.
> All we can do is wash and dress
> And keep ourselves intact.
> Besides which, this is an express
> And passes all the stations.[31]

These stanzas enforce the idea of the artist as outsider on the move, the lack of any 'earthly schedule' suggesting a more bohemian lifestyle played out on the unpredictable edge. In terms of the volume itself, 'our several destinations' comes to include Aran, Angers, Arles, Belgium, Brittany, Donegal, Holland, London, Paris, Canada and North America. In terms of Mahon's own life, it embraces London, Dublin and New York as well France and Italy (where he enjoyed brief sojourns). 'Girls in their Seasons' thus sketches in miniature the displacement of the ironic conscience, the parenthetical 'I travel light' encapsulating its preference for the mobility of 'thistledown' or 'a twig in a stream' over any form of rootedness.[32] The concluding stanza sets this peripatetic awareness against 'the flinty chink of the Orion and the Plough', prefiguring the cosmic perspective of later poems like 'The Globe in North Carolina' (*The Hunt by Night*).

The origins of this sense of displacement can be traced in the two key poems, 'In Belfast' and 'Glengormley'. Taken together, they provide an autobiographical narrative for the ironic conscience, highlighting its underlying uncertainty in relation to identity and place. In this regard, they establish the terms of Mahon's early poetry, torn between here and elsewhere, solitude and community, the desire to belong and the hankering after a more alternative lifestyle. Home is less a supportive space than a problematic site of alienation, absence or

---

[31] Longley's 'No Continuing City' is the title poem of his first volume, published the year after *Night-Crossing* (1968). Its journey through time and space is linked with a series of sexual encounters.

[32] Mahon's use of these terms to counter Hewitt's prescription of rootedness for the Ulster poet is outlined in the Introduction, p. 15.

paralysis. It offers few of the consolations customarily associated with it in Irish poetry, inducing rather a state of internal division or exile. A certain desperation can be detected in both poems as Mahon's quarrel with self intensifies into a critique of Northern Irish culture, touching on complex issues of Protestant identity. We will analyse each in detail before examining the enabling influence of MacNeice in *Night-Crossing*.

2.2.1 'In Belfast'.

An early version of 'In Belfast', subsequently called 'The Spring Vacation', had appeared in *Icarus*, while Mahon was a student in Trinity. As the revised title suggests, the poem's occasion is the poet's return to Belfast between university terms, an experience which gave rise to conflicting feelings.[33] The opening phrase ('walking among my own') may be read as an attempt to distinguish 'In Belfast' from MacNeice's 'Belfast', enforcing Mahon's impression that MacNeice 'didn't, by class or religious background, 'belong to the people'':

> Walking among my own this windy morning
> In a tide of sunlight between shower and shower,
> I resume my old conspiracy with the wet
> Stone and the unwieldy images of the squinting heart.
> Once more, as before, I remember not to forget. [34]

However, the identification is strained by the self-consciousness of the final line which highlights the negative impact of home on the psyche. The rhythm marvellously evokes the impression of a time warp which binds one in emotional knots, a case of *plus ça change, plus c'est la mème chose*. 'Once more, as before' (recalling 'my old conspiracy') suggests old, self-protective habits die hard, constraining any real freedom of response. Better inure oneself to expectations or shut the valves of attention like 'Stone' (to adapt Emily Dickinson), rather than rebel against 'the unwieldy images of the squinting heart'.[35] A certain fatalism or resignation at such tribal complicity is offset only by the wry humour of remembering 'not to forget'. The use of what Hewitt termed, 'that loaded word, / Remember' (in connection with the dead), is finely measured and deftly undermined in a

---

[33] The poem has been successively titled 'Poem in Belfast' in *Twelve Poems* (Belfast: Queen's University, 1965); 'In Belfast' in *Night-Crossing*; 'The Spring Vacation' in *Poems 1962-1978* (where it is dedicated to Longley); 'Spring in Belfast' in *Collected Poems* (1999).

[34] 'MacNeice in Ireland and England', *Journalism*, p. 25. The essay was originally published in Terence Brown & Alec Reid (eds.), *Time was Away* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974).

[35] Dickinson's phrase is from 'The Soul selects her own Society '. It is the 'wet / Stone' that is at the foreground of Mahon's attention in the opening stanza.

typical Mahon word-play.[36] The following stanzas probe this paralysis a little more deeply, shifting the focus from the personal to the communal conspiracy, as Mahon broaches the issue of religion:

> There is a perverse pride in being on the side
> Of the fallen angels and refusing to get up.
> 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 -
>
> But yield instead to the humorous formulae,
> The spurious mystery in the knowing nod.
> Or we keep sullen silence in light and shade,
> Rehearsing our astute salvations under
> The cold gaze of a sanctimonious God.

These stanzas set up an opposition between the fallen angels who defy divine authority and those who 'yield' in fearful piety to its prescriptions. The speaker appears to identify, at least in part, with the 'perverse pride' of the rebellious, and the swagger of their insistent *non serviam*. For the following lines, with their reference to *all* being 'saved', as Edna Longley suggested, turn 'Protestant orthodoxy, Protestant conscience, against itself, to outline a very different kind of salvation to that offered by evangelism'.[37] It has little to do with the 'elect' of Calvinist theology or the 'saved' of mission-hall homiletics, and much to do with the enlightenment of the liberal imagination. Its non-denominational salvation signifies freedom from the shackles of fear, guilt and religious repression. Hence, the sneaking regard for the pride of the fallen which refuses to live in fearful service or defer to any external authority. However, the shift from the first person singular in the opening stanza ('I resume...I remember') to the plural 'We', suggests Mahon acknowledges his own complicity in that social and religious conformity which cedes independence of spirit to a distorted image of divinity ('The cold gaze of a sanctimonious God'). Here the poem taps some of MacNeice's scepticism towards religious orthodoxies in 'Belfast':

> In the porch of the chapel before the garish Virgin
> A shawled factory-woman as if shipwrecked there
> Lies a bunch of limbs glimpsed in the cave of gloom
> By us who walk in the street so buoyantly and glib.[38]

---

[36] Hewitt, 'Neither an Elegy Nor a Manifesto', in Ormsby (ed.), *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1991), p. 188: 'Bear in mind these dead: / I can find no plainer words. / I dare not risk using / that loaded word, Remember'.

[37] Edna Longley, 'The Writer and Belfast', in Maurice Harmon (ed.), *The Irish Writer and the City, Irish Literary Studies* 18 (1984), p. 83. The hill refers to Cave Hill, one of the landmarks of Belfast, which Mahon used to enjoy climbing as a youngster (Scammell interview, p. 4).

[38] MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, edited by E. R. Dodds (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), p. 17.

The tone of 'In Belfast', however, is anything but buoyant and glib, resisting the perspective of a detached outsider. It acknowledges instead the complex and problematic reality of home - what Heaney termed, 'the weary twisted emotions that are rolled like a ball of hooks and sinkers in the heart' – and how it triggers a whole set of conditioned responses.[39] 'The humorous formulae', as a strategic evasion of embarrassment or self-consciousness, underline the power of the collective and the pressure to comply. Reference to 'the spurious mystery' and the 'sullen' (not solemn) silence, which recalls MacNeice's 'free speech nipped in the bud' (*Autumn Journal*), enforce the impression of a joyless piety which, in the endless rehearsal of its 'astute salvations', is a parody of religious passion. The 'knowing nod' ('knowing' picking up 'astute' and 'nod' playing off 'squinting' in stanza one) suggests a degree of calculation in the communal conspiracy, a deliberate option for sham which, in turn, is projected onto a 'sanctimonious' deity. It also highlights the subtle codes embedded in the social fabric of Northern Irish life, designed to avoid confrontation or mask sectarian tensions. Such codes underlie the oblique perspectives of Mahon's early poetry and, indeed, those of other Northern poets. In 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', Heaney viewed such codes as the art of being 'Expertly civil tongued with civil neighbours', only to expose the sinister reality:

> O land of password, handgrip, wink and nod,
> Of open minds as open as a trap,
> Where tongues lie coiled, as under flames lie wicks,
> Where half of us, as in a wooden horse
> Were cabin'd and confined like wily Greeks,
> Besieged within the siege, whispering morse.[40]

This darker reality is reflected in Mahon's revision of 'the spurious mystery in the knowing nod' to 'the hidden menace in the knowing nod' in *Poems 1962-1978*. 'In Belfast' thus takes a forensic look at a certain mindset for which religion as a 'cave of gloom' is a catalyst for distorted vision, a neurotic inability to confront the reality of how things actually are. As Edna Longley indicated, it profoundly concentrates the 'problem' of Belfast, drawing together 'all that sense of the city as hell or purgatory, as a manifestation of unadmitted evil'.[41] The final stanza returns to the perspective of the personal, offering a fascinating insight into the city-in-the-mind as a source of division or internal exile:

> One part of my mind must learn to know its place –

---

[39] Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 30.
[40] Heaney, *North* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp. 57-60.
[41] Edna Longley, 'The Writer and Belfast', p. 85.

> 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 than my casual pity.

Here we see the early origins of the displacement of the ironic conscience, torn between solitude and community, between the desire to belong and the need to remain apart. A psychic split is evident which reflects the initial opposition between those who yield and those who rebel. While one part of the mind 'must learn to know its place', another chooses freedom. It resists the brutalising effects of home, the subtle conspiracies of denial or silence which mark the city as 'desperate'. For the ironic conscience, as we have seen, free-floating independence is preferable to rootedness. Knowing one's place is more a crippling inhibition than a source of strength particularly when, as William A. Wilson put it, 'the obligations of fellowship shade into emotional usury'.[42] The repetition of 'interest', in conjunction with the pivotally accentuated 'Exact', makes engagement appear like 'the continuing cost of servicing a debt'.[43] The financial metaphor adds a further twist to 'this desperate city', echoing MacNeice's sense of its culture as 'built upon profit'.[44] It imbues the 'astute' religiosity of stanza three with that acquisitive mentality memorably captured by Yeats in the line, 'For men were born to pray and save' ('September 1913'). In this context, rhyming 'city' with 'pity' seems apt, because it underlines the sense of desperation behind the supposedly 'casual interest'. This desperation is even more obvious in the earlier version of the final stanza in *Icarus*, which formulated with particular bluntness the insidious pressure to conform:

> 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.[45]

This version sees the city banish creative expression to some 'more glib environment' outside the industrial pale ('glib' echoing MacNeice's 'buoyantly and glib'). Assessing the whys and wherefores of existence is tantamount to apostasy, a blatant refusal to accept one's place in the local scheme. The poetic, so far removed from the daily grind, is dismissed with

---

[42] William A. Wilson, 'A Theoptic Eye: Derek Mahon's *The Hunt by Night*', *Eire-Ireland*, 25, 4 (1990), p. 124.
[43] Kathleen Shields, 'Derek Mahon's Poetry of Belonging', *Irish University Review,* Derek Mahon Special Number, 24, 1 (1994), p. 71.
[44] 'A city build upon mud; / A culture built upon profit; / Free speech nipped in the bud, / The minority always guilty' (*Autumn Journal*, Section XVI).
[45] Mahon, 'In Belfast', *Icarus*, 42 (March 1964), p. 31.

puritan disdain. The final lines, which 'dig' the abruptness of those 'spiky consonants' (to recall Rodgers' 'Epilogue' to *The Character of Ireland*), are an affront to every form of 'fluent drivel'.[46] Rhyming 'rivet' with 'live it' hammers home the reality of Belfast as the obverse of poetry, the domain of practicality or 'the hard man'. Brendan Hamill succinctly captured its sense of menace:

> After some years in London, I thought Belfast was a quiet city – full of sullen repressed raw energy and clotted with hard men who asked you with fierce eyes 'Who the fuck do you think you're lukin at?' – to which the reply was a derisory 'Not much', and then you ran for dear life.[47]

It is not surprising then that the key phrase 'know your place' finds an echo in the work of other Northern poets. Muldoon entitled his first pamphlet *Knowing my Place* (1971), while the speaker in Heaney's *Station Island* (1984) despised his own connivance in the communal system: 'I hate how quick I was to know my place. / I hate where I was born, hate everything / That made me biddable and unforthcoming'.[48] The latter phrase mirrors the conflicting response to local expectations in 'In Belfast', with its mix of defiance and complicity, either through humour or silence. The repeated 'hate' in turn echoes its quiet desperation or visceral reaction against the pressure to 'know your place'.

'In Belfast' thus offers an autobiographical narrative on the displacement of the ironic conscience. It highlights Mahon's sense of having been initiated into the wrong tribe and taught the wrong language or socio-cultural codes (to recall Rorty's terms, as outlined in the Introduction). The final 'should' ('Should engage more than my casual interest'), which also appears, as we shall see, in 'Glengormley' ('I should rather praise'), illustrates his ambivalence to any form of rootedness or belonging (it is a signature of the ironic conscience which thrives on ambiguity). Alongside other words like *could*, *might* and *perhaps*, it operates in the space between certainties. Here it simultaneously acknowledges and resists the claims of community ('know you place'), reflecting Mahon's preference for mobility over fixity. While one part of the mind 'must learn to know its place', another is always elsewhere. It floats free of any group, relishing the free agency or in-between existence of the outsider.

---

[46] Rodgers's poem is mentioned in Chapter One, p. 56.
[47] Hamill, 'The Troubles he's seen: Fiacc and Belfast 1967', *Krino*, No. 18, 1995, p. 27.
[48] Muldoon, *Knowing my Place* (Portrush: Ulsterman Publications, 1971). Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p. 85.

2.2.2 'Glengormley'.

Like 'In Belfast', 'Glengormley' also sheds light on the displacement of the ironic conscience. Its position as the opening poem of *Poems 1962-78* (1979) and *Selected Poems (1991)* highlights its significance in the Mahon canon. As he expressed it:

> I was born in Belfast in 1941 and brought up there off the Antrim Road, on the north side of the city. My home turf stretched from the Cavehill Road to the Shore Road, from Carlisle Circus to Glengormley. Very mixed part of the town, from working class to upper middle, both sides of the religious divide.[49]

The poem also enforces his conviction that the Protestant suburbs of Belfast are legitimate ground for poetry and not 'the final anathema for the traditional Irish imagination'.[50] Its dedication to Fiacc is notable in this regard, for Fiacc (who had been close to Padraic Colum) was 'a very real link between the lost world of the Revival and the disintegrating world of Belfast'.[51] Having lived in Manhattan (as Mahon himself did later), he returned to Belfast in the 1950s, to the suburbs of Glengormley. His chequered history and charismatic, somewhat eccentric, personality influenced a number of aspiring writers. Like 'a man dipped in hazel varnish who dried out unevenly', as Hamill remarked, he was 'closer in spirit to the air and fire world of the young Derek Mahon' than the earthiness of early Heaney.[52] Dawe, in particular, singled him out as a highly enabling influence:

> When I met Fiacc I found a guy who had a sense of the Modernist aesthetic; he had read and absorbed people like Beckett so there was this edginess and fragmentation and disruption, the breaking down of formal English and its shapes....Fiacc made poems out of the landscape in which I was literally walking and that authorizing of the landscape was extremely important for me at that time in the early 1970s. Reading his early poems, like 'By the Black Stream', which is about a Belfast man being caught in the half-light of the moon, floored me. There is also an extraordinary irony and self-mockery in Fiacc whereby he deconstructs the whole notion of 'the poet' and the pretentiousness that goes with that title.[53]

---

[49] Mahon, interview with Scammell, p. 4.
[50] Mahon, interview with Cooke, p. 10.
[51] Dawe, *The Rest is History*, p. 100. He described Fiacc's writing as 'the lasting testament to the human spirit that kept Belfast from turning into Sarajevo', bridging the link between poetry and violence (p. 102).
[52] Hamill, 'The Troubles he's seen: Fiacc and Belfast 1967' (*Krino*, No. 18, 1995), p. 31. Here he alludes to the Belfast Festival Publication *In Their Element: a selection of poems by Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon* (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1977), which included in its introduction Longley's remarks in an essay on Ulster Poetry in *Causeway*: 'Seamus Heaney's talent complements interestingly that of Derek Mahon. Since both refer frequently in their work to the four elements, a comparison might be pursued by granting Heaney water and earth, Mahon fire and air'.
[53] Dawe, *In the Chair*, p. 200.

For Mahon, Fiacc's validation of the Northern Irish landscape of post-war growth, new housing estates and technological mod cons, was equally important. Likewise, his interest in Beckett and French writers like Rimbaud (a central figure in *The Hunt by Night*) was also greatly appealing.[54] However, just as Fiacc's *By the Back Stream* (1969) was no eulogy of Belfast, depicting a bleak, sectarian and violent town (what he dubbed 'Hellfast'), so Mahon's poem is no paean to suburban life.[55] Rather it is charged with tensions as it probes beneath the façade of civility. In this regard, 'Glengormley' is not unlike MacNeice's 'Carrickfergus' which also highlighted underlying conflicts:

> Wonders are many and none is more wonderful than man
> Who has tamed the terrier, trimmed the hedge
> And grasped the principle of the watering can.
> Clothes-pegs litter the window-ledge
> And the long ships lie in clover. Washing lines
> Shake out white linen over the chalk thanes.
>
> Now we are safe from monsters, and the giants
> Who tore up sods twelve miles by six
> And hurled them out to sea to become islands
> Can worry us no more. The sticks
> And stones that once broke bones will not now harm
> A generation of such sense and charm.[56]

The opening line, taken from the Chorus of Sophocles's *Antigone*, invites 'an ironical acceptance of the apotheosis of twentieth-century man', whose timid pleasures ('tamed' and 'trimmed') are in stark contrast to the violent struggles ('tore' and 'hurled') of myth and history.[57] In the safety of this 'new era' of industrial growth and prosperity, unruly monsters and giants are replaced by the domesticated terrier. However, an underlying insecurity registers in the metrically emphatic 'Now', which marks the opening of the second and third stanzas ('Now we are safe from monsters…Only words hurt us now'). It surfaces also in the

---

[54] In interview, Fiacc spoke of an encounter on board a ship leaving New York for Ireland in 1946 (in order to avoid having to enlist in the American army): 'I boarded a Swedish liner though, the Gripsholm, and got to the far end of the boat to get away from everybody waving bye-bye to The Statue of Liberty. I met this woman who lived in a studio in Paris that Verlaine and Rimbaud had lived in – they were both lovers and I loved Rimbaud – so I didn't need to be down the far end of the boat when I could talk Rimbaud with her' (*In the Chair*, p. 35).

[55] Fiacc, *In the Chair*, p. 39.

[56] In MacNeice's 'Carrickfergus', the tensions revolve around class ('I was the rector's son, born to the anglican order / Banned for ever from the candles of the Irish poor'); ethnicity (the clash between 'The Scotch Quarter' with its 'line of residential houses' and 'the Irish Quarter' which was 'a slum for the blind and halt'); and domicile (the vast distance between the 'puppet world' of boarding school in Dorset and 'the mill girls, the smell of porter' in the town) – to adopt the terms of Edna Longley's analysis of MacNeice's outsiderhood in 'Extreme Religion of Art', p. 287.

[57] D. E. S. Maxwell, 'Contemporary Poetry in the North of Ireland' in Douglas Dunn (ed.), *Two Decades of Irish Writing* (London: Carcanet, 1975) p. 180.

phrase 'will not now harm' at the close of stanza two. All is not quite as charming as it seems in this archetypal Belfast suburb with its clothes pegs, washing lines, watering cans and ships 'in clover'.[58] The grudging acceptance of belonging at the close suggests that material possessions are inadequate compensation for the loss of, what Brown termed, 'Ulster's prehistoric titanism':

> Only words hurt us now. No saint or hero,
> Landing at night from the conspiring seas,
> Brings dangerous tokens to the new era –
> Their sad names linger in the histories.
> The unreconciled, in their metaphysical pain,
> Strangle on lamp-posts in the dawn rain
>
> And much dies with them. I should rather praise
> A worldly time under this worldly sky –
> The terrier-taming, garden-watering days
> Those heroes pictured as they struggled through
> The quick noose of their finite being. By
> Necessity, if not choice, I live here too.[59]

Echoes of Yeats's 'September 1913' can be heard in the reference to 'those heroes' who 'struggled through / The quick noose of their finite being'. *Was it for this*, the poem asks, that all the blood of Ulster's violent, prehistoric past was shed? The anomie of 'terrier-taming, garden-watering days' seems the obverse of artistic passion. Mention of Nerval (a key influence in *The Snow Party*) who, in his 'metaphysical pain', hanged himself from a streetlight with a length of chain, suggests that Mahon may be more than a little 'unreconciled' with his surroundings.[60] As Stewart pointed out, one of the poem's many ironies is the fact that, for Mahon, 'metaphysical unease' is precisely the source of 'poetry of lasting value'.[61] This explains the underlying ambivalence in 'Glengormley', or the grudging praise for a 'sense and charm' that is devoid of extremities, such as lyrical madness (the hysteria of a *poète maudit*) or heroic passion (Yeats's 'delirium of the brave'). Cosseted

---

[58] Given the poem's dating before the Troubles, few lines can have proven so brutally ironic as 'Now we are safe from monsters' or 'Only words hurt us now'. It highlights art's capacity to penetrate communal neurosis, exposing the sectarian tensions ('dangerous tokens') lurking beneath the civil façade. In this context, the poem may be read as 'a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community', to cite Frederic Jameson's remark (in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 70.), presaging the whole damned-up tragedy of violence in the North of Ireland.

[59] Brown's phrase is from *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975), p. 193.

[60] Kendall, in '"Leavetakings and Homecomings": Derek Mahon's Belfast', *Eire-Ireland*, 29, 4, p. 102, specifies Nerval as one of the unreconciled who hanged himself. 'Strangle' (as in 'Strangle on lamp-posts in the dawn rain') is revised to 'dangle' in subsequent volumes.

[61] Stewart, '"Solving Ambiguity": The Secular Mysticism of Derek Mahon', p. 63. In his Introduction to *The Sphere Book of Irish Poetry* (p. 12), Mahon spoke of 'the metaphysical unease in which all poetry of lasting value has its source'.

suburbia is no site for saints or heroes who live on the dangerous edge. Yet their 'sad names' which 'linger in the histories' exert more hold on the speaker than the present generation, for all its resourcefulness, sense of order or safety. The repetition of 'worldly', which follows the tentative gesture of praise, signals distaste for the stultifying uniformity of the new materialism. The contrast between past and present is enforced in the language of the final stanza, where the drab and unimaginative 'A worldly time under this worldly sky' pales beside the striking imagery of 'struggled through / The quick noose of their finite being'.

The key phrase 'I should rather praise' sounds the signature note of ambiguity as once again the ironic conscience simultaneously admits and resists the claims of this 'worldly' place. The faltering final statement ('By / Necessity, if not choice, I live here too') seems a little resentful at the prospect of living with a 'terrier-taming' whimper rather than a more heroic bang. Its abrupt, staccato edge oscillates between defiant resolve and grim resignation in the face of compulsion. The element of choice, introduced conditionally in opposition to necessity, suggests the *living here* may well be provisional, staving off the attachment implied in a phrase like 'I belong here too'. In this sense, the conclusion captures the displacement of the ironic conscience which, as Brown memorably stated, is 'perhaps most in exile when actually at home.'[62]

'Glengormley' thus offers another angle on the displacement of the ironic conscience. The sense of alienation at home is what compels Mahon not so much to know his place as to look beyond it, to explore alternative horizons elsewhere. As the early poem, 'An Irishman in London' (published in *Icarus* in 1964) put it: 'Now I am truly rootless, having outstripped / The streets of home. A shipyard siren / Mourns to the stony North'.[63] 'Glengormley' also reflects this need to outstrip the streets of home, only in this instance they are not the 'echoing back-streets of this desperate city' ('In Belfast') but the enclosed spaces of suburban life. Replete with washing lines and watering cans, they do not exactly correspond with Mahon's idea of *le vrai lieu* ('the real place'). In this sense, the poem enforces the link between the ironic conscience and the bohemian lifestyle, echoing the sentiments expressed in 'The Poets Lie where they Fell':

---

[62] Brown, Introduction to *Journalism*, p. 18.

[63] It was published in *Icarus* 42, March 1964, pp. 8-10. The poem sardonically refers to the experience of *night-crossing* in the lines: 'Odysseus must take / No cheap night-crossing into Ithaca, / But having once set out must struggle through / With the rage of Ahab' (reference to the latter picking up Hart Crane's 'Voyages' in *White Buildings* (1926) perhaps).

We were born to this –
Deckchairs, train corridors,
American bus stations,
Park benches, open boats
And wind-worried terraces
Of nineteenth-century Paris.

Walking the dog and trimming the hedge are scant substitute for the freedom of the open road, as outlined in Kerouac's celebrated novel which influenced Mahon's wanderlust.[64] For all the 'wonders' of modern ingenuity, the poem questions 'the life we have lost in living' equating order and security, sense and charm with a kind of creative death.[65] In comparing the present with the more heroic past, it highlights Mahon's profound ambivalence towards a place of origin. This ambivalence is reflected in the underlying tensions within the poem between violence and order, security and danger, barbarism and civility, freedom and constraint. From the opening stanza, which offsets the 'long ships' and 'chalk thanes' reminiscent of the original landscape as compared with suburban life, we are (as Riordan expressed it) 'on the battleground between the city and its opposite, evoked here as a landscape of primitive energies'.[66] In this sense, 'Glengormley' may be seen to harbour a subconscious longing for something Dionysian to shatter the suburban idyll, in keeping with Mahon's sense of the poet as rebel or outcast. Here it echoes 'In Belfast' which acknowledges 'a perverse pride in being on the side / Of the fallen angels', while also depicting the city as a kind of battleground between conformity and rebellion. The oppressive uniformity of suburban life, it suggests, is a 'noose' which strangles the self in its search for freedom and independence.

As key poems in the autobiographical narrative of home, 'Glengormley' and 'In Belfast' are crucial to understanding the operation of the ironic conscience in Mahon's early poetry. They suggest that its different modes of expression (playful, oblique, shape-changing,

---

[64] As Paul Durcan indicated in 'The World of Derek Mahon', *Magill* (Christmas 1984), the poet's travels in Canada and North America were partly inspired by Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957).

[65] T. S. Eliot, 'Choruses from 'The Rock'', 1, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p. 161.

[66] Riordan, 'An Urbane Perspective: The Poetry of Derek Mahon', p. 171. As Haughton stated in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 37, Mahon's poem is 'acutely conscious of 'the histories'....The reference to giants conjures both Greek mythology and Ulster legends (as in the 'Giant's Causeway'), while the reference to 'long ships' in clover recall Viking and other early invaders as well as the Belfast shipyards. In associating saints and heroes with 'conspiring seas', Mahon alludes not only to early historical visitors such as St. Patrick, but the successful UVF gun-running operation of 1914 and the unsuccessful Nationalist operation involving Sir Roger Casement and the Aud a year later. In this way the poem's almost bland lexicon uncannily epitomises the complex, violent history of the province'.

satirical) are the means by which it eludes the 'nets' of home, including the restrictive codes and gestures which compel the individual mind 'to know its place' in the community or the unheroic days and ways of bourgeois respectability. In this regard, they confirm Heaney's description of Mahon as 'the Stephen Dedalus of Belfast', who refuses to trade personal freedom or independence for a sense of belonging. One part of his awareness is always elsewhere, outstripping attachment to any single identity or place. In these two poems then we can traces the origins of several others, notably 'Ecclesiastes', 'Beyond Howth Head' and the title poem in *Lives* (in which the speaker flies by the nets of nationality and religion); 'The Last of the Fire Kings' in *The Snow Party* (which exemplifies the use of 'silence...and cunning' to elude the demands of 'the fire-loving / People'); 'The Poet in Residence' (*Poems 1962-1978*) and '*from* The Drunken Boat' in *The Hunt by Night* (which highlight the contumacy of the rebellious in search of the unconventional). Finally, the acute sense of exile at home, evident in 'In Belfast' and 'Glengormley', largely accounts for Mahon's affinity with artistic outsiders or exiled writers like Ovid, Brecht and Rimbaud. It also explains his identification with a figure like MacNeice, whose influence can be felt throughout *Night-Crossing*. It is to this influence we now turn before concluding with a study of how the world of art offered Mahon an alternative home. For the ironic conscience, 'Poetry and fluent drivel' (as the *Icarus* version of 'In Belfast' deemed it), was less an escape from reality than a means of exploring different realities.

2.3 The Influence of Louis MacNeice on the Ironic Conscience in *Night-Crossing*.

Mahon's identification with MacNeice is best understood in the context of that early experience of displacement outlined in 'In Belfast' and 'Glengormley'. As he remarked in interview with Brown, he was 'a familiar voice whispering in my ear'.[67] Or, as he expressed it later to Scammell:

> I've always had a thing about MacNeice. We met twice, once in a Dublin pub after a rugby international at Lansdowne Road, and once at his house in London, where he was watching rugby on TV and didn't have much to say. He took no notice of me (why should he?) but I felt some connection had been made.[68]

Part of this connection was a shared sense of cultural dislocation, or what Stephen Gwynn, an Ascendancy Nationalist, called a condition of 'spiritual hyphenation' (MacNeice

[67] Mahon, interview with Brown (1985), p. 18.
[68] Mahon, interview with Scammell (1991), p. 5.

memorably conveyed the effects of such a psychic split in adolescence in his autobiography *The Strings are False*).[69] It resonated with Mahon's own experience as a Northern Protestant or his conflicting feelings towards home (what he described to the Poetry Book Society as 'a nostalgic (and slightly guilty) independence of community, and a resulting self-consciousness'). Thus, *Night-Crossing* engages in a form of cross-talk or dialogue with a fellow Northern poet, as 'In Belfast' and 'An Unborn Child' echo MacNeice's 'Belfast' and 'Prayer before Birth'. Edna Longley remarked in relation to 'In Belfast' that 'it would have been less easy for Mahon to walk 'among my own this windy morning'' if MacNeice had not placed this desperate Northern city 'on the hitherto lopsided rural/Dublin map of Irish poetry'.[70] Clearly Mahon drew upon MacNeice's urban imagery and use of colloquial language to echo the strong stresses of Northern speech ('shipyard gantry, bolt and rivet', 'Clothes-pegs litter the window-ledge...Washing lines / Shake out white linen'). He also drew upon the many images of alienation in MacNeice's poetry, in particular that of the window, which marks the threshold of contrasting worlds.[71] Significantly, the opening poem 'Girls in their Seasons' sees the poet-speaker slumped by the window of an express train hurtling north. It enforces, as we have seen, the mobility of the ironic conscience which constantly shifts between 'several destinations'. Little wonder then that Mahon defended his predecessor in an early article 'MacNeice in Ireland and England':

> 'A tourist in his own country', it has been said, with the implication that this is somehow discreditable; but of what sensitive person is the same not true? The phrase might stand, indeed, as an epitaph for modern man, beside Camus's 'He made love and read the newspapers.'[72]

---

[69] Brown, *Sceptical Vision*, p. 10. It must be pointed out that, in naming this condition, Gwynn was actually distancing himself from it: 'I was brought up to think myself Irish, without question or qualification; but the new nationalism prefers to describe me and the like of, as Anglo-Irish. A. E. has even set me down in print as being...the typical Anglo-Irishman. So all my life I have been spiritually hyphenated without knowing it'. One particular passage from *The Strings are False* (pp. 78-9) is particularly revealing, as MacNeice describes his feelings of guilt: 'On the Twelfth of July Powys came into my dormitory and said: What is all this they do in your country to-day? Isn't it all mumbo-jumbo?' Remembering my father and Home Rule and the bony elbows of Miss Craig and the black file of mill-girls and the wickedness of Carson and the dull dank days between sodden haycocks and foghorns, I said Yes it was. And I felt uplifted. To be speaking man to man to Powys and giving the lie to the Red Hand of Ulster, was power, was freedom, meant I was nearly grown up. King William was dead and his white horse with him...That the Twelfth of July was mumbo-jumbo was true, and my father thought so too, but the moment Mr Cameron appeared I felt rather guilty and cheap. Because I had been showing off to Powys and because Mr. Cameron being after all Irish I felt I had betrayed him'.

[70] Edna Longley, 'Stars and Horses, Pigs and Trees', *Crane Bag*, 3, 2 (1979), p. 477.

[71] As an aspiring young poet, Mahon could readily identify with the speaker in MacNeice's poem 'The Window': 'How, yes how! To achieve in a world of flux and bonfires / Something of art's coherence, in a world of wind and hinges / An even approximate poise, in a world of beds and hunger / A fullness more than the feeding of a sieve? (MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 276).

[72] Mahon, 'MacNeice in Ireland and England', *Journalism*, p. 25.

He knew only too well that the phrase 'a tourist in his own country' might equally be applied to him (it recalls his description of himself as 'a twig in a stream'). In fact, Boland, who knew Mahon as an undergraduate in Dublin, described him as 'exactly the sort of European intellectual tourist I admired most and was least acquainted with: quoting Gérard de Nerval and Baudelaire' (in this instance, it is another French writer, Camus).[73]

However, it wasn't simply this shared experience of displacement that drew Mahon to MacNeice, but the manner in which it shaped his poetry, notably its visionary aspect and sharp, subversive wit. As John Byrne expressed it in *The Crane Bag* in 1985:

> [MacNeice's] bitter experience of the Northern Irish Protestants' cultural dilemma, his sense of discontinuity and dissociation from the urban community in which he lived, his sustaining, desperate and comic irony and delight in the actual importance of the world around him, all mark him as the most significant and lasting influence on Mahon.[74]

This 'desperate and comic irony' ('desperate' recalling the final stanza of 'In Belfast') and 'delight' in the surrounding world, are characteristics of the ironic conscience as outlined in this thesis. The former is evident in the mordant humour or Beckettian satire of *Lives*, while the latter features throughout his early work, in keeping with Mahon's cherished Yeatsian phrase ('a lonely impulse of delight'). In particular, it underlies that receptivity to the numinous in nature which marks Mahon's early poetry, what Brown termed (as previously outlined), 'a strange exhilaration, a kind of lightness, a weightless, buoyant sense of the moment's possibility, of experience charged with inexplicable significance'.[75] Delight and comic irony, in this sense, are integral to the ironic conscience, part of that light touch or humorous love-play which offsets bleaker, more sceptical or despairing elements.

MacNeice's complex sensibility or, what 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' terms his 'humane perspective', thus greatly informs the operation of the ironic conscience in *Night-Crossing* and subsequent volumes. For Mahon, he was not so much a father-figure as an ancestor 'of the emotions, of the quality and slant of mind' (to adopt Hewitt's phrase).[76] In an uncollected poem of 1995, 'MacNeice's London', Mahon strives to capture this elusive

---

[73] Eavan Boland, 'Compact and Compromise: Derek Mahon as a Young Poet', p. 61.
[74] John Byrne, 'Derek Mahon: A Commitment to Change', *Crane Bag* 6, 1 (1982), p. 62.
[75] Brown's remarks are cited in the Introduction, p. 18.
[76] Tom Clyde (ed.), *Ancestral Voices: Selected Prose of John Hewitt* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1987), p. 116.

mindset as he imagines the poet during the war in 'A bunker of civilized sound, / A BBC studio':

> Thirty years dead
> I see your ghost, as the Blitz caroms overhead,
> Dissolve into a smoke-ring, meditative,
> Classic, outside time and space,
> Alone with itself, in the presence of the nations,
> Well-bred, dry, the voice
> Of London, speaking of lost illusions.[77]

These lines encapsulate in miniature many of the qualities he admired in MacNeice and which also serve to define the ironic conscience as it operates in Mahon's early poetry. These include urbanity, solitary reflection, dry humour, an engaged yet 'meditative' voice. Adopting a stance 'outside time and space' is crucial, as we shall see, to the vast perspectives of the ironic conscience in *Lives* and *The Snow Party*, just as 'speaking of lost illusions' is central to the autobiographical mode of poems like 'The Sea in Winter' in *Poems 1962-1978* and 'Craigvara House' in *Antarctica* (the phrase alludes to both Mahon and MacNeice's painful struggle with alcoholism). Mahon himself offers a variation on 'the voice / Of London' in 'Another Sunday Morning' and 'One of these Nights' (*The Hunt by Night*), as well as in the elaborate pastiche 'A Kensington Notebook' (*Antarctica*). In *Night-Crossing*, MacNeice's influence registers in several poems, all of which number him as the most significant 'ghost' in the volume, to echo 'Girls in their Seasons' ('Their ghosts go with me as I hurtle north'). He is one of those instinctively chosen influences Mahon turned to in order to map out his own poetic space. As he outlined in the introduction to *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry*, MacNeice provided a vital frame of reference:

> For a long time it seemed that Louis MacNeice was Irish only by an accident of birth, but in recent years his reputation, never at the highest in Britain, has come to rest in the country he could never quite bring himself to disown. This is particularly the case in the North, where his example has provided a frame of reference for a number of younger poets in much the same way as Kavanagh's has done in the South.[78]

The personal significance of these remarks is highlighted by the fact that Mahon, Longley and Heaney gave a poetry reading in Glengormley in 1966 to mark the publication of E. R. Dodd's *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, an event which, as Clark pointed

---

[77] Mahon, 'MacNeice's London', cited by McDonald in his article 'Louis MacNeice: irony and responsibility', in Campbell (ed.), *Contemporary Irish Poetry*, p. 59.

[78] Mahon, Introduction to *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry,* p. 14. The fact that MacNeice was 'local' was of particular importance to Mahon, because it meant he provided a frame of reference which other, more 'illustrious' poets, could not.

out, was part of a sustained campaign to rescue his reputation from the shadow of Auden and reclaim him 'as an Irish poet of major significance'.[79] Both MacNeice's poems 'Prayer Before Birth' and 'Snow', which Mahon chose to read at this event, found an echo in *Night-Crossing*, the latter in the moving tribute 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' which celebrates his poetic legacy. It had its origins in an earlier visit by the three poets to MacNeice's grave, as recounted by Longley in his introduction to the more recent Faber selection:

> A year or so after his death in September 1963 Derek Mahon, Seamus Heaney and I drove to MacNeice's grave in Carrowdore churchyard among the drumlins of County Down. We dawdled between the graves, then signed the visitors' book, each contemplating an elegy. MacNeice's premature death at the age of fifty-five had shocked us. We felt bereaved of a father-figure whom we had only recently been getting to know. (Mahon was the only one of us who had met him personally). The return of his ashes to Ireland did feel like some kind of repatriation. When the three of us were next together Mahon took from his pocket 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' and read it aloud. Heaney started to recite his poem, then crumpled it up. I wisely decided then and there not to make the attempt. Mahon had produced the definitive elegy. Echoing some of the pivotal poems in this selection ('Snow', 'The Casualty', 'Brother Fire'), it brilliantly spans the poles of MacNeice's imagination – colour and darkness, destruction and rebirth, the underworld and the earth's lovely surfaces...[80]

This account confirms MacNeice's significance for this generation of Northern poets, Mahon in particular. His sense of connection with his predecessor ('I've always had a thing about MacNeice') is what enabled him to produce 'the definitive elegy' encompassing MacNeice's imagination. It greatly contributed to his literary recuperation 'in the country he could never quite bring himself to disown'.[81] It also heralded the arrival of Mahon's poetic highlighting particular aspects of the ironic conscience. On being questioned in interview as to his first real poem ('your "Digging" or "Thought-Fox"', as Scammell put it, alluding to

---

[79] Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, pp. 127-8.

[80] *Louis MacNeice: Poems selected by Michael Longley* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. xi. Longley had previously written an Introduction to *the Selected Poems of Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988).

[81] Issues of cultural politics were largely responsible for the critical neglect of MacNeice's poetry in Ireland and England. This neglect was addressed by poets like Mahon, Longley and Heaney. As Corcoran put it, in 'Keeping the Colours New: Louis MacNeice in the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland', in *Louis MacNeice and His Influence*, edited by Kathleen Devine and Alan J. Peacock (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998), p. 115, the literary reappropriation of MacNeice has 'been virtually coterminous with the development of the poetry of Northern Ireland since the mid-1960s; and it represents a concerted and strategically successful form of accommodation and recuperation of a kind for which I can think of no contemporary parallel'.

Heaney and Ted Hughes), Mahon replied: '"Carrowdore Churchyard"; and I knew it at the time'.[82] We will analyse it now in some detail.

2.3.1 'In Carrowdore Churchyard'.

> Your ashes will not stir, even on this high ground,
> However the wind tugs, the headstones shake –
> This plot is consecrated, for your sake,
> To what lies in the future tense. You lie
> Past tension now, and spring is coming round
> Igniting flowers on the peninsula.

The opening stanza of 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' is (to adapt Haughton) a witty conflation of the poet's grave, the plot of Mahon's poem and the future plot of both their poetry.[83] 'Consecrated' to MacNeice, it stakes a claim for his literary reputation (by no means as established then as it is now), while mapping out Mahon's own poetic space. What makes the poem such a vivid monument is the manner in which it incorporates formal and thematic elements of MacNeice's work. These include his empirical humanism; his painterly eye for the play of light and shadow; his sense of ambiguity or dialectical awareness of the polarities of life and death, growth and decay, fixity and flux.[84] The poem also reflects his fascination with language, and its varied speech-rhythms (from the casual and colloquial to the scholarly or classical); his skillful use of traditional forms; his belief in the efficacy of art as transformative.[85] It reveals just how familiar MacNeice's voice was to Mahon and how influential on his own:

> Your ashes will not fly, however the rough winds burst
> Through the wild brambles and the reverend trees.
> All we may ask of you we have. The rest
> Is not for publication, will not be heard.
> Maguire, I believe, suggested a blackbird
> And over your grave a phrase from Euripides.
>
> Which suits you down to the ground, like this churchyard
> With its play of shadow, its humane perspective.
> Locked in the winter's fist, these hills are hard

---

[82] Mahon, interview with Scammell, p. 5.

[83] In 'Place and Displacement in Derek Mahon', p. 102, Haughton wrote: 'In invoking the 'high ground' of the earlier poet's grave, it equates the site of the churchyard with the moral 'high ground' of MacNeice's art and then, in a comparably well-plotted pun, calls it a 'plot… consecrated … to what lies in the future tense' – a witty conflation of the poet's grave and the plot of his poetry'.

[84] Mahon refers to MacNeice's empirical humanism and painter's eye for 'the sensuous qualities of light and landscape' in 'MacNeice in Ireland and England', pp. 26-27.

[85] Mahon's deft word-play (lies / lie; tense / tension) and orchestration of sound-effects (shake / sake; spring / Igniting; Past tension / peninsula) pay tribute to MacNeice's sense of verse as 'a precision-instrument' (as outlined on p. 85).

As nails, yet soft and feminine in their turn
When fingers open and the hedges burn.
This, you implied, is how we ought to live -

A certain familiarity is evident in the colloquial tone ('Maguire, I believe, suggested a blackbird'; 'This, you implied, is how we ought to live') which offsets the more lyrical and metaphorical diction ('When fingers open and the hedges burn').[86] This makes the poem seem part of an ongoing conversation, in keeping with Mahon's sense of poetry as 'people talking to each other' ('Poetry in Northern Ireland'). A mordant humour surfaces in the phrase 'suits you down to the ground', echoing MacNeice's clever use of cliché (here 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' recalls 'My Wicked Uncle', which describes the burial of Mahon's relative as a 'most absorbing ceremony').[87] The feeling of kinship is also present in the shared sense of place, the 'wild brambles and the reverend trees' of the churchyard, the sweep of the surrounding hills and the surge of flowers on the peninsula. The phrase, 'these hills are hard / As nails' condenses the opening of MacNeice's 'Belfast', projecting the 'hard cold fire' of the industrial northerner (gantries 'Like crucifixes') onto the winter landscape.[88] However, in keeping with the 'humane perspective' attributed to him (recalling the reference to Euripides, and the urbanity MacNeice derived from the classics), Mahon tempers the image with its vernal opposite ('yet soft and feminine in their turn'), stressing MacNeice's dialectical awareness. It is enforced by the series of oppositions within the poem (cold / heat; hard / soft; masculine / feminine; clarity / blindness), in particular that of vitality (*stir; tugs; shake; spring; igniting; burst; open; burn; loving; solving; rinsing*) versus death or stasis (*ashes; grave; lie; locked; nails; pneumonia; ague; choked; bombed-out*).

As a carefully plotted structure of balanced tensions, 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' captures the quality and slant of mind so memorably expressed in MacNeice's poem 'Entirely':

And if all the world were black or white entirely
  And all the charts were plain
Instead of a mad weir of tigerish waters,
  A prism of delight and pain,
We might be surer where we wished to go

[86] Maguire refers to the Ulster painter George McCann, a friend of MacNeice's.
[87] 'My Wicked Uncle', *Night-Crossing*, p. 9. Earlier the poem portrays him as 'Coffined to perfection in the bedroom'.
[88] 'The hard cold fire of the northerner / Frozen into his blood from the fire in his basalt / Glares from behind the mica of his eyes / And the salt carrion water brings him wealth. // 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' (MacNeice, 'Belfast', *Collected Poems*, p. 17).

Or again we might be merely
Bored but in brute reality there is no
Road that is right entirely.

However, it also reflects the dialectical mode of the ironic conscience which readily acknowledges that reality is never 'black or white entirely' but a 'mad weir' of ambiguity, contradiction and paradox. Hence, the pivotal phrase 'solving ambiguity' in the final stanza, which not only alludes to the final line of MacNeice's 'Snow' ('There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses'), but encapsulates the ambivalence of several Mahon poems, including 'In Belfast' and 'Glengormley':

The ironical, loving crush of roses against snow,
Each fragile, solving ambiguity. So
From the pneumonia of the ditch, from the ague
Of the blind poet and the bombed-out town you bring
The all-clear to the empty holes of spring,
Rinsing the choked mud, keeping the colours new.

Like Ciaran Carson and Paul Muldoon after him, Mahon both acknowledges and emulates one of MacNeice's finest early poems.[89] The oxymoronic 'loving crush' is his take on MacNeice's 'great bay-window...Spawning snow and pink roses against it', while 'solving', with its play on *re*solving and *dis*solving (the latter all the more apt in relation to snow) ambiguously qualifies 'ambiguity'.[90] 'Fragile', which leans towards dissolution or suggests the tentative nature of any resolution, further qualifies the ambiguous qualifier, matching the metaphysical conundrum of MacNeice's poem. At the same time, Mahon subtly enshrines key elements of the ironic conscience, such as its exploitation of ambiguity and sense of life as paradoxical or crazy with all its 'collateral and incompatible' elements (to adopt the terms of 'Snow'). The stanza thus exemplifies the truth of MacNeice's remark that:

> Verse is a precision-instrument and owes its precision to the many and subtle differences which an ordinary word can acquire from its place in a rhythmical scheme.[91]

---

[89] The final lines of Muldoon's poem 'History' from *Why Brownlee Left* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980) allude to 'the room where MacNeice wrote "Snow" / Or the room where they say he wrote "Snow"', wryly suggesting that poetry may be more truthful or historically accurate than what often passes for history (such a contentious issue in the North of Ireland). Ciaran Carson's 'Snow', in *Belfast Confetti* (1990), also plays on MacNeice's poem (using the metaphor of 'ping-pong'), citing key-words ('incorrigible', 'soundlessly collateral') in an oblique commentary on the situation in Northern Ireland.

[90] 'Solving ambiguity' echoes the 'solving emptiness' in Philip Larkin's line in 'Ambulances' from *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964): 'the solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do'.

[91] MacNeice, in Heuser (ed.), *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, p. 143.

It also reveals how Mahon absorbed and refined MacNeice's use of the six-line stanza, manipulating the form with great dexterity. Rhyming 'So' with 'snow' (the only stanza to begin with a couplet) for greater emphatic effect, sets up the poem's climax, as the crucial pentameter ('you bring / The all-clear to the empty holes of spring') enacts art's powers of renovation.[92]

Mahon's stanzaic skill keeps form 'new', *springing* its own release from the ravages of history while incorporating further references to MacNeice's work. The 'ague / Of the blind poet and the bombed-out town' is an allusion to 'Raftery or Homer' as in MacNeice's 'The Casualty', and London in the Blitz as in 'Brother Fire', from which Mahon also draws his 'all clear'.[93] Despite the reality of suffering and death, the run-on lines, incantatory rhythm and rapid succession of images generate a countervailing resolve or defiant hope. Mahon's poem (to adapt MacNeice's 'The Window') makes its own case for 'art's coherence', embodying a formal poise or fullness in a world of flux.[94] It depicts the artist as the herald of spring, a catalyst for renewal in the winter of discontent. Seasonal references to winter and spring ('the winter's fist', 'spring is coming round', 'the empty holes of spring'), and the repeated references to wind ('However the wind tugs', 'however the rough winds burst') and ashes ('Your ashes will not stir', 'Your ashes will not fly') recall Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' ('O, Wind, / If Winter comes, can spring be far behind?').[95] The final lines suggest poetry is a force for change (revitalising 'the empty holes') or a potent source of renovation. In the context of the North of Ireland, 'keeping the colours new' is particularly apposite, given the iconography of conflicting communities or the sectarian tension between orange and green. The phrase also has a powerful resonance in relation to MacNeice's 'To Posterity', which sums up the whole enterprise of poetry:

> When books have all seized up like the books in graveyards
> And reading and even speaking have been replaced
> By other, less difficult, media, we wonder if you

---

[92] Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 178. Comparing MacNeice's 'Autolycus' with Mahon's 'In Carrowdore Churchyard', she noted how both poems 'express resurrection, art's powers of renewal and self-renewal, the imagination's hard-won victories over time'.

[93] 'The Casualty', MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 246. The poem refers to 'Raftery or Homer' in the context of 'some old blind minstel'. As we shall see, the Gaelic poet features in 'I Am Raftery' in *Lives*. 'Brother Fire', which looks at London during World War 11, mentions 'the All Clear' after air-raids (MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 196).

[94] See footnote 71 in relation to 'The Window'.

[95] In interview (*In the Chair*, p. 122), Mahon spoke of his inclination to Shelley rather than Auden on the issue of art's efficacy, citing his celebrated words: 'The great instrument of moral good is the imagination…Poetry contributes to the effect by acting upon the cause'.

> Will find in flowers and fruit the same colour and taste
> They held for us for whom they were framed in words,
> And will your grass be green, your sky be blue,
> Or will your birds be always wingless birds?

It is fitting then, at his graveside, that Mahon should pay homage to MacNeice's lifelong struggle to purify the language of the tribe, to 'rins[e] the choked mud' free of the *rigor mortis* of political or religious prejudice. The linguistic precision of 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' suggests that, for Mahon too, the art of 'fram[ing] in words' is equally urgent (as he stated in 'Poetry in Northern Ireland', 'a good poem is a paradigm of good politics'). This is what makes it such a moving tribute, arguably the finest poem in *Night-Crossing*. However, it also makes its own gesture to posterity, deftly plotting the intersection of the ironic conscience and MacNeice's 'humane perspective' in terms of vision and sense of the relationship between art and life. Both share a belief in the transformative power of art as 'a light to lighten the darkness' ('Poetry in Northern Ireland') or keep 'the colours new'. Similarly, both reflect a dialectical awareness which views life in terms of oppositions and truth as susceptible to multiple interpretations.[96] This awareness is sceptical of absolutes and resists any mentality which regards things as 'black or white entirely'. Rather, it is open to life's variety ('the drunkenness of things being various', as 'Snow' expressed it), exploiting ambiguity or ambivalence in the interest of subtlety or complexity. Here it finds an echo in Keats's 'negative capability' which relishes 'uncertainties, mysteries and doubts' over fact and reason. For MacNeice, such receptivity is linked with a state of surrender, or what he termed 'falling awake':

> ...to keep falling awake seems to me the salt of life much more than existentialist defiance. We cannot of course live by Keats's Negative Sensibility alone, we must all, in E. M. Forster's phrase, use 'telegrams and anger'; all the same what I feel makes life worth living is not the clever scores but the surrenders – it may be to the life-quickening urge of an air-raid, to nonsense talked by one's friends, to a girl on top of the Empire State building, to the silence of a ruined Byzantine church, to woods, or weirs, or to heat dancing on a graveled path, to music, drink or the smell of turf smoke, to the first view of the Atlantic or to the curve of a strand which seems to stretch to nowhere or everywhere and to ages before and after the combustion engine which defiled it.[97]

---

[96] This dialectical awareness extends also to art. As we shall see in subsequent volumes, Mahon's sense of poetry as a 'light to lighten the darkness' is offset by his sense of it as 'a dying art' ('Rage for Order'). The romantic belief is undercut by an underlying scepticism or doubt which surfaces in key poems, notably 'The Sea in Winter' in *Poems 1962-1978* ('And all the time I have my doubts / About this verse-making'). For MacNeice, the dialectic is clearly evident in poems like 'The Window', which dramatises the clash between 'flux' and 'fullness', or life's contingency and art's formal necessity.

[97] MacNeice, *The Strings are False*, p. 220.

For the ironic conscience, this dialectical awareness is associated with a bohemian sensibility or a consciousness which is attuned to the surprising or numinous dimension of human experience. The 'life-quickening urge' of spring in the Ulster landscape of 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' is a case in point, as 'winter's fist' opens to a blaze of light and colour. Mahon's seminal poem thus neatly aligns both visions, addressing not only MacNeice's 'humane perspective' but aspects of the ironic conscience itself. In this sense, it bears out the truth of Jorge Luis Borges' remark (cited by Mahon as an epigraph to *Journalism*) that 'Every writer *creates* his own precursors'.[98] It 'brilliantly spans the poles of MacNeice's imagination' (to re-quote Longley) because it is the fruit of an ongoing dialogue. This meeting of minds is what makes MacNeice such an enabling influence, allowing Mahon to define his own particular stance or poetic vision more clearly. As Kennelly stated, there are certain types of influence that are inseparable from personal development:

> People often talk disparaging about influence but it should not be so, because any true original is derivative. He is derivative from himself through others. He willingly submits himself to certain instinctively chosen influences until he emerges into himself. The thing is to see where the derivative self ends and the new original self begins. Mahon's original self begins in this tribute to Louis MacNeice. [99]

These lines are especially apposite in relation to the ironic conscience and the influence of MacNeice in *Night-Crossing*. They provide another angle on *creating* one's precursors, stressing the importance of 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' in Mahon's *oeuvre*. The only reservation is that, for the ironic conscience, there is no single or 'original self' but a multitude of selves. Like the world in MacNeice's 'Snow', its shape-changing identity is 'incorrigibly plural' (this, as we shall see, is the central issue in the title poem of *Lives*, which deconstructs the derivative / original opposition). Thus, while MacNeice is the most significant influence in this volume, there are a number of other figures with whom Mahon identifies. We will address each of these in turn for they offer different angles on the displacement of the ironic conscience in *Night-Crossing*, while illustrating how the world of art offers the poet an alternative home.

---

[98] The phrase, as cited by Mahon (in *Journalism*, p. 11), is from Borges's *A Personal Anthology*.
[99] Kennelly, 'Derek Mahon's Humane Perspective', p. 129.

2.4 Allusive Intertextuality and the Displacement of the Ironic Conscience in *Night-Crossing.*

As a first volume, *Night-Crossing* highlights the literary and cultural allusiveness of the ironic conscience. It marks the beginning of Mahon's dialogue with artistic outsiders or, what Andrew Waterman aptly termed, his 'iconoclastic outsiders' hall of fame'.[100] Alongside MacNeice, it includes Villon, De Quincey, Beckett, the Dutch painters Van Gogh and Van Meegeren, as well as the poets of the 1890s ('Dowson and Company'), Bruce Ismay ('As God is my Judge') and Marilyn Monroe ('Death of a Film Star'). All of these figures allow Mahon to dramatise, if not exoticise or universalise, his own experience of alienation. They provide alternative masks with which to explore the different states of self. Intertextuality in this regard is not a theoretical dead letter but a creative resource, allowing the ironic conscience to cultivate a more fluid and mobile identity. Literary tradition in *Night-Crossing* is thus more a source of liberation than anxiety (*contra* Harold Bloom), offsetting if not overcoming the autobiographical narrative of displacement.[101]

The 'phrase from Euripides', supposedly suggested by 'Maguire' for MacNeice's grave, might well read, 'Whom God wishes to destroy, he first makes mad', given Mahon's affinity for the lyrical madness of the *poète maudit*.[102] Many of the artists featured in *Night-Crossing* share a kink of madness or eccentricity. They exemplify a certain waywardness, wanderlust, mischievous humour or passion for excess. 'My Wicked Uncle' is revealing in tracing the origins of this affinity. In interview, Mahon described him as 'a self-taught man, a left-wing autodidact', whose single-mindedness stimulated his political awareness as a teenager.[103] As the poem records, there was 'something about him', not least a refusal to conform:

> ...picture the surprise
> Of the chairman of the board, when to
> What will you have with your whiskey?' my uncle replies –

---

[100] Andrew Waterman, '"Somewhere, Out there, Beyond": The Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon', *PN Review*, 8, 1 (1980), p. 40.

[101] In *Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry*, p. 15, Buxton noted that, for many Northern Poets, literary tradition is a highly enabling influence. As she put it: it 'is not a weight they stagger under and seek to offload. Rather, their use of quotation and allusion is a means by which they can establish and assert their identity as poet alongside their peers and precursors. It is a way both of building a literary community – with the intertextual associations serving to forge links between the members of that community, much like an exchange of common currency – and of asserting independence of voice: the knowing departures and subversions announce control over material rather than dependence on it.'

[102] Euripides, cited in *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations* (London: Penguin, 1981), p.156. The Latin version quoted in Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) reads, *'Quos deus vult perdere, prius dementat'.*

[103] Mahon, *In the Chair*, p. 113.

'Another whiskey, please'.

Once he was jailed in New York
Twice on the same day –
The crookedest chief steward in the Head Line.
And once (he affected communism)
He brought the whole crew out on strike
In protest at the loss of a day's pay
Crossing the international date line.

In terms of 'In Belfast', Mahon's relative was clearly 'on the side / Of the fallen angels' in his subversion of Protestant orthodoxies or respectabilities. Here the poem finds an echo in 'De Quincey in Later Life' which also sanctions a specifically masculine bohemianism associated with drugs. As the poem ironically puts it, in reference to the English poet's 'quart / Decanter of laudanum':

...No sort
Or condition of men but is the less human
For want of this. *Mens sana*
In corpore sano.[104]

De Quincey, the hero of Baudelaire's *Paradis Artificiels* (1860), exemplifies Mahon's band of unreconciled artists who, in the words of the French poet, have felt 'the wind of the wings of madness pass over me':

And then the dreams came, and his children
Woke him every day at noon –

Until he cried out I WILL SLEEP NO MORE
And quit the hot sheets and the enormous
Apparitions dying on the floor.[105]

These lines highlight the allusive intertextuality of the ironic conscience which adopts and modifies the language of different writers. They dramatise the central conflict in De Quincey's life, as outlined in the impassioned prose of his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*:

> One memorial of my former condition still remains: my dreams are not yet perfectly calm: the dread swell and agitation of the storm have not wholly subsided: the legions that encamped in them are drawing off, but not all departed: my sleep is still tumultuous, and, like the gates of Paradise to our first parents

[104] In *Poems 1962-1978* the title is revised to 'De Quincey at Grasmere'.
[105] The phrase from Baudelaire's journal ('I have cultivated my hysteria with delight and terror. Now I suffer continually from vertigo, and today, the 23rd of January 1862, I have received a singular warning: I have felt the wind of the wings of madness pass over me') is cited in John Pilling, *Modern European Poets* (London: Pan, 1982), p. 17.

> when looking back from afar, it is still, in the tremendous line of
> Milton – 'With dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms'.[106]

The creature comforts of Grasmere in the Lake District cannot stave off the nightmares which return to haunt him in, what the poem terms, 'the whispering-gallery of his soul'. Mahon's phrase ('enormous / Apparitions dying on the floor') neatly encapsulates the gradual subsidence or 'drawing off' of the throng of 'dreadful faces' in De Quincey's text. For the romantic poet, these visions recall restless nights wandering the embankments in search of 'some such panacea'. The poem's final line (which looks back to the opening phrase 'Tonight the blessed state') highlights the cyclical or unending nature of the visionary quest. The eighteen-year old is father of the man as 'De Quincey in Later Life' is still afflicted by creative unrest:

> His own small, urgent discord echoing back
> From the dark roads of abandon
> And the restless thunder of London –
> Where he had gone in his eighteenth year
> And walked the terraces after dark,
> Seeking precisely some such panacea.

Here the poem offers an oblique angle on the autobiographical narrative of displacement in *Night-Crossing*. De Quincey's restlessness mirrors that of Mahon himself, whose experience in 'Glengormley' and 'In Belfast' was marked by a similar 'small, urgent discord' (he too, as we shall see in *Lives*, looks to London for release). It also reflects the longing of the ironic conscience for visionary states, alternative modes of being or 'some such panacea', as an antidote to the constraints of domesticity or the drawbacks of home (conformity, calculation, grim duty, gloomy piety or bourgeois complacency).

The oblique self-dramatisation continues in 'Van Gogh among the Miners' which not only reflects the displacement of the ironic conscience but particular aspects of Mahon's aesthetic. These include his sense of the artist as rebel or outcast, of poetry as a visual art or labour of shaping, which is attuned to the numinous play of light in nature. The poem reveals Mahon as an intensely visual poet, with an eye for the secular *numen* in the most mundane aspects of the phenomenal world, such as the sparkle of glass or the glitter of coal-dust:

> Shivering in the darkness
> Of pits, slagheaps, beetroot fields,
> I gasp for light and life
> Like a caged bird in spring-time

[106] De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, in Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (eds.), *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 731.

Banging the bright bars.

Like a glow-worm I move among
The caged Belgian miners,
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.

This preoccupation with the aesthetic partly explains the poem's dedication to the Northern Irish painter Colin Middleton (it is subsequently re-titled 'A Portrait of the Artist').[107] Like Van Gogh or Middleton, Mahon is fascinated by the transfiguring power of light, which can turn a 'glass of beer' into 'a church window' (in his introduction to Jaccottet's *Selected Poems*, he cites Geoffrey Grigson who wondered 'if deity and art don't originate in sparkle, glitter, crystal, refracted light, an abstracted portion of sun, the gravel after rain...'[108]). The word *light* appears in four of the five stanzas, revealing Van Gogh as its obsessed devotee.

Reference to the 'caged' bird (repeated in the image of the 'caged Belgian miners') draws upon a letter of July 1880, in which Van Gogh compares himself to 'a caged bird in spring' who 'bangs his head against the bars of his cage'.[109] It also illustrates the formal dynamics of Mahon's work and his conviction (after Chandler) that there can be 'no art without resistance of the medium'. 'Banging the bright bars' in this sense echoes the Apollonian / Dionysian dialectic referred to earlier or MacNeice's idea of art's formal limitations as beneficial ('In the arts bars can be cross-bars and limitations an asset'). The image thus reflects Mahon's sense of poetry as 'forceful activity', an arduous struggle with

[107] Colin Middleton (1910- 1983), a Belfast painter noted for the brilliance of his paint and inexhaustible capacity for wonder, was heavily influenced by the work of Van Gogh. In interview (*In the Chair*, p. 95), Longley remarked of him: 'In my twenties I was blessed by the friendship of Colin Middleton whom John Hewitt [who wrote a book on Middleton] once called Ireland's most accomplished painter. He was a magician, a master draughtsman and technician.' Heaney also acknowledged Middleton and another painter T. P. Flanagan as part of that 'pre-Hobsbaum, pre-Group, pre-Longleys and Mahon context' that was important to him (cited in Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 112). In Mahon's *Selected* (1991) and *Collected Poems* (1999), the poem is re-titled 'A Portrait of the Artist'.

[108] Mahon, Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, p. 12. In interview with Scammell (p. 6), Mahon described writing 'The Hunt by Night' (*The Hunt by Night*) in terms of 'putting paint on a canvas: staining the silence', adding 'Poetry, I often think, is a visual art among other things'.

[109] Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 48.

language which mirrors the painter's wrestle with colour.[110] Finally, it neatly enforces that sense of exile or entrapment at home as outlined in 'Glengormley' and 'In Belfast'. This experience in turn underlies Mahon's affinity with the artist *in extremis* in *Night-Crossing*, gasping 'for light and life' as this poem expresses it. The final stanza links the artist with the miners in the Borinage, whose lamps on the forehead are like blazing meteors:

> A meteor of golden light
> On chairs, faces and old boots,
> Setting fierce fire to the eyes
> Of sun-flowers and fishing boats,
> Each one a miner in disguise.

The image of the meteor 'setting fierce fire', which recalls Marilyn Monroe in 'Death of a Film-Star' ('We are slowly learning from meteors like her'), picks up the Dutch painter's sense of art as a vocation or mission (as he expressed it: 'your profession is what you were put on earth to do, with such passion and intensity that it becomes spiritual in calling').[111] It also echoes Ted Hughes's 'The Jaguar', which pictures the artist 'hurrying enraged / Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes / On a short fierce fuse'.[112] Mahon's poem thus brings Van Gogh's tormented personality to life, singling him out among those artistic heroes who 'struggled through / The quick noose of their finite being' (to cite 'Glengormley'). Like 'De Quincey in Later Life', it also incorporates a wealth of biographical material, notably his work with the miners and the move to Arles, in south-eastern France; the different phases and subject matter of his painting (from the 'chairs, faces and old boots' of earlier work to the 'sun-flowers and fishing boats' which marked his first great period); and details from his letters, including one to his brother Theo, detailing his discharge from religious studies 'for being / Over-zealous'. In this regard, it prefigures the pattern of future poems in which Mahon adapts the persona of different artists to dramatise his own displacement (including 'Edvard Munch' in *Lives*, 'The Poet in Residence (after

---

[110] The references to MacNeice, Chandler and Mahon's sense of poetry as 'forceful activity' are cited in Chapter One, pp. 47-48.

[111] Van Gogh, cited in Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory: 1900-1990* (Oxford: Blackwell Ltd, 1992), p. 597. For Mahon, Marilyn Monroe exemplified the plight of the artist *in extremis,* a tragic Cinderella whose untimely death raised her to the status of American cultural icon: 'Goddesses, from the whipped sea or the slums, / Will understand her final desolate / Stark-nakedness, her teeth ground to the gums, /Fingernails filthy, siren hair in spate / (And always with her, as she goes and comes, / Her little bottle of barbiturate)'. Her demise, graphically recorded in all its grisly detail, reveals his early fascination with self-punishing artists who struggled to survive.

[112] Hughes, 'The Jaguar', *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), in *Selected Poems 1957-1981* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p. 15.

Corbière)' in *Poems 1962-1978*, 'Brecht in Svendborg' or 'Ovid in Tomis' in *The Hunt by Night*).

'The Forger' continues Mahon's identification with Dutch painters, once again depicting the artist as a man with a mission, a martyr to the exigencies of his own interior light ('And I, too, have suffered / Obscurity and derision, / And sheltered in my heart of hearts / A light to transform the world). Van Meegeren, like Van Gogh, is afflicted by a creative 'genius' which enables him to emulate, if not surpass, the 'Old Masters':

> 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.
>
> When they hauled me in before the war-crimes tribunal
> No one suspected, nobody knew
> The agony of regrets
> With which I told my secrets.
> They missed the point, of course –
> To hell with national heritage,
> I sold my *soul* for potage.
>
> The experts were good value, though,
> When they went to work on my studio -
> Not I, but *they* were the frauds.
> I revolutionized their methods.
>
> Now, nothing but claptrap
> About mere technique and true vision,
> As if there were a distinction –
> Their way of playing it down.
> But my genius will live on,
> For even at one remove
> The thing I meant was love.

For Mahon, the sheer quality of Van Meegeren's forgeries ('better than the best'), which were motivated by selflessness ('The thing I meant was love'), made light of any crime and the designation *fakes*. Rather, their existence questions the very notion of originality, suggesting in a kind of Borgesian deconstruction that imitation is the true ground of great art. As Mahon pointed out in 'Felicities and Forgeries' in 1971, 'soul' (artistically speaking) may be 'a mysterious felicity of technique'.[113] It is no surprise then that the speaker in 'The Forger' dismisses as 'claptrap' the spurious distinctions of the so-called 'experts' regarding

[113] Mahon, 'Felicities and Forgeries', the *Listener*, 4 February 1971. The reference to 'soul' is picked up in the poem in the allusion to the biblical story of Jacob and Esau in the second stanza: 'To hell with national heritage, / I sold my *soul* for potage'.

technique and vision. Here the poem offers an implied justification for the ironic conscience which adopts, mimics, imitates or parodies the voices of different writers. In confirming the value of imitation in painting, it also endorses its allusive intertextuality. For as Mahon remarked in relation to one of his own attempts at a 'Durcan poem': 'Only an original and memorable voice lends itself to pastiche: it's the mediocre who are inimitable' (Ciaran Carson echoed the point later in relation to Van Meegeren, citing the well-known proverb, 'imitation is the sincerest form of flattery').[114]

'The Forger' thus has great significance for Mahon's own 'vision' and 'technique', as reflected in the final line ('A light to transform the world'), which recalls the crucial phrase in 'Poetry in Northern Ireland' ('a light to lighten the darkness'). To adopt its terms, those who dismiss his early poetry as aesthetically disengaged, marked by a certain posturing or fabricated cosmopolitanism, *miss the point*. For the ironic conscience, 'genius' is derivative in the sense of drawing on different sources, its very notion of identity predicated on multiple selves. Hence, what Haughton termed, the 'self-conscious culture of mimicry' in Mahon's early poetry or its penchant for translation as 'a form of virtual originality'.[115] In *Night-Crossing* this is evident in the poems on De Quincey, Van Gogh and Van Meegeren, as well as those featuring others artists like Beckett and Villon.[116]

'Legacies (after Villon)', the final poem in *Night-Crossing*, is particularly important in highlighting Mahon's gift for imitation. As one of his earliest translations or creative adaptations, it wryly evokes the spirit of the original in which the speaker, 'sacrificed for love', prepares to 'be enrolled above / Among the amorous elect', *sans* sword, shoes, clothes and scraggy locks:

---

[114] Mahon, 'Orpheus Ascending: The Poetry of Paul Durcan' in Colm Tóibín (ed.), *The Kilfenora Teaboy: A Study of Paul Durcan* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1996), p. 164. The article first appeared in *The Irish Review*. A revised version is included in *Journalism*. Commenting on Van Meegren in interview, Carson remarked: 'Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. It's true. And we often imitate without knowing we imitate. In fact, when you look at it, everything's imitation' (*In the Chair*, p. 151). His book *Fishing for amber: a long story* (London: Granta Books, 1999) refers to the Dutch painter.

[115] Haughton, ''The Importance of Elsewhere': Mahon and Translation' in Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, pp. 179-180.

[116] 'Exit Molloy' (*Night-Crossing*, p. 18), the fourth poem in the sequence 'Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc', depicts the eponymous anti-hero of Beckett's novel. He is the ultimate outsider who, although 'already dead', can still 'hear the birds sing on over [his] head'. The theme of dispossession reaches an extremity in this poem, which offers a black comic image of 'unaccommodated man' in a heap ('in a dark ditch I lie wintering'). In interview with Kelly (p.11), Mahon made the link with Shakespeare's *King Lear*, mentioning how Beckett 'leaves you with the poor bare forked animal'.

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.[117]

The poem hones the ironic bequests of Villon's character, making 'his perky bravado a rebuke for less debonair poetics and ways of life'.[118] It gives free rein to Mahon's wit, allowing him to dramatise his own displacement while indulging the kind of 'humour, mischief, wickedness' he found wanting in Hewitt's prescriptions for the Ulster writer. As Kathleen McCracken pointed out, he takes liberties with the translation in order to incorporate aspects of his own aesthetic.[119] Such self-projection is a feature of the ironic conscience, part of its dialogue with *les déshérités*. As we shall see in the chapters on *Poems 1962-1978* and *The Hunt by Night*, this dialogue continues in the numerous translations or creative adaptations, which highlight the facility with which Mahon adopts, mimics, imitates or parodies the voices of different writers.

---

[117] The measure of Mahon's achievement is better understood in the context of Lowell's version in *Imitations* (1961), which fails to evoke the spirit of the original.

[118] Brown, 'Home and Away: Derek Mahon's France', in Barbara Hayley and Christopher Murray (eds.), *Ireland and France, A Bountiful Friendship* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992), p. 146.

[119] See Kathleen McCracken, 'Homophrosyne: The French Element In The Poetry Of Derek Mahon', in Joseph McMinn (ed.), *The Internationalism of Irish Literature and Drama* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992), pp. 181-192. She outlined in particular Mahon's stress on silence, which he associated with the practice of writing, frequently from windows or isolated positions on the margins. Thus Villon's words '*...en escripvant, / Ce soir, seulet, estant en bonne...*' ('while writing, / Tonight, alone, in a good state') appear in Mahon's poem as 'Alone in the silence of my room / And being in the mood to write' (p. 184).

CHAPTER THREE

LIVES (1972): THE SATIRICAL MODE OF THE IRONIC CONSCIENCE

3.1 The Cultural Context of *Lives*.

The outbreak of the Troubles in 1969 unearthed layers of sectarian animosity and hatred in Northern Ireland which had remained buried, at least partly, over previous decades. There was growing civil disorder on the streets of Derry and Belfast, resulting in British troops being sent to the province in August 1969. The full intractability of the conflict became clear as the army had to erect a 'peace line' in parts of Belfast to contain the rioting and keep Protestants and Catholics apart. The Scarman Report in 1972 estimated that, in July, August and September 1969, 1.6 per cent of all households in Belfast were forced to move - 1,505 of them Catholic and 315 Protestant (in general, Catholics were forced out of east and north Belfast and Protestants out of west Belfast).[1] Ulster's violent past was like the return of the repressed, enforcing the bitter irony of Mahon's words in 'Glengormley' (*Night-Crossing*): 'The sticks / And stones that once broke bones will not now harm / A generation of such sense and charm'.

Riots, beatings, bombs, burnt-out cars and rubber bullets became a daily reality over the next few years as sectarian violence intensified. August 1971 saw the introduction of internment without trial as Brian Faulkner, the Minister of Home Affairs, announced: 'We are, quite simply, at war with the terrorist, and in a state of war many sacrifices have to be made'.[2] Boiling-point was reached in 1972, the bloodiest year of the conflict, in which the death toll was 496. In January, on Bloody Sunday in Derry, thirteen people were shot dead by British troops. In July, eleven people were killed and one hundred and thirty wounded by twenty-one IRA bombs on Bloody Friday in Belfast. The Northern Ireland Parliament at Stormont was prorogued and direct rule from Westminister introduced, marking the collapse of the Unionist regime which had lasted as a system of government for fifty years. The violence continued in 1973 (the year both Ireland and the United Kingdom joined the

[1] These figures are taken from Paul Bew and Gordon Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-1999* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999), p. 18.
[2] Ibid., p. 36. The quotation cited is from *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*.

European Economic Community) making this period the worst in the conflict. Between them the years 1972 and 1973 accounted for over a quarter of all deaths between 1969 and 1990.[3]

The Troubles provide a backdrop for Northern Irish poetry of the period. It includes Mahon's second volume *Lives* (1972) whose title alludes, on one level, to the loss of innocent lives (soldiers, policemen, civilians) during this period and Heaney's *Wintering Out* (1972), which initiated the sequence of bog poems which followed in *North* (1975).[4] It also takes in Longley's *An Exploded View* (1973), which links the violence in Northern Ireland with the open wounds of history (the First World War in particular), and Deane's *Gradual Wars* (1972), with its evocation of murderous shadows in battle-scarred Derry.[5] As the dedicatory poem to *An Exploded View*, 'For Derek, Seamus and Jimmy', expressed it:

> We are trying to make ourselves heard
> Like the lover who mouths obscenities
> In his passion, like the condemned man
> Who makes a last-minute confession,
> Like the child who cries out in the dark.[6]

This sense of darkness is reflected in the cover photograph of *Lives*, which depicts Belfast ship-workers returning home with the image of the Titanic looming in the background. It is especially evident in the poem 'A Dark Country', as Mahon imagines an apocalyptic sea-change for the city of Belfast:

> Recognizing,
> As in a sunken city
> Sea-changed at last, the surfaces
> Of once familiar places.
> With practice you might decipher the whole thing
> Or enough to suffer the relief and the pity.

The desired transformation seems almost a form of expiation for the extremities of feeling occasioned by return ('a waste / Of rage, self-pity bordering on self-hate'), leaving the speaker bereft and forlorn ('A blind man without comfort at the gate'). The concluding statement ('With practice you might...'), which recalls the ambivalent 'should' in the final lines of 'Glengormley' and 'In Belfast' (*Night-Crossing),* highlights Mahon's increasing

---

[3] Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson, *Northern Ireland 1921-2001: Political Forces and Social Classes* (London: Serif, 2002), p. 188.

[4] *Wintering Out* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972) also marked Heaney's departure to live in the South of Ireland (at Glanmore, near Ashford, in County Wicklow).

[5] Longley, *An Exploded View* (London: Gollancz, 1973); Deane, *Gradual Wars* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972). Longley's poem 'Wounds', an elegy to his father, exemplifies this historical association, connecting the 1914-18 war with the casualties of the Troubles.

[6] Derek, Seamus and Jimmy refers to Mahon, Heaney and Simmons respectively.

ambivalence towards the 'sick counties we call home'.[7] Any understanding of this place, it suggests, is sufficient only 'to suffer the relief and the pity', the final word echoing that of 'In Belfast'. The mood of quiet desperation offers little relief from the interior landscape or 'dark country' of one's own cultural background.

This bleak mood is better understood in the context of Mahon's life at the time. After his return from America in 1967, he gradually came to experience what he termed 'a state of intense exasperation with Ireland'.[8] Such exasperation was heightened by the brutal nature of the sectarian conflict in the province. In a revealing interview in 1995, he explained just how traumatic this whole period was for him:

> I felt very far from home in those years. (In fact, for a large part of my life I've been *terrified* of home.) I think that this has a great deal to do with what started happening in Northern Ireland in 1968, 1969 – how it took me by surprise. I'd been away from it for a bit, not too long, but I was close enough to get burned inside. (I'm thinking of the marches, of Burntollet and so on.) I was horrified, and I didn't go up there after a certain point. No, that's not true. I would go up to Belfast from time to time, right up to 1970. In some sense (this may sound very phony) it was almost as if the things that were happening up there were happening literally to me. I felt 'beaten-up'. I wonder if others felt the same. I felt that I had been guilty of something I wasn't aware of. Although I've never been a motorist, I felt as perhaps a hit-and-run driver must feel when he wakes up the next morning. It was extremely upsetting, especially when the death toll started mounting. I couldn't deal with it. I could only develop a kind of contempt for what I felt was the barbarism, on both sides. But I knew the Protestant side; I knew them inside out. I was one of them, and perhaps I couldn't bear to look at my own face among them. So I adopted a 'plague on both your houses' attitude.[9]

These comments shed further light on the issue of displacement as outlined in relation to *Night-Crossing*. The conflict in the North served only to intensify Mahon's sense of alienation, leaving him racked by feelings of guilt, horror and contempt, particularly in the early 1970s when the death toll was at its worst. The 'plague on both your houses' attitude encapsulates his disillusion or the extent of his revulsion towards 'the barbarism, on both sides'.

---

[7] The phrase, which puns on the 'Six Counties' of Northern Ireland, is from Longley's poem 'To Seamus Heaney' in *An Exploded View* (1972). As outlined in Chapter Two (p. 72), *might* is one of those signature words which reflects the 'negative capability' of the ironic conscience.

[8] Mahon, in interview with Brown in 1985, stated: '...in 1970 I'd been living in Ireland for several years, I'd been living here in Dublin, and I remember quite distinctly that I was in a state of intense exasperation with Ireland, especially since the troubles had started up and it seemed to me at the time that the troubles were almost certainly going to take a sectarian turn', p. 12.

[9] Mahon, *In the Chair*, pp. 115-6.

This note of exasperation surfaced in Mahon's work as a literary journalist during this period, only it was by no means confined to the North of Ireland. Rather it extended to the island as a whole which he deemed both backward and bigoted, marked by repressive institutions. In March 1970, the first issue of *Atlantis* (on whose editorial board he served, alongside Seamus Deane and W. J. Mc Cormack) damned parochialism by declaring its aim 'to see Ireland in an international perspective, to lift its drowsy eyelid and disturb it into a sense of relationship and awareness'.[10] This impression of Ireland as a place in which a sort of dozy insularity prevailed also appeared in 'Poetry in Northern Ireland' (1970), where he noted a deadening provinciality in poets from the South (a point reiterated in his Introduction to *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* (1972), with its reference to 'parochial self-content'). Like MacNeice, Mahon believed that the country, not having been in the War, had isolated itself and become inward looking or out of touch with modernity. Events in 'the forgotten North', he maintained, had forced Ireland back into the twentieth century, disturbing its complacent insularity.[11]

'Homecoming', the opening poem in *Lives*, captures this sense of stasis. It sees the poet-speaker return from 'Boston to Dublin', only to find that nothing has altered since he left:

> Bus into town
> and, sad to say,
> no change from when
> he went away
> two years ago.
> Goes into bar,
> affixes gaze
> on evening star.
> Skies change but not
> souls change; behold
> this is the way
> the world grows old.
> Scientists, birds,
> we cannot start

[10] Cited by Brown in his Introduction to *Journalism*, p. 16. The five man editorial board also included Augustine Martin, a lecturer in English at UCD (University College Dublin) and Michael Gill, a Dublin publisher (Gill and Macmillan).

[11] In interview with Brown, p. 12, Mahon remarked: 'Like Louis MacNeice and others, I always believed that Ireland should have been in the war. I understand the arguments against but I think in the last analysis Ireland should have been in there. Not having been in the war shunted Ireland to the sidelines, and I think she's been forced back into the twentieth century by events in the North, by the forgotten North'. Prior to entry into the EEC (European Economic Community), Ireland's cultural self-image was ruralist and repressive, the influence of the Catholic Church predominant in the South (its special position in Eamonn de Valera's constitution was only removed by the electorate in 1972).

at this late date
with a pure heart,
or having seen
the pictures plain
be ever in-
nocent again.

By 1970 Mahon had enough of the way 'the world grows old' in Ireland, turning instead to London where he continued to work as a literary journalist. The final lines, echoing Larkin's 'MCMXIV' ('Never such innocence again'), firmly suggest that there is no refuge to be found in the past, for 'at this late date' in history we can never 'be in- / nocent again' (the split line break effectively symbolising the 'pure heart' ruptured).[12] The first and final poem of this volume thus play off one another, 'Homecoming' (in response to the central question posed in 'Beyond Howth Head': 'and who would trade self-knowledge...') dismissing the possibility of any 'prelapsarian' or 'prescriptive innocence'. It indulges its own Beckettian 'bleak *reductio*' (graphically evident in the lineation) as 'sad to say', where Ireland is concerned, it's always a case of the nothing new, to echo 'Ecclesiastes' on the following page. 'Goes into bar, / affixes gaze / on evening star' mocks the downward spiral into melancholia with grim precision. The only way up, it would appear, is to get out - the poem, like the final verse-letter, signaling the necessity for pastures new.

On a formal level, the need for change and development found expression in Mahon's desire to experiment with different poetic styles in *Lives*. This experimentation was very much in keeping with his sense of poetry as an evolving or dynamic process. As he outlined in an earlier letter to Longley from Canada in 1966:

> I am, of course, making a conscious effort to introduce new stylistic devices into my work – to train my 'voice' with variety, and perhaps prepare the ground for something richer than the regular rhyming pentameters we have loved for so long, God bless them. Is this ill-advised? I don't think so. You have to keep running to stay where you are. I am becoming more and more aware of poetry as a dynamic process. One must keep growing and expanding.[13]

---

[12] The final stanza of Larkin's 'MCMXIV', from *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1964) reads: 'Never such innocence, / Never before or since, As changed itself to past / without a word – the men / Leaving the gardens tidy, / The thousands of marriages / Lasting a little while longer: / Never such innocence again'. In 'Death of a Film-Star' in *Night-Crossing* (p. 10), Mahon also used a split line break to highlight the dramatic effect of a collision between opposed forces: 'when an immovable body meets an ir- / Resistible force, something has got to give'.

[13] Mahon, letter from Toronto (c. Dec. 1966), cited by Clark in *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 34.

These remarks highlight Mahon's literary ambition and strenuous efforts to introduce new forms and tonal variety into his work. In *Lives*, this includes the element of satire, partly as a result of his increasing disenchantment with the unchanging nature of affairs in Ireland ('no change from when / he went away / two years ago' as 'Homecoming' expressed it), not to mention the violence in the North. Such satire may be seen as Mahon's attempt to forge the conscience of his own (to recall the opening line of 'In Belfast'), or critique, if not redefine, 'the national psyche', to adapt the terms of his *Sphere Book* Introduction in relation to the work of Austin Clarke and Patrick Kavanagh:

> Clarke and Kavanagh are known as satirists, Clarke more so than Kavanagh. The word is unfortunate, since it seems to imply quite unnecessary reservations about the scope and nature of their work. It is, in fact, their satirical (or, to use a nineteen-thirtyish term, 'social') content that distinguishes them from their lesser-known contemporaries; for Clarke's anti-clerical poems and Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* express a central preoccupation of the poetry since Yeats – the redefinition of the national psyche, the attempt (in Joyce's phrase) 'to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race'. Clarke and Kavanagh have done much to forge that conscience. [14]

The satirical element is central to the ironic conscience in *Lives*. It represents a new mode of engagement, part of Mahon's attempt to expose the shortcomings of the Irish psyche, including the Northern Protestant community, from a variety of spatial and temporal angles. These satirical perspectives which, as Haughton argued, reflect a 'new and drastic historical consciousness', served to extend the scope and nature of his early poetry.[15] They draw upon an array of different influences, Beckett in particular. From the opening poem 'Homecoming' to the final verse-letter 'Beyond Howth Head', his 'bleak *reductio*' can be felt formally and thematically. Formally, the Beckettian note registers in the shift away from regular rhyming pentameters to more austere, constrained verse forms and in the droll yet disconsolate eloquence which exploits the comic possibilities of language. Thematically, it surfaces in the preoccupation with life on the margins; in the satirical exposure of different forms of human pretension; in the subversive critique of cherished notions of history, nationality or identity; and in Mahon's increasing doubts about the efficacy of art. Beckett's influence is thus crucial to understanding the operation of the ironic conscience in this volume, in particular its new satirical mode.

---

[14] Mahon, Introduction to *The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Poetry* (1972), p. 13.
[15] Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 58.

3.2 The Influence of Beckett on the Ironic Conscience in *Lives*.

While the influence of MacNeice continues in *Lives* (notably in the verse-letter 'Beyond Howth Head'), the most significant presence is that of Beckett whom Mahon came to appreciate during his final year in Trinity.[16] Although evident in *Night-Crossing* ('Exit Molloy' from the sequence 'Four Walks in the Country near Saint Brieuc' reflected a shared connection with France), the Beckettian voice is much more predominant in *Lives*. His satirical perspectives, mordant humour or metaphysical sense of the absurd, resonated strongly with Mahon. As Edna Longley argued:

> Insofar as their Irish context matters, it is possible to see Beckett and Mahon as aesthetically living out an obliging racial death-wish (arising in Mahon's case from his cultural disowning of 'his own', despite some loving portraits of Belfast workers). It is equally possible to see them as mounting a vital and radical assault on the sniffing of 'ancient faeces' in actual and literary Ireland.[17]

In this regard, Mahon's essay 'Poetry in Northern Ireland' and his *Sphere Book* Introduction can be seen to echo certain views expressed by Beckett in 1934, particularly that of Irish poets' 'flight from self-awareness' and writing out of an 'accredited theme'.[18] Like him, Mahon targeted the Revival aesthetic for its avoidance of particular subjects, arguing that it lacked the 'metaphysical unease' necessary for 'all poetry of lasting value'. The latter recalls Beckett's idea of a rupture or metaphysical disjunction between 'subject' and 'object', between the perceiving sensibility and everything in the external world, 'from the burnt match to the farthest star'.[19] Beckett's views thus informed Mahon's reading of twentieth century Irish poetry and alerted him to the possibilities of an alternative aesthetic (what

---

[16] In interview with Brown, *Poetry Ireland*, 14 (Autumn 1985), p. 18, Mahon remarked '...I responded to Beckett, whom I read in my last year at Trinity, in the same way I responded to MacNeice, whom I read in my last year at school. I felt in each case, here was a familiar voice whispering in my ear'.

[17] Edna Longley, 'Stars and Horses, Pigs and Trees', p. 478. The phrase 'ancient faeces' is from Beckett's short story 'First Love' in *Samuel Beckett, Collected Shorter Prose 1945-1980* (London: John Calder, 1986), p. 8. The relevant passage is cited in footnote 30.

[18] Beckett, 'Recent Irish Poetry' in *Disjecta* (London: John Calder, 1983), p. 71.

[19] Mahon, 'The Existential Lyric', *Journalism*, p. 56. He pointed out that this rupture was not 'the social and cultural phenomenon so often adumbrated by English poets, but rather a metaphysical disjunction between 'subject' and 'object''. The article, a review of Beckett's *Collected Poems in English and French*, first appeared in the *New Statesman* in 1977. The reference to 'metaphysical unease' in the *Sphere Book* Introduction is cited in Chapter Two (p. 75).

Beckett deemed 'the existential lyric') more in accord with his own underlying sense of displacement.[20]

Edna Longley's remark about Mahon 'aesthetically living out an obliging racial death-wish' can be seen in several poems in *Lives*, which feature a satirically conceived post-historical moment. This is linked with Beckett and the Protestant imagination which, 'nourished as it is on the Book of Revelation' (as Paulin stated in *Minotaur*) 'reacts to extreme pressure by imagining apocalypse, purging fire, a new order'.[21] For Mahon in this volume, it results in poems of exquisite reduction which reflect a society purged of repressive institutions or pared back to the terminal minimum. This is partly in atonement or retribution for those feelings of guilt, horror and contempt which he experienced as a result of the sectarian conflict, as opposed, in Beckett's case, to the sin of having been born.[22]

What appealed most to Mahon in Beckett, however, was his searching irony with regard to language and the sharpness of his satirical wit. In his 1974 essay 'MacNeice in Ireland and England', he remarked that it would be hard to deny 'some sort of Irish sensibility' in the work of both Beckett and MacNeice, which he outlined as:

> A mordancy perhaps, and a fascination with the fact of language itself, deriving from an inherited sense of the lethal possibilities of words:
>
> *Natives of poverty, children of malheur,*
> *The gaiety of language is our seigneur.*[23]

The quotation from Stevens is particularly apt in relation to Beckett's derelicts, including Molloy, whose sole relief from hardship is 'the gaiety of language'. It alone allows them to crack a smile in the face of misery, knowing only too well (to cite *Endgame*) that 'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness'. *Malheur*, in Beckett, is often hilarious, as hitting rock bottom leaves 'nowhere to go but up'.[24] It is this acerbic humour exploiting the comic, if not lethal,

---

[20] Mahon, 'The Existential Lyric', *Journalism*, p. 56. Beckett coined the phrase, as Mahon indicated, when writing about the Irish poet Thomas MacGreevy (a close friend of Beckett's).

[21] Paulin, *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 167. The context of this statement is the work of D. H. Lawrence.

[22] Mahon's sense of involvement in the violence is evident in the passage cited earlier: 'But I knew the Protestant side; I knew them inside out. I was one of them, and perhaps I couldn't bear to look at my own face among them' (*In the Chair* interview, p. 116).

[23] Mahon, 'MacNeice in Ireland and England', *Journalism*, p. 21. The quotation is from Wallace Stevens's poem 'Esthétique Du Mal'.

[24] In interview with Willie Kelly, *The Cork Review*, 2, (1981) p. 11, Mahon remarked: 'Sometimes I have a curious sense that Beckett is almost a sentimental writer, and if he's a sentimental writer I don't know who isn't. Having hit rock bottom as you do with him, you know there's nowhere to go but up'.

possibilities of words that drew Mahon to Beckett and which underlies the ironic conscience in this volume. In the 1986 article, 'A Tribute to Beckett on his Eightieth Birthday', he cited specific instances of such wit:

> And indeed his apprehension of the 'real world' is painfully, if often hilariously, acute. 'Born of a wet dream and dead before morning', he might have led a happy death, but the blackest humour, if not exactly cheerfulness, keeps breaking in, for an important thing to remember about Beckett is that he is one of the funniest of modern writers, a fact often lost sight of in the sea of exposition. Ultimately, said Jacques Tati, humour is in the legs. Beckett uses words as legs, tripping over himself syntactically in a doomed effort to make himself clear: 'There are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said'. And again: 'Let us, for once, be foolish enough not to turn tail. All have turned wisely tail, before the ultimate penury'.[25]

A similar grim felicity marks the satirical mode of the ironic conscience in *Lives*, as Beckett's voices from beyond the grave can be heard in poems like 'An Image from Beckett', 'Consolations of Philosophy', 'Entropy' and 'What Will Remain'. Black humour too keeps breaking in, inflecting the satire in multi-layered and complex ways, by turns laconic and droll, caustic or self-deprecating. It is essential to the ironic conscience in this volume, offsetting the bleaker aspects of Mahon's alienation, his 'plague on both your houses' attitude to Protestant and Catholic factions in the North. Hence, the crucial influence of Beckett as a familiar voice in *Lives*, which takes grim delight in articulating 'the ultimate penury' with precision, each word syntactically honed for the play of humour:

> With Beckett I've always felt that there was a friendlier, a matier kind of voice speaking in my ear. I've always felt a great affinity with Beckett...I think the first time I read Beckett I found him so hilariously funny, and it was exactly the kind of humour that I've always enjoyed. I felt instantly that I'd found, if not my writer, certainly *one* of my writers, and also of course I think something of a cultural nature having to do with being an Irish Protestant as well.[26]

The link with Beckett as an Irish Protestant bears upon Mahon's doubts about the efficacy of art. This is a new development in *Lives* which can also be traced to the poet's

---

[25] Mahon, 'A Tribute to Beckett on his Eightieth Birthday', *Journalism*, p. 62 (originally written for the *Observer* in 1986). The first quotation Mahon cited is one of Beckett's wry comments concerning his own life. The two final quotations, which Mahon also referred to in the opening paragraph of his 1976 article 'Sam's Think' in the *New Statesman*, are from the third of Beckett's 'Dialogues with Georges Duthuit'. This article (a review of John Pilling's *Samuel Beckett*) is included in *Journalism*, pp. 58-60.

[26] Mahon, interview with Brown 1985, p. 18. In the extract cited, he distinguishes Beckett's voice from that of Yeats, who 'is grand and magnificent and at a distance a splendid monument'.

increasing disillusion with Ireland. It is as if the devastating effects of the Troubles triggered a certain Protestant distrust of the aesthetic as a stain upon silence.[27] Because Protestant culture abjures the image, Protestant writers often seek to break with the past and destroy the aesthetic. This impulse underlies the apocalyptic strain in this volume just as it shapes Beckett's satirically conceived pre-, or post-, historical scenarios (before birth or beyond the grave). Similarly, it accounts for Mahon's doubts about art and the role of the poet (explicitly dramatised in 'Rage for Order'), as it informs Beckett's association of art with failure ('the ultimate penury').[28]

Beckett is thus the central influence on the ironic conscience in *Lives*, shaping its satirical perspectives and doubts about the significance of art, particularly in the context of violence. The volume's title, which alludes to victims of the conflict in the North of Ireland, also echoes the Beckettian idea of *The Lost Ones* (1972) or the marginalised whose lives are neglected by history.[29] As 'Beyond Howth Head' suggests, it looks well beyond the shores of Ireland. This broad focus, as we shall see, signals a shift in the ironic conscience from a private to a more politically engaged or public voice, as Mahon mounts his own radical assault on 'the charm of our country' (to echo Beckett's short story 'First Love') and the larger cultural networks of contemporary society.[30]

3.3 The Satirical Mode of the Ironic Conscience in *Lives*.

For schematic purposes, Mahon's satirical perspectives in *Lives* may be grouped into two particular categories. First, the satirical 'long view' encompassing vast stretches of history, often with an apocalyptic strain which imagines the disintegration of society.[31] Secondly, the

---

[27] 'The Legacy of John Calvin', the opening chapter of Barry Sloan's book, *Writers and Protestantism in the North of Ireland: Heirs to Damnation* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), pp. 8-33, discusses the complex Calvinistic inheritance of Ulster Protestantism, with its suspicion of the artistic imagination and abhorrence of the merely decorative.

[28] Mahon cited Beckett's declaration that 'to be an artist is to fail as no other dare fail' in his essay, 'A Noise Like Wings: Beckett's Poetry', in *Irish University Review* 24, 1 (1984) p. 82, and in his Introduction to *Words in the Air* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1998), p. 12.

[29] Mahon singled out Beckett's *The Lost Ones* in 'Sam's Think', *Journalism* (p. 59). According to Bew and Gillespie, in *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-1999*, p. 5, 3,700 lives were lost in the violence in the North of Ireland.

[30] As Beckett facetiously stated in 'First Love' (p. 8): 'What constitutes the charm of our country, apart of course from its scant population, and this without help of the meanest contraceptive, is that all is derelict, with the sole exception of history's ancient faeces'. 'Beyond Howth Head', as we shall see, makes it own witty reference to contraceptives.

[31] Mahon applies this term, the 'long view', to the work of J. G. Farrell, as outlined in Chapter Four on *The Snow Party*.

satirical close-up which targets more specific ills or social content (as Mahon expressed it in relation to Clarke and Kavanagh's work). We will address each in turn as part of Mahon's attempt to forge the conscience of his own people or fly by the nets of nationality and religion.

3.3.1 Satirical Perspectives: the Long View.

'What Will Remain' and 'Entropy' enact their own bleak reduction of humanity, holed up on the margins without any of the trappings of so-called progress. As the former expressed it:

> 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.

The opening lines, suggestive of atomic or nuclear apocalypse, point to a post-historical wilderness in which society is returned to its most primitive state, to 'the blank nature before / Whiskey, before scripture'. Such elemental existence has little regard for religion or politics, least of all issues of nationality or identity. Against the vast perspective of time, the poem suggests, all our cherished credos and political beliefs appear as pulp ('soft / Vegetables' rather than 'ancient faeces') for daws or dogs to peck at ('One dog rooting the / Red guts of another'). The tone reflects a certain world-weary *chagrin* at the human stain and hankering after release in the guise of some 'dark / Repose'.

'Entropy' opens with an alternative vision of humanity eking out an existence on the margins, bereft of all the creature comforts of suburbia (a variation, perhaps, on one of Beckett's existential lyrics, which Mahon described as 'a post-lapsarian, indeed apocalyptic sphere'[32]):

[32] Referring to Beckett's 'Saint-Lô', Mahon noted that the final lines 'move abruptly into a post-lapsarian, indeed apocalyptic sphere, where the landscape is rather one by Max Ernst (*L'Europe après La Pluie*, perhaps)

We are
Holing up here
In the difficult places –

In caves,
Terminal moraines
And abandoned farmhouses,

The wires cut,
The old Citroën
Disposing itself for

Death among
The inscrutable,
Earth-inheriting dandelions.

This process of reduction or 'par[ing] life to the bone', which is mirrored formally in terse stanzaic form, sees us surrounded by the detritus of industrial technology. Our legacy is little more than a waste of commodities: an 'old Citroën', a few 'Ditched bicycles' and 'The bronze shards / Of a monumental sculptor'. The satirical aside 'O / Time thy pyramids...' highlights the paltriness of human achievement in comparison with the wonders of previous civilisations. At the close, we are reduced to vestigial life forms as Mahon, adapting a passage from William James, offers another consoling vision of the future:

While we,
Anemones, receive
On our bare rock

Whatever
Nourishment the wash
Of the waves may bring.[33]

'Entropy' takes Beckett's minimalism a step further by stripping everything away, leaving us not simply with 'the bare forked animal' but with the sessile anemone.[34] There is a wry sense of the absurd in such satire which pokes fun at the mess humanity makes of the world. It turns bitterness into bleak comedy obliquely suggesting (to adapt James's remark) that only without concepts will humans learn to live and let live on their patch of land or 'bare

---

and the music by Ligeti' ('A Noise Like Wings: Beckett's Poetry', *Journalism*, p. 53). While in Beckett's poem, the old mind sinks 'ghost-forsaken...into its havoc', in 'Entropy' we sink into a state of terminal stasis.

[33] Andrews cited James's passage, from *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1979), in his article, 'The Poetry of Derek Mahon: 'places where a thought might grow'', p. 245: 'Had we no concepts we should live simply 'getting' each successive moment of experience, as the sessile sea-anemone on its rock receives whatever nourishment the wash of the waves may bring'.

[34] As Mahon stated in interview with Kelly, p.11: 'There are a great many middle-brow writers who provide consolation. Beckett strips all that away, leaves you with the bare forked animal'. The focus on vestigial life forms prefigures Mahon's preoccupation with mute phenomena in *The Snow Party*. There, they provide a satirical perspective on humanity as the articulate centre of the universe.

rock'. The implications for the North of Ireland are obvious, numbered as it was among the more 'difficult places' at the time (the reference to 'reading / Gibbon' links its conflict with other narratives of decline and fall).

'An Image from Beckett' in particular highlights the influence of Beckett on the satirical stance of *Lives*, drawing on Pozzo's outburst at the close of *Waiting for Godot*. As Mahon stated in interview:

> I've always been struck by the line in *Waiting for Godot*, 'They give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more' – in fact I've written a poem about it. Things are here before us, and they'll be here after us. This is perhaps a remote secular echo of the Church of Ireland liturgy with which I grew up.[35]

The poem dramatises that instant, which acts as a structural refrain, offering its own reflection on human transience or how quickly we pass through the noose of our finite being (to echo 'Glengormley'):

> Our hair and excrement
>
> Litter the rich earth
> Changing, second by second,
> To civilizations.
>
> It was good while it lasted;
> And if it only lasted
> The Biblical span
>
> Required to drop six feet
> Through a glitter of wintry light,
> There is No-one to blame. [36]

The short, pointed three line stanzas heighten the sense of 'drop', as the poem pares life to the dregs. 'Hair and excrement' is the enduring residue of the human stain, the dust of future 'civilizations'. However, the existential chill ('wintry light') is offset by the sardonic six feet Biblical span, as opposed to the psalmist's seventy years, 'or eighty for those who are strong'.[37] The sublime resonance of the divine decree in Genesis that 'it was good', slides into bathos with the qualification 'while it lasted'. Mahon strikes the quintessential

---

[35] Interview with Kelly, p. 11. Pozzo's words, cited by Mahon, follow his furious reaction to Vladimir's sense of time ('Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time!').

[36] The opening line 'In that instant' is repeated in stanza seven, as the light gleaming in *Waiting for Godot* is juxtaposed ironically with the Arnoldian phrase 'sweetness and light' (from *Culture and Anarchy*): 'For in that instant / I was struck by the sweetness and light, / The sweetness and light, // Imagining what grave / Cities, what lasting monuments, / Given the time'. 'Grave' is another of Mahon's finely chosen puns.

[37] Psalm 89 (90) Revised Standard Version: 'All our days pass away in your anger. / Our life is over like a sigh. / Our span is seventy years / or eighty for those who are strong'.

Beckettian note of terminal humour, all the more poignant for the fact that 'There is No-one to blame'.

Bill Tinley viewed the poem as evidence of Beckett's increasing influence on Mahon's work, especially in its concern with such themes as 'the relentless onset of the end, the Bible, the ambiguity of light as a symbol, the voice beyond death'.[38] This voice is also present in 'Consolations of Philosophy' which opens abruptly with the lines: 'When we start breaking up in the wet darkness / And the rotten boards fall from us'. This is not 'the sweet peace of death' (as 'Beyond Howth Head' expressed it) but stark reality, in keeping with Mahon's sense of Beckett as one who hits rock bottom.[39] Yet, the Beckettian *risus purus*, which reads 'cracking up' for 'breaking up' in the opening line, surfaces in the next three stanzas:

> Oh, then there will be the querulous complaining
> From citizens who had never dreamed of this –
> Who, shaken to the bone in their stout boxes
> By the latest bright cars, will not inspect them
>
> And, kept awake by the tremors of new building,
> Will not be there to comment. When the broken
> Wreath bowls are speckled with rain water
> And the grass grows wild for want of a caretaker
>
> Oh, then a few will remember with affection
> Dry bread, mousetrap cheese, and the satisfaction
> Of picking long butts from a wet gutter
> Like daisies from a clover field in summer.

The only consolation of philosophy (*contra* Boethius) is 'querulous complaining' in the afterlife, as the dead are unsettled by a world oblivious to their absence. Nothing like rubbing your face in the grimy details, down to the shock-waves of the 'latest bright cars' and 'tremors of new building'. Like Beckett, Mahon takes grim pleasure in stating the worst fluently, evincing wry 'satisfaction' in *le mot juste*. Though soggy butts replace daisy-chains in our posthumous recollections, life's little privations are remembered with affection. The gaiety of language tempers the *malheur*, as the play of alliteration makes the endgame go down ('shaken to the bone in their stout boxes'). The elapse of generations, as in 'An Image from Beckett', yields but 'a subliminal / Batsqueak of reflex lamentation'. Mahon's biting humour is even more apparent in the revised version of the final stanza in *Poems 1962-1978*:

---

[38] Tinley, 'Harmonies and Disharmonies', *Irish University Review*, pp. 92-3.
[39] Stanza seventeen of 'Beyond Howth Head' states with reference to Chateaubriand: 'This peace is the sweet peace of death / or *l'outre-tombe*' (*Lives*, p. 37).

'Oh, then a few will remember with delight / The dust gyrating in a shaft of light; / The integrity of pebbles; a sheep's skull / Grinning its patience on a wintry sill'.[40]

All of these poems in *Lives* operates on a Beckettian edge (astride a grave, cave, bare rock, mudflat or moraine), as the ironic conscience casts a satiric eye on life and death. In 'Entropy' we are 'holing up', in 'Consolations of Philosophy' 'breaking up', in 'What Will Remain' returning to a state of 'blank nature', while in 'An Image from Beckett' we are littering 'the rich earth'. Their estranged long view illustrates that 'alienated distance' Heaney noted in Mahon's work, influenced as it is by Beckett, whose writing, as Dawe suggested, 'lives inside Mahon's poems in an afterlife of intertextuality'.[41]

The satirical mode of the ironic conscience finds rich expression in the title poem 'Lives' which, as Andrews indicated, is 'a wild playful fantasy of metamorphosis'.[42] The speaker as anthropologist pokes fun at the profession by recalling previous incarnations throughout the course of history. The poem revels in the weird succession of lives and eclectic mix of belief systems, narratives and cultures, mocking fixed notions of history or identity:

> First time out
> I was a torc of gold
> And wept tears of the sun.
>
> That was fun but
> They buried me in the
> Earth two thousand years
>
> Till a labourer
> Turned me up with a pick
> In Eighteen fifty-four
>
> And sold me for
> Tea and sugar in
> Newmarket-on-Fergus.
>
> Once I was an oar
> But stuck in the shore
> To mark the place of a grave
>
> When the lost fleet
> Sailed away. I thought of
> Carthage but soon withered.

[40] 'Consolations of Philosophy', *Poems 1962-1978* (1979), p. 47.
[41] Dawe, 'Heirs and Graces: The Influence and Example of Derek Mahon', p. 51. Heaney, in 'Place and Displacement' (p. 123), used the phrase 'alienated distance' in relation to Mahon's poetry, recognising the difficulty in trying to 'fix' his poetry too schematically: 'I don't want to reduce Derek Mahon's poems to this single theme of alienated distance, for his work also abounds in poems where the social voice is up and away on the back of Pegasus…'
[42] Andrews, 'The Poetry of Derek Mahon: "places where a thought might grow"', p. 243.

The time that I
Liked best was when
I was a bump of clay

In a Navaho rug,
Put there to mitigate
The too godlike

Perfection of that
Merely human artifact.

Oar, torc, bark and clay are all grist to the ironic conscience in parodying the intellectual discipline of anthropology or the ethnic claims of nationalism. As Haughton indicated, these opening stanzas derive from an anecdote in Sean O'Faolain's *The Irish: A Character Study* (1949), used to illustrate the nation's relationship to its past (it centres on the discovery of a torc near Newmarket-on-Fergus in 1854).[43] The poem thus wryly subverts cherished notions of cultural nationalism, especially those linked with land or some essential identity (Nationalist or Unionist). Such notions, it must be remembered, were particularly vexed in the politically charged context of the North of Ireland. For Deane, they were more of a drug than a dream, a form of addiction with devastating consequences. As he stated in the second issue of *Atlantis* in October 1970: 'Unity on any ethnic basis is a drug, and it is one on which most Irishmen are hooked'.[44] Hence, the worst features of the tragedy of violence:

> The idiom of separation is so powerful by now that it can easily press on from exclusiveness, a social attitude, to boycott, a political one, to insulation, a psychic one, to racism, a psychotic one. This is the pass to which ethnic nationalism has, unsurprisingly brought us.[45]

It is in the context of such a separatist mentality that Mahon's satire assumes greater political edge. Its blithe transmigration of borders and boundaries is subversive in its disregard for local attachment, territorial claims or single historical narratives. It is revisionist in exposing 'cultural permeations that political ideologies deny' (to adopt Edna Longley's remark in relation to Northern Irish poetry).[46] If the ancestral songline of the free-floating subject can stretch from Carthage to Arizona, Newmarket-on-Fergus to Tibet, Irish identity might well include the Shankhill and the Falls. 'Lives' thus anticipates themes later explored by poets like Muldoon and Paulin. Muldoon's long narrative poem 'Immram'

---

[43] Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 84.
[44] Deane, 'Mugwumps and Reptiles', *Atlantis*, 2 (October, 1970), p. 6.
[45] Ibid., p. 5.
[46] Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994), p. 62.

parodied the essentialist quest for origins with its own weird transmogrifications (black cat turned blues musician, Atlantic Ocean a 'pool' hall or 'old Deep Water Baptism Mission'), while Paulin's *Fivemiletown* (1987) singled out fragmentation as an essential aspect of identity in Northern Ireland.[47] As he outlined, in relation to the volume's intention:

> I just wanted to displace the concept of national identity, the concept of belonging to your tribe, the idea of tradition and so on. I wanted to wreck that and replace it with something that's plural and infinite, something that moving all the time.[48]

Paulin's remarks are equally applicable to 'Lives' with its deconstructive raid on different cultures and option for a multitude of selves. It too wrecks any 'concept of national identity' based on tribe, tradition or ethnic principle.[49] Here Mahon's poem can be read as a riposte to Heaney, to whom the poem is dedicated, wryly subverting his 'Bog Poems' with their fixation on archetypal or metaphysical realities and quasi-religious identification with the Irish landscape (the reply poem in Northern Irish writing is a further aspect of the creative collaboration referred to in Chapter One, in which close-reading and hard-criticism are common). The heterogeneous emblems ('torc of gold', 'bump of clay', 'tongue of bark', 'stone in Tibet') poke fun at Heaney's idea of an 'indigenous territorial numen', such as Mother Ireland, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, the Shan Van Vocht, fertility goddess or Bog Queen.[50] As Stewart expressed it in relation to national consciousness, contrasting Mahon's perspective with that of Heaney (while recalling the anemone image of 'Entropy'):

> By contrast, Mahon offered a series of witty responses addressing philosophical rather than political aspects of the matter and in particular the notion that the archaeological treasures of Ireland are receptacles of national memory or conduits for the national spirit. Put in other terms, he derided the idea that Irish history concerns a metaphysical entity ('Irishness') and that the national territory ('Ireland') has a greater regard for that entity than any others living in it, whether the humble anemone or an Ulster planter. [51]

---

[47] 'Immram' is the concluding poem of *Why Brownlee Left* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), Muldoon's creative rewriting of the Gaelic *Immram Mael Duin*, in which the hero seeks out his father's murderer. Paulin, *Fivemiletown* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987).

[48] Paulin, interview with Eamonn Hughes, in *Writing Irish: Selected Interviews with Irish Writers from the Irish Literary Supplement*, p. 125. This interview first appeared in *Irish Literary Supplement*, 7 (Fall 1988).

[49] As Deane argued, the question 'What is Irishness?' puts 'the cart before the horse', deeming Irishness the result of unity, not the precondition of it ('Mugwumps and Reptiles', p. 5).

[50] Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', *Preoccupations*, p. 57.

[51] Stewart, ''Solving Ambiguity': The Secular Mysticism of Derek Mahon', p. 60. In this essay Stewart pointed out how 'the literary colloquy between Heaney and Mahon entered an acute stage after the publication of [Heaney's] 'Bogland' and 'The Tollund Man' between 1968 and 1972' (p. 59).

'Lives' thus highlights significant differences between the two poets, contrasting the trajectory of Mahon's vision with Heaney's poetic excavations. While 'Bogland', from Heaney's *Door into the Dark* (1969), mythologises the quest for a grounding centre that holds ('striking / Inwards and downwards'), the ironic conscience skims the surface of cultures and civilisations across four continents.[52] It playfully rejects as 'insolent ontology' the archaeological paradigm evident in Heaney's early poetry, which, in its suggestion of history as a metaphysical entity, may be seen to justify repetitive or pre-determined cycles of conflict (hence, the criticism of *North* (1975) alluded to in Chapter One).[53] As the poem states: 'It all seems / A little unreal…'

'Lives' also highlights how the ironic conscience in Mahon's early poetry deflects a definite sense of the implied author, as in much of Heaney's work. As previously outlined, its shape-changing relishes free agency over rootedness, insisting that the poetic personality is 'incorrigibly plural' (to recall MacNeice's 'Snow'). Such plurality underlies the poem's satirical play as the speaker, refusing to be trapped within any given identity, assumes a multitude of selves, while poking fun at narrowly prescriptive categories:

> So many lives,
> So many things to remember!
>
> …I know too much
> To be anything any more;
> And if in the distant
>
> Future someone
> Thinks he has once been me
> As I am today,
>
> Let him revise
> His insolent ontology
> Or teach himself to pray.

The elusive mobility is heightened by the deft three line stanzas as the subject glides through various states of incarnation, confirming Rorty's remark that ironists, given their shifting or provisional sense of self, are never quite able to take themselves too seriously. They can never 'be anything any more' (as in any *one* thing), preferring plurality over fixity ('So

[52] Europe ('Newmarket-on-Fergus', 'Carthage'), North America ('Navaho', 'Tucson'), Asia ('Tibet') and 'Africa'.

[53] In 'Awakening from the Nightmare: History and Contemporary Literature', pp. 244-246, Brown analysed versions of history operative in Irish literary texts, including Heaney's 1974 essay 'Feeling Into Words' and his volume *North* (1975). Certain versions, as he put it (citing an extract from 'Feeling Into Words') appear to present the Ulster crisis as 'one more manifestation of a conflict between two almost metaphysical realities, the pattern of Irish history pre-determined in pre-history' (p. 244).

many lives' echoes 'So many heroes!' in 'An Image from Beckett', the latter including Thomas Mann's Tonio Kröger and Stendhal's Sorel).[54] The poem in this sense confirms Keats's statement, which Mahon cited later in relation to Jaccottet's work: 'the poetical character is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing – it has no character'.[55] This statement underlies the allusive intertextuality of the ironic conscience, its delight in imitation, mimicry or creative adaptation. It also helps to explain Mahon's impatience with the politics of identity, most notably regarding MacNeice and the question as to whether he is 'really an *Irish* writer?'[56]

As the title poem, 'Lives' is critical to understanding the operation of the ironic conscience in this volume. It exemplifies the oblique yet sharp political edge of its satiric mode which vaporises the national psyche as much as anthropological pretension. In this regard, the surfeit of technological accessories ('An anthropologist / With my own / Credit card, dictaphone, // Army-surplus boots / And a whole boatload / Of photographic equipment) is symptomatic of cultural 'baggage', or the weight of inherited assumptions about nationality and identity which bedevilled political debate in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s.[57] The poem thus seeks to foster an alternative awareness, advocating the need to 'travel light' (as 'Girls in their Seasons' expressed it) in the sense of letting go of restrictive ideologies or 'the *rigor mortis* of archaic postures, political and cultural' ('Poetry in Northern Ireland'). Knowing your place, it suggests, is to challenge divisive notions of tradition, history or national identity and embrace cultural diversity.

---

[54] Stanza six in 'An Image from Beckett' (*Lives*, p. 8) alludes to these characters from Mann's semi-autobiographical novella *Tonio Kröger* (also referred to, as we shall see, in 'The Sea in Winter' in *Poems 1962-1978*) and Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (*The Red and the Black*) (1830): 'So many heroes! / Sorel, perhaps, or / Kröger, given the time'.

[55] Mahon, Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, p. 10.

[56] Mahon's article, 'MacNeice in Ireland and England' (*Journalism*, p. 21) opens with the line: 'The time is coming fast, if it isn't already here, when the question, 'Is So-and-So really an *Irish* writer?' will clear a room in seconds'. A later article for the *Irish Times* in 1988 ('Incorrigibly Plural' in *Journalism*, pp. 47-49) revealed a similar frustration on his part with the issue of MacNeice's identity as a poet: 'Asked if he were an Irish poet or an English one, he would reply that he was simply 'a poet'....Let Ulster claim him, let Ireland claim him, let England claim him; but let him be claimed or reclaimed. He is indeed, as these volumes [Edna Longley's *Louis MacNeice: A Study* and *Selected Poems by Louis MacNeice*, edited by Michael Longley] demonstrate, 'incorrigibly Plural''. The speaker in 'Lives' lays claim to such plurality of identity in an effort to escape the nets of nationality.

[57] Here the poem is indirectly linked with 'The Archaeologist' (*Lives*, p. 12) and 'After Cavafy' (*Lives*, p. 24). The former, dedicated to Hugh Maxton (a pseudonym used by W. J. Mc Cormack, a fellow editor of *Atlantis*), lists 'poles, binoculars, whistles, / Blankets and flasks' among the surfeit of accessories. The latter depicts this preoccupation with material possessions as the new barbarism. Talk 'Of fitted carpets, central / Heating and automatic gear-change', it suggests, denotes a betrayal of the unspoiled virtues of the past (when 'A man could be a wheelwright and die happy').

3.3.2 Satirical Perspectives: the Critical Close-up.

'As It Should Be', is best read with an eye to historical context, its caustic satire (like Longley's 'Wounds') exposing paramilitary violence:

> We hunted the mad bastard
> Through bog, moorland, rock, to the starlit west
> And gunned him down in a blind yard
> Between ten sleeping lorries
> And an electricity generator.
>
> Let us hear no idle talk
> Of the moon in the Yellow River;
> The air blows softer since his departure.
>
> Since his tide-burial during school-hours
> Our kiddies have known no bad dreams.
> Their cries echo lightly along the coast.
>
> This is as it should be.
> They will thank us for it when they grow up
> To a world with method in it.

Chillingly, this victim is killed for the sake of 'a world with method in it'. In the eyes of the purblind speaker, such murder is justified in the interest of a world in which 'our kiddies [know] no bad dreams'. The poem offers a disturbing insight into the sectarian mentality which fuelled such murders, helping to explain Mahon's terror of home (to recall the interview in 1995), especially when the death toll mounted.[58] 'The air blows softer since his departure' is all the more sinister for its understatement, the tone reminiscent of Swift's *saeva indignatio.* The cursory 'Let us hear no idle talk / Of the moon in the Yellow River' (the latter an allusion to Denis Johnston's play in which a character who attempts to blow up an electricity generator is shot dead) reflects the harsh mentality of the *Icarus* version of 'In Belfast' (*Night-Crossing*), where all things literary are dismissed as 'fluent drivel'.[59]

---

[58] Mahon was not alone in his reaction. Heaney, in 'Christmas, 1971', written shortly after his return from Berkeley in America, remarked: 'There are few enough people on the roads at night. Fear has begun to tingle through the place. Who's to know the next target on the Provisional list? Who's to know the reprisals won't strike where you are? The bars are quieter. If you're carrying a parcel you make sure it's close to you in case it's suspected of being about to detonate' (*Preoccupations*, p. 31). By the end of 1971, 174 people died as a result of the Troubles and over 1,500 were interned without trial (Bew and Gillespie, *Northern Ireland: A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-1999*, p. 43).

[59] Like MacNeice, Denis Johnston (1901-1984) worked with the BBC, becoming a war correspondent in 1942 and Director of Programmes in 1946. His play *The Moon in the Yellow River* refers to Li Po, the Chinese Poet, who strove to catch the yellow moon's reflection in the river (most likely the Hwang-Ho in China, noted for the yellow earth it carries). The *Icarus* version of 'In Belfast' is referred to in Chapter Two (p. 71).

While 'As It Should Be' targets the paramilitary mindset, 'Ecclesiastes' exposes the 'sabbatarian grimness' of Ulster Protestantism.[60] It opens with a blast of pent-up energy as facetious mock-identification with the tribe shades into bitter satire:

> God, you could grow to love it, God-fearing, God-
> chosen purist little puritan that,
> for all your wiles and smiles, you are (the
> dank churches, the empty streets,
> the shipyard silence, the tied-up swings) and
> shelter your cold heart from the heat
> of the world, from woman-inquisition, from the
> bright eyes of children.

The bitterness lies in the recognition of just how appealing such dour life-hatred can be to an ego in thrall to its own messianic complex. Repeated references to 'you could' emphasise the allure of playing the role of evangelist preacher or prophet of doom, burying all emotion behind masks of vainglory or self-righteousness. 'Cold heart' echoes the 'squinting heart' of 'In Belfast', while 'Wiles and smiles' recalls its 'humorous formulae' and knowing nods. 'Ecclesiastes' enforces once again the power of conditioning and the control of the group over the individual. Calvinistic Protestantism casts its pall over the speaker (a self-confessed 'purist little puritan') and the city, the Sunday gloom setting the tone for the rest of the week. The 'tied-up swings' reflect the iron grip of repression, as 'the empty streets' and 'shipyard silence' evoke an eerie atmosphere of paralysis or stagnation.[61]

The poem satirises the Puritan ethic which fears women, denies pleasure, flees the lures of the world and banishes all traces of creativity. It is particularly scathing of that mentality which cultivates a harsh zeal or exalted superiority, utterly immune to traces of compassion for the failings of lesser mortals:

> Yes you could
> wear black, drink water, nourish a fierce zeal
> with locusts and wild honey, and not
> feel called upon to understand and forgive
> but only to speak with a bleak
> afflatus, and love the January rains when they
> darken the dark doors and sink hard
> into the Antrim hills, the bog meadows, the heaped
> graves of your fathers.

---

[60] Mahon, 'The Coleraine Triangle', *Journalism*, p. 217. 'Ecclesiastes' first appeared in the *Listener*, 25 July 1968. It also appeared as the title poem in the pamphlet *Ecclesiastes* (Manchester: Phoenix Pamphlet Poets No. 9, 1970).

[61] In 'Mugwumps and Reptiles', p. 10, Deane refers to that Sunday gloom: 'Change is not a matter of excitement. But the desire for it, created by misery and boredom (who could take many more of those Belfast Sundays?) is at least a matter for encouragement'.

These local John the Baptists or self-appointed Lord's anointed are devoid of charisma, 'bleak / afflatus' replacing divine inspiration. Their extremes of asceticism reflect the cold gaze of a punitive deity, casting a shadow of fear over the landscape. Fixated with the cause of their own just souls, they make no concession to human solidarity. Love of the dismal January weather reflects a perverse preference for doom and gloom, while reference to 'the heaped graves', as opposed to the faith of the fathers (to echo a well-known Catholic hymn), suggests a long line in life-denying austerity. The poem's conclusion highlights this sense of sterility, intensifying the speaker's dismay at the possibility of becoming what he instinctively derides:

> Bury that red
> bandana and stick, that banjo, this is your
> country, close one eye and be king.
> Your people await you, their heavy washing
> flaps for you in the housing estates –
> a credulous people. God, you could do it, God
> help you, stand on a corner stiff
> with rhetoric, promising nothing under the sun.

The lines echo the collective dysfunction analysed in 'In Belfast' (the inability to see things as they are, perspectives being always twisted or forced), confirming Erasmus's remark that 'in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king'. For Mahon, it seems, institutionalised religion is more often a case of the blind leading the blind, 'a credulous people' contrasting sharply with the defiance of the fallen angels. The 'red / bandana', which defies all the black garments and 'dark doors', is symbolic of the subversive streak of the ironic conscience which values life's variety and surprise over monotonous uniformity. It keeps 'the colours new' (to recall 'In Carrowdore Churchyard') reflecting an identification with the aesthetic as a transgressive and irrational realm which, as Patricia Horton suggested, 'is a direct challenge to a Protestantism that he perceives as rational and authoritarian' (she linked it with the Dionysian tradition which, with its valorisation of creativity, passion and sexuality, directly opposes the repressive structures of organised religion).[62] The syntactically emphatic 'stiff' enforces the sense of contempt for the dogmatic rigidity and mind-numbing rhetoric of those who, in the words of the biblical preacher from which the poem takes its title, 'promis[e] nothing under the sun'. The last line hammers home the emptiness, the resounding 'nothing' like the final nail in the coffin. For the ironic conscience, as for the

[62] Patricia Horton, 'Degree Zero: Language, Subjectivity and Apocalypse in the Poetry of Derek Mahon', *Irish Studies Review*, 8, 3 (December 2000), p. 355. In the context of 'the Black North', the red bandana takes on even greater symbolic significance.

speaker in 'Ecclesiastes', fierce zeal needs a little humour to lighten up. Evangelists ought to leaven their message with a spark of wit or let the symbolic banjo bring a touch of magic to grim housing estates. Anything to disperse the dark Sabbath cloud or shatter the awful silence, introducing *joie de vivre* to empty streets.

'Ecclesiastes' thus extends the satire in *Lives* to the issue of religion, forensically examining the puritanical mindset which, in its extreme form, strangles all forms of creativity, promising nothing apart from guilt and fear.[63] It is part of Mahon's attempt to hold the mirror up to the northern Protestant community, just as Clarke held the mirror up to Catholic Ireland's 'Ill-fare state' (religion in its institutional form being seen to exploit and cultivate passivity).[64] As Dawe outlined:

> In many of Mahon's poems, a mirror is held up in which the northern Protestant community can see itself. In the unflattering conclusion to 'Ecclesiastes', he comes closer to understanding the nature of that community than any poet I know.[65]

On a lighter note, 'I Am Raftery', after the celebrated Gaelic poem '*Is Mise Raiftearaí*', shifts the focus from religion to art. Here Mahon satirises the role of the artist and the institutionalisation of poetry, projecting the persona of the blind, late eighteenth century *file* (poet) onto a contemporary British campus:

> I am Raftery, hesitant and confused among the
> cold-voiced graduate students and inter-
> changeable instructors. Were it not for the
> nice wives who do the talking I would have
> run out of hope some time ago, and of love.
> I have traded in the simplistic maunderings
> that made me famous for a wry dissimulation,
> an imagery of adventitious ambiguity dredged
> from God knows what polluted underground spring.

The self-doubting poet is confronted by 'cold-voiced' graduates (like the cold-hearted preachers in 'Ecclesiastes') and creative writing instructors.[66] Only the 'nice wives' redeem the tedious business of selling one's soul (as writer-in-residence) for 'two seminars a week'.

---

[63] As Haughton indicated, in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 63, Mahon published another poem, '1 Corinthians 13' in the *Honest Ulsterman* in December 1968, the same year 'Ecclesiastes' was first published. It replaces the preacher's 'bleak / afflatus' with a 'resounding tinkling tongue'. Both poems were included in the pamphlet *Ecclesiastes* (1970).

[64] The phrase is from Clarke's poem, 'The Subjection of Women', in *Austin Clarke: Selected Poems* (Portlaoise: Dolmen Press, 1984), p. 118. It first appeared in the volume *The Echo at Coole and Other Poems* (1968).

[65] Dawe, *False Faces*, p. 67.

[66] Reference to 'another East Anglian winter' suggests one of the new English universities, with such modern facilities as a record library. In *Collected Poems*, Mahon revised the phrase to 'another New England winter'.

The poem sheds light on the 'wry dissimulation' of the ironic conscience in this volume which adopts numerous masks or lives (to echo the title poem). Its 'underground spring' draws from an eclectic range of influences, including not only Gaelic or Anglo-Irish figures like Raftery, Beckett, Kavanagh and Clarke, but Scandinavian, British and American sources, as we shall see in 'Edvard Munch' and 'Beyond Howth Head'.[67] Little wonder then that the speaker treats the world of uniform or marketable poetic method with levity and self-deprecating wit:

> Is it
> empty pockets I play to? Not on your life,
> they ring with a bright inflationary music –
> two seminars a week and my own place reserved
> in the record library. Look at me now,
> my back to the wall, taking my cue from a
> grinning disc-jockey between commercials. [68]

A space in the record library is the measure of success, as the poet resembles a smirking disc-jockey. Better to grin and bear the artistic betrayal in the age-old Apollo versus Mammon dispute. Dark visions gained through starvation or self-destructive excess (romanticism's 'empty pockets') give way to the 'bright inflationary music' of state subsidy.[69] Truly, 'death is near', creatively speaking at least, as the speaker wonders if he can 'survive another East Anglian winter' (this campus poet-cum-DJ is a far cry, as we shall see, from the eccentric, 'crack-voiced' figure of the artist depicted in 'In the Aran Islands').

All of these poems (both the long view and the forensic close-up) illustrate the satirical mode of the ironic conscience in *Lives* and the versatility of Mahon's shape-changing. They are the fruit of his effort to introduce greater variety into his work, to 'keep growing and expanding' (as the early letter to Longley expressed it) by experimenting with new forms or

---

[67] It also includes Greek ('After Cavafy', *Lives*, p. 24) and biblical ('Job's Comforter', *Lives*, p. 21) sources. MacNeice (in 'Beyond Howth Head' particularly) and J. P. Donleavy ('J. P. Donleavy's Dublin', *Lives*, p. 13) may be added to the list of Anglo-Irish influences. Mahon's article on Donleavy ('The Sadness Lurks So Deep', which appeared originally in *Hibernia* in 1970, is included in *Journalism*, pp. 185-188. It refers to several novels of the Anglo-Irish writer, including *The Ginger Man* (1955), a cult work in 1960s Dublin. The opening lines of 'J. P. Donleavy's Dublin' are taken from *The Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B* (1968), appearing also as epigraph to the *Journalism* article ('When you stop to look back and see all those days dreaming of a future. And say then, that was my life').

[68] The final lines are a witty take on the conclusion of the Gaelic version: '*Féach anois mé / Is mo chúl le bhfalla / Ag seinm ceoil / Do phócaí folamh*' ('Behold me now / With my back to the wall / Playing music / To empty pockets').

[69] Mahon's parody of state-subsidised poetry is, no doubt, partly motivated by his suspicion of the American academy. As he wrote to Longley in 1966: 'the big firms in Boston and NY are too busy turning out the well-wrought droppings of tight-assed literocrats who teach at the right places. It's all part of the Great Society, from which God save us. Better a real fish in a real pond than in a vast aquarium kept alive by central heating and artificial light' (cited in Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 110).

incorporating different influences. This experimentation brings greater intellectual range and tonal mobility, as well as a more intense historical and political engagement to his poetry. Anthropologist, ideologue, preacher or wandering bard provide a facetious, if not barbed, outlet for his disillusion, offering an oblique critique of particular aspects of life in Ireland. 'Beyond Howth Head' is clearly the most ambitious of Mahon's early poems, greatly extending the scope of the ironic conscience in this volume. Before addressing it, however, we will return to the influence of Beckett in the context of the poet's increasing doubts about art.

3.4 The Ironic Conscience: Doubts about Art and the Role of the Poet in *Lives*

A number of poems in *Lives* wrestle with conflicting feelings about the aesthetic, particularly in the face of violence (in 1972, the year in which the volume was published, Mahon's earlier remark that 'a good poem is a paradigm of good politics' appeared a little too full of liberal humanist optimism perhaps). Doubts about art and the role of the poet began to surface in his work, reflecting the dialectical awareness of the ironic conscience as well as the influence of Beckett. This new element receives its finest expression in the key poem 'Rage for Order'. It dramatises Mahon's ambivalence about the efficacy of art in terms of a clash between activist and poet:

> 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.

The opening lines, which allude (though without specificity) to the violence in the North, convey a sense of disillusion at the futility of art. Reference to 'a dying art' (also the title of the second poem in *Lives*) and the poet's 'wretched rage for order' deflates Wallace Stevens's romantic notion of poetry, as outlined in 'The Idea of Order at Key West': 'Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon, / The maker's rage to order words of the sea, / Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred, / And of ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier

demarcations, keener sounds'.[70] For Mahon, such demarcations are merely an 'eddy of semantic scruple / In an unstructurable sea', the latter phrase radically undermining the dream of order. Against the backdrop of violence, of people 'getting themselves killed / Left, right and centre' (to re-quote Muldoon's poem), it is easy to understand the intensity of the activist's reaction and the pressure on writers to be seen to take a stand.[71] The events of Bloody Sunday only served to fuel such pressure, as witnessed by the response of certain poets.

Adopting Mahon's phrase as its title, Ormsby's anthology of poetry about the Troubles, *A Rage for Order* (1992), included a number of poems by poets North and South which dealt obliquely and directly with that fateful day, such as Deane's 'After Derry, 30 January 1972'; Thomas McCarthy's 'Counting the Dead on the Radio, 1972' and Thomas Kinsella's 'A Butcher's Dozen'. Written in ballad form, Kinsella's poem was published in April 1972, immediately after the Widgery Tribunal Report exonerated the Parachute Regiment of the British Army from blame. It took the guise of a series of ghostly encounters with the victims of the brutal massacre (after an Irish *aisling* or vision poem), its bitter tone reflecting widespread anger at the findings of the official enquiry.[72] As Campbell pointed out, Heaney also wrote a ballad on the subject (entitled 'The Road to Derry'), waiting twenty-five years before he consented to its publication in a 1997 commemorative issue of the *Derry Journal*.[73] Doubtless, this was due to its direct political comment, a rare occurrence for Heaney: 'And in the dirt lay justice like an acorn in the winter / Till its oak would sprout in Derry where the thirteen men lay dead'.[74]

As outlined in Chapter One, Mahon's poem was thus extremely topical in confronting the vexed question of poetic commitment. It dramatised the clash between artist and activist, the conflict between both registering in the poem's series of oppositions, notably 'his high window' (suggestive of detachment or isolation) and 'our scattered glass' (denoting solidarity of the oppressed):

---

[70] Stevens, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 130.
[71] Muldoon's 'Lunch with Pancho Villa' is discussed in Chapter One, pp. 35-36.
[72] Kinsella, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2001), pp. 133-137.
[73] Campbell, 'Ireland in poetry: 1999, 1949, 1969', p. 13. He pointed out that, initially, Heaney sent the ballad to Luke Kelly of The Dubliners folk group who never took up the offer to adapt it. The *Derry Journal* referred to is the Bloody Sunday Commemorative Issue, 1 Feb. 1997.
[74] Ibid., p. 13.

He is far
From his people,
And the fitful glare
Of his high window is as
Nothing to our scattered glass.

Reference to scattered glass is picked up in Ormby's satiric editorial in the *Honest Ulsterman*, parodying the plight of the Troubles poet: 'Tell me, have you mentioned flying glass in your poem?'[75] In addition, the voice of the activist prefigured that of the political realist in Muldoon's 'Lunch with Pancho Villa', who clamoured for greater documentary detail and less 'fitful' engagement:

His posture is
Grandiloquent and
Deprecating, like this,
His diet ashes,
His talk of justice and his mother

The rhetorical
Device of a Claudian emperor-
Nero if you prefer,
No mother there;
And this in the face of love, death and the wages of the poor.

The jagged and irregular syntax, graphically evident in the stanza's final line, heightens the sense of 'unstructurable' reality. As in 'Ecclesiastes', the issue of rhetoric surfaces as the poet's talk ('Grandiloquent and / Deprecating') is dismissed as the bombast of some self-styled autocrat ('Claudian emperor' is revised to 'etiolated emperor' in *Poems 1962-78*, suggesting a certain cosseted isolation).[76] Poetry, like the zealots' preaching, it seems, also promises nothing as the artist shelters his cold heart against the world, the penitential diet ('His diet ashes') a reminder of the 'locusts and wild honey' in 'Ecclesiastes'. The satirical critique of religion is thus extended to art, as 'Rage for Order' questions its value in the face of brutal realities. A poet's disengagement ('Somewhere beyond') is challenged for its apparent indifference or obscene self-indulgence.

However, an ambivalence emerges at the close as the distance between activist and poet is undermined in a *rapprochement* of sorts:

---

[75] Ormsby, cited by Clark in *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 102. The editorial set up a dialogue between the figure of a 'Troubles poet' ('Tragic Anguish') and his young protégé ('Disciple'), in order to highlight the dangers of exploiting the Troubles for poetic copy. It appeared in the *Honest Ulsterman*, 46/47 (1974), pp. 2-3.

[76] As Haughton indicated, in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 80, reference to a 'Claudian emperor' enforces the link with Stevens, Mahon having published another poem, 'The Man Who Built his City in Snow', in memory of the American poet in 1972. Included in its pastiche is the line, 'These are the cadences of the Emperor. The leaves abdicate but the band plays on', a variation perhaps on the idea of Nero fiddling while Rome burns.

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

When the drums start –
For his is a dying art.
Now watch me
As I make history,
Watch as I tear down

To build up
With a desperate love,
Knowing it cannot be
Long now till I have need of his
Germinal ironies.

The pivotal phrase 'a dying art' exemplifies the manner in which the ironic conscience exploits ambiguity in the interest of subtlety or complexity. It acknowledges impotence and failure, in keeping with Beckett's aesthetic, yet also concedes the possibility of poetry's collusion in violence ('how quickly the gleam in a romantic poet's eye could convert to the glint in the eye of a sniper', to recall Heaney's observation, cited in the Introduction). Its formal imperative is not altogether removed from political or religious fanaticism. The poet's 'rage for order' and the activists 'desperate love' are linked in their desire to structure reality. The well-wrought poem, in this regard, may be seen as the artistic analogue of 'a world with method in it' (to echo 'As It Should Be'), replete with fascist tendencies or 'virulent sectarianism' (Eagleton).[77] As we have seen in Chapter One, the aesthetic is never innocent, perhaps least of all when it claims such values as integrity, disinterest or balance.

The ambiguity is heightened in the final lines as the voice of the agitator, articulated by the poet, anticipates need of the latter's 'germinal ironies' ('germinal', while echoing terminal, also suggests that the dying art may yet hold the seed of something new). As Corcoran expressed it: 'This ironizing of the potential scope of poetry is itself, however, ironized at the end of the poem'.[78] This *volte-face* is prefigured in the earlier throwaway 'like this' ('His posture is / Grandiloquent and / Deprecating, like this'), a self-reflexive jibe which reflects the poem's internal quarrel. In playing competing voices against each other, 'Rage for Order' thus resists the rigidity of 'black or white entirely', wryly subverting any

[77] The full reference for Eagleton's remark is cited in Chapter One (p. 43). Heaney's observation is cited in the Introduction, p. 12.
[78] Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 147.

simplistic opposition between artist and activist, poetry and politics. The conclusion leaves open the possibility that art, too, has a role to play, if only to remind us that action without reflection is not sufficient. By itself, passionate involvement ('desperate love') may be as much a form of escapism as a poet's superior isolation ('far / From his people'), pandering more to one's ego than redressing the wrongs of others ('watch *me* / As *I* make history...'[my italics]). The activist's monopoly on the 'last word' or moral high ground is deflated as much as any grandiloquent claims on behalf of the artist.

The poem's ambivalence is compounded by Mahon's revision in *Poems 1962-1978*, which substitutes 'desperate' for 'germinal' in qualifying ironies. It further dissolves the central opposition, subtly linking 'the history-maker's singular and 'desperate love' and the poet's plurally 'desperate ironies''.[79] Such revisions, or eddies of 'semantic scruple' (altered to 'scruples' in *Poems 1962-1978*), are a vital aspect of the ironic conscience, as we shall see in Chapter Five, part of its strategy of resisting fixity, negotiating oppositions or keeping meaning fluid in the sense of open to ambiguity, uncertainty, paradox or contradiction. 'Rage for Order' is thus a central poem in *Lives*, which addresses the crucial issue of the relationship between poetry and politics. Like the title poem, it addresses particular historical realities with an acute sense of their implications on the ground. In Ormsby's terms, its semantic scruples are an antidote to 'the reductive, lethal simplicities of the propagandist...in a province where language is often a dangerous, sometimes a fatal, weapon'.[80] The use of 'Rage for Order' as a framing device for the Preface to his pivotal anthology of poetry about the Troubles, only serves to illustrate the engagement of Mahon's early work, contrary to critical claims about its historical detachment.[81]

'Edvard Munch' also addresses the contentious issue of engagement while tackling the aesthetic and psychological roots of the artist's need for order:

> You would think with so much going on outside
> The deal table would make for the window,
> The ranged crockery freak and wail
> Remembering its dark origins, the frail
> Oilcloth, in a fury of recognitions,
> Disperse in a thousand directions,

---

[79] Smith, 'The Twilight of the Cities: Derek Mahon's Dark Cinema' in Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 255. In this article, Smith reappraised his earlier critique of Mahon's aesthetic (as outlined in Chapter One, pp. 49-50). 'Rage for Order', *Poems 1962-1978*, p. 44.

[80] Ormsby, Preface to *A Rage for Order*, p. 4.

[81] Ormsby cited the opening two stanzas of Mahon's poem at the beginning of his Preface, echoing key phrases ('semantic scruples', 'a dying art', 'scorched gable end and the burnt-out buses') in the conclusion.

And the simple bulb in the ceiling, honed
By death to a worm of pain, to a hair
Of heat, to a light snowflake laid
In a dark river at night – and wearied
Above all by the life-price of time
And the failure by only a few tenths
Of an inch but completely and for ever
Of the ends of a carefully drawn equator
To meet, sing and be one – abruptly
Roar into the floor.

Munch's all-purpose studio (the title is revised to 'The Studio' in *Poems 1962-1978* and subsequent volumes) sheds light on the creative mind with its own 'dark origins' or psychic undercurrents. The internal mechanism of a simple light bulb mirrors the plight of the Beckettian artist as one forever doomed to failure, justifying Borges' definition of the aesthetic phenomenon as 'the imminence of a revelation which can never occur'.[82] To wrest order from chaos and get words or pigments 'To meet, sing and be one' (the ultimate in formal necessity) forever eludes the artist's grasp. 'Freak', 'wail' and 'fury' convey the sense of despair as the mind strives not to implode or 'disperse in a thousand directions'.[83] The opening sentence is almost the verbal equivalent of Munch's *The Scream*, with its pent-up energy and startling, kaleidoscopic images. 'Honed / By death to a worm of pain' might well serve as a caption for the anguished figure in the foreground of that painting.

Yet the whole scenario is an elaborate projection on the poet's part, yet another play on possibility ('You would think') which, once entertained, is immediately undermined. Instead of competing voices (as in 'Rage for Order'), there are starkly contrasting situations, as vivid fantasy is superseded by mundane reality:

But it
Never happens like that. Instead
There is this quivering silence
In which, day by day, the play
Of light and shadow (shadow mostly)
Repeats itself, though never exactly.

---

[82] Borges, *Selected Poems 1923-1967* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1985), p. 9.

[83] The hissing chemicals in the well-wrought urn which Mahon referred to in interview (as outlined in Chapter One, p. 47) are picked up here in the 'freak', 'wail' and explosive dispersal of elements 'in a thousand directions'. The poem thus confirms his sense of the Apollonian / Dionysian dialectic at the heart of every poem. The sense of despair also acknowledges Munch's painting *Despair* (1893-4) which, like *The Scream* (1893), Mahon traces back to this studio.

Creative anguish gives way to the daily grind ('day by day'), as Mahon inscribes key elements of Munch's aesthetic, notably 'the play / Of light and shadow'.[84] The parenthetical 'shadow mostly' gestures back to the theme of failure while pointing also to the predominance of suffering in Munch's life (the Norwegian is another of Mahon's artistic outsiders who went against the grain of current fashion to forge his own inimitable style).[85] In celebrating him, however, Mahon neatly reflects his own preoccupations, obliquely returning to the central issue of engagement (as in 'Rage for Order'). Speaking about the poem's origins, he remarked in 1979:

> This poem started off for me as a comment on a photograph of Munch's studio in Oslo... The studio photo connected for me with a phrase in a review by Beckett of a Jack Yeats exhibition; the being in the room when it happens in the street, the being in the street when it happens in the room... The phrase in turn suggested the oblique, and possibly escapist relationship of the Artist to his historical circumstances, particularly where those circumstances include a violent upheaval...[86]

Besides shedding light on the random muse and her association with yet another painter who was a particular favourite of Beckett's, the passage highlights Mahon's preoccupation with the role of the poet.[87] It links the opening line of the poem ('You would think with so much going on outside') with the kind of violent goings on in the street depicted in 'Rage for Order', projecting the radical urge to intervene onto 'the furniture'. The studio is thus a metaphor for a state of mind in times of violence, highlighting the need to act and *do* something. This rage to intervene, however, appears somewhat futile (the deal table, ranged crockery, frail oilcloth and bulb 'abruptly / Roar into the floor), rather like the activist's strenuous efforts to tear down and build up perhaps. 'But it / Never happens like that' interjects a note of realism into the blazing transformative urge, as the studio assumes a more functional aspect:

---

[84] This 'play / Of light and shadow', which is always varied ('Repeats itself, though never exactly'), is what attracts Mahon to painters like Munch or, as we have seen in *Night-Crossing*, Van Gogh and Van Meegeren.

[85] The painter's life was marked by the death of his parents, his brother and sister during his childhood, and the mental illness of another sister. He himself suffered a nervous breakdown in 1908-9 (see Amanda O'Neill, *The Life and Works of Edvard Munch* (Bristol: Parragon Book Service, 1996).

[86] Mahon, 'Edvard Munch', in Desmond Egan and Michael Hartnett (eds.), *Choice* (Curragh: Goldsmith Press, 1979), p. 80. The poem, which first appeared in *The Listener* (17 December, 1970), was entitled 'On a Photo of Edvard Munch's Room in Oslo'.

[87] Mahon's reference to 'dark origins' reflects comments made by Beckett in another review of Jack Yeats's work: 'What is incomparable in this great solitary *oeuvre* is its insistence upon sending us back to the darkest part of the spirit that created it and upon permitting illuminations only through that darkness' (cited in Hilary Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats: A Biography* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1970), p 48.

This is the all-purpose bed-, work- and bedroom.
Its mourning faces are cracked porcelain only quicker,
Its knuckles door-knobs only lighter,
Its occasional cries of despair
A function of the furniture.

In this context, the poem enforces Mahon's concern with the relationship of the artist to his 'historical circumstances', mediating between conflicting positions (as in 'Rage for Order'). It allows for the possibility that being in the studio when it happens in the street (as Mahon expressed it) need not always imply escapism, just as being in the street need not necessarily pre-empt the search for meaning. Once again the poem is ambivalent as it negotiates opposites, the 'occasional cries of despair' reflecting Mahon's doubts about art in the face of violent upheaval. The photograph of Munch's studio acts as a catalyst for reflection on the engaged or 'possibly escapist' perspectives of his own poetry.

Finally, 'In the Aran Islands' also offers an oblique reflection on the issue of engagement. Like 'Edvard Munch' it opens with an interior / exterior opposition, except that a session in a pub rather than a photograph acts as catalyst:

He is earthed to his girl, one hand fastened
In hers, and with his free hand listens,
An earphone, to his own rendition,
Singing the darkness into the light.
I close the pub door gently and step out
Into the yard, and the song goes out
And a gull creaks from off the corrugated
Iron roof of an outhouse, over the ocean,
Circling now with a hoarse inchoate
Screaming the boned fields of its vision.
God, that was the way to do it,
Hand-clasping, echo-prolonging poet.

The poem dramatises the clash between engagement (community) and detachment (solitude) in the contrasting image of the folksinger 'earthed to his girl' and the sea-bird soaring 'over the ocean'. The impact of the moment is such that the speaker savours the tribal intimacy passed on through generations. He imagines himself as part of 'that tradition', marked by the touch of the human presence:

Scorched with a fearful admiration
Walking over the nacreous sand,
I dream myself to that tradition,
Fifty winters off the land –
One hand to an ear for the vibration,
The far wires, the reverberation
Down light-years of the imagination

And, in the other hand, your hand.

Following 'Edvard Munch' however, the fantasy is undercut, as the focus shifts from the cosy interior to the natural world, focusing not on companionship but the flight of a menacing gull:

> The long glow leaps from the dark soil, however –
> No marshlight holds a candle to this.
> Unearthly still in its white weather
> A crack-voiced rock-marauder, scavenger, fierce
> Friend to no slant fields or the sea either,
> Folds back over the forming waters.

Despite feelings of awe at its powerful rituals ('Scorched with a fearful admiration'), the speaker identifies not only with the island tradition, but with a foraging, friendless, 'crack-voiced' gull. The image enforces the idea of the artist as solitary outsider, 'fierce' (echoing 'fierce fire' in 'Van Gogh among the Miners') suggesting wildness or extremism, 'crack-voiced' a certain wayward eccentricity.[88] The key word 'Unearthly', in opposition to the earlier 'earthed', highlights the conflict between detachment and engagement, or between poetic freedom and poetic responsibility (to recall Clair Wills's terms, as outlined in Chapter One).[89] Yet again, Mahon negotiates this central opposition, illustrating the volume's preoccupation with the role of the poet. As in 'Rage for Order', 'In the Aran Islands' is torn between the claims of tradition or community on the one hand, and the independence or freedom of the creative imagination on the other (here the mobility of thistledown or 'a twig in a stream' is replaced by that of a sea-bird). Hence, the signature note of ambiguity as the ironic conscience mediates between the folk-singer rooted in community and the gull rootless in staking out 'the boned fields of its vision'. The final image of return ('Folds back' echoing the earlier 'Circling') tempers the extremity of solo-flight, suggesting that even the most solitary artist cannot afford to fly off into the ether. The dangers of such deracination, as Mahon outlined later in interview are 'solipsism, inhumanity, intolerance'.[90]

'Rage for Order', 'Edvard Munch' and 'In the Aran Islands' all reflect Mahon's preoccupation with the aesthetic and doubts about the role of the poet in *Lives*. Each poem,

---

[88] In 'A Tribute to Beckett on his Eightieth Birthday' (*Journalism*, p. 61), Mahon noted 'the famous gull's eyes', indirectly linking Beckett with the figure of the artist outlined here. In 'An Image from Beckett', there is also a reference to gulls, 'A white flicker of gulls and / Washing hung to dry'.

[89] Wills's analysis is discussed in Chapter One, pp. 55-56.

[90] Mahon, *In the Chair*, p. 123. He added: 'Really it's a psychological risk to deracinate from your given community'. However, he also pointed out (in typical dialectical fashion), how 'an obvious and easier danger' is 'to be absorbed' by one's community.

in different ways, illustrates the dialectical mode of the ironic conscience as it strives to negotiate the conflicting claims of freedom and responsibility. This negotiation may be seen as part of his early poetry's attempt to sing 'the darkness into the light', the pivotal phrase from 'In the Aran Islands echoing his earlier statement in 1970 ('a light to lighten the darkness'). In terms of poetry, the darkness includes doubts about its significance or the sense of it as 'a dying art', particularly in the face of violent atrocity. Light, on the other hand, acknowledges poetry as a force for change, its imaginative vitality an antidote to the intolerance of political or religious rhetoric.[91]

3.5 'Beyond Howth Head': the Historical and Political Engagement of the Ironic Conscience in *Lives*.

'Beyond Howth Head' is one of the most ambitious and accomplished of Mahon's early poems, the finest example of the historical and political engagement of the ironic conscience in *Lives*. As the volume's climax, it brings together elements from different poems, in particular the long view or satirical critique of contemporary society and the deft literary and cultural allusiveness. It greatly extends the scope of previous work, moving beyond the autobiographical narrative of displacement in *Night-Crossing* (the personal reflection on art and origins) to a more profound meditation on the force of history. In this regard, 'Beyond Howth Head' signalled an expansion in Mahon's work, an increasing movement away from the insularity of Ireland and Irish poetry. As he stated in interview with Cooke, the poem

> ...is basically about getting out of a place which is static, and a situation which was static – it was a very personal poem, getting into a situation which is mobile, growing. I think what I'm particularly interested in now is the contrast between a backward and a forward life.[92]

The notion of a 'forward life' mirrored Mahon's sense of poetry as a dynamic process, which called for training and experimentation in order to expand and develop. 'Beyond Howth Head' is the fruit of such effort, the verse-letter form aligning him with an eminent literary tradition embracing Irish, English and American influences. The epigraph from Pascal, which Mahon added to the version in *Lives*, *'Il faut parier. Cela n'est pas volontaire;*

---

[91] See footnote 95 in Chapter Two (p. 86), which refers to Mahon's option for Shelley over Auden in relation to the art's efficacy.

[92] Mahon, interview with Cooke, p. 10. He highlighted this contrast as the difference between Ireland and England: 'Psychologically Ireland is a very backward country. Ireland is backward looking and Britain is forward looking'.

vous êtes embarqué' ('One must wager. There is no choice, for you are already aboard'), suggests a certain risk-taking on his part, abandoning the regular rhyming pentameters for aesthetically more challenging territories.[93] His assimilation of the socio-political dimension of British 1930s poetry - including MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* (1939), Auden's 'Letter to Lord Byron' (1936) and 'New Year Letter' (1940), as well as his *Letters from Iceland* (1937), written in collaboration with MacNeice (where 'Letter to Lord Byron' appeared) - and contemporary American verse, notably Lowell's *Near the Ocean* (1967), was part of his search for a more public voice.[94] As he stated in interview in relation to Lowell:

> But I like to be spoken to in the tone of Lowell's 'Waking Early Sunday Morning':
>
> > Pity the planet, all joy gone
> > From this sweet volcanic cone.
>
> Then I'm hearing music loud and clear. I like the tenor of it...It's a form of giving yourself to life. It's the ability to surrender; to walk into water without a lifebelt; to do the big thing.[95]

In this context, 'Beyond Howth Head' may be seen as Mahon's attempt 'to do the big thing', to direct his voice out upon the planet. This involved taking account of 'current events in the political and ideological spheres' or tuning in to 'the economic and psychological conditions' of our time (to re-quote an early editorial of his in *Icarus*).[96] Hence, the references to bombs in Belfast, American intervention in Cambodia, a Greek poet in prison, as the poem spins 'celestial globes of words' across different realms (biblical, mythological, historical, literary) and continents (from Inishmaan to the Aegean, from Carraroe to Toyama or Cape Cod). Embracing figures, real and imaginary (Molloy, Kemoc, Chomei, Thoreau and the children of Lir), it keeps its eye firmly fixed on contemporary society, targeting such woes as state-sanctioned terrorism, paramilitary violence, patriarchal conservatism or institutionalised repression. It thus adapts the English verse-letter to conditions of late twentieth century life ('rehearsing for the *fin de siècle*'), mixing Irish mythology ('Anna Livia', 'an *aisling*', 'the swan-sons of Lir') and Christian symbolism

---

[93] The epigraph, from Pascal's posthumous *Pensées* (variously arranged from notebooks after his death), does not appear in the earlier pamphlet version *Beyond Howth Head* (1970).

[94] Longley recalled in correspondence how, in the winter of 1970, Mahon rescued him from writer's block by proposing a verse correspondence in 'Marvellian octosyllabic rhyming couplets'. Mahon's first instalment specifically mentioned *Letters from Iceland* alongside Auden and MacNeice: '...a bottle of whiskey for the one / who, for whatever reason or none, / allows his whiskey stint to lapse; / and wryly conscious too, perhaps, / of certain precedents in kind / (*Letters from Iceland* comes to mind). / Twelve lines already, and what haste / to invoke the practice of the past! - / though Auden and MacNeice themselves / had Pope and Dryden on their shelves' (cited in Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, pp. 184-5).

[95] Mahon, interview with Grennan, p. 118.

[96] This editorial is referred to in Chapter One, p. 38.

(Moses and the 'broken stone', Noah, Clonmacnois) with a multitude of literary texts, contemporary and historical (from Auden, Beckett, Norman Mailer, Milton, MacNeice, Spenser and Shakespeare to Arnold, Lowell, Basil Bunting, Dylan Thomas and Chateaubriand). As D. E. S. Maxwell noted, 'Beyond Howth Head' is 'a brilliantly executed jaunt around ideas and disasters: 'Dover Beach' revisited with all the aplomb of Auden's public manner'.[97]

The relaxed and discursive mode of the verse-epistle afforded free rein to the allusive intertextuality of the ironic conscience, greatly extending the literary roll-call of *Night-Crossing*. The Atlantic wind in the opening stanza is apt, as the poem's allusions, abrasive idiom and rapid shifts of perspective and tone, read like a blast of fresh air. In Peter Denman's terms, the intertextual range offers a literary analogy to the poem's general theme, 'the sweep of larger currents, imaged by wind and tide, through the fractured perception of the immediate'.[98] Central to these allusions is the work of Auden, MacNeice and Lowell, as Mahon sought to fuse a distinctive voice out of contrasting material. In this regard, 'Beyond Howth Head' bears out the truth of his own words in relation to Irish poetry in 1972: 'But the most striking thing is the new willingness to experiment with styles and idioms that once seemed strange and inappropriate'.[99]

Like Auden's 'New Year Letter', 'Beyond Howth Head' is written at the close of a decade and the beginning of a new one (it is dated March-April 1970), has a named addressee (Jeremy Lewis) and is shadowed by violence.[100] It directly quotes Auden's poem in stanza eighteen ('since "we are changed by what we change"'), and alludes to another reference in stanza fifteen ('an old world crossed the Delaware').[101] The former is taken

---

[97] D.E.S. Maxwell, 'Contemporary Poetry in the North of Ireland', *Two Decades of Irish Writing*, p. 183.
[98] Peter Denman, 'Know the One? Insolent Ontology and Mahon's Revisions', *Irish University Review*, Derek Mahon Special Number, 24, 1 (1994), p. 32.
[99] Mahon, Introduction to *The Sphere Book of Irish Poetry*, p. 14.
[100] All quotations from Auden are taken from Edward Mendelson (ed.), *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976). Written as 'a scrambling decade ends' (dated January 1, 1940), 'New Year Letter' is addressed to Elizabeth Mayer (a German-born American editor and translator closely associated with Auden). As outlined in Chapter One, Lewis is a former T.C.D. student and friend of Mahon's. His memoir *Playing For Time* (London: Flamingo, 1987) facetiously describes, among other episodes, his college life in Dublin. Mahon's review of the book, 'Dublin in the '60s', is included in *Journalism* (pp. 224-226). It singled out Lewis as one of 'the many intelligent and likeable persons' among the English undergraduates at Trinity.
[101] Auden's 'New Year Letter' (p. 173) describes the devil as right to 'Look forward with the cheesecake air / Of one who crossed the Delaware'. Mahon links the phrase with the Tsar's demise in Russia, in a further allusion (as the accompanying notes indicate) to Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station* ('snow still in the Tsar's room where Len-/in rushed in from the hissing rain').

from a passage which bears directly on the central conflict in 'Beyond Howth Head', between fixity and flux, stasis and change ('a backward and a forward life'):

> As proper people find it strange
> That we are changed by what we change
> That no event can happen twice
> And that no two existences
> Can ever be alike; we'd rather
> Be perfect copies of our father,
> Prefer our *idées fixes* to be
> True of a fixed Reality.[102]

Such a sense of 'fixed Reality' underlies Mahon's satirical critique of Ireland in the poem, particularly in relation to religion, which is linked both with violence and sexuality morality. The divine Word of Christianity (whose *idées fixes* derive from stone tablets) is associated with terrorism on the streets of Belfast:

> ...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 plast-
> ic bombs go off around Belfast...[103]

The juxtaposition of bombs and fundamentalist zealots highlights the religious element of sectarian violence (the original pamphlet version of the poem, it must be remembered, appeared when 'the Troubles were just beginning, the swinging sixties just ending'[104]). In the North of Ireland, the life-giving Word is the cause of death. Here Mahon's stanza echoes Ormsby's sense (previously cited) of the province as a place where language is a dangerous, if not fatal, weapon. As Sloan expressed it:

> ...the questionable adequacy of such a verbally dependent theology is rendered more doubtful by the absurdity of the sign in Co. Clare – 'Stop here and see the sun go down' and by the literally fatal results of language that has frozen into dogma in Northern Ireland where, 'for a word's sake, the plast-/ic bombs go off around Belfast'.[105]

---

[102] Auden, 'New Year Letter', Part Two, p. 168.

[103] The reference to 'broken stone' echoes the earlier reference in stanza six ('where Yeats's hill-men still break stone') which, as the accompanying note explains, refers to Yeats's 'Parnell': 'Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man: Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone'. The poem obliquely enforces the issue of religion as divisive, the former having been denounced ruinously by the Catholic Church for his adulterous affair with Kitty O'Shea.

[104] Edna Longley, 'Looking Back from *The Yellow Book*', in Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 39.

[105] Sloan, 'Derek Mahon: "Singing the darkness into the light"', *Writers and Protestantism in the North of Ireland: Heirs to Damnation'*, p. 223.

'Beyond Howth Head', in this regard, recalls the bitter invective of MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* (Section XVI), as religion is seen to promote discord and hatred:

> And one read black where the other read white, his hope
> The other man's damnation:
> Up the Rebels, To Hell with the Pope,
> And God save – as you prefer – the King or Ireland.
> The land of scholars and saints:
> Scholars and saints my eye, the land of ambush,
> Purblind manifestos, never-ending complaints,
> The born martyr and the gallant ninny.

Like MacNeice, Mahon challenges stereotypical perceptions of Ireland, satirising the myth of saints and scholars. He extends the quarrel into the sexual domain, linked as it is with the quest for freedom. Significantly, Howth Head is the scene of Molly Bloom's courtship which surfaces at the close of Joyce's *Ulysses*. Her final 'Yes' spits in the face of Mahon's 'elders', whose repressive mentality seeks to strangle sensuous or sexual *jouissance*:

> What can the elders say to this?
> For girls must kiss and then must kiss
> and so by this declension fall
> to write the writing on the wall.
> A little learning in a parked
> Volkswagen torches down the dark
> and soon disperses fogged Belief
> with an empiric *joie de vivre.*

The authoritarian 'elders' (like the 'fathers' in 'Ecclesiastes') are the subject of Mahon's satire as the poem decries a sexually repressive culture, marked by pious insularity or prescriptive beliefs. Ireland meets modernity as 'Beyond Howth Head' subverts its representation as a country 'that never was, / Baptised with fairy water'.[106] Rather, the poem sees it blessed with

> (unbosomings of sea-weed, wrack,
> industrial bile, a boot from Black-
> pool, contraceptives deftly tied
> with best regards from Merseyside).

Here it may be seen to endorse Montague's parody of Yeats's refrain, *'Puritan Ireland's dead and gone / A myth of O'Connor and O'Faolain'*.[107] The quest for pleasure or delight in the frank sexuality of youth is one of the major currents in the poem, from the opening

---

[106] MacNeice, Section XVI, *Autumn Journal* (*Collected Poems*, p. 132).

[107] Montague, 'The Siege of Mullingar', *The Rough Field* (Portlaoise: The Dolmen Press, 1972), p. 68. The scene of revelry is the Fleadh Cheoil (music festival) of Mullingar, the poem linking the reforms of Vatican 11 and sexual freedom. Mahon wrote a review of Montague's *The Lost Notebook* in the *Irish Times* in 1987, remarking how he had never seen the subject of sex 'treated with such candour and delicacy' (*Journalism*, p. 96).

image of young girls thumbing a lift home from a dance, to those who, by their kissing, 'fall'; to the plea for love to shed 'that tight-arsed, convent-bred disdain'; to the Merseyside contraceptives, the enticing 'world-circles women make' and, finally, Anna Livia and 'my *cailín bán*'('fair young woman' as the accompanying gloss translates it). As a plea for *joie de vivre*, it flies in the face of sheltering of one's heart 'from the heat / of the world' ('Ecclesiastes'). Pascal's wager, in this context, is a summons to life, not fear; to freedom, not fixed ideas or 'fogged Belief' (it is a fitting epigraph for a poem which advocates a forward, rather than a backward, life).

For Mahon in 'Beyond Howth Head', fixity is associated with a certain intransigence or lack of imagination. Like MacNeice in 'Mutations' (a poem Mahon cited in his 1974 essay 'MacNeice in Ireland and England'), he was keenly aware that

> For every static world that you or I impose
> Upon the real one must crack at times and new
> Patterns from new disorders open like a rose
> And old assumptions yield to new sensation.[108]

This awareness underlies Mahon's experimentation with poetic form, his search for fluid models that did not 'crack' before the pressure of history, but assimilated its incessant flow of unpredictable elements. It explains why he turned to the verse-epistles of Auden and MacNeice. As Auden expressed it in 'Letter to Lord Byron' (written at the age when Mahon wrote 'Beyond Howth Head'):

> I want a form that's large enough to swim in,
> And talk on any subject that I choose,
> From natural scenery to men and women,
> Myself, the arts, the European news...[109]

Auden's genius was to mould a genre with distinct classical and romantic precedents (Horatian verse epistle, Juvenalian satire, Byron's *Don Juan*) to his own poetic voice, mixing the trivial with the serious while keeping the tone light, as in the intimacy of ordinary conversation. Managing to be serious in 'the airy manner' of Byron, he showed how it isn't only in trivial matters that poets can feel 'in sufficient intimacy with their audience to forget themselves and their singing robes'.[110] Auden thus loosened up the form for Mahon,

---

[108] MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 195.

[109] Auden, 'Letter to Lord Byron', *Collected Poems*, p. 79. The poem is generally regarded as the finest achievement of *Letters from Iceland* (1937), the collaborative work of Auden and MacNeice.

[110] In 'Letter to Lord Byron', Auden described Byron as 'the master of the airy manner' (*Collected Poems*, p. 89). In his Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, he stated: 'Light Verse can be serious. It has only come to mean *vers de societé*, toilets, smoke-room limericks, because, under the social conditions which

diagnosing the ills of age with a relaxed and discursive wit which facilitated the play of ideas, allusions, references and tone. We can trace his influence in the poem's mix of levity and seriousness, of trenchant satire and self-deprecating wit. The latter is evident as Mahon, attuned to the verse-letter's addressee, parodies his own high seriousness:

> leaving us, Jeremy, to flick
> blank pages of an empty book
> where the 'outdated futures' lie
> wide to the runways and the sky;
> to spin celestial globes of words
> over a foaming pint in Ward's
> bent victims of our linear thought
> (though booze is *bourgeois* pot is not)
>
> rehearsing for the *fin de siècle*
> gruff Jeremiads to redirect
> lost youth into the knacker's yard
> of humanistic self-regard...

Lost youth however doesn't appear to be looking for redirection, and seems happily intent on making the most of its moral 'declension', spinning less celestial globes in a 'parked / Volkswagen' (as the earlier stanza noted). Its zest for life is immune to 'gruff Jeremiads' from any quarter, particularly two blokes posing as alternative elders over another pint. Fortunately, the irony is not lost on the speaker, who satirises such solicitude as veiled self-regard or *bourgeois* complacency; a case of the blind leading the blind, or at least the 'bent' trying to make straight the paths of others. Such condescension makes a mockery of the poem's earlier plea for 'Lewde libertie' to 'come back and be with us again!' (in stanzas five and six, Mahon appropriates Spenser's phrase for his own subversive use, deeming it a positive force for freedom or a rebellious catch-cry against sexually oppressive morality[111]).

The 'Centripetal' form of 'Beyond Howth Head' also mirrors Auden's eclectic 'whirlpool', drawing everything from myth, literature, history, political critique and social documentary into its vast sweep, including a motley set of references:

---

produced the Romantic Revival, and which have persisted, more or less, ever since, it has only been in trivial matters that poets have felt in sufficient intimacy with their audience to forget themselves and their singing robes' (cited by Redmond in 'Wilful Inconsistency: Derek Mahon's Verse-Letters', *IUR, Derek Mahon Special Number*, 24, 1 (1994), p. 98).

[111] Whereas, in Spenser's phrase, taken from a pamphlet of 1598, *A Veue of the Present State of Ireland*, 'Lewde' implied 'ignorant' (underlying the anarchy and rebellion which resulted in the destruction of 'Kilcolman' castle), Mahon links it, as Deane pointed out (in *Celtic Revivals*, p. 158), with the 'search for pleasure (including sexual, hence 'lewde' pleasure) and freedom (including rebellion against oppressive forces)'. Heaney's 'Bog Oak' in *Wintering Out* (1972) also alludes to Spenser's *A Veue of the Present State of Ireland* in the final stanza: 'geniuses who creep / "out of every corner / of the woodes and glennes" / towards watercress and carrion'.

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

might serve as models for a while
but to return in greater style.
Centripetal, the hot world draws
its children in with loving claws
from rock and heather, rain and sleet
with only Kosangas for heat
and spins them at the centre where
they have no time to know despair...[112]

These lines illustrate not only the oblique and subtle engagement of the ironic conscience but the poem's formal dynamic. Following Auden's exemplary range ('from natural scenery to men and women, / Myself, the arts, the European news'), it draws divergent elements together. All is 'grist / to the mill' of Mahon's imagination as the poem, oscillating between different times and places, sets up an elaborate network of internal correspondences. East and West overlap as the focus shifts from the twelfth (Chomei) to the sixteenth (Spenser), nineteenth (Thoreau) and twentieth centuries.[113] The 'not-to-be-trusted' reference (from Bunting's 'Chomei at Toyama') recalls Spenser's 'enemyes' (and the destruction of Kilcolman castle mentioned in stanza six), as well as the betrayal of Hamlet's father by Claudius ('the hebona behind the smile' in stanza seven) and CIA activities in Cambodia in stanza thirteen (the deposition of Prince Sihanouk).[114] 'Since we are seen by what we see' is a variation on Auden's earlier line ('we are changed by what we change'), while mention of Thoreau ('like ice among the trees') looks back to the 'old hermits' in the previous stanza who withdrew 'to a small island in a lake'. Just as 'the hot world' draws everything into its centre, so 'Beyond Howth Head' takes the reader on a kaleidoscopic literary trip, lending

[112] Auden's 'New Year Letter', Part Two, adds philosophy to its eclectic mix: 'Perceiving that by sailing near, / The Hegelian whirlpool of Idea / Some foolish aliens have gone down, / Lest our democracy should drown / We'd wreck her on the solid rock / Of genteel anarchists like Locke' (Auden, *Collected Poems*, p. 176).
[113] The note for Chomei reads: 'The Twelfth-century Japanese poet', adding 'Cf. 'Chomei at Toyama' in Basil Bunting's *Collected Poems* (*Lives*, p. 39).
[114] Bunting, 'Chomei at Toyama', *Collected Poems* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1968), p. 83. The exact line reads: 'I am a shifting rivermist, not to be trusted' (in *SP* and *CP*, the Japanese type-symbols are used in the printing , 'Chomēi at Tōyama...'). The accompanying note for the reference to hebona reads: 'The poison used by Claudius to kill Hamlet's father. One may smile and smile and be a villain', while that for Cambodia cites the deposition of Prince Sihanouk.

substance to Robert Frost's claim that a poem 'is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written'.[115]

However, the intertextual 'madness' is not without political edge. The reference to Spenser wryly suggests American foreign policy exemplifies the kind of brutality endorsed in *A Veue of the Present State of Ireland* (all the more so, as we shall see, given the poem's Lowellian echoes and concluding reference to Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*). Mahon's formalism is inseparable from historical critique, the verse-letter reflecting the socio-political engagement of British 1930s poetry or American writers like Lowell, Mailer and Thoreau.[116] The literary allusions also deftly confirm Mahon's sense of the solitary artist. Mention of 'Chomei at Toyama', which recalls earlier references to Van Gogh or Beckett's wandering figure Molloy in *Night-Crossing* and looks forward to Bashō in *The Snow Party*, highlights the recurring theme of exile and displacement. 'Saddened...with idealistic philosophies', Bunting's character embarked on a life-defining journey, the road becoming his only dwelling place ('neither palace nor straw-hut / is quite satisfactory').[117]

Alongside Auden, the influence of MacNeice registers throughout 'Beyond Howth Head'. It surfaces in the documentary detail and use of trademarks like 'Kosangas' (as Mahon pointed out, MacNeice excelled in the notion of poetry-as-documentary, making habitual use of brand names[118]). Like *Autumn Journal*, Mahon's poem looks for meaning in the flux of history ('And when we clear away / all this debris of day-to-day experience, / What comes out to light, what is there of value / Lasting from day to day?'[119]). And just as MacNeice adapted the socio-political themes of the 1930s verse-letter to 'an autobiographical, interior and latently lyrical voice', so Mahon mixes autobiography and

---

[115] Frost, cited by Buxton in *Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry*, p. 7.

[116] In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau observed: 'Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison'. 'Beyond Howth Head' refers to 'a Greek poet' in 'an Aegean prison', the accompanying notes (*Lives*, p. 39) specifying the composer Mikis Theodorakis. The latter was imprisoned for his resistance to the Greek junta (1967-1974).

[117] As Chomei expressed it in Bunting's poem (p. 85): 'One generation / I saddened myself with idealistic philosophies, / but before I was fifty / I perceived there was no time to lose, / left home and conversation. / Among the cloudy mountains of Ohara / spring and autumn, spring and autumn, spring and autumn, / emptier than ever'. He added, 'a lodging [is] not a dwelling' (p. 85), later citing Semimaru who said: 'Somehow or other / we scuttle through a lifetime. / Somehow or other / neither palace nor straw-hut / is quite satisfactory' (p. 87).

[118] Mahon, 'MacNeice in Ireland and England', p. 23: 'Was he the first English poet to make habitual use of brand names? It seems likely...there was nothing bizarre in the notion of poetry-as-documentary; and this is where MacNeice excelled'.

[119] MacNeice, Autumn Journal, Section XXI.

history, moving beyond Auden's 'slick and easy generalisation' (as 'Letter to Lord Byron' expressed it) to more profound reflection.[120] In this regard, the poem (as Edna Longley stated) is perhaps 'most deeply charged by a *tension* between the precedents of Auden and MacNeice', which accounts in part for its range of ideas and allusions, richly diverse language, and striking shifts of register and tone.[121] However, the influence of Lowell has also to be taken into account, given Mahon's interest in American poetry (as we have seen in relation to *Night-Crossing*) and association of an 'adventurous use of language' with the United States.[122]

The voice of Lowell's *Near the Ocean*, with its protest against war and the dubious policies of a neo-colonialist United States ('Hammering military splendor, / top-heavy Goliath in full armor'), clearly served to qualify the 'airy manner' in 'Beyond Howth Head'.[123] Reference to the 'ghost-ridden rhetoric!' of the American president in 'Waking Early Sunday Morning', is echoed in Mahon's dismissive 'dead sparrows rhetoric', in the context of CIA operations in Cambodia:

> from an Aegean prison now
> a Greek poet consults the sky
> where sleepless, cold, computed stars
> in random sequence light the bars;
> and the United States, whose swell
> intentions pave the road to hell,
> send in the CIA to make
> Cambodia safe for Dick Van Dyke.
>
> Oh, everywhere the ground is thick
> with the dead sparrows rhetoric
> demands as fictive sacrifice
> to prove its substance in our eyes.

The accompanying notes cited Matthew X.29 in relation to sparrows (a passage which implies a caring providence), suggesting a desire to be rid of both political and religious rhetoric. Set alongside a world of imprisonment, torture, war and the violation of human

---

[120] Edna Longley, 'Looking Back form The Yellow Book', in Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), The Poetry of Derek Mahon, p.40.
[121] Ibid., p 40.
[122] Lowell was a significant influence on Mahon's poetry in the 1960s. As Edna Longley suggested, in '"Atlantic's Premises": American Influences on Northern Irish Poetry in the 1960s', pp. 277-278, there are formal and thematic parallels between 'My Wicked Uncle' and 'Canadian Pacific' in *Night-Crossing*, and Lowell's 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow' and 'Children of Light'. As we have seen in Chapter Two (p. 2), Mahon noted Lowell's influence in Harvard as a result of the creative writing classes he gave a year or two prior to his visit to Cambridge, Massachusetts.
[123] Lowell, 'Waking Early Sunday Morning', in *Robert Lowell's Poems: A Selection*, edited by Jonathan Raban (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), p. 103.

rights, it appeared duplicitous ('fictive'), or all too full of empty promises. Here Mahon's poem recalls one of his letters to the Longleys from North America in 1967, which alluded to Yeats's 'The Second Coming'. As he put it, the poet's task is 'to keep the distinctions between imagination and fantasy, humanity and brutality, for if we don't the best lack all conviction'.[124] 'Beyond Howth Head' strives to uphold such distinctions in the face of empty rhetoric (what Yeats termed 'passionate intensity'). It serves as a reminder that, for Mahon in *Lives*, poetry's mission to lighten the darkness is to engage with historical realities. This includes addressing 'things the well-fed American prefers not to notice, like social evils, the ugliness of the whole system and the corruption of his very humanity'.[125] The quarrel with the American 'elders' thus has it origins in Mahon's sojourn there in the 1960s, his correspondence at the time reflecting a heightened political consciousness. This awareness informs 'Beyond Howth Head', which echoes Lowell's wrestle with the 'Faith of our fathers' in 'Waking Early Sunday Morning', both poems embodying the latter's memorable refrain: 'O to break loose'.[126]

'Beyond Howth Head' also satirises Christianity, exposing (as we have outlined) the fatal consequences of entrenched belief systems. Such dogmatism is associated with the loss of mythological resources, as the children of Lir are changed 'back from swans to men':

> 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.[127]

For Mahon, loss of this numinous ('fourth-dimensional') world-picture results in spiritual impoverishment or, what the poem earlier termed, 'linear thought'. The call of the bells which 'tinkles with as blithe a sense / of man's cosmic significance', is contrasted

---

[124] Letter from Mahon to Edna and Michael Longley n.d. (1967), cited in Clark, *Ulster Renaissance*, p. 109.
[125] Letter from Mahon to Edna Longley, n.d. (1967), cited in Clark, p. 110.
[126] Lowell, 'Waking Early Sunday Morning', p. 103. As discussed in relation to 'Ecclesiastes', rhetoric is associated with a 'cold heart', suggesting that for Mahon, as for Yeats, 'Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart' ('Easter 1916'). Here Mahon dismisses such rhetoric as illusory ('fictive'). The desire to break loose is to be rid of such destructive fantasies.
[127] In the context of the bell, this reference to the children of Lir recalls Hewitt's lines in 'An Irishman in Coventry': 'Yet like Lir's children banished to the waters / our hearts still listen for the landward bells' (*The Collected Poems of John Hewitt*, edited by Frank Ormsby (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992), p. 98). Eavan Boland's poem 'Elegy for a Youth Changed to a Swan' in *The War Horse* (1975) is also based on the Irish legend (it is included in Boland, *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), p. 26).

unfavourably with the elemental 'roar / of waves'. It seems almost out of place in the natural world, as the following stanza suggests: 'It calls as *oddly* through the wild / eviscerations of the troubled channel between us and North Wales' [my italics]. Like Lowell, celebrating the 'unpolluted joy' of a boy's primal being, and sensing the spirit missing in 'new electric bells, / clearly chiming, "Faith of our fathers"', Mahon's poem laments the dearth of inspiration or creative vitality in Christian logocentrism.[128]

As in 'Waking Early Sunday Morning', religion is a central theme in 'Beyond Howth Head', each poem incorporating details of the bells, the elders, the signs and the hypocritical rhetoric ('they sing of peace, and preach despair'[129]). In addition, both adopt the long view in their indictment of a soulless culture. Just as Lowell satirises the American dream:

> No weekends for the gods now. Wars
> flicker, earth licks its open sores,
> fresh breakages, fresh promotions, chance
> assassinations, no advance...

so 'Beyond Howth Head' exposes the fact that all is certainly not 'for the best in the best of all possible worlds'. The 'cracked spectacles' of Pangloss reflect the cracked mythological worldview and the loss of imaginative vitality:

> dissolving once again, it seems
> our fond amelioristic dreams
> to loss is gain and gain is loss,
> cracked spectacles of poor Pangloss. [130]

'Fond amelioristic dreams' (like Chomei's 'idealistic philosophies') offer little in the face of violence, as Ulster witnesses its own spate of brutal assassinations. Only Mahon's poem never quite reaches the depths of Lowell's negative sublime: 'Pity the planet, all joy gone/ from this sweet volcanic cone....a ghost / orbiting forever lost / in our monotonous sublime'. Instead it gestures to the human presence, finding solace in intimacy amid encroaching darkness:

> and here I close my *Dover Beach*
> scenario, for look! the watch-
> ful Baily winks beyond Howth Head,

---

[128] Lowell, 'Waking Early Sunday Morning', p. 102.

[129] The relevant stanza in 'Waking Early Sunday Morning' (p. 102) reads: 'O Bible chopped and crucified / in hymns we hear but do not read, / none of the milder subtleties / of grace or art will sweeten these / stiff quatrains shovelled out four-square - / they sing of peace and preach despair; / yet they gave darkness some control, / and left a loophole for the soul'.

[130] In the notes for 'Pangloss' in *Lives* (p. 39), the entry states: 'All for the best in the best of all possible worlds'. In the original pamphlet version (p. 16), the gloss reads: 'Candide's tutor, who said 'All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds'.

> my *cailín bán* lies snug in bed
> 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.*

The image of the beloved 'snug in bed' is in stark contrast to Lowell's lost ghost forever orbiting the planet, playing more into Arnold's 'Ah, love, let us be true / To one another'. Reference to the moon rattling 'the lost stones / among the rocks' also echoes the lines from 'Dover Beach':

> Come to the window, sweet is the night air!
> Only, from the long line of spray
> Where the sea meets the moon-blanched land,
> Listen! You hear the grating roar
> Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
> At their return, up the high strand...

However, Mahon substitutes 'look!' for Arnold's 'Listen!' as the poem focuses within and without (to the room's interior and the vast expanse of sea), finds its title ('the watch- / ful Baily winks beyond Howth Head') and wryly puts out the light on the poem itself and the volume as a whole. The concluding reference to Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968), coined from the final line of Arnold's poem and subtitled 'History as a Novel / The Novel as History' highlights the poem's political engagement (Mailer's novel described how Lowell read 'Waking Early Sunday Morning' to an anti-war demonstration in Washington on the eve of the Pentagon march in October 1967). The larger currents noted by Denman thus include not only the world of literature and mythology but Anglo-Irish history, Bolshevik revolution, industrialisation, sexual liberation and the global implications of American foreign policy. Alongside *The Armies of the Night,* two of the poem's embedded texts, Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station* (1940), subtitled *A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* and Daniel Cohn-Bendit's *Obsolete Communism*: *The Left Wing Alternative* (1968), also deal with revolutionary politics.[131]

Contrary to criticism of Mahon's early poetry as disengaged (as outlined in Chapter One), 'Beyond Howth Head' aligns him with the socio-political voice of British 1930s

[131] The poem's accompanying notes link the lines referring to Lenin ('snow still in the Tsar's room where Len- /in rushed in from the hissing train') with Wilson's *magnum opus*, and the phrase 'outdated futures' in stanza eight with Cohn-Bendit's text. The latter was one of the leaders of the French student revolt of May 1968. Stanza seven draws attention to literary critical debate at the time, concerning the uses and function of literature: 'the hebona behind the smile / of grammar gets its brisk forensic / smack in the *realpolitik* / and Denmark's hot stylistics pass / to the cool courts of Cambridge, Mass'.).

poetry as well a host of other writers like Lowell, for whom literature is a subversive force. The ending is apposite in this regard, for Mailer's novel echoes Lowell's castigation of American military might: 'the symbol, the embodiment, no, call it the true and high church of the military-industrial complex, the Pentagon, blind five-sided eye of a subtle oppression...greedy stingy dumb valve of the worst of the Wasp heart'.[132] It enforces the earlier statement that the swell intentions of the CIA 'pave the road to hell'. Like Heaney, whose time at Berkeley in 1970-71 sensitised him to art as 'a force, almost a mode of power, certainly a mode of resistance', Mahon's spell on the East Coast enforced his sense of the necessity for poetry to attend to the socio-cultural or political *zeitgeist*.[133]

'Beyond Howth Head' clearly undermines the argument that formalism in Mahon's early poetry implies conservatism or, in Caplan's words, 'a dangerously nostalgic, politically naïve or reactionary escape from history'.[134] Rather it highlights the historical and political engagement of the ironic conscience in *Lives*, as Mahon cultivates a more public voice. However, this voice does not 'hitch a ride on yesterday's headlines', as Longley expressed it.[135] It prefers an oblique and subtle approach which avoids propaganda or rhetoric. In this regard, it finds an echo in MacNeice's 'A Statement' (1938), which was written in the context of the issue of poetic 'commitment':

> The world no doubt needs propaganda, but propaganda...is not the poet's job. He is not the loudspeaker of society, but something much more like its still, small voice. At his highest he can be its conscience, its critical faculty, its grievous instinct. He will not serve his world by wearing blinkers. The world to-day consists of specialists and intransigents. The poet, by contrast, should be synoptic and elastic in his sympathies.[136]

As a volume, *Lives* illustrates just how 'elastic' the ironic conscience can be, reading the signs of the times through various different modes – satirical, dialectical, allusive, witty. It exemplifies the manner in which it functions, not as 'the loudspeaker of society', but a kind

---

[132] Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel / The Novel as History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 125.
[133] Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 29. He noted Heaney's growing political awareness during his time at the University of California in Berkeley, where he encountered the poetry of Gary Synder, Robert Bly and Robert Duncan, with its protest against the Vietnam War.
[134] Caplan, *Questions of Possibility*, p. 98.
[135] Longley, *Reading the Future*, p. 127.
[136] MacNeice, 'A Statement' in Heuser (ed.), Selected *Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, p. 98. The article originally appeared in *New Verse*, 31-2 (Double Number on 'Commitments', Autumn 1938).

of 'critical faculty' which probes rather than confirms, exploiting ambiguity and uncertainty in the interest of the more complex truth.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SNOW PARTY (1975): THE VISIONARY MODE OF THE IRONIC CONSCIENCE

4.1 The Cultural Context of *The Snow Party*.

In keeping with the title of the final verse-letter in *Lives*, Mahon moved away from Dublin to work as literary journalist in London during the 1970s. Following in the footsteps of MacNeice, he reviewed for prominent publications like the *Observer*, *Listener* (as drama critic, 1971-1972), the *New Statesman* and *Times Literary Supplement*.[1] He was features editor with *Vogue* for a year (1974-1975), an interview with Anthony Burgess in Rome being one of his first assignments (the resulting article, 'Rome and Music: Anthony Burgess', is included in *Journalism*). As he stated, regarding his stint for the fashionable magazine:

> Oh yes, *Vogue*. I was the worst-dressed features editor *Vogue* ever had. It was quite fun. I was there for one calendar year. I'm a magazine addict...Glossies, you know – pretentious glossies. I've always been intrigued by figures like Edmund Wilson, who worked for *Vanity Fair* – people who could bring a kind of academic seriousness to the commercial writing scene. It's easy to sneer at *Vogue* but at one stage in the 1920s you had D. H. Lawrence writing book reviews and Aldous Huxley writing travel pieces.[2]

Mahon's articles from this period, a selection of which are included in *Journalism*, reveal his interest in Irish writers like Beckett, Oscar Wilde, Brian Moore and J. P. Donleavy, as well as J. G. Farrell, the Liverpool-born novelist best known for his tragicomic 'Empire' trilogy.[3] As we shall see, he is a key influence on *The Snow Party*, and the dedicatee of its most

---

[1] Mahon refers to MacNeice's literary criticism for London periodicals in 'An Ulster Blackthorn', *Journalism*, p. 43.

[2] Mahon, interview with Eve Patten, *Rhinoceros*, p. 88. Wilson's *To the Finland Station* (1940) is one of the embedded texts in 'Beyond Howth Head', as outlined in Chapter Three, p. 46. *Axel's Castle* (1931), his study of symbolist literature, was a seminal text in literary criticism.

[3] Farrell was a friend of Mahon's, whose trilogy comprised *Troubles* (1970), *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) which won the Booker Prize, and *The Singapore Grip* (1978). He also wrote *A Man from Elsewhere* (1963), *The Lung* (1965), *A Girl in the Head* (1967) and an unfinished novel, *The Hill Station* (published posthumously in 1982). Two of Mahon's articles on Farrell are included in *Journalism*, namely 'The Distant Skylight' (originally produced in *Vogue*, 1974) and 'J. G. Farrell 1935-1979'. Section XVII of *The Yellow Book*, 'The World of J. G. Farrell', pp. 49-50, incorporates images from his trilogy in addressing the decline of the British Empire.

celebrated poem, 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'. What these articles highlight is the light touch of Mahon's journalistic criticism, which mixes levity with 'seriousness', and his fascination with artistic 'characters', prone to wanderlust and a certain defiant eccentricity.

London thus became the centre of Mahon's literary career, his move there not surprising in the light of its significance for him and other 'young sophisticates' at 'Inst' in Belfast (as outlined in Chapter One). As Simmons stated in 'Flight of the Earls' (1974), sarcastically linking the scattering of contemporary poets with Irish exiles of old:

> Mahon was too fastidious for Belfast,
> he fled to Dublin, but that didn't last,
> onward and upward, the ambitious rogue
> rests now in London, on the staff of *Vogue*.
> And Heaney's skulking in some quaint street
> in Wicklow or at large in Baggot Street,
> talking with editors in Dublin bars
> far from his students and his seminars.[4]

'Afterlives', the opening poem in *The Snow Party*, is dedicated to Simmons, drawing attention to the close-knit nature of the literary community in Belfast. However, the dedication is somewhat pointed given that Mahon took offence at Simmons's suggestion that, in opting to live in London, he had abandoned the North.[5] As Brearton explained, dedications in Irish poetry

> ...can be a prickly subject – and a double-edged sword. This one is both compliment and challenge; a concession to this kind of criticism, and a refutation of it.[6]

Equally, the dedication to Heaney, as we have seen in the title poem of *Lives*, was 'both compliment and challenge', as much a subversive critique as an act of homage. Clearly, Mahon was disillusioned with aspects of life in Ireland, not least the bombs going off around Belfast (to echo 'Beyond Howth Head'). Nonetheless, such events were not going to get in the way of his literary career (in this sense, as Simmons pointed out, Mahon was 'ambitious'). As he stated later in interview:

---

[4] Simmons, 'Flight of the Earls Now Leaving', *Irish Times*, 4 June 1974. The title recalls the Irish exiles who served in continental Catholic armies after the Treaty of Limerick (1691) and during the period when the Penal Laws were in force (otherwise referred to as the flight of the Wild Geese).

[5] As Douglas Dunn noted in a letter to Longley (cited by Brearton in *Reading Michael Longley*, p. 55), Mahon seemed 'terribly hurt' by Simmons's remarks. The letter is dated 25 July, 1972.

[6] Brearton, *Reading Michael Longley*, p. 55. She continued (in a somewhat damning indictment of Simmons): ''Afterlives' is, after all, a poem far more sophisticated in its form and politics than anything Simmons would ever write about the North, and a poem whose 'responsibility' is found in its complexity'.

> I think probably there were things that I should have come to terms with, researched, looked into, looked at, but I didn't. At that time, Protestants like James Simmons, Michael Longley, myself could think that this was not our quarrel – our peculiar upbringing as middle-class, grammar-school-educated, liberal, ironical Protestants allowed us to think of ourselves as somehow not implicated. I told myself that I had more important things to do. Which were going to London, getting on with my own literary career as I had now started to conceive of it, marrying Doreen, getting myself together, discovering a sense of purpose. And writing directly about those conditions in the North was not part of that purpose. [7]

Notwithstanding these remarks, it was very difficult for Mahon to escape the impact of the Troubles, especially in the early 1970s when the violence reached its peak, extending far beyond the province.[8] In May 1974 over thirty-three people were killed as a result of loyalist paramilitary bombings in Dublin and Monaghan (the highest number of people killed in a single day of the Troubles), while the IRA stepped up its bombing campaign in England. In October, five people were killed and fifty-four injured in the bombing of two pubs in Guildford, Surrey, resulting in the wrongful (highly publicised) conviction of the 'Maguire Seven'.[9] Nineteen people were killed and 182 injured in explosions in two pubs in Birmingham in November, giving rise to a similar miscarriage of justice in the case of the equally publicised 'Birmingham Six'. 1975, the year in which *The Snow Party* was published, saw the negotiation of a truce between the British Government and Provisional IRA which, despite various near-breaking points along the way, lasted until late September. In July, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a loyalist terrorist group, murdered three members of an Irish showband returning home from a concert in Belfast, an incident commemorated in Durcan's poem 'In Memory: The Miami Showband: Massacred 31 July

---

[7] Mahon, *In the Chair*, p. 116. He married Doreen Douglas from Portballintrae in North Antrim in 1972. *The Snow Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) is dedicated to her. These remarks arose in response to a discussion of 'Afterlives'.

[8] Following the prorogation of Stormont in favour of direct rule from London in 1972, negotiations took place in order to try and establish a power-sharing executive, involving Unionist politicians and the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). This was an attempt to fill the political vacuum which had been exploited by terrorists of all sides, resulting in such horrific loss of life in 1972 and 1973 (as outlined in Chapter Three). The first meeting of the Northern Ireland Assembly took place in July 1973, followed by The Sunningdale Agreement in December which allowed for the formation of a Council of Ireland. While initially the agreement seemed a triumph for consensus politics, its unpopularity, particularly with loyalist sections of the Protestant community, soon became apparent. The February 1974 general election which resulted in a sea-change in the fortunes of the Northern Ireland executive, followed by an Ulster Workers' Council strike in May (which the British Labour government failed to confront), effectively ended power-sharing and called a halt to the Council of Ireland. In the meantime, the wave of violence continued.

[9] The 1993 film *In the Name of the Father* by Irish director Jim Sheridan exposes the British judicial system's unjust imprisonment of the Guildford Four – Gerry Conlon, Paul Hill, Carole Richardson and Paddy Armstrong – as well as their alleged accomplices, Conlon's father and two other relatives in the Maguire family. The Four were released in 1989, Conlon's father having died in prison.

1975'.[10] Here the clash between artist and activist, as outlined in Mahon's 'Rage for Order' or Muldoon's 'Lunch with Pancho Villa', is stated more bluntly: 'a patriotic (sic) / Versifier whines into my face: 'You must take one side / Or the other, or you're but a fucking romantic''.[11]

It is not surprising, therefore, that the first part of 'Afterlives' (neatly recalling the title of the previous volume), should reflect Mahon's increasing disillusion as long-term solutions to the sectarian conflict in the North seemed impossible. It echoes sentiments expressed in 'Beyond Howth Head' about bourgeois complacency ('the knacker's yard / of humanistic self-regard'), only the tone is less playful, more embittered:

> This is our element, the bright
> Reason on which we rely
> For the long-term solutions.
> The orators yap, and guns
> Go off in a back street;
> But the faith does not die
>
> That in our time these things
> Will amaze the literate children
> In their non-sectarian schools
> And the dark places be
> Ablaze with love and poetry
> When the power of good prevails.
>
> What middle-class cunts we are
> To imagine for one second
> That our privileged ideals
> Are divine wisdom, and the dim
> Forms that kneel at noon
> In the city not ourselves.

Here liberal humanism is castigated for its faith in 'bright / Reason', or misguided assumption that 'love and poetry' can transform all the injustices of society. The obscene language befits the obscenity of patronising others or mistaking one's own thoughts for 'divine wisdom'. Reference to 'the dim / Forms that kneel at noon' (most likely Catholics who pray the angelus) mixes wariness of religiosity, particularly the sanctimonious kind dismissed in 'In Belfast' (*Night-Crossing*), with disgust at profoundly sectarian attitudes.

---

[10] The UVF staged a fake roadblock to ambush the band, planning to conceal a bomb on the minibus so that it would appear they were involved with the IRA. The bomb exploded prematurely killing two UVF men, the others in their panic shooting dead three band members.

[11] Durcan, 'In Memory: The Miami Showband – Massacred 31 July 1975', *A Snail in My Prime: Selected Poems* (London: The Harvill Press, 1993), p. 45.

The bipartite form of 'Afterlives', juxtaposing London and Belfast, reflects Mahon's divided self, torn between guilt for having left (unlike Simmons who remained) and regret for the life he might have led (a theme echoed, as we shall see, in 'Leaves'). Once again, the familiar note of ambiguity registers in the final stanza, as the words 'Perhaps' and 'might' (like the closing 'should' in 'Glengormley' and 'In Belfast') hold conflicting feelings in creative tension:

> And I step ashore in a fine rain
> To a city so changed
> By five years of war
> I scarcely recognise
> The places I grew up in,
> The faces that try to explain.
>
> But the hills are still the same
> Grey-blue above Belfast.
> Perhaps if I'd stayed behind
> And lived it bomb by bomb
> I might have grown up at last
> And learnt what is meant by home.

The conclusion sees Mahon ponder the road not taken and the difference it 'might have' made. Returning to Belfast evokes the Freudian uncanny (*unheimlich*), a haunting feeling of living some kind of ghostly 'afterlife' or sense of unease in face of the altered familiar. Reference to 'a city so changed / By five years of war' highlights the awful impact of the tragedy on Belfast. Rhyming 'bomb' with 'home' stresses its traumatic personal effect, while implicitly justifying Mahon's decision to leave. The volume's opening poem thus does deal directly with 'conditions in the North', contrary to his remarks in interview. However, all of the other poems adopt a much more detached, otherworldly stance, as Mahon experiments with the visionary mode of the ironic conscience. This mode is the defining feature of *The Snow Party*, remarkable for the ingenuity with which it taps spaces 'where a thought might grow' (to echo 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford').

4.2. The Visionary Mode of the Ironic Conscience in *The Snow Party*.

The visionary mode of the ironic conscience in *The Snow Party* adopts two distinct yet related strands which, for schematic purposes, might be termed the Oriental long view and

the satirical, worm's-eye perspective.[12] The long view incorporates Japanese rituals, Babylonian myths, Celtic fire festivals, the Inquisition and other atrocities. It perceives the flux of history as if through a pane of ice. Here Mahon draws upon a variety of different influences, including Jaccottet, the Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō, the Greek writers George Seferis and Constantin Cavafy, and the Anglo-Irish novelist Farrell. His vast perspectives on human history greatly appealed to Mahon, as evident in the article 'J. G. Farrell 1935-1979', which appeared originally in the *New Statesman* in 1979 to mark the novelist's tragic and untimely death.[13] The final paragraph is worth quoting at length, for the light it sheds on the visionary perspectives of the ironic conscience, not only in 'A Disused Shed' but in several poems:

> ...like most Farrellites, I lost my heart to *Troubles*, that strange, haunting story set in a crumbling hotel in Co. Wexford during the War of Independence, in which the Major, a younger man than in the *Grip*, makes his first gloomy appearance. On the first page occurs the sentence: 'A few years later still the Majestic itself followed the boats and preceded the pines into oblivion by burning to the ground'. It was that 'and preceded the pines' that hooked me. Here was a novelist who stood back, who took the long view. There is nothing meretricious or merely topical about Farrell's work; it has the detachment and repose of great art. Which is not to say that it lacks humanity. On the contrary, an important part of Jim's make-up was a vivid and compassionate humanism which embraced Dives and Lazarus, the choleric tycoon and the indigent coolie. And always there is the sense that in the midst of life we are in death.[14]

As we shall see, this passage helps to explain the Olympian detachment of this volume. Just as Farrell eschewed the merely topical, so Mahon distances himself from contemporary events, situating the local in the context of the universal. Several poems seek to emulate 'the detachment and repose of great art' or aspire to the condition of silence (the word silence recurs throughout *The Snow Party*). In Heaney's terms, they are as 'rinsed of political and

---

[12] In 'Pythagorean Lines', the final poem in *The Chimeras*: A Version of *Les Chimères* by Gérard de Nerval (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1982), p. 20, Mahon uses the phrase 'worm's-eye view': 'Respect the dog's life and the worm's eye-view; / each flower in nature is an open soul'.

[13] The article is included in *Journalism*, pp. 210-210. Farrell died in a drowning accident off the coast of West Cork.

[14] Mahon, 'J. G. Farrell 1935-1979', *Journalism*, p. 210. *Grip* refers to Farrell's other novel, *The Singapore Grip* (1978). Here Mahon echoes Patrick Kavanagh in his Introduction to *Collected Poems* (London: Martin Brian & O'Keeffe, 1972), p. xiv, which spoke of the 'true detachment' of a work of art, or in 'Self-Portrait', where he stated that *The Great Hunger* lacked 'the nobility and repose of poetry'. The latter is included in *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose of Patrick Kavanagh*, edited by Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003), p. 314.

ethnic solidarity as a *haiku* by Bashō'.[15] This is clearly evident in the title poem, with its reference to a Japanese tea ceremony and Bashō's journey to Nagoya, but also in 'Leaves', 'Going Home', 'The Last of the Fire Kings', 'Thammuz', 'Cavafy', 'Dead of Night' and 'Flying' (the *haiku*-like quality of the latter sees its inclusion as the final poem in the revised sequence 'Light Music' in *Poems 1962-1978*[16]). All of these poems feature the afterlife or a place outside history. The overall effect is that the telescopic perspectives in this volume assume a more metaphysical or detached meditative quality. The Beckettian voice from beyond the grave in *Lives* is given an Eastern twist, as the visionary mode of the ironic conscience casts a cold eye on life and death.

This Oriental long view in *The Snow Party* is complemented by a satirical voice which speaks through the medium of 'the mute phenomena', following the example of the French writers Nerval (a version of whose *Les Chimères* Mahon published in 1982) and Jaccottet. What appealed to Mahon in both poets was an attentiveness to nature or sense of the numinous in the natural world. In Jaccottet, it finds expression in an interior and meditative voice, which has overtones of mysticism. As Mahon stated in his Introduction to the latter's *Selected Poems* in 1987:

> He is a secular mystic. '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, hill, wind, water, bird, house, lamp.[17]

By contrast, Nerval's regard for nature is mixed with a certain levity or satirical disregard for aspects of contemporary society, anthropological pretension in particular. This playfulness underlies the series of nature poems in *The Snow Party*, as the strange and quirky life of leaves, hub-caps, stones, tins and frost crystals offers a wry angle of critique on the human stain. Poems such as 'The chair squeaks…', 'After Nerval', 'A Hermit', 'The Apotheosis of Tins' and 'The Banished Gods' reflect Mahon's distinctive eco-poetics, which mixes the mysticism of Jaccottet with the satirical edge of Nerval. Here it finds an echo in East European poetry, notably the work of the Czechoslovakian poet Miroslav Holub, who also

---

[15] Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland', p. 123.
[16] The revised sequence comprises twenty-five miniature pieces, as opposed to twenty in the original pamphlet version *Light Music* (1977). It will be discussed in Chapter Four.
[17] Mahon, Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, p 11.

turned the microscope on society via such mute phenomena as a pebble, a door, a forest or flypaper (to allude to various titles).[18]

Taken together, both these strands (the theoptic and worm's-eye perspective) give the ironic conscience in *The Snow Party* an otherworldly aura, as Mahon distances himself from the 'merely topical' or mundane reality (to echo his remarks on Farrell) in order to express more universal truths.[19] They underlie the perception of him as something of a 'secular mystic', who negotiates the contrasting spheres of literature, history, phenomenology, mythology and metaphysics. However, as Mahon pointed out in the *New Statesman* article, detached perspectives do not necessarily imply indifference or a lack of humanity. On the contrary, he identified 'a vivid and compassionate humanism' at the heart of Farrell's work (the phrase recalls his earlier reference to MacNeice's 'empirical humanism'[20]). In praising the detachment and repose of Farrell's writing, Mahon is also framing a justification for his poetic strategy in this volume. For all its otherworldly remove, or mystical 'sense that in the midst of life we are in death', *The Snow Party* is deeply engaged with human history. Like Farrell's novels which 'relive for us the lives of people whose names are obscured for ever by the passage of generations', its poems are preoccupied with marginalised 'lives' (a key word for Mahon).[21] This is particularly evident, as we shall see, in 'A Disused Shed' with its remarkable lyric distillation of the cries of the oppressed in different historical eras and cultures. It is also noticeable in 'The Snow Party' and 'The Last of the Fire Kings', which form a kind of poetic diptych, both poems addressing the 'barbarous cycle' of history. Even the series of nature poems offer an implicit critique of modernity, focusing as much on the silence of 'historical nightmare' ('The Apotheosis of Tins') as of eternity. As outlined in the Introduction, the visionary mode of the ironic conscience (or Mahon's secular mysticism) must not be considered in isolation from other modes, in particular the satirical streak or

---

[18] Holub's *Selected Poems* first appeared in English in 1967, as part of the Penguin Modern European Poets series. A proficient scientist, he turned to poetry as an oblique and powerful critique of totalitarian society. All references to his work are taken from *Miroslav Holub, Poems: Before & After* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990).

[19] As we have seen, Mahon pointed out in 'J. G. Farrell 1935-1979' that there is 'nothing meretricious or merely topical about Farrell's work'. Farrell himself stated, in relation to his work: 'I am deeply interested in trying to write universal as opposed to regional novels, the sort of books in which people trying to adjust themselves to abrupt changes in their civilization, whether it be in Ireland or Japan, may be able to recognise themselves' (cited as epigraph to Ralph Crane & Jennifer Livett (eds.), *Troubled Pleasures: the fiction of J. G. Farrell* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997). The 'abrupt changes' in the North of Ireland ironically resulted in the unintended topicality of Farrell's *Troubles* (1969).

[20] See Chapter Two, p. 83, for this reference to MacNeice's 'empirical humanism'.

[21] Mahon, 'The Distant Skylight', p. 208.

'subversive Dionysian spirit'. Its cold eye, for all the transcendental remove, is deeply engaged with realities on the ground. We will now illustrate this engagement in poems that exemplify both the long view and the satire of mute phenomena. Finally, we will analyse 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford', which combines elements of both strands in a dramatic climax. It is the consummation of the visionary mode of the ironic conscience in *The Snow Party*, highlighting its oblique yet powerful historical engagement.

4.2.1 The Visionary Long View in *The Snow Party*.

Adopting a view from beyond the grave, 'Going Home' opens abruptly with the lines: 'Why we died / Remains a mystery, / One we shall never solve'. The afterlife is described in terms of spirits like shift workers from Hull, recalling the grainy image of Belfast shipyard workers on the cover photograph of *Lives*. They are ferried across the Humber ('Twice daily') like souls across the Styx, vanishing into obscurity for ever like the Roman legionaries before them:

> For ours is the afterlife
> Of the unjudgeable,
> Of the desolate and free
>
> Who come over
> Twice daily from Hull
> Disguised as shift workers
>
> And vanish for ever
> With a whisper of soles
> Under a cindery sky,
>
> The sort of sky
> That broke the hearts
> Of the foundered legionaries.[22]

With typical Mahon wit, the poem goes on to depict the afterlife as a 'blank Elysium / Predicated on our / Eschewal of metaphysics' (echoing the rejection of scripture and return to 'blank nature' in 'What Will Remain' in *Lives*). There is no happy ending, no good news or gold at 'the end / Of the rainbow', because, as the last stanza facetiously notes, 'the pubs are shut' and the buses not running till morning. 'Going Home' is Mahon's witty *Purgatorio* or satirical take on the grand *telos* of history. Our 'foreclosed species' is seen to ebb out with a dry whimper, if not a dying footfall (given the Beckettian pun on soles/souls).

---

[22] The poem's dedication to Douglas Dunn enforces the connection with Hull, the former's first volume *Terry Street* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969) based on a deprived, working-class part of the city.

'Thammuz', a revised version of 'What Will Remain' in *Lives*, also takes up the theme of the afterlife, in the form of a Babylonian god who dies at the end of summer only to be reborn again in spring, an allusion to Sir James Frazer's anthropological epic, *The Golden Bough*.[23] Like the title poem of Mahon's second volume, it too plays with the fantasy of metamorphosis, in the guise of the eternal recurrence of the gods:

> There will be silence, then
> A sigh of waking
> As from a long dream.
>
> Once more I shall rise
> And plough my country
> By first light,
>
> At noon lie down
> In a warm field
> With the sun on my face,
>
> And after midnight
> Fish for stars
> In the dark waters.
>
> Once more I shall worship
> The moon, make gods
> Of clay, gods of stone,
>
> And celebrate
> In a world of waste
> Their deaths and their return.

Reference to 'a world of waste', which recalls the apocalyptic opening: 'What will be left / After the twilight of cities, / The flowers of fire', obliquely enforces the sense of endgame or nuclear meltdown. The 'silence' is thus linked with historical nightmare, as in 'The Antigone Riddle', and the figure of Thammuz with survival.[24] He joins Mahon's miscellany of marginalised outsiders, the vast temporal perspective intensifying his displacement ('waking / As from a long dream'). Each rebirth (as in the repeated 'Once more') suggests a certain nostalgic longing to return to primal origins, rid of the contamination of humanity.

---

[23] The poem is re-titled 'The Golden Bough' in *Poems 1962-1979*.

[24] 'The Antigone Riddle', *The Snow Party*, p. 16, which thrice repeats the word 'silence', can be read as a gnomic political epitome. Its reference to 'bombers' links the destructive forces of modernity with the authoritarian Creon. Its silence is also that of destruction in the guise of chemical warfare or nuclear holocaust ('bombers', in the light of 'Beyond Howth Head' in *Lives*, suggests US campaigns in Vietnam and Cambodia perhaps).

'Leaves' has a marked utopian expansiveness, moving from the concrete particularity of 'a field below the wood' to 'the heaven / Of lost futures'.[25] It takes on a visionary intensity, as the natural object evokes a timeless or transcendent realm:

> 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.

Leaves become a metaphor for spirits in the afterlife as the repetition of 'somewhere' and 'infinite' (echoing the opening line, 'prisoners of infinite choice'), alongside 'heaven' and 'futures', conveys the vastness of time and space. The deft orchestration of sound-effects heightens the hypnotic effect, so that the poem embodies the desired 'fulfilment'. With its vision of eternity in the elemental world, 'Leaves' exemplifies the volume's mystical dimension, illustrating, what Jerzy Jarniewicz called, 'Mahon's immanent religion'.[26] Each stanza possesses its own *haiku*-like imagism, as it seeks to attain the 'detachment and repose of great art' or, as Mahon stated in relation to Beckett (adopting Walter Pater's dictum), 'the condition of music'. Clearly, Beckett's influence can be traced in 'Leaves', not only in the hypnotic use of language but in the association of leaves with the dead and the reference to 'Rustling and sighing'. Mahon cited the relevant passage from Beckett's best-known play in an article for *Irish University Review* in 1984. It is worth quoting here in full for it highlights Dawe's point (noted earlier) about Beckett enjoying an intertextual 'afterlife' in Mahon's poetry:

> There is one passage in Godot which achieves, I think, the condition of music.
> Let us call it 'All the Dead Voices'

---

[25] It is interesting to read 'Leaves' and 'Afterlives' in the context of 'The City' (part one of the five part poem 'Cavafy' in *The Snow Party*), for the latter muses on the reality of having remained at home and the futility of hoping for things elsewhere. Cavafy's poem offers a glimpse of the life Mahon 'might have led' (to adopt 'Leaves') as Alexandria becomes a mirror of Belfast. Mahon deftly uses translation as a way of playing out his particular concerns, in this case the central homecoming-leavetaking compulsion: 'To have gone to a new country, a new sea, / Another, finer city - / Too late now to deliver / The condemned heart from the vicinity / Of lost chances, dead ends, / Dark ruins of the life / You have wasted here. // There is no new country, no new sea. / Only the same old city / Shadows you night and day'. The reference to 'lost chances' echoes the theme of 'lost futures' in 'Leaves', setting up a kind of internal dialogue between 'The City', 'Leaves' and 'Afterlives' as *The Snow Party* ponders lives, afterlives, roads taken or not taken. 'Cavafy' is re-titled 'Alexandria' in *Adaptations* (2006).

[26] Jarniewicz, 'Derek Mahon: History, Mute Phenomena and Beyond', in Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002), p. 93.

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.[27]

'All the Dead Voices' is a kind of lyric distillation of what Beckett's *Molloy* termed 'the long sonata of the dead', a phrase Mahon noted in his article 'Sam's Think', which first appeared in the *New Statesman* in 1976.[28] Its austere form mirrors the tight mathematical vice of Mahon's stanzas in several poems, all of which suggest the poet's willingness to partake of the 'Spartan maieutics' Beckett commended in Pound.[29] This reductive process receives hilarious expression in 'Matthew V. 29-30', which strips life to the terminal minimum. Thus, the Beckettian voice, so pervasive in *Lives*, persists in this volume, particularly in its fixation with residual states and unearthly silence. However, 'Leaves' also points to Jaccottet who frequently uses the natural object to register interior states, the drama of the mind in search of illumination or 'fulfilment'. In *'Les eaux et les forêts'* ('Streams and Forests'), he stated that *'la feuille morte sert les vivantes couronnes'*, which Mahon

[27] Mahon, 'A Noise Like Wings: Beckett's Poetry', *Journalism*, pp. 53-54. Reference to 'the condition of music' echoes Pater's remark (in 'Giorgione', *The Renaissance*) that 'All art constantly aspires to the condition of music'. Dawe's remark is cited in Chapter Three, p. 15.
[28] The article is included in *Journalism*, p. 59. Beckett's phrase is from *Molloy* (New York: Grove Press, 1955), p. 41, which became the first novel in *The Beckett Trilogy*, alongside *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*.
[29] Mahon refers to Beckett's remark in 'A Noise Like Wings', p. 52.

translates as, 'dead leaves will make the living crown'). Also, in *'Je sais maintenant que je ne possède rien'* ('I know now I possess nothing of my own'), Jaccottet used the image of *'feuilles pourries'* ('dead leaves') in the context of an afterlife or *'une heureuse patrie'*.[30]

Like Beckett, Jaccottet was an intensely visual poet who sought to pare down language to achieve greater poetic intensity. As Mahon stated in his Introduction to *Words in the Air* (1998), linking the French poet with a painter whose work Beckett also admired:

> But the artist with whom he has the greatest affinity is Tal-Coat, whose characteristic manner, developed in the 1950s, has been called 'lyrical abstraction': a natural scene or object is teased out until precise subject-matter disappears and we are left with a few brush-strokes only, black on white, which qualify, so to speak, as ideograms – even as haiku, what Grigson calls 'a few words in space'. Jaccottet too developed a mode of lyrical abstraction consciously based on oriental precedents.[31]

In 'Leaves' and other short poems, Mahon experiments with his own mode of lyrical abstraction, tapping the natural world for its latent mystery. Thus, in 'The Antigone Riddle', a windfall drops 'in / Silence to the long grass'; in 'Dead of Night', grapes dreams 'of the days of wine', while in 'Flying', 'A wand of sunlight' resembles 'the finger of heaven' ('Flying'). Such poems single out Mahon as a creative visionary, who uses a natural scene or object to conjure up memorable images of the afterlife, whether shift workers at the pier, a stadium of dead leaves or 'A land of cumulus / Seen from above' ('Flying').[32] This visionary strain is what distinguishes *The Snow Party*, strengthening the perception of Mahon as a secular mystic. It is especially evident in the title poem which, in striving after the condition of music, opens up a richly symbolic space.

Oriental precedents, notably Bashō, the poem's resonant opening word, underlie the minimalist style of 'The Snow Party', with its focus on a Japanese tea ritual (as imagined by

---

[30] Mahon's translation 'Streams and Forests' is included in *Words in the Air: A Selection of Poems by Philippe Jaccottet* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1998), p. 27. His translation of the first stanza of Jaccottet's poem '*Je sais maintenant que je ne possède rien*' from *Words in the Air*, p. 21, reads: 'I know now I possess nothing of my own - / not even the gold of these dead leaves, still less / these days flying past into the unknown / beating their great wings about what happy place'.

[31] Mahon, Introduction to *Words in the Air*, p. 13. This introduction is a revised and abbreviated version of the earlier one in *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet* (1987). There, Mahon cited particular works by Tal-Coat such as the series *Terres* (1966) and *Herbes* (1967), as well as pictures like *Paysage d'Aix* (1950), *Pluie sur la Ste Victoire* (1952) and the ink drawing *Plateau cevénol* (1954). The first of Beckett's 'Three Dialogues' in *Disjecta* (London: John Calder, 1983), pp. 138-145, concerns the French artist Tal Coat.

[32] In 'Wilful Inconsistency: Derek Mahon's Verse-Letters', p. 116, Redmond refers to Mahon as 'a sensual visionary', who, at his best, is 'almost the equal of Yeats'.

Mahon).[33] The symbolist desire to get beyond language and figure intangible realities can be seen as Mahon exploits the visual and musical possibilities of words. As in 'Leaves', the incantatory rhythm of the first five stanzas evokes a timeless realm, the blanket silence offset by the 'tinkling of china':

> Bashō, coming
> To the city of Nagoya,
> Is asked to a snow party.
>
> There's a tinkling of china
> And tea into china.
> There are introductions.
>
> Then everyone
> Crowds to the window
> To watch the falling snow.
>
> Snow is falling on Nagoya
> And farther south
> On the tiles of Kyōto.
>
> Eastward, beyond Irago,
> It is falling
> Like leaves on the cold sea.

This rhythm derives from the repetition of key words ('is', 'china', 'falling', 'snow') and the trance-like naming of exotic places ('Nagoya...Kyōto...Irago'). The image of snow falling like leaves (recalling the 'dead leaves' in the earlier poem) shows how deftly Mahon can create his own ideograms or *haikus* using 'a few words in space'. The repeated use of the present tense ('There is a tinkling...There are introductions...there is silence') and strategic deployment of the continuous present ('falling') intensifies the sense of timelessness, of an eternal now. This links the poem, as Dillon Johnston noted, with Gabriel Conroy's dream in Joyce's 'The Dead', with its equally hypnotic description of snow 'falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly on the Bog of Allen and, further westwards, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves'.[34] The mood of 'The Snow Party' thus reflects a 'condition of supremely unillusioned quietism' (to re-quote Paulin's phrase, cited in Chapter One), a quasi-Zen state of repose beyond good or evil. In this

---

[33] A Japanese tea party takes places outside rather than indoors as 'The Snow Party' depicts it. This oversight supports Haughton's suggestion (in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 102) that the poem, given its dedication to the American poet Louis Asekoff, 'may recall a winter party they both attended in or near Boston at the height of the Vietnam war'.

[34] Johnston, 'MacNeice & Mahon', *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p. 229.

context, it appears to confirm criticism of Mahon's early poetry as disengaged, in particular Porter's sense of it as evading history or 'preparing a pantheon' outside time.[35]

To equate this vast, unillusioned perspective with political indifference or a reactionary escape from history, however, is to overlook the poem's engagement with ambiguity. The meditative spell is broken as the abrupt 'Elsewhere' of stanza six shatters the Zen silence of Mahon's 'cold pastoral' (to recall Keats's poem), interjecting a vision of historical nightmare:

> Elsewhere they are burning
> Witches and heretics
> In the boiling squares,
>
> Thousands have died since dawn
> In the service
> Of barbarous kings –
>
> But there is silence
> In the houses of Nagoya
> And the hills of Ise.

Mention of 'barbarous kings' echoes 'The Last of the Fire Kings', its companion piece on the facing page, just as the reference to burnings at the stake in 'boiling squares' graphically depicts the latter's 'barbarous cycle'. Mahon's spare elegance is intensely allusive as the poem expands to encompass the calamitous vistas of human history, including the slaughter of Aughrim and the Boyne in Ireland (contemporary with Bashō's tour to Nagoya and northern Japan), the Salem witch trials in New England and the Vietnam War.[36] Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli' can be traced in the panoramic sweep of 'all the tragic scene', the 'tinkling of…tea into china' suggesting an insouciance akin to that of the Chinamen whose 'ancient, glittering eyes, are gay'. As Edna Longley stated, drawing attention to the crucial issue of the aesthetic and violence:

> Here Mahon specifically revisits Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli': a poem in which the 1890s come up against the 1930s. Mahon, too, asks how the imagination should comport itself when the times 'Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in'.[37]

---

[35] Porter's criticism is discussed in Chapter One, p. 50, while Paulin's phrase from the Introduction to *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (1988) is cited in Chapter One, p. 54.

[36] The Salem witch trials in 1692 are contemporary with Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1694), a seminal text, as we shall see, for this poem. The poem's dedication to Asekof (see footnote 33) points to a link with the Vietnam War, particularly in the light of Mahon's reference (in a letter to the Longleys in 1966) to its bloodshed 'stain[ing] the snow in Harvard Yard' (cited by Haughton in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 42). Johnson, in 'MacNeice & Mahon', p. 229, made the link with the battle of Aughrim and the Boyne (and Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli'), alongside that of Joyce's 'The Dead'.

[37] Edna Longley, 'Looking Back From *The Yellow Book*', p. 31. The quotation is from 'Lapis Lazuli'.

In this context, 'The Snow Party' confirms the volume's oblique approach to art and history. The juxtaposition of the courteousness of a Japanese ritual with scenes of murderous devastation ('Thousands have died') is a subtle reminder of the complicity between barbarism and civility, 'the thin partitions which divide them, the deep bonds which conjoin them'.[38] The final 'But' (But there is silence') does not so much counsel detachment or quietism, given the insignificance of human endeavour against the backdrop of eternity, as expose the tribal collusion in silence. In this sense, it recalls Heaney's 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing' in *North* (1975), as the 'houses of Nagoya' hug their own little destinies.[39] The poem's ambiguity is less 'solving' (to recall 'In Carrowdore Churchyard') than unsettling, as it probes the link between art and violence. Here 'The Snow Party' looks back to 'Rage for Order' in *Lives*, its reference to the window ('Then everyone / Crowds to the window') echoing the poet's 'high window'. The association suggests that the tea party itself is 'a dying art', if watching the falling snow is synonymous with turning a blind eye to brutal realities.

A far cry from being hermetically disengaged, Mahon's poem obliquely confirms Benjamin's remark that 'there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same a document of barbarism'.[40] Just as Bashō, for all his meditation or enlightenment, repeatedly tells us he has one foot in this world, so the visionary mode of the ironic conscience keeps a close eye on history.[41] When asked by Scammell in interview in 1991 as to whether it is reasonable to construe 'The Snow Party' as a 'comment or No Comment on 'the Troubles', your '*Non serviam*'', Mahon replied: 'Yes. The incident is taken from Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* [(1694)], a title no Ulster poet can read without a smile'.[42] The poem itself thus has its own Zen-like quality of compressed or hidden meanings. Like Muldoon's 'Pancho Villa' (as outlined in Chapter One), the figure of Bashō provided Mahon with an alternative angle on historical violence, including atrocities 'a little nearer home'.

---

[38] Deane, 'Derek Mahon: Freedom from History', p. 161.
[39] The final lines of Heaney's poem read: 'Competence with pain, / Coherent miseries, a bite and sup, / We hug our little destiny again', *North*, p. 60.
[40] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, H. Arendt (ed.), H. Zohn (trans.) (London: Cape, 1970), p. 258.
[41] See the Introduction by Nobuyuki Yuasa to *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Sketches*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 27, for this insight into Bashō's life and work.
[42] Mahon, interview with Scammell, p. 6. Muldoon uses Bashō's title for a poem in *Mules* (1977), which also deals obliquely with violence.

'The Last of the Fire Kings', which Mahon paired with 'The Snow Party', also adopts an oblique angle on art and history and displays a similar ambiguity, only now the artist is depicted as a roving daredevil whose birthright is freedom and adventure. As Haughton indicated, the poem was originally one of a group of anthropological poems, drawing on Frazer's *The Golden Bough.*[43] Ignorance of 'the language' places the speaker outside the tribal mores, beyond the claims of the collective:

> 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.
>
> Either way, I am
> Through with history –
> Who lives by the sword
>
> Dies by the sword.
> Last of the fire kings, I shall
> Break with tradition and
>
> Die by my own hand
> Rather than perpetuate
> The barbarous cycle.

Reference to 'a moving train' recalls 'Girls in their Seasons', the opening poem in *Night-Crossing*, as the artist (still in transit) 'strikes out over the fields'. As outlined in Chapter One, the single phrase, 'I am / Through with history' confirmed for certain critics the impression of a poet for whom art is a ghostly paradigm, at a remove from the cruelties and compromises of the street. In the context of the poem, however, this reading is somewhat reductive, for the second half ironises the speaker's desire to 'Break with tradition' and escape 'The barbarous cycle'. The yearning for 'a place outside of time, / A palace of porcelain' (echoing Yeats's 'artifice of eternity' in 'Sailing to Byzantium') is forced to

[43] Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 103.

contend with the force field of history and tradition. Tribal allegiance makes itself felt in the demands of the 'fire-loving / People':

> Five years I have reigned
> During which time
> I have lain awake each night
>
> And prowled by day
> In the sacred grove
> For fear of the usurper,
>
> Perfecting my cold dream
> Of a place outside of time,
> A palace of porcelain
>
> Where the frugivorous
> Inheritors recline
> In their rich fabrics
> Far from the sea.
>
> 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.

The pivotal phrase, 'rightly perhaps', which looks back to the closing *perhaps* in 'Afterlives' ('Perhaps if I'd stayed behind'), sounds the signature note of ambiguity, simultaneously admitting and resisting the claims of the collective. Once again the poem balances conflicting perspectives as the artist is torn between poetic freedom and poetic responsibility (to recall the terms of Wills's argument discussed in Chapter One) or, alternatively, between the unrealistic desire to escape the world (the aesthetic option) and the equally undesirable reality of remaining a dependent creature (the claims of engagement).[44] In the context of Northern Ireland in 1975, the year in which Heaney's *North* was published, 'The Last of the Fire Kings' was thus extremely apposite, its terms readily applicable to the highly charged critical debate concerning the precise relationship between poetry and politics. Edna Longley, as we have seen, accused Heaney of selling out to the demands of

[44] The aesthetic option is captured by the sheer decadence of 'frugivorous / Inheritors', reclining like Roman emperors in a kind of Bacchanalian frenzy (the image recalls the reference to 'a Claudian emperor' in 'Rage for Order' in *Lives*). The call to engage is represented by the 'world of / Sirens, bin-lids / And bricked-up windows', echoing the scorched gables and 'burnt-out / Buses' of 'Rage for Order'.

the 'fire-loving / People' in *North*.[45] As spokesperson for the tribe, he appeared to condone rather than condemn 'the ancient curse' of violence (witness Conor Cruise O'Brien's remarks: 'I had the uncanny feeling, reading these poems, of listening to the thing itself, the actual substance of historical agony and dissolution, the tragedy of a people in a place: the Catholics of Northern Ireland'[46]). Consequently, Carson deemed him 'the laureate of violence' who aestheticised murder by linking it with ancient rituals or, what Brown termed, predatory deities and 'dark cults of blood, sex, revenge and power'.[47]

'The Last of the Fire Kings' encapsulated the dilemma facing Northern poets at the time, regarding the vexed issue of commitment - *damned if you do, damned if you don't.* Its sustained ambiguity strives to negotiate the issue of artistic freedom and responsibility, mediating between the extremes of an otherworldly aestheticism (splendid Bacchanalian isolation) and an artistically compromised form of engagement (subservience to a group's every 'demand'). Like 'The Snow Party', the poem is not 'Through with history' but addressing its challenges for the artist, in particular that of violence. The play on ice and fire in both poems recalls Yeats's attempt to resolve the dialectic of art and history by writing poetry 'cold and passionate as the dawn'.[48] The phrase neatly summarises the visionary perspectives of the ironic conscience in this volume, which encompass vast cycles of history, the afterlife, spirits of the dead or the eternal recurrence of the gods. They exude an aura of detachment (as reflected in the coldness of title) only such detachment is not to be confused with indifference. For Mahon, as for Farrell, to step back and take the long view does not imply a lack of humanity but a desire to come to terms with the barbarism of history.

4.2.2 The Satire of Mute Phenomena in *The Snow Party*.

The worm's-eye perspective of 'mute phenomena' ('After Nerval').in *The Snow Party* shifts the focus from the theoptic to the microscopic, allowing for a more playful satire on aspects of contemporary society, including human pretension.[49] Mahon's interest in experimentation, or training his voice with variety, can be seen in the introduction of two

---

[45] See Chapter One, pp. 33-34, for Edna Longley and Ciaran Carson's comments on *North* (1975).
[46] O'Brien, cited in Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 34.
[47] Brown, 'Awakening from the Nightmare: History and Contemporary Literature', p. 244.
[48] The phrase is from the final lines of Yeats's 'The Fisherman'.
[49] As we shall see in Chapter Six, Mahon uses the word 'theoptic' ('the mild theoptic eye') in 'The Globe in North Carolina' (*The Hunt by Night*).

prose poems which wittily adapt 'the nature mysticism stuff' that, as Heaney put it, was 'hot on the ground' in America during his stay in Berkeley in 1971.[50] Geoffrey Hill's volume *Mercian Hymns* (1971) was also influential in this regard, given Mahon's admiration for the English poet and their shared interest in French writers like Saint-John Perse and Yves Bonnefoy.[51] 'A Hermit', the first of these prose poems in *The Snow Party*, opens with the speaker abandoning the creature comforts of suburbia for a spell in the wilderness ('I have abandoned the dream kitchens for a low fire and a prescriptive literature of the spirit'). He then proceeds to describe the ascetic routine:

> ....My days are spent in conversation with stags and blackbirds; at night fox and a badger gather at my door. I have stood for hours watching a salmon doze in the tea-gold dark, for weeks watching a spider weave in a pale light, for months listening to the sob story of a stone on the road – the best, most monotonous sob story I have ever heard.
>
> I am an expert on frost crystals and the silence of crickets, a confidant of the stinking shore, the stars in the mud. There is an immanence in these things which drives me, despite my scepticism, almost to the point of speech. Like sunlight cleaving the lake mist at morning, or when tepid water runs cold at last from the tap.[52]

Such is the gist of the Mahon Tao, a semi-playful yet provocative variation on Bashō's identification with nature, prompted in part by a certain weariness with the ways of the world.[53] Here the poem recalls 'Beyond Howth Head' (*Lives*), which entertained the fantasy of being one of those old hermits who 'withdrew / from the world-circles women make / to a small island in a lake'. Observing nature for hours engenders a transcendental state of

---

[50] Heaney, in *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 68. Like Mahon, Heaney tried his hand at short prose pieces, mentioning his reluctance to publish them given the appearance of Hill's *Mercian Hymns* in 1971: 'I did three or four of them in California, and in that year Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* arrived, and in some ways I hesitated. I began them in California because the nature mysticism stuff was hot on the ground and I was re-entering little spots of time, really'.

[51] Mahon, interview with Scammell, p. 6, Mahon spoke of his admiration for Hill in the context of being labelled a 'secular mystic'.

[52] The complex textual history of so many of Mahon's poems is evident in 'A Hermit', which becomes 'The Mayo Tao' in *Poems 1962-1978*, and whose layout as a prose-poem is changed to irregular stanzas. As Denman stated (in reference to both 'The Hermit' and 'The Apotheosis of Tins'): 'The added lineation alters them radically. Line endings privilege phrases such as 'terminal democracy' and 'the notion of permanence', and the isolation of a sentence such as 'We resist your patronage, your reflective leisure' gives it a gnomic significance; in the prose poems these were part of a continuous discursive flow' ('Know the One? Insolent Ontology and Mahon's Revisions', *Irish University Review*, 24, 1 (1994), p. 29.

[53] In *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Sketches*, p. 33, Bashō gives the following advice to his disciples: 'Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn'.

meditation in which objects take on a numinous glow. The silent activity of spiders and crickets, or the unconscious state of stones or crystals, moves the speaker 'to the point of speech'. Reference to 'an immanence in these things' reflects Mahon's sense of the eternity of the phenomenal world in *The Snow Party*. Sunlight 'cleaving the lake mist at morning' captures the poetic note of tranquility. Lest the *participation mystique* become a little too earnest, however, the poem ironises the eremitical flight. Listening for months 'to the sob story of a stone on the road' is more than a little self-mocking. Like Zbigniew Herbert's 'Pebble', Mahon's stone is

> a perfect creature
>
> equal to itself
> mindful of its limits
>
> filled exactly
> with pebbly meaning...

only of the monotonous variety.[54] The conclusion parodies the quest for immanence as the outcome of this prolonged stay in the wilderness is 'a four-line poem / about the life of a leaf', the speaker's meagre contribution to a literature of the spirit (Mahon himself managed six lines in 'Rogue Leaf' from 'Light Music').[55]

The quirky humour continues in 'The Apotheosis of Tins' (the companion piece, on the facing page, to 'A Hermit') as the voice of mute phenomena receives striking expression:

> HAVING spent the night in a sewer of precognition, consoled by moon-glow, air-chuckle, and the retarded pathos of mackerel, we wake among shoelaces and white wood to a raw wind and the cries of gulls. Deprived of use, we are safe now from the historical nightmare, and may give our attention at last to things of the spirit, noticing for example the consanguinity of sand and stone, how they are thicker than water. This is the terminal democracy of hatbox and crab, of hock and Windowlene. It is always rush hour. If we have learnt one thing from our desertion by the sour smudge on the horizon, from the erosion of labels, it is the value of self-definition. No-one, not even the pensioner whose shadow strains above us after dawn and before dusk, will have our trust. We resist your patronage, your reflective leisure.

---

[54] Zbigniew Herbert, *The Faber Book of Modern European Poetry*, edited by A. Alvarez (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 52.

[55] 'Rogue Leaf', 'Light Music', *Poems 1962-1978*, p. 97. The poem (no. 23) is one of the new additions to the earlier pamphlet version in 1977.

The phenomenal world becomes a potent source of inherent mystery as Mahon enters into the life of tins. The poem playfully suggests that human preoccupation with acquisition and function negates attention to 'things of the spirit', resulting in a kind of spiritual blindness. It is the poet's wry variation on discarded objects as the cornerstone of the secular *numen*, that 'random, hazardous thing' present even in 'hock and Windowlene' (the brand name recalling 'Kosangas' in 'Beyond Howth Head').[56] Divested of function, discarded materials take on an aura or luminosity which transcends the 'historical nightmare' (after Joyce). There is a lot we have to learn from their tenacious, marginal existence:

> ....The
> longest queues in the science museum will form at our last homes
> saying, think now, what an organic relation of art to life in the
> dawn of time, what saintly devotion to the notion of permanence
> in the flux of sensation and crisis, perhaps we can learn from
> them.

In *The Snow Party*, Mahon's eco-poetics is linked with an attentiveness to mute phenomena. Revelation happens in remote places as articles, considered worthless, are invested with quixotic significance. The 'notion of permanence', it seems, is particularly fascinating to the ironic conscience, as the solidity of things contrasts sharply with its shape-changing identity. Hence, the catalogue of technological detritus (hatboxes, hub-caps, cutlery, tins and chemical sprays) in abandoned places 'at the arse-end of nowhere' ('The Banished Gods'). The latter phrase illustrates how the volume injects the very elements which Mahon deems missing from Jaccottet's poetry into its peculiar mysticism - 'vitality sometimes, humour, the demotic, the abrasive surfaces of the modern world'.[57] The playful, satiric edge of these poems pokes fun at humanity, subverting its place in the universal scheme. Their deification ('Apotheosis') or sanctification ('saintly devotion') is our denigration. For Mahon, as for Holub, this is due in part to an acquisitive and destructive mentality. As the latter expressed it laconically in 'A Helping Hand':

> We gave a helping hand to grass –
> and it turned into corn.
> We gave a helping hand to fire –
> and it turned into a rocket.[58]

Little wonder then that Mahon's objects resist our 'patronage' and 'reflective leisure' ('The Apotheosis of Tins') or dismiss our 'politics and bad draughtsmanship' ('After

[56] Mahon, interview with Brown, p. 16: 'To me it's a random, hazardous thing, present in the world, to which we have access'.
[57] Mahon, Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, p. 13.
[58] Holub, *Poems: Before & After* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1990), p. 61.

Nerval'). In *The Snow Party*, they offer a wry critique of modernity with all its industrial waste, just as in East European poetry they cast aspersions on totalitarian ideology. While Holub's 'The Door' sums up the stifling pre-1968 atmosphere of Czechoslovakia, Mahon's 'The chair squeaks...' (re-titled 'Nostalgias' in *Poems 1962-1978*) speaks eloquently about the historical predicament of the Northern Protestant community or other marginalised groups:

> The chair squeaks in a high wind,
> Rain falls from its branches,
> The kettle yearns for the
> Mountain, the soap for the sea.
> In a tiny stone church
> On the desolate headland
> A lost tribe is singing abide with me.[59]

The poem is a pithy dream of origins as the chair, holding the memory of its original greenwood life, becomes a metaphor for the lost tribe in search of its divine roots (the version in *Poems 1962-1978* – 'A lost tribe is singing 'Abide With Me'' – stresses the well known Protestant hymn). Objects in *The Snow Party* are always *more* than meets the eye. This is a central aspect of the visionary mode in these poems, part of Mahon's 'secular mysticism'. As he stated, regarding 'the sacramental sense' in Brian Moore's writing:

> An object, for Moore, is more than the sum of its atoms; it contains within itself a racial memory of its raw material, as a wardrobe might have heard of the crucifixion.[60]

Thus, the kettle 'yearns for the / Mountain', the source of its constitutive ore, as the wardrobe recalls its earlier forms. As symbolic guardians of forgotten worlds, the mute phenomena in 'The chair squeaks...' speak with extraordinary pathos. As Heaney noted, 'the touch here is exhilaratingly light, but the mass moved is heavy'.[61] Vona Groarke also picked up the theme of lightness and weight in summarising the poetic strategy of these poems:

> What Mahon does is take very sophisticated ideas to do with the decay of civilization, with the mutability of the human condition, ideas which can sometimes topple a poem into rhetoric and emptiness.... [and] write them in an imagery that is so graceful,

---

[59] Holub, *Poems: Before & After*, p. 64. The line 'Go and open the door', which acts as a refrain throughout 'The Door', prepares for the final lines: 'At least / there'll be / a draught' (the latter suggesting, among other possibilities, relief from Soviet oppression).

[60] Mahon, 'Webs of Artifice', *The New Review*, 1976. The version in *Journalism* (p. 69) omits the final example, 'as a wardrobe might have heard of the crucifixion'.

[61] Heaney, 'Vision and Irony', p. 48.

and is so precise, that it makes them seem like something blithe,
something easy, something uncomplicated.[62]

The squeak of a chair, the sob story of a stone or the soliloquy of tins are all part of the visionary mode in this volume, its levity an antidote to political or religious rhetoric. A key influence in this regard is Nerval, whose comical look at the animism or aseity of objects greatly appealed to Mahon. In 'After Nerval' (re-titled 'The Mute Phenomena' in *Poems 1962-1978*), this otherness offers a rich source of satire, targeting human ignorance and pretension:

Your great mistake is to disregard the satire
Bandied among the mute phenomena.
Be strong if you must, your brusque hegemony
Means fuck-all to the somnolent sun-flower
Or the extinct volcano. What do you know
Of the revolutionary theories advanced
By turnips, or the sex-life of cutlery?
Everything is susceptible, Pythagoras said so. [63]

Here mute phenomena wryly subvert the arrogance of stilted hegemonies, as Mahon mixes the grandiloquent with the demotic, the throwaway 'fuck-all' ridiculing 'the deity that human pride has made in its own image'.[64] The 'sex-life of cutlery' or 'revolutionary theories' of turnips rebuke such pride, mocking our exalted status as 'articulate centre of the universe'.[65] Fittingly, the final lines stress expendability as opposed to the distinctive value of human achievement:

God is alive and lives under a stone.
Already in a lost hub-cap is conceived
The ideal society which will replace our own.

God living 'under a stone' echoes the theme of 'The Banished Gods' which sees the deities residing, not in any human institution, but in the elemental world, sitting out the centuries 'In stone, water / And the hearts of trees, / Lost in a reverie of their own natures'. The epigraph from Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, 'The old gods of the rain lie wrapped in pools', enforces

---

[62] Groarke, cited in *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000), p. 165.
[63] The poem is based on Nerval's 'Vers dorés', the last poem of *Les Chimères* (Geneva and Paris: Droz and Minard, 1969), p. 79. The more literal translation is 'Pythagorean Lines', the final poem in *The Chimeras* (p. 20).
[64] Mahon, interview with Kelly, p. 11.
[65] Ibid., p. 11. Mahon stated: 'I think there's a sense in which the human race flatters itself, takes too much for granted its own status as articulate centre of the universe. But I don't think the inanimate world has had its due'.

Mahon's immanent religion.[66] Reference to the ideal society under 'a lost hub-cap' (an oblique criticism of modernity, if not the political situation in the North) grafts the utopian dimension onto Nerval's '*Vers dorés*'. It exemplifies the worm's eye view these poems adapt. Leaves, cutlery, turnips, sunflowers, hub-caps, stones, tins and frost crystals are all grist to the visionary perspectives of the ironic conscience in its search for novel angles on familiar themes, including modernity, mutability, ecology, the environmental crisis or the human stain.

Perhaps the most hilarious example of Mahon's satire of the human stain is 'Matthew V. 29-30', which savours nothing less than our complete annihilation:

> 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…

Repetition of 'the offence continued' with every drastic remedy, in response to the biblical injunction to pluck out the eye and throw it away, is a black comic indictment of the harsh zeal of Calvinistic Protestantism. The remedial action reaches absurdity upon realisation that even a 'lobotomy and vivisection' (reducing one 'To a rubble of organs') will not erase the contamination of self. Following the principle of infinite regress, not only the body and all its parts must be eradicated, but every trace (including records, cheques, phrases, poems, postcards, even 'the casual turns / Of phrase engraved / On the minds of others'). Nothing is spared the 'scalpel' as the poem revels in a Swiftian *reductio ad absurdum*. 'Matthew V. 29-30' is an elaborate conceit on fallen nature, a wry addition to *The Snow Party's* satirical critique of anthropological pretension, including artistic hubris (hence, the erasure of 'poems

[66] This epigraph is omitted from subsequent versions of 'The Banished Gods' in *Poems 1962-1978* and *Collected Poems* (1999).

published / And unpublished'). As Edna Longley stated: 'Matthew V. 29-30' summons 'the whole historical 'offence' to a comprehensive day of judgment', which ends, almost inevitably, in 'silence':

> Until, at last, offence
>
> Was not to be found
> In that silence without bound.
> Only then was I fit for human society.[67]

Universal erasure is Mahon's variation on the Beckettian endgame, a further angle on the metaphysical conundrum of being and nothingness. With its riotous exposure of a twisted mindset, 'Matthew V. 29-30' mirrors the satire of mute phenomena, poking fun at 'human society'. It brings the microscopic perspective of these visionary poems to an absurd end, which involves the 'Erosion...Evaporation...extinction' of every human trace. Only in such boundless silence, it seems, is the self fit to begin again.

4.3 The Visionary Mode of the Ironic Conscience in 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'.

'A Disused Shed' highlights the ironic conscience at its most visionary. Arguably, Mahon's best-known poem, it incorporates both the long view of *The Snow Party* and the voice of mute phenomena. Mahon's witty conceit linking mushrooms and human victims mirrors the volume's quirky preoccupation with animate and inanimate objects, in poems like 'After Nerval', 'A Hermit', 'The Apotheosis of Tins' and 'The Banished Gods'. The immanence it perceives in things is extended to mushrooms which become the 'voice' of marginalised and oppressed peoples everywhere. In the context of *The Snow Party* as a whole, they represent 'the dim forms' ('Afterlives'), 'lost tribe' ('The chair squeaks...'), 'forlorn cries of lost species' ('The Banished Gods'), 'shortlived souls' ('The Gypsies'), 'prisoners of infinite choice' ('Leaves') or 'the loved lost' ('Cavafy'). Just as Blake discovered 'a World in a grain of sand', so Mahon sees the whole of human suffering in their plight. The elegiac note which sounds for lost opportunities in 'Afterlives' ('Perhaps if I'd stayed behind') and 'Leaves' ('the lives we might have led'), or vanished cultures in 'The chair squeaks...'

[67] Edna Longley, 'Extreme Religion of Art', p. 299.

reaches a dramatic climax in their plea ('Save us, save us, they seem to say'). It is a paean to the resilience of the human spirit or a 'modern threnody for universal victimage'.[68]

Like 'Beyond Howth Head', the final poem in *Lives*, 'A Disused Shed' brings many of the volume's images and themes together, while drawing upon an array of literary texts. Principal among these is Farrell's *Troubles*, from which the poem (as the dedication indicates) takes its inspiration, as well as Seferis's *Mythistorema*, which provides the epigraph 'Let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels'.[69] In analysing the poem, we will consider both these sources in detail, while also addressing other texts which find an 'echo' in its stanzas. As we shall see, this allusive intertextuality operates exponentially, opening up a whole range of correspondences. It intensifies the poem's visionary perspective and greatly contributes to the poem's universal appeal.

The opening sentence of 'A Disused Shed', which encompasses three continents before converging (after thirteen lines and a stanza break) on a keyhole in a derelict shed, illustrates the long view in *The Snow Party*. Its vast sweep suggests an epic time-scale:

> Even now there are places where a thought might grow-
> Peruvian mines, worked out and abandoned
> To a slow clock of condensation,
> An echo trapped for ever, and a flutter of
> Wildflowers in the lift-shaft,
> Indian compounds where the wind dances
> And a door bangs with diminished confidence,
> Lime crevices behind rippling rainbarrels,
> Dog corners for shit burials;
> And in a disused shed in Co. Wexford,
>
> Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel,
> Among the bathtubs and the washbasins
> A thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole.

The phrase 'Even now', with its overtones of resignation, picks up the sense of arrest or 'slow' time in line three. There is an aura of timelessness in the sweeping reference to abandoned places across the globe, the hint of a brooding never-ending state of captivity

---

[68] Brown, 'Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness', p. 141.

[69] George Seferis's epic sequence *Mythistorema* (1935) comprises twenty-four sections or short poems, which translate the Odyssean myths into a modern idiom. Their titles, taken from the opening lines ('And if the soul', 'We didn't know them', 'What are they after, our souls', We who set out', 'So very much having passed before our eyes') evoke themes of exile, nostalgia, wandering and death. Mahon had used an alternative line from the final poem ('We who had nothing will teach them peace') as an epigraph for the earlier pamphlet *Ecclesiastes* (Manchester: Phoenix Pamphlet Poets Press, 1970). It did not appear in the version in *Lives* (1972). All quotations from Seferis's poems (except the 'King of Asini' in *Logbook I*) are from George Seferis, *Collected Poems* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1986).

('trapped for ever'). These derelict sites do not partake of the peaceful silence of any pastoral idyll, but of pained associations of 'burials', imprisonment and violence ('burnt-out hotel'). A mood of enervation hangs over the poem, relieved only by glimpses of possibility ('a thought might grow'). These are heard in the sounds which break the silence, and distract from the oppressive 'clock of condensation', as when 'the wind dances'. As in the title poem, Mahon exploits the musical possibilities of language. Edna Longley described the poet as 'John Cage, orchestrating faint echoes, flutters, bangs and ripples'.[70] These evoke a residual note of hope, of 'diminished confidence', for a potentially liberating thought to break the cycle of decline, as the poem zooms in on its specific locale and title, 'a disused shed in Co. Wexford'.

As Mahon stated in interview, the poem drew its inspiration from Farrell's novel: 'Ah, the 'Shed'. That had its source in *Troubles*, whence the dedication'.[71] However, as Haughton illustrated, one of the poem's great ironies, with its epigraph counselling remembrance from *Mythistorema*, is that it grows 'from a piece of creative mis-remembering'.[72] It has its source not only in *Troubles* (1970) but in Farrell's earlier novel *The Lung* (1965), where the main character Sands, suffering from polio, attends a reception in a country house in Oxfordshire:

> 'Good heavens, you're bleeding. And you look so pale, you poor darling'.
> 'I'm a pale fungus growing towards the light'.
>
> He remembered the door of a disused potting-shed he had once opened and the long, sickly white shoots racing each other interminably across the earth floor towards the minute bead of light from the keyhole. Tulips, or seed potatoes, or merely anonymous weeds, it was impossible to tell. Perhaps by now one of them had reached the keyhole and, obstructing it, had condemned the others to death in darkness, only to expire itself in an unaccustomed blaze of sunshine.[73]

The central image of mushrooms gravitating towards the keyhole as the sole source of light, and the idea of the survival of the fittest ('Those nearest the door grow strong – Elbow room! Elbow room!') point to the influence of Farrell's second novel. Mahon's poem is thus an inspired fusion or cross-pollination of literary texts, a cross between *The Lung* and

---

[70] Edna Longley, 'Looking Back From *The Yellow Book*', *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 33.
[71] Mahon, interview with Scammell, p. 6.
[72] Haughton, 'On Sitting Down to Read 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' Once Again', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 31, 2 (June 2002), p. 188.
[73] Ibid., p. 188.

Troubles.[74] It pays tribute to Farrell's sense of period by inscribing precise details of *Troubles* into 'A Disused Shed'. The opening vision of the ruined hotel:

> Here and there among the foundations one might still find evidence of the Majestic's former splendour: the great number of cast-iron bath-tubs, for instance, which had tumbled from one blazing floor to another until they hit the earth; twisted bed-frames also, some of them not yet altogether rusted away; and a simply prodigious number of basins and lavatory bowls...[75]

registers in the second stanza, 'Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel, / Among the bathtubs and the washbasins'. The poem's lofty rhyme enshrines the 'splendour' of Farrell's Majestic, while registering, what Mahon described as, 'the narcotic inconsequence' of its daily life.[76] Its six ten line stanzas are a sturdy edifice where phantoms, in the shape of 'a thousand mushrooms', may keep warm (in interview, Mahon spoke of the 'Shed' as 'a Big House poem', alluding to Yeats's 'Coole Park and Ballylee'[77]). Just as the Majestic operates symbolically in *Troubles* – its labyrinthine corridors are at once the cunning passages of history (the Irish Troubles of 1919-21; the Great War; global unrest); the contrived modes of fiction (Gothic, farce, realism, the surreal); the organic offshoots of a green epidemic (nature's inexorable process of growth and decay); the physical manifestation of the Major's grieving mind (his traumatic memories); a playground for colonies of rats, cats and dogs, as well as the scene for dotty old ladies' whist and tea parties (Kilnalough as a microcosm of Irish society) – so Mahon's disused shed functions on many levels. It is a womb, tomb, cave, prison cell or torture-chamber, having affinities with Dante's hell or Plato's cave; with Hades, Sheol and other biblical or mythical underworlds of evil cradling. This symbolism largely accounts, as we shall see, for the poem's visionary perspective and proliferation of possible meanings.

---

[74] As Haughton stated, in 'On Sitting Down to Read', p. 188, 'Mahon's poem is generated from the inspired crossing of this hallucinatory shed from *The Lung* and the out-house of the hotel in *Troubles*. Sand's remembered tulips, seed potatoes or weeds take on the identity of the 'pale fungus growing towards the light', now located in the troubled Co. Wexford of *Troubles*. The keyhole, the notion of being condemned to death, and the lethal blaze of sunshine from this moment in *The Lung* contribute to the poem's many-layered historical and geographical identity'.

[75] Farrell, *Troubles* (London: Flamingo, 1984), p. 10. The Majestic – an immense, once prosperous but now decaying, hotel in Co. Wexford – is the imaginative heart of *Troubles*. The novel begins and ends with the vision of its charred remains. In 'The Distant Skylight' (*Journalism*, p. 206) Mahon wrote: 'Left to its own devices, the building takes on an almost anthropomorphic existence, whistling and groaning in the wind from the sea, and wilfully, it seems, surrenders itself bit by bit to the encroachments of the natural world'.

[76] Mahon, 'The Distant Skylight', *Journalism*, p. 205.

[77] Mahon, interview with Scammell, p. 6. As he expressed it: 'It *is* a Big House poem, of course – a late residual echo, *mutatis mutandi*, of Coole Park and Ballylee'. 'Coole Park, 1929' and 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931' are two of Yeats's poems from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933).

In *Troubles*, as Mahon illustrated, there is a pervading sense of death in the midst of life. This is chiefly because of Farrell's linguistic virtuosity, the manner in which he weaves the central metaphor of war or battle into the text. Thus the 'odour of death' which drifted into the dug-outs also seeps like 'an invisible gas' through the corridors of the Majestic. Occupants appear like 'ghosts, gasping feebly' or 'souls in perdition'.[78] Candles resemble regiments; clouds, a fortress; moths, a squadron; guests, a platoon; pots and pans, an armoury; draughts, a dagger; glances, a battery; and kitchen knives, bayonets. Similarly, the stench of death seeps through Mahon's poem, from the opening reference to 'shit burials' in stanza one (revised to 'bone burials', suggestive of genocide, in *Poems 1962-1978*), to 'civil war days' or 'flies dusted to mildew' in stanza three, to the grotesque vision of history in stanza four:

> There have been deaths, the pale flesh flaking
> Into the earth that nourished it;
> And nightmares, born of these and the grim
> Dominion of stale air and rank moisture.
> Those nearest the door grow strong –
> Elbow room! Elbow room!
> The rest, dim in a twilight of crumbling
> Utensils and broken pitchers, groaning
> For their deliverance, have been so long
> Expectant that there is only the posture.

Reference to 'nightmares', which recalls the allusion to 'historical nightmare' in 'The Apotheosis of Tins', links the mushrooms predicament with the ancient, Homeric figures in Seferis's rendering of the Odyssean myths. It also points to the Great War, mention of pale flesh 'flaking into the earth' and 'the grim / Dominion of stale air and rank moisture', evoking:

> ...the horrors of the trenches; with men buried alive, shell-shocked, sharing their underground prison with the decomposing bodies of their companions, drowning in seas of mud, breathing poisoned air and convinced the war would last for ever.[79]

Like Farrell's text, 'A Disused Shed' sets up an elaborate web of correspondences, as the mushrooms represent the collective memory of victims everywhere, from doomed generations and tribes to the imprisoned, tortured and dispossessed. The former include

---

[78] The relevant passages from *Troubles* are: 'Why are we all sitting here in shadowy silence clinking our chains like souls in perdition' (p.42); 'For hours afterwards a thick white fog of plaster hung in the corridors, through which the inhabitants of the Majestic flitted like ghosts, gasping feebly' (p. 426); 'the odour of death drifting into the dug-out in which he scratched out his replies by the light of a candle' (p. 12).

[79] Brearton, 'A Dying Art: Derek Mahon's Solving Ambiguity', p. 210.

victims of the famine or Irish Civil War; the Anglo-Irish caste depicted in *Troubles*; those who perished in the Great War or the struggle for Indian Independence; and, as we shall see in the final stanza, the 'lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!'[80] This preoccupation with the dead, specifically those of the European holocaust recalls the work of Geoffrey Hill, in particular the sequence 'Of Commerce and Society' with its striking claim, 'Some of us have heard the dead speak', and stark references to the 'furnace chambers and lime pits' of Auschwitz.[81] It also brings to mind Hill's 'Funeral Music' sequence which gives voice to the barely-remembered casualties of England's 'Wars of the Roses', notably the opening poem with its references to 'the exemplary cave' or 'restless / Habitation, no man's dwelling-place'.[82] Mahon's mushrooms likewise bear witness to the numberless dead, appearing to speak on their behalf.

'A Disused Shed' conjures up its own ghosts or 'strange visions' (to adopt a phrase from *Mythistorema*) as, following Seferis's poem and Farrell's *Troubles,* surface realism merges imperceptibly with the symbolic and the surreal.[83] The most eerie and sombre of these visions coincides with the dramatic opening of the door in stanza five. The 'half century' wait, formally embodied in the languorous progression of the previous stanzas with their repeated emphasis on time – 'So many days' (stanza two); 'waiting...since civil war days' (stanza three); 'so long / Expectant' (stanza four) – finally comes to an end:

> A half century, without visitors, in the dark-
> Poor preparation for the cracking lock
> And creak of hinges. Magi, moonmen,
> Powdery prisoners of the old regime,
> Web-throated, stalked like triffids, racked by drouth
> And insomnia, only the ghost of a scream
> At the flash-bulb firing squad we wake them with

---

[80] Given its publication in 1973, reference to 'half a century later' in stanza five, as Haughton pointed out (in 'On Sitting Down to Read 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' Once Again', p. 190) links the poem with the Irish Civil War, the Treaty being signed in May 1923. The reference to 'Indian compounds' (which, as Mahon stated in interview with Scammell, p. 6) are 'Indian as in Raj, not as in Peru', obliquely alludes to Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*, set during the so-called 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857 (a significant moment of threat to the British Empire).

[81] Hill, Poem 4, 'Of Commerce and Society', *For the Unfallen* (1959), in Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 49.

[82] Hill, Poem 1, 'Funeral Music', from *King Log* (1968), in *Collected Poems*, p. 77. In his notes to this volume Hill refers to the 'Wars of the Roses', in particular 'the Battle of Towton, fought on Palm Sunday, 1461' (p. 200).

[83] *Mythistorema* – a composite of *mythos* (myth) and *istoria* (both 'history' and 'story') is thus extremely apt for Mahon's concerns, acknowledging the interplay of different levels of reality, including the surreal or visionary: 'So very much having passed before our eyes / that our eyes in the end saw nothing, but beyond / and behind was memory like the white sheet one night in / an enclosure / where we saw strange visions...' (Seferis, *Collected Poems*, p. 55).

Shows there is life yet in their feverish forms.
Grown beyond nature now, soft food for worms,
They lift frail head in gravity and good faith.

Here the poem burgeons into life, as conflicting images flash rapidly across the lines. 'Magi, moonmen' encapsulates the volume's long view, while yoking disparate historical moments together. Magi picks up the earlier, repeated reference to star ('This is the one star in their firmament / Or frames a star within a star'), highlighting the poem's utopian or messianic impulses ('What should they do there but desire?').[84] Moonmen recalls the image in the second stanza of 'the world waltzing in its bowl of cloud' (earth perceived from the porthole of a space-craft perhaps). 'Powdery prisoners of the old regime' points the previous mention of death ('the pale flesh flaking') variously towards prisoners in the Bastille, the insurgents of the 1798 rebellion in Wexford (given the poem's title), or the Irish leaders of the Easter Rising in 1916.[85] The 'old regime' could thus be French Monarchy, British Empire, Third Reich or Spanish Conquistadors (in light of the opening 'Peruvian mines'). The startling 'flash-bulb firing squad' enforces the connection with Easter 1916 (in which fifteen men were executed by firing squad), while gesturing to 'Treblinka' in the final stanza, whose survivors also lifted frail heads in good faith before the incoming Allies, who recorded the horrors for posterity.

Alternatively, 'the flash-bulb firing squad' captures the media frenzy which turns tragedy into spectacle, not only in the North of Ireland but troubled spots around the globe. The paradoxical 'ghost of a scream' (recalling Munch's graphic image) emphasises both the helplessness of the victim and the horror of exploitation, if 'good faith' is betrayed and the door into the light shut once again.[86] Reference to 'triffids', which strikes a weird sci-fi note introduces a certain menace, hinting that the colony of mushrooms will have their day ('there is life yet in their feverish forms').[87] Stanza five thus generates a kind of Yeatsian phantasmagoria, as in 'Byzantium' with its 'images that yet / Fresh images beget'.

---

[84] The keyhole as star is reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol': 'I never saw a man who looked / With such a wistful eye / Upon that little tent of blue / Which prisoners call the sky'.

[85] The uprising in 1798 was most widespread in Wexford and Ulster where insurgents fought against overwhelming odds. This rebellion generally came to represent 'a myth of the last chance', symbolising the last real attempt by Irish Catholics and Presbyterians to find common cause' (see Terence Brown, *The Whole Protestant Community: The Making of a Historical Myth*, Field Day Pamplet No. 7, 1985).

[86] 'Girls on the Bridge' in *The Hunt by Night* (1982) alludes to Munch's picture in the final stanza ('A mile from where you chatter, / Somebody screams').

[87] Brown, in 'Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness' (p. 141), associated the reference to triffids with John Wyndham's sci-fi novel, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). A film version of the novel was released in the UK in 1962.

With the symbolic opening of the decaying door (the 'cracking lock / And creak of hinges'), the poem achieves lift-off. Allegorical ('moonmen'), biblical ('magi'), historical ('the old regime'), gothic ('web-throated'), natural ('soft food for worms'), realistic ('a half century'), sci-fi ('triffids') and metaphorical ('powdery prisoners') elements contend to intensify the surreal effect. Everything extends 'beyond nature now' as Mahon's mushrooms, like Farrell's Majestic, teem with significance. 'A Disused Shed' thus offers its own 'door into the dark' (to allude to the title of Heaney's 1969 volume), whether on the level of the individual; of generation or group; of race, tribe or nation, past and present. Mute phenomena in derelict spaces are a fertile source for the visionary mode of the ironic conscience.

The final stanza underlines the symbolic polyvalence as the narrator gives voice to suffering humanity through the 'mouths' of mushrooms:

> They are begging us, you see, in their wordless way,
> To do something on their behalf
> Or at least not to close the door again.
> Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!
> Save us, save us, they seem to say,
> Let the god not abandon us
> Who have come so far in darkness and in pain.
> We too had our lives to live.
> You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary,
> Let not our naïve labours have been in vain![88]

This implicit voice, which interprets (if not breaks) the fifty year silence, is the climax of the poem. It has a resonance or choric authority which, in drawing the different strands together, resembles a final word 'on their behalf'. The use of the first person plural, which echoes the opening line of stanza three ('They have been waiting for us') strikes a plangent note, making the reader more involved in the narrator's response. It heightens the summons to respond, to do something to alleviate the mushrooms' plight, if only 'not to close the door again'. As Seferis put it: 'The wrong has been committed. / The important thing is who will redeem it?', lines cited by Montague as epigraph to his epic of Irish history *The Rough Field* (1972).[89]

The civil or mild-mannered 'you see' fades before the shock of 'Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!' which compels attention. The precise historical allusions, which

---

[88] In *Poems 1962-1978* and subsequent volumes, the mushrooms' 'speech' is in inverted commas: 'Save us, save us'; 'Let the god not abandon us.....Let not our naïve labours have been in vain!'
[89] Montague, *The Rough Field* (Portlaoise: Dolmen Press, 1984), p. 1.

encompass centuries of cataclysm (natural and human), ground the oneiric or surreal quality of the previous stanza. The earlier references to death are firmly anchored in specific locations. The insistent 'Save us, save us' intensifies the god-forsaken plea in the next line ('Let the god not abandon us'), recalling the primal abandonment by the 'expropriated mycologist' a half century ago. Here the poem opens up all kinds of symbolic possibilities. Is this the god of colonialism or cargo-cult primitivism, or one of Mahon's banished gods who 'sit out the centuries / In stone, water / And the hearts of trees, / Lost in a reverie of their own natures' ('The Banished Gods')? Or is it the angel at the opening of *Mythistorema* ('The angel - / three years we waited intently for him / closely watching / the pines the shore and the stars'), or the god of the psalmist, whose plaintive voice ('give success to the work of our hands, / give success to the work of our hands') finds an echo in the closing line of the poem: 'Let not our naïve labours have been in vain'? [90]

The repeated 'Let not' lends a plaintive, world-weary note to the supplications of those 'who have come so far in darkness and in pain'. 'So far' enforces previous references to time or the duration of their ordeal, while 'in darkness and in pain' encapsulates its traumatic impact (echoing the psalmist's sense of our days as 'emptiness and pain'[91]). Liturgical rhythms underlie the nostalgic impulse of these final lines, as the mushrooms, like Seferis's 'weak souls', seek release from a near interminable state of exile. 'We too had our lives to live' resonates with sentiments expressed in *Mythistorema*: 'The life they gave us to live, we lived. / Pity those who wait with such patience.[92]

The penultimate line, with its flippant, yet damning, word play on poet or photojournalist in 'light meter' ('light' and 'relaxed' sounding almost obscene in the context of darkness and pain), points an accusatory finger at the heavily stressed 'You'. Yet the poem is not so 'naïve' as to be blind to its own artistic exploitation, arrogating the sufferings of others while supposedly speaking 'on their behalf'. Hence, the significance of 'they seem to say', which acknowledges the vast distance between the observer and the victims' plight ('wordless' in the dual sense of having no voice, and defying description). It mitigates the conceivably offensive patronage of one with a 'relaxed itinerary' to those who have 'come so far'. The play on 'light meter', linking the poet-narrator with 'the flash-bulb firing squad', also

[90] Seferis, *Mythistorema*, p. 3. Psalm 89 (90), Revised Standard Version.
[91] Psalm 89 (90) includes the lines, 'All our days pass away in your anger. / Our life is over like a sigh...And most of these are emptiness and pain'.
[92] Seferis, *Mythistorema*, section fifteen, p. 37.

suggests an awareness that conceits linking 'a thousand mushrooms' with 'Treblinka and Pompeii!' are, potentially, as exploitative as a media sound-bite for sensationalist purposes. Here Mahon obliquely addresses the issue of the aesthetic, touching on a major theme in Hill's work, namely, that poetry (in Coleridge's phrase) 'excites us to artificial feelings – makes us callous to real ones'.[93] Like the loaded word 'prod' in Hill's 'Of Commerce and Society' (in the context of Auschwitz), 'Artistic men prod dead men from their stone', Mahon's 'light meter and relaxed itinerary' sits uncomfortably alongside the sufferings of others. As Goodby indicated, perhaps the 'thought' which shadows 'A Disused Shed' from the opening line is that 'in its freedom to open up the horrors of history, the poem highlights its inadequacy to 'represent' its victims'.[94] In this sense, the conclusion may be read as a plea that poetry not be unaware of its own manipulation of suffering for purposes of vanity or self-interest.

'A Disused Shed' thus enforces the historical engagement of the visionary long view in this volume. In particular, it illustrates how effectively this vast perspective can be mediated through the 'still, small voice' voice of mute phenomena, which is far more potent than any loudspeaker, while avoiding the risk of rhetoric or propaganda (to recall the terms of MacNeice's 'A Statement').[95] Central here is the poem's rich symbolism which opens up a wealth of possible interpretations. We will now address some of these interpretations with an eye to the many texts echoed within the poem, in order to stress the poem's oblique and direct engagement with historical or political realities.

4.3.1 The Play of Ambiguity in 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'.

The drama of 'A Disused Shed' derives not merely from the representation of its victims, but from the poet-speaker's response, interpretations of which can be seen to enforce either a resigned or hopeful note in the poem. Does the narrator break the cycle and so become 'god'-like in redeeming the mushrooms' pain, or does he stand shell-shocked by the door, caught in a condemned posture like the mushrooms themselves? Does he, as in Yeats's 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' (another poem about ancestral houses) 'turn away and shut the door', repeating the act of the 'expropriated mycologist', thereby confirming the

[93] As Corcoran pointed out, in *English Poetry Since 1940* (p. 122), 'Hill's poetry is written under the sign of [this] undermining sentence from Coleridge's 1796 Notebook which he cites in his critical prose'.
[94] Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness Into History*, p. 172.
[95] MacNeice's 'A Statement' is referred to in the conclusion of Chapter Three, p. 143.

cyclic nature of history subtly registered in several details throughout the poem.[96] Tim Kendall interpreted the ending as yet another instance of a 'frozen tableau' which 'lies at the heart of Mahon's work'. He saw the speaker as standing immobile in the doorway, trapped (like the symbolic 'echo' in stanza one) 'between complicity and an outright *non serviam*'.[97] Interestingly, part three of 'Cavafy', 'A Considered Pause', speaks of such a moment of reckoning: 'When the time comes to decide / The man who will say yes / Does so without hesitation / And the future is his; / While the hesitation / Of the man who says no / Is a considered pause, as if / He has known all along / There was no future in it'.[98] Horton compared the speaker to Bruce Ismay in 'As God is my Judge' in *Night-Crossing*, whose psyche is haunted by images of trapped or tortured souls who cry out to him for salvation:

> I drown again with all those dim
> Lost faces I never understood, my poor soul
> Screams out in the starlight, heart
> Breaks loose and rolls down like a stone.

For her, both texts are 'paranoic texts' which exhibit a sense of persecution or 'pathology of guilt'.[99] In this context, the 'ghost of a scream' that greets the opening of the door may symbolise the repressed emotion of the poet-narrator. As Riordan stated:

> Ultimately, the poem speaks perhaps for all that is suppressed in consciousness, for those impulses, desires, instincts, which, denied the light of actuality for whatever historical reasons, maintain their own weird and secret life.[100]

Reflecting this psychological angle, Joris Duytschaever found echoes of Auden's elegy on Freud, with its call to remember those delectable creatures of the night who, with sad eyes,

> ...look up and beg
> Us dumbly to ask them to follow;
> They are exiles who long for the future
>
> That lies in our power....[101]

---

[96] Yeats, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', in *W.B. Yeats: The Major Works*, edited by Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 107. The opening section of the poem is entitled 'Ancestral Houses'. In 'A Disused Shed', the cyclic nature of history is reflected in the 'echo trapped for ever', or the recurring nightmares, including famine, war (with its mass graves or killing fields), natural disaster (Pompeii) or nuclear holocaust (reference to 'the world waltzing in its bowl of cloud' hints at atomic explosion).

[97] Kendall, 'Leavetakings and Homecomings, Derek Mahon's Belfast', pp. 108-9.

[98] 'Cavafy', *The Snow Party*, p. 19.

[99] Horton, '"The Half-Sure Legislator": Romantic Legacies in the Writing of Derek Mahon and Tom Paulin', *Irish University Review* 31, 2 (Autumn / Winter, 2001), p. 410.

[100] Riordan, 'An Urbane Perspective: The Poetry of Derek Mahon', p. 176.

[101] Duytschaever, 'History in the Poetry of Derek Mahon', in Joris Duytschaever and Geert Lernout (eds.), *History and Violence in Irish Literature*, *Costerus*, vol. 71 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1978), p. 105. Auden's poem is entitled 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud' (1940). Haughton, in 'On Sitting Down to Read 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' Once Again', pp. 196-7, pointed out that Freud, in his essay on 'Repression' prefigured Mahon's

The disused shed is thus the prison of the mind and the piteous forms of the mushrooms the return of the repressed, clamouring for the light of consciousness ('Elbow room! Elbow room!). Here Mahon's poem echoes a number of others which address mental anguish in times of uncertainty, such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* (which greatly influenced Seferis in *Mythistorema*): 'I have heard the key / Turn in the door once and turn once only / We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison / Only at nightfall'.[102] It also recalls section VI of Yeats's 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' which, like Farrell's *Troubles*, speaks of a man killed and 'a house burned': 'We are closed in, and the key is turned / On our uncertainty'.[103]

Such psychological interpretations are more plausible in the context of Mahon's intense disillusion with events in the North of Ireland, the trauma (as he expressed it in interview) of being 'beaten-up' inside. They offer a personal gloss on the poem's many nightmares. As he outlined in the same interview:

> It's possible for me to write about the dead of Treblinka and Pompeii: included in that are the dead of Dungiven and Magherafelt. But I've never been able to write directly about it. In *Crane Bag* they'd call it 'colonial aphasia'.[104]

These comments allude to the pressure on Northern poets to deal directly with the violence. Reference to *The Crane Bag* is interesting, given Deane's criticism in that journal (as outlined in Chapter One) of certain Irish writers' apolitical stance. The phrase 'colonial aphasia' might usefully be applied to the Major in Farrell's novel, who, having returned from the Front, is traumatised by, what he termed, 'the aching void of the world'.[105] A similar affliction accounts for the perceived paralysis of the poet-speaker at the close of 'A Disused Shed' perhaps, explaining its 'split poetic psyche'.[106] In this context, Heaney's

---

metaphor of mushrooms by likening repressed instincts and impulses to fungi which ramify in the dark, taking on extreme forms of expression.

[102] Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 'What the Thunder said', *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, p. 79. Seferis, who was counsellor of the Greek embassy in London from 1951 to 1953, and Ambassador in London from 1957 until his retirement in 1962, knew Eliot personally. The sense of solipsism in *Mythistorema* is reminiscent of *The Waste Land*, the 'bodies that no longer know how to love' (Section X) recalling those encountered by Tiresias in the 'Unreal City' in 'The Fire Sermon'.

[103] Yeats, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', 'VI. The Stare's Nest by My Window', *W.B. Yeats:The Major Works*, p. 105. *Troubles* concludes with the murder of a Sinn Feiner by Edward Spenser, the proprietor of the Majestic.

[104] Mahon, *In the Chair*, p. 116. The reference to being 'beaten-up' is cited in Chapter Three (p. 3).

[105] Farrell, *Troubles*, p. 246.

[106] Edna Longley, in 'Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art', p. 299, spoke of the poem's 'split poetic psyche', torn between the mushrooms and 'the supposed 'god' who unlocks the door'.

analysis of the poem is particularly apt. He linked it with Mahon's 'unlived life', in terms which are as much a projection of personal anxieties concerning his own Northern heritage:

> Mahon, the poet of metropolitan allusion, of ironical and cultivated manners, is being shadowed by his unlived life among the familiar shades of Belfast. Do not turn your back on us, do not disdain our graceless stifled destiny, keep faith with your origins, do not desert, speak for us: the mushrooms are the voices of belonging but they could not have been heard so compellingly if Mahon had not created the whispering gallery of absence not just by moving out of Ireland but by evolving out of solidarity into irony and compassion.[107]

While simultaneously a justification of Heaney's departure from the North, these remarks confirm Mahon's ambivalence towards his origins, as reflected in 'Afterlives' and 'Leaves', both of which are haunted by a sense of 'the lives we might have led'. This ambivalence underlies his oblique stance or substitution of 'the dead of Treblinka and Pompeii' for the 'familiar shades of Belfast'. However, such indirection has not detracted from more overtly political readings of the text. 'A Disused Shed' has been interpreted as an allegory of sectarianism, in which the mushrooms deliverance from 'the brutality of a dark, instinctive and lethal struggle into the light of recognition' signifies Ulster Catholic experience.[108] Their feverish forms, in this context, mirror the nationalist trope of repressed chthonic forces emerging from the past.

However, the problem with such readings, as Haughton wittily remarked, is that the title is not 'A Disused Shed in Co. Down'.[109] As the epigraph from Seferis makes clear, 'A Disused Shed' is about memory, only as time and place constantly shift and dissolve in the poem, those remembered are multiple. They include not only the victims of the Northern conflict but the ancient dead ('the weak souls among the asphodels' and the lost souls of Pompeii); those killed in the Irish Civil War and the victims of two World Wars. As Kennedy-Andrews argued, a dream-like displacement or instability

> ...between speaker and mushrooms, owner ('expropriated mycologist') and property, past and present, interior and exterior

---

[107] Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland', p. 132. Heaney acknowledges, however, the difficulty with specific readings when he writes: 'To reduce the mushrooms' lives and appetites to counters for the frustrations and desolations of lives in Northern Ireland is, of course, one of those political readings which is perfectly applicable, but we recognize that this allegorical approach ties the poem too neatly into its place', p. 132.

[108] Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, p. 163.

[109] Haughton, 'On Sitting Down to Read 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' Once Again', p. 194.

> worlds, light and darkness, desire and reality, poetry and history…[110]

pervades the poem, resulting in a kaleidoscope of shifting identities and scenarios. For all its historical specificity, the central signifiers of mushrooms and shed resist being tied to any specific identity or place, so that it shifts between a Big House poem and a version of Plato's cave; an allegory of sectarianism and a plea for political amnesty; a parable on the collective unconscious and a critique of colonial or post-colonial relationships; a paean to lost lives and a meditation on art.[111] The poem's polyvalence is extremely fertile, giving rise to a deconstructionist play of *différance*, in which traces of other meanings (figured by reference to echoes, flutters, bangs and ripples) are always present. It explains the slippage into different forms of victimage, suffering or oppression and the surplus of possible interpretations.

This instability largely accounts for the poem's visionary appeal, for it taps the spectrum of human experience from abandonment, rejection or 'diminished confidence' to disappointment, bereavement and despair. The mushrooms' pleading is as much the collective yearning of suffering humanity as the cry of any particular group, 'a whole Lethe full of doomed generations and tribes' (as Heaney remarked).[112] Their hearing 'once a day, perhaps' a hopeful note in the sounds of noise outside only intensifies the sense of lost time or the disillusion of false expectations. Reference to 'drouth / And insomnia' enforces the impression of sleepless nights racked by unfulfilled desire; 'groaning' for deliverance (another biblical echo), the collective urge to be rid of the burden of history.[113] Mahon's central symbol thus assumes mythic overtones, tapping the Platonic parable or Odyssean descent into Erebus, while bearing witness to human resilience, the capacity to survive and weather all kinds of hardship 'in gravity and good faith'.[114] The poem's allusiveness brings numerous texts to mind, including (as we have seen) *Troubles* and *Mythistorema*, as well as

---

[110] Kennedy-Andrews, 'Introduction: The Critical Context', in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 23.

[111] 'The rest, dim in a twilight' of flickering shadows captures the plight of the chained slaves only in Mahon's poem, as Jarniewicz indicated, we are confronted with 'an ironically reversed Platonic anamnesis', since the mushrooms know, and long to rejoin the real world outside, heard so plaintively in 'a shout from the blue / Or a lorry changing gear at the end of the lane' (Jarniewicz, 'History, Mute Phenomena and Beyond', in Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 94).

[112] Heaney, 'Place and Displacement', p. 131 ('it is not just a single life that is given voice, but a whole Lethe full of doomed generations and tribes, whispering their unfulfilment and perplexed hopes in a trickle of masonry').

[113] In Romans 8: 22-24, St. Paul speaks of creation groaning inwardly for deliverance.

[114] Seferis refers to 'Odysseus waiting for the dead among the asphodels', in *Mythistorema*, Section IX.

poems by Yeats, Eliot, Auden and Hill.[115] While 'Beyond Howth Head' signalled the development of a more public voice in *Lives*, 'A Disused Shed' announced the visionary mode of the ironic conscience in *The Snow Party*. However, it also illustrated how this mode was not removed from, or indifferent to, the claims of history but engaged with its cycles of violence. From the poem's first publication in *The Listener* in September 1973, it was greeted with acclaim, a telling contribution to the iconography of suffering. As Dunn, writing in *Encounter* in 1975, expressed it: 'the poem blazes off the page, and is the consummation of [Mahon's] writing so far, simply one of the best poems of the decade'.[116] Or, as John Banville, in a review of *Selected Poems* (1991), remarked: 'A Disused Shed' is 'the best single poem written in Ireland since the death of Yeats'.[117] It greatly enhanced Mahon's growing reputation as a poet, singling out *The Snow Party* as the most accomplished of his first three volumes (it received the Denis Devlin Award).

Heaney's comments in relation to Czeslaw Milosz, the self-exiled Polish poet and Nobel laureate, are particularly apt in relation to the visionary mode of the ironic conscience in *The Snow Party*, illustrating how it

> ... can turn what, in lesser hands or with a lesser writer, would be a poem of personal nostalgia into a symptom of great cultural and historical change, without portentousness. That move from personal lyric lament to visionary, tragic lamentation: I just love the *note*.[118]

This visionary note 'without portentousness' is precisely the register, not only of 'A Disused Shed', but of several poems in this volume. Their elegant or lucent surfaces belie the technical mastery, highlighting just how well Mahon has learned his Yeatsian trade.[119] Lofty ideas seem but 'a moment's thought', as the richly significant space of his poetry opens up striking angles on history, modernity, eco-politics, the aesthetic and the afterlife.

---

[115] In addition, Edna Longley (in 'Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art', p. 297) viewed the poem as the sequel to 'An Unborn Child' (*Night-Crossing*) and thus the second part of Mahon's response to MacNeice's 'Prayer Before Birth'; Brearton (in 'A Dying Art: Derek Mahon's Solving Ambiguity', p.211) linked some of its imagery with Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger*; and Haughton (in 'On Sitting Down to Read 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' Once Again', p.196) associated it with the Canto I of Pound's *The Cantos*, or the Hades episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

[116] Dunn, 'Mañana is Now', *Encounter* 45 (1975), p. 80.

[117] Banville, 'Slouching towards Bethlehem', *New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1991, p. 38. In a letter to the *London Review of Books*, 23, 5 (2001), p. 24, Paulin recalled reading it in *The Listener* in September 1973, deeming it 'a modern classic, one of those permanent and immortal works of art which leaves one breathless with admiration'.

[118] Corcoran, *Seamus Heaney*, p. 39.

[119] As Yeats expressed it in 'Adam's Curse' (*W.B. Yeats: The Major Works*, p. 37): 'Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught'.

CHAPTER FIVE

POEMS 1962-1978 (1979): THE IRONIC CONSCIENCE AND THE DIALECTIC OF PLACE AND PLACELESSNESS

5.1. The Cultural Context of *Poems 1962-1978.*

The publication of *Poems 1962-1978* (1979) by Oxford University Press (who also published his three previous volumes) enhanced Mahon's reputation as a poet of distinction, drawing upon the widespread critical acclaim of 'A Disused Shed' in *The Snow Party* (1975). In a review of his work in *English Studies* in 1979, Brian Donnelly regarded him as the heir of Auden, noting in particular his assured technical mastery, 'wit and wry humour', 'lively and quirky intelligence'.[1] Such qualities indicated a vision distinct from that of Heaney, as suggested by the preface to *In Their Element*, a pamphlet selection of work by both Mahon and Heaney, published by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in 1977.[2] Adopting Longley's geological analogy, it contrasted Mahon's 'igneous' poetic and lithe metaphysical intelligence with Heaney's 'sedimentary processes' and 'brooding devotion to the earth goddess'.[3] Such differences were playfully exposed by Mahon, as we have seen in the title poem of *Lives*, which rejected the archaeological paradigm for a free-floating mobility.

Having lived in London since 1970, Mahon returned to the North as writer-in-residence at the New University of Ulster, Coleraine (1977-1979). He spent the first year in Portstewart, the second in Portrush, as outlined in 'The Coleraine Triangle', an article published in the Dublin-based magazine *Magill* in 1979 (included in *Journalism*).[4] It was during this period that *In Their Element* was published, as well as the pamphlet *The Sea in*

---

[1] Brian Donnelly, 'The Poetry of Derek Mahon', *English Studies*, 60, 1 (1979), p. 23. 'Beyond Howth Head', as we have seen, drew inspiration from Auden's 'New Year Letter' (1940) and 'Letter to Lord Byron' (1936).
[2] See footnote 52 in Chapter Two, p. 73, regarding *In Their Element.*
[3] *In Their Element*, p. 2. The geological analogy is taken from Longley's essay on Ulster Poetry in *Causeway: the Arts in Ulster* (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland; Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1971).
[4] Mahon, 'The Coleraine Triangle', *Journalism*, pp. 216-219. The article opened with a vivid description of the region: 'Think of an isosceles triangle, upside-down, with Coleraine as the apex and the twin seaside resorts of Portstewart and Portrush as the base angles. During term time most of the students reside in the base angles. Last year the writer-in-residence resided in Portstewart; this year he resides in Portrush, in a pleasant whitewashed house with flaking pilasters at the front door and a magnificent sea view...On a clear day I can see Jura and Islay. Earth has not anything to show more fair'.

Winter (1978) and *Poems 1962-1978* (1979).[5] The verse-letter 'The Sea in Winter' which, in a revised form concluded *Poems 1962-1978*, is the most significant of the new poems in this volume. As we shall see, it reveals how painful this homecoming was for Mahon, leaving him temporarily depressed, in bad health and resolved 'never to live in Northern Ireland again'.[6] Nonetheless, it brought about a reassessment of the poetry of his first three volumes. Upon completion of *Poems 1962-1978*, he remarked that he felt 'released, or partly, from the impertinent rhetoricism [*sic*] of what I suppose I must now regard as my 'early work'', deeming himself at last 'in a position to begin'.[7] In this regard, the volume may be seen to mark both an end and a beginning, bringing together the majority of poems from previous collections (some with significant revisions) as well as a number of new additions. As Denman remarked, *Poems 1962-1978* was in effect a collection 'of new and selected poems', drawing on the earlier volumes while adding 'some nineteen pieces not previously published in book form'.[8]

Poems 1962-1978 thus offers a very useful overview of Mahon's work to date, shedding further light on the centrality of displacement for the ironic conscience. In several of the new poems, including 'Ford Manor', 'Penshurst Place' and 'Surrey Poems' (which arose out of Mahon's sojourn in the South of England) as well as 'A Chinese Restaurant in Portrush', 'The Return' and 'The Sea in Winter' (which deal with his return to the North of Ireland), it registers as an ongoing dialectic of place and placelessness. It is as if alienation from one's home place or native city, as outlined in 'Glengormley' and 'In Belfast' (*Night-Crossing*), has made exile, deracination, abandonment, loss, colonial anxiety or metaphysical unease the hallmark of modernity. This is clearly evident in 'The Sea in Winter', with its epigraph from Rimbaud's *Une Saison en Enfer* (*A Season in Hell*), *'Nous ne sommes pas au monde; la vraie vie est absente'* ('We are not in the world; real life is absent'). The verse-letter illustrates how painful this particular period was for Mahon, precipitating as it did a confrontation with his own demons, including alcoholism, marital difficulties, doubts about art and the role of the poet. It also highlights key images of the ironic conscience in Mahon's

---

[5] *The Sea in Winter* (Dublin: Gallery Press; Old Deerfield, Massachusetts: Deerfield Press, 1979).
[6] Johnston, *Irish Poetry After Joyce*, p. 225. The reference is from an interview with the author in New Haven, Connecticut (14 June 1979).
[7] Mahon, cited in Jonathan Barker, ed., *Thirty Years of the Poetry Book Society*: 1956-1986 (London: Hutchinson, 1988), pp. 151-2.
[8] Denman, 'Know the One? Insolent Ontology and Mahon's Revisions', *IUR, Derek Mahon Special Number*, 24, 1 (1994), p.27.

early poetry, notably that of the window, from which all his verse-letters (including 'The Globe in North Carolina' in *The Hunt by Night*) are addressed.

5.2 The Ironic Conscience and the Dialectic of Place and Placelessness in *Poems 1962-1978.*

'Autobiographies', one of the most significant new poems in this volume (recalling MacNeice's 'Autobiography') neatly outlines the dialectic of place and placelessness in this volume.[9] In the opening section, home becomes 'The Home Front' as the Antrim Road gives way to 'the gates of Stalingrad' or German concentration camps:

> While the frozen armies trembled
> At the gates of Stalingrad
> They took me home in a taxi
> And laid me in a cot,
> And there I slept again
> With siren and black-out;
>
> And slept under the stairs
> Beside the light meter
> When bombs fell on the city;
> So I never saw the sky
> Filled with a fiery glow,
> Searchlights roaming the stars.

The association of 'bombs' with home, which looks back to the final lines of 'Afterlives' in *The Snow Party*, enforces the impression of home as a conflicted space.[10] Autobiography and history dramatically intersect as the proto-poet is presented as 'A male child in a garden / Clutching *The Empire News*' (the concluding lines of stanza five). The 'roaming' searchlights are a metaphor for the shifting focus of the poem itself. 'The Lost Girls' (section two) moves from 'the playground / Of Skegoneill Primary School' to Kenya; 'The Last Resort' (section three), from 'Strandmore Hotel' to 'the sands of Tenerife'; 'The Bicycle' (section four), from Belfast and the surrounding countryside to Monaghan and Dublin. Places themselves are displaced as the passage of time pushes everything to the side:

> Years later, the same dim
> Resort has grown dimmer
> As if some centrifugal
> Force, summer by summer,

[9] The poem is dedicated to the Ulster novelist Maurice Leitch, formerly the dedicatee of 'A Refusal to Mourn' (*The Snow Party*). MacNeice's poem, dated September 1940, is also about displacement, or the traumatic effect of his mother's death, 'When I was five the black dreams came; / Nothing after was quite the same'.

[10] Reference to 'the light meter', particularly in the context of 'released Jews / Blinking in shocked sunlight' in stanza five, suggests that the origins of Mahon's 'Shed' can also be traced to this enclosed space under the stairs.

Has moved it ever further
From an imagined centre.[11]

'Autobiographies' thus provides a template for the dialectic of place and placelessness in *Poems 1962-1975*. As we shall argue, 'some centrifugal / Force' disturbs the sense of belonging in several poems. Attachment to a specific place frequently grows 'dimmer' in the light of history, cultural dislocation, feelings of loneliness, absence, exile or unease. For the ironic conscience in this volume, it would appear, home is the stuff of dreams, an elusive or 'imagined centre'.

In 'Teaching in Belfast' (based on Mahon's experience as a teacher in Belfast High School, Newtonabbey), the centrifugal force is the fantasy of 'the glittering west'. It holds the speaker's imagination, as gulls descend on a deserted playground after lunch break:

At five to two the lunch hour nears its end
And gulls come down on the deserted playground,
One at a time, to search the litter bins.
This is the moment my fantasy beings
And I drive with a generous lady, long since lost,
Against the traffic to the glittering west,
Startling the hens in drowsy villages,
Cushioned with money, time and privileges.
O chalky teachers, you would gladly do
Without your pensions to be with me too!
The fields are bright with sunlight after rain,
The skies are clear, the music starts again...[12]

Just as the enclosed spaces of 'Glengormley' (*Night-Crossing*) did not exactly correspond with Mahon's idea of *'le vrai lieu'* ('the real place'), so too classroom and schoolyard fuel the longing for the open road (after Kerouac).[13] Easy money is no answer to creative unrest. The poem ends, like several others, with a sense of larger ground, as the trappings of the mundane (corridors, bells, homework, chalk, 'confiscated penknife') fade before the visionary expanse of earth and sky. As for MacNeice, the play of light after rain is an endless source of fascination, its dazzle, glint and glitter all part of the secular *numen* (the penultimate line is reminiscent of MacNeice's 'The Sunlight on the Garden').

---

[11] There is a Larkinesque feel to 'The Last Resort', recalling the final lines of 'Afternoons': 'Something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives' (Larkin, *Collected Poems*, p. 121).

[12] 'Teaching in Belfast' is positioned between 'Ecclesiastes' (*Lives*) and 'Bruce Ismay's Soliloquy' (*Night-Crossing*) in the first section of the volume, rather than towards the end where the majority of new poems are placed. This reflects its period of composition. Mahon worked in Belfast High School on return from America, before moving to Monkstown, Co. Dublin, where he wrote 'Beyond Howth Head'. Reference to gulls and 'the glittering west' looks back to 'Recalling Aran' in *Night-Crossing*, with its opening 'dream of limestone in sea-light / Where gulls have placed their perfect prints'.

[13] Mahon mentions *'le vrai lieu'* in his Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, p. 11.

'Penshurst Place' also picks up the play of sunlight after rain, the opening stanza capturing the pleasantries of an English idyll while echoing Christopher Marlowe's 'The Passionate Shepherd to his Love' ('Come live with me, and be my love').[14] However, the harmonious surface is disturbed by undercurrents of deceit, venery and intrigue, suggesting all is not quite as it seems in this gilded scene of lute music and courtly love:

> The bright drop quivering on a thorn
> In the rich silence after rain,
> Lute music from the orchard aisles,
> The paths ablaze with daffodils,
> Intrigue and venery in the air
> *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*,
> The iron hand and the velvet glove –
> Come live with me and be my love.

Arcadian bliss is shadowed by other realities as reference to the iron hand in the context of 'Spanish ships around Kinsale' points to the defeat of Hugh O'Neill (arch-traitor in English eyes for scorning the likes of Sir Henry Sidney who fostered him at Penhurst Place). It also alludes to the brutality of Elizabethan policy in Ireland, notably at the hands of Sir Walter Raleigh, renowned for his neatly symmetrical response to Marlowe's pastoral, 'The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd':

> A pearl face, numinously bright,
> Shining in silence of the night,
> A muffled crash of smouldering logs,
> Bad dreams of courtiers and of dogs,
> The Spanish ships around Kinsale,
> The screech owl and the nightingale,
> The falcon and the turtle dove –
> Come live with me and be my love.[15]

For all its levity, Mahon's poem counterpoints the charm of a rustic English scene against the historical legacy of imperialism, exemplifying the oblique engagement of his early poetry. A moment of Elizabethan rapture in the grounds of a secluded estate gives way to the Battle of Kinsale in which O'Neill was defeated and Irish hopes crushed, the subsequent 'flight of the earls' bringing an end to Gaelic Ulster. 'Penshurst Place' is thus more about

---

[14] The title also alludes to Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst', written to celebrate the estate of Sir Robert Sidney, Viscount Lisle (1605), later to become Earl of Leicester (1618).

[15] The poem recalls MacNeice's 'Suite for recorders' in *Ten Burnt Offerings* (1952), with its opening reference to Raleigh and Marlowe, and Heaney's 'Ocean's Love to Ireland' in *North* (1975), pp. 46-47. The latter poem compares Ireland to the maid raped by Raleigh, obliquely criticising the imperialist politics associated with the Elizabethan lyric tradition: 'The ruined maid complains in Irish, / Ocean has scattered her dreams of fleets, / The Spanish prince has spilled his gold // And failed her. Iambic drums / Of English beat the woods where her poets / Sink like Onan'.

dispossession than the transience of youth and love, making the refrain from Marlowe's poem all the more bitterly ironic.[16] It illustrates the acute historical awareness which underlies displacement. As Heaney expressed it, he is

> ...culturally in love with the Surrey countryside where he was living with his family when this poem was written, but ethnically and politically entangled with the country of his first nurture.[17]

History is less a frozen memory than a disruptive force, as the tranquillity of the present is marred by the conflicts of the past. The 'bad dreams of courtiers and of dogs' is another instance of the return of the repressed. Excess civility or charm belies its brutal opposite, 'Penshurst Place' (like 'Glengormley' in *Night-Crossing*) having its own dangerous tokens and historical links with 'the unreconciled, in their metaphysical pain'.[18] This dialectical awareness is reflected in the poem's series of oppositions, or the clash between light ('bright drop', 'numinously bright') and dark ('*l'ombre*', 'night'); tranquil silence ('rich silence', 'shining in silence') and menacing sound ('muffled crash', 'screech owl'); gentleness and brutality ('falcon and the turtle dove' echoing the earlier 'iron hand and the velvet glove'). Once again, the sense of attachment or belonging is subtly undermined. In this instance, it is fraught with colonial anxiety, as the ghosts of the dead cast a pall over the delights of the living (captured in the epigraph from Marlowe's poem, '*And if these pleasures may thee move...*')

In 'Ford Manor', the sense of displacement derives not from the legacy of history but the deracination of modern life. Like 'Penshurst Place' it reveals the attractions of the sedate English countryside, only in this instance to the poet in his role as father.[19] The felicities of marriage are registered in the smiling image of a pregnant wife against the backdrop of greenhouses, local fauna and flora, the epigraph from *The Divine Comedy*, '*Non sapei tu che qui è l'uom felice*?' ('Did you not know that man is happy here?') linking her with Dante's beloved Beatrice:

---

[16] The final stanza of Raleigh's 'The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd' reads: 'But could youth last and love still breed, / Had joys no date, nor age no need, / Then these delights my mind might move, / To live with thee and be thy love'.

[17] Heaney, 'Place and Displacement', p. 135.

[18] These nightmares prefigure those which shatter the idyllic calm at the close of 'Girls on the Bridge' in *The Hunt by Night* ('When the bad dreams / You will hardly know will scatter / The punctual increment of your lives').

[19] On moving to Surrey in 1975, Mahon lived with his wife in the laundry flat ('this airy box') of Ford Manor, an old burnt-out estate near Gatwick airport. Both his children were born there in 1977 and 1979.

Even on the quietest days the distant
Growl of cars remains persistent;
Reaching us in this airy box
We share with the field-mouse and the fox;
But she drifts in maternity blouses
Among crack-paned greenhouses –
A smiling Muse come back to life,
Part child, part mother, and part wife.[20]

However, the grounds of an old estate are not immune to the outside world in the guise of distant traffic, its persistent 'growl' (recalling 'crash' and 'screech' in 'Penshurst Place') a reminder of sharply contrasting realities. Reference to 'Tokyo, New York or Rome' in the second stanza enforces this global alternative, as the noise of incoming flights to nearby Gatwick airport vies with the tranquil sounds of nature. Again the concrete details of a particular scene give way to far-flung places, as Mahon balances the conflicting perspectives of tradition and modernity, natural and technological worlds:

Even on the calmest nights the fitful
Prowl of planes is seldom still
Where Gatwick tilts to guide them home
From Tokyo, New York or Rome;
Yet even today the earth disposes
Bluebells, roses and primroses,
The dawn throat-whistle of a thrush
Deep in the dripping lilac bush.

As in 'Penshurst Place' ('Come live with me and be my love') and 'Teaching in Belfast' ('The skies are clear, the music starts again...'), the final lines enact their own music to convey a sense of transcendence. This lyrical resolution reflects Mahon's sense of poetry's formal necessity, as the exquisite end-rhymes ('throat-whistle of a thrush' / 'dripping lilac brush') embody the timeless world of art.[21] This world is the nearest the ironic conscience comes to 'home' in this volume, its 'imagined centre' (to adopt 'Autobiographies') offering a vital point of reference in the ongoing drama of place and placelessness.

'The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush' provides a further example of the oscillating perspective of these new poems in *Poems 1962-1978*. The concluding stanza shifts the indoor scene to 'the mountains of Donegal' and the world of the Far East (depicted in the framed representation of Hong Kong):

---

[20] The epigraph is from *Purgatorio*, Canto XXX, line 75.
[21] 'The Blackbird', another of the new poems in this volume, illustrates Mahon's facility for end-rhyme or aural closure. The final phrase, 'the silence of the seas', neatly echoes the earlier 'Hesperides'.

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

The whistled tune, like the bird's throat-whistle in 'Ford Manor', picks up the note of harmony. All is poised 'as if the world were young', the 'first yacht' a symbol of innocence, the resonant 'home' (a key word in these poems) of belonging. Reference to the sail as an ideogram in the context of heavenly light is suggestive of art's eternity. Both poet-speaker and proprietor are 'framed' in sacral time. However, the moment of transcendence is shadowed by historical realities. As Brown stated, drawing attention to the loaded word 'invasion' in the poem's opening lines: 'Before the holidaymakers comes the spring / Softening the sharp air of the coast / In time for the first 'invasion''):

> As disputed Crown colony (the poem dates from before the British hand-over of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China) it reminds us of Northern Ireland's ambiguous status in the United Kingdom and makes the phrase 'the first "invasion"' of stanza one, far from innocent. The good place is a momentary trick of light on the mountains of Donegal (across a contentious border), the legacy of history is ineluctable, home the stuff of dreams. Even such a celebratory poem of place as this is rich in ironies.[22]

Once again the centrifugal force underlying the dialectic of place and placelessness is the legacy of history. It disrupts the idyllic calm, highlighting the conflict between art and life, exile and belonging. The poem's conclusion is ambiguously poised, as the final 'home' suggests not so much a dream of innocence as a site of yearning for something irretrievably lost.

Finally, 'The Return' enforces the central issue of displacement in this volume as it oscillates between the starkly contrasting landscapes of the south of England and the North Antrim coastline. The opening stanzas facetiously entertain the fantasy of belonging in Surrey:

...[I]often thought if I lived
Long enough in this house
I would turn into a tree
Like somebody in Ovid

[22] Brown, 'Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness', p. 137.

- A small tree certainly
But a tree nonetheless –

Perhaps befriend the oak,
The chestnut and the yew,
Become a home for birds,
A shelter for the nymphs,
And gaze out over the downs
As if I belonged here too.

The repeated 'As if', however, which operates as a refrain throughout the poem ('As if I owned the place'; 'As if the trees responded / to my ignorant admiration'; 'As if I belonged here too'; 'As if its very existence'; 'As if it belongs there'), serves only to heighten the speaker's sense of exile. Ovidian transformation into a small tree (a far cry from Yeats's 'great-rooted blossomer') to provide shelter for birds and nymphs poisoned by car exhaust, seems more than a little self-mocking.[23] Like 'The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush', with its dream of innocence ('*as if* the world was young' [my italics]), 'The Return' indulges the fantasy of belonging only to undermine it. Hypothetical scenarios are immediately confronted by harsh reality, as the second half of the poem contemplates the poet's return to the North of Ireland in 1977:

But where I am going the trees
Are few and far between.
No richly forested slopes,
Not for a long time,
And a few winking woodlands;
There are no nymphs to be seen.

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 sea-wind

With nothing to recommend it
But its harsh tenacity
Between the blinding windows
And the forests of the sea,
As if its very existence
Were a reason to continue.

Crone, crow, scarecrow,
Its worn fingers scrabbling
At a torn sky, it stands
On the edge of everything

[23] The opening stanza reads: 'I am saying goodbye to the trees, / The beech, the cedar, the elm, / the mild woods of these parts / Misted with car exhaust, / And sawdust, and the last / Gasps of the poisoned nymphs'.

Like a burnt-out angel
Raising petitionary hands.

Grotesque by day, at twilight
An almost tragic figure
Of anguish and despair,
It merges into the funeral
Cloud-continents of night
As if it belongs there.

Here Mahon echoes MacNeice's 'Woods' (1946), which juxtaposes the 'tame' English landscape with 'the wilds of Mayo' in the West of Ireland.[24] The inland vista of downs, woodland, nymphs and flowers gives way to the sight of a solitary shrub in a wilderness assailed by the elements ('a burnt-out' rather than a fallen 'angel', to recall 'In Belfast' in *Night-Crossing*). Given its dedication to John Hewitt (whose long poem of the same title appeared in 1944), 'The Return' may be read as an oblique critique of rootedness, particularly in the light of Mahon's later remarks concerning Hewitt's prescription that the Ulster writer 'must be a *rooted* man'.[25] As Kerrigan put it 'Hewitt's thornscape has been reduced to Beckettian futility' (hence, the crucial 'almost' which qualifies 'tragic').[26] Its grim determination to survive is more 'grotesque' than tragic. For Mahon, as we have seen, the free-floating mobility of thistledown or 'a twig in a stream' is vastly preferable to the 'anguish and despair' of eking out an existence 'in stony ground'. The final 'As if it belongs there' suggests that neither the sedate English countryside nor the besieged Northern coastline can provide a final home or resting place.

All of these poems highlight the dialectic of place and placelessness in *Poems 1962-1978* or the impossibility of belonging in any one place. For the ironic conscience the idea of home is a deferred reality, if not an elusive dream. As the poet-speaker in the fourth and final part of 'Surrey Poems' noted, wryly addressing the various flora:

I have a right to be here too.

---

[24] MacNeice, 'Woods', *Collected Poems*, p. 230. The opening line reads: 'My father who found the English landscape tame…' Mahon mentioned MacNeice's poem in 'MacNeice in Ireland and England' (*Journalism*, p. 22), suggesting that only an 'English poet' could have written the final stanza: '…The patch / Of sky at the end of the path grows and discloses / An ordered open air long ruled by dyke and fence, / With geese whose form and gait proclaim their consequence, / Pargetted outposts, windows browed with thatch, / And cow pats – and inconsequent wild roses'.

[25] As outlined in the Introduction, p. 15, Mahon regarded Hewitt's remarks as a bit tough on the peripatetic ('thistledown' / 'twig in a stream') sensibility. Hewitt was resident at Queen's University between 1976 and 1979.

[26] Kerrigan, 'Ulster Ovids', p. 241. For Dawe, the 'harsh tenacity' of this 'last stubborn growth' represented that Ulster Protestant intransigence which cripples instead of inspiring 'confidence in the necessity and management of change' ('The Sound of the Shuttle', *Stray Dogs and Dark Horses*, p. 67).

Maybe not like you –
like the birds,
say, or the wind blowing through.
('Dry Hill')

These lines enforce the conflict between the desire to belong ('to be here') and the yearning to move on ('blowing through). The desired mobility is represented by birds, wind and sea, which frequently appear as symbols in Mahon's early poetry.[27] This reference to wind also helps to explain the significance of 'The Window' (*The Snow Party*), Mahon's verbal icon or ideogram in the form of a frame with the centrally iconic word 'wind' at the centre.[28] It is strategically positioned as the penultimate poem in *Poems 1968-1972,* opposite 'The Sea in Winter'. The wind is a key symbol for Mahon, which he associates with the creative imagination, as outlined in 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' (*Night-Crossing*) and 'Beyond Howth Head' (*Lives*), the verse-letter opening with the words 'The wind that blows these words to you...' In the context of this volume, it symbolises mobility or resistance to rootedness. The displacement of the ironic conscience is thus mirrored formally in the imagery of several poems. This is particularly evident in 'The Sea in Winter', which foregrounds the sea as a central element in Mahon's 'soul-landscape', while also stressing the symbolic importance of the window (which it specifically links, as we shall see, with the wind). The poem is remarkable for its profoundly autobiographical edge, bringing the dialectic of place and placelessness in these poems to a dramatic conclusion.

Written from 'a draughty bungalow in Portstewart', the verse-letter is dedicated to Desmond O'Grady, a friend and fellow Irish poet living on the Mediterranean.[29] The sense of unreality (or lack of 'real life', to recall Rimbaud's epigraph) reflects Mahon's depression

---

[27] The sight of birds, imagination's missionaries or 'angels of wind' as 'Bird Sanctuary' (*Night-Crossing*) deemed them, is frequently a call to new horizons in Mahon's early poetry. As his translation of Saint-John Perse's *Oiseaux* (1962) puts it, birds move not to any timetable or schedule but to 'a cosmic rhythm, inscribing themselves instinctively in the great vagrant poem of the evolving earth' (*Birds: Saint-John Perse, A version by Derek Mahon* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2002), p. 23). Their freedom or mobility speaks to his own vagrant spirit, a scavenging gull associated with the figure of the artist, as we have seen, in 'In the Aran Islands' (*Lives*).

[28] 'The Window', *The Snow Party*, p. 25. The frame consists of the horizontally repeated word 'wood' and the vertically repeated words 'wood' and 'window'. As outlined in Chapter Two, one of MacNeice's poems was also entitled 'The Window'.

[29] O'Grady was born in Limerick in 1935. He shares Mahon's interest in translation, publishing numerous works, including *The Selected Poems of Cavafy* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1999). Mahon's holiday with him in Greece is mentioned in the opening stanza: 'the tiny port / Where we drank so much retsina'. The penultimate stanza alludes to O' Grady's long poem *The Dying Gaul* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968). His response to the verse-letter can be seen in 'My Fields in Springtime' (1980), in O'Grady, *The Road Taken: Poems 1956-1996* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg Press, 1996), p. 284. Like Mahon, the Irish writer has lived abroad for much of his life (in Paris, Rome, Cairo and Alexandria), residing now in Kinsale, Co. Cork.

at the time as well as the violent political conflict in Northern Ireland. It fuels the longing for elsewhere as the poet-speaker imagines his addressee's 'white island in the south':

> Beside my 'distant northern sea',
> I imagine a moon of Asia Minor
> Bright on your nightly industry.
> Sometimes, rounding the cliff top
> At dusk, under the convent wall,
> And finding the little town lit up
> As if for some island festival,
> I pretend not to be here at all;
>
> That the shop fronts along the prom,
> Whose fluorescence blinds the foam
> And shingle, are the dancing lights
> Of Paros – those calescent nights! –
> That these frosty pavements are
> The stones of that far-shining star;
> That the cold, glistening sea-mist
> Eclipses Naxos to the east.

However, the charm of the Greek isles ('those calescent nights!') serves only to heighten the underlying displacement. The Arnoldian reference (Arnold contrasted his own 'distant northern sea' with Sophocles's Aegean), which recalls the 'Dover Beach / scenario' of 'Beyond Howth Head', suggests that the North of Ireland is another site of 'struggle and flight', where paramilitary gangs, if not ignorant armies, 'clash by night'. As the following stanzas indicate, its violence and murders are a far cry from the sentimental lyrics of the Northern Irish song-writer Jimmy Kennedy (a fellow Trinity College graduate):

> 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.
>
> Portstewart, Portrush, Portballintrae –
> *Un beau pays mal habité*,
> Policed by rednecks in dark cloth
> And roving gangs of tartan youth…
>
> 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.[30]

The phrase 'Elysian / And neighbourly', in the context of Kennedy's lyric ('Red sails in the sunset, / way out on the sea / Oh, carry my loved one / home safely to me') is bitterly ironic, given the toxic effect of violence, not only on the body politic, but on marital life ('Sunders the husband from the wife').[31] Unlike Pindar's 'far-shining star', the province is a kind of hell-hole ('infernal / Backwater') or godforsaken place ('*un beau pays mal habité*').[32] The reference to 'Red Hugh', an allusion to the long history of conflict in the province, implicitly links sails in the sunset with 'The Spanish ships around Kinsale' ('Penshurst Place').[33] 'A clear day' is counterpointed yet again by historical realities, as Mahon, like Joyce Cary, is all too aware of colonial interests.[34] As in 'Penshurst Place', this historical legacy disrupts the present. It informs the current wave of violence, evident in the 'roving gangs' of sectarian youth as well the highly visible military presence needed to contain them. As Mahon pointed out in 'The Coleraine Triangle', security, in the form of checkpoints, army patrols, helicopters, heavily fortified installations with their arc-lights, watch-towers and surveillance equipment, had come to replace textiles and shipbuilding as the largest single industry.[35]

The personal impact of this pathology ('something rotten in the state') engendered a state of depression in Mahon and a crisis of confidence in his poetic ability. On return to the North, he struggled to come to terms with the past and his own cultural background:

When I returned one year ago

---

[30] Kennedy (1902-1984) was born in Omagh, but grew up in Portstewart. 'Red Sails in the Sunset' was one of his early successes, inspired by a beautiful summer evening in Portstewart in 1935. Many of his songs were recorded by famous artists.

[31] 'The Old Snaps' (*Poems 1962-1978*, p. 101), addressed to Mahon's wife, highlights this toxic effect. It acknowledges frankly: 'We have never known a worse winter'. Its parenthetical allusion to Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, '('When will we ever go to Moscow')', enforces the stark realisation that real life (to echo Rimbaud's epigraph) is elsewhere.

[32] The phrase '*Un beau pays mal habité*', as Mahon noted in 'The Coleraine Triangle' (p. 219), is a traditional French platitude used to describe Germany, adding 'the same is true of the North'. For Pindar, Delos was the 'far-shining star of / dark-blue earth'.

[33] Red Hugh refers to Hugh O'Donnell, Prince of Tyrconnell, who helped to lead the Nine Years War, a revolt against English occupation, from 1593-1603. After the Irish defeat at Kinsale in 1602, he left the country for Spain.

[34] The novelist Joyce Cary was born in Derry in 1888. Like J. G. Farrell, the British Empire figured as a major theme in his writing. His first four novels, *Aissa Saved* (1932), *American Visitor* (1933), *The African Witch* (1936) and *Mister Johnson* (1939), were all set in West Africa, dealing with the clash between tribal culture and British administration. *Castle Corner* (1938) was the only completed novel of a planned trilogy on the decline of the Empire. His later trilogy, comprising *A Prisoner of Grace* (1952), *Except the Lord* (1953) and *Not Honour More* (1955), explored the world of politics. His main characters are generally eccentric outcasts at odds with the conventional world, figures like Gulley Jimson (the irresponsible artist) and Chester Nimmo (the political adventurer), I would suggest, very appealing to Mahon.

[35] Mahon, 'The Coleraine Triangle', p. 219.

I felt like Tonio Kröger – 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. The upshot?
Chaos and instability,
The cool gaze of the RUC.

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 on the choral hills –
On antabuse and mogadon
Recovering, crying out for the sun.

The bleak autobiographical edge appears to confirm the wisdom of his earlier decision (*contra* Simmons) not to return to Belfast and live the grim reality 'bomb by bomb' ('Afterlives'). For this homecoming triggered a state of ill-health, 'antabuse and mogadon' suggesting alcoholism and insomnia.[36] 'Chaos and instability' in the province is experienced internally as a failure of poetic nerve, as Mahon's doubts about art, particularly in the face of violence, intensify. The allusion to Thomas Mann's semi-autobiographical story is apt, for Tonio Kröger's return to Lübeck on the Baltic Sea is that of a disillusioned writer trying to rediscover his love for humanity. It enforces the estrangement from the world in Rimbaud's epigraph, as does the reference to 'the prodigal son in *Ghosts*'. The line from Ibsen's play, 'Mother, give me the sun', is echoed here in 'crying out for the sun', the latter representing (among other things) the light of poetic inspiration.[37] Mention of 'the grim, arthritic coasts / Of the cold north' heightens the sense of a deprived and depressed culture, the 'cool gaze' of the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) recalling the 'cold gaze' of divinity in 'In Belfast' (*Night-Crossing*) and the preacher's 'cold heart' in 'Ecclesiastes' (*Lives*). This association of the North with cold, which underlies the longing for light and warmth in this poem, prefigures the later crisis in *Antarctica* (1985). Mahon's words, 'Yet knowing I could never cast / Aside the things that made me what, / For better or worse, I am', are prescient in this regard. Like those of MacNeice in 'Valediction' (1934), 'I cannot deny my past to which my

[36] As Haughton pointed out in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 150, Mahon was 'briefly hospitalised for alcoholism in Derry in late 1978 and early 1979', before returning to London to take up a 'new role as television adaptor and programme maker', living with his family in Observatory Gardens.
[37] In the final act of Ibsen's play, Oswald's condition grows into insanity, the play ending with the repetition of the tragic words, 'The sun…the sun'.

self is wed, / the woven figure cannot undo its thread', they suggest it is impossible to escape the grip of the past.[38]

The verse-letter thus highlights the profoundly personal nature of Mahon's displacement and how it undermines his sense of art's efficacy ('And all the time I have my doubts / About this verse-making').[39] It also illustrates how this displacement is formally embodied in the oscillation between different 'lives' and places. As we have seen, the various lives, literary and non-literary, include: Sophocles, Pindar, Arnold, Rimbaud, Oswald, Joyce Cary, Red Hugh O'Donnell, Jimmy Kennedy and Tonio Kröger, as Mahon meshes the contrasting spheres of autobiography, literature, history and popular culture. Places range from the North Atlantic to 'Asia Minor', incorporating the islands of Jura, Islay and Inishowen, as well as Paros and Naxos. Finally, 'The Sea in Winter' picks up key images of displacement in *Poems 1962-1978*, notably that of the window, associated once again with wind (as in 'The Window'):

> Why am I always staring out of
> Of windows, preferably from a height?
> I think the redemptive enterprise
> Of water – hold it to the light! –
> Yet distance is the vital bond
> Between the window and the wind,
> While equilibrium demands
> A cold eye and deliberate hands.

This stanza draws a number of elements together. First, it enforces the sea as a potent source of inspiration for Mahon. Its ceaseless ebb and flow is 'redemptive', because it answers the hunger at the heart of his own displacement (like Larkin, he too would make use of water, if 'called in / To construct a religion').[40] Several poems, the verse-letters in particular, 'hold it to the light!', acknowledging its symbolic significance. Secondly, the stanza links the image of the artist at the window (a key one for Mahon, as we have seen, in 'Rage for Order' in

---

[38] MacNeice, 'Valediction', *Collected Poems*, p. 53.

[39] The remaining lines of stanza fifteen add: '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'.

[40] Larkin, 'Water', *Collected Poems*, p. 93. The connection with Larkin's poem is enforced by the phrase 'hold it to the light!', which echoes the final stanza in 'Water': 'And I should raise in the east / A glass of water / Where any-angled light / Would congregate endlessly'. Mahon's phrase, the 'redemptive enterprise / Of water' also recalls the moving waters at their task 'Of pure ablution' round earth's shores in Keats's 'Bright Star'). The affinity with water also recalls MacNeice's poem, 'Our Sister Water' in *Ten Burnt Offerings* (1952), which opens with the phrase 'World's best is water…' (MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 299).

Lives) with the idea of 'distance', which is described as 'the vital bond'.[41] This association helps to explain the displaced perspectives of Mahon's early poetry or the 'long view' which casts 'A cold eye' on the present (the original pamphlet version used the phrase 'a long view' to make this link explicit).[42] It illustrates why the artist, following Yeats's horseman, frequently looks on 'from a height' (as in 'Rage for Order' in *Lives*) or steps back in order to observe the competing claims of art and history, reality and imagination (as in 'The Snow Party' and 'The Last of the Fire Kings' in *The Snow Party*). 'The Sea in Winter' thus sheds light on the marginal stance of the ironic conscience in *Poems 1962-1978* (what stanza eight described as 'the curious sense / Of working on the circumference'). It highlights the fact that distance, whether of the 'actual, exilic, cross-channel variety or the imaginary, self-renewing, transhistorical and transcultural sort' (to re-quote Heaney's words, cited in Chapter One), is the vital element underlying the dialectic of place and placelessness.

It is not surprising then that Mahon, musing about the *fin-de-siècle*, should picture himself at a window by the sea, whose ebb and flow is nature's answer to Stevens's call for 'keener' sounds:

> 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?
> I hope so, for the sake of these
> Subsidized serendipities.
> 'Ghostlier demarcations, keener
> Sounds' are needed more than ever.[43]

Stevens's phrase qualifies the disparagement of verse-making in stanza fifteen ('All farts in a biscuit tin, in truth - / Faint cries, sententious or uncouth'), as 'keener sounds' replace the earlier shouts of drunken souls in torment 'At closing time'. For all his doubts about its significance, the world of art continues to offer Mahon a source of consolation. At this

---

[41] The image of the window also features significantly in the title poem of *The Snow Party* ('everyone / Crowds to the window'). 'The Attic', another of the new poems in *Poems 1962-1978*, p. 102 (dedicated to John and Evelyn Montague) depicts the window as a kind of watchtower or 'muse-light on the city'. In 'Everything is Going to Be All Right' (*Poems 1962-1978*, p. 107), the vantage point is a 'dormer window'.

[42] This 'cold eye', evident in *The Snow Party* (1975) is even more apparent, as will be outlined, in *Antarctica* (1985). The pamphlet version of this stanza - *The Sea in Winter* (Dublin: Gallery Press), p. 5 - read: 'Why am I always staring out / Of windows, preferably from a height? / Does this solar acclivity / Require a long view of the sea, / A distance between me and it, / Between the poetry and the shit? / Does merest sanity demand / A cold eye and a careful hand'.

[43] 'Rage for Order' (*Lives*) also alluded to the final stanza of Stevens's 'The Idea of Order at Key West', from which the phrase 'ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds' is taken.

difficult juncture, its forms 'are needed more than ever'. 'The Sea in Winter' concludes by reaffirming a belief in art as a catalyst for transformation:

> 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'.
>
> 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.

The task of poetry, the poem suggests, echoing the catch-cry of modernism, is 'to make it new', to let go of the atavistic hatred of the past in order to imagine 'The ideal future' that 'Shines out of our better nature'. The allusion to Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1694) links such transformation with an interior quest. It involves a certain collective risk-taking ('leap / Before we look!') or capacity to see things afresh ('The sun is but a morning star').[44] Given the iconography of conflicting communities in the North of Ireland, or the sectarian tension between orange and green, 'Colours we scarcely dare to dream' is politically charged. 'Forsake the grey skies for the blue' neatly subverts loyalist graffiti which, as Mahon outlined in 'The Coleraine Triangle', typifies 'the Ulster Protestant pathology' ('*We shall never forsake the blue skies of our Ulster for the grey skies of an Irish Republic*').[45] Here the poem recalls 'In Carrowdore Churchyard' (*Night-Crossing*) with its stress on the artist as one who keeps 'the colours new'.

'The Sea in Winter' thus obliquely addresses the situation in the North, as evident in the allusion to Bashō's text, which looks back to the title poem in *The Snow Party*. As in 'Penshurst Place', 'Ford Manor' and 'The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush', the legacy of history disrupts the present. Only now, it is not so much the blissful moment of tranquillity which is undermined as the 'luminous' world of art, graphically realised in Botticelli's

[44] The reference to 'the road to Damascus', which alludes to the conversion of St. Paul, enforces this idea of seeing things anew. It prefigures the reference in the final stanza to being 'Cured of our ancient colour-blindness…'

[45] Mahon, 'The Coleraine Triangle', p. 219. He noted the 'weird poetry' of this particular loyalist graffiti.

drawings.[46] Here the verse-letter mirrors the dialectic of place and placelessness in previous poems, as art's 'imagined centre' ('that paradise / Each has his vision of') is tempered by harsh reality. The image of Beatrice is balanced by the earlier reference to marital estrangement, the divine procession by the guilt-ridden Oswald crying out for the sun, or Tonio Kröger struggling to make sense of his past (figures more apt for the poet-speaker's 'unnerved' or depressed state). Even the colours we 'dare to dream' are counterpointed by 'our ancient colour-blindness' in the concluding stanza:

> 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.
>
> *Portstewart-Portrush; Oct., 1977-Sept., 1978*

The reference to *Ecclesiastes* ('There is nothing new under the sun') is subtly qualified in the final line ('a new days crawls up the beach'), as the spirit-sapping routine is offset by a residual note of promise. 'The Sea in Winter' vividly captures the conflict between hope and despair in the poem, triggered by Mahon's return to his native province. As he stated later in interview: 'all I could do was re-experience the landscape, re-experience the awfulness'.[47]

5.3 Poetic Revisions and the Ironic Conscience in *Poems 1962-1978.*

On a formal level, the displacement of the ironic conscience is reflected in Mahon's numerous revisions, which ensure that his poems resist fixity or refuse to be tied to any final form. Shape-changing in his early poetry thus extends to the poems themselves, which also assume different 'lives' (occasionally, as we shall see, radically different ones). This strategy of revision is very much in keeping with the ironist's awareness of the inadequacy of language or the contingency of final vocabularies (to echo Rorty's remarks cited in the Introduction). As 'Heraclitus on Rivers', another of the new poems in this volume, outlined, mutability extends not only to the body ('your changing metabolism') and professions of

[46] This reference to the Italian artist recalls the final lines of 'The Lost Girls' in 'Autobiographies': 'On a shadowy school playground / Like the nymphs dancing together / In the 'Allegory of Spring''.
[47] Mahon, interview with Kelly, p. 11.

love ('When she told you she loved you') but to language itself. It highlights the provisional nature of words on a page, while alluding intertextually to Horace and Shakespeare:

> You will tell me that you have executed
> A monument more lasting than bronze;
> But even bronze is perishable.
> 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. [48]

In Mahon's case, the language in which the poems are written is indeed 'perishable' or subject to variation in time, despite the insistence on poetry's formal necessity (here the conflict between art and history registers in the monosyllabic rush of the final line, which counters the cyclical repetition of 'you', 'bronze', 'poem', 'language'). His early poetry, as we shall see, is certainly not written in stone. His 'eddy of semantic scruple' (or 'scruples', as the version of 'Rage for Order' in *Poems 1962-1978* has it) gives rise to numerous revisions, which undermine the fixity of any poetic 'monument'.

In interview with Scammell in 1991, Mahon justified his 'finicky revisions and re-revisions', citing Paul Valéry's dictum that 'a poem is never finished, only abandoned'.[49] Certain poems can exist in several different forms, notably the verse-letters 'Beyond Howth Head' and 'The Sea in Winter'.[50] Such updating (as the blurb on the cover of *Collected Poems* (1999) deems it), illustrates Mahon's preference for fluidity over fixity, as a poem's variant states playfully resist final closure.[51] For example, 'Gipsies Revisited' ('Lives'), which follows the earlier 'Gipsies' in *Night-Crossing*, appears (with minor revisions) in *Poems 1962-1978* as 'Gipsies', the original having been omitted or 'unwritten', its title transferred to the later poem. To complicate matters further, another poem entitled 'The Gipsies' (*The Snow Party*) appears as the third piece in the sequence 'Three Poems After Jaccottet' in *Poems 1962-1978*. Its line, 'short-lived souls that we are', might equally apply to the works themselves. As Denman noted, 'the rootless and nomadic course of these poems

[48] The poem substitutes 'bronze' for 'brass' in both Horace (*Odes*, Book III, XXX) and Shakespeare (Sonnet 65).
[49] Mahon, interview with Scammell, p. 6.
[50] 'The Sea in Winter', which, in *Poems 1962-1978*, has 22 eight line stanzas (a number of which are revised from the original pamphlet version) is reduced to 12 stanzas in Mahon's *Selected* and *Collected Poems*.
[51] The gloss at the back of Mahon's *Collected Poems* reads: 'This volume brings together, in updated form, the poems the author 'wishes to preserve' from the work of forty years'.

is representative', for their complex textual history formally embodies the displacement of the ironic conscience.[52]

Such revisions are a strategic reminder that 'Nobody steps into the same poem twice' (to adapt the opening line of 'Heraclitus on Rivers'). In Mahon's early poetry, titles change, place-names rotate, epigraphs or dedications appear or disappear. Stanzas are modified or omitted, individual words or phrases adjusted, particulars of formatting or punctuation varied. Consequently, in *Poems 1962-1978*, the formal unity or integrity of individual volumes is radically altered, with poems from different collections being mixed together. 'Bruce Ismay's Soliloquy', formerly 'As God is my Judge' in *Night-Crossing*, appears alongside work from *Lives*, while 'September in Great Yarmouth' from *The Snow Party* is placed with pieces from *Night-Crossing*. Poems not previously included ('A Mythological Figure', 'Teaching in Belfast') figure among selections from *Night-Crossing* and *Lives*. This mobility is deliberate, for the juxtaposition of particular poems often generates an oblique cross-talk or dialogue. The pairing of 'Father-in-Law' and 'Homage to Malcolm Lowry' (*The Snow Party*) is a case in point. In both poems, the image of the sea suggests a psychic voyage which is linked with art and alcohol.[53] Lowry is clearly one of Mahon's aesthetic elect who epitomised a certain bohemian self-possession. The poem celebrates the rebellious excess of his 'round-the-cosmos trip' ('your deportment in those seas / Was faultless. Lightning-blind, you, tempest-torn / At the poles of our condition, did not confuse / The Gates of Ivory with the Gates of Horn').[54]

Titles in particular are subject to constant revision in *Poems 1962-1978*, as if to stress the fictional status of individual poems as well as the contingency of place. Alterations from *Night-Crossing* include: 'The Spring Vacation' for 'In Belfast'; 'Jail Journal' (an allusion to the work of the Irish nationalist John Mitchel) for 'The Prisoner'; 'Breton Walks' for 'Four

---

[52] Denman, 'Know the One? Insolent Ontology and Mahon's Revisions', p. 29.

[53] In 'Father-in-Law', Mahon's relative ('A sea captain') is described as a 'Lost voyager' or 'curious ghost', who took to writing poetry ('When you lost your balance like Li Po / They found unfinished poems in your sea-chest'). The link with alcohol is evident in both poems: 'I think we would have had a lot in common - / Alcohol and the love of one woman / Certainly' ('Father-in-Law'); 'The voyage started, clearly, when you were born / That danced those empty bottles' ('Homage to Malcolm Lowry').

[54] As a youth, Lowry rebelled against his conventional upbringing and went to China as a cabin boy. He spent his life on the move, living in France, Canada, the U.S., Italy and Mexico. In a review of Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947), a novel about the last desperate day of a dispirited alcoholic and former British consul in Mexico, Mahon dismissed the prevailing opinion in literary circles that Lowry's life 'pointed in a direction we must *not* take'. He deemed his example 'one of the few shining beacons in a sea of mediocrity' ('Coca-Cola', *Journalism*, p. 182).

Walks in the Country near Saint-Brieuc'; 'Van Gogh in the Borinage' for 'Van Gogh among the Miners'; 'De Quincey at Grasmere' for 'De Quincey in Later Life'; 'Thinking of Inishere in Cambridge, Massachusetts' for 'Recalling Aran' (this revision enforces the vital element of distance or cultural bilocation).[55]

Title changes from *Lives* include: 'Dog Days' for 'J. P. Donleavy's Dublin'; 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy' for 'After Cavafy'; 'A Stone Age Figure Far Below' for 'The Archaeologist' (the dedication also substitutes the pseudonym 'Hugh Maxton' for 'Bill Mc Cormack'). In relation to changes from *The Snow Party*, 'After Nerval' becomes 'The Mute Phenomena', while 'A Hermit' is re-titled 'The Mayo Tao'. 'The Facts of Life', initially the fifth poem in the sequence 'Cavafy', now stands as a separate work, the other four short pieces being omitted altogether. 'Dead of Night' is re-titled 'Málaga', the first of two short poems in 'Postcards', the second of which ('Patmos') incorporates three lines from 'The Early Anthropologists' ('studying the punctual / haemorrhage of sea and sky, / the galaxies of dust').[56] Certain lines, as well as titles, enjoy an afterlife in other poems (as if to withstand the slippage of language as opposed to 'sea and sky').

Besides the revision of titles and other minor changes, a number of poems from *The Snow Party* also underwent substantial formal alteration in *Poems 1962-1978*.[57] 'Thammuz', formerly 'What Will Remain' in *Lives*, is re-titled 'The Golden Bough' (after Frazer's anthropological epic), the original three line stanzas altered to six lines. Similarly, the three line format of 'Matthew V. 29-30' and the two prose-poems 'The Apotheosis of Tins' and 'The Mayo Tao' (the latter is dedicated to Mahon's friend Eugene Lambe) are reworked in irregular stanzas.[58] The revised lineation, as Denman suggested, radically altered these poems, privileging particular phrases or altering the import of specific lines (he cited as an

[55] Mitchel was charged with sedition and transported to Van Diemen's Land after he expounded his political views in *The United Irishman*. In *Jail Journal* he registered his hatred of British political and economic policy. In Mahon's *Selected Poems* (1991) and *Collected Poems* (1999), 'Van Gogh in the Borinage' becomes 'A Portrait of the Artist', 'De Quincey at Grasmere' reverts back to the original (the poem is omitted in *Collected Poems*), while 'Thinking of Inishere in Cambridge, Massachusetts' adopts the Gaelic form of the island and abbreviates the American state -'Thinking of Inis Oírr in Cambridge, Mass'.

[56] 'The Early Anthropologists' is one of the new poems in *Poems 1962-1978*, linked thematically with others like 'The Golden Bough' or 'A Stone Age Figure Far Below'.

[57] Such minor changes include the omission of *'Honoris causa'* in the final line of 'Bruce Ismay's Soliloquy', and the substitution of 'the hidden menace' for 'the spurious mystery' in 'The Spring Vacation'.

[58] Part VI of *The Yellow Book*, 'To Eugene Lambe in Heaven', celebrates his bohemian lifestyle and generosity of spirit. Other formal changes include 'Málaga', which reworks 'Dead of Night' (*The Snow Party*) into eight lines, incorporating a number of minor changes. 'Waking at dead of night I remembered that / I was in Spain' now reads 'Waking alone at dead of night / in a silent house'. Here Mahon stresses the element of silence, as he did earlier in 'Legacies' (*Night-Crossing*).

example, 'We resist your patronage, your reflective leisure' in 'The Apotheosis of Tins', which now assumes a kind of 'gnomic significance').[59]

Several other poems from *Night-Crossing* and *Lives* were also significantly revised. 'Legacies' (after Villon), in three parts, loses four of its fifteen stanzas to become 'The Condensed Shorter Testament', revealing how rarely Mahon's poems survive 'with all [their] parts intact' (to echo one deleted line). In addition, the version of 'Day Trip to Donegal' in *Poems 1962-1978* reads very differently, given the excision of stanza three in *Night-Crossing*:

> How could we hope to make them understand?
> Theirs is a sea-mind, mindless upon land
> And dead. Their systematic genocide
> (Nothing remarkable that millions died)
> To us is a necessity
> For ours are land-minds, mindless in the sea.

As Michael Allen noted, the speaker as gifted yet socially maladroit *poète maudit*, who strikes an intimate note of address with the reader and compels attention with the dramatic association of mutilated fish and genocide, is replaced by a more representative, public persona.[60] The original play on mind ('sea-mind', 'mindless upon land', 'land-minds', 'mindless in the sea'), which reflected the focus on the unconscious as symbolised by the sea, is dropped. In *Poems 1962-1978*, the word 'mindless' appears only in the final line.[61] In the continuous process of revision, certain poems can thus assume a very different form, occasionally losing touch with their 'underground spring' of associations (to recall 'I Am Raftery' in *Lives*). Like the slow sea in 'Day Trip', Mahon's semantic scruples enact their own 'immeasurable erosions', as poetic 'monuments' from the past are altered in the light of shifting preoccupations.

Finally, the verse-letter 'Beyond Howth Head' also underwent extensive revision in *Poems 1962-1978*. Besides minor alterations of particular words and phrases ('bored to tears by Telefís' for 'in contempt of Telefís'; 'We fumble with the matches' for 'We fumble with

---

[59] Denman, 'Know the One? Insolent Ontology and Mahon's Revisions', p. 29.
[60] Michael Allen, 'Rhythm and Revision in Mahon's Poetic Development', in Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 113.
[61] It is subsequently deleted in Mahon's *Selected Poems* (1991) and *Collected Poems* (1999), the phrase 'mindless wind and rain' altered to 'vindictive wind and rain', thereby erasing the initial chain of associations altogether. Allen, in 'Rhythm and Revision', p. 113, also drew attention to the substitution of 'promise' for 'the wry archaism 'earnest' (literally money given in part-payment, a pledge or guarantee)' in the final stanza in *Poems 1962-1978.*

the light-switch'; 'Denmark's hot iambics' for 'Denmark's hot stylistics'; 'the Spartan code of Dylan Thomas' for 'the memory of Dylan Thomas'), place-names are varied, highlighting the provisional nature of place in Mahon's early poetry (Seaford for Cheltenham, Cushendun for Inismaan, 'the unquiet Cyclades' for 'an Aegean prison'). The lines referring to American involvement in Cambodia are omitted altogether and stanza fifteen (linking the end of the Tsarist regime in Russia with 'an old world cross[ing] the Delaware') is excised. These changes also saw the substitution of mythological allusions for historical realities ('But soon Persephone, re-found / In the cold darkness underground, / Will speak to the woodlands with fine rain / And the ocean to Cynthia once again').[62] In stanza twenty-one, the lines referring to dying alone ('his micro-fury turning brown / and dying, as we dream, alone'), echoing the line in 'Job's Comforter' ('We die, as we dream, alone') are altered to, 'Our afterlives a coming true / Of perfect worlds we never knew'. This revision reflects the later theme of afterlives in *The Snow Party* and the omission of 'Job's Comforter' from *Poems 1962-1978*.

In particular, the last stanza of 'Beyond Howth Head' saw a number of key changes from the version in *Lives*. They bring the issue of Mahon's revisions into sharp relief. The more precise dating in *Poems 1962-1978* highlights the underlying displacement or cultural bilocation:

'Beyond Howth Head', *Lives*	'Beyond Howth Head', *Poems 1962-1978*
And here I close my *Dover Beach* scenario, for look! the watch- ful Baily winks beyond Howth Head, my *cailín bán* lies snug in bed 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*.	And here I close; for look, across Dark waves where bell-buoys dimly toss The Baily winks beyond Howth Head, And sleep calls from her silent bed; While the moon drags her kindred stones Among the rocks and the strict bones Of the drowned, and I put out the light On shadows of the encroaching night.
March-April, 1970	*Monkstown, Co. Dublin; March-April 1970* *Lingfield, Surrey; March-April 1975*

The deletion of the reference to *Dover Beach* necessitates the removal of '*my cailín bán*' ('fair young woman'), which reflects the interpersonal element in Arnold's poem ('Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!').[63] This significantly alters the tone of the conclusion,

[62] The lines also allude to Raleigh's elegy to Queen Elizabeth 1, 'The Ocean's Love to Cynthia' (a poem which underlies Heaney's 'Ocean's Love to Ireland' in *North* (1975), as we have seen in relation to 'Penshurst Place'.
[63] It also results in the revision of the final line, Mailer's title having been coined from Arnold's poem.

shifting the emphasis from companionship and comfort ('snug in bed') to solitude and isolation ('And sleep calls from the silent bed'). The sombre mood, which reflects the theme of marital estrangement in 'The Sea in Winter' and 'The Old Snaps', is enforced by the substitution of 'dark waves where bell-buoys dimly toss' for 'my *Dover Beach* / scenario' ('strict', in the context of 'the drowned', sounds very like 'stricken'). The addition of 'drags' instead of 'rattles' highlights the lunar pull, while the final 'shadows of the encroaching night' deletes the reference to Mailer's text, following the erasure of Arnold's poem.

These revisions illustrate how Mahon deliberately ensures his poems resist fixity. Several shift between alternative versions, marked by different images, allusions, rhythms and intonations as well as different place-names, dating, epigraphs, titles and dedications. In her review of *Selected Poems* (1991), Edna Longley viewed these revisions as a distortion of history; a desire to forget the author's personal or literary history, or the actual period of composition. Taking 'Beyond Howth Head' as an illustration, she argued that the changes sacrificed specificity, topicality, 'cheeky wit' and political edge, reading more like literal translations (deletion of the references to the CIA and Mailer's novel are prime examples).[64] In this regard, it might be said of *Poems 1962-1978* that Mahon did not quite heed his own *caveat*, outlined in an *Irish Times* review of *Poems* by Patrick MacDonagh in 2001:

> But *caveat emptor*: too often, revisiting the past with sophisticated hindsight and superior technical means, we lose the original aura, the poignant sense of imperfect, lost reality; we cease to 'walk unaware'.[65]

However, this thesis argues that these revisions formally reflect the crucial issue of displacement in this volume. Updating or revising is less a distortion of history than an option for fluidity over fixity, a resistance to being 'trapped.../ In my own idiom' as 'The Sea in Winter' expressed it. Just as the ironic conscience is constantly between places, so Mahon's poems are in an ongoing state of composition. Abandonment, as Valéry stated, is the nearest they come to home. The theme of 'Leavetaking and homecoming' ('Going Home') extends to the texts themselves, calling for a certain 'negative capability' on the part of editor or reader. 'So many lives, / So many things to remember!' ('Lives') sums up their predicament, an obvious source of frustration for one who is fixated on certainties. As Denman explained, alluding to 'Lives' and 'Heraclitus on Rivers':

---

[64] Edna Longley, 'Where a Thought Might Grow', p. 8.
[65] Mahon, 'Forgotten Poet is our Loss', *Irish Times*, 14 July 2001.

> It is, therefore, a bold reader or editor who would pronounce on the state of the texts. They are in a state of flux. Sometimes the changes improve or clarify; sometimes they alter the thrust of the poem. But primarily the changes are not made in the interests of ideological revisionism or a technical tinkering; the point is the unfixing, the repeated challenge to insolent ontology. His poetry must be read as a work in constant progress, dedicated to Heraclitus.[66]

The ironic conscience has little time for 'insolent ontology' ('Lives'), for it is all too aware of the contingency of language (or 'final vocabularies', as Rorty noted) and of identity. Updating, unfixing or revising are thus integral to Mahon's strategy of 'keeping the colours new' ('In Carrowdore Churchyard'), of ensuring his poems remain mobile. The artist's task is never complete, because the process of writing is an ongoing search for 'a form that nearly sings'. As 'The Sea in Winter' indicated, the poetic ideal is always tentative, in keeping with Beckett's association of art and failure:

> 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...[67]

A 'brief glow' is the nearest Mahon's early poetry comes to permanence, as his revisions ensure that every 'mark' is subject to further mutation.

5.4 Translation and the Ironic Conscience in *Poems 1962-1978.*

The displacement of the ironic conscience finds a formal analogy not only in Mahon's revisions but in the various translations which *Poems 1962-1978* brings together. These include 'The Condensed Shorter Testament (after Villon)', 'The Mute Phenomena (after Nerval)', 'Three Poems after Jaccottet' and 'The Poet in Residence (after Corbière)'.[68] All of these poems illustrate how particular texts oscillate, not only between different versions, but between different languages or worldviews. As Haughton expressed it: 'A translated poem is 'a particularly intense form of cultural bilocation', generated from another place and another language'.[69] Mahon's interest in translation thus also reflects his preference for fluidity over fixity or desire not to be trapped in a particular idiom. His creative adaptation of

---

[66] Denman, 'Know the One? Insolent Ontology and Mahon's Revisions', p. 37.
[67] Once again, the indeterminate 'Perhaps' betrays the mindset of the ironic conscience which thrives on ambiguity or moves in the space between certainties.
[68] 'The Poet in Residence' is a version of Corbière's *Le Poète Contumace* ('Embittered Poet').
[69] Haughton, ''The Importance of Elsewhere': Mahon and Translation', p. 147.

various writers is an essential part of his attempt to extend the resources of his voice, to experiment with different styles and perspectives. It provides a means of looking beyond the Anglophone world to other European cultures, opening up new angles on self and society.

The origins of Mahon's interest in translation may be found in the autobiographical narrative of 'In Belfast' (*Night-Crossing*), which drew attention to language as a subtle means of coercion. In this 'desperate city', even 'the humorous formulae' were designed to ensure the individual mind learned 'to know its place'. Thus, from the outset, the poet was alert to alternative linguistic codes which afforded a measure of independence from the demands of the tribe (to echo 'The Last of the Fire Kings' in *The Snow Party*).[70] Alternatively, Mahon's interest can be traced back to 'The Forger' (*Night-Crossing*) which questioned, as we have seen, the very idea of originality. Like the poems about artistic outsiders, which this volume throws into greater relief, his translations are a kind of literary genuflection, acknowledging the creative influence of other writers, those ancestors 'of the emotions, of the quality and slant of mind' (to recall Hewitt's phrase, cited in Chapter Two).[71] In this regard, they are an extension of the literary allusiveness of the ironic conscience, a further expression of its self-dramatising mode. Not surprisingly, given his study of French literature at Trinity College and spell at the Sorbonne, French writing was attractive to him, particularly in terms of the psychology of the *poète maudit*. The latter greatly resonated with aspects of the ironic conscience, including its sense of alienation, subversive Dionysian spirit and attraction for the bohemian life style. As McCracken argued, Mahon's affinity with French literature had more to do with 'like-minded' ideas or sense of style than national affiliation.[72] Even as a teenager, he identified with the wild longings or existential *ennui* of French poets like Baudelaire and Rimbaud. It is fitting then that a version of Corbière's *Le Poète Contumace* ('Embittered Poet') should feature among the final works of *Poems 1962-1978*, just as an adaptation of Villon's '*Le Lais*' concluded *Night-Crossing*. What is remarkable about 'The Poet in Residence' is how deftly it provides an alternative voice for Mahon's own estrangement, as outlined in 'The Sea in Winter':

---

[70] It is not surprising, in this context, that the speaker in 'The Last of the Fire Kings' expressed ignorance of the tribal mores ('Not knowing a word of the language').

[71] Hewitt's phrase is cited in Chapter Two, p. 80. The list of poems about marginalised artists in *Poems 1962-1978* includes: 'De Quincey at Grasmere', 'The Forger', 'Van Gogh in the Borinage', 'Epitaph for Robert Flaherty', 'An Image from Beckett', 'The Studio' (formerly 'Edvard Munch'), 'I Am Raftery', 'Homage to Malcolm Lowry'.

[72] McCracken, '*Homophrosyne*: The French Element in the Poetry of Derek Mahon', in Joseph McMinn (ed.), *The Internationalism of Irish Literature and Drama* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992), pp. 181-192.

He dreamed his life, his dream the tide that flows
Rattling among the stones, the tide that ebbs.
Sometimes he stood there as if listening –
For what? For the wind to rise,
For the sea to sing?
Or for some half-forgotten voice? Who knows?

Does he know himself? Up there on the exposed
Roof of himself, does he forget how soon
And how completely death unmakes
The dead? He, restless ghost,
Is it perhaps his own lost
Contumacious spirit that he seeks?

The plight of the French poet ('one of life's fugitives') pacing the battlements of self reflects Mahon's 'unnerved' state, as the verse-letter expressed it. The imagery of storm, wind and sea in both poems acts as a metaphor for psychic unrest. Even the reference to Corbière as a 'restless ghost' echoes Mahon's description of himself as 'the prodigal son in *Ghosts*'. While the former seeks out his 'lost / Contumacious spirit', Mahon (as we have seen) struggles 'To come to terms with my own past'. Following 'The Sea in Winter', 'The Poet in Residence' even mirrors the association of the solitary artist with the key image of the window. His vagrant spirit is captured in the final lines, as the bits of love-letter strewn in the wind are depicted as 'gulls in flight':

His lamp went out; he opened the shutter.
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.[73]

However, like 'Legacies' in *Night-Crossing*, Corbière's poem also allows Mahon to interject a certain humour into the sense of spiritual and mental exile. The existential angst is laced with self-deprecating wit, as in the parenthetical asides which mock the poet's address to his beloved:

Come and help me die; from your room
You'll be able to see my harvest fields
(A few firs shivering in the wind)
And the wild heather in full bloom
(Well, bundled around the fireplace).
You can gulp your fill of the sea air
(It's nearly taking the roof off)
And climb to sleep by a golden stair
(Lit by a single candle)

[73] Haughton, in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 149, described Mahon as the 'sea-gull's laureate'.

While the sea murmurs of shipwrecks –
Tenebrae for the wild ducks.

In this regard, 'The Poet in Residence' recalls 'The Mute Phenomena' (*The Snow Party*), which allowed Mahon to 'fly off after the spirit' of Nerval's original rather than write a more literal translation.[74] It facilitates the play of wit, while dramatising his own displacement in terms and imagery which echo the final verse-letter. In addition, it highlights the fact that, in Mahon's hands, translated poems can assume very different 'afterlives', some of which the purists or 'translation police' might find objectionable.[75]

By contrast, Jaccottet's poetry enables Mahon to experiment with a very different idiom, which is much more attuned to the mystical or visionary mode of the ironic conscience in *The Snow Party*. Thus, in 'Three Poems after Jaccottet', he adheres more closely to the original texts. This is very much in keeping with the French poet's statement in *L'Ignorant* (1957), *'L'effacement soit ma façon de resplendir'*, translated by Mahon as, 'Let self-effacement be my way of blazing'.[76] Jaccottet's poems thus afford him 'a little space' ('Ignorance') in which to experiment with an interior or meditative voice, devoid of humour, the demotic and 'the abrasive surfaces of the modern world'.[77] They reflect a very different physical and psychic landscape to that of 'The Poet in Residence' or 'The Sea in Winter'. As Mahon expressed it:

> It's sparsely populated, and there's a certain thinness of texture, albeit deliberate. Sometimes it seems refined out of existence. There is (almost) no *sea*; for this is an inland poetry of river and hill, the country road, the lake in the woods.[78]

This minimalist style and interior voice is evident in the second poem 'Ignorance', with its emphasis on solitude and silence:

The older I get the more ignorant I become;
the longer I live the less I possess or control.
All I have is a little space, snow-dark
or glittering – never inhabited.
Where is the giver, the guide, the guardian?
I sit in my room and am silent. Silence

---

[74] As Mahon stated regarding Robert Lowell's *Imitations*: 'His object was to take the letter and fly off after the spirit as he updatedly perceived it; and foreign literatures provide a rich feeding ground for the predatory adaptor as for the blocked poet' (cited in Haughton's ''The Importance of Elsewhere': Mahon and Translation', p. 150).

[75] Mahon cited Alastair Reid's phrase in his Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, p. 16.

[76] Ibid., p. 9.

[77] As outlined in Chapter Four, p. 166, Mahon cited these three qualities (alongside vitality) as missing from Jaccottet's poetry.

[78] Mahon, Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, pp. 13-14.

comes in a like a servant to tidy things up
while I wait for the lies to disperse.
And what remains to this dying man
that so well prevents him from dying?
What does he find to say to the four walls?
I hear him talking still, and his words
come in with the dawn, imperfectly formed:
'Love, like fire, can only reveal its clarity
on the failure and the beauty of ashen forests'.

Just as the first poem 'The Voice' is about self-emptying ('the voice is audible only to those / whose hearts are emptied of property and desire'), so 'Ignorance' speaks of relinquishing possessions or 'control'. The opening lines are reminiscent of those in Eliot's *Four Quartets*: 'In order to arrive at what you do not know / You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance. / In order to possess what you do not possess / You must go by a way of dispossession'.[79] In this context, the title has echoes of *The Cloud of Unknowing* or the Taoist conception of 'ignorance', which, as Mahon outlined (in his Introduction to Jaccottet's poetry) 'owes something to Keats's theory of negative capability', whether in terms of receptivity to the numinous or release from the burden of fact and reason.[80] He also linked the poem with Keats's description of the poetic character as having not a single but an elastic or all-encompassing identity ('everything and nothing'), citing Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, translated into French by Jaccottet.[81]

All of these associations are revealing, not only for Jaccottet's work, but for the light they shed on Mahon's own poetry. They are particularly apt in relation to the ironic conscience, whose shape-changing is a means of exploring the different states of oneself, thereby avoiding entrapment in a given identity, idiom or perspective. The translations of *Poems 1962-1978* highlight the fact that it too is 'everything and nothing', in the sense that it assimilates with equal facility the disparate voices of Villon, Nerval, Corbière and Jaccottet. These voices underlie its protean identity which is as much part-mystic as *poète maudit*, part-satirist as chiliastic prophet. Thus, in this volume, Jaccottet's 'dying man' in his room

---

[79] Eliot, 'East Coker', *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), 25.

[80] Mahon, Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, p. 10. *The Cloud of Unknowing* stresses human ignore in face of the divine, as in the opening of Chapter Six: 'But now you will ask me, 'How am I to think of God himself, and what is he?' and I cannot answer you except to say 'I do not know!' (*The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, translated into Modern English with an Introduction by Clifton Wolters (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 67).

[81] Ibid., p. 10. Keats's description of the poetical character as having 'no self' is cited in Chapter Three, p. 115 in relation to the title poem. For Mahon, Musil's protagonist 'has *given up* his qualities, *as an ascetic might give up the world*' (his italics).

plays off other references, such as the 'restless ghost' of Corbière 'in the one-eyed tower', Strindberg's Oswald or O'Grady's 'Dying Gaul' ('The Sea in Winter'), all of which serve to reflect Mahon's displacement.

'Ignorance' also recalls Beckett's *The Unnamable* who talks 'to the four walls' while waiting 'for the lies to disperse'. As Mahon pointed out, there is something of Beckett in Jaccottet's minimalism, as evident in the preoccupation with silence and failure ('Love, like fire, can only reveal its clarity / on the failure and the beauty of ashen forests').[82] While such minimalism appealed to him, it was also in part a discovery of otherness. In this sense, Jaccottet's poetry may be seen to extend the resources of Mahon's 'voice' (to echo the title of the opening poem), bringing out the mystical element in his work or a certain mode of lyrical abstraction based on oriental precedents (as we have seen in relation to *The Snow Party* (1975)). This is clearly evident in the revised sequence 'Light Music' (*Poems 1962-1978*), in which a few words vividly capture a particular scene or moment, after the fashion of Japanese haiku. The third poem 'Negatives' is a case in point, exemplifying what Jaccottet termed *'la goutte d'eau pur'* ('the pure-water-drop') of poetry: 'Gulls in a rain-dark cornfield, / crows on a sunlit sea'.[83]

'Light Music' highlights that openness to the numinous in the natural world which Mahon identified in the French poet, citing his affinity with Rainer Maria Rilke (whom Jaccottet also translated and wrote about):

> Like Rilke, he wishes to be '*attentif à ce qui, d'un autre monde, affleure dans le nôtre*' ('attentive to what, from another world, appears in our own') - the classic definition of a miracle'.[84]

As a series of snapshots or miniature epiphanies, the poem reflects the visionary mode of the ironic conscience in *The Snow Party*. This is borne out by the fact that 'Flying', the last of the twenty-five short pieces, was originally a separate poem in that volume. It encapsulates this transcendence-in-immanence or attentiveness to the miraculous in the mundane:

A wand of sunlight

---

[82] Mahon, Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet*, p. 9.

[83] Ibid., p. 14. 'Negatives' was not included in the original pamphlet version in 1977. These short poems in 'Light Music' also reflect Jaccottet's poetic diary *La Semaison* (suggesting seed dispersal or sowing), which included the following entry: 'Ice, limpidity, sun. A few clouds clinging to the mountains'. (January 1959). It is cited by Mahon in the Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet* (p. 12).

[84] Ibid., p. 10. Mahon also makes the connection with the French poet Paul Eluard, again in relation to the numinous in nature: *'Il y a une autre réalité, mais elle est en celle-ci'* ('There is another reality, but it resides in this one')', p. 8

touches the rush-hour
like the finger of heaven.

A land of cumulus
seen from above
is the life to come.[85]

Poems 1962-1978 thus enforces the importance of translation in Mahon's early work. As an extension of the literary and cultural allusiveness of the ironic conscience, it continues the dialogue with other artists begun in *Night-Crossing*. Just as all the dedications in this volume 'amount to the creation of a new family' (they include fellow writers like Heaney, Hewitt, Longley, Montague, Grennan and Dunn), so Mahon's creative adaptations reflect the influence of a much wider literary community.[86] The world of art offers a more fluid space, which transcends the limitations of background and culture, enabling him to cultivate a mobile identity. Following Keats's sense of the poet as 'elastic in his sympathies' (to echo MacNeice), or Muldoon's awareness of the writer as a free agent (as outlined in the Introduction), the ironic conscience draws upon an array of different voices, all of which reflect aspects of the protean self.[87] In *The Hunt by Night*, as we shall see, the role of translation becomes even more central, as Mahon's shape-changing or self-dramatisation looks well beyond the world of French literature.

[85] The penultimate poem 'Revelation' enforces this attentiveness to the transcendent as it appears in nature: 'A colour the fish know / we do not know, so / long have we been ashore. // When that colour / shines in the rainbow / there will be no more sea'.
[86] Mahon, *In the Chair* interview, p. 123.
[87] MacNeice's phrase, which endorses Keats's understanding of the poet, is cited in Chapter Three, p. 143.

CHAPTER SIX

THE HUNT BY NIGHT (1982): THE IRONIC CONSCIENCE: AN ELUSIVE AND MOBILE VOICE

6.1. The Cultural Context of *The Hunt by Night.*

After his period as writer-in-residence at the New University of Ulster in Coleraine between 1977 and 1979, Mahon returned to London, where he did free-lance work for the BBC, writing adaptations for television or profiles for Radio 3. His adaptations included Elizabeth Bowen's *The Demon Lover* (1945) and *The Death of the Heart* (1939), as well as Jennifer Johnston's *Shadows on Our Skin* (1977) and *How Many Miles to Babylon* (1974).[1] In interview in 1991, he noted how this work supported him financially, while expressing his frustration with casting and production values which 'often interfere with the literature of the thing'.[2] In particular, he regretted losing out on the opportunity to work on Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1949) and J. G. Farrell's *Troubles* (1970), a major influence, as we have seen, on 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'. 'A pity', he added, 'since I consider myself a bit of a Bowenite and I was a friend of Jim Farrell. The people who made *Troubles* got it all wrong, but then they had problems'.[3]

The Hunt by Night (1982) is dedicated to the memory of Farrell (1935-1979), a gesture all the more appropriate in the context of the novelist's response to Paolo Uccello's painting, the inspiration behind the title poem. As Mahon outlined in a statement to the Poetry Book Society in 1982, citing Milton's text in honour of his friend Edward King (who, like Farrell, died by drowning):

> A note on the dedication, though. A friend described to me how she had watched the late J. G. Farrell, author of *The Singapore Grip*, sit entranced before *The Night Hunt* in the Ashmolean shortly before moving to Ireland, there to be washed from a rock while fishing in Bantry Bay. We were friends, and I'm one of the many who remember him with an acute sense of loss.

---

[1] Mahon's review of Johnston's *Fool's Sanctuary* (1988) is included in *Journalism*, pp. 102-104. The article first appeared in the *Irish Times* in 1987. He deems the book, alongside *How Many Miles to Babylon* (1974) and *The Old Jest* (1979), as one of her three best novels. He also cites 'If only…' as her recurrent theme. It finds an echo in his poetry's preoccupation with roads not taken or 'The lives we might have led', to recall 'Leaves' in *The Snow Party*.

[2] Mahon, interview with Scammell, p. 5.

[3] Ibid., p. 6.

Now, Lycidas, the shepherds weep no more.
Henceforth thou art the genius of the shore
In thy large recompense, and shalt be good
To all that wander in that perilous flood.[4]

Besides working for the BBC, Mahon continued his journalistic work during this period, renewing links with the *New Statesman* in 1981, where he assumed the post of poetry and fiction editor (previous articles for that journal included 'Sam's Think' (1976) and 'The Existential Lyric' (1977), both on Beckett). In 1981, the pamphlet *Courtyards in Delft* was published by Gallery Press, from which all but two of the fourteen poems appeared (with minor revisions) in *The Hunt by Night*.[5] This volume, as we shall see, reflects that cosmopolitan engagement with the world of art which is evident in Mahon's literary journalism, drawing on whole range of writers (Beckett, Byron, Confucius, Hölderlin, Kant, Orwell, Proust, Tacitus, Yeats, Wilde and Wittgenstein), artists (de Hooch, Munch, Uccello) and literary texts (from *Metamorphoses*, *The Halieutica*, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the *Tao Tê Ching* to *Hunger*, *Murphy*, *The Life of Galileo* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*).[6] It looks well beyond the shores of Ireland and England to the borderless world of art.

Despite the strong international focus in *The Hunt by Night*, however, the North of Ireland still features in a small number of poems. The first part of 'Brighton Beach' recalls memories of Belfast and Donegal (in particular the journey which inspired 'Day Trip to Donegal' in *Night-Crossing*), while alluding to the 'rough sectarian banter' in Mahon's native city. 'North Wind: Portrush' links the troubled history of the province with a certain coldness of heart, which recalls 'Ecclesiastes' in *Lives*: 'Our hearts starred with frost / Through countless generations?'. 'Derry Morning' is the only poem which deals directly with the violence in the North. Its brutal legacy is reflected in the bleak tone of the conclusion, which assonantly links 'ideologue' with 'shroud', 'bound', 'Mourns' and 'gloom':

---

[4] Mahon, cited in *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their own Words*, p. 174. Uccello's painting in the Ashmolean is actually entitled *A Hunt in the Forest* (c. 1465). As outlined in Chapter Three, Mahon alluded to 'Lycidas' in 'Beyond Howth Head' ('where Lycid's ghost for ever sails…').

[5] *Courtyards in Delft* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1981). As outlined in the Introduction (p. 20), the principal focus is the poems as they appear in *The Hunt by Night* (1982), rather than the earlier pamphlet versions. In this volume, 'North Wind' is re-titled 'North Wind: Portrush' and 'April in Moscow' altered to 'The Earth'. 'Songs of Praise' and 'Old Roscoff' are omitted. Further revisions will be referred to in the chapter's analysis of particular poems.

[6] Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *The Halieutica* (a fragmentary text about local fishing) feature in 'Ovid in Tomis', while Beckett's *Murphy* is alluded to in the reference to 'the park where Celia's father died' in 'Another Sunday Morning'. All other texts are referred to in the course of this chapter.

What of the change envisioned here,
The quantum leap from fear to fire?
Smoke from a thousand chimneys strains
One way beneath the returning rains
That shroud the bomb-sites, while the fog
Of time receives the ideologue.
A Russian freighter bound for home
Mourns to the city in its gloom. [7]

The final rhyme recalls the association of 'home' with 'bomb' in 'Afterlives' (*The Snow Party*), as Derry, like the city of Belfast, provokes a sense of alienation in Mahon. His displacement has not eased over time, for the conclusion echoes that of the early poem 'An Irishman in London' (1964): 'A shipyard siren / Mourns to the stony North'.[8] Scarred by 'bomb-sites' (the consequence of the ideologue's fanaticism), Derry enforces a haunting sense of doom and 'gloom', vividly captured in the opening image of the 'rubbled city's / Broken mouth'.

As the second poem in *The Hunt by Night*, 'Derry Morning' foregrounds this 'unhappy home of significant events', as Shaun Richards expressed it, 'whose anniversaries have resounded bloodily across centuries' (the phrase, 'Here it began', alludes to events in the Bogside area of the city in October 1968, which gave rise to the conflict).[9] However, Derry was also significant in that it was the spiritual and physical home of the Field Day Theatre Company. As outlined in Chapter One, Field Day sought to challenge the stock ideas, myths and stereotypes which were both 'a symptom and a cause' of the violence (to recall Deane's statement).[10] Its vision or '*aisling*', to adapt the Gaelic word in the first stanza of Mahon's poem, sought to engage a wide audience, both at home and abroad (the opening night of its annual production was held in the Guildhall on the third Wednesday of September).[11] The plays it adopted were often contentious, directly addressing, what Stewart Parker referred to

---

[7] 'Derry Morning' was the opening poem in the pamphlet *Courtyards in Delft*. The epigraph from Baudelaire's *Journaux Intimes* is omitted in the version in *The Hunt by Night*: '*Il ne peut y avoir de progrès (vrai, c'est-à-dire moral) que dans l'individu et par l'individu lui-même*' (Moral progress is possible only within and by the individual himself).

[8] The poem is referred to in Chapter Two, p. 76.

[9] Richards, cited in Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965*, p. 135. Such events included the infamous 'Bloody Sunday' in January 1972 (as outlined in Chapter Two), and the siege during 1688-1689.

[10] Field Day is discussed in Chapter One, pp. 42-43. Deane's remarks are cited on p. 43.

[11] In Paulin's poem 'S/He' from *Liberty Tree* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p. 34, a helicopter (like the 'clattering shadows' in 'Derry Morning') appears 'above the Guildhall', during a performance of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*: 'It stuck close to me, though, / how all through the last half / a helicopter held itself / above the Guildhall - / Vershinin's lines were slewed / by the blind chapping blades…'

as, 'the multiplying dualities' of the North of Ireland: 'two islands (the 'British Isles'), two Irelands, two Ulsters, two men fighting over a field'.[12] Brian Friel's *Translations* (the first Field Day production in 1980) focused on issues of national identity, cultural memory and linguistic colonialism, while Paulin's *The Riot Act* (1984) updated Sophocles' *Antigone* in the light of contemporary events, like the hunger strike crisis of the early nineteen eighties.[13] This crisis, as we shall see, is referred to in the poem 'A Postcard from Berlin', in the context of bombings and other atrocities. It also provides a context for the second part of Mahon's adaptation 'Brecht in Svendborg', with its refrain 'Truly, we live in a dark time'. Thus, while events in the North of Ireland are not a central feature of this volume, they clearly inform its preoccupation with the violence of history.

As we shall argue, *The Hunt by Night* is an outstanding piece of work, for it reveals the ironic conscience at its most elusive and mobile. This is due to its extensive use of *ekphrasis*, which enables Mahon to negotiate the contrasting spheres of art, history, autobiography, religion, phenomenology and cultural critique.[14] The opening section of this chapter illustrates how several poems subtly operate on different levels, as the framed world of paintings and picture postcards provide novel angles on themes of displacement, violence, the aesthetic, the role of the poet and the nature of 'real life'. However, as section two outlines, the elusive mobility also derives from Mahon's numerous translations and creative adaptations, which adopt and modify the voices of artists like Brecht ('Brecht in Svendborg'), Hamsun ('Knut Hamsun in Old Age'), Joyce ('The Joycentenary Ode'), Ovid ('Ovid in Tomis'), Pasternak ('The Earth') and Rimbaud ('from The Drunken Boat'). The combination of these different voices sets up a multi-layered, intertextual dialogue in *The Hunt by Night*. In Heaney's words, it is Mahon's 'most exuberant and authoritative single volume to date', displaying 'a copiousness and excitement....that is to be found only in work

---

[12] Parker, Introduction to *Three Plays for Ireland* (1989), cited in Dawe's *The Rest is History*, p. 68. Parker's remark is particular appropriate in relation to Thomas Kilroy's *Double Cross* (1986) and Terry Eagleton's *Saint Oscar* (1989), both Field Day productions.

[13] The first hunger strike began in October 1980 by Republican prisoners in the Maze prison. In 1981, ten prisoners (including Bobby Sands) starved themselves to death in a desperate attempt to gain political status within the prison system.

[14] *Ekphrasis* refers to the graphic or dramatic representation of a visual work of art by another medium. For Mahon in *The Hunt by Night*, it is a principle of composition, creating poetry by way of describing paintings or picture postcards. See Rui Carvalho Homem's article, 'Of Furies and Forgers: *Ekphrasis*, Re-vision, and Translation in Derek Mahon', *New Hibernia Review*, 8, 4 (Winter, 2004), pp. 117-134, for a detailed analysis of this issue as it features in his poetry.

of the highest order'.[15] From the perspective of this thesis, it is the finest expression of Mahon's vision in, what I have termed, the first extended phase of his poetry. It is fitting then that the final verse-letter, 'The Globe in North Carolina' should bring the core issue of displacement, which underlies this body of work, to a dramatic conclusion. Its memorable phrase, 'Lost meteorites in search of home', encapsulates the plight of all the exiled artists from *Night-Crossing* (1968) to *The Hunt by Night* (1985).

6.2 *Ekphrasis*: the Mobility of the Ironic Conscience in *The Hunt by Night*.

Key poems in *The Hunt by Night* take their inspiration from paintings or postcards, including the title poem which is based on an Uccello painting. As Mahon outlined in a contribution to the Poetry Book Society in 1982:

> 'Courtyards in Delft' and 'Girls on the Bridge' are about pictures too, but also about 'real life'. 'A Lighthouse in Maine', 'A Postcard from Berlin' and 'The Terminal Bar' fall into the same category, each having been set off by a picture postcard – a reproduction of Hopper's Highland Light, a Berlin street scene, a rocky-horror glimpse of New York night life. The same is true of 'A Garage in Co. Cork'.[16]

This statement highlights the centrality of *ekphrasis* in this volume, as a means of addressing the aesthetic or the relationship between art and 'real life' (the inverted commas draw attention to the fact that reality, for the ironic conscience, 'consists of the many realities it can be made into', to re-quote Stevens's remark cited in the Introduction). It reflects, as Haughton noted, Mahon's 'new found interest in the visual arts on his return to London after Coleraine'.[17] In *The Hunt by Night*, paintings and picture postcards are a creative resource providing the poet with new angles on familiar themes. The framed world acts as an extremely fertile space for thoughts to grow (to echo 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'). Mahon exploits the ambiguity of its silent form to great effect. In Deane's view, he found a way 'of meditating about poetry and history' that enriched his work by liberating it from 'conventional attitudes towards this elusive yet very central relationship'.[18] This is particularly evident, as we shall see, in 'Courtyards in Delft', one of the volume's most

[15] Heaney's remarks are included on the cover of the original Oxford University Press edition of *The Hunt by Night* (1982).
[16] Mahon, cited in *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their own Words*, p. 173.
[17] Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 158.
[18] Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, p. 163. Here, the Derry-born writer qualified his earlier remarks that Mahon's poetry evades history, regarding it as 'something from which he should escape'. These remarks are cited in Chapter One, p. 49.

accomplished poems, which foregrounds the conflict between light and dark, barbarism and civility, as an essential aspect of 'real life'.

As the opening poem in *The Hunt by Night*, 'Courtyards in Delft' highlights Mahon's dialectical awareness, suggesting that the ironic conscience in this volume is engaged in a subtle form of imaginative redress. In Heaney's terms, it adds weight to the lighter side of the scale, balancing the order of art with the chaos of history or the passion for 'chaste / Precision' with 'fire and sword'. Here 'Courtyards in Delft' prefigures the pattern of other ekphrastic poems, which offset 'elaborate / Spectacle' with 'Crazed' pursuit ('The Hunt by Night'), 'adolescent hopes' with a radically uncertain future ('Girls on the Bridge'), 'the blue / Of postcard skies' with 'a razed Reich' ('A Postcard from Berlin'). For Mahon, it would seem, the aesthetic space is invariably a site of conflict or a force field of competing narratives. Pictures or paintings operate as a figure for his own poetry, marked by the clash between Apollonian and Dionysian forces or the 'hissing chemicals inside the well-wrought urn'.[19] Far from endorsing a residual aestheticism, they challenge artistic representations which fail to acknowledge certain aspects of reality. For Mahon, these include 'waste, drift, contingency' alongside darker, more violent elements (the problem with de Hooch's interior, as 'Courtyards in Delft' puts it, is that 'Nothing is random, nothing goes to waste').[20] Contrary to Smith's critique as outlined in Chapter One, the poetry in this volume is less a comfort zone or interface 'where a guilty but finally secure consciousness abstracts itself from its contingent world', than a searching examination of the aesthetic, the relationship between art and history, the role of the poet and the nature of 'real life'.[21]

One poem in particular, 'Tractatus' (after Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922)), offers a useful gloss on the ekphrastic mode in *The Hunt by Night*.[22] The opening stanza adapts Wittgenstein's statement, 'The world is everything that is the case', to suggest that reality includes everything that happens in the material world, from the most trivial event ('the fly giving up in the coal-shed') to the sublime achievements of art ('the Winged

---

[19] These comments from Mahon's *In the Chair* interview are cited in Chapter One, p. 47.
[20] In interview, Mahon noted that 'waste, drift, contingency are the better part of wisdom', adding that the task of poetry 'might be, to retrieve the lost stuff: lost experience, lost ideas' (cited in Niall MacMonagle (ed.), *Poetry Now* (Dublin: The Celtic Press, 2001), pp. 222-223.
[21] Smith's remarks are cited in Chapter One, p. 49.
[22] The poem is dedicated to Aidan Higgins, another Irish writer, whose novel *Langrishe, Go Down* (1966) was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction. It was adapted as a BBC television film by Harold Pinter in 1978, starring Jeremy Irons and Judy Dench.

Victory of Samothrace').[23] It underlies Mahon's later remark in interview that 'the world as it is' includes artistic representations of itself, such as 'the pictures of Rembrandt…the music of Mozart and the sonnets of Shakespeare'.[24] By contrast, the second stanza emphasises the primacy of the imagination, reflecting Mahon's Romantic roots or his receptivity to the inexplicable in human experience.[25] It also endorses his preference for Stevens over Wittgenstein, as outlined in the submission to the Poetry Book Society in 1968 ('Wittgenstein saw 'poetry' as the enemy of language, but I prefer Wallace Stevens – '*The whole race is a poet that writes down / The eccentric propositions of its fate*''):

> The world, though, is also so much more –
> Everything that is the case imaginatively.
> Tacitus believed Mariners could *hear*
> The sun sinking into the western sea;
> And who would question that titanic roar,
> The steam rising wherever the edge may be?[26]

In addition, the opening lines of this stanza shed light on the practice of *ekphrasis* in *The Hunt by Night*. They highlight the fact that, for Mahon, there is 'so much more' to the aesthetically charged world of picture postcards and paintings than meets the eye. In this volume, as we shall see, 'Everything that is the case imaginatively' includes not only Tacitus's poetic error (formally validated, as Edna Longley illustrated, by Mahon's auditory imagination), but the unseen or missing elements in framed reproductions, what has been overlooked if not deliberately suppressed.[27] Mahon exploits these elements in order to draw attention to the aesthetic as a site of conflict, ambiguity, paradox or contradiction. In so doing, he also illustrates the complexity of reality, shaped as it by the collision of opposite forces.

---

[23] 'The world is everything that is the case' is the first of seven main propositions in Wittgenstein's text, which greatly influenced the logical positivists in their philosophical stance.

[24] Mahon, interview with Brown, p. 17.

[25] Horton, in '"The Half-Sure Legislator": Romantic Legacies in the Writing of Derek Mahon and Tom Paulin', analysed this aspect of Mahon's poetry, including his option for Shelley over Auden on the efficacy of the imagination.

[26] Mahon, cited in *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their own Words*, p. 172. The quotation is from Stevens's poem 'Men Made Out of Words'.

[27] Wittgenstein reacted to certain forms of philosophy, such as Heideggerian phenomenology, which he regarded as 'the bewitchment of intelligence by means of language' (cited in Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater (eds.), *The Continental Philosophy Reader* (Routledge: London, 1996), p. 261). Mahon in 'Tractatus' engages in his own 'bewitchment', formally validating Tacitus's poetic error. As Edna Longley pointed out in 'The Singing Line: Form in Derek Mahon's Poetry', p. 184: 'Mahon's aural imagination also outflanks most prosaic historians, or perhaps anyone whose definitions limit history as well as philosophy, by conferring validity on Tacitus's poetic error. Stress and assonance celebrate the limitless horizons of the imagination working on its own terms, by making us 'hear' the sun sinking, the steam rising'.

The opening words of 'Courtyards in Delft' encapsulate the 'oblique' strategy of these ekphrastic poems:

> Oblique light on the trite, on brick and tile –
> Immaculate masonry, and everywhere that
> Water tap, that broom and wooden pail
> To keep it so. House-proud, the wives
> Of artisans pursue their thrifty lives
> Among scrubbed yards, modest but adequate.
> Foliage is sparse, and clings. No breeze
> Ruffles the trim composure of those trees.
>
> No spinet-playing emblematic of
> The harmonies and disharmonies of love;
> No lewd fish, no fruit, no wide-eyed bird
> About to fly its cage while a virgin
> Listens to her seducer, mars the chaste
> Precision of the thing and the thing made.
> Nothing is random, nothing goes to waste:
> We miss the dirty dog, the fiery gin.
>
> That girl with her back to us who waits
> For her man to come home for his tea
> Will wait till the paint disintegrates
> And ruined dykes admit the esurient sea;
> Yet this is life too, and the cracked
> Out-house door a verifiable fact
> As vividly mnemonic as the sunlit
> Railings that front the house opposite.

The Dutch interior of de Hooch's *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* (1658) acts as a catalyst for reflection on art, history, the spirit of place, the issue of religion or the poet's own Protestant background. While there is a certain respectful nostalgia on Mahon's part for the radiance of chaste reality ('late-afternoon / Lambency informing the deal table'), there is also a longing for what is missing.[28] Here the poem playfully exposes a Puritan mindset which promotes frugality, denies pleasure, suppresses spontaneity and deems cleanliness next to godliness. The repeated 'No' heightens the sense of life-denying austerity ('No spinet-playing…No lewd fish, no fruit, no wide-eyed bird'). Music as the food of love, with all its 'harmonies and disharmonies', is banished entirely. Like the banjo and red bandana in 'Ecclesiastes' (*Lives*), it upsets the state of equilibrium. Mahon's subversive wit takes a certain glee in listing all that is lacking in the 'strict / Propriety' of this composed scene (to recall Richard Wilbur's poem 'A Dutch Courtyard', based on de Hooch's painting of that

[28] As stanza three remarks: 'Yet this is life too'.

title (c.1660)).[29] It relishes the sexual innuendo of 'lewd fish', 'wide-eyed bird' and 'dirty dog', pictorial *topoi* evident in mid-seventeenth century Flemish painting associated with Delft. As Rui Carvalho Homem outlined, the bird 'About to fly its cage' may allude to de Hooch's *Couple with Parrot* (1668), in which a man

> ...leans over a young woman to open a cage on the table in front of her, apparently allowing the bird to come out – a possible source for the allegorized seduction scene to which Mahon dismissively alludes.[30]

The 'fiery gin', in this context, represents the glass in her hand, while also pointing to other de Hooch paintings like *Drinkers in the Bower* (1658), which depicts an almost identical setting, or *A Woman Drinking with Two Men* (c.1658). Mahon's poem clearly has an eye on various works of the period. It incorporates other paintings by de Hooch as well as Vermeer, whose Protestant bourgeois townscapes reminded him of his native Belfast.[31] The plural title, as well as the alternative date (1659), is a reminder that the poem is not simply a response to a single painting but to several different paintings. It ponders the aesthetic and the spirit of place at a particular point in history, while stressing the fact that what appears to be the case is in fact 'so much more' (to adopt 'Tractatus').

'Courtyards in Delft' thus reveals Mahon's ambivalence towards his Protestant upbringing or the Puritan mentality behind the preoccupation with order. After all, 'thrifty lives' are the antithesis of that bohemian abandon characteristic of his community of artistic outsiders. Words like 'scrubbed' and 'trim' are a little 'too creamy for [his] taste', as 'The Woods' expressed it, in relation to another 'pale paradise' from which the poet sought release.[32] The 'immaculate' yards are reminiscent of 'Glengormley', only 'broom and wooden pail' replace clothes-pegs and watering can ('the trim composure of those trees' also finds an echo in the earlier 'trimmed the hedge'). It is not surprising then that Mahon writes himself into the painting, transposing his cultural background in a deliberate anachronism:

> I lived there as a boy and know the coal

---

[29] Wilbur, 'A Dutch Courtyard', *New and Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), p. 361. Mahon, in interview with Kelly, p. 10, spoke of the influence of Wilbur's formalism on his poetry: 'He creates that cool artefact. A lot of people sneer at him for his preciosity. I don't. I know what he's about'.

[30] Homem, 'Of Furies and Forgers: *Ekphrasis*, Re-vision, and Translation in Derek Mahon', p. 124.

[31] Tinley, in 'International Perspectives in the Poetry of Derek Mahon', *Irish University Review* 21, 1 (Spring / Summer 1991), pp. 107-8, recalled Mahon's comments in a lecture and slide-show at the National Gallery of Ireland (6 March 1990), which linked Vermeer with Belfast.

[32] 'The Woods', *The Hunt by Night*, p. 58. The poem suggests that, for Mahon, the 'secluded and sedate' English countryside lacks a certain vitality or bracing edge. Hence, the need to 'ponder the darkness in another place', as the final line puts it.

Glittering in its shed, late-afternoon
Lambency informing the deal table,
The ceiling cradled in a radiant spoon.
I must be lying low in a room there,
A strange child with a taste for verse,
While my hard-nosed companions dream of war
On parched veldt and fields of rain-swept gorse…

This stanza highlights the intensely personal nature of his response to de Hooch's painting, which conjures up early memories of childhood experience. As he recalled in interview, the lucent surfaces of different materials ('brick and tile', delft, cutlery, 'Water tap', 'deal table') were an endless source of fascination to him growing up:

> Since there wasn't any hurly-burly of siblings, I had time for the eye to dwell on things, for the brain to dream about things. I could spend an afternoon happily staring…I'd see other things besides, like a coal delivery, the sort of pictorial qualities of coal. That kind of thing – the running of cold water from a kitchen tap, the light. I had time to dwell on these things.[33]

These remarks explain the origins of Mahon's 'taste for verse', in particular the painterly eye for precise detail and sensitivity to the play of light, which invests objects or enclosed spaces with numinous significance ('the coal / Glittering in its shed', 'The ceiling cradled in a radiant spoon'). They also account for his affinity with de Hooch's interiors, his childhood experience of 'lying low' providing an early apprenticeship in the art of perspective. As Edna Longley noted, it ensured that his poetry is 'well placed to subvert'.[34] In 'Courtyards in Delft', the subversive element surfaces in the sexual innuendo of stanza two. However, it is particularly evident in the concluding stanzas, which intensify the focus on the role of art and religion in history.

The allusion to 'my hard-nosed companions' dreaming of war signals the return of the repressed, as Mahon probes the connection between a puritanical rage for order and violence. The shadow side of spotless interiors is the marauding face of Dutch imperialism or loyalist paramilitaries, given the association of 'veldt' (a Dutch word assimilated in Afrikaans) and 'gorse' (the Protestant word for 'whins').[35] The final stanza, which is an addition to the pamphlet version in 1981, explicitly links religious zeal with imperialism, as the biblical call to stewardship gives way to the despoliation of nature:

---

[33] Mahon, *In the Chair*, p. 110.
[34] Edna Longley, 'Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art', p. 287.
[35] In interview with Scammell, p. 6, Mahon pointed out this connection between 'gorse' and 'whins', in the context of the poem's connection with Protestantism.

For the pale light of that provincial town
Will spread itself, like ink or oil,
Over the not yet accurate linen
Map of the world which occupies one wall
And punish nature in the name of God.
If only, now, the Maenads, as of right,
Came smashing crockery, with fire and sword,
We could sleep easier in our beds at night.[36]

Here the poem undermines extreme forms of Northern Protestantism. The line, 'And punish nature in the name of God', is an indictment of the destructive force of religious ideology. It applies as much to the Troubles in the North of Ireland as the Boer War in South Africa. As Mahon stated in interview, de Hooch's contemporaries, who 'founded the Cape Colony, took the Williamite Wars to Ireland'.[37] However, it also probes the aesthetic and its relation to violence, as the rage for order (to echo the key poem in *Lives*) is extended to the artist's passion for perfection of form ('the chaste / Precision of the thing and the thing made'). Reference to 'ink or oil' suggests that the 'documents' of poet and painter alike are never entirely free of the taint of barbarism, to recall Benjamin's well-known statement, cited earlier in relation to the title poem in *The Snow Party*.[38] The 'pale light' of Delft, which leaves its punitive imprint on the world map, confirms this association of light with dark, barbarism with civility, as does the introduction of the Maenads. Their destructive frenzy (Dionysian chaos) is the shadow side of Puritan austerity (Apollonian order).

'Courtyards in Delft' confirms Deane's sense that Mahon found an alternative approach to the relationship between poetry and history. In stressing the issue of violence, it suggests that the poet was well aware of the fact that idealised values (artistic or religious) are not always the privileged mark of 'decency, civility and cultivation' (to recall Eagleton's remarks, discussed in Chapter One).[39] Here the poem finds an echo in the volume's title

---

[36] Like the conclusion of the pamphlet version of 'Girls on the Bridge' ('And knew no pain'), the final line in this revised version appeared to substitute bathos for ambiguity ('We could sleep easier in our beds at night'). In interview with Scammell (p. 6), Mahon remarked that 'in trying to be too explicit, I succeeded only in being inept'. He facetiously added that he reverted to the original form in *Selected Poems* (1991) in the hope of being 'marginally more ept'.

[37] Mahon, interview with Scammell, p. 6. The Protestant work ethic, with its attendant political values had far reaching effects, giving rise to the Planter culture from which the commercial, middle-class economy of Northern Ireland developed.

[38] As outlined in Chapter One (pp. 33-34), in relation to critical contexts for reading Mahon's early work, Heaney's *North* (1975) brought such accusations to the fore, highlighting the conflicting pressures on poets in the North of Ireland.

[39] Eagleton's remarks, from his Field Day Pamphlet, 'Nationalism: Irony and Commitment' (1988), are cited in Chapter One, p. 43.

poem, which also questions the link between violence and the aesthetic by drawing attention to unseen elements within the frame:

> Wild with suspense
> Leaping to left and right,
> Their cries receding to a point
> Masked by obscurities of paint –
> As if our very hunt by night,
> So very tense,
>
> So long pursued,
> In what dark cave begun
> And not yet done, were not the great
> Adventure we suppose but some elaborate
> Spectacle put on for fun
> And not for food.[40]

This elaborately 'stylised' poem (each stanza is a well-wrought miniature composition with an intricate anti-climactic rhyme scheme) mirrors Uccello's brilliantly structured composition, which focuses the viewer's gaze on an elusive, vanishing point into which animal and human forms logically recede.[41] However, as Brown suggested, Mahon is sceptical of 'the painterly *sprezzatura* of an Uccello', in which the hunt ('So very tense / So long pursued') can seem 'some elaborate / Spectacle' as opposed to a desperate struggle to survive.[42] Reference to the 'dark cave' in which 'Man the maker killed to live', as the opening stanza expresses it, offsets the Apollonian order with a certain Dionysian chaos. It highlights the fact that the stylised 'pageantry' of art often 'masks' more brutal realities, as symbolised by the 'foetid / Bestial howls' in the 'neolithic bush'. In this context, the poem recalls the pivotally ambiguous phrase, 'a dying art', in 'Rage for Order' (*Lives*), as Mahon probes the aestheticisation of violence ('Tamed and framed to courtly uses').[43]

---

[40] Part of the painting's appeal derives from its association in Mahon's mind with a line from the French writer, Alfred-Victor Vigny. As he explained to the Poetry Book Society in 1982 (linking Vigny's poem with Yeats's 'The Stolen Child', an early favourite of his): 'I must have been sixteen or so when, in whatever anthology of French verse we were studying at my Belfast grammar school, I came upon Vigny's line, *'Dieu, que le son du cor est triste au fond des bois!'*, and it has remained with me ever since, like the refrain of Yeats's 'The Stolen Child', its echo reverberating down the years. The closest visual analogue I've met with is the Uccello in the Asmolean from which this collection takes its title: tense figures, stylised yet realistic, in pursuit of what unseen prey?' (cited in *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their own Words*, p. 173).

[41] Johnston noted, in 'MacNeice and Mahon', p. 243, that while Mahon disguises his pattern of rhyme through the use of enjambement, apocopated and slant rhymes, he 'employs a recurrent anticlimactic rhyme scheme of ABCCBA'.

[42] Brown, 'Derek Mahon: The Poet and Painting', p. 50.

[43] The opening two stanzas read: 'Flickering shades, / Stick figures, lithe game, / Swift flights of bison in a cave / Where man the maker killed to live; / But neolithic bush became / The midnight woods // Of nursery walls, / The ancient fears mutated, / To play, horses to rocking-horses / Tamed and framed to courtly uses, / Crazed no more by foetid / Bestial howls'. Stanza three opens with the lines: 'But rampant to / The pageantry they share…'

In a similar vein, 'Girls on the Bridge' (which immediately follows 'The Hunt by Night') interjects a note of violence or uncertainty into the framed world of Munch's *The Frieze of Life*, a series of paintings composed between 1889 and 1909, in particular *Girls on the Pier* (c.1901) or *Three Girls on Jetty* (c.1899).[44] The final stanza enacts another Dionysian deconstruction, 'smashing' the illusion of order enforced by key words like 'crisp' and 'sedate' in the opening lines (echoing 'scrubbed' and 'trim' in 'Courtyards in Delft'). Projecting into the girls' future, it taps the hidden menace which undermines the harmonious spectacle of 'world-wondering youth'. The adolescent 'chatter' ('Expressive of calm days / And peace of mind') gives way to a terrifying scream, calling to mind Munch's celebrated painting in which it finds its archetypal image:

> When the bad dreams
> You hardly know will scatter
> The punctual increment of your lives.
> The road resumes, and where it curves,
> A mile from where you chatter,
> Somebody screams...[45]

This abrupt shift enforces Mahon's desire to balance the order of art with the chaos of history. Reference to nightmares reflects his dialectical awareness, while recalling the 'Bad dreams of courtiers and of dogs' in 'Penshurst Place' (*Poems 1962-1978*). The element of conflict is even more pronounced in the earlier and longer pamphlet version of 'Girls on the Bridge', which declares 'The girls are dead', before offering an apocalyptic vision: 'The house and pond have gone. / Steel bridge and concrete highway gleam / And sing in the arctic dark; the scream / We started at is grown / The serenade // Of an insane / And monstrous age'.[46]

The element of the 'monstrous' also intrudes in 'A Postcard from Berlin', dedicated to Paul Durcan, as the idyllic scene ('Skies are the blue / Of postcard skies, and the leaves green / In that quaint quarter of Berlin') gives way to a vision of historical violence. The city is linked with troubled spots 'elsewhere', in particular the North of Ireland with its bombings and hunger-strikes:

---

[44] Mahon dates the poem 1900. In *Collected Poems* (1999), it is dated 1901. In the earlier *Selected Poems* (1991), Mahon added '*Pykene na Brukken*, Munch, 1900'. His poem about the Norwegian artist, 'Edvard Munch' (*Lives*) is discussed in Chapter Three (pp. 125-128).

[45] The final 'screams' finds an echo in 'the screams of the Rathlin women' in 'Rathlin' (*The Hunt by Night*, p. 16).

[46] 'Girls on the Bridge', *Courtyards in Delft*, p. 25. This version includes an extra four stanzas.

I hear echoes of Weimar tunes,
Grosz laughter in the beer-gardens
Of a razed Reich, and rumbling tyres
Unter den Linden; but the fires
Of abstract rage, exhausted there,
Blaze out of control elsewhere –
Perhaps one reason you pursue
This night-hunt with no end in view.

I can imagine your dismay
As, cornered in some zinc café,
You read of another hunger-strike,
A postman blasted off his bike…[47]

All of these ekphrastic poems reflect Mahon's dialectical awareness and sense of art and life as a site of conflict. They unmask or expose the darker elements behind the desire for order, the 'echoes' of violence which belie the sense of harmony. Far from seeking to escape history, they ensure that the aesthetic reflects its destructive force ('the fires / Of abstract rage' in 'A Postcard from Berlin' echoes the reference to 'fire and sword' in 'Courtyards in Delft'). In order for art to be credible for Mahon, it has to engage with the conflicts of life, which (to recall MacNeice's phrase) is never 'black or white entirely'.[48] Thus, each poem points beyond the framed spectacle of picture postcard and painting to disturbing realities 'elsewhere'.

The three remaining poems inspired by a particular postcard ('A Lighthouse in Maine', 'A Garage in Co. Cork', and 'The Terminal Bar') continue the volume's reflection on 'real life', only the focus is less the dialectic of art and history than that of place and placelessness. Here they complement a number of other poems ('North Wind: Portrush', 'Brighton Beach', 'Rathlin Island', 'Another Sunday Morning'), all of which prepare for the vast cosmic perspective of the final verse-letter, 'The Globe in North Carolina'. The finest of these ekphrastic poems is 'A Garage in Co. Cork', which transforms the framed reproduction of an abandoned garage into a window on 'the universe':

Where did they go? South Boston? Cricklewood?
Somebody somewhere thinks of this as home,
Remembering the old pumps where they stood,
Antique now, squirting juice into a chrome

[47] 'Orpheus Ascending', a review of Durcan's *The Berlin Wall Café* (1985), is included in *Journalism*, pp. 115-118. The final lines of 'A Postcard from Berlin' ('Oh, Hölderlin no fly would hurt, / Our vagabond and pilgrim spirit, / Give us a ring on the way back / And tell us what the nations lack') enforce the idea of the bohemian artist whose task is to diagnose the ills of the age. As Mahon pointed out in 'Orpheus Ascending' (p. 118), the German poet was a particular favourite of Durcan's.

[48] MacNeice's 'Entirely' is cited in Chapter Two, p. 84-85.

Lagonda or a dung-caked tractor while
A cloud swam on a cloud-reflecting tile…

A god who spent the night here once rewarded
Natural courtesy with eternal life –
Changing to petrol pumps, that they be spared
For ever there, an old man and his wife.
The virgin who escaped his dark design
Sanctions the townland from her prickly shrine.

We might be anywhere – in the Dordogne,
Iquitos, Bethlehem – wherever the force
Of gravity secures houses and the sun
Selects this fan-blade of the universe
Decelerating while the fates devise
What outcome for the dawdling galaxies?

The image of the fan-blade is apt, given the poem's oscillation between different people, times and places. The perspective shifts from Co. Cork to London ('Cricklewood') and South Boston, as well as 'the Dordogne, Iquitos, Bethlehem'; from Noah to 'an old man and his wife', turned petrol pumps courtesy of an Ovidian god who 'spent the night'; from 'a frontier store-front in an old western' to 'a chrome / Lagonda' or 'dung-caked tractor'; from 'soft-drink ads' to a family who 'ate, slept and watched the rain'.[49] Just as a lighthouse in Maine takes on various forms (it is at once an 'ivory tower', 'A polished Buddha', 'A kindly eye' and 'the soul of Adonais'), so this roadside stop is historical, mythological, Wild West, contemporary, eternal ('Nirvana!'). It enforces the fact that, for Mahon, place is always 'reimagined in the light of other places'.[50] The pivotal phrase 'We might be anywhere' is richly ironic, given that the poet himself locates this particular outpost ('I set it in Co. Cork because Cork is one of my favourite counties. The ruined garage is probably somewhere else altogether – Wicklow or Donegal'[51]). Here the poem echoes 'A Lighthouse in Maine', whose opening line ('It might be anywhere') is repeated in a later stanza:

It might be anywhere –
Hokkaido, Normandy, Maine;

---

[49] Stanza seven alludes to the story of Baucis and Philemon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VIII). They were spared death for their hospitality to the gods who were disguised as ordinary peasants (the town was destroyed by flood).

[50] Heaney, 'Place and Displacement', p. 123.

[51] Mahon, cited in *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their own Words*, p. 174. He added: 'I didn't see the garage and start writing the poem. The trigger was a postcard photograph by one Fritz Curzon entitled *McGrotty's Garage, Eire (sic)*. The photo shows an abandoned filling station with the remains of two ancient pumps in front of it, and over the door the legend: 'McGrotty's Garage'. Ho-ho. Irish joke. 'Grotty' isn't a word you would hear in Ireland. It's a London yob-word, and I suppose it was some patriotic reflex that got the poem going'.

But it is in Maine.[52]

Both poems reflect the childhood appeal for Mahon (as a chorister in St. Peter's Church of Ireland on the Antrim Road) of lines like 'From Earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast', or litanies of exotic place-names (as in the BBC shipping forecast *Malin, Faroes, Dogger, Irish Sea, Finisterre*).[53] They also prefigure the global perspective of the concluding verse-letter, which offers the most striking vision of earth's expanse. As we shall see, it draws upon such images as 'The light of heaven' ('A Lighthouse in Maine') or 'the dawdling galaxies' ('A Garage in Co. Cork').[54]

This mobility in terms of people, time and place is also reflected thematically in 'A Garage in Co. Cork'. Like 'Courtyards in Delft', its deft negotiation of contrasting spheres ensures that the poem can be read on different levels. It is at once a meditation on the theme of displacement; a study of the historical effect of emigration or rural depopulation; a reflection on the aesthetic or the mysterious world of mute phenomena in derelict sites ('oily puddles', 'cracked panes' and 'coils of rusty wire' assume an almost 'sacramental' significance).[55] This thematic mobility makes it one of the finest of Mahon's early poems. It is a further illustration of the ingenuity of the ironic conscience as it adapts different modes to dramatise its own obsessions.

---

[52] The poem opens with the phrase, 'It might be anywhere', A draft version (as Haughton indicated in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 190), was entitled 'Highland Light' ('Edward Hopper', 1930). In *Life on Earth* (2008), p. 31, Mahon offers another version of the poem in two eight-line stanzas.

[53] In interview with Grennan (*In the Chair*, p. 111), Mahon cited a verse (including this line) from the hymn 'For All the Saints', remarking: 'The way this was printed in the hymnal was important to me: it was under the music, *far-thest*, so somehow I created a whole geography of my own, around ocean's *far-thest*, as it were far-flung, coasts. The words themselves became facts, objects; and I believed in those objects, those clumped printed objects'. In interview with James P. Myers (ed.) *Writing Irish*, p. 189, he mentions this particular litany of place-names from the BBC shipping forecast.

[54] 'The Terminal Bar' (*The Hunt by Night*, p. 52), a witty take on the theme of displacement, also reflects this cosmic imagery. The final lines depict a Manhattan watering hole as a kind of porthole on the planet: 'Welcome to the planet, / its fluorescent beers / buzzing in the desolate / silence of the spheres. / Slam the door and knock / the snow from your shoe, / admit that the vast dark / at last defeated you - / nobody found the Grail / or conquered outer space. / Join the clientele / watching itself increase'.

[55] The final stanza offers an oblique and subtle commentary on the 'place' of poetry itself. Like the materials which, divested of function, return to the 'Nirvana' of their original state and 'shine with a late sacramental gleam', so too the poetic word finds its 'Unique' and irreplaceable home. The stanza itself is the site in which language does not fade but stands 'resplendent'. Its formal necessity holds the fleeting word in 'one place only', in the still point of the poem's eternal 'residence' or perpetual present 'tense'. Art's transcendence rests in its 'intrinsic nature', the 'sure sense' of its organic form. 'A Garage in Co. Cork' can thus also be read as a reflection on the aesthetic or that 'Blessed rage for order' (to echo Stevens's phrase, picked up in Mahon's title from *Lives*). Haughton, in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 187, writes eloquently of the poem as a study of emigration in post-war Ireland. He sees it as 'an anti-pastoral modern equivalent of Goldsmith's 'Deserted Village''.

6.3 The Ironic Conscience and Translation: An Elusive and Polyphonic Voice.

The Hunt by Night looks not only to the fine arts for inspiration, but to writers like Brecht, Hamsun, Joyce, Ovid, Pasternak and Rimbaud. More than any previous single volume, it highlights the significance of translation and creative adaptation for the ironic conscience, as it engages with the languages and imagery of very different artists. The overall effect is that of a polyphonic voice which draws, with equal facility, upon different modes, from the visionary symbolism of Rimbaud or the political satire of Brecht, to the sharp wit of Ovidian lamentation and Joycean Finneganese. It reflects Mahon's eclectic sense of art and awareness of the poet as one who is deeply involved with historical reality. It also accounts for such contrasting perceptions of him as a romantic visionary, a terminal ironist, a sceptical modernist, secular mystic or satirical wit. We will now analyse two poems in particular ('Brecht in Svendborg' and 'from The Drunken Boat ('after Rimbaud'), which are representative of this composite and elusive voice, for the light they shed on Mahon's sense of the function of art, the role of the poet and the nature of 'real life'.

In 'Brecht in Svendborg', Mahon adopts the satirical voice of the German writer's *Svendborg Poems*, which were among his most politically engaged. They were written in the 1930s when Brecht, in flight from the Nazis, went to live in Denmark. He stayed for the most part near Svendborg on the island of Fyn, before moving to Finland in 1939 and subsequently to the United States. Part One, 'A Danish Refuge', is Mahon's adaptation of the three *Svendborg Poems*, 'Place of Refuge', 'Spring 1938' and 'Concerning the Label Emigrant'.[56] In addition, it incorporates numerous details from Brecht's life and work. These include his play *The Life of Galileo* (1939); 'Confucius' scroll portrait' (mentioned in a later poem 'Study' (1943)); one of Brecht's trenchant dicta, 'THE TRUTH IS CONCRETE'; as well as references to '*Macbeth*, / Kant, or the *Tao Tê Ching*'.[57] As Mahon stated in the Foreword to *Adaptations* (2006), the poem is 'a piece of bricolage if ever there was one'.[58] However, it also provides an oblique angle on historical violence:

---

[56] These three poems are included in *Bertold Brecht: Poems 1913-1956*, edited by John Willet & Ralph Manheim, with the co-operation of Erich Fried (London: Minerva, 1994). They are grouped under Brecht's Later Svendborg Poems and Satires 1936-1938. All references to Brecht's poems are from this text. 'Place of Refuge' is a much revised and shorter version of the earlier 'Nature Poem 1 (Svendborg)'.

[57] Brecht's literary sonnets of this period included 'On Shakespeare's Play *Hamlet*' (p. 311), 'On Kant's Definition of Marriage in *The Metaphysics of Ethics*' (p. 312) and 'Legend of the Origin of the Book *Tao Tê Ching* on Lao-Tsû's *Road into Exile*' (pp. 314-316).

[58] Mahon, *Adaptations*, p. 11.

We have lashed oars on the thatch
To keep it down in everything
Short of a cyclone, and
The sun gilds our garden;
But deadly visions hang
Like rain-clouds in the sound.

A little boat with a patched
Sail skates on the crinkly
Tinfoil of the bay; but we
Are not deceived by scenery.
Ears cocked, we can hear
Screams beyond the frontier. [59]

The phrase 'deadly visions' alludes to the atrocities of Nazi Germany, as evident by the reference in stanza four to 'the naval / War-games of the Reich'. Mention of 'Screams beyond the frontier' links the poem with 'Rathlin' on the facing page, which speaks of the sixteenth century massacre of the MacDonnells (it opens with the line, 'A long time since the last scream cut short…').[60] It also recalls the sense of menace at the close of 'Girls on the Bridge'. 'A Danish Refuge' is thus shadowed by the destructive force of history. While it offers the German poet 'a home from home' (here the poem prefigures a key phrase in 'The Globe in North Carolina'), there is little security in this isolated place: The final lines intensify the note of apprehension, 'I notice that the house / Has four doors for escape…'

Part Two of Mahon's poem, 'To the Unborn' (an adaptation of Brecht's 'To Posterity'), locates the source of violence in the contradictions of human nature ('We who wished to found / A kind future could not ourselves be kind'). It probes the culture of denial in which the majority conform to the will of the collective and 'idle chat' masks an underlying injustice:

What sort of times are these
When idle chat is treated
As wicked nonsense,
Implying as it does
Avoidance of other topics?
And who has a clear conscience?

Eat, drink and be thankful! –

---

[59] Stanza two draws upon Brecht's poem 'Concerning the Label Emigrant' (p. 301), which noted: 'Ah, the silence of the Sound does not deceive us! We hear / the shrieks / From their camps even here. Yes, we ourselves / Are almost like rumours of crimes, which escaped / Over the frontier'.

[60] 'Rathlin', *The Hunt by Night*, p. 16. The 'unspeakable violence' was part of a campaign by the Earl of Essex to overcome the Gaelic chieftains, among them the famous Somhairle Buidh Mac Dónaill (Sorley Boy MacDonald). Reference to 'bombs doz[ing] in the housing estates' in stanza two links the Troubles in the North of Ireland with this carnage from the past.

But how can I do this
If my food belongs
To the starving,
My drink to the parched?
At the same time, I eat and drink.

I would so much like to be wise,
To shun strife and live
Quietly, without fear;
To love my enemies.
I can do none of these.
Truly, we live in a dark time.

Here the trenchant note of Brecht's satire offers Mahon an oblique angle on historical violence, including the Troubles in the North of Ireland. In the early nineteen eighties, the hunger strikes heightened the impression of living 'in a dark time', a key phrase echoed in the opening line of the poem.[61] They exacerbated the enmity in the province or the inability 'To love [one's] enemies'. The phrase 'Eat, drink and be thankful!' was precisely what the nationalist prisoners in the Maze refused to do, as the sense of outrage turned self-destructive. As the following stanza expressed it: 'We know that hatred, even of evil, / Disfigures the face; / That anger, even at cruelty, / Hardens the voice'. 'To the Unborn' thus highlights the artist as politically engaged in reading the signs of the times or pointing out 'what the nations lack' (to adopt the final lines of 'A Postcard in Berlin').[62] It captures Brecht's caustic wit, encapsulated in the memorable lines from the opening stanza: 'The man / Who laughs is merely someone / Who has not yet heard the terrible news'.

By contrast, Mahon's creative adaptation of Rimbaud's text enforces the link between the ironic conscience and a bohemian sensibility. The poem is a phantasmagoria of correspondences as the boat, symbolic of Romantic quest-voyages, shifts between different worlds in place and time. Juxtaposing both versions reveals how he takes certain liberties with the translation while capturing the spirit of the original (unlike Beckett, whose translation remains closer to the French text):

Trembling, I heard volcanic eructations,	*Moi qui tremblais, sentant geindre à cinquante lieues*
A thrash of behemoths…But now, my ears	*Le rut des Béhémots et les Maelstroms épais,*

[61] 'To the Unborn' opens: 'Truly, we live in a dark time. / The candid word is suicide; / A clear brow argues / A thick skin'. The phrase recalls 'A Dark Country' in *Lives*, which also featured a 'deluge' in the form of an apocalyptic sea-change for Belfast ('a sunken city / Sea-changed at last').

[62] As outlined previously, the poem specifically mentions the hunger-strikes in the North. 'To the Unborn' can also be linked with 'The Earth (after Pasternak)', *The Hunt by Night*, p. 59, which sees poetry as a means of overcoming 'fire and fear' (echoing 'from fear to fire' in 'Derry Morning' and 'fire and sword' in 'Courtyards in Delft'). For Mahon, as we have seen, in relation to 'The Snow Party' and 'The Last of the Fire Kings' in *The Snow Party*, fire is often associated with historical violence.

Weary of this crescendo of sensations,	*Fileur éternal des immobilités bleues,*
I thought of Europe and her ancient towers	*Je regrette l'Europe aux anciens parapets!*
Delirious capes! Strewn archipelagoes!	*J'ai vu des archipels sidéraux! et des îles*
Do you nurse there in your galactic foam	*Dont les cieux délirants sont ouverts au vogueur:*
The glistening bodies of obscure flamingoes	*Est-ce en ces nuits sans fonds que tu dors et t'exiles,*
Tranced in a prescience of the life to come?	*Millions d'oiseaux d'or, ô future Viqueur?*[63]

Here Mahon's skills as a translator are clearly evident, as he merges earth and sky in a subtle sleight of hand ('galactic foam' combines '*des archipels sidéraux*' and '*les cieux délirants*'), heightening the vertiginous movement between time past and time future ('tranced in a prescience of the life to come?'). He too abandons himself to the intoxicating current of Rimbaud's French, capturing its exotic sensuality ('glistening bodies of obscure flamingoes') and hectic excess ('crescendo of sensations'). As stanza two expresses it, linking speaker and translator, 'I let / The current carry me where I choose to go'. The poem exploits the music of language, tapping 'frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist'.[64] For Rimbaud, such frontiers offered relief from the mundanity of life or 'the dull weight' of the quotidian (to adapt the terms of the second stanza). They are linked with what he memorably termed a 'systematic derangement of the senses'. It is in the context of this heightened awareness that the celebrated *poète maudit* is so important to Mahon. For him, it is a vital aspect of the bohemian life style. As he stated in interview:

> I suppose it must be, it must have been, akin to what is considered to be a religious experience – I'm talking about the apparent suspension of time, the transcendence of bother and the quotidian, the sense that life is long and life is full, the sense that if we are here to perceive anything it is this kind of perception that is particularly intended...A 'systematic derangement of the senses'. I think Rimbaud was well acquainted with what we're talking about, and gave it the kind of weight that I'm giving it here. For me it has a great deal to do, it *had* a great deal to do, with a certain bohemian way of being – living at a certain angle to life, spending quite a lot of time having the brain active, having the senses alive at certain times of the day or night when other people are asleep or out at work. I think that way of life can help the creative. I don't

[63] Rimbaud's text is taken from Arthur Rimbaud, *Poèsies* (Paris: Éditions A.-G. Nizet, 1978), p.168. Stanzas twenty-one and twenty-two correspond to stanzas ten and eleven in Mahon's poem. Beckett translated the poem in full, his version of the relevant stanzas reading: 'I who heard in trembling across a waste of leagues / The turgent stroms and Behemoths moan their rut, / I weaving for ever voids of spellbound blue, / Now remember Europe and her ancient ramparts. // I saw archipelagoes of stars and islands launched me / Aloft on the deep delirium of the skies: / Are these the fathomless nights of your sleep and exile, / Million of golden birds, oh Vigour to be?' (*Samuel Beckett, Collected Poems in English and French* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), p. 103).

[64] Eliot, 'The Music of Poetry', *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 64.

> think that's bohemian sensibility; I think there's truth to it. Before the bohemian clichés, there were bohemians who were originals. There is an original bohemian idea to which I still have an attachment, despite all the nonsense that has been said and done in its name.[65]

These remarks are crucial because they highlight the importance of this 'original bohemian idea' for Mahon, illustrating its connection with cherished concepts like 'the free-floating imagination, Keats's 'negative capability' [and] Yeats's 'lonely impulse of delight'', to re-quote his response to Hewitt (as discussed in the Introduction).[66] In so doing, they underline the moral dimension of the ironic conscience's quest for authenticity and freedom. Its search for alternative modes of being or intense states of awareness ('the transcendence of bother and the quotidian') is more about living life to the full ('having the brain active, having the senses alive') than 'preparing a pantheon' or yearning for some place outside time (to recall Porter's criticism, cited in Chapter One). For Mahon, 'there's truth' to the bohemian idea, not because it facilitates an escapist mentality, but because it fosters a subversive Dionysian spirit which 'can help the creative'. Rimbaud is a central figure among his iconoclastic outsiders because he took this alternative life style seriously ('gave it the kind of weight that I'm giving it here'). His defiance of convention and resistance to rootedness underlies Mahon's awareness of the artist as one who lives 'at a certain angle to life'. The latter implies mobility, not only in the sense of moving between places, but living in the space between certainties, remaining open to the moment's possibility, to 'the drunkenness of things being various' (to recall MacNeice's phrase, cited in Chapter Two). The voice of Rimbaud thus greatly informs the discussion of '*la vrai vie*' ('real life') at the heart of *The Hunt by Night*. The key phrase, from the epigraph to 'The Sea in Winter' (*Poems 1962-1978*), directly links him with the ekphrastic poems which explore this theme from a variety of perspectives.

Little wonder, then, that Mahon is drawn to the kaleidoscopic world of Rimbaud's poem, which vividly captures this sensual derangement or manic intensity of experience ('My heart rose to a tidal detonation'). It confirms his belief that 'a certain bohemian way of being' induces heightened moments of sensation, marked by an awareness of the otherworldly or inexplicable ('the apparent suspension of time'). Such moments are a kind

---

[65] Mahon, *In the Chair*, p. 120. Rimbaud's phrase is alluded to in the Introduction to this thesis (p. 19).
[66] Introduction, p. 15. As outlined, Mahon uses these concepts to refute Hewitt's argument that the Ulster writer 'must be a rooted man'.

of 'religious experience', characterised by visionary perception. As stanza seven of Mahon's translation expresses it:

> I saw skies split by lightning, granite waves
> Shaking the earth, ambrosial dusks and dawns,
> Days risen aloft, a multitude of doves –
> And, with the naked eye, vouchsafed visions.

In this context, the 'crazed' metamorphoses of this strange 'sea-poem' may be seen to reflect the numinous in nature or the search for 'a language beyond art' ('The Joycentenary Ode'). Here they mirror those of 'Ovid in Tomis', 'Rock Music', 'Table Talk', 'The Joycentenary Ode' and 'A Garage in Co. Cork'.[67]

'Ovid in Tomis' plays into the surreal, kaleidoscopic world of 'from The Drunken Boat', highlighting the fact that the 'gaiety of atoms', 'the dumb spirit / In boulder and tree', the sighing and 'keening' of reeds, are all part of the secular *numen*. It laments the demise of that visionary state of *participation mystique* which is accessible to the bohemian sensibility ('Pan is dead, and already / I feel an ancient / Unity leave the earth').[68] In 'Rock Music', 'the furious whisperings of the sand' in Rimbaud's text find an echo in nature's 'residual roar': 'Rock music started up on every side - / Whisper of algae, click of stone on stone, / A thousand limpets left by the ebb-tide / Unanimous in their silent inquisition'. In 'Table Talk', the simple piece of furniture (like the drunken boat) craves an alternative and more intense life, beyond the bounds of the mundane: 'I pray for a wood-spirit to make me dance, / To scare you shitless and upset your balance, / Destroy the sedate poise with which you pour / Forth your ephemeral stream of literature'. 'Balance' and 'poise', one might add, are the antithesis of the bohemian. The poem faces 'The Dawn Chorus', as if to stress the allure of this alternative world of visionary 'metamorphosis' in *The Hunt by Night*. Its refrain encapsulates the human longing for transcendence: 'We yearn for that reality in this'.

'From The Drunken Boat' is thus a key text, singling out Rimbaud as a central influence on the ironic conscience in *The Hunt by Night*. For Mahon, he embodies the allure of the bohemian ideal which renounces respectability or 'the tightly corseted lives' of sedentary

---

[67] The 'sonerous / Volapuke of the waives' in 'The Joycentenary Ode' is reminiscent of 'the curdled puke and the blue wine' of Rimbaud's ocean. Commissioned by the BBC for the centenary of the Irish writer in 1992, it pays homage to Joyce's genius and originality ('origeniosity'), ribald and subversive wit (shattering 'Our precontraceptions / About lutherature'), sense of exile ('switzocclusion') and long view of history ('from / Creak of dawn / To crack of doom').

[68] In its search for 'a language beyond art', 'Ovid in Tomis' suggests it is 'Better to contemplate / The blank page' than engage in the art of writing.

souls (to echo 'Knut Hamsun in Old Age').[69] Rather, it craves a certain lyrical madness and creative excess. To highlight this affinity with the French poet, he writes himself into the original text (here the poem follows 'Courtyards in Delft', with it autobiographical reference, 'A strange child with a taste for verse'). The final stanza translates '*Un enfant accroupi, plein de tristesse*' (literally, a squatting child, full of sadness) as 'an only child':

Meuse of the cloud-canals, I would ask of you	*Si je désire une eau d'Europe, c'est la flache*
Only the pond where, on a quiet evening,	*Noire et froide où vers le crépuscule embaumé*
An only child launches a toy canoe	*Un enfant accroupi, plein de tristesse, lâche*
As frail and pitiful as a moth in spring.	*Un bateau frêle comme un papillon de mai.*[70]

In addition, he deftly specifies '*une eau d'Europe*' as the river Meuse (which rises in North East France and flows across Europe to enter the North Sea), linking earth and sky in an apostrophe to the Muse ('Meuse of the cloud-canals'). The hyphenated phrase subtly underlines the fact that Mahon's poetry is forever between places. The sense of home, as we shall see, is provisional, marked by a heightened awareness of elsewhere.

6.3 The Ironic Conscience and the Search for Home in *The Hunt by Night.*

Alongside 'A Lighthouse in Maine', 'A Garage in Co. Cork', and 'The Terminal Bar', a number of other poems in *The Hunt by Night* address the central issue of displacement, enforcing the fact that the ironic conscience operates 'at a certain angle to life'. It is never 'in one place and one place only' (to echo 'A Garage in Co. Cork'), given that place is constantly reimagined in the light of elsewhere. This is particularly evident in 'North Wind: Portrush', which alternates between the 'benighted coast' of Northern Ireland and the sunny climes of France ('Elsewhere the olive grove, / *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, / Poppies and parasols, / Blue skies and mythic love') and 'Brighton Beach', which contrasts the drab reality of a dispirited seaside-resort with a more exotic and sensuous life style:

> From the far end of the pier
> I imagine the sun-gleam
> On a thousand *deux-chevaux*.
> Over there they explore
> Balbec and sip Pernod

---

[69] 'Knut Hamsun in Old Age' (*The Hunt by Night*, pp. 20-21) also addresses the bohemian life, illustrating its disregard for the conventional or desire to transcend more mundane realities. The poem highlights the semi-delirious trip of Hamsun's starving hero in the *Bildungsroman*, *Hunger* (1890), who abandons his native city for pastures new. It relishes this aspiring artist's wanderlust and disdain for 'dream homes', just as it savours the figure of Hamsun 'perched on the screaming roof of a freight train' in order to rid himself of tuberculosis in America (the ultimate in bohemian abandon).

[70] The final stanza of Mahon's extract is the penultimate stanza in the original French (Rimbaud, *Poèsies* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999). p. 168).

In a Monet-monoxide dream.

Europe thrives, but the off-shore
Islanders year by year
Decline, the spirit of empire
Fugitive as always.
Now, in this rancorous peace,
Should come the spirit of place.

Too late, though, for already
Places as such are dead
Or nearly; the loved sea
Reflects banality.[71]

Both poems reframe 'Here' in the context of 'Elsewhere', evoking a sense of nostalgia. In 'Brighton Beach' this is intensified by the long view, which stresses that places themselves are subject to displacement over the course of history, losing their original charm ('the loved sea / Reflects banality'). Here we can trace what Brown termed 'the voice of a gravely pained belatedness' which is drawn to marginalised sites which 'are dead / Or nearly'.[72] Like Larkin's 'Reference Back', Mahon's poem reveals how 'the long perspectives / Open at each instant of our lives...link us to our losses'.[73] Reference to the fading 'spirit of empire' associates it with 'Another Sunday Morning', which oscillates between different continents in its vast sweep of civilisation ('So many empires come and gone').[74] However, in this instance, the nostalgia is laced with satirical humour:

Black diplomats with stately wives,
Sauntering by, observe the natives
Dozing beside the palace gates –
Old ladies under wide straw-hats
Who can remember *Chu Chin Chow*
And Kitchener. Exhausted now
By decades of retrenchment, they
Wait for the rain at close of play.

So many empires come and gone –

---

[71] '*Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*' ('The Lunch on the Grass'), a celebrated painting by Édouard Manet, enforces the impression of Gallic sensuality and abandon in 'North Wind: Portrush'. It finds an echo in the 'Monet-monoxide dream' of 'Brighton Beach'.

[72] Brown, 'Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness', p. 137.

[73] Larkin, 'Reference Back', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 106.

[74] Mahon's title, 'Another Sunday Morning', is in dialogue with other poems like Stevens's 'Sunday Morning', Lowell's 'Waking Early Sunday Morning' (referred to in Chapter Three), MacNeice's 'Sunday Morning' and 'Sunday in the Park'. The latter, in particular, with its reference to people out strolling with prams and dogs, and old men who feel lost, is a significant influence, I would suggest, on Mahon's poem: 'The prams are big with doom, the walkers-out forget / Why they are out, London is lost, geraniums / Stick it out in the wind, old men feel lost / But stick it out and refugees forget / Pretences and grow sad while ironies / Frill out from sprinklers on the green veneer...' (MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, p. 496). The word 'ironies' is repeated four times, the poem concluding (in an allusion to the biblical story of creation in *Genesis*): 'The Tree / Forgets both good and evil in irony'.

The spear and scimitar laid down,
The long-bow and the arquebus
Adapted to domestic use.
A glimpse of George V at Cowes
Lives on behind the wrinkled brows
Of an old man in Bognor Regis
Making dreadnoughts out of matches.[75]

The central irony (recalling MacNeice's 'Sunday in the Park' which revolves around 'ironies') is that the heart of the British Empire is itself colonised, the reversal of fortune complete as 'the natives' are observed with mild curiosity by the 'stately wives' of foreign diplomats. As Brearton illustrated, the loaded word 'retrenchment', suggestive of both territorial erosion and thriftiness in personal economy, 'locates the source of decline in the trenches of the Great War'.[76] Once again the legacy of the past overshadows the present in *The Hunt by Night*, as the reference to Kitchener recalls British military campaigns (in South Africa, the Sudan, India and the First World War), while the list of weaponry charts the course of battle down through the ages. For Mahon, London's Hyde Park is yet another window on a world of violence. However, like Lowell in 'Waking Early Sunday Morning', he finds little redemption in the trappings of military splendour, turning instead to art as an antidote to the fanaticism of the ideologue:

...every artefact
A pure, self-referential act,
That the intolerant soul may be
Retrieved from triviality
And the locked heart, so long in pawn
To steel, redeemed by wood and stone.[77]

All of these poems on displacement set the scene for 'The Globe in North Carolina', which brings this central issue in Mahon's early poetry to a remarkable conclusion. As the third of his verse-letters addressed to friends or lovers on distant shores (following 'Beyond

[75] The park in the poem refers to London's Hyde Park, which Mahon visited regularly while living in Observatory Gardens. Like Farrell's novels, 'Another Sunday Morning' highlights the *feel* of history, or the 'being alive that every age has to do' (to cite *Troubles*, p. 102). There is a certain poignancy in the fact that, while empires come and go, individual memories endure. 'Old ladies under wide straw-hats' recall the spectacular musical stage hit *Chu Chin Chow* (based on the Arabian Nights Tale of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*), while 'an old man in Bognor Regis' savours a 'glimpse of George V at Cowes'.

[76] Brearton, 'A Dying Art: Derek Mahon's Solving Ambiguity', p. 195. Like the word 'invasion' in 'The Chinese Restaurant in Portrush' (*Poems 1962-1978*), 'retrenchment' is one of those richly allusive words which opens up different layers of meaning.

[77] Lowell's poem, as we have seen in the chapter on *Lives*, is a significant influence on 'Beyond Howth Head'. The figure of the old man 'Making dreadnoughts out of matches' (a variation on turning swords into ploughshares, as in Isaiah 2:4), symbolises the desired transformation of weapons of war into more creative 'artefacts'.

Howth Head' and 'The Sea in Winter', which concluded *Lives* and *Poems 1962-1978*), it intensifies the human longing for home by situating it within a vast global perspective. Here the poem draws upon the language and imagery of previous poems ('the existential, black / Face of the cosmic dark' in 'North Wind: Portrush' or 'the dawdling galaxies' in 'A Garage in Co. Cork'), as the North American landscape is mirrored in the constellations:

> From Hatteras to the Blue Ridge
> Night spreads like ink on the unhedged
> Tobacco fields and clucking lakes,
> Bringing the lights on in the rocks
> And swamps, the farms and motor courts,
> Substantial cities, kitsch resorts -
> Until, to the mild theoptic eye,
> America is its own night-sky,
>
> Its own celestial fruit, on which
> Sidereal forms appear, their rich
> Clusters and vague attenuations
> Miming galactic dispositions.
> Hesperus is a lighthouse, Mars
> An air-force base; molecular cars
> Arrowing the turnpikes become
> Lost meteorites in search of home.

This startling image of the continent as 'its own night sky', is reminiscent (as Haughton indicated) of the self-reflexive tropes or conceits of metaphysical poetry, compounding the macro- and the microcosm, the topographical and the cosmological.[78] The focus spins from earth to space, as Mahon (after Jaccottet) orchestrates his own intellectual 'music of the spheres', the accumulation of polysyllabic phrases heightening the vertiginous distances of space.[79] Internal and end rhymes activate their own 'rich / Clusters' of correspondence as cadence and sense play against stanza form in a virtuoso display of wit and formal achievement ('celestial' / 'sidereal'; 'vague attenuations' / 'galactic dispositions'; 'lighthouse' / 'air-force'; 'Miming' / 'Arrowing'; 'Mars' / 'cars'; 'turnpikes' / 'meteorites'). The kaleidoscope of rapidly shifting imagery recalls the visionary perspective of 'from The Drunken Boat' with its 'milky stars' and 'phosphorous harmony', just as the transformation of Hesperus into 'a lighthouse' and Mars into 'an air-force base' reflects its 'crazed' metamorphoses. Like stanza five of 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' (*The Snow Party*), in which mushrooms become magi or moonmen, these lines achieve symbolic lift-off, extending far beyond nature or 'everything that is the case' (as 'Tractatus' expressed it).

---

[78] Haughton, 'Place and Displacement in Derek Mahon', p. 111.
[79] In his Introduction to *Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet* (1987), p. 15, Mahon spoke of Jaccottet's 'intellectual music' in terms of 'what Dryden would have called the music of the spheres'.

To compare 'The Globe in North Carolina' with 'Girls in their Seasons', the opening poem of *Night-Crossing* (with its reference to 'the flinty chink of the Orion and the Plough'), is to highlight the development of Mahon's voice, which is altogether more assured and technically accomplished in *The Hunt by Night*. The resonant phrase, 'Lost meteorites in search of home', which caps his lyrical snapshot of galactic America, lends great poignancy to the human predicament. It is amplified by the poem's ensuing reference to earth itself as 'our peripheral / Night garden in the glory-hole / Of space, a home from home'. These lines, which echo 'Brecht in Svendborg', are the ultimate in existential displacement, a chastening reminder of our metaphysical deracination. 'The Globe in North Carolina' thus stresses the fact that we have no fixed abode and that the planet itself simply a stepping-stone on the road to elsewhere, featured variously as 'the grail' ('The Terminal Bar'), 'the light of heaven' ('A Lighthouse in Maine'), 'Nirvana!' ('A Garage in Co. Cork') or 'the silence / Of infinite space' ('Ovid in Tomis'). In so doing, it brings the dialectic of place and placelessness which runs throughout this volume, and indeed Mahon's early poetry, to a resounding finale. The image of a freight train in the final lines, which recalls the train hurtling north in 'Girls in their Seasons', serves as a reminder that we are always passing through or passing on (to echo the pun on death).

> Five miles away a south-bound freight
> Shrieks its euphoria to the state
> And passes on; unfinished work
> Awaits me in the scented dark.
> The halved globe, slowly turning, hugs
> Its silence, and the lightning bugs
> Are quiet beneath the open window
> Listening to that lonesome whistle blow.

'A Globe in North Carolina' enforces the fact that the ironic conscience is always between places, as reflected in the familiar image of the window, which appears in this revised version.[80] Like the conclusion of 'Beyond Howth Head' (*Lives*), the poem pictures the poet on the threshold of contrasting worlds, poised between the warmth of the domestic interior and the darkness of the external universe. An exilic note registers once again in the sound of 'that lonesome whistle' which breaks the 'silence'. In terms of home, *The Hunt by Night* suggests, the most one can expect are sheltering places on the 'slowly turning' globe.

---

[80] The conclusion in the original version in *Courtyards in Delft* (1981), comprising seven (as opposed to eleven stanzas), depicted the poet in a state of Keatsian 'enchantment': 'Five miles away a south-bound freight / Shrieks its euphoria to the state / And passes on. Who wants to work? / I want to lie here in the dark, / Enchanted, while the lightning bugs / Chirp on their night-flowering rugs / Of grass – pulsars on indigo - / And listen to that lonesome whistle blow'.

CONCLUSION

ANTARCTICA (1985): THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

The Cultural Context of *Antarctica*.

1985, the year in which *Antarctica* was published, marked the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement between the British and Irish governments at Hillsborough Castle in Belfast, by the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher and the Taoiseach, Garret Fitzgerald (in October the previous year, Thatcher survived a bomb attack by the IRA on the Grand Hotel in Brighton).[1] It offered some hope for the future, suggesting a possible end to the violence of the previous decades. However, the 'Ulster Says No' campaign in response to the Agreement hinted at irreconcilable differences. In this context, *The Berlin Wall Café*, the title of Durcan's collection (also published in 1985), subtly reflected the bitter sectarian divide. The North of Ireland was still a 'dark country' (to recall the poem in *Lives*), as evident in 'Death and the Sun', the pamphlet's concluding poem, dedicated to Albert Camus. It links Camus's image of the plague (from his 1947 novel of that title) with the Troubles, as Belfast becomes 'the stricken home' of Oran:

> Deprived though we were of his climatic privileges
> And raised in a northern land of rain and murk,
> We too knew the familiar foe, the blaze
> Of headlights on a coast road, the cicadas
> Chattering like watches in our sodden hedges;
> Yet never imagined the plague to come,
> So long has it crouched there in the dark –
> The *cordon sanitaire*, the stricken home,
> Rats on the pavement, rats in the mind,
> 'St. James infirmary' playing to the plague wind.[2]

These lines are a reminder of how Mahon and Longley were caught out by the festering resentments which erupted from 'the dark' in 1969. They link the peace lines of Belfast with *The Plague's* '*cordon sanitaire*'. 'The blaze / Of headlights on a coast road' echoes Heaney's 'The Ministry of Fear' (*North*), which also highlights roadblocks as a familiar

---

[1] The treaty (which was signed on 15 November 1985) gave the Irish Government an advisory role in relation to Northern Ireland, while confirming that the latter would remain part of the United Kingdom unless a majority of its citizens agreed to join the Republic. It also outlined conditions for establishing a devolved consensus government in the region.

[2] As Haughton pointed out, in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 208, Mahon silently cursed Paulin for 'having got their first', the latter having noted in *Liberty Tree* (1983) that South Belfast 'is like the French Quarter in Oran / and longs to cross the water'.

feature of life in the province.[3] Mention of the American folksong is particularly poignant, for the infirmary blues afflicted many families whose 'baby's never comin' back'.[4] 'Rats in the mind' encapsulates the psychopathic mentality which fuelled the paramilitary violence, turning the place into a living hell. The ensuing reference to 'Wee shadows fighting in a smoky cave', heightens the sense of unreality, enforcing the truth of Rimbaud's remark, cited as epigraph to 'The Sea in Winter' (*Poems 1962-1978*): *'Nous ne sommes pas au monde; la vraie vie est absente'* ('We are not in the world; real life is absent').

'Death and the Sun' thus expresses with renewed intensity Mahon's sense of alienation from his native city. However, it also celebrates the Algerian-born existentialist as an enabling influence, not only on Mahon, but a whole generation of aspiring writers in post-war pre-Troubles Belfast. His 'climatic privileges' gave rise to a philosophy or worldview which was a welcome antidote to that promulgated in this 'northern land of rain and murk'. As Dawe outlined, in the context of Mahon's poem:

> ...existentialism was an aggressive way of bringing oneself up in a city coming down with passionless religion and atrophied politics. It was a thing of the heart; iron in the soul.[5]

'Death and the Sun' bears out this association of existentialism and passion, citing Camus as one whose 'life and death [is] a work of art / Conceived in the silence of the heart'.[6] In *Antarctica*, as we shall see, it is the figure of Meursault, the central protagonist of *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider*), who embodies this single-mindedness or 'iron in the soul', epitomising Mahon's sense of the artist as outsider or rebel (to echo another of Camus's novels). His desperate plight reflects that of the pamphlet's other alienated figures (real and imaginary), including Anthony Burgess ('October'), Ford Madox Ford, Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound ('A Kensington Notebook'), King Lear ('Dejection'), Ovid ('Ovid in Love'), Placidus ('St. Eustace'), Rilke ('Night Drive'), Tithonus ('Tithonus') and Lawrence

---

[3] Heaney, 'The Ministry of Fear', *North* (1975), p. 63.

[4] One set of lyrics ascribed to 'St. James Infirmary Blues', the American folk song (recorded by Van Morrison among others) reads: 'Yes, sixteen coal black horses, to pull that rubber tied hack, / Well, it's seventeen miles to the graveyard, but my baby's never comin' back'.

[5] Dawe, *The Rest is History*, 'Belfast Notes (1984-1993)', p. 84. Here he alludes to Sartre's novel *La Mort dans l'Âme* (1949), translated as *Iron in the Soul.*

[6] Mahon's lines capture Camus's sense of the artist as one who 'keeps in his heart of hearts a single stream which, so long as he is alive, feeds what he is and what he says' (cited in *Albert Camus: Selected Essays and Notebooks* (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 18. They also tap his own association of writing with silence (frequently associated with isolated locations on the margin or extremity) and the heart. As 'Everything Is Going To Be All Right' in *Poems 1962-1978* suggested, 'The hidden source is the watchful heart'.

Oates in the title poem. Its opening line, 'I am just going outside and may be some time', which echoed the explorer's last words on Scott's ill-fated Terra Nova expedition, uncannily anticipated Mahon's own spell in the creative wilderness. His next volume *The Hudson Letter* did not appear until 1995, concluding a long poetic silence. It had its roots, at least partially, in the personal struggle alluded to in 'The Sea in Winter' (*Poems 1962-1978*), which highlighted the difficulties he experienced on his return to the North in the late 1970s.

Antarctica thus marks a decisive moment in his work, effectively bringing this first extended phase of his poetry (1968-1985) to an end. From the point of view of this thesis, it signals the fact that the ironic conscience has reached a certain impasse. The sense of contingency in relation to self and place has been well and truly expressed, the deck of literary masks or poetic *mises-en-scènes* largely played out. In terms of displacement, as the polar wilderness of the title suggests, there is literally nowhere else to go. The recurring motif of travel, exile, journeying which runs through the pamphlet and, indeed, Mahon's poetry to date, has reached 'the end of the earth' ('October'). The final line of 'A Kensington Notebook' ('What farther shore?') is proleptic in this regard, pondering not only the fate of Pound but the future direction of Mahon's work. It was not until the production of *The Yaddo Letter* in 1992 that this shore finally came into view, as the longer and looser, sequential verse form of *The Hudson Letter* (1995) and *The Yellow Book* (1997) marked a new departure. In the meantime, a period of silence ensued. It is prefigured in the recurring motif of the artist *in extremis* and the sense of an ending which overshadows *Antarctica.* They suggest that the ironic conscience itself is in crisis. In this context, the final poem 'Death and the Sun' signals 'the dying of the light' of inspiration at this juncture of Mahon's poetic career.

The Ironic Conscience at an End?

Several poems in *Antarctica* feature the artist in adversity, alluding to issues like alcoholism, depression, loneliness, breakdown, marital estrangement, masculine self-destruction, withdrawal and defeat. The opening poem 'A Kensington Notebook' looks at the lives of the three modernists, Ford, Lewis and Pound, at particular points of crisis following two World

Wars.[7] It pays tribute to that kink of eccentricity or creative madness which set them at odds with received opinion (Ford is described as 'An old cod in a land / Unfit for heroes', Pound as 'Confucius of the dooryard' and Lewis as 'Adam versus the Broad / Church of received opinion').[8] Like so many of Mahon's artistic outsiders, the single-minded pursuit of their solitary vision largely contributed to their marginal status, exacerbated by Pound's regard for Mussolini and Lewis's support for Hitler (later retracted in *The Hitler Cult* (1939).[9] 'Perfection of the life', it seems (to recall Yeats's phrase, cited by Mahon in 'Knut Hamsun in Old Age' (*The Hunt by Night*)) eluded these modernists in their pursuit of artistic excellence.[10] The poem highlights their commitment to literature, not as a surrender to interiority or subjectivism (which Lewis's *The Apes of God* (1930) decried), but a challenge to the increasing hollowness and banality of civilisation. Their 'creative thrust' kept the 'sacred flame' of art alive, a light to lighten 'the evil / Done in their day'. The latter, as the opening section expressed it, included the horrors of the Great War, reference to 'a lost generation / Dumbfounded on the Somme' echoing Pound's 'botched civilisation'.[11] Such horrors, which marked the 'death-throes of an era', were graphically depicted in Lewis's war paintings, featured in section three ('A moonscape, 'trees like gibbets', / Shrapnel, wire, the thud / Of howitzers, spike-helmeted / Skeletons in the mud').[12] In turn, these paintings recall Ford Madox Brown's 'The last of England' in section one, the Pre-Raphaelite artist being a grandfather of Ford. 'A Kensington Notebook' thus neatly sets up the theme of ending, which pervades the pamphlet as a whole. As the final section expressed it:

> Ford dies abroad,
> A marginal figure still;
> And Lewis self-condemned,

---

[7] Like the verse-letters 'Beyond Howth Head' (*Lives*) and 'The Sea in Winter' (*Poems 1962-1978*), as well as the sequence 'Light Music' (*Poems 1962-1978*), 'A Kensington Notebook' was originally published in pamphlet form - *A Kensington Notebook* (London: Anvil Press, 1984).

[8] Here they are linked with the figure of Camus in 'Death and the Sun', who is described as 'a stranger bayed by dogs' in stanza one.

[9] The relationship between the aesthetic and reactionary politics is thus obliquely addressed. Here the poem looks back to 'Knut Hamsun in Old Age' (*The Hunt by Night*), who also 'shook hands with Hitler'. In 'Letter to Lord Byron' (1936), referred to in the context of 'Beyond Howth Head' in Chapter Three, Auden described Lewis as 'that lonely old volcano of the Right'.

[10] As outlined in Chapter One, p. 48, Paulin alluded to Yeats's phrase from 'The Choice' in relation to Mahon's poetry.

[11] Ezra Pound, 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley', *Collected Shorter Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), p. 191. The preceding reference to 'Bitches in country houses…' enforces the link with Pound's well-known lines from the opening section of 'Mauberley' (poem V): 'There died a myriad, / And of the best, among them, / For an old bitch gone in the teeth, / For a botched civilization'. In addition, 'The rest is dust' in the final section recalls Pound's declaration in 'Mauberley' (p. 89), 'a tawdry cheapness / Shall outlast our days'.

[12] After the Battle of Ypres in 1917, Lewis was appointed as an official war artist for both the Canadian and British governments (he was born in Canada in 1882).

Eyeless in Notting Hill.

Pound released, reads
To his grandchildren; 'helps'
With the garden; dozes off in a high
Silence of the Alps –

Un rameur, finally,
Sur le fleuve des morts,
Poling his profile toward
What farther shore?

These lines illustrate the poem's formal dynamic as it draws divergent elements together, following the densely allusive style of Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley', which provides the underlying model for the poem's satirical theme and structure. Reference to 'Lewis self-condemned, / Eyeless in Notting Hill', incorporates the semi-autobiographical *Self Condemned* (1954) and the book of short stories *Rotting Hill* (1951). These recall two other Lewis texts embedded in section three, namely the autobiographical *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937) and *Monstre Gai*, the second novel of his trilogy *The Human Age* published in 1955: 'Aesthetic bombardiering / Prefigured the real thing, / the *monstre gai* in a vortex / Of "stone laughing"'.[13] The effect of this elaborate bricolage is slightly oppressive, sitting uneasily alongside the fluency and verve of previous poems, which highlighted Mahon's adopted masks or alter egos. The literary allusion seems somewhat factitious, intent on impressing, if not entertaining, the critic pack (to recall Frost's phrase, cited in the Introduction).[14] The concluding image of Pound as *'Un rameur...sur le fleuve des morts'* ('a rower on the river of the dead'), strikes the terminal note which stands out in *Antarctica*. Here the image looks forward to the 'final river' in 'October', only unlike the ghostly figures searching their pockets 'for the Stygian fare' in that poem, the American poet single-handedly poles 'his profile toward / What farther shore'.[15]

The following poem 'Craigvara House' continues the autobiographical mode of 'The Sea in Winter', as Mahon confronts his own demons or 'desert places' (to echo Frost's poem of

---

[13] These lines also acknowledge Lewis's 'Vorticism' (as Pound dubbed it), which injected the vitality of Futurism into Cubist art. Its short-lived journal *Blast: The Review of the Great English Vortex* (1914-15) is referred to in section three: 'Asquith was not amused / When the editor of *Blast*...').

[14] The poem alludes to a whole range of texts. Apart from those mentioned already, these include Pound's *The Spirit of Romance* (1910) and *Personae* (1909), Lewis's *Tarr* (1918), as well as Ford's *Parade's End* (1924-1928), in particular *Last Post*, originally the fourth novel in the sequence ('No more parades.../ Ghostly bugles sound / The 'Last Post'...'). Pound's phrase is cited in the Introduction, p. 7.

[15] As Haughton noted in *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 201, it was Cocteau who called Pound '*un rameur sur le fleuve des morts*'.

that title).[16] The poem recalls the crisis he experienced on return to the North of Ireland in the late 1970s, describing it variously as 'the year / of the black nights…of watchful anomie, / heart silence'; a sojourn in the wilderness ('I slowly came / to treasure my ashram'); a kind of night-crossing ('and crossed by night / a dark channel') or period of imprisonment:

> I stared each night
> at a glow of yellow light
> over the water where the interned sat tight
>
> (I in my own prison
> envying their fierce reason,
> their solidarity and extroversion)
>
> and during storms
> imagined the clenched farms
> with dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms.[17]

This painful time had its origins in Mahon's battle with alcoholism, the embedded reference to Milton's *Paradise Lost* ('with dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms') recalling De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*.[18] The addiction put severe strain on his marriage, as evident in the poem's association of domesticity not with comfort and security but heartbreak and pain: 'I thought, home is where the heart breaks – // the lost domain / of week-ends in the rain, / the Sunday sundae and the sexual pain'.[19] Reference to 'the lost domain', an allusion to the novel *Le Grand Meaulnes* by Alain Fournier (which Mahon reviewed for the *Irish Times* in 1986), suggests home itself can be a desert place, marked by estrangement and unfulfilled longing.[20]

The theme of home also surfaces in 'Mount Gabriel', the poem immediately following 'Craigvara House'. Like the mushrooms in 'A Disused Shed' (*The Snow Party*), these 'giant' radars (which transmit pulses to airplanes flying over the Atlantic) metamorphose into 'Angels…aliens…burnt-out meteorites, time-capsules…intermediaries'. Here the poem echoes 'The Globe in North Carolina' (*The Hunt by Night*) with it reference to 'Lost

---

[16] Frost, 'Desert Places', *Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 58. The final lines are particularly appropriate for 'Craigvara House': 'I have it in me so much nearer home / To scare myself with my own desert places'.

[17] The 'glow of yellow light / over the water' refers to Magilligan prison in Limavady, Co. Derry.

[18] As outlined in Chapter Two in relation to 'De Quincey in Later Life' (*Night-Crossing*), Milton's line, from *Paradise Lost*, Book XII, concludes De Quincey's *Confessions*..

[19] The opening section of 'A Kensington Notebook' also betrays negative associations with home, though on the level of society rather than the individual. It rhymes 'home' not with 'bomb', as in 'Afterlives' (*The Snow Party*), but with 'the Somme': 'What price the dewy-eyed / Pelagianism of home / To a lost generation / Dumbfounded on the Somme?'

[20] Mahon, 'The Big Moan' (a review of Fournier's *The Lost Domain*), *Journalism*, pp. 140-142. The title of the article is J. G. Farrell's translation of the French author's novel.

meteorites in search of home'. For Mahon, these technological constructions are racked with anthropomorphic longing and desire: 'sick / With exile, they yearn homeward now, their eyes / Tuned to the ultramarine, first-star-pierced dark'. They too are depicted *in extremis*, stranded in a state of perpetual suspension between primal origins and future apocalypse ('here for ever now as intermediaries / Between the big bang and our scattered souls').[21] Reference to the cave ('The geodesic domes have left their caves'), which recalls the 'ashram' or 'prison' in 'Craigvara House', links their plight with 'Plato's neolithic troglodyte' in 'Death and the Sun'. The pamphlet thus sets up a subtle network of correspondences between different poems, enforcing the theme of adversity, estrangement, exile, suffering and unfulfilment.

With its epigraph from Beckett's *The Unnamable* ('Worm will see the light in a desert'), 'Tithonus' picks up the desert imagery in the pamphlet, while also reflecting the longing for release in 'Craigvara House' and 'Mt. Gabriel'. This light represents the elusive transfiguration ('Awaiting, as I have done / For centuries, / My transfiguration') for this mythological character, whose dismal plight (of living forever in a residual form) exemplifies the artist in adversity. The poem is a veritable gazetteer of sites of human suffering, as it free-floats from Thermopylae, Golgotha and Krakatoa to Dresden, Hiroshima and Ethiopia (whose dreadful famine prompted the Live Aid concert in 1985, the year *Antarctica* was published).[22] However, the tone is light or full of dry and self-deprecating wit. Like the afflicted speaker in *The Unnamable*, Tithonus wrests grim humour in face of the absurd:

> If they could see
> Me now, reduced
> To this absurdity…
>
> Perhaps I shall die
> At long last,
> Face in the dust –
>
> Having seen,
> Not that I asked,
> The light in the desert.

[21] The repeated 'now' ('yearn homeward now', 'here for ever now') intensifies the note of pathos, just as the vertiginous sense of time and space heightens their plaintive 'exile'.
[22] Like 'A Garage in Co. Cork' or 'Ovid in Tomis' in *The Hunt by Night*, the poem oscillates between literary, mythological and historical worlds as Eos, Echo, Endymion, Selene and Tithonus figure alongside Heraclitus and Genghis Khan.

The 'light in the desert', which recalls the 'glow of yellow light' or 'the flickering pier-light' in 'Craigvara House', also links 'Tithonus' with the following poem, 'St. Eustace'. Based on a painting by the Italian artist Pisanello (1395-1455), it aligns the conversion of the Roman Placidus, as he witnesses a vision of the crucified Christ on the antlers of a deer, with Arthurian legend ('Gawain caught in a cold cathedral') and the Acts of the Apostles ('Paul / Blind on a desert road'). The central theme is martyrdom as Placidus, like St. Paul, was persecuted for his spiritual transformation. The hunter becomes the hunted, as the poem concludes with another image of the artist in extremity: 'Braised in his own fat for his contumacy / And vision; in his dying briefly / One with the hind, the hare / And the ring-dove'. Reference to 'contumacy / And vision' associates Placidus with Mahon's band of outsiders, echoing 'The Poet in Residence' (his version of Corbière's *Le Poète Contumace*) in *Poems 1962-1978*.

Like 'Tithonus', the epigraph in 'Achill', from the Gaelic poet Piaras Féiritéar, '*im chaoinaí uaigneach nach mór go bhfeicim and lá*' ('a desolate waif scarce seeing the light of day'), encapsulates the longing for release.[23] In this poem, isolation ('the solitude locked in my mind') and dejection ('lift the weight from my heart') constitute the mind's 'desert places', as the poet is separated from his wife and children on holiday in Greece. The final lines (which reflect an experimentation with Gaelic forms) capture the ebb and flow of the sea around this island in the West of Ireland, as well as the poet's 'disconsolate' mood:

> And I lie and imagine the lights going on in the harbour
> Of white-housed Náousa, your clear definition at night,
> And wish you were here to upstage my disconsolate labour
> As I glance through a few thin pages and switch off the light.[24]

'Dejection' continues the bleak note in *Antarctica*, adding the figure of Lear on the heath to other images of the artist under duress.

> Bone-idle, I lie listening to the rain,
> Not tragic now nor yet to frenzy bold.
> Must I stand out in thunderstorms again
> Who have twice come in from the cold?

---

[23] The translation, which is not included in *Antarctica*, is from Frank Sewell's article, 'Derek Mahon: Coming in from the Cold', in Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, p. 189.

[24] Reference to 'white-housed Náousa' recalls 'the dancing lights / Of Paros' in 'The Sea in Winter' (*Poems 1962-1978*), just as the concluding image looks back to 'Beyond Howth Head' (*Lives*), in which the speaker puts out the light 'on Mailer's *Armies of the Night*'.

Reference to 'twice' recalls the difficult period Mahon experienced on return to 'the cold north' in the late 1970s, in which he compared himself to the prodigal son in Ibsen's *Ghosts* 'crying out for the sun' ('The Sea in Winter').[25] The association with Lear is apposite given the conclusion of the following poem, 'Night Drive' (*after Rilke*), which speaks of another journey 'in from the cold' or the mind's release from the 'knot' of madness:

> ...as if one
> long mad should find the knot untied
> and watch, recovered and clear-eyed,
> a fixed idea in its Byzantine,
> varnished and adamantine shrine
> spin off from the whirling mind
> and vanish, leaving not a trace behind.

Rilke's poem thus neatly enforces the imagery of previous poems, the very title echoing Mahon's own night-crossing in 'Craigvara House'. It links the icy waste of Antarctica with pre-Revolutionary St. Petersburg (the poem is dated 1900), as 'the Czar's private park' is seen to be 'frozen for ever in the past'. These references in turn set up a connection with 'October', the companion poem (on the facing page) to 'Dejection'. It is a key poem in the pamphlet, highlighting its sense of an ending. The title of Eugene O'Neill's celebrated play, which is used in connection with the exploits of a double-agent (presumably Guy Burgess) working for Soviet intelligence during the Cold War, has particular resonance for poems like 'Antarctica' and 'Craigvara House':

> Europe, after the first rain of winter,
> shines with a corpse-light.
> A cold wind scours the condemned playground;
> leaves swarm like dead souls
> down bleak avenues as if they led
> to the kingdom of the dead.
> An alcoholic defector
> picks out 'Rock of Ages' with one finger
> on the grand piano in his Moscow flat,
> his long day's journey into night
> almost complete. Some cold fate
> awaits us at the end of the earth.[26]

The bleak imagery heightens the impression of a Beckettian endgame, as Europe assumes the ghostly aura of an out-of-season resort. It resembles a 'condemned playground' (an

---

[25] In that verse-letter (as we have seen in Chapter Five) suffering is associated with the dying of the light: 'Slumped in a deckchair, full of pills / While light died in the choral hills'.

[26] Burgess (1911-1963) was part of the Cambridge Five spy ring that passed information to Soviet intelligence before and during the Cold War (other members included Anthony Blunt, Donald Duart Maclean and Kim Philby, the so-called Fifth Man never having been formally identified). He was notorious for his overt alcoholism, defecting (alongside Maclean) to Moscow.

allusion to Cyril Connolly's collection of essays in 1945) in which souls, like leaves, are scattered in the 'cold wind'.[27] The metaphor recalls the earlier poem 'Leaves' (*The Snow Party*), while reference to 'the kingdom of the dead' links the whole continent with Hades or the Underworld. In this context, the popular Christian hymn 'Rock of Ages' is more than a little ironic, for some 'cold fate' rather than redeeming presence 'awaits us at the end of the earth'. The final lines enforce the terminal note, as crossing the Styx becomes the ultimate journey into night: 'Like the leaves we are coming within / sight of the final river...As if ghosts already, / we search our pockets for the Stygian fare'.[28]

Mention of ghosts in the context of earth's extremity obliquely echoes the title poem, which sees the severely frostbitten and malnourished explorer 'Goading his ghost into the howling snow'. A similar 'cold fate' marks his final journey:

> 'I am just going outside and may be some time'.
> The others nod, pretending not to know.
> At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.
>
> He leaves them reading and begins to climb,
> Goading his ghost into the howling snow;
> He is just going outside and may be some time.

A whole series of correspondences thus link these 'solitaries in the cold', as Oates in Antarctica, Rilke and Burgess in Russia, Lear on the heath, all enforce the sense of an ending in *Antarctica*.[29] It is the most extreme of Mahon's studies of the exiled imagination, highlighting the image of the artist on the edge. However, all of these figures are also a metaphor for the ironic conscience itself which had reached an impasse, the traversing of which took Mahon 'some time' (to echo the villanelle's choric phrase).

'Death and the Sun', the final poem dedicated to Camus, draws many of these correspondences together, while stressing the pamphlet's terminal note. Here the polar wilderness gives way to desert landscape as this particular solitary is more associated with the sun. The epigraph from La Rochefoucauld, '*Le soleil ni la mort ne se peuvent regarder fixement* ('One cannot stare for long at death or the sun'), which obliquely recalls Oates's

---

[27] Connolly, *The Condemned Playground: Essays 1927-1944* (New York: Macmillan, 1946). Mahon's article on Connolly ('Palinurus'), which appeared in the *Irish Times* in 1989, is included in *Journalism* (pp. 198-201).
[28] The idea of being 'ghosts already' is another instance of the Freudian *unheimlich*, as human existence resembles a kind of afterlife (to echo the opening poem in *The Snow Party*).
[29] As outlined in the Introduction, Mahon (in interview with Grennan, p. 124) associated poetry not with 'the voice of community' (people in 'warm spaces') but with 'solitaries in the cold...in the open, which is where the human soul really is'.

desperate predicament, also reflects the metaphor of the desert which runs through the poem.[30] Like 'October', the poem taps the imagery of ghosts, depicting Belfast as another Underworld in which the unemployed, like 'Sisyphus's descendants', await release:

> The lights are going on in towns that no longer exist.
> Night falls on Belfast, on the just and the unjust,
> On its Augustinian austerities of sand and stone –
> While Sisyphus' descendants, briefly content,
> Stand in the dole queues and roll their own.
> Malraux described these preterite to you
> As no longer historically significant;
> And certainly they are shrouded in white dust.
> All souls leprous, blinded by truth, each ghost
> Steams on the shore as if awaiting rescue.[31]

The city, with its 'dole queues', is depicted as another 'condemned playground'. A deathly (if not nicotine) shroud overhangs 'these preterite' who savour a moment's respite from the unremitting futility ('roll their own' neatly plays with the mythical allusion). Their plight typifies *La Condition Humaine* (to adapt the title of Malraux's novel in 1933), 'awaiting rescue' from its fallen state. 'All souls leprous, blinded by truth' anticipates the image of the Platonic cave in the final stanza:

> One cannot stare for long at death or the sun.
> Imagine Plato's Neolithic troglodyte
> Released from his dark cinema, released even
> From the fire proper, so that he stands at last,
> Absurd and anxious, out in the open air
> And gazes, shading his eyes, at the world there –
> Tangible fact ablaze in a clear light
> That casts no shadow, where the vast
> Sun gongs its lenity from a brazen heaven
> Listening in silence to his rich despair.

Reference to 'a clear light / That casts no shadow' deftly incorporates Camus's description of *The Outsider* as a man who 'is in love with the sun that leaves no shadows'.[32] Like Meursault en route from his own dark prison at the novel's close, this 'neolithic troglodyte' stands in the face of death. Purged of illusion, he opens himself to the benign indifference of 'a brazen heaven'. He finally sees 'the world' as it is in a surge of 'rich

---

[30] Mahon's translation of the epigraph becomes the opening line of the final stanza. A 'blinding desert sun' in the opening stanza echoes 'a hot beach white as a scream' in stanza two and 'A desert of fog and water' in stanza five.

[31] As outlined in Chapter Two, Mahon read Camus's *Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) during his stay in the Latin Quarter in Paris in the autumn of 1964. In his poem, 'Letter to Derek Mahon' (1971), Longley referred to Mahon and himself (in the context of the Northern Troubles) as 'Two Sisyphuses come to budge / the sticks and stones of an old grudge'. It is referred to in Chapter One, p. 40.

[32] This description, from the preface to the American University Edition of *The Outsider*, is cited in Philip Thody (ed. & translator), *Albert Camus: Selected Essays and Notebooks* (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 208.

despair'. The pamphlet's concluding phrase, which encapsulates Camus's paradox of the Absurd (the duality of life's value and ultimate meaninglessness), enforces the theme of ending.[33] It also recalls, what Mahon termed, Connolly's 'magnificent prediction': 'It is closing time in the gardens of the west, and from now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude or the quality of his despair'.[34] 'Death and the Sun' speaks eloquently for all the despairing artists in *Antarctica*, including Mahon himself. His later revision, if not radical erasure, of the poem suggests that it marked a dramatic end to this first extended phase of his work, the final 'silence' (like Oates's last words) anticipating his spell in the creative wilderness.[35]

[33] Camus's theory of the Absurd is founded on such dualisms as life and death, light and dark, hope and despair. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the duality of life's value and ultimate meaninglessness presents a certain paradox.

[34] Mahon, 'Palinurus', *Journalism*, p. 220. The lines concluded Connolly's final editorial ('Comment') for *Horizon*.

[35] In Mahon's *Collected Poems* (1999), the poem is re-titled 'Camus in Ulster'. Its nine lines are a reworking of the second stanza in 'Death and the Sun'.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

WORKS BY DEREK MAHON

VERSE

Twelve Poems (Belfast: Festival Publications, 1965).

Design for a Grecian Urn (Cambridge Mass.: Erato Press, 1966).

Night-Crossing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

Beyond Howth Head (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1970).

Ecclesiastes (Manchester: Phoenix Pamphlet Poets Press, 1970).

Lives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

The Snow Party (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Light Music (Belfast: Ulsterman Publications, 1977).

In Their Element: A Selection of Poems. With Seamus Heaney (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1977).

The Sea in Winter (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1979).

Poems 1962-1978 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

Courtyards in Delft (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1981).

The Hunt by Night (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

A Kensington Notebook (London: Anvil Press, 1984).

Antarctica (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1985).

Selected Poems (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1991; London: Penguin, 1991; New York, Viking Penguin, 1991).

The Yaddo Letter (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1992).

The Hudson Letter (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1995).

The Yellow Book (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1997).

Collected Poems (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1999).

Roman Script (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2000).

Selected Poems (London: Penguin, 2000).

Resistance Days (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2001).

Harbour Lights (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2005).

Selected Poems (London: Penguin, 2006).

The Life of Things (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2008).

TRANSLATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

The Chimeras: A Version of Les Chimères by Gérard de Nerval (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1982).

High Time, After Molière (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1985).

The School for Wives, After Molière (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1986).

Selected Poems by Philippe Jaccottet (London: Viking, 1987; Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988; Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Wake Forest University Press, 1988).

Night Without Day, translation from the French of Raphaële Billetdoux's novel (New York: Viking, 1987).

Racine's Phaedra (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1996).

Words in the Air: A Selection of Poems by Phillipe Jaccottet, with translations and introduction by Derek Mahon (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1998).

The Seaside Cemetery: A Version of 'Le Cimetière Marin' by Paul Valéry (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2001).

Saint-John Perse, *Birds: A Version by Derek Mahon* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2002).

Cyrano de Bergerac: a new version of Rostand's 'heroic comedy' (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2002).

Oedipus (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2006).

Adaptations (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2006).

EDITED BOOKS

The Sphere Book of Modern Irish Verse (London: Sphere, 1972).

The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry, ed. Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon (London: Penguin, 1990).

Jonathan Swift, *Poems selected by Derek Mahon* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

Patrick MacDonogh, *Poems*, edited and introduced by Derek Mahon (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2001).

Dylan Thomas, *Poems selected by Derek Mahon* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

ARTICLES AND LITERARY CRITICISM

'Poetry in Northern Ireland', *Twentieth Century Studies*, 4 (November 1970).

Journalism: *Selected Prose 1970-1995,* ed. Terence Brown (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1996).

'Yeats and the Lights of Dublin', *The Dublin Review*, 8 (Autumn 2002).

TELEVISION ADAPTIONS

Shadows on our Skin, adapted from the novel by Jennifer Johnston. BBC 1, London, 20 March 1980.

Summer Lightning, adapted from the novel *First Love* by Ivan Turgenev. RTE, Dublin and Channel 4, London, 1982 / 1984.

How Many Miles to Babylon?, adapted from the novel by Jennifer Johnston. BBC 2, London, 26 February 1982.

Death of the Heart, adapted from the novel by Elizabeth Bowen. Granada, London, 22 December 1985.

Demon Lover, adapted from the novel by Elizabeth Bowen. Granada, London, 21 June 1986.

ABOUT MAHON

SPECIAL ISSUES

Donnelly, Brian (ed.), *Irish University Review*, *Derek Mahon Special Number*, 24, 1 (Spring / Summer 1994).

BOOKS

Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, *Ulster Editions and Monographs: 11* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002).

Haughton, Hugh, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

INTERVIEWS

Battersby, Eileen, 'Made in Belfast: An Interview with Derek Mahon', *Sunday Tribune*, 25 August 1990.

'A Very European Poet', *Irish Times*, 10 November 1992.

Boland, Eavan, 'Northern Writers' Crisis of Conscience: 1: Community', *Irish Times*, 12 August 1970.

'Northern Writers' Crisis of Conscience: 2: Crisis', *Irish Times*, 13 August 1970.

'Northern Writers' Crisis of Conscience: 3: Creativity', *Irish Times*, 14 August 1970.

Brown, Terence, 'Interview with Derek Mahon', *Poetry Ireland*, 14 (Autumn 1985).

Cooke, Harriet, 'Harriet Cooke talks to the Poet Derek Mahon', *Irish Times*, 17 January 1973.

Grennan, Eamon, 'Derek Mahon: The Art of Poetry', *Paris Review* (Spring 2000).

Kelly, Willie, 'Each Poem for me is a New Beginning', *Cork Review*, 2, 3 (June 1981).

Murphy, James J., McDiarmid, Lucy and Durkan, Micheal J., 'Derek Mahon', in James P. Myers Jr. (ed.), *Writing Irish: Selected Interviews with Irish Writers from the Irish Literary Supplement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999).

Ní Anluain, Clíodhna (ed.), *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000).

Patten, Eve, 'Translations: An Interview with Derek Mahon', *Rhinoceros*, 3 (1990).

Scammell, William, 'Derek Mahon Interviewed', *Poetry Review*, 81, 2 (Summer 1991).

ARTICLES AND CHAPTERS OF BOOKS ON MAHON

Allen, Michael, 'Rhythm and Revision in Mahon's Poetic Development', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002).

Boland, Eavan, 'Compact and Compromise: Derek Mahon as a Young Poet', *Irish University Review* 24, 1 (Spring / Summer 1994).

Brearton, Fran, 'A Dying Art: Derek Mahon's Solving Ambiguity', in *The Great War in Irish Poetry: W. B. Yeats to Michael Longley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

---'Poetry of the 1960s: the 'Northern Ireland Renaissance', in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Brown, Terence, 'Four New Voices: Poets of the Present', in *Northern Voices* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975).

---'A Northern Renaissance: Poets from the North of Ireland 1965-1980', in *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays* (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1988).

---'Home and Away: Derek Mahon's France', in B. Hayley and C. Murray (eds.), *Ireland and France, A Bountiful Friendship* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992).

---'Derek Mahon: The Poet and Painting', *Irish University Review*, 24, 1 (Spring / Summer 1994).

---'Mahon and Longley: place and placelessness', in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Byrne, John, 'Derek Mahon: A Commitment to Change', *Crane Bag* 6, 1 (1982).

Clutterbuck, Catriona, '"Elpenor's crumbling oar": Disconnection and Art in Derek Mahon', *Irish University Review* 24, 1 (Spring / Summer 1994).

Corcoran, Neil, 'Resident Alien: America in the Poetry of Derek Mahon', in *Poets of Modern Ireland: Text, Context, Intertext* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1999).

Dawe, Gerald, '"Icon and Lares": Derek Mahon and Michael Longley', in Gerald Dawe and Edna Longley (eds.), *Across a Roaring Hill: The Protestant Imagination in Modern Ireland* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1985).

---'Heirs and Graces: The Influence and Example of Derek Mahon', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002).

Deane, Seamus, 'Mugwumps and Reptiles', *Atlantis*, 2 (October 1970).

---'Irish Poetry and Irish Nationalism', in Douglas Dunn (ed.), *Two Decades of Irish Writing* (Cheadie: Carcanet, 1975).

---'Derek Mahon: Freedom from History', in *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985).

Denman, Peter, 'Know the One? Insolent Ontology and Mahon's Revisions', *Irish University Review* 24, 1 (Spring / Summer 1994).

Donnelly, Brian, 'The Poetry of Derek Mahon', *English Studies* 60, 1 (1979).

Dunn, Douglas, 'Maňana is Now', *Encounter* 45 (1975).

Duytschaever, Joris, 'History in the Poetry of Derek Mahon', in Joris Duytschaever and Geert Lernout (eds.), *History and Violence in Irish Literature*, *Costerus*, vol. 71 (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1978).

Frazier, Adrian, 'Proper Portion: Derek Mahon's *The Hunt by Night*' (review), *Éire-Ireland*, 18, 4 (Winter 1983).

Goodby, John, '"The Soul of Silence": Derek Mahon's Masculinities', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002).

Graham, Colin, 'Derek Mahon's Cultural Marginalia', in Eve Patten (ed.), *Returning To Ourselves: Second Volume of Papers from the John Hewitt International Summer School* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995).

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

---'The Importance of Elsewhere: Derek Mahon and Translation', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002).

---'On Sitting Down to Read 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' Once Again', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 31, 2 (June 2002).

Heaney, Seamus, 'The Pre-Natal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry', in *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

---'Place and Displacement: Reflections on Some Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland', in Elmer-Andrews (ed.), *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992).

Homem, Rui Carvalho, 'Of Furies and Forgers: *Ekphrasis*, Re-vision, and Translation in Derek Mahon', *New Hibernia Review*, 8, 4 (Winter 2004).

Horton, Patricia, 'Degree Zero: Language, Subjectivity and Apocalypse in the Poetry of Derek Mahon', *Irish Studies Review*, 8, 3 (December 2000).

---'"The Half-Sure Legislator": Romantic Legacies in the Writing of Derek Mahon and Tom Paulin', *Irish University Review* 31, 2 (Autumn / Winter 2001).

Jarniewicz, Jerzy, 'Derek Mahon: History, Mute Phenomena and Beyond', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002).

Johnston, Dillon, 'MacNeice and Mahon', in *Irish Poetry After Joyce* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

Kendall, Tim, 'Leavetakings and Homecomings, Derek Mahon's Belfast', *Eire-Ireland*, 29, 4 (1994).

Kennelly, Brendan, 'Derek Mahon's Humane Perspective', in Terence Brown and Nicholas Grene (eds.), *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

Kerrigan, John, 'Ulster Ovids', in Neil Corcoran (ed.), *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992).

Longley, Edna, 'Stars and Horses, Pigs and Trees', *Crane Bag*, 3, 2 (1979).

---'The Writer and Belfast', in Maurice Harmon (ed.), *The Irish Writer and the City*, Irish Literary Studies 18 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002).

---'Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland' and 'The Singing Line: Form in Derek Mahon's Poetry', in *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1986).

---'Where a Thought Might Grow', *Poetry Review*, 81, 2 (Summer 1991).

---'The Aesthetic and the Territorial', in Elmer-Andrews (ed.), *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992).

---'Derek Mahon: Extreme Religion of Art', in Micheal Kenneally (ed.), *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerards Cross, 1995).

---'Atlantic's Premises: American Influences on Northern Irish Poetry in the 1960s', *Poetry and Posterity* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000).

---'Looking Back from *The Yellow Book*', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002).

Longley, Michael, 'The Empty Holes of Spring: Some Reminiscences of Trinity & Two Poems Addressed to Derek Mahon', *Irish University Review* 24, 1 (Spring / Summer 1994).

McCracken, Kathleen, 'Homophrosyne: The French Element in the Poetry of Derek Mahon', in Joseph McMinn (ed.), *The Internationalism of Irish Literature and Drama* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1992).

McDonald, Peter, 'Derek Mahon, Tom Paulin, and the Lost Tribe', in *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

Maxwell, D. E. S., 'Contemporary Poetry in the North of Ireland', in Douglas Dunn (ed.), *Two Decades of Irish Writing* (Cheadle: Carcanet, 1975).

Paulin, Tom, 'A Terminal Ironist', in *Ireland and the English Crisis* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1984).

Redmond, John, 'Wilful Inconsistency: Derek Mahon's Verse-Letters', *Irish University Review* 24, 1 (Spring / Summer 1994).

Riordan, Maurice, 'An Urbane Perspective: The Poetry of Derek Mahon' in Maurice Harmon (ed.), *The Irish Writer and the City*, *Irish Literary Studies*, 18 (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1984).

Sewell, Frank, 'Derek Mahon: Coming in from the Cold', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002).

Shields, Kathleen, 'Derek Mahon's Poetry of Belonging', *Irish University Review* 24, 1 (Spring / Summer 1994).

Sloan, Barry, 'Derek Mahon: "Singing the darkness into the light"', in *Writers and Protestantism in the North of Ireland: Heirs to Damnation* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000).

Smith, Stan, 'Margins of Tolerance: Responses to Post-War Decline', in *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth Century Poetry* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992).

---'The Twilight of the Cities: Derek Mahon's Dark Cinema', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002).

Stewart, Bruce, 'Solving Ambiguity: The Secular Mysticism of Derek Mahon', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (ed.), *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2002).

Tinley, Bill, 'International Perspectives in the Poetry of Derek Mahon', *Irish University Review* 21, 1 (Spring / Summer 1991).

---'"Harmonies and Disharmonies": Derek Mahon's Francophile Poetics', *Irish University Review* 24, 1 (Spring / Summer 1994).

Waterman, Andrew, '"Somewhere, Out there, Beyond": The Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon', *PN Review*, 8, 1 (1980).

Wilson, William A., 'A Theoptic Eye: Derek Mahon's *The Hunt by Night*', *Eire-Ireland*, 25, 4 (Winter 1990).

OTHER WORK

W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems,* ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976).

Barker, Jonathan (ed.), *Thirty Years of the Poetry Book Society*: 1956-1986 (London: Hutchinson, 1988).

Beckett, Samuel, *Molloy* (New York: Grove Press, 1955).

---*Collected Poems in English and French* (New York: Grove Press, 1977).

---*The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979).

---*Disjecta* (London: John Calder, 1983).

---*Collected Shorter Prose 1945-1980* (London: John Calder, 1986).

Bashō, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Sketches*, trans. and with an introduction by Nobuyuki Yuasa (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).

Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Cape, 1970).

Bew, Paul and Gillespie, Gordon, *Northern Ireland*: *A Chronology of the Troubles 1968-1999* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1999).

Bew, Paul, Gibbon, Peter and Patterson, Henry, *Northern Ireland 1921-2001: Political Forces and Social Classes* (London: Serif, 2002).

Boland, Eavan, *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989).

Borges, Jorge Luis, *Selected Poems 1923-1967* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1985).

Brearton, Fran, *Reading Michael Longley* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2006).

Brown, John, *In the Chair*: *Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Clare: Salmon Publishing, 2002).

Brown, Terence and Reid, Alec (eds.), *Time was Away* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1974).

Brown, Terence, *Louis MacNeice: Sceptical Vision* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975).

---*Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays* (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1988).

Bunting, Basil, *Collected Poems* (London: Fulcrum Press, 1968).

Buxton, Rachel, *Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

Campbell, Matthew, 'Ireland in poetry: 1999, 1949, 1969', in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Caplan, David, *Questions of Possibility*: *Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Carson, Ciaran, *Fishing for amber: a long story* (London: Granta Books, 1999).

Clark, Heather, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962-1972* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Clarke, Austin, *Selected Poems* (Portlaoise: Dolmen Press, 1984).

Clyde, Tom (ed.), *Ancestral Voices: Selected Prose of John Hewitt* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1987).

Corcoran, Neil (ed.), *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992).

Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993).

---*After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

---Poets of Modern Ireland: Text, Context, Intertext (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1999).

Crane, Ralph and Livett, Jennifer (eds.), *Troubled Pleasures: The Fiction of J. G. Farrell* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997).

Cronin, Anthony, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1997).

Dawe, Gerald, *Against Piety: Essays in Irish Poetry* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995).

---*The Rest is History* (Belfast: Abbey Press, 1998).

---*Stray Dogs and Dark Horses* (Newry: Abbey Press, 2000).

Deane, *Gradual Wars* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972).

Deane (ed.), *Ireland's Field Day* (London: Hutchinson, 1985).

Devine, Kathleen and Peacock, Alan J. (eds.), *Louis MacNeice and His Influence* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1998).

Dunn, Douglas, *Terry Street* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

Durcan, Paul, *A Snail in My Prime: Selected Poems* (London: The Harvill Press, 1993).

Egan, Desmond and Hartnett, Michael (eds.), *Choice* (Curragh: Goldsmith Press, 1979).

Eliot, T. S., *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983).

---*Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).

---*Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

Frost, Robert, *Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1992).

Farrell, J. G., *Troubles* (London: Flamingo, 1984).

---*The Siege of Krishnapur* (London: Flamingo, 1985).

---*The Hill Station* (London: Flamingo, 1987).

Goodby, John, *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

Haffenden, John (ed.), *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981).

Hamsun, Knut, *Hunger* (London: Picador, 1976).

Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul (eds.), *Art in Theory: 1900-1990* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

Heaney, Seamus, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966).

---*Door into the Dark* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969).

---*Wintering Out* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972)

---*North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).

---*Station Island* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

---*Finders Keepers*: *Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

Heuser, Alan (ed.), *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Hill, Geoffrey, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1985).

Holub, Miroslav, *Poems: Before & After* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1990).

Hughes, Ted, *Selected Poems 1957-1981* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984).

Hutcheon, Linda, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Jameson, Frederic, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989).

Kavanagh, Patrick, *Collected Poems* (London: Martin Brian & O'Keeffe, 1972).

Kearney, Richard and Rainwater, Mara (eds.), *The Continental Philosophy Reader* (Routledge: London, 1996).

Kendall, Tim, *Paul Muldoon* (Mid Glamorgan: Seren, 1996).

Kendall, Tim and McDonald, Peter (eds.), *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004).

Kennelly, Brendan, *Journey into Joy: Selected Prose* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1994).

Kinsella, Thomas, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2001).

Kirkland, Richard, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland since 1965: Moments of Danger* (London: Longman, 1996).

Larkin, Philip, *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964).

---*Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

Larrissy, Edward (ed.), *W. B. Yeats*: *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Lewis, Jeremy, *Playing For Time* (London: Flamingo, 1987).

Longley, Edna, ''Inner Emigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'? Seamus Heaney's *North*', in *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1986).

---*Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988).

---*The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bloodaxe, 1994).

Longley, Michael (ed.), *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster* (Belfast: Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1971).

---*Selected Poems of Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988).

---*Louis MacNeice: Poems selected by Michael Longley* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

Longley, Michael, *An Exploded View* (London: Gollancz, 1973).

---*Tuppenny Stung: Autobiographical Chapters* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1994).

---*Collected Poems* (London: Cape Poetry, 2006).

Lowell, Robert, *A Selection*, ed. Jonathan Raban (London: Faber and Faber, 1974).

Lucy, Sean (ed.), *Irish Poets in English* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1972).

MacNeice, Louis, *Collected Poems*, ed. E. R. Dodds (London: Faber and Faber, 1966).

---*The Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967).

---*The Strings are False: An Unfinished Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982).

Mc Cormack, W. J., *The Battle of the Books: Two Decades of Irish Cultural Debate* (Mullingar: Lilliput Press, 1986).

McDonald, Peter, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

---'Louis MacNeice: irony and responsibility', in Matthew Campbell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

MacMonagle, Niall (ed.), *Poetry Now* (Dublin: The Celtic Press, 2001).

Mailer, Norman, *The Armies of the Night* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).

Montague, John, *The Rough Field* (Portlaoise: The Dolmen Press, 1972).

Morrison, Blake, *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (London: Methuen, 1986).

Muecke, D.C, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969).

Muldoon, Paul, *Knowing my Place* (Portrush: Ulsterman Publications, 1971).

---*Why Brownlee Left* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980).

O'Grady, Desmond, *The Dying Gaul* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968).

---*The Road Taken: Poems 1956-1996* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg Press, 1996).

---*The Selected Poems of Cavafy* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1999).

O'Neill, Amanda, *The Life and Works of Edvard Munch* (Bristol: Parragon Book Service, 1996).

Ormsby, Frank (ed.), *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1991).

Paulin, Tom, *Liberty Tree* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983).

---*Ireland and the English Crisis* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1984).

---*Fivemiletown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).

---*Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

Pilling, John, *Modern European Poets* (London: Pan, 1982).

Pound, Ezra, *Collected Shorter Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987).

Pyle, Hilary, *Jack B. Yeats: A Biography* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1970).

Quinn, Antoinette (ed.), *A Poet's Country: Selected Prose of Patrick Kavanagh* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2003).

Reid, Beatrice, *Leaves from a Greek Village* (Dublin: [the author], 1998).

Rimbaud, *Poèsies* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

Ronsley, Joseph (ed.), *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature* (Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1977).

Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Seferis, George, *Collected Poems* (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1986).

Stevens, Wallace, *Opus Posthumous* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

Thody, Philip (ed.), *Albert Camus: Selected Essays and Notebooks* (London: Penguin, 1984).

Tóibín, Colin (ed.), *The Kilfenora Teaboy: A Study of Paul Durcan* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1996).

Vance, Norman, *Irish Literature: A Social History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Press, 1990).

Walcott, Derek, *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986).

Widdowson, Peter (ed.), *Re-Reading English* (London: Methuen, 1982).

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

Willet, John and Manheim, Ralph (eds.), *Bertold Brecht: Poems 1913-1956* (London: Minerva, 1994).

Wills, Clair, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

---*Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998).

ANTHOLOGIES

Alvarez, A. (ed.), *The Faber Book of Modern European Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

Bloom, Harold and Trilling, Lionel (eds.), *Romantic Poetry and Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Brown, Clare & Paterson, Don (eds.), *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their own Words* (London: Picador, 2003).

Deane, Seamus (gen. ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, 3. vols. (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991).

Kinsella, Thomas (ed.), *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Ormsby, Frank (ed.), *A Rage for Order: Poetry of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1992).

Paulin, Tom (ed.), *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986).